

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Discursive violations

How sexist rhetoric is perpetuated by our public representatives



KAJAL SHEHREEN ISLAM

DISCOURSE—the production of knowledge through language—as the famous French philosopher Michel Foucault has defined it, consists of language as well as practice. Discourse determines what is and is not talked about, and how people should

conduct themselves in relation to it. Foucault has argued that truth is unattainable, because it is embedded in, and produced by, systems of power. This makes the study of discursive processes, which construct discourses, and, in turn, truth, so very important. According to scholars of discourse studies, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak, discursive practices may have major ideological effects, producing and reproducing unequal power relations and passing off (often falsifying) assumptions as mere common sense.

Over 20 years ago, on the eve of the new millennium, a woman was sexually assaulted near the TSC on the Dhaka University campus. Protests broke out, demanding arrest and punishment of the accused, a member of the ruling party's student wing at the time, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL). Amidst all the protests and demands for justice, on January 25, 2000, erstwhile Awami League (AL) lawmaker, Joyнал Hazari, stood in Parliament and argued that during the previous Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) regime, women had been raped and killed, their bodies left lying on the streets, but people did not raise their voices then. He claimed that it was only to undermine the ruling Awami League that people were making a big deal about some drunkards attacking a woman who he implied, was asking for it for being out late at night.

Hazari suggested that even though the woman was apparently wearing a saree, there were "other matters" involved. While the culprit should of course be punished, he said, the woman's actions were also unacceptable. He strongly demanded punishment of the woman as well, because such women created

such perpetrators—if they did not come out on the streets half naked, such incidents would not occur, he said. What the woman had done was not a part of Islamic culture, it wasn't even Bengali culture, and Hazari stressed the need to ensure that young women did not come out at midnight to observe such "Christian culture". While there was widespread criticism of his statement, most Members of Parliament (MPs) who were asked for comments by the media at the time, denied being present the day he made the statement.

Less than 20 days ago, on November 18, 2020, BNP-backed independent lawmaker Rezaul Karim Bablu stood in the same Parliament, speaking on the Women and Children Repression Prevention (Amendment) Bill, 2020, which was passed that same day, allowing death penalty as the highest punishment for rape. The lawmaker found it necessary to point out, however, that "the acceptability of rape" had increased so much that "rapists are encouraged to rape" because "feminists are encouraging women to become freer". According to the lawmaker, the onus lies on "our mothers and sisters" to dress and act decently and not provoke rapists to rape them.

He also made reference to recently deceased Hefazat-e-Islam leader Shah Ahmed Shafi's infamous 2013 sermon which had gone viral on social media. In the sermon, the cleric had compared women to tamarind, describing how men covet women like a child craves tamarind

when they see another child sucking on it. Shafi also made insinuations about working women, stressing that women should be confined to the home, caring for the furniture and the children, educated just enough to be able to manage their husbands' accounts. Later, in an interview with *The Daily Star* on the subject, Rezaul Karim Bablu clarified that if women go out on the streets in "indecent clothing" like T-shirts, "perverted men with ill intentions will look at them". Again, while women's rights groups and social media users have protested the lawmaker's statements, MPs, particularly parliamentarians belonging to

going viral on social media in which he was seen brandishing a gun. Both men continued to hold their positions despite all of the above. The offensive comments made by them about women and rape, while criticised by the public, elicited no response, let alone action, from the institutions and parties which they represent. Not even a Parliament and a government led by women and which prioritise women's development and empowerment.

Political power is linked to the management of information and the power of rhetoric, particularly in democracies. This power is derived from key institutions where individuals

sharing of the news, one young man stated that both women and men should dress "decently", and that in a Muslim-majority nation like Bangladesh, decency is not a matter of personal choice (as suggested by the woman) which is a "Western, atheist notion". The vulgar clothing and movements of some women provoke some men to rape; this is not to blame women but to protect them from such men, he said. Another young man commented that if a jackfruit is laid out, flies are bound to descend upon it.

Research on language, symbolism and discursive violence has shown how the strategic use of language conceals violence, obfuscates perpetrators' responsibility, conceals victims' resistance and blames and pathologises victims, demonstrating an inextricable link between the problem of violence to the problem of representation. In the case of violence against women, research has also revealed that common historical constructions as well as repetitive media representations of women as "prostitutes", criminals, victims of sexual crimes, etc, enables the state to maintain a position of limited involvement in addressing and alleviating discrimination and violence against them.

How we think, what we say, and what we do, are all intertwined. What we allow to be said and done is also a reflection of endorsement. Whether or not the words of our public representatives are representative of and acceptable to the general public has become apparent from the competing discourses of agreement and protest. But what does the passive silence on the part of the institutions which these men represent say about what they allow, accept and endorse? Justifying violence, even through words as these men have done, legitimises violence, as does the silence of others around such legitimising discourses. Holding people accountable for language, rhetoric and representations which violate, may be the first step towards prevention of violence, before discursive violations are allowed to become translated into acts of violence.

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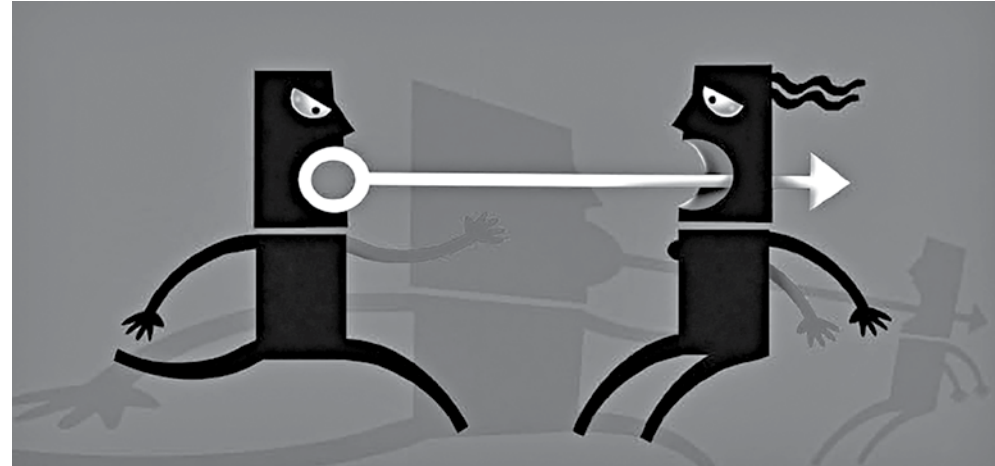


PHOTO: CARTOONING FOR PEACE/ELENA

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reserved seats for women, have been criticised for not responding in any manner.

Joyнал Hazari had several cases filed against him from the 1970s to the 2000s—for murder, possession of arms, money laundering, and the torture of journalist Tipu Sultan, among others—from all of which he was eventually acquitted. He was suspended from the AL for his statements against the party in 2004, but in October 2019, he was made a member of the party's advisory council. Rezaul Karim Bablu was in the news soon after winning his seat in the December 2018 general elections because of several allegations of fraud, including concealing information from his statement of wealth prior to the polls. He was again in the news in October of this year for a photo

in specific positions within these institutions have the access and ability to publicise their perspectives and to be heard. As Linda Coates and Allan Wade note in their work on language and violence, they are social agents, whose discursive actions either reflect or depart from institutional ideologies, policies and objectives. When these agents make objectionable and offensive statements which are overlooked and they are not made to face any consequences, it gives them and others a certain legitimacy to continue to speak in a similar manner, and ultimately to even act accordingly.

In the case of Rezaul Karim Bablu, MP, when his statements were shared on social media, even university students became divided. In response to a female student's

THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE PROJECT

Institutional reputation through enabling students first

The Academic Experience Project is a faculty-student collaborative work aimed to glean insights about the experiences of tertiary-level students. Each Friday, The Daily Star will publish an op-ed highlighting the findings of the project. This is the fifth article of the series.

NAJEBA MOHAMMED ALTAJ and SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

In a nation that has a university every 5.38 square kilometres in its capital and with a university that is still lauded by some as the "Oxford of the East", it is no coincidence that Dhaka is recognised as the university capital of the world. Undeniably, the sheer number of universities have made higher education much more accessible to students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. However, many of the universities have a dismal and lacklustre record regarding the quality of the educational experience they provide. Understandably, their standings in global university rankings are undistinguished.

A recent survey of students, from both public and private universities across Bangladesh, showed that their satisfaction derived primarily from how well their universities prepared them for the job market and their institution's brand value. However, what is perennially missed by academic administrators is that student satisfaction is also greatly influenced by the atmosphere of the campus and the time they spend in it, the sense of community they build, and the joys they experience as they socialise and network with each other. In order to foster that sense of community and encourage collaborative learning among students and between students and teachers, there needs to be a safe and secure space in addition to proper facilities. A majority of the respondents found these provisions to be largely unsatisfactory.

Students also indicated that meeting the minimum physical requirements such as



Students socialising in the TSC courtyard a few years ago.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

providing classrooms, sanitation facilities, and computer labs is "not what a university is all about." These are not extraordinary features; rather they are just basic necessities. At this level, what should be prioritised is maintaining and updating the current facilities. Thus, if universities are still using the same computer lab equipment, have only one photocopying machine for an entire department, and books in the library from 10 or 15 years ago, this will not do.

Moreover, by situating themselves in

commercial buildings or in the outskirts of Dhaka, universities have sacrificed the important role that physical infrastructure and access play in providing a holistic academic experience. These cost-effective moves are important as long as the expanded set of requirements suggested by the students are met. Also, by regularly repainting the building exteriors to look fresh and new, a choice is being made to sacrifice the greater good for a face lift that hides the deficiencies within.

Covid-19 has also recently exposed the

severe lack of technological and digital infrastructure; most, if not all, universities in Bangladesh are painfully ill-equipped when it comes to online learning platforms. An extensive technology and digital infrastructure will equip students with the ability to access much needed books and journals, class materials, presentations, testing, and even allow them to communicate with the university's management and faculty online. It will also allow them to register for courses, receive grades, and pay their dues from anywhere in the country. This platform would further facilitate the creation of the university's own digital library that can house published work needed by the faculty and students. Adapting to the new normal of online learning would have been infinitely easier had there been a sophisticated technological and digital infrastructure in place.

Well-established physical and technological infrastructure also provide universities a competitive edge on a global scale. This is particularly true in an era when students have access to online courses from anywhere in the world. If the pricing is right, and if they can afford it, many students will prefer an overseas degree. With technology paving the way, access to foreign universities will become ever easier. It is time to rethink a university's technology strategy or adopt the path of the dinosaur.

Many universities also fail to update the information they provide on their websites. As a result, they fail to communicate their achievements with agencies like Times Higher Education and miss out on international recognition-building. Even if professors and students successfully produce and publish

substantial research work, they will not get the spotlight they deserve if they are not showcased by their university on their own platforms.

It is also time to tap into the knowledge creation potential that already exists in Bangladesh and start a national discussion about larger investments needed in research and collaborative work among students and their teachers by setting up spaces where students can enter the world of discovery. If our universities are to truly strive for excellence and gain international stature and recognition, we will have to start by providing our students an experience that is much better than the bare minimum. Cost should not be the only criteria for running these universities: here, effectiveness must trump efficiency.

For universities in Bangladesh to compete internationally and make their way into global university rankings, they'll have to do more to capitalise on their biggest asset: their students. These are the very students who graduate from local institutions and go on to thrive abroad in well-designed academic environments where they are often celebrated for their excellent research work. Should we not exert the extra effort to build similar enabling environments to keep them here and tap into the human capital they represent that is so desperately needed by this nation?

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QUOTABLE Quote

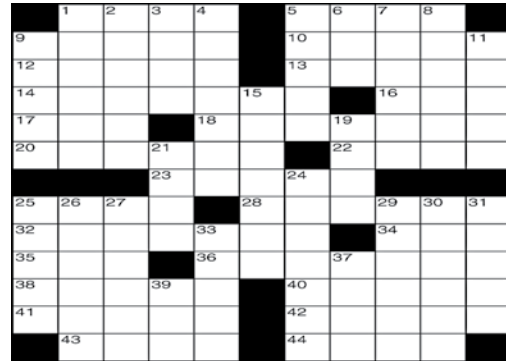


NELSON MANDELA (1918-2013) President of South Africa.

Live life as though nobody is watching, and express yourself as though everyone is listening.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

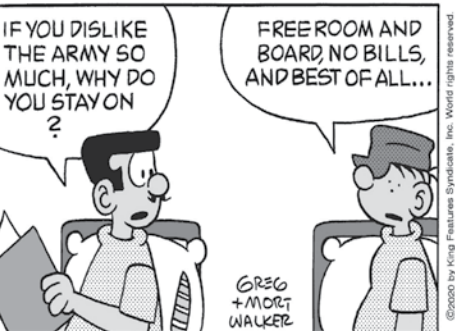
- ACROSS**
 1 Far from firm
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 9 Craze
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 13 Horse's cousin
 14 Hurler weapon
 16 Vault part
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 18 Waterfall
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 22 Manipulative sort
 23 Caravan stop
 25 Bus. envelope abbr.
 28 Fly, e.g.
 32 Troop group
 34 Negative link
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 36 Spread throughout
 38 Word separator
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 41 Tribal leader
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- DOWN**
 1 Mountain shrub
 2 Start a new paragraph
 3 Bearing
 4 Magic cure
 5 Challenges for mice
 6 Valuable rock
 7 Some October babies
- 8 Mock
 9 Molten rock
 11 Cavalry weapon
 15 Part of the Earth facing the sun
 19 Swear
 21 Ann Darrow's admirer
 24 Resistance to change
 25 Degraded
 26 Diamond feat
 27 Angry rant
 29 Tooth layer
 30 Software writers
 31 Lock
 33 Mimics
 37 End of a famous boast
 39 Cartoon frame



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



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BY MORT WALKER



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