

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND MENTAL HEALTH

Why we need more family level policy changes



SHAMSIN AHMED

IN April last year, the “two-finger test” on rape victims was banned by the High Court of Bangladesh stating it had no scientific or legal basis. Rights

activists have long been insisting that the “two-finger test” was irrational and tantamount to a second rape of the victim.

While the prohibition of such a procedure was long due, it brings to light the ignorance and negligence of mental health care for victims of violence. In a country where patriarchy is a way of life and victim-blaming is commonplace, this comes as no surprise. But now, more than ever, it is necessary to think about mental health.

The first problem with finding a mental health remedy for victims of violence is that two of the most common kinds of violence against women—domestic abuse and rape—carry a huge amount of stigma. Mental health in the context of Bangladesh is extremely stigmatised and a neglected public health issue. In general, people tend to give importance to physical health, so most victims only seek treatment for physical wounds, whereas the longer term impact of violence is psychological. It is only when it turns into post-traumatic stress disorder that it is given any importance.

That violence is only the physical manifestation of dominance that results from a bad social and psychological environment has only recently begun to be brought to light. The *Lancet Psychiatry*, one of the most prestigious

medical journals in the world, in 2016 highlighted that little research has been done on how to improve identification and treatment of victims and perpetrators in terms of mental health services. This is disconcerting because mental health services can not only help heal victims but also play a major role in primary and secondary prevention of violence against women.

Poor state of mental health is both a cause and consequence of violence against women. Men who have been



SOURCE: POSTER123.INFO

emotionally repressed and abused themselves are prone to wield violence and become perpetrators, while women who are often belittled, and develop low self-esteem as a result, are more prone to be victims and suffer for long periods without speaking out.

This in fact is the second barrier to seeking mental health support for victims of violence. In an article titled “The Burden of Proof” published on November 23, 2018 in the *Star Weekend*, a victim of rape relates how the *ayah* at

the hospital where she went for medical examination said, “If people wear clothes like this, then it is entire [sic] possible for them to be raped.” Faced with such reactions, it is thus no surprise that victims are reluctant to seek psychological help. Despite clinical guidance on the role of mental health professionals in identifying violence against women and responding appropriately, poor identification persists and can lead to non-engagement with services and poor response to treatment.

Due to mental health being a very neglected and stigmatised topic in Bangladesh, there is no national policy for mental health care and the national budget allocation for mental health is not even one percent of our health budget. There is a lot more to be done and there’s a need to address the problem of a dearth of knowledge and resources for developing effective psychosocial interventions.

With the rise of the #MeToo movement and the emergence of stories of millions of women, we seem to have drawn attention to the scale of the problem. Understanding the gravity and scale of violence against women is a necessary first step. That so many women have been affected speaks volumes about the deep psychological wounds that these women have had to live with. It questions the psyche of the society itself that has allowed such violence to take place, without demanding accountability, for ages.

While most of us see it positively that women are starting to speak up about assaults, be it physical or psychological, we have only begun to scratch the surface of “objective violence”. Current interventions to prevent violence against women have

started to address systemic violence and discrimination such as unequal pay for men and women. The more difficult form of violence to address is “symbolic violence”. It is important to identify symbolic violence because, for too long, we have not been able to put mental abuse and manipulation in the context of violence. Where this gets scarier is when it all originates from a supposedly safe place called the “family”.

Our perceptions of gender, through the roles our parents play, are the first indications of how we understand gender. Sadly, especially in the context of Bangladesh and some other places in the world, these gender roles have not changed, particularly in the perceptions of men. So we see more women pursuing higher education, getting jobs, and speaking out about unjust circumstances; yet they increasingly feel the situation has not changed for the better. More women today work in offices and factories but has that reduced their workload at home? Has it increased their decision-making capacity at home? Has it reduced domestic violence and, more importantly, symbolic violence?

Many educated girls and women in Bangladesh are employed by choice and not by necessity; they are not the natural breadwinner of the family. Even when they earn money to provide for their families after marriage, they move into the man’s home to be provided by him, hence the decision-making power is the man’s. While this has changed in practice and many women today are equal contributors to household incomes, the authority of the house is still the man. Men’s understanding of gender roles has not changed significantly. So, a large proportion of

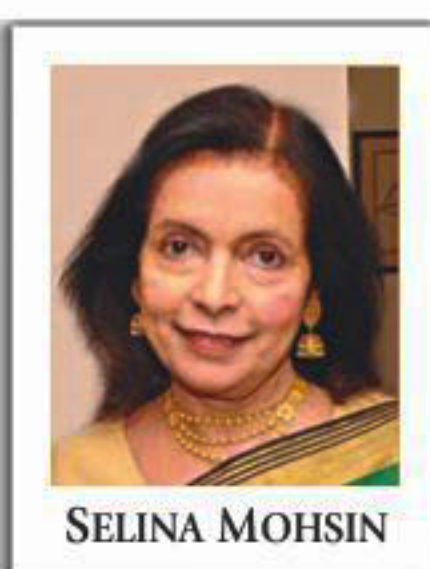
young men still devalue the wants and expectations of women because in the homestead gender roles have not changed. Women are to take care of children, cook and clean because their economic contributions to the household are responsibilities they took on by choice. A choice that requires permission from the authority of the house, the man. This dominion comes from the understanding of those gender roles and to maintain the status quo, men sometimes take to coercion and symbolic violence, i.e. mental abuse.

Women who want to pursue a career are expected to do that only if they are able to manage the household on their own, too. That the maintenance of the household has to be the man’s responsibility as well so that women can pursue a life and career outside the homestead, as is their right, is yet to be socially accepted. This, along with the whole gender disparity phenomenon, cannot be addressed by counselling women alone; men must be brought into it as well and it has to start from the family level.

In Sweden, this cultural change is happening through systemic changes such as parental leave policy. The policy entitles parents of both sexes to 480 days (16 months) of paid parental leave at about 80 percent of their salary and both the parents must share the responsibility. Swedish dads must take some of those 16 months. This has given more prominence to the role of men in the household and changed stereotypical gender roles and perceptions; hence this family-level intervention helps to prevent both systemic and symbolic violence.

Shamsin Ahmed is founder and director of Identity Inclusion, which works towards breaking the mental health stigma and promoting social inclusion of people with psychosocial disabilities.

The other side of social responsibility



SELINA MOHSIN

EVER since I returned to Dhaka in 2011, I have seen how fast Dhaka has been growing. The GDP growth rate has been phenomenal but, with economic

wealth, multifarious challenges have come to the fore: land- and river-grabbing, tree-felling, and endless construction changing the landscape of the city. Recently, Dhaka topped the rankings of the world’s cities with the worst air quality and one of the reasons for this is that the city is being stripped of most of its greenery. Even a few trees can improve air quality and provide a sense of well-being, thereby helping people reduce stress. Consequently, the few parks that are left in this concrete jungle are like gems for the city-dwellers. Yet, even these parks, where many people of all ages go to hoping to momentarily escape the suffocating fumes of city traffic, are not maintained properly. A terrible experience I had a few months ago will illustrate the callousness of those in charge of one of these rare oases.

One fine evening last November, I went for a walk in the nearby park. The park is known by its two names, “Ladies Park” and “Rashtrapoti Bicharpoti Shahabuddin Ahmed Park”, situated on Road 83, Gulshan. Having had knee replacement surgery, I had been advised by my doctor to walk for 45 minutes every day as part of my recovery. I was walking with my mobile phone in one hand towards the right side of the circle on the road. I passed the place where, as usual, some men were playing badminton under bright lights. I then crossed the chancery police guard room. After a few minutes, I came to a corner

of the park. It was completely dark—the bulb on the light post was broken.

I carefully stepped forward but there was no road, only a ditch covered with sharply broken bricks for construction. My canvas shoes hit one large brick and I fell headlong on the bed of bricks. I made a painstaking effort to get up but could not. My body was inert. Blood was oozing from my right knee with the cut artery near my right eye spurting out blood. From my recumbent position, I could see about 20 yards away the badminton players continuing to play merrily.

After what seemed like ages, a chancery policeman saw me. He screamed, “Blood, blood!” Other constables came running and one brought a newspaper to stem the flow of blood near my right eye. I whispered

It seems we do not give enough importance to social values like good citizenship, responsibility, honesty, or even basic decency.

with great effort to ask them to pull me up. They caught hold of my hair and arm and pulled me up towards a stall where a man measured my blood pressure.

My last call on my mobile phone had been to my driver so with difficulty I pressed the call button and managed to get him. “Come quickly,” I whispered. He came running.

Suddenly, a man appeared out of



The few parks we have left in Dhaka city are, for many, a much-needed source of respite from the suffocating fumes of city traffic.

nowhere saying, “I am an advocate of the Supreme Court. I can take you to United Hospital.”

“No, Apollo Hospital,” I murmured. I was somehow carried to my car. The advocate sat down beside me. I tried to speak to him pleasantly on the way.

In the hospital’s emergency room, the physician on duty immediately took me in. The surgery took one and a half hours and medicines were prescribed.

Pushed in a wheelchair, I was brought towards the exit and found to my surprise the advocate standing there. I asked the nurse to hand me my bag so that I could pay the hospital bill with my credit card.

“No, I will pay and you can pay me back. Using credit cards is dangerous,” the advocate said. I had used credit cards many times at this hospital but was too weak to remonstrate. The advocate paid the bill of Tk 18,209.75. My driver noted down his address so that the money could be returned.

I drove back with him saying, weakly, that I would initiate a case against the

park authorities for not taking precautions for walkers.

“You don’t have to do it. I shall initiate a case for you,” the advocate assured me. He called me the next day saying that he had lodged a case. I returned his money, sent a “Thank you” card and a bouquet of flowers for his wife.

He wanted to come and see me with his family. When I invited them over, he was delighted but expressed his regrets at the last moment. From then on, he neither responded to my calls nor replied to my text messages. He disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared in the park.

I waited but eventually found that no case had been lodged. His assurance had been a hoax.

I got the details of the general secretary of the park and spoke to him. “I had an accident in November in the park,” I said.

“I know, you fell down. I saw it.” He had been playing badminton.

“Why was there no light?” I asked. “It

was out of order,” he replied indifferently.

“Why was the area not cordoned off to avoid accidents?”

“Not necessary.”

“What? I was seriously injured!” I exclaimed.

“People will be able to walk safely when the road is fixed,” he replied.

“Why are the roads not properly illuminated?”

No answer.

I was appalled at his complete lack of compassion. He had been playing badminton with thousands of watts of lights and did not bother to care about what happened to a senior woman lying on the ground, with blood splattered on sharp bricks, even though he had seen me fall!

The accident has left me with acute pain in my knee and right eye along with sharp headaches but all that pales in comparison to the shock and disappointment I feel about my fellow human beings. An official in charge of a park meant to provide relief to the residents of the area did not have the sense of responsibility to make sure the lights were working so accidents would not happen. He didn’t have the common decency to help someone who had been injured because of his negligence.

We take pride in our economic growth; we demand quality education, health services and implementation of affirmative reforms. But, it seems we do not give enough importance to social values like good citizenship, responsibility, accountability, honesty, human rights, freedom of expression or even basic human decency. Without these values, no matter how much we “develop” economically, as a country, we will remain handicapped when it comes to the most fundamental principles.

Selina Mohsin is a former ambassador.

QUOTABLE Quote

ROBERT FROST (1874-1963)
AMERICAN POET

Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

| | | |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| ACROSS | 34 Parisian pal | 8 Meal for a Manx |
| 1 Stopwatch button | 35 Co. abbr. | 9 Biofuel option |
| 6 Kitchen gadget | 36 Part of a student's email address | 10 Do museum work |
| 11 Sun-dried brick | 37 Ballpark give-aways | 14 Sinuous fish |
| 12 Use a soapbox | 40 Loafed around | 19 Piercing tools |
| 13 Relaxing soaks | 41 Bert's buddy | 22 Fishhook feature |
| 15 Water cooler | 42 Most new drivers | 23 Live together |
| 16 Director Spike | 43 Sees socially | 24 Apple pie order |
| 17 Dieter's no-no | DOWN | 25 Like good hand-writing |
| 18 Fouls up, as plans | 1 Zealous | 26 Pitched suddenly |
| 20 Musci's Yoko | 2 Bring out | 28 Walking aid |
| 21 Director Anderson | 3 Very serious | 30 Desolate areas |
| 22 Churlish one | 4 Subside | 31 Inclined |
| 23 Uses the phone | 5 Boob tubes, in Britain | 32 Jockey Arcaro |
| 26 Soup server | 6 Judge's wear | 33 Tricks |
| 27 Bullfight cries | 7 S&L offering | 38 Actor Affleck |
| 28 Nasty dog | | 39 Epoch's kin |
| 29 Crone | | |
| 30 Small songbird | | |

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott