

It's been a year since #MeToo. What next?

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ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

It's been a year since I woke up that October morning, and watched my Facebook newsfeed fill up with stories pouring out from so many women—some I knew closely, many not at all. Stories of buried secrets that hadnot been shared publicly before, to stories of everyday incidents that are vented loudly. Each story was different, with different characters, different outcomes—but they were also the same—they were all filled with a mixture of anguish, shame, courage, anger and most of all, a connecting thread that theywere not alone; me too.

The meaning of the two words have shifted in history.

The reactions that followed over the coming weeks cannot be described easily—there was solidarity and love across the globe. There were bravos and enthusiastic comments about how fearless they were, these women who have lived through so much pain and suffering, and came out on the other side bright, independent and most importantly,

intact, or so it seems. That's supposed to be true for me—one of those strong, outspoken, independent women—one who doesn't back out from a fight, one who speaks her mind.

Being an advocate for women to speak out, I have sat in numerous group and individual conversations, talking and listening to both women and men speak about similar kinds of abuses. This was no surprise, and yet, there I was, shattered and broken. Because, even as I know there is a need to speak out, I am well aware about what it takes for any of us to step up: the amount of strength and voice one has to muster; the anxiety you feel every time you get a notification of someone leaving a comment.

Even as I type this, I am already anxious about the reactions that this article will bring. There will be solidarity, but there will also be those questions: Why didn't you say something? Why didn't you report it? Why did you go alone? He was just a bad apple. I have never been that kind of a man.

My first proper recollection of being harassed is probably before I was seven years old. Holding my mother's hand in a stall at Dhaka International Trade Fair, when someone shoved his palm against my crotch as he walked by. I couldn't see his face, given that any grown person would tower way above my eye level, but even then, I could tell this was not an accidental brush in the crowd, that there was something wrong with this. I remember being frozen, unable to know what I felt, express what happened. With time, I guess I pushed that memory aside somewhere; by now, you realise how often, as women, we do this.

Fast forward a decade or so later, my first visit to Cox's Bazar with my family. After a day spent by the sea, we entered the hotel in our wet clothes. My brother ran off to the room first, while my parents decided to stop at the reception. My younger sister and I were walking up the stairs, while two young men were climbing up behind us, softly muttering "Beautiful...wow...uhh" at each step.

For the first time in my life, I turned around as soon as my sister had entered our room before me, and shouted at them. As they tried to deny their doing, my father reached us, told them off, and the men apologised and disappeared. Some part of my memories of such countless experiences are often so hazy, as though it's only a form of armour helping my sanity. I don't remember if my parents spoke to me about this, or if I came across those boys the next day. What I do remember is the anger, frustration, fear, helplessness and the need to ensure that my sister was safe before I screamed at them. I don't remember feeling brave or joyous at telling them off; I don't remember feeling strong.

Every time I hear these stories, they resonate with the uncountable times

similar things have happened to me—out on the street, on a bus, in my school, at my home—by men I loved, men I knew well, men I had just met, men whose faces I didn't even see. Countless stories and emotions that came flooding back to me in that one week, and I thought: "I didn't know I could get triggered like this." Despite a strong support system around me, a year ago, I found myself not wanting to get out of bed for days.

This last one year has been, in a way, a deeply personal journey to understand how abuse does not only leave us scathed, but it leaves behind a deeply engraved sense of loss and being. I have had conversations about how most probably women internalise these pains with shame, and men fight them off with anger. I think there is truth in that. But I also know that I learnt to deal with most of the shame a long time ago. What I feel today, is the lack of resolution. These things happen and being a strong woman, sometimes I fight, sometimes I walk away, sometimes I vent about to my safe circles. Eventually, I pack it off and move on. And then it happens again, and again, and again. There is no resolution, there is no finishing line. It is just a matter of "until next time".

The doorman at my building noticing what I wear when I walk out every morning, to the *rickshawwallah* staring at my cleavage when I pay him; or the overly friendly colleague who notices what I eat every day. I know this, because he tells me that I must be very health conscious. You will notice it too, if you just paid attention.

And that brings me to the point: Why are we not paying attention? Why are we not making any noise? When we know that our friend is leering at the woman sitting at the next table in the restaurant; or when my aunt complains about her daughter-in-law being at the office too much—why aren't we stopping them? Are we still sitting in an auditorium and laughing, when the speaker makes fun of his wife, and reduces a successful global representative to a woman who could be "gotten"?

We are aware enough to know harassment is rampant, we understand gender issues are real, and discrimination happens. So, what exactly are we waiting for? For more women to tell their stories, because it gives us something to read; waiting for someone we know who is the accuser, because then we can express our solidarity; waiting for someone we know who is the accused, and then we can unfriend him on Facebook; waiting for something to happen in the office, and then we can start talking about a harassment policy. We keep on waiting for the next ball to drop, because only then, maybe we can prove that we aren't that bad.

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