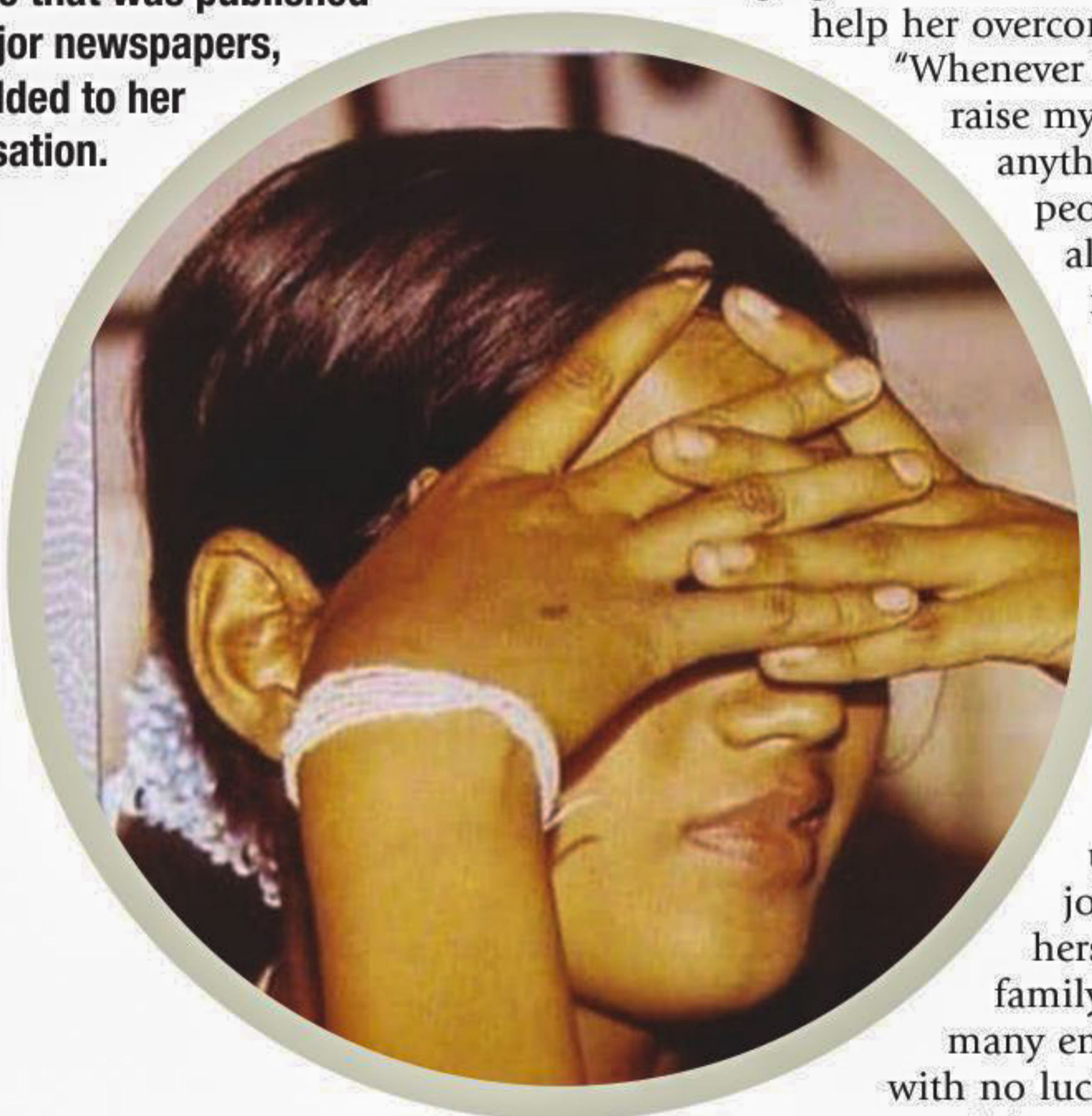




Paper clipping of Purnima's account and photograph back in 2001.

If elected MP, Purnima wants to work on sensitising the media. She blames journalists for disclosing the identity and details of rape survivors without their permission, but doing little to ensure that the perpetrators are punished.

The photo that was published in all major newspapers, which added to her stigmatisation.



After page 3
After her SSC exams, Purnima Shil had to change her name and become Purnima Sarker in the hope that it would allow her a life in which she wasn't simply a "victim" of rape, a minority to be pointed at and interrogated. Purnima was able to complete her bachelors' degree with a new name but in a society in which victim blaming is prevalent, changing her name did very little to help her overcome her trauma.

"Whenever I wanted to raise my voice regarding anything, some people would always try to make me feel ashamed about the fact that I was a rape victim."

But Purnima's hardest struggle began after her graduation when she was unable to get a job to support herself and her family. She went to many employers but with no luck; some would even mock her, saying 'Why are you looking for a job in the private sector? The prime minister will give you a job, go try your luck there'.

"Every day was like hell. I couldn't even start begging; people would still think I had a bad intention for doing so," she remembers.

In 2014, Purnima decided to do something for survivors like herself and registered for an NGO called the 'Purnima Foundation Trust'. But as fate would have it, she didn't receive much support from others, even from local political leaders, who were afraid that if she got exposure, she might take over their position.

"My father died in 2005, with no treatment. My mother needs 230 taka for her medicines daily. My siblings are busy with their own families. No one was

there to take care of my mother and I. At one point, my mother and I even talked about taking our own lives, as we had no way to survive," she says.

"When I saw that nobody was giving me any space, or a job, that my family could not give me shelter, or even arrange my marriage, that's when I thought about joining Awami League," adds Purnima. "I didn't like politics that much, but I always remember my father's words—that Bangabandhu was the sole protector of the Hindus, that he stood by our side when nobody else did—and so I started going to the AL party offices. And during my darkest hours, it was the AL government which helped me. I even served as a personal secretary to Tarana Halim, the former state minister of the information ministry, for 11 months, a year ago."

If elected MP, Purnima wants to work on sensitising the media. She blames journalists for disclosing the identity and details of rape survivors without their permission, but doing little to ensure that the perpetrators are punished.

"I understand the pain of a rape victim, when they want to take their own life, can't form a family, can't get married to their loved ones or survive in the society with minimum empathy. And so, I want to work for them and bring them towards light, so that they can live on their own, for themselves, with dignity.

Children should be taught from an early age that violence against women is unacceptable, that it is a heinous crime and that it is not the woman's fault, and these lessons should be included in the curriculum," she says.

When asked why she didn't contest in the election directly, Purnima answers that election campaigning requires a huge amount of money, which she doesn't have. In fact, she bought her nomination paper with the financial help of one of her well-wishers and a forum called 'Minorities Online Activist Forum'. "Besides, if I had to contest, I would have to fight against the son of HT Imam Sir, which I didn't want to do," she adds.

Purnima is waiting for a call from the Prime Minister. Everyone around her is telling her to lobby for herself and talk to senior leaders. But Purnima doesn't know anyone high-profile enough who can help her. "If she calls me, I will say only one thing—if she wants me to stand by the victims, I will be happy to fight for them and for the country. But if not, I just want to ask: why did they introduce me to the people around the world as a rape victim, why did they take me to the election campaigns in almost every district last year and reintroduce me as a minority rape victim from 2001? I cannot take this identity anymore. I want a life of dignity," she concludes.

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