

PHOTO: KAZI AKTIB BIN ASAD

Farewell

AFSARA KHAN

Goodbye, old friend.
It was great while you were here,
So many memories,
All the old photos we share.
This run was long, a lifetime together,
Loved you so much, thought we'd be forever.
But these days I'm starting to wonder
If you ever needed me, as much as I needed you.
I guess you didn't bother.
Never even noticed me, did you?
You were there when I was born,
But I fear that "you" is long gone.
I know life gets to us, things change,
But you could've chosen me,
Yet you thought better to estrange.
You're not "you" anymore
I can see it in your stare.
Every friendly gesture I show
You counter with a glare.
A stranger now, a foreign being,
That is what you are now,
A caged soul that needs freeing.
So perhaps it's time I let you go.
But if we were to meet again,
All I want is for you to know
That we will always be the same as we were before.
You will be welcomed if you're at my door.
Till then, my friend, its best we bid farewell
Just know that I always have and always will
Wish you well.

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A COW'S DREAM

MOHUA MOULI

"When are we going to the farmhouse?"

"I don't know."

Bilqis and Ruma have been ploughing the fields for a while now and it's starting to get dark. It wouldn't have been a problem if their master wasn't such a pitiful human being.

"My back hurts, I don't think I can work any more today," moaned Bilqis.

"My feet are killing me too, but we can't leave until we are done with this patch. Or would you rather go to sleep with a half-empty stomach?" added Ruma.

Bilqis sighed and got back to work with a back ache that was getting worse every second. This was her first season in the fields where her sister Ruma had been working for two seasons already, where their mother and aunts and grandmother worked their whole lives. The master and his family have been a part of this farm for generations too. But the man who now runs the farmland has grown old and senile.

The cows grazing in the next field laugh at Bilqis and Ruma because their master doesn't clean the sisters very often. They are usually always covered in mud. Meanwhile, the other cows are tall, proud, plump and their beautiful coats of fur are always shining in the afternoon sun.

Every evening, Bilqis watches the other cows slowly walking towards their barn. She gawks at them in wonder and her eyes follow them with envy, as she tries to imagine her near-skeletal, dirt-covered body walking next to them. It feels like a crime to even imagine it. She longs to be one of them, a cow of dignity and valour, until Ruma shoves her with her horns and brings Bilqis back

to reality.

"Get to work, we are going to be late again," groans Ruma.

"We are always late anyway. We are doing the work of five cows every day. How do you put up with this?" inquires Bilqis.

Ruma replies, "This is the life we've been given and it is what it is."

This was never good enough for Bilqis, she had always wanted more out of life. While she contemplated, she saw a man on his beautiful chestnut horse. Now that seemed like a life with purpose. Bilqis always admired horses and the work they did. And no creature looked as majestic as a horse with a full mane of silky straight hair.

"You know what I want? I want to have a head full of long, silky hair. Just like that man's horse," said Bilqis, sadly.

Ruma smirked and asked, "And how do you plan on getting this long and silky mane, you dumb cow?"

Bilqis looked at her sister with sparkly eyes and said, "I'll go ask the horse myself." And with that, she shook the ploughing tool off her back and she began to run. Out of breath, covered in mud and parched, Bilqis ran like there was no tomorrow.

Ruma gasped in awe as her sister ran off into the sunset to catch the man's horse. "Bilqis. Stop! You're going to pass out. Don't run. Come back!" she cried.

Bilqis ran as her sister's voice faded away behind her. The closer she came to the horizon, the further it felt out of reach. She didn't know if it was still getting darker or if her eyes were growing heavier, but she kept running to the horse because for the first time in her life, she was chasing her dream.



A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

"It is generally known that teenagers go through immense changes in terms of physical and emotional growth due to the influence of hormones. One of the natural responses to such hormonal changes is the development of feelings for their peers," said Sharmin Haque, Clinical Psychologist at Square Hospital, when asked about the inevitability of the situation.

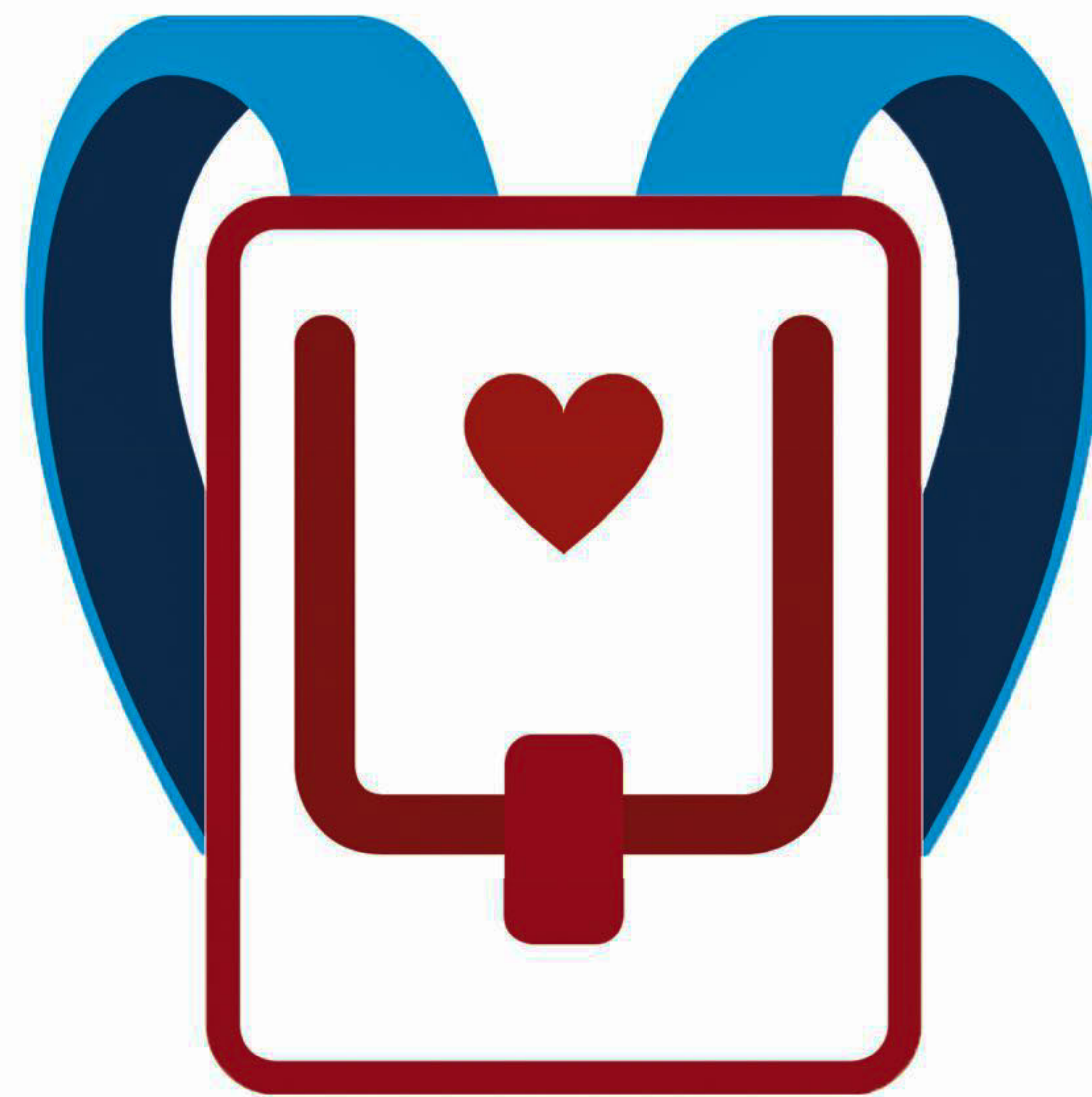
Sometimes, teenagers may feel like the experiences they are going through are unnatural and that they have lost control over their own decisions. What makes matters worse for them is the inevitable interest and attraction they may develop towards their peers, leading to teenage relationships. The question to ask, though, is if they are receiving the *proper* counsel they require to deal with a situation that is so unavoidable in nature.

THE STATUS QUO

Upon being asked about relationships people have been a part of, or have witnessed during their years in school, the following are a few experiences I came across.

"Being the eldest in the house, it was expected of me to be a role model to my younger siblings. However, when I was suspended from school because I was standing next to a girl (with whom I was known to be in a relationship) during recess, it came as a shock to my family. Not only was I ridiculed in front of my family for having emotions as a guy and acting on them, but I was also shunned for thinking about anything other than my education 'at this age'. Ever since that incident, all the teachers had 'marked' us and would use every opportunity to humiliate us in class," shared Shafkat Hussain*, an alumni of a private school in Uttara.

"During middle school, a friend of mine had been dating a guy from outside school. He'd often come to visit her while she was in school, and they'd see each other through the window during recess. So, one day when the teacher found out my friend was speaking to someone through the window, she immediately called had the window sealed off and did not give her any chance to speak. Her brother was called in to have him informed of the events that had taken place. The situation quickly got



DESIGN: KAZI AKTIB BIN ASAD

out of hand and things got extremely messy as the abrupt turn of events had adverse effects on my friend's mental health," recalls Neela Rahim*, a student of a renowned Bangla-medium girls' school in Ramna.

These are only two of the numerous stories where adolescents have had to deal with more than their fair share as a result of them having natural feelings, which they have little to no control over. Stories of expulsion, serious disciplinary actions and humiliation were shared that not only seriously harmed their mental health, but easily distorted their ideas about the nature of healthy relationships.

Apart from that, making children face dire consequences that may be detrimental to their future does not send the right message to the children anyway.

WE ARE SENDING THE WRONG MESSAGE

"In my school, most teachers gave us a

very distorted image of what girls and relationships were like. We were told that their only intention is to 'distract poor boys' and manipulate them into getting into relationships that would essentially ruin their lives. One of the teachers even referred to girls as 'the witch that chats with you from the other side of the screen' in order to get his point across," said Imran Hossain*, former student of a boys' school in Mohammadpur, when asked about the kind of conversations that took place about the topic.

The conservative approach that most schools take and the lack of proper discussion surrounding these topics provide the perfect grounds for toxic ideologies that demonise girls and assign inappropriate gender roles to exist. These narratives are thus passed on to the children in their crucial years which they may internalise. On a larger scale, these ideals allow bigger problems to remain deeply rooted in our society in the form of structural abuse.

"A patient that I've treated as a child for familial issues came back to me after a few years dressed quite differently from how she used to. Later in that conversation it became apparent that she'd only been dressing up that way because her boyfriend at the time had imposed his beliefs and insecurities onto her. As odd as that may sound, projection of one's feelings is very common at this age because they don't know how to deal with their feelings properly, thus, they often get involved in situations where they are pressured into involving themselves in activities they are not completely comfortable with," added Sharmin Haque.

Due to the nature of our society and difference in beliefs of every individual, it is common that young adults are often pressured into behaving in certain ways and involving themselves in practices that may or may not align with their personal beliefs. Sadly, not all of these situations result in passive consequences. Sometimes the consequences are far more direct and imminent. Sexual harassment in the form of coercion comes to mind.

However, coercion can take multiple forms. Some may be visible through the internet and now that social media has become more and more available to young adults in recent times, they continue to become and remain vulnerable to cybercrimes as their private information, including pictures and even locations have become increasingly accessible.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Teenagers spend a substantial amount of their time at school. Most of their ideas of discipline and moral standards are built on the foundations of the lessons learned at the institutions. Thus, whatever idea they acquire about relationships in school become a crucial part of their lives. Not only that, mental health issues triggered by unhealthy or toxic relationships often have lasting impacts on these people too.

When asked about the possible actions that schools could take, Nileema Khan, who has served as a counsellor in schools like DPS, The Aga Khan School, and Chittagong Grammar School, says, "We need to have a conversation about emotions and healthy boundaries, to allow the children to refrain from getting involved in toxic and unhealthy relationships. It is also the responsibility of the school counsellors to provide a safe space for the children to be able to freely share their troubles and have their feelings validated. A lot of the problems arise because we don't educate our children about emotions. Hence, I started my own organisation, Protibha, to help start these conversations."

While the entire idea may seem to be westernised and modern, children have always had feelings at this age; they were never taught how to deal with them in a healthy manner. With the increasing risks that development bring along for the vulnerable, it is the responsibilities of schools to allow proper conversations to happen regarding emotions and boundaries without it being delivered as a threat. It is also imperative that we completely stop shaming adolescents for having feelings and trivialising such issues to facilitate a safer and healthier environment and promote their mental wellbeing to allow them to truly flourish.

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Three things are of utmost importance to Afrin: the climate, equality, and cats. Not necessarily in that order. Find her at afrintara@gmail.com. Or not.

