

Obligations of a society revealed by a hashtag

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MeToo in Bangladesh is faltering. If it ended today, the only tangible outcome will have been this newspaper investigating allegations made against its employees—a logical bare minimum that, bizarrely and worryingly, is unique by virtue of being absent in the response of other organisations and, indeed, society as a whole. The intangible outcome of hope being comprehensively crushed by a complete lack of humanity, will have been more devastating.

It started with a hashtag, and needed to end with restitution for those who suffered, adequate punishment for those who caused the suffering, and positive societal change. The beginning was there, but if the flame is to be coaxed back to life from the dying embers for the movement to solidify and provide the right ending, the larger society needs to play a part that it has thus far failed to play.

The timing of the nascent movement was inopportune. It started organically in the US, as women claimed their voice and agency in the aftermath of a narcissistic misogynist and serial sex offender being elected to the highest office in the land. In neighbouring India, it manifested as a unified call against the patriarchy and the powerful, with unconditional support from progressives. By contrast, in Bangladesh, the movement originated during a crucial election cycle. The eleventh general election not only dominates the media, it is keeping the civil society occupied, and has overwhelmed public discourse with demagoguery. Jostling for

meant to be followed by collectivism, not just amongst the scores of sufferers, but between them and conscientious citizens. Only then can a demand for justice be raised so loudly that it must be heeded, lest there are consequences. Actions, including credible investigations and accountability, flow from the demand, reiterated relentlessly. Unfortunately, the ugly side of human nature has featured prominently, in response to the allegations, which have further hindered such a natural progression of the movement in the country.

Tired justifications of the perpetrators being honourable men of unimpeachable character, and victim-blaming have, unsurprisingly, been de rigueur and dutifully prevalent. These are more potent in Bangladesh than in many other countries. Its civil society and politics, reflecting the country, are concerned with promotion of their own respective interests, resulting in a conservative outlook that is, in turn, projected onto the populace. People are ordered not to run too fast, to keep to their lanes when running, to slow down to a jog and claim victory. Women and the LGBTQ+ community are commanded not to run at all. The court of law, replete with systemic problems, will never hear MeToo cases, and the court of public opinion, with its primeval conservatism and higher standard of proof, is heavily prejudiced against them. The chief objective is to preserve the establishment, complete with the institutional deficiencies that mean the powerless remain so, the pow-



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space in the collective conscience of a deeply patriarchal, anti-feminist, misogynistic society is difficult enough without this additional, immovable obstacle. This is where the informal, unstructured nature of MeToo can be useful.

Bangladesh has only seen a glimpse of this movement. It begins with a groundswell of sufferers who have borne their pain and scars in silence, refusing to conform with society's demand of silence. The ground has not swollen, but a few voices have shaken it. That is a fraction of the beginning of the movement. It is

erful remain insulated and immune, all in the name of tradition. A movement that is rude to the system, that attacks the system, is, therefore, urgent and long overdue. That is precisely what MeToo is.

It is incumbent upon every single Bangladeshi citizen to defy convention and support the multitudes of sufferers. They have suffered so that others could be spared. They have suffered so that the country can have a rare chance at redemption, perhaps even salvation. The first step is to listen and believe unconditionally, because in a society where sex is

taboo and being abused—rather than abusing—carries stigma, those who come forward have absolutely nothing to gain from doing so. They are reliving some of their most traumatic experiences in public, forcing themselves to encounter their worst memories—memories that they would rather were someone else's—not for sympathy or self-aggrandisement. They want to spare others a similar fate. Deriving voyeuristic pleasure without attempting, or even pretending to be a fierce ally is inhuman. While this may not be true for countries with more robust institutions, civil society and politics, such a movement is only possible in a woefully inadequate Bangladesh if society listens and believes. Belief gives hope that there will be action, and the support that materialises from that belief can deliver on that hope.

This may be imperfect, fanciful idealism, but MeToo represents idealism in a world of cynicism. Against insurmountable odds, in the face of deterrents and

threats that accompany challenges to power, it has sparked into existence in Bangladesh. Rather than consigning it to a brief moment, society needs to participate in allowing it to thrive as a movement. The laundry list of socio-political matters that are broken or dysfunctional in the country that the lumpen majority is powerless to affect, is enough to make even the most optimistic of conscientious citizens despair. This, however, is within society's ability to respond to and repair. Beyond simply showing solidarity, society has an obligation to be an active participant to cure its own ills, single-minded in pursuit of redress. Failure to do so will see the pervasive erosion of values to its inevitable conclusion of absolute moral bankruptcy.

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