

YOUTH IN ACTION

Combatting cyber harassment through comics



Team members of NAW receive their DKC runner-up trophy from Rob Stoelman, Project Manager, UNDP Bangladesh.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF NAW

SHANIZ CHOWDHURY

Youth-led organisation N te Nari, N te Nirapotta (NAW) was the 2021 runner-up in the students/campaigns category for UNDP's Digital Khichuri Challenge (DKC), titled "The Unsafety Net: How Online Abuse is Driving Women Out of Digital Spaces".

Shahriar Pranto, Founder of NAW, formed a team of five to enter the competition and counter cyber harassment. The other members of the team are Co-Founder Nur-A-Shafee Ahnaf, who studies Economics at Dhaka University (DU), Chief Strategist Md Rakib Hossain, a marketing student at North South University, Ashim Faiaz Talukdar, the Chief Arts & Graphic Designer from Faculty of Fine Art, DU, and Sheherin Jahan, the Campaign Coordinator, who just completed her HSC from Adamjee Cantonment College.

During the competition, their research led them to find existing ways in which women can seek help if fall victim to online harassment. However, people are oblivious to such facilities due to lack of information dissemination.

There are numerous hotlines that women can use to complain about cybercrimes, including Police Cyber Support for Women, Quick Response Team of the Women Support & Investigation Division and Cyber Police Centre.

In order to tackle violence against women and children, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs provides a national helpline, 109, which provides police

assistance and counseling services, among other things.

NAW publishes comics online, based on true stories, to enlighten people about such services. This medium allows them to portray the story of a woman being harassed, asking for help and finally, the perpetrator being punished, in a way which people can relate and empathise with. As people read the comics, they become aware of the assistance available in case anyone comes into such dangers.

NAW also organised debate and art programmes online so their message of speaking up instead of staying silent is dissipated across the nation to as many people as possible.

"Women have increasingly exposed themselves to social media, especially through e-commerce, so it is important that we promote safe and healthy online communities. We are also hoping to start campaigns and have someone from the police go to schools and teach both boys and girls about helplines," shared Pranto.

In the future, NAW aspires to have printed versions of their comics. "If physical copies of our comics are distributed in debate programmes, science fairs, libraries and student clubs in schools and universities, it will be easier for us to relay the necessary information," concluded Rakib.

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NAW publishes comics online about cyber harassment and women's safety issues.



PHOTO: ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

Garo children perform at the Wangala Festival at Madhupur.

EXPERIENCE

Roaring drums, vivid 'Dokmandas' and a day too good to forget

Celebrating Wangala with the Garo community in the greenery of Madhupur

ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

Jishu ni Rasong (in the name of Jesus, I greet you) read a board at the church gate as we stepped into the Saint Paul's Dharmapalli in Pirgacha, a small rural area that lies in the suburbs of Madhupur in Tangail.

The hustle and tussle of the young girls, the women screaming on top of their voices, giving instructions to each other and the men constructing the platform for the next morning- this is how Madhupur welcomed me for Wangala, a festival that celebrates the arrival of winter and the harvest season.

This was my very first time visiting Madhupur for a field trip, organised by my Sociolinguistics professor Fr Shankar Leonard Rozario from Notre Dame University Bangladesh (NDUB). He taught us to design ethnography last semester, but was unable to take us to any speech event to practically analyse speech acts due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Being one of his former students and an associate at the NDUB Language Centre, I was asked to accompany the junior Master's batch and help them write an ethnography report on the Wangala Festival.

The Wangala, being derived from the pagan beliefs, is a festival where the worshipers thanked the Misi Saljong (Sun God) for their rich harvest. For decades, the woods of Madhupur has been home to the Garo Christian community.

Draped in beautifully hand woven Dokmandas, the girls were rehearsing for the performance. Children aged between 4 and 8 were repeating their steps, as they kept forgetting the sequences.

As the night closed in, everyone gathered around the campfire, enjoying the foggy winds, local delicacies paired with Chu (locally made rice wine). We had the privilege to visit a Garo family who invited us for dinner.

As we sat around the dining table, a long train of dishes arrived: first the bhortas, then the curries and stews, and finally the spicy stir-fried non-veg items and fruits. Juicy pineapples, luscious papayas, and naturally grown guavas paired with a mug of Chu, which seemed to be on auto-refill every time the cup went empty.

I woke up the following day with the sound of the big brass bell dangling beside the Wangala podium. Hastily finishing our breakfast, we rushed to the church field.

Adapting to their current religious faith while treasuring their cultural heritage, the Garo community began the day with performances, leading to a prayer and ending the day with a cultural event.

As the sun set and the festivities began to quiet down, it was time for me to bid farewell to this amazing organic lifestyle and wonderful hosts. Holding a large coconut on my hands while sipping its sweet water with a bamboo cane straw, I waved the cheerful yet sad faces goodbye, promising to meet them again.

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NURTURING DREAMS

Making waves in the overseas industrial scene

LABIBA ANJUMI KABIR

Afshen Mozammel Misha has been making waves as an industrial engineer overseas in notable ways.

After graduating from North South University in Human Resource Management and Finance & Accounting, Afshen pursued her MS in Industrial Engineering Technology and Organizational Leadership & Supervision at Purdue University Northwest. She was also the Deputy Manager of Vendor Management and Training at Grameenphone.

She moved to Indiana to pursue her MS in Industrial Engineering Technology and Organizational Leadership & Supervision, and has worked as a Lean Six Sigma & Process Improvement Analyst, Process Engineer and Process Improvement Engineer at different points of her career. She was also the Deputy Manager of Vendor Management and Training at Grameenphone.

Afshen's longest tenure started at DENSO, where she started off as Senior Process Engineer and then moved on to the position of Advanced Process Engineer in 2019. After DENSO, she started working for Cox Communication as Manager of Engineering Enablement.

Currently, Afshen is the Manager of Engineering Enablement at Cox Communications.

As an experienced industrial engineer, she believes that there are immense opportunities in Bangladesh for process improvement efficiency in the manufacturing industry, especially in garments, pharmaceuticals, and even service sectors.

"Our country is heavily export-based, and there are no alternatives but to lower costs for

maximum benefits to compete in the world market. The only way to increase profits without increasing prices is to lower costs. Process improvement initiatives offer the opportunity to lower costs, without hiking prices, and with optimum investment," she said.

Afshen has worked on multiple projects nationally and internationally. One of her biggest projects was improving a model for Chrysler as Lead Engineer. She was also certified as Six Sigma Green Belt (CSSGB), American Society for Quality (ASQ) in 2010 and Six Sigma Black Belt (CSSBB), ASQ, in 2012.

"Even with awareness, the representation of women in engineering as well as leadership continues to be small. I have been a panellist for several leadership and engineering forums myself, to inspire other women. Life comes with challenges, but we have to be persistent to bring about positive changes," she added.

Afshen aspires to invest time in Bangladesh to develop people's leadership skills, which will add value not only to their personal lives, but also to their companies and communities. She also facilitates different workshops on job interviews and resume writing.

Afshen dreams of sharing her knowledge of industrial engineering and process improvement with the people of Bangladesh. "One way of developing people's skills here is through classes, workshops, seminars and training sessions. Another way is to work with different industries, especially garment manufacturing, to make their processes more efficient," she concluded.

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PHOTO: COURTESY

Afshen Mozammel Misha.

SPOTLIGHT

Violence against young women and girls with disabilities: An everyday affair

NILIMA JAHAN

Worldwide, young women and girls with disabilities face up to 10 times more violence than women and girls without disabilities, and Bangladesh is no exception.

In Bangladesh, young women with disabilities are at a high risk of experiencing gender-based and other forms of violence due to social exclusion, limited mobility, lack of support structures, communication barriers, negative social perceptions, and overall culture of impunity.

According to data from the Women with Disabilities and Development Foundation, an organisation providing non-legal support to women with disabilities, 96 percent of women and girls with disabilities face physical, psychological, sexual and emotional violence.

Another 2020 study conducted by BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, in association with the Netherlands Embassy that interviewed 5,000 people with disabilities, revealed that one fourth (74 percent) of the women and girls with disabilities faced psychological violence, while more than 33.2 percent of them faced physical violence and 10 percent faced sexual violence.

In most cases, the caregivers, either at home or in institutional settings, and violent partners, are found to be the perpetrators, as they are socially dependent on them for survival.

On the other hand, research and real-life experience show that once young

women and girls with disabilities are victims of violence, they are more likely to be victims of violence for the second or third time, as the perpetrators take advantage of their vulnerability and helplessness.

Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) data also revealed a similar picture of the magnitude of repeated violence against them—about 78 percent of young women and girls with disabilities become victims of various forms of sexual and physical abuse due to their limited ability to protest and 18 percent of them are



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

victims of repeated abuse.

However, media monitoring reports also show that incidents of violence against this vulnerable group mostly go unreported.

The process for reporting violence is often inaccessible because of family, administrative and social barriers, as almost 99 percent of women with disabilities live below the poverty line, while only 1 percent of girls with disabilities have access to education and an overwhelming majority

of them do not know sign language.

Besides, the inequalities in access to justice, including the inaccessible court buildings, lack of interpreters for young women and girls with intellectual, speech, hearing and psycho-social disabilities, inadequate policies and standards, information unavailability about services and funding make them even more vulnerable to experience multiple forms of violence. According to experts, we need to look for reasons why young women and girls with disabilities are being excluded from getting justice, and take necessary steps to remove these obstacles.

Arranging compensation for the victims of disabilities and giving exemplary punishment to the perpetrators is crucial, they noted. Meanwhile, laws related to disability rights must be disseminated to the victims in accessible formats (through braille, sign language), so that they can be aware of the crimes and their rights.

Ashrafun Nahar Misti, Executive Director, WDDF, also highlighted that the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013 does not specify how a girl child or young woman will get remedies if they are raped.

"It would have been better if there was a separate chapter on how these particular cases could be tried and remedies were provided," she said.

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