



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

and needed up to Tk 10 lakhs as a bribe to secure it. Helena, in good faith, says she then gave her lifetime savings, nearly Tk 1 lakh, and took a loan of Tk 2.5 lakh from a rural development NGO, which Jasim said he would repay once he started his job.

Tara Miah also took a loan of Tk 1,50,000 from her paternal aunt back home and told Helena's other relatives that she had gotten married to Jasim and took money from them in the name of giving gifts to the new bridegroom.

#### The abuse

The most devastating things happened next. According to Helena, one day Jasim asked her to go with Tara Miah as they were going to marry at a Kazi office. Helena went with him in good faith. But instead of going to the Kazi office, he took her to a house where she says he attempted to rape her.

"I never imagined that that man could do this to me. Not only this but he had told me that he was someone else and wanted to marry me. Since I didn't agree, he threatened me saying that he would release the nude photos and videos he had taken and he wouldn't repay my loans. He beat me severely and then took my signature on a piece of paper," she says.

Helena says she wanted to leave him but Tara Miah continued to blackmail her and didn't allow her to go back to her village or share the events with relatives or

and her husband Tara Miah rented a room worth Tk 3,000 in the middle of last September. "As far as I know, the man was unemployed and he came every month when Helena would get her salary. We would find Helena crying all night and the other tenants could not sleep well for her crying. We asked her several times but she wouldn't share anything with us. Later, like the other tenants, I assumed that her husband had married another woman," she says.

Sultana also mentions that Helena wouldn't cook, take showers, or ever smile. "I sometimes gave her food. At the end of last month, she became extremely sick and unable to attend work. I called her husband to take her, but he refused to do so. Later, finding no other solution, I called her younger brother, who took her home," she adds.

#### Pursuing a legal battle—nearly impossible for the poor

Helena's relatives have finally been able to file a case against Tara Miah in Rangpur judge court. According to Helena's paternal uncle Wahed Ali, the police of Pirgachha thana in Rangpur was reluctant to take her case, as the events in question occurred in Gazipur. "But it is impossible for us to deal with a case in Gazipur, as I need to take care of Helena at the same time. Her younger sisters' in-laws are not allowing them to visit her," he says.

Star Weekend contacted Pirgachha thana OC Md Rezaul Karim about Tara Miah's recent threats towards Helena. He said, "If there is any issue of threats in my area, only then can we take the case."

Tara Miah had previously offered Tk 1.5 lakhs, through relatives, to 'settle' the matter. Otherwise, he threatens to release Helena's photographs and videos. Star Weekend could not get in touch with Tara Miah, because he and his family members went on hiding. Since then, his number is also switched off.

However, we have listened to a phone recording provided by Helena. Tara had called her phone, and she recorded the conversation. "You told everything to your uncle. I will see what you can do now. Do whatever you want, I don't have any problem. I thought since I have married you, I won't show those (images and videos) to anyone. But now I think I don't have any option," the recording states.

According to Wahed Ali, law enforcers as well as legal aid offices, seemed hesitant about taking the case because they are suspicious as to why Helena gave such a large amount of money to Tara Miah or why she kept silent for years. But according to Helena and her close friends and relatives, she was suffering from depression for years while struggling to support her family and enduring blackmail. She says she could not have spoken up.

"My confidence as an educated independent woman evaporated and I was so depressed that I wasn't in a state to get out. Sometimes, I thought I would take my own life but I ultimately couldn't. But now, I truly want to get out of it. I kept silent for years because I feared for my dignity and money, which has already been destroyed. Now, I want justice for the nightmares that happened to me," Helena says from her sickbed.

**Additional Reporting done by Kongkon Karmaker, Dinajpur Correspondent of The Daily Star.**

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friends.

"I was so helpless that I started a job in the quality section of Tanaz Fashion garments in Tongi. Tara Miah would come from Rangpur when I got my salary, take all the money from me and give only around Tk 200-300 for my food for the whole month. I protested but he would beat me severely and blackmail me with the photos and videos. At one point, I became so sick that I could not get up from the bed and had to leave my job," she adds.

Star Weekend contacted Sultana Begum, the caretaker of the house where Helena was staying. According to Sultana, Helena

# She Suffered in Silence

NILIMAJAHAN

28-year-old Helena Akter, from Pirgachha, Rangpur, is currently battling for her life due to pulmonary tuberculosis, psychological trauma, and other health complications. According to her relatives, doctors of Rangpur Medical College Hospital even recommended that her relatives take her home as her TB is infectious and the hospital authorities say that it may spread to other patients.

This all happened as a result of the alleged constant physical and mental abuse she endured for the past year and a half from a neighbour Md Tara Miah, whom she used to call *uncle*. According to Helena, he forcefully married her by hatching a plot—seducing her over the phone under another identity, filming intimate moments, and then threatening to upload these clips online if he wasn't given money. This way, Tara Miah extorted around Tk 8,00, 000 from Helena in the past two years. Her younger brother rescued her from a house in Gazipur at the beginning of this month, after which she was taken to the hospital in her home district of Rangpur.

Helena's story could have been different. She was an independent working woman who lost her mother when she was five and then her father at 13. Inevitably, the responsibility of her three siblings fell on her and despite the lack of financial and family support, she continued her studies and moved to Dhaka in 2013 to complete her masters in Islamic History and Culture at Eden College. According to

her younger sister Hena, after completing her masters, Helena was finding it difficult to land a job. "She would manage money for our food and schooling by doing part-time jobs in different event management companies. Later, in 2017, she managed a full-time job with a meagre salary (around Tk 10,000) as a field officer of a microcredit organisation in Gazipur," she says. Despite her hardships, she arranged and paid for the weddings of her two younger sisters. "Now, it was her turn. Our relatives were searching for a suitable bridegroom," she adds.

#### The plot

According to Helena, Md Tara Miah claimed he had found Jasim Uddin, a potential groom for her. Helena was interested and asked him to proceed. "Acting as Jasim, Tara Miah spoke with me on the phone. I couldn't imagine that he would trick me like that. All I knew was that I fell in love with the man on the other end of the phone," she says.

Helena claims that a few days later the man told her that he needed to complete a course for his job, for which he needed Tk 10,000 monthly, and asked for it from her. "Since I was hoping to marry him, I didn't think twice about investing in his future and paid Tk 1,20,000 from my salary over one year through Tara Miah."

Jasim never wanted to meet her in person though and always made excuses when Helena asked to meet him. She was convinced that he was busy with his studies and preparation for jobs. A few days later, Jasim told Helena that he had an offer for a job as a police sub-inspector