

# NOT #MYCHILDRENTOO

After page 12

why me, could I have avoided it, could I have stopped it, could I have done something about it, I realised that not only was it not my fault, but that it wasn't even something I had allowed to happen—it had happened TO me. Just like women who are abused anywhere, by anyone, under any circumstances, don't "ask for it" or even "entertain it". They are subjected to it by men in positions of power. They are victims-survivors-strong women, who live and deal with the trauma and/or speak out against it and demand justice.

I'm speaking out today not to hold any one person accountable, or to expose them so that others will know. I'm not even writing this to make myself feel better, because, truth be told, I really don't feel any better. I'm telling my story and probably that of countless others, to show that no one, no matter how young or old or sheltered or privileged, is safe, anywhere, around anyone—not even children, not even in their own homes and not even in the company of trusted people.

And that's why, when I look at my five-year-old daughter today, I know it's not too early to teach her to protect herself, because I know that, unfortunately, I won't always be able to protect her.

As a baby, I would discourage random people from touching and carrying her and sitting her on their laps. Now, I show and tell her about the parts of her body that no one except her father and myself and the doctor, in our presence, should be touching, that too on a need basis such as when bathing her or applying medication or lotion. I tell her that if they do, she should say no and stop them. I stress that if they do, she should come and tell me, or tell her father if I'm not around. When she's older, I want to tell her that shame is for perpetrators, not victims-survivors, and that safety is more important than false notions of modesty. If I had a son, I would teach him the same.

Experts have differentiated between teaching children about "good" and "bad" touching, where "bad" might seem like anything that hurts, for example, vaccinations, and "safe" and "unsafe" touching, where "unsafe" may not hurt or even always feel bad but which is anything that makes one feel uncomfortable and unsafe, including taking pictures. It is important for children—and adults—to know about safe and unsafe touching, about parts of the body that are considered private, about who they can go to if they feel unsafe or even confused, and to be able to express themselves using assertive language. Children should know that they can and should leave uncomfortable situations, that they should report the person making them feel unsafe no matter who they are, and that they should not keep it a secret just because the person has requested it of them or even threatened them. It is



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

important to make children understand that it is not their fault and that they should feel no guilt or shame in the event that something like this occurs.

Children must be able to open up to adults they trust, safe in the knowledge that they too will be trusted. Parents need to listen, understand, believe and act. Research has shown that if there is disclosure, how parents react can either help or harm the healing process. Parents/guardians are advised to remain calm and encourage the child to share details without using leading questions which may confuse them. Once the information is acquired, action must be taken against the perpetrator. Counselling for children is recommended.

All of the above apply to adults as much as they do to children. In an ideal world, none of this would have ever happened or needed talking about. But the truth is, there are bad people out there doing bad things, and while we are not responsible for the actions of others, the onus is on us to try to protect ourselves the best we can. Training children from an early age to be sensitive and cautious not only equips them with the knowledge to protect themselves as children but also normalises the process for them as adults, so that, be it at college or in the

workplace, they know what is and isn't acceptable behaviour and what can and should be done about it.

Fighting abuse must be normalised. We teach our children to look out before crossing the road, or to not touch a hot stove, or to keep their distance from dangerous animals, all in order to avoid getting hurt. Even though it should come naturally, we teach them to call out for help in dangerous situations. If they're hurt, we administer to their wounds, until one day they're able to help themselves, or if they can't, they know to go to someone for help. Rarely do we warn them about *people*, namely sexual predators, who are the more common dangers around us. As unimaginable, uncomfortable, and scary as it may be for us, this is an issue we must address sooner rather than later. It is evident how important it is for #MeToo survivors to have people believe in them and stand up for them. If anything, it's even more important for children, and will help develop their feelings of self-worth, while also reinforcing their confidence in the adults they love and trust.

*Kajalie Shehreen Islam is Assistant Professor at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.*

# FEAR AND SILENCE: THE TWO PILLARS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

After page 13

*We have a stereotypical image of a 'perpetrator' rooted in our cognition. We don't want to accept that a sexual predator is not from a different species, that it can be anyone from amongst us. It disturbs our false comfort zone.*

More than 40 years later, in 2018, the accusations of abuse carried out by Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein started the #MeToo movement on social media. This has brought a certain wind of change to the culture of victim-blaming in sexual assault cases. It is an exciting opportunity for us to end the silence of victims caused by sexist assumptions of the society. But we still have miles to go.

Victim-blaming reigns supreme in Bangladesh, as was proven after the accusations made against the renowned late drama personality Selim Al Deen. It highlighted how we have a stereotypical image of a 'perpetrator' rooted in our cognition. We don't want to accept that a sexual predator is not from a different species, that it can be anyone from amongst us. It disturbs our false comfort zone.

But a human being is composed of various coexisting selves. They show different faces in different situations. Some of them—the sexist parts in particular—have been completely internalised in our social mindsets. Sometimes, they show up in neutralised forms and can even be considered art. At other times, they take the more violent form of assault. It is our duty to identify the root of sexism in our collective conscience and ensure that it isn't nurtured in any form.

To achieve this goal, we need to break the two pillars holding up the mantle of violence against women. The first is the fear of being sexually harassed, and the second is the silence of the victims. We need to stop putting the victim in the spotlight, scrutinising what s/he did before or after the assault. We need to stop asking "Why did or didn't s/he do this or that?" We need to weaken sexism at its core.

*Nasrin Khandoker is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Jahangirnagar University. Reach her at nasrin.khandoker@gmail.com*