



PHOTO: FARIDA ALAM

NOT #MYCHILDRENTOO

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The #MeToo movement and the recent sharing of numerous stories of sexual abuse in Bangladesh and across the world have brought home to us what we already knew—that women and girls (men and boys too, but mostly women and girls) are commonly subjected to various forms of sexual abuse throughout their lives.

“Commonly” is a key word here. Sexual abuse can happen to anyone, no matter how young one is or how old. It can happen anywhere, from out on the streets and other public places to the workplace, school and inside the home. It can be perpetrated by anyone, from complete strangers and random acquaintances, to colleagues, friends, relatives and close family members.

I remember a not-too-distant cousin “exposing” himself to me when I was perhaps five and he was 10 or 12 years older than me (though he seemed much older at the time). I remember being molested multiple times by a member of

the household staff when I was eight. I remember telling a close family member about it only months after the man left our employ and possibly the country, and being told that I had imagined it. Maybe because there was nothing to be done, maybe because the issue was too difficult to comprehend, or perhaps to make me believe I had imagined it in order to help me forget... I remember being approached by another member of the staff when I was 13—and finally being able to push him away. I remember being touched inappropriately in crowded and not-so-crowded places when I was 10 and throughout my life and being able to do little about it.

For much of the above, I didn't know what was happening, but somehow it just didn't feel right. I remember the red *ghagra* with golden sequins that I got for Eid which I loved and was looking forward to wearing—and which I never wore again. I remember thinking my parents' bedroom would be a safe place

because he would never dare to enter it—and being shocked at how wrong I was. I remember praying to God that I didn't “grow” like those men said I would, so that I wouldn't have to experience such things again and worse. I remember for the longest time disliking people with the same names, men with moustaches, men who smoked, anything I associated with them.

Later in life, I remember thinking that I owed it to my significant others to tell them what had happened to me. They told me how it wasn't my fault, how I was still good and pure. But I think it was my husband who really put it into perspective when he said very matter-of-factly, “If YOU'RE not the one who abused someone, I don't know why you're explaining it/yourself to me.” And just like that, two decades after the fact, things fell into place. After carrying it around for 20 years thinking,

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