

SPOTLIGHT

The presence of the photos of these two whores, Umme Habiba Benojir and Shamima Binte Rahman, on my newsfeed has made my blood boil with anger. I wish I could go back to the 80s when I was a part of the Chhatra League.

Dear current generation, please do your duty. Please finish the job within one to two days. Don't compel half-centurions like us to come to the ground."

Shabbir Khan, a member of the Awami League's Sylhet chapter, published the above Facebook post, which went viral, on July 6.

The doctor, who's in his fifties, refers to two female protesters of the quota movement, both of whom are half his age, as prostitutes. He then asks the current members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League to complete their 'duty' before referring to himself as a 'half-centurion.'

It was the second part of the post, which many believe refers to Jasimuddin Manik—an Awami League cadre who had openly celebrated his 100th rape at the Jahangirnagar University in the late 90s and referred to himself as the centurion—that garnered the most amount of attention.

Shabbir, though, denies the allegations. He claims that his status has nothing to do with rape.

"When I said half-centurion, I referred to my age. And my request to the current generation was to file a case against these two girls because they spoke ill of the prime minister," he says.

When asked why he referred to the two protesters as prostitutes, he says: "That's because I was angry. The kind of things that both the girls had said... only a prostitute can say that. This is not an abnormal reaction from my side."

The above is a typical example of how many women, who have taken part in the quota reform movement, have been targeted on digital platforms.

Women getting harassed online is not a new phenomenon. Take for instance the cases that took place after the sexual assault incidents in TSC on Pahela Baishakh in 2015. The post of a user named Arefin Ahmed Shehim, who, implying that the girls deserved much more than groping, wrote: "I will openly rape you [girls] on the streets. I believe in direct action... As long as you show [your skin] we will touch you." There were a couple of other similar posts published back then.

In fact, of the 17,000 complaints that Bangladesh's ICT Division's Cyber Help Desk has received so far, women Internet users have filed more than 70 percent of them. The original number is likely to be a lot higher, since many women don't report cybercrimes fearing social consequences.

However, the organised approach used to demean and harass the female protesters online on a large scale during the quota reform movement in the last six months, is something that's relatively new and quite concerning.

Many female protesters have been openly tagged as prostitutes. Statuses and messages have been circulating online welcoming anyone to beat up or rape the protesters, many of whom weren't even in the frontline of the protests. Several of the female protesters have also been tagged as members

of Jamaat, even though they don't have any political affiliation. Some have also been deemed as secret agents of Pakistan on public forums online.

Saima Kaniz, a fourth-year student of the University of Dhaka's Department of History says that she has been receiving threats ever since she uploaded a video of a protest, related to the quota movement, that took place in her hall last week.

"That video got around 25,000 likes and ever since I have been getting messages in my inbox asking me about my rate and my body size. My photos from my profile have been shared with many disgusting captions on public forums. In one particular message, I was asked if my mother had a relationship with a Pakistani and if that's the reason I am like this. The words they used to describe me were so bad that I can't even say it out loud," says Saima.

The range of people attacked online because of the protest, according to Saima, has drastically increased. "There was a time when only those involved in politics were threatened. But now even

general students with no political affiliation are receiving such threats. I have been here for four years and this is the worst reaction to a protest that I have ever seen," she laments.

"Sometimes it's difficult to believe that this is the 21st century. Our Prime Minister is a woman, and yet we have to face threats of rape on a regular basis online just because we have raised our voice against something that is not right. What kind of a culture is this?"

According to Umme Habiba Benojir, who studies Statistics in the University of Dhaka and is the president of the Bangladesh Chhatra Federation, online harassment is a strategy that is being used a lot more frequently against

women because it's easier to make them 'feel bad' on the digital platform.

"In the last one week, I have been threatened of being raped and being beaten up in public on Facebook. I have been asked for my 'visit' cost publicly. My Facebook ID has been pasted on different groups. Members of these groups keep on sending disgusting

messages to me."

"The kind of harassment that we are noticing now is a lot more organised.

There are many fake IDs involved. As a result, there is a

lot more presence on the social media, which in turn encourages other to join in. In the past sexual harassment online seemed to be more of a personal affair," explains Benojir.

"They feel that they can break a woman mentally. Yes, reading those threats and messages does make me feel bad. But if they feel that we won't join the protests because of this, then they are living in a fool's paradise. The only way to solve this is by fighting it and that's what I am going to do," she adds.

What has made things worse for a number of these activists is that they haven't been able to confide in their guardians, both at home and at campus. "No one I know has said anything to their parents. If we do, then they will just ask us to stay quiet, because they will obviously want us not to get involved in any mess," says Saima. The

Nasreen, professor of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

"Just look at the case of the girl [Moriom Mannan Farah]. She has been harassed four times. She was first attacked at Shaheed Minar. Secondly, she was harassed in a CNG by many people while she was returning home. After that she was harassed at the police station. And then finally she was sexually harassed on the social media. Nothing has been done about the assailants. The harassment continues, but no one has bothered to take any action in this regard either," she adds.

After all that, a brave Moriomi, who was almost in tears, hit back at her attackers through a press conference. "If they want to give me respect, they should remove the prostitute tag from my body."

The sheer number of posts dealing with harassment reflects the confidence and audacity with which these write-ups are published online. And this is happening at a time when the country has in place stringent laws to tackle online harassment, such as Section 57 of the ICT act.

Many victims have refrained from filing cases regarding sexual harassment mainly because they are afraid that complaining about these aspects might just make things worse for them. "It won't be a surprise if the officer-in-charge just laughs at us and asks us to leave," says Saima.

However, according to barrister Sara Hossain, even if complaints aren't filed against these harassers by the victims themselves, the police can take action if they are aware of such threats.

"If the police are aware of any cognizable offence that has happened, they are supposed to take action immediately. It's very clear in the law that someone doesn't have to come to the police and make a complaint. If they are aware of an offence they are supposed to register it and take action themselves," says barrister Hossain. "As far as I know, the police have not actually filed cases supporting the victims. On the contrary, they are filing cases against the victims, and this seems to be discriminatory."

"For instance, with section 57, they took the young man (Rashed Khan, protester) in remand. Why are they not moving section 57 against people who are threatening these women? Why are they waiting for cases to be filed? In other cases the police are directly filing the FIR. They are not waiting for informants," explains Hossain.

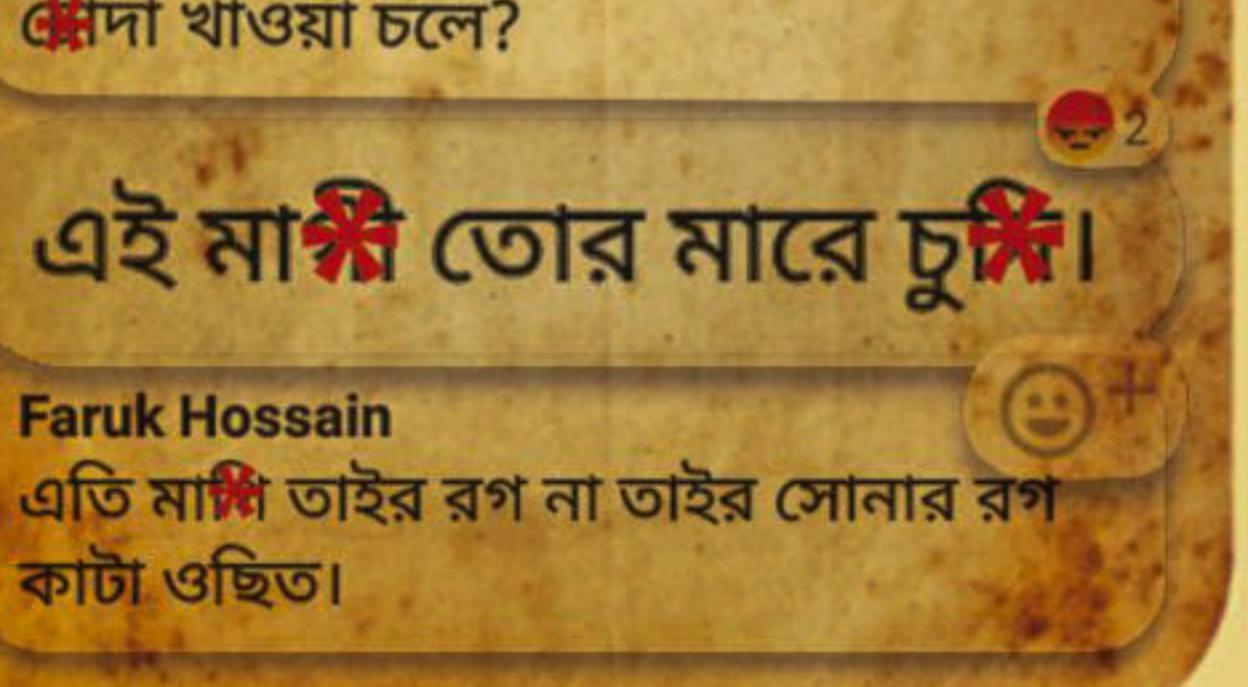
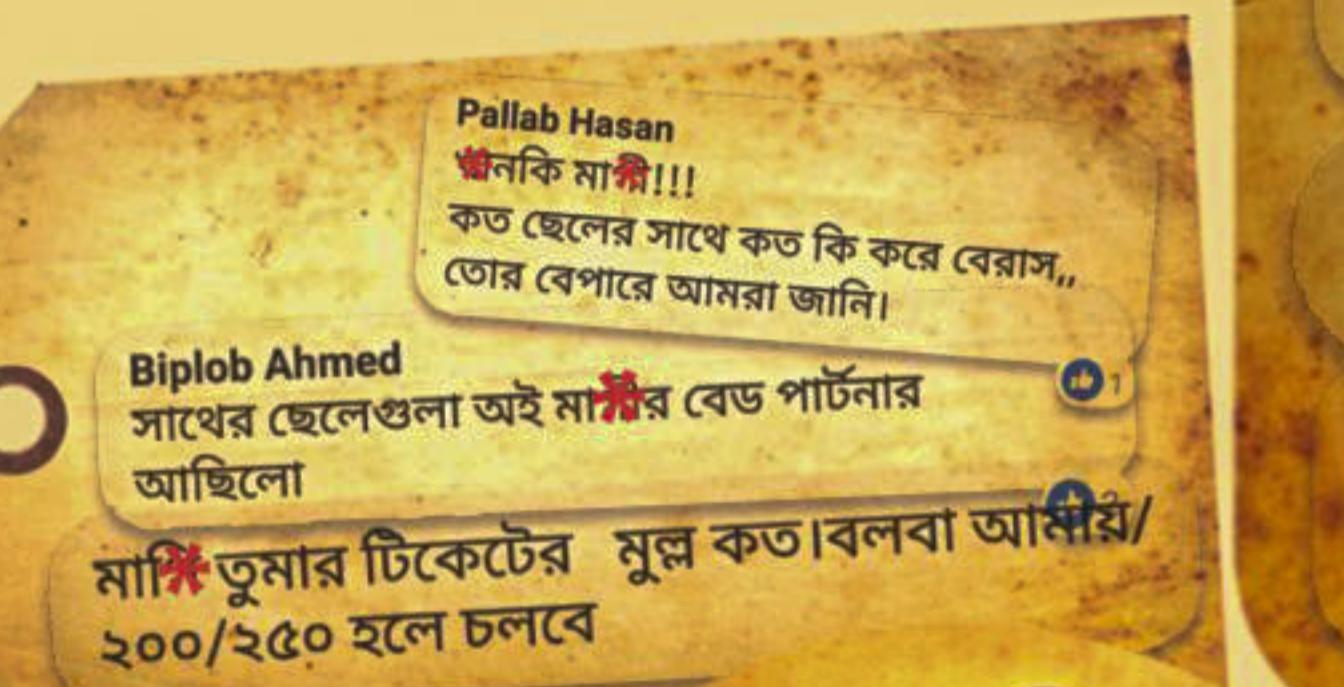
Going by the stance of the government with regards to the quota reform movement, it's not a surprise that Saima and her friends' calls for justice are falling on deaf ears.

"There are so many of us getting harassed. Don't we matter at all? Do people not care about us?" Saima asks. Going by the current scenario, the answer to those questions seem obvious.

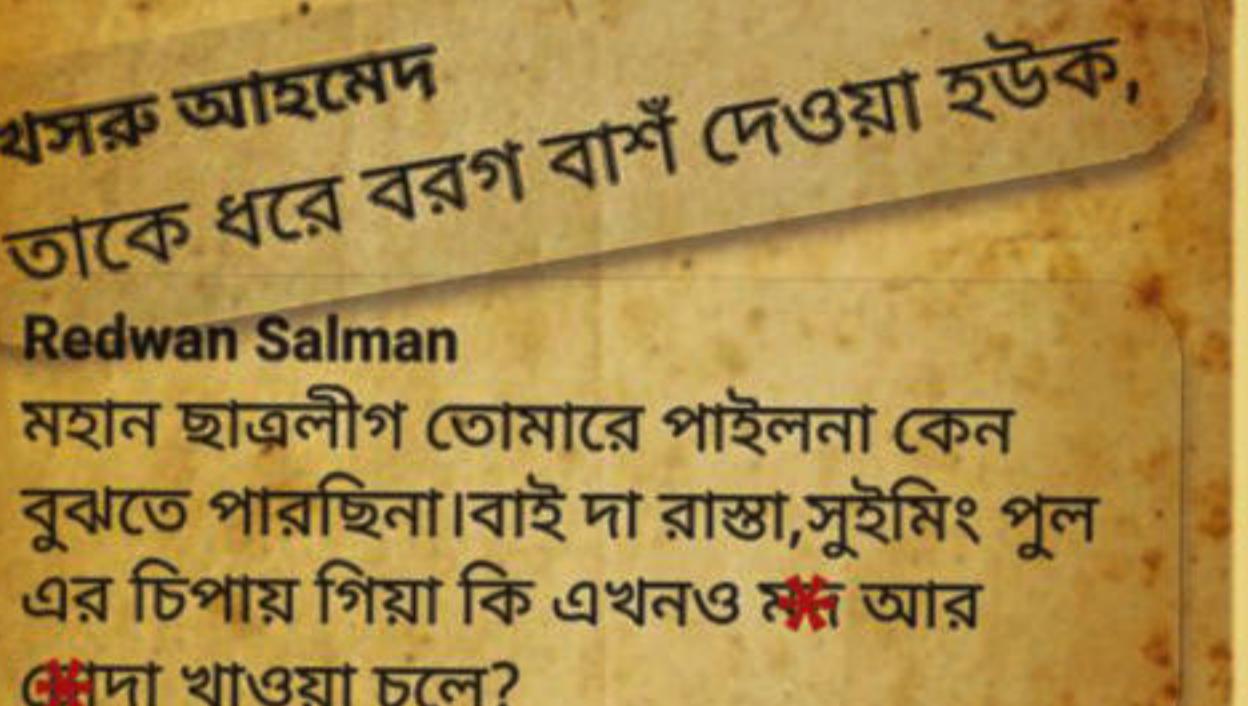
THE NEW WEAPON OF WAR IN DIGITAL BANGLADESH

Woman participating in the quota reform movement are being sexually harassed online and are constantly getting bombarded with inappropriate messages. The worst part of it all is that they have no one to turn to.

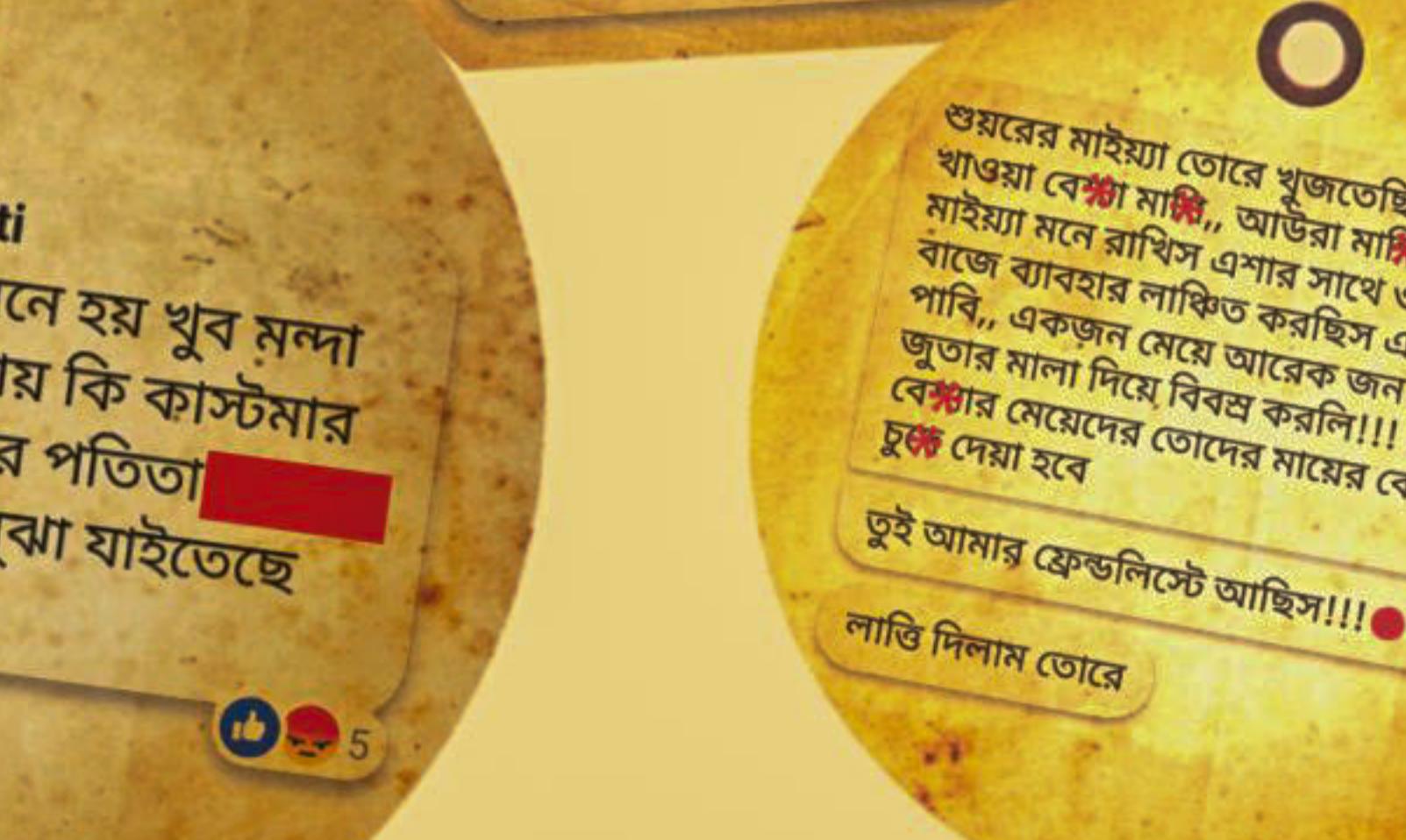
Naimul Karim



liqbal Al Harbi
মার্ডির লিঙ্কটা দেন, একটু খেলামু



Monir Hossain Ah
আমার পক্ষ থেকে
এই উপহার
মার্ডির জন্য



Aahmed Kawsar
মিষ্টি পল্লিতে পাঠানো হোক



These were the violent rape threats received the quota-reform movement protesters interviewed. They were both posted publicly on social media, as well as, sent to the inboxes of their personal profiles.