



ILLUSTRATION: NOOR-US-SAFA ANIK

#WHY THEY STAY

NILIMA JAHAN

Back in last October, when Alyssa Milano invited victims to post their experiences with sexual abuse using the hashtag “#MeToo”, one of my closest friends who is a development worker by profession, responded to the call on Facebook by sharing her story of getting harassed by colleagues at a former workplace. Except, I knew that inside her own home, she has to face much more abuse on a daily basis.

Another woman, a female journalist, known for her writings on gender issues, once wrote, “#MeToo is not just for workplaces and public buses because women are not even safe in their own homes.”

That post got only 10 likes, in spite of her having innumerable friends on Facebook. Nobody asked her the context of the post—in fact, some of her husband’s friends reacted with the “haha” emoticon.

Around 20 minutes later, I noticed that her post was edited to two words only: “#MeToo”.

I met her the next day for work, and while chatting we started talking about her Facebook status. When I asked her

why she edited out those parts of her post, she seemed to get a bit distracted in response. Then slowly, she said, her husband had serious objections to the Facebook post and they had a falling-out—so much so that he took it upon himself to edit out the Facebook status. (It must be mentioned that her husband was the “keeper” of the password to her Facebook account). According to her husband, she is only being an attention seeker by making such posts, and ridiculing him in front of his friends.

Both these acquaintances of mine are not only established in their fields of work, but are actually more successful than their peers. They contribute to the family financially just as much as their husbands. But when it comes to abuse within the domestic sphere, I have always observed them maintaining pin-drop silence—in fact, I too, am not very different from them.

I feel that the biggest reason why this is so, is because the victim is under such crushing, intolerable social pressure—pressure that is so daunting that instead of facing it, we choose to stay and make it work; coax a flicker of col-

our to salvage even the most lacklustre of relationships. Society has nurtured us to be naturally attracted to the security that “family” offers, and we keep doing roundabouts in that circle, unable to get out, even when it poisons us. And that is why, even educated women cannot make the right decision, to get out of an abusive relationship.

According to 2015 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data, 73 percent of married women in Bangladesh experience some form of violence by their intimate partners. Unfortunately, this shocking data doesn’t even show the real picture, because social stigma silences most of our actual victims.

Atoshi Mahjabeen, a senior officer at a private bank, is a part of this unfortunate statistic. She married a university professor after dating him for several years. “It was only after marrying him that I realised that abuse isn’t restricted to a particular class,” says Atoshi.

While the initial days of her marriage went smoothly, she was taken aback once the dust had settled. “I remember while we were packing for our honeymoon, he didn’t allow me to take any jeans or T-shirts. This, despite the fact that he knew that I wore jeans and tops quite frequently. He had never complained about it before when we were dating,” says Atoshi. “When I argued, he said that I was a married woman now and his conservative family may not like it. I got angry, but I left it at that,” she recalls.

Soon after this episode, she began to realise how controlling and insecure her husband was. He would log on to her Facebook account while Atoshi slept at night and remove friends he didn’t know of. He would also chat with her male friends online to get an idea of whether she was particularly close to them.

15 days into the wedding, Atoshi knew she had married the wrong guy. “I

started feeling very uncomfortable in front of my friend,” says Atoshi.

“I returned home to find my in-laws talking about my ‘loose character’ in disapproving tones. ‘How could I sit with a male friend on a bike... his butt surely touched my thigh’, they were saying. The moment my husband saw me, he got angry and threw one of the bathroom slippers he was wearing at my face in front of everyone.”

Atoshi was dumbfounded. She shouted. She screamed and cried. Her in-laws eventually took their son away from her that night as he was getting more violent with her. Atoshi’s mother was no more and so she thought of calling her father. But she worried that her father would have a heart attack if he came to know that she wanted to break things off on what was only the 16th day of her marriage.

Frustrated, Atoshi tried to commit suicide. She gathered all the pills she had in her medicine pouch and took them. Hearing her cry loudly, her husband came back to their room and slapped her and shouted: “Now you’re taking pills? Did you not think about how angry your husband would be when you were riding a bike with other men? Or when you were having lunch with them?”

“I will never forget what I felt when he had his hands tightly around my neck. Behind him, my mother-in-law was saying that I had taken the pills to shift blame for what had happened,” she recalls.

Two years on, Atoshi’s controlling and manipulative husband has compelled her to isolate herself from everyone she was once close with. She only wears salwar kameezes and her only job is to earn and contribute to the family’s income, look after the household and entertain guests. He has converted her into an ‘ideal wife.’

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had gone to meet a close friend of mine [a guy] who wasn’t able to attend my wedding. We decided to have lunch together as I shared with him that my husband and I were having difficulties in adjusting. On reaching the restaurant, I found ten missed calls from my husband.

“I was worried, so I called him back and told him that I had been on a motorbike and couldn’t check my phone. When he came to know that I was on a bike with a male friend, he started swearing at me. I was shocked and

I continue, I will face more violence,” says Atoshi.

Atoshi’s story is an example of how domestic violence is also prevalent among women who are well-established in society. Sexual violence in intimate relationships too, is common. We are yet to reach a point where marital rape can even be considered a crime. What’s worse is that in many cases, even ‘educated’ and ‘well-established’ women fail to recognise such violence.

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