

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

How conforming to societal misogyny breeds gender-based violence



AFIA JAHIN

IF I had to pick only one trait of my own that I admire, it would have to be my ability to adapt. Growing up in a (then) low-income part of the city

but attending an English medium school in a quintessentially affluent area, I learned early on to modify my behaviour and personality to suit different audiences. Still now, the last thing I want is to stand out. Or, to stand out for the wrong reasons. As such, I have always tried to abide by the saying of “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” After all, fitting in is a survival tactic. When you fit in with the dominant crowd, you are safe. From attention, criticism, debate, and from the possibility of your opinions being proven “wrong.” In some contexts, the need to fit in—or rather, be invisible—becomes a requirement or necessity, for the sake of self-preservation.

So while my skills of adjustment do come in handy when solving problems in a crunch, there have been many times when this trait became the cause of my subjugation. For instance, on a 2018 morning when I spotted two men taking photos of my then-*hijabi* and amply-clothed self while crossing the Mirpur 10 footbridge, I confronted them. The phone’s photo gallery was riddled with images of women—in *salwar-kameez*, burqas, niqabs—taken from that same location and on that morning. I yelled many choice words

at the two men, one of whom seemed nervous while the instigator seemed to be finding my reaction hysterical. I was, I will admit. In that moment of rage and insecurity, hysteria should not seem that inappropriate of a reaction. Of the bystanders who did nothing but watch, one was a man who chuckled disparagingly at me, while his young son watched and, I would assume, learned: Harassment is no big deal and women overreact to it. Not knowing what to do—

“Would any nearby law enforcement agents help me or would they laugh at me, too?”—I took pictures of the offenders on my own phone, threw theirs down onto the footbridge’s floor, and stormed down the stairs to catch my bus.

People commented on my social media post about the incident later on, all kudos to me for standing up to the harassers.

The unsavoury truth is that I was very scared, during and long after the incident. In fact, given that my family was moving to another area the next month anyway, I took a different and lengthier route to my bus every morning after that. “Like a coward,” I’d tell myself. But I had heard and read too many accounts of how scorned men have harassed, stalked, thrown acid at, assaulted, abducted, and/or raped women as revenge—or even just because. Not only is harassment on the streets, in and of itself, mentally and emotionally harmful to the recipient, but it always has the potential to be dangerous and life-threatening. And this is a constant fear that *all* women carry within themselves.

A common rebuttal of rape-apologists in our country is that



The solidarity women find in each other while facing societal misogyny together is reassuring, but should not be so necessary.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

rape takes place because women do not dress “properly” here. One can assume that “proper” means covered, preferably from head to toe. So I was, on that morning of 2018, and back then it was because I was trying to fit into the narrative of a “properly dressed” woman, so as to avoid being sexually objectified. And so was 19-year-old Sohagi Jahan Tonu, before she was raped, brutally murdered and discarded in March of 2016, inside the “safe” area of Mainamati Cantonment in Cumilla. Nusrat Jahan Rafi (18) of Feni, too, was a “properly” dressed madrasa student, who refused to withdraw the sexual assault case she had filed

against her school’s principal and was in turn set ablaze by a few miscreants in broad daylight on April 6, 2019.

So, in our country, even when women do as the Romans do (or, as the Romans want them to do), it seems that Rome perhaps is not fully ours. We do not have as much claim to it, or as much freedom of expression and movement in it, as our male counterparts are allowed to have. In order to stay safe and “dignified”, we try to fit ourselves to the image of a “good” woman, as much as possible.

We may go out to school or work, but we make sure to be as unnoticeable as possible. When men

on the footpaths walk towards us head-on from the opposite direction, with no indication that they will give us space to walk past them, we take a few steps to one side ourselves, so as not to “allow” the men to bump into and/or grope us. Just as I used to in my teens, when a man sits next to me on a public bus, I give him his space. When his hand still manages to brush against my side, I tense up and put myself in the corner of the seat, as much as I can. I ignore catcalls now, but still look out for phones positioned a bit too vertically, with the camera pointing in my direction. I know now which outfits will get me too many stares for comfort,

and I keep them tucked away in my cupboard, pretty as they are. This all helps me fit in and keeps me safe from judgement and harm; keeps my dignity intact, too—or so they’ve told me, and then I’ve taught myself. You see, after a point, fighting against the misogynistic rules of our society does not seem worth it, and simply conforming gives women some rest from all that.

Of course, violence that is birthed from these rules and our (voluntary or involuntary) conformity to them exists in many forms (mental, emotional, sexual, physical) and can be of varying levels. But when mild forms of violence (such as obscene comments thrown towards women on the streets) go unchecked, or are made into laughing matters, it lends a certain kind of acceptance to acts which fall under this level of violence and, by extension, to acts worse than them. When such acts of “mild violence” against one gender are normalised, more dangerous forms of violence veer closer towards being acceptable in society, too.

Putting aside the need for the state to train its representatives to be more gender-inclusive and to eliminate/reform all laws which allow for gender discrimination and violence to persist, individuals as conscious members of the public must actively fight back against gender-based violence even in its mildest forms. Violence against someone based solely on their gender is everyone’s responsibility to counter. Whether it happens in broad daylight or behind closed doors, gender-based violence is no laughing or “private” matter.

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SELINA BAHAR ZAMAN Author, Educationist and Cultural Icon

Selina Bahar Zaman left the mortal world on December 1, 2004 at the age of 64. She, along with her mother Anwara Bahar Chowdhury, played an active role in the cultural manifestations of Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) in the 1960’s. After independence, Selina Bahar Zaman became a chronicler of biographical studies of Rokeya and many others. She was known to many and one of them was Mary Frances Dunham, wife of an American architect working in Dhaka in the 60’s, herself an accomplished lady, a friend of Bengali culture and Bangladesh. Mary left Dhaka in 1967 and became an active supporter of the nation’s struggle for liberation in 1971. She returned to Bangladesh in the 1990’s to further study Bengali culture and published her seminal work titled “Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh” (University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1997). Mary Frances Dunham passed away on October 11, 2021 in New York. She received the award “Friends of Bangladesh Liberation War” in 2013. This tribute to Selina Bahar Zaman by Mary Frances Dunham is also a tribute to both, the great champions of Bengali culture.

MY friendship with Selina and her family dates back over 40 years. I shall always remember my first sight of her in the early 1960s when I watched in awe as Selina diligently, often heroically, worked for the Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA). The Academy was run by a Committee whose members all worked voluntarily for the school. Selina was the Assistant Secretary of the Committee. At that time, she was in her early 20’s, yet she had already finished her Masters of Science degree from Dhaka University and was appointed Lecturer of Mathematics at Eden Girls College (now Badrunessa College). Selina herself was a dancer and was involved in the staging of several dance-dramas. In those early years of our acquaintance, I was ignorant of these precocious accomplishments, only learning them recently from Selina’s sister Dolly. Through Dolly, I found out that during that early time, Selina produced dance-dramas along with Saaduddin, a friend of mine at a later date, who was the first Bangladeshi to receive a doctorate in Ethnomusicology, an outstandingly bright and dedicated scholar like Selina herself.

In those days, I belonged to a triad of foreign housewives eager to learn whatever we could about Bangladeshi (then East Pakistani) music and dance. Once a week

riding our bicycles, we gathered together at an intersection in Ramna from where we pedalled through the old city to the elegant premises of BAFA on the Buriganga. There, like ungainly elephants among graceful gazelles, we tried to imitate the accomplished students in the front rows of the beginners’ class.

As I watched Selina helping with the work of BAFA, I admired her intelligence and determination. How quickly she understood what was needed doing and what needed more thoughtful solutions! Somehow we became friends and I started visiting her and her family where they lived in Shantinagar, not far from our house on Siddheswari Road. Selina’s mother reminded me of a favourite aunt of mine, a doctor by profession, whose home was always full of visitors who enjoyed her company for the comfort and good advice that she shared. Especially after our daughter Katherine was born, I would visit Selina and her family where affectionate fuss was made over our spoiled baby girl. Meanwhile I felt at home in a family where literature mattered, where the house was simple and practical, and where so much laughter filled the rooms.

It happened that the idea to attend BAFA had come from my early acquaintance with my tutor for lessons in Bangla, someone who became a life-long friend to my family,



Selina Bahar Zaman
(February 15, 1940 – December 1, 2004)

Professor Ahmed Sharif, also a relative of Selina’s family. At that time, Professor Sharif lived with his wife and three small sons in the Dhaka University faculty quarter. When I expressed my interest in Bengali music (later a career for me), he suggested that I

visit BAFA, little knowing how close I would become to Selina and her family.

In the fall of 1963, the English lady who brought up my brother and myself visited Dhaka. Selina met her at our house and she and Emmy (Mary Emerson) became friends. Emmy invited Selina to visit her ancestral Suffolk village where she retired. As it turned out, Selina was able to visit her soon after, when she went to England to study in Newcastle. On my trip to Dhaka in 2003, Selina showed me an article that she had written in which she described her visit to Emmy and her village. The description is full of Selina’s sharp observations and lively recreation of conversations and surroundings. Unlike myself, Selina could remember precise dates and places and the very words spoken.

In later years, I knew Selina as a writer of children’s books and many biographies, which she generously gave me. My Bangla is good enough for reading her children’s books, but unfortunately not for reading the biographies, but I am proud to have them on my shelves. Around 1994, when I was preparing a book on Jarigan, Selina took me around to scholars who could help. I remember bouncing along in rickshaws with her as she took me from place to place, telling me as we went along about what projects she was working on at the time. Anyone who

has met her must remember the eager way in which she spoke of a multitude of her books in progress already printed. She used to leave me feeling quite breathless and ashamed that I was not doing as much for the world.

Selina’s siblings share her traits of intelligence, energy and devotion to hard work. her brother Iqbal and sisters, Dolly, Bacchu and Puplu all share a generous, outgoing, hard-working, warm-hearted nature. By coincidence, Dolly (Shaheen) was one of my husband’s architectural students. She is one of the first three women architects to graduate from the first Bangladeshi (then East Pakistani) Department of Architecture at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). At the time, my husband, Daniel Durham, was a member of the team of American architects who were hired to establish the pioneer department. With Dolly in his class, our bond with Selina was happily increasing.

During my visit to Dhaka in 2003, Selina entertained me with dinner and on the early morning of my departure she turned up where I was staying with gifts in her hands. I know that future visits to Dhaka will entail missing Selina even more than I do as I write now, but her smiling face on that morning and her warm embrace will remain with me forever.

MARY SHELLEY
English novelist
(1797 - 1851)

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Following
6 Concert setting
11 Doone of fiction
12 White Cliffs setting
13 Be real
14 Pancake order
15 Crescent's tip
17 Invites
18 Boxer LaMotta
20 Opposed
22 Lawyer's letters
23 Shirt parts
26 Brownish gray
28 "Hello" singer
29 School primer
31 Dr.'s org.
32 Store come-on
33 Shoelace problem
34 Drill parts

36 Puts down
38 Writer Loos
40 Football plays
43 Saint – (Largest of the Virgin Islands)
44 Enjoyed avidly
45 Thus
46 Rick's cartoon grandson

DOWN

1 Hearty brew
2 Sly one
3 You need to be careful replying to it
4 Follow
5 "Darn it!"
6 TV spots
7 Turned
8 Dodging

9 Bottle part
10 Sacred chests
16 Bud
18 "West Side Story" gang
19 Memo letters
21 Approach
23 Hawk
24 Sailors' saint
25 Pants part
27 Credit card, in slang
30 Long swimmer
33 Honshu city
34 "Art of the Fugue" composer
35 Concerning
37 First father
39 Firefighting aid
41 Bolt connector
42 Mole, e.g.

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT