



(L) Team members of Swayong. (R) Swayong's Founder, Swatil Mahmud, at the 'Rage against rape' protests in front of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.



PHOTOS: MONON MUNTAKA

Dismantling social injustices through storytelling

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Founded by Swatil Mahmud, Swayong is an inclusive platform that addresses women's issues through myth-busting and storytelling. It intends to provide women with a safe space to express themselves, while inspiring others. "Swayong means individuality, and every person's story is important to us," Swatil asserted. The platform was created in June this year, while the idea was conceived as Swatil came across people from different walks of life during her undergraduate education at Sunway University, Malaysia. She realised that regardless of country and society, everyone faces harassment and injustice.

Swatil saw the pandemic and the subsequent months of isolation as the ideal opportunity to launch Swayong, as people were spending plenty of time on the internet. "We were tired of waiting for others to do things and decided to initiate the changes that we wanted to see. We felt that there was a dire need for meaningful content and conversations," said Swatil's sister, Kazi Mitul Mahmud, Co-founder, Swayong.

The organisation was declared as runners up in Digital Khichuri Challenge 2020's Ideation Competition. Through

their work, they addressed gender-based issues faced by female frontline warriors, including healthcare workers, hospital staff and journalists.

As a survivor of child abuse, Swatil appreciates the power of storytelling. "Stories connect with more people and encourage them to share their personal experiences," she said. She opened up about the abuse to her sister, realising that acceptance and tolerance are important pillars of familial relationships. "Elders need to provide children with the space to share their experiences and appreciate their courage," Swatil added. She also emphasised on the role of school authorities in shaping the minds of children. "They must ensure safe spaces in the campus and teach young boys how to behave, thereby busting patriarchal standards," she further said. "Making sex education compulsory in all educational curriculums will also mitigate the problem."

Swayong's activities are currently virtual, due to the ongoing pandemic. Their first campaign, entitled 'ShorirJarShiddhantoTar | Your Body, Your Choice: Breasts & Bra Series', intended to celebrate all features of the female body, and called for an end to sexualisation

and objectification. They collaborated with WeMen View for another online campaign, shedding light on the alarming rise in cases of sexual harassment in public places. They also participated in Rise of Youth Community Global's 'Silent the Silence' campaign, featuring stories of transgender individuals. "The main challenge was gathering the stories for this series as these people felt afraid and ashamed to share their tales of injustice," she said.

They also collaborated with Wander Woman, a social platform for female travellers of Bangladesh, to conduct a campaign called 'Horrors of Travel'. "The number of solo female travelers has increased immensely in the past few years, but amidst the 'Instagram-worthy' pictures, there are tales of violence and horror, raising questions on how the world treats women who travel alone," Swatil added. This campaign was fueled by an incident of harassment faced by both the founders during a trip to Sunamganj.

Swayong's members were also active participants of the 'Rage against Rape' protests, organised by Feminists Across Generations. Swatil gave a heartfelt speech at the protests in front of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban. After her speech,

a girl came up to her with teary eyes and hugged her, as a gesture of solidarity. "It was a powerful experience, and I will never forget the warmth of that hug," Swatil said. Swayong also introduced a campaign, featuring stories from the protests to connect with more people.

The organisation is currently supported by a group of young volunteers called, 'Swayong's Warriors' and the founders have arranged online capacity building sessions to train them. Their other initiative includes live sessions under the banner 'AngurFolTok'. They will use this platform to address issues such as problematic song lyrics and workplace challenges for female frontline workers. "It is a model that deviates from the typical jargon-heavy webinars and encourages guests and participants to be candid," Swatil added.

Moving forward, Swayong will organise an awareness week on the transgender community, and they will work with Bangladesh Development Project, an organisation based in the USA, to share first-hand accounts of garment factory workers' experiences in the industry during the pandemic. The stories have been collected and are scheduled to be shared from Swayong's online profiles this month.

Nasif Imtiaz looks to tell meaningful visual stories

SUMAIYA KABIR

Photographer Nasif Imtiaz's name comes up amidst those whose art transcends borders and makes us Bangladeshis proud. His photographs bring forth a face of society that not all of us might have the heart to process, but one that will always be worth discussions.

Behind all his heartfelt images lies a long and challenging journey that began in 2011. Even though it wasn't until 2014 that he got his hands on some professional equipment, it was as early as 2012, when for the first time, his photographs were featured in an exhibition at Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy. It was part of a photography contest at North South University, where he

Geographic's Instagram photography community 'Your Shot' to *The Huffington Post* in Germany and Columbia University, his captures have been featured far and wide.

From the crucial scenes of the Rohingya crisis, to the unforgettable fire breakout in Chawkbazar and the vibrant celebrations of Durga Puja and Holi, Nasif is always present at all the right places at the right times to immortalise fleeting and important moments.

His most recent photography project, titled *Can't Remember Anything*, documents the many faces of mentally unstable patients and their everyday lives at the Pabna Mental Hospital. He tells stories of patients who have lost their sanity from domestic violence,



PHOTO: COURTESY OF NASIF IMTIAZ

Kamlapur Railway Station.

What makes these photographs come to life is that Nasif doesn't just click zoom on his lenses or use a drone – he goes as up and close to his subjects as possible. "I talk to them and get to know their story in details. I take my time to convince them that their photographs are secure with me. I earn their trust and I truly empathise," he shares. "I travel to a lot of different places for my work. My subjects range from mentally unstable patients to homeless people on the streets. I am always exposed and at risk. I have received severe threats from people, who I believe really could've taken my life if they'd wanted to."

Interestingly, Nasif is also a lyricist. He has written many popular numbers, sung or composed by celebrated artistes such as Fuad and Rafa.

Nasif loves making everyone happy through his work. He recognises that wedding photography is no longer as simple as it used to be and not everyone can afford it these days. So, every wedding season, he offers to officially take photographs for people on their special day for free. "Men may not care much for it, but women do. How can they not keep pictures of the best day of their lives?," he adds.

His latest wedding photographs were of a blind couple. All of his work, mainly focusing on human rights issues such as drug abuse, child labour and mental health awareness, can be found at www.nasifimtiaz.com.



'Holi Festival' by Nasif Imtiaz

was completing his BBA. Nasif recalled that at the time, his only gear was a mobile phone with a 2 MP camera.

"It is all about deciding which moment to capture – that's where the art is," says the internationally published young documentary photographer. From National

a divorce, or a business deal gone wrong, and of those who have forever been left behind, with no guardian returning to take them back home, even though they have been cured.

Another notable work by him is one that he spent more than two years on – surreal images of drug-consuming orphans at the

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The Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree in Aquaculture, Environment and Society Plus (EMJMD ACES+) offers a unique opportunity to study in up to four centres of European excellence in aquaculture research and learning: Scotland, Crete, France and the Netherlands. It will also allow you to

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husband, Lawrence Senesh, established this fellowship following her death in 1989. The first award was made at the IPRA 25th Anniversary conference, July 1990, in Groningen, Netherlands and has been made biennially ever since.

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