

# AGENTS OF CHANGE

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COLLAGE ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

## Youth-based organisations fighting against gender-based violence, harassment and bullying

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Bangladesh has witnessed an alarming increase in cases of gender-based violence over the past few years. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, 1,627 women were raped in 2020. Cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment and cyberbullying have also been on the rise. Numerous youth-based social organisations have been fighting against gender-based violence and rape culture through their advocacy and awareness campaigns. The Daily Star talked to the teams of five such organisations to learn more about their activities and their ways of combating gender-based violence, harassment and bullying.

KOTHA

Founded by Umama Zillur, Kottha is an intervention programme that addresses the attitudes, behaviours, and conditions that support, condone and lead to sexual violence. The organisation has been working actively to eliminate gender-based violence by initiating necessary conversations. During the pandemic, Kottha conducted various virtual activities to engage with young people.

For their project, 'Mental Health x Covid-19: Archiving our emotions', they interviewed people of all ages and genders to capture how the pandemic affected their mental health. "We also worked with 18 artists to create a Bangladesh-specific pandemic dictionary," Umama shared.

Their team produced over 100 pieces of educational content, which were used by several other organisations for their campaigns, training and seminars. "Our content is created after thorough research and is specialised for Bangladesh. Some of our tools such as the culture of violence pyramid were particularly helpful for people to start and carry forward conversations around gender-based violence," Umama further said. The organisation also launched their podcast, 'Not Here For'. The first season of the podcast had a special series, focusing on feminine rage, under a fellowship by BRAC and CREA.

The members of this organisation were active protesters at the #RageAgainstRape

movement.

Umama shared that she has witnessed a shift in the type of conversations revolving around rape culture. "Although the culture of victim blaming is pervasive, the group of people fighting against this culture is slowly expanding. Consent and sex education are also becoming more prominent," she shared. "I see rage. When people talk about this issue, there is anger, which is spreading."

SWAYONG

Swayong is an inclusive platform, founded by Swatil and Mitul Mahmud, which dismantles social injustices through myth-busting and storytelling. The organisation believes in the power of real-life stories, and values the impact these stories have on people's minds. "Real stories, shared by a diverse group of survivors, help solidify empathy in a way that factual statements encapsulated in bullet points or numbers fail to," Swatil asserted.

Swayong intends to eliminate gender-based violence by encouraging conversations about sensitive topics and busting the myths associated with women's issues. According to Swatil, patriarchy is responsible for rape culture, which ultimately leads to gender-based discrimination and violence. The inequality that exists because of patriarchy also creates societal imbalance. "I personally believe that we have failed in raising good sons, as a nation," she shared. "We excuse and overlook violent behaviour of men and boys, which eventually leads to perpetrators of rape and other gender-based violent crimes, and men are getting away with it."

Nowadays, people are talking against rape and patriarchy on social media, protesting on the streets and becoming more interested in uprooting the rape culture from our society. However, the number of rape cases is not decreasing. "I do not see changed behaviour in men and boys when women are walking on the streets, I do not see perpetrators of rape being held accountable for their crimes, and I am continuously seeing victim blaming taking place," Swatil said, while discussing the effects of the #RageAgainstRape protests.

As an organisation, Swayong believes that powerful and meaningful conversations, along with proper sex education, is necessary to eliminate rape culture. "The rape culture in Bangladesh is a collective problem—it is everyone's issue. If we want to take appropriate and sustainable measures, everyone has a part to play in it," Swatil said.

CYBER TEENS

Cyber Teens, an app that intends to provide a safe space for teenagers to ask for help against cyberbullying, is founded by Sadat Rahman, the winner of the International Children's Peace Prize 2020. One of the major issues around cyberbullying is that young people are afraid to report it to the police or to inform their parents. The app provides them with information about internet safety and gives them the option to report cyberbullying confidentially. Cyber specialists, social workers and the police are brought together via this initiative.

"Many victims of cyberbullying attempt suicide, due to the lack of help and resources. To stand beside them, we started one-to-one counselling and generated awareness regarding the use of social media," shared Sadat, who is from Narail.

He discovered a passion for video making and website development from an early age. He now uses these skills to help other children and young people, through his awareness-raising organisation, Narail Volunteers, and through his pioneering anti-cyberbullying app.

Cyber Teens has already supported over 300 victims of cyberbullying, including by reporting fake social media accounts and providing support for mental health problems. Sadat has also reached over 45,000 teenagers with internet safety seminars in schools and colleges. He has created "Cyber Clubs" in every school in his local area. In these clubs, young people are educated on digital literacy knowledge. He now wants to spread the app beyond his local area to help victims of cyberbullying across Bangladesh.

The rate of stalking and cyber-bullying

has increased significantly over the past few years. Sadat identifies rape culture, pronography and lack of knowledge as the main pillars that contribute to such issues. "To combat any form of gender-based discrimination or violence, we need to stand against the convict and beside the victim. Victim blaming indirectly supports the occurrence of the crime. We must learn to become more empathetic," he asserted.

Sadat also plans to provide counselling services to victims of cybercrime, with the help of professional psychologists, and start "Cyber Clubs" in different educational institutions across Bangladesh.

ORODDHO FOUNDATION

Oroddho Foundation, a youth-based social organisation, has been fighting against gender-based violence since 2019. They utilise education and art to promote tolerance, peace and social justice.

"Gender-based violence is not an isolated issue. Rape culture intersects with many other social issues like religious dogma justifying misogyny, the colonial legacy in our legal system that needs correction and the problems it entails. Attacking the socioeconomically challenged and vulnerable minority groups, political unrest and minority rights issues also play a part," shared Noorin Suhaila Asjad, CEO and Co-founder of the organisation.

During the pandemic, Oroddho received a fellowship grant award from BRAC JGSPH, BLAST and CREA to produce content and spread awareness on rape culture. For this project, they made a short film titled Meyeder Eshob Maniye Nite Hoy, which highlights the culture of violence. They also created several other videos to raise awareness about different issues, including domestic violence during the pandemic.

Project Bhor, Oroddho's initiative for topics such as sex education, consent and toxic gender roles, was conducted virtually for school students. It was started with the hope that instead of taking action after gender-based violence occurs, Bangladesh can raise a new generation that is not violent. "The educational content that we have developed was made from scratch by

our dedicated team, fully catered to Bangladesh. Our belief in proactive work motivates us to focus on education and discussion so that we can end violence from its roots," Noorin added. They began their pilot programme with 25 students and continued these classes for six weeks.

AMADER SKIN

Amader Skin is a social media platform that welcomes people to open up about their personal battles with their skin conditions, weight, height, appearance and other issues. It aims to educate people about different prevailing discriminations, through art and illustrations.

Encouraging people to be comfortable in their own skin, the platform has gained popularity over the last few months. "We want to spread the message that you are not alone, and use visual tools to do so, because they have the power to connect and inspire," said Tashfia Bari, Co-founder of the organisation.

Throughout the pandemic, Amader Skin has featured life stories and experiences of people who challenged the society's unrealistic expectations and fought back ideal beauty standards. They also worked on Amader Ayna, a children's book featuring a female superhero who fights sexism, bullying, classism, colourism and builds environmental awareness. "Through this book, we want to educate children about the discriminations surrounding their lives by presenting a female role model," added Fayziah Rahman, Co-founder, Amader Skin.

This team also designed the cover for the #RageAgainstRape movement. The illustration, which went viral during the protests, featured a diverse group of angry women. "We felt that we were playing a role in fighting the prevailing injustice in our society by participating in such an initiative," concluded Fayziah.

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