



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

A Perpetrator's Prerogative

The accused who accused his accusers

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About a month back, a 20-year-old man—a university student—was accused of sexual harassment and assault by multiple girls who came forward on social media. Following the circulation of posts exposing his alleged behavior, he faced, at max, a blast of “angry” emojis and hateful comments. So, he approached my friend Nuzhat’s organisation PrivaC, which mediates cyber-crime solutions—claiming that he had been wrongfully accused, defamed and victimised. She

was already acquainted with him through common friends, but since I didn’t know him personally at all, she passed the case over me to orchestrate a matter-of-fact evaluation of his claims relating to three distinct cases.

The first case was verified by Nuzhat’s team after the victim had reached out to PrivaC earlier. It was later posted by the victim’s friend as a cautionary tale and gained furious traction online. The screenshots reflected conversations

between the two from when they were both 14 years old. His messages to the girl starkly displayed ferocious coercion: “You *have* to do it tomorrow, you said you would do it today.” The girl’s messages indicated unmistakable helplessness: she was ill with a fever and yet she was trying to satisfy him but she just couldn’t. His responses were, “Can’t you watch porn and learn?” His words also mirrored emotional manipulation: “Can’t I be a happy boyfriend?” (referring to the victim’s unwillingness to “perform an act”)

Prior to questioning, I had to dispel my first impression from reading the texts—particularly, the *feeling* that he was probably guilty, as those chats spoke for themselves to his solid disadvantage.

I asked him, “Were you in a relationship with the person you wrote these messages to?” He replied, “I had only one girlfriend and a few flings. I don’t remember which girl I could’ve said this to.” I tacitly framed the next question, “If you don’t remember who you said this to, could it have been one of your girlfriends?” And he replied, “Well of course, I, like other guys, would only talk like that to a girlfriend.”

However, soon, he admitted otherwise. “I’m not proud of it, but I’ve had many girlfriends... I didn’t say it earlier as I didn’t want anyone to judge me.” I corrected his misplaced observation, stating that dating women was clearly not the issue in question. This misunderstanding seems to be a common one among teenagers today—which comes as no surprise as adults in our society continuously reinforce this misconception. For instance, in the comment section for one of the posts, a middle-aged man wrote, “First teach these kids that these relationships before marriage are illegal.” The legal age of marriage is 18 (Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017) and the legal age of consent is 14 (Act No. XLV of the Penal Code 1860), so the claim that its an “illegal” relationship is incorrect. Sanctioning pre-marital relationships as taboo ensures that young adults don’t learn what constitutes a healthy one and a toxic one. By drawing focus to the prejudice against dating itself, teenage men tend to duck the implications of the real problem: the inability to behave like a proper human being and their thorny, endangering behaviour towards others. In this case, the perpetrator’s ambivalence heightened by the minute.

We arrived at a conclusion regarding who the victim could have been, and Nuzhat requested the girl to give him access to their past chat logs (she had blocked him), so that he in turn could provide the same screenshots from his end. If the two versions matched, he would be proven guilty. But he arrived with no clear answer, rather empty chat threads corroborating his empty claims that nothing happened, ever. Her screenshots, on the other hand, clearly showed the “seen” stamp beneath her sent messages. We showed these screenshots to the boy, and yet the evidence didn’t carve even the slightest dent in his denial, even as his stories became more confusing and directionless.

One of his clumsy defenses was that his phone had been stolen when the conversations happened back in 2015.

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