

Rape: It's not all about patriarchy



BADIUZZAMAN BAY

DOES the outpouring of anger and grief after some of the high-profile rape crimes in recent months signal a social awakening? Can a death sentence for the rapists bring closure to the families of victims? Will the ongoing chorus of outrage lead to actual action resulting in reductions in such crimes?

The answer to the first question is arguably "yes". The answer to the second is "maybe". And the answer to the last, unfortunately, is "no".

Bangladesh's struggle with rape has of late moved to the centre stage of public concerns thanks to the rise in rape crimes, bringing forth some troubling questions: why is the country failing to check these crimes? Why does a society that, justly, prides itself on strong family values continue to tolerate widespread violence against women? The recent outrage suggests a deeper public engagement with these issues but it also lays bare our inflexible approach to understanding rape, which is still considered a "women's issue" in which men are by design complicit. This is the only allowable truth about rape in our society.

Recently, I was reading an article that claimed that patriarchy, which underpins the male-dominated power dynamics in society, is singularly responsible for rape and other forms of sexual violence. Rape, in that sense, is an asexual act—"it's not about sex, it's about power." Power over the weaker sex, that is. Proponents of this school of thought tend to view any argument contradicting it as rape apologia. Of course, men remain the primary instigators of physical assault, which is a result of the imbalance of power between the victim and the perpetrator, but is it reasonable to support a blanket condemnation of men? More importantly, does this patriarchy-centred rape narrative capture the total picture?

According to American writer and rape survivor Charlotte Shane July, the contention that rape should be regarded as an "asexual act" has done nothing to remedy this. "Insisting that no rape is ever 'about' sex but is rather about an individual man acting on a patriarchal mandate to sow terror by exercising 'power' does a disservice to us all." The point of this argument is that bringing "exclusive" focus to patriarchy takes our attention away from other possible reasons that may exist. How would you, for example, explain the recent gang-rape of a male adult in Gazipur after his failure to pay extortion money? How would you explain the rape of a girl by her father?

How would you contextualise sexual harassment by a female perpetrator? What about paedophilia, a psychiatric disorder that is documented in both men and women? Are these crimes and medical conditions also reflections of an ulterior motive to exercise male power? Clearly, there are more layers to peel off this metaphorical onion than just one (patriarchal mandate).

Some years ago, a Reddit thread soliciting stories of sexual assaults came up with startling confessions that offered a profound insight into the minds of rapists. While comments in the conversation thread would at times seem disgusting, they do help you realise that rape is every bit as complex as murder or other violent and non-sexual crimes. The

problem—the other part has to do with external factors including the unique social setting from which rapists emerge.

An analysis of most of the reported cases of rape in recent years would shine a light on a young demographic that is poor, vulnerable, poorly educated, semi-skilled, and high on drugs living in a country that has an awful track record of drug abuse, human rights violations, political unrest, etc. Some of the blame for the rising rape crimes also goes to our criminal justice system: too few judges and policemen, shoddy investigations, questionable trials, low conviction rates. We cannot expect our anti-rape campaign to succeed without recognising the role that these factors play in the making of a criminal—and a rapist. Unfortunately,

our need to feel connected to the victims to be sympathetic: "our daughters", "our sisters", "our wives". This is patriarchy in its most alluring form. Inherent in this form of identification is a tacit rejection of the individual identity of the rape victims. Yes, a female victim is certainly someone's daughter or sister, but this is NOT why raping her is wrong.

A unique protest in Jaipur, India about two years ago saw four girls standing on the roadside with some posters in their hands, which read: "Come on, rape me please, because I ain't anybody's sister", "I am waiting to be gangraped, because my husband isn't waiting for me at home", "Can anybody tear off my mini-skirt and make me naked? My father won't feel ashamed of me." As provocative as the message of these four girls is, this is a powerful statement against people's tendency to ascribe value to victims through their relations with the male members of society.

Another unintended effect of the exclusive focus on patriarchy is increasing the vulnerability of the victims, who are often forced to believe that rape is the worst thing that can happen to a woman. Charlotte Shane July, while debunking this "mythology" of rape's status as the ruination of all who go through it, posits that by promoting this belief, we inadvertently establish a fantasy of absolute male sexual power and absolute female vulnerability. "We are, in essence, honouring the timeless belief that a woman's worth, self-respect, and ability to function within society are dictated exclusively by the sexual use of her body," she said. This probably does a more lasting damage to a rape survivor than the actual act of rape.

Unfortunately, our society is still unable to address rape with the clarity and sobriety that the topic deserves. Unless we address rape in all its permutations—and not just within the context of patriarchy—no amount of outrage will help to reduce it. It is, therefore, important that we approach the problem with an open mind and not exacerbate it with our own narrow figuration of rape. Also, it's important that we recognise that rapists are not some vile agents of patriarchy hiding in the bushes to strike but rather ordinary people with discernible motives. Of course, there is no denying the cataclysmic impact of patriarchy on our society. But there is also no denying the importance of fostering frank, honest conversations about sex—and sexual assaults—in non-generalising and non-victimising terms. Only then can everyone take part in the conversation and possibly find a solution that actually works.

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STAR GRAPHICS

there is simply not enough debate on this in our existing rape discourse.

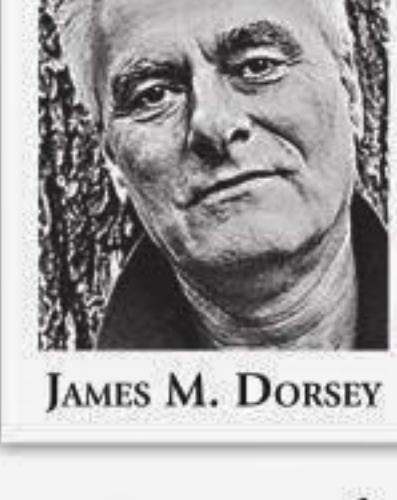
An exclusive focus on patriarchy has some unintended consequences, too. For one, it corrupts our idea of a solution. This was illustrated, most recently, by a statement by the bereaved father of six-year-old Samia Afrin Saima who was raped and killed in July 2019. He urged parents to stay "alert" so that their daughters don't have to endure the brutalities that his had to.

"I couldn't protect my daughter," he said, "try to protect yours." As authentic as his emotion is, the fundamental issues underlying his remark are more complex. Firstly, it supports a case for police officials to outsource their duty to provide security to the parents (read citizens) themselves. It also exemplifies

motivations cited by the assailants who shared their stories are many: some talked about getting "mixed message" from their partners, some talked about peer pressure, some thought women were objects for the taking, others blamed it on their biology. Some blamed bad parenting. Some also blamed the internet and bad influences such as pornographic material.

The stories of these men (and women), and the many other motivations that have been known to exist, contradict the conventional feminist notion of patriarchy being responsible for all sex crimes. They also illustrate why, to address the rape epidemic in Bangladesh, it is imperative that we undertake broader research into what's causing it. Of course, patriarchy, misogyny and other personal motivations are only part of the

Playing Palestinian politics: UAE-backed ex-security chief weighs his options



JAMES M. DORSEY

A controversial former security official and Abu Dhabi-based political operator, Mohammed Dahlan, has lurked for several years in the shadows of Palestinian politics. Now, he could

emerge as a monkey wrench in an attempt to pave the way for US President Donald J Trump's much-maligned "deal of the century" to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

President Mahmoud Abbas, the head of the Palestine Authority, and Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, have condemned the proposed, yet-to-be-published deal and boycotted a conference in Bahrain in June organised by Jared Kushner—Trump's negotiator and son-in-law—that focussed on economic aspects of the proposal.

The Palestinian boycott followed Abbas' earlier rejection of the United States as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the Trump administration recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, cut off funding and closed down the Palestinian representation in Washington. Trump has since recognised the occupied Syrian Golan Heights as part of Israel.

Kushner unveiled at the conference, attended by government officials and businessmen from the Gulf, the United States, Europe and Asia, a USD 50 billion investment plan—USD 28 billion of which would be earmarked for the creation of Palestinian jobs and reduction of poverty.

The Trump administration has said it would release political details of the peace plan only after the September 17 Israeli election so that it does not become an issue in what appears to be a tight electoral race between prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and former military chief Benny Gantz's Blue and White.

Saudi and United Arab Emirates crown princes, Mohammed bin Salman and Mohammed bin Zayed, have quietly sought to support the US peace effort that in Kushner's words will deviate from the 2002 Arab peace plan by not calling

for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dahlan, who is believed to be close to the UAE's Prince Mohammed as well as former Israeli defence minister Avigdor Lieberman, has played an important role in that effort, particularly with regard to UAE efforts to clip Hamas' wings.

Dahlan went into exile in the UAE in 2007 after Hamas defeated his US-backed efforts to thwart the group's control in Gaza. US President George W Bush described Dahlan at the time as "our

in Qatar support for Gaza's health and education services as well as reconstruction.

Qatar, with its close ties to various Islamist movements, has long supported Hamas, while Prince Mohammed's visceral opposition to any expression of political Islam has pitted the UAE against the movement.

The two states' diametrically opposed views of political Islam lie at the core of the rift in the Gulf with the UAE alongside Saudi Arabia leading a more than



Palestinian demonstrators shout during clashes with Israeli troops during a protest at the Israel-Gaza border east of Gaza City, on April 6, 2018.

move comes against the backdrop of a broader, sustained UAE-Saudi effort to facilitate the US peace plan, despite the two states' official insistence that East Jerusalem should be the capital of an independent Palestinian state, and counter-maneuvering in Palestine by Qatar and its ally Turkey.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE sought to weaken Turkish efforts to exploit opposition to Trump's recognition of Jerusalem to bolster its claim to leadership of the Muslim world and weaken Jordan's role as the custodian of the Haram esh-Sharif in the city that is home to the Al Aqsa mosque, Islam's third most holy site.

Speaking earlier this year to an Arab media outlet believed to be close to Qatar, Kamal Khatib, an Israeli-Palestinian Islamist leader, asserted that Dahlan, working through local businessmen, had unsuccessfully tried to acquire real estate adjacent to the holy site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount where Judaism's two ancient temples once stood.

With approximately half of its population of Palestinian descent, Jordan has walked a tight rope balancing its reluctance to endorse the Trump administration's approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace-making with its complex ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Unlike Jordan, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are not shackled by Palestinian demographics but need to tread carefully in supporting an initiative that is widely believed to be designed to deprive Palestinians of independent statehood because of domestic public sentiment and fears that it would backfire and strengthen Hamas.

A formal re-entry into Palestinian politics by Dahlan could help resolve the UAE and Saudi dilemma that is accentuated by concern that too much pressure on Abbas to reverse his rejection of US mediation could boost Hamas with its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Said one Gulf official, "We are trying to strike a delicate balance. The key in doing so is to strengthen moderates, not extremists," the official's codeword for Hamas and other Islamists.

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Probe into Titash's death unsatisfactory

Ordinary citizens deserve better

ON July 31, we wrote an editorial about the tragic death of Titash Ghosh in Madaripur due to a three-hour delay of the ferry carrying him that had to wait for a high official to arrive, despite the pleadings of the family who needed to get the injured boy to Dhaka for a much-needed surgery. As a result of the subsequent public outcry, a writ and High Court order, the authorities held an enquiry headed by an additional secretary of the Cabinet Division, whose report has now been submitted to the attorney general's office.

It comes as no surprise that the probe has found no "logical grounds" to hold the joint secretary in question responsible for the ferry delay. Rather, it has mentioned that some terminal (ghat) officials are to blame. It does not stand up to logic that without specific instructions, ferry officials would whimsically hold up a ferry for three hours in spite of pleadings by the family concerned. According to reports, waiting vehicles were not allowed to board the ferry till it was ascertained that the official in question was nearby. Due to the prevalence of an unwritten "VIP" culture, officials at district levels and those on tour routinely abuse their power and office to take undue advantage where public facilities are concerned.

In spite of all the assurances of a fair enquiry, we are left with a probe report conducted by the peers of the person accused and hence its findings do not come as a surprise at all. This sort of report will do nothing to do away with the "VIP" culture that reduces ordinary citizens to humiliation, hardship or even death. We hope some remedial measures will follow from all this so that the death of Titash does not go in vain.

Crack down on the syndicate of sand traders

Illegal sand extraction putting Bongshi river and nearby land at risk

IT is most unfortunate that despite there being strict laws against illegal sand-lifting from rivers, such practices continue unabated all across the country. As this daily reported on September 4, indiscriminate sand-lifting from the Bongshi river in Bashna area of Dhamrai upazila is posing a threat to nearby farmlands and homesteads and escalating the risk of river erosion. During a recent visit to the spot, our correspondent found that a syndicate of sand traders, led by a politically influential person, was extracting sand using two locally assembled dredging machines. According to the residents of the area, sand lifting at the spot has been going on for the last eight months.

We often see the local administrations conducting mobile court drives against illegal dredging, but as soon as they leave the place, things go back to business as usual. In this particular case, although the Dhamrai upazila administration burned down the dredging machines used to lift sand a week before Eid-ul-Azha, the traders brought two new dredgers and resumed extraction within a short period of time. It is, therefore, clear that only conducting occasional drives won't stop such mindless practices.

What is most disturbing is that the sand traders often do this in collusion with the local administration and the law enforcers. As long as this continues, beyond the occasional spectacles of a clearance drive, it will be unreasonable to expect a genuine effort to crack down on the syndicates of sand traders and prevent sand-lifting once and for all. So, we urge the government to take strict legal action against those engaged in these mindless acts and their collaborators in the administration and the police force. We have ample laws to protect our rivers and those need to be implemented.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Reschedule BUET, medical admission tests

This year's admission season for tertiary education is just around the corner. The students are right now taking preparation for their admission in one of the many public universities and medical colleges across the country. Generally, most students who are from the science background target engineering universities and medical colleges. However, these students will be in trouble this year as the entrance exams of the medical colleges (both public and private) and BUET will be held on October 4 and 5, respectively.

The admission tests for medical colleges for the MBBS course will be held in nineteen centres across the country, while the admission test for BUET will be held on its own campus in Dhaka. Attending the back-to-back tests will be a problem especially for the travelling students. How are they going to attend the test for MBBS one day and attend the BUET admission test the very next day? It's a matter of great concern among the students and their guardians. Surely, some students will fail to participate in one of the tests and some will not be able to perform as well as they can.

I think the authorities should consider this predicament and reschedule the admission dates for the sake of the admission-seekers.

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