

## Justice denied

### No conviction in 97 percent cases of violence against women and children

ACCORDING to a report by Prothom Alo, 97 percent of these cases filed in five tribunals in Dhaka district, over the last 15 years, ended up with no conviction. Some cases described in the report are disturbing and constitute absolute examples of why justice delayed is justice denied.

The outright negligence on the part of the investigating officer, public prosecutor and the police has been identified as one of the main reasons for the lack of conviction in these serious cases ending up in the acquittal of the accused. According to plaintiffs' complaints, bribery plays a role in the investigating officer filing the final report without recommending punishment for anyone. Prolonged investigations and social stigma also discourage the victims and their families to pursue these cases.

Most victims of these crimes are from underprivileged backgrounds while the perpetrators often wield power and influence. Therefore, victims' families are often intimidated and coerced into agreeing to a settlement out of court, which is illegal in such cases, by powerful perpetrators.

It is quite a shame for us as a nation that due to the serious systematic shortcomings and flaws in our judicial and legal proceedings, we cannot ensure justice for most victims of VAWC—not even if the victim is murdered. Our system is rigged against the victims. Those who are supposed to work on behalf of the victims are not doing their job. Unless there is a systemic change and more efforts are given to vigorously pursue these cases, some of the most heinous criminals will continue to go unpunished and justice will continue to be denied to victims.

## ACC should bag all involved

### Land acquisition funds embezzled

ACC, the anti-graft body, filed a police case against a former land acquisition officer at the deputy commissioner's office on January 17 for the embezzlement of Tk 5 crore. The ACC recovered Tk 92 lakh by raiding one of the accused's accomplices but this is only a fraction of the full amount.

What is interesting here is that an internal probe carried out by the DC office back in December found the accused to have siphoned off Tk 8.7 crore from the land acquisition fund and once his transfer order came through, the accused withdrew a huge amount from the DC office's account at the Sonali Bank. The withdrawal of such a large amount is what tipped off the DC office and the ACC got wind of it from there.

We hope the ACC will go the whole nine yards in uncovering the racket that allowed for a coterie of land office officials to gain access to a government land compensation fund. This is more so because various departments and ministries are involved in large-scale land acquisition to pave the way for development projects. With thousands of crores of taka involved in the buying of land, the anti-graft body must remain vigilant to help plug the holes in the system that allow for such graft to take place.

The ACC's prompt action has helped to ward off a major embarrassing situation for local authorities. The investigation into the matter must be allowed to run its course so that all those involved can be brought to face justice. Only then can we expect corrupt officials to think twice before committing acts of graft.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Improving healthcare services

A number of people have recently protested the fact that high-ranking public officials often go abroad for their treatment, instead of going to local hospitals. Many medical colleges and hospitals have been established across the country over the years, but our public officials seem not to trust them. How can they then expect others to use them and be satisfied?

The quality of service and equipment in our public hospitals are extremely poor, whereas private hospitals are expensive and do not provide the treatment one would expect in return for such high prices. As a result, many patients who can afford it find it more reasonable to go abroad for treatment, while those who cannot afford to go abroad must make do with the sub-standard healthcare service that is domestically available.

The authorities need to ensure that quality healthcare service is available in all our public hospitals so that everyone can receive adequate healthcare domestically and for confidence in our public healthcare system to go up.

Md Zillur Rahaman  
By e-mail



# A field day for sexual predators

*The home minister on March 8 announced that law enforcers will take action against those who sexually harassed women on the streets on March 7. But the question is, why do these abhorrent acts keep recurring?*

MOYUKH MAHTAB

THERE are few things that could make a college student so disgusted at her fellow countrymen to make her want to not live in that country anymore. Being molested by a mob of men on the streets—supposedly there in celebration of a major milestone of this country's independence—is definitely one of them. Most of us are probably aware of the status by the college student, which was being shared all over social media yesterday. She had just been heading home after classes when 15-20 men from a procession surrounded her. According to her status, she was harassed, slapped and molested while others took pictures and videos on their phones. She went home with a torn uniform, and it would take a seriously disturbed person to not be affected by her words: "My two hands were not enough to stop so many hands from touching my body."

And while her Facebook status about the horrifying incident was being shared all over the internet, instead of the only possible response, that of outrage and condemnation, there were those making excuses for a political party, and some even outright claiming that she was lying to belittle that party. Because of the politicisation of her post, she eventually took it down. And yet, she was not the only woman yesterday caught in the midst of beasts. Other women too came forth on social media about their experiences of being harassed, verbally and physically. One woman had her hair pulled while on a rickshaw and then drenched with water from a bottle. This was in her own university campus. Another woman spoke of a similar experience of these men pouring water all over her at a major intersection in the city. Talking to this paper, a student of Dhaka University said a mob heading towards Shahbag surrounded her near Karwan Bazar and groped her and tried to pull off her scarf. There were policemen nearby, but they did not come forward.

But then again, are we really surprised? These incidents happened only a day after Brac presented a report which showed that 94 percent of women surveyed had been victims of sexual harassment in public transport. Only a few years back, a very similar public incident sparked outrage, when mobs of

men encircled women during Pahela Baishakh celebrations and molested them. Yet, judging from the defensive gesture of people online, it would seem they find it very hard to believe that men in our country can commit such acts. Instead, one party official went so far as to claim that these incidents might have been cooked up to create controversy regarding March 7. Of course, speaking out against sexual harassment on March 7 does as much to discredit the day as speaking out about it on April 14 discredits the idea of Pahela Baishakh.

So why the defensiveness? We as a

they can assault a woman for refusing their advances. Despite all our laws, the powerful feel they can get away with harassing women. From the loopholes in our laws to the impossible burden of proof in courts and hospitals, it is no surprise that more often than not women do not even speak up about the harassment they go through. This is a country where rapists can go inside a house and rape women and still enjoy institutional protection, while the women are subjected to further abuse. How else would you explain that in broad daylight, in public, in the presence

It was incredibly brave of these women to speak out about the harassment they faced on the streets that day. Let us not forget, most women face this every day. If these incidents made the news, it was because of the audacity of it, because these were committed in public by mobs of men. I cannot imagine the trauma of having gone through it, and subsequently again for speaking out.

Our Home Minister has assured that CCTV footage has been collected of the incident and those responsible will not be spared. Great—except, let us also not



A group of students protesting against the incident of sexual assaults on women during Pahela Baishakh celebrations on April 14, 2015.

PHOTO: STAR

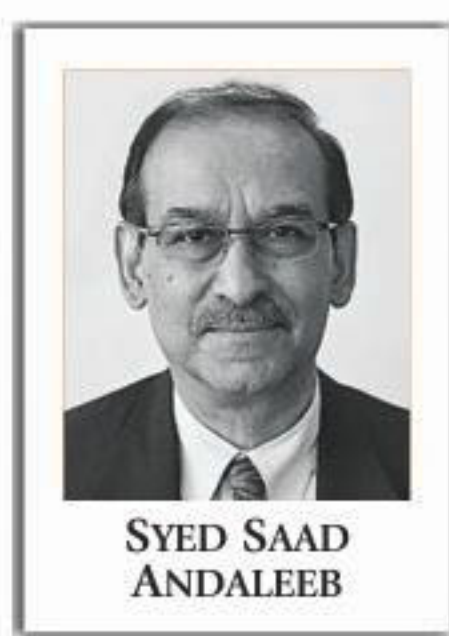
nation have failed miserably when it comes to being vocal against sexual harassment and taking action to prevent it. Not only in terms of punishing offenders, but in bringing up men who do not feel that it is deplorable to harass and molest women. We are absolutely fine with shaming women for being molested, blaming them even for bringing it on themselves, but then in the same breath, we excuse men for their behaviour. We will go as far as to call women whores for going out of the house, or not wearing an orna, but act incredulous when men and boys feel

of law enforcers, a group of men can dare to do something they know is a crime? And it is not enough to say that the harassers are uneducated men, "from the slums," who took advantage of the situation. Ask any woman, and they will say that sexual harassers are not confined to any class or section of society—from classrooms and offices to public transport and on the roads, they are everywhere. For too long we have taught girls to be careful on the roads, while forgetting that teaching boys to be respectful would be a far more ideal solution.

forget that much was made of CCTV footage of sexual harassment during the Pahela Baishakh celebration in 2015. What came of that investigation? Some have pointed out the irony of the sexual harassment incidents happening a day before International Women's Day—but, what good is one day, when we have failed to stop such cases happening every day throughout the year, and still failed to do anything to stop them, socially or legally?

Moyukh Mahtab is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star.

## The widening scourge of sexual harassment



SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

VIOLENCE against and violation of women result from "some of the worst forms of discrimination" that continue unabated in a variety of ways: mistreatment,

harassment, lewd stares, groping, maiming, raping, and even murdering. With choices that matter to women in their hands, men seem to have been endowed with an arcane sense of entitlement to do as they wish with the lives of women.

The result, more often, is vulgar, depraved and dehumanised behaviour, occurring widely, with regularity, and without any sign of abatement. The perpetrators appear to be convinced that they will bear no consequence for their unrelenting and atrocious acts. The phenomenon is apparently a global one that has become an everyday bitter experience for uncounted females stepping out into an unsafe world to make a living.

There is unfortunately no comprehensive study on this issue in Bangladesh. Based on a two-phased study—a qualitative phase and a quantitative survey phase—this article touches upon three findings: the nature of sexual harassment, who commits them, and how widespread the phenomenon is.

**Nature of sexual harassment**  
It was determined that 94 percent of the

women using public transportation have experienced sexual harassment at some time; such harassment occurs more on public transportation than on the streets.

Verbal harassment is very common and takes the following forms: (i) Calling out or passing a comment such as "sexy", "baby", etc; (ii) Whistling or making kissing sounds; (iii) Asking personal questions or soliciting cell phone numbers and/or Facebook/Twitter ID; (iv) Using obscene/abusive language; (v) Sexual teasing, joking or making remarks; (vi) Commenting on clothing, anatomy or looks; and (vii) Asking to be a girlfriend, about sexual life, or soliciting sexual favours.

Physical harassment includes the following: (i) Deliberate touching/pinching; (ii) Making contact

percent of the respondents indicated that men aged 26-40 years had harassed them. To some surprise and consternation, the worst age group of male commuters who harass female commuters is between 41-60 years. Around 66 percent of the women respondents accused this age group for sexually harassing them.

A male student from a private university said, "Somehow my perception is that aged people are more prone [to harassing], not the young people that much." Another male student disclosed, "One of my close female friends had been harassed badly. A person over 50 brushed against her private parts." The shocking fact is sometimes they are of the age of the target group's fathers or even

In our search for patterns, interestingly, we found none. The study involved young and older women, from different occupations (students, working, or homemakers), and from three locations (urban, peri-urban, and village). They all suffered comparable and high levels of sexual harassment—to the extent that this scourge may be deemed a public safety hazard.

**What has gone wrong?**  
It has probably been this way for long. Men's temerity may in fact be on the rise, unshackled by lax laws and poor law enforcement, their growing feelings of entitlement, a rising tide of corruption with absolute nonchalance, and the egregious inattention to designing public transportation systems that are inclusive and respectful of women.

The spotlight may also be trained on whether with rising economic growth and a focus on attaining middle-income status, we have lost our moral moorings. Economic growth is unlikely to be sustainable if the country's social and moral edifice is feeble, social justice is cast to the winds, and women as partners are disrespected, as displayed crassly in our streets and public transportation system.

Women are not only going to be present in the public domain; they will be there in greater numbers as they educate themselves and seek opportunities whereby they can flourish and thrive. On International Women's Day—and every other day—there must be a firm resolve to recognise and celebrate our friends, partners and caregivers (yes, our mothers, spouses, daughters, sisters, and co-workers). The onus is particularly on men to self-reflect and deliver.

There is much to be done on three fronts: capacity building, social mobilisation by harnessing the power of the media, and strengthening policy along with appropriate interventions to bring desperately needed changes. It goes without saying that we must also monitor, through continuous audits, the progression of women and their changing experiences. It is also vital to reinforce the notion that women's place in society reflects what they earn with their hard work and ingenuity, not what men deem fit to accord to them.

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In a recent study by Brac, 94 percent of women surveyed complained of harassment in public transport.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

by leaning closely or pushing gently; (iii) Playing with women's hair; (iv) Putting hands on women's shoulders; (v) Standing too close or brushing up against a woman; (vi) Touching/rubbing/pressing private parts; (vii) Patting on the buttocks; and (viii) Poking with private parts.

Other forms of harassment include: (i) Staring lewdly or ogling; (ii) Showing indecent pictures on their cell phones; (iii) Making obscene gestures; (iv) Following/stalking secretly; (v) Showing genitals; and (vi) Taking a picture/video by a cell phone.

**Who commits these acts of indecency?**  
In the case of public transportation, 35 percent female commuters indicated facing sexual harassment by male commuters aged 19-25 years. Almost 59

grandfathers. A garment worker said, "Old people close to my father's age are the worst. When they do something inappropriate, I call them 'Abba' (father) to make them feel insulted."

**How widespread is harassment?**  
People who sexually harass women come from various tiers of society, age groups, and geographical areas (urban, peri-urban, and rural), unveiling the pervasiveness and epidemic nature of this problem. Surprisingly, many of them are well-educated and hold decent jobs. According to a female university student, "Those who are spoiled or come from a lower class harass without any hesitation; the educated people also do the same thing but subtly and within a limit as they fear for their social reputation."