



No clear remedy for a pervasive ill

“

They came to our house and took Rakin away, without telling us where they are going. He was kept in the lockup inside the police station. This arrest will define his life even if he does get out on bail.

RAKIN'S MOTHER



When asked why he had been beaten up like that, Farhan launched into a convoluted, lengthy tale about a tussle over “respect”.

The Cabinet Committee on Law and Order at the home ministry recently suggested that the legal age determining who is a “child” be lowered.

Chief of the committee, Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque, said the age should be 14 years and below instead of the current 18 years.

This will allow law enforcers to send children to jail and not let them get away with committing “heinous crimes”, he said.

The issue of what age defines a child or minor has come to the fore ever since 10th-grader Ashraf Islam Jitu beat his teacher to death with a cricket stump in Ashulia on June 25, supposedly, to impress a girl.

As public outrage poured over the death of Utpal Kumar Sarkar, the teacher and a Hindu, certain questions were not asked: How does a teenager like Jitu become “Jitu Dada”, who thought nothing of beating his teacher to death with a cricket stump in front of the whole school? Jitu’s teachers have given extensive interviews about his errant ways, his bad manners and propensity towards drugs and gang culture – but could say little about what he likes, what his struggles were, who his

“senior” cousin and his “older” friends.

“On that day I was called by a junior who said, a senior bhai is here to solve this issue. They told me that they have agreed to give me ‘respect’,” said the boy. And so, off Farhan went, lured by the prospect of being granted the much coveted “respect”.

As they beat him up in the Eid gah field, the whole episode was recorded and edited with slow-motion special effects. The video was then laid over with a trippy “drift” tune and someone rapping lyrics roughly translated as “Beat him up, don’t mess with Mirpur boys, we will make you wear a sari from Benarsi palli.” The level of creative effort cannot be denied.

Farhan’s sister called 999 and the boys were hauled off by the Pallabi police and slapped with attempt-to-murder charges – after all, putting aside the notion that this was turf war fought in the teenage spirit, Farhan could truly have been killed.

Pallabi Police Officer-in-Charge (OC) Parvez Islam called it a “gang” and said “7 members of the gang including its team leader were arrested in a raid”. The inspector (investigation) cast them off as “hopeless cases” saying that “no amount of arrests will

shares a bed with his grandmother. All his social media activity, his forays into PubG was done using his mother’s phone.

Rakin lives in a two-bedroom apartment, that his father and older brother can barely afford with their jobs as a personal driver and waiter. The apartment is airy and the building has a caretaker and a lift – Rakin is clearly loved and cared for.

This beloved teenager however is growing up in a neighbourhood where the only after-school activity involves going to coaching centres for lessons and hanging out in street-corners and making TikTok videos.

There is usually only one cultural event a year, held in a nearby field. Even though the neighbourhood is not affluent, gaudy sports bikes are plenty and there is an inverse relationship between the engine capacity of the motorbike, and the willingness to wear a helmet. As our female correspondent walked into an alley, an older woman verbally harassed her for “wearing her scarf wrong”.

In this neighbourhood, teenagers like Rakin, Farhan and the others are left to entertain themselves using smartphones. They find their own idols. On TikTok, homemade videos like the one Rakin and his friends were making while beating up Farhan, are plenty – most, in all probability, being staged.

Teenagers like them, act out exactly how and when to slap or beat up their girlfriends and promote toxic masculine behaviour. Since this is user-generated content, there is no oversight on what values are being represented, and since this is a new technology, the parents have no idea.

Mohammadpur Police Station OC Abul Kalam Azad said the situation is similar in his area. “Children of low-income families are getting involved in such teen gangs. In many cases, they do not even know what the punishment will be if they commit a crime. No one in society makes them aware. They commit various crimes due to lack of awareness.”

He said many are school dropouts with parents working long hours. “These parents don’t know how their children are passing their time,” he said. Soon they gain the patronage of local criminals and move to bigger crimes.

Farhan was asked why everyone wanted “respect” so badly – he had no answer. The response perhaps is that no teenager wants to be left out. Zabin (not his real name), a teenager from a slum of Bhashantek, explains the pangs of being ostracised by his friends after he had to drop out after fifth grade to help his father sell fish.

“I like going to the gaming arcade but they do drugs there.”

“I do not have a smartphone so I cannot be in my friends’ TikTok videos, but I am good at shooting videos so they at least let me shoot.”

“I cannot go to school, and they sometimes bunk school and hang out, so I cannot go with them.”

“Outside of work, I just hang out with my friends. I miss English and Religion classes.”

Grownups would be quick to judge the teenager and dismiss these as juvenile problems – but to Zabin, these are big. He manifested his pain through self-harm – he has two rows of over a dozen blade-cut scars on his forearm. The cuts are neat, deliberately done and only a month old.

“I cut myself in front of my friends. They thought I was crazy. I let them think that.”

Juvenile “delinquents” – the law enforcers criminalise them; society calls them products of failed parenting and the media call them gang members. But there is hardly anyone helping them grow in a healthy way.

‘Time to look at what we’re doing for our children’

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

Kamal Uddin Ahmed Chowdhury is a professor of the department of clinical psychology of Dhaka University and programme director of Nasirullah Psychotherapy Unit – an outpatient mental health unit managed by DU’s department of clinical psychology. He has been researching adolescent mental health and juvenile delinquency for decades. Recently he talked to The Daily Star about the sudden rise of criminal behaviour among youths and adolescents.

Q: Adolescents are forming street gangs and often commit organised crimes. Multiple instances of faceoffs between rival gangs have been reported. What is influencing them?

A: Adolescents love to spend time with their peers. They want to learn from them and they want their recognition. They love group activities. When such groups commit an offence, we call them gangs, adding a negative connotation to their activities. But groups of youth have also done great work such as road safety movements. When these youths are not motivated to do positive activities, when they are not appreciated for their good qualities, and when they are treated as “the other” in society, they may form such groups.

However, social media and popular media are also some of the biggest contributing factors. Through social media, which they have used excessively during the pandemic, they learn to interact with people who are just like them.

They join social media groups where they find many youths who act and think like them. Many of these youngsters have millions of followers without making any real contribution to society.

In this manner, these youths confine themselves to a very narrow sense of identity and culture, which they reproduce by forming groups in their real lives. They take inspiration by observing other such groups on social media and popular media, such as drama serials and cinema.

Q: What is your comment on the mental health condition of Bangladesh’s adolescents?

A: According to a 2019 study conducted by National Institute of Mental Health, 14 percent of the below-18 population have been suffering from conduct disorder, which means these children persistently show anti-social behaviour.

Among them, 1.7 percent are involved in criminal activities. If you consider Bangladesh’s population, the number is huge. Again, this study was conducted before the pandemic. I believe that the mental health condition of our youth has deteriorated drastically during the pandemic.

More than 90 percent of these adolescents do not get any medical attention due to lack of awareness in the family and also due to scarcity of mental health services in our country.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused the situation to further deteriorate as children have become severely deprived of healthy recreation, and are overly engaged in social media. Many adolescents find their families suddenly in impoverished condition due to income losses induced by the pandemic.

Many adolescents and youth have been suffering from depression due to such factors and getting addicted to narcotics. Suicide rate among them has also increased alarmingly.

Q: What effective measures can be taken to keep children away from such destructive activities?

A: The time has come to think about what services we are providing our adolescents and youth instead of focusing on what they are doing. If we can think in this way, we shall see that we have deprived them of healthy recreation, and co-curricular activities in schools, we have deprived them of a safe childhood within their own community.

We must ensure healthy recreation, outdoor physical sports and outdoor co-curricular activities for adolescents. We need to build organisations such as clubs, volunteerism-based youth organisations so that youth are engaged in creative activities and community services.

Teachers’ training and parenting training is also essential. Including everything in the textbook and syllabus will not help at all unless teachers are trained to deliver quality and impactful teaching.

Some parents impose excessive, unnecessary restrictions on their children. They often physically punish their children and use abusive words against them. When these children find their back against the wall, they start to commit offences to break free from those restrictions. Ultimately, they want to break social norms and create their own rules.

On the other hand, overly permissible and protective parenting can also encourage them to commit crimes as they think they will get away with their misdeeds with the help of their parents. Again, overlooking offences of one’s own children and maintaining silence is also an instance of such parenting that encourages children to commit further offences.

Also, if children see their parents involved in criminal activities, they are very likely to get involved in criminal activities as they see their parents as their role models.

Recently we have conducted a study on parents of children having conduct disorder. We developed a module on positive parenting and after training the parents for one month, we conducted an assessment.

Our assessment proved that the training parents reduced the frequency of anti-social behaviour among children significantly. Another follow-up study after one month showed similar results. We should organise training on positive parenting all over the country as soon as possible.