

The unfortunate apathy of bystanders

AHMED NUZHA OISHEE

In recent times, I've come across countless news stories about women apprehending muggers and confronting harassers in public places. These women have also attested to receiving little to no help from spectators.

In Bangladesh, where robust emergency services are non-existent, bystanders must play pivotal roles in protecting individuals from life threatening danger until law enforcement arrives.

However, the bleak reality is that most bystanders witness individuals being subjected to all sorts of crime from the side-lines and do nothing to help.

When a woman faces perpetuated crime, it has become normative for bystanders to blame her disposition instead of condemning the crime. They question her behaviour, how modestly she's dressed, who she's with, why and when she was at the place of incident.

These details are later used against victims to show their supposed lapse of judgement. What's even more mind-boggling is that sometimes onlookers will assume the victim has provoked criminal urges in an individual, and then forego the culpability of that perpetrator all together.

When the whole crowd nods in silent agreement, they wrongly attribute the crime to be repercussions of the victim's eroding

moral compass. This creates unfair consequences for victims who have already been through emotional trauma.

When onlookers make snide remarks and insinuate a women's body language and choices meant "she was asking for it", they are no longer just bystanders. They're passive aggressors and are complicit in the damage.

However, not all bystanders are psychologically aggressive. Some are passive witnesses who refuse to intervene because they don't want to get into tedious legalities or believe in minding their own business. Those who acknowledge the necessity to protest, hold themselves back in the hope that someone else in the crowd will act first. They diffuse responsibility through waiting for someone else to lead.

In psychological terms, this is known as the "bystander effect".

Bystanders are also guilty of dictating how victims should react to being wronged. Being a victim to crime is equally traumatising for men and women. However, it's blatant misogyny when a man's public display of anger towards culprits is considered rational

and a woman's public protest is deemed an over-reaction. Onlookers usually try to conciliate the situation by advising women to rein in their emotions.

Reinforcing the stereotype that women are overly-emotional and prone to hysteric meltdowns discredits our truth. The crowd concludes women are rationally incapable of moderating untoward situations and hence should not speak up.

We are all bystanders to something every day. It would be unfair to ask human beings to protest against every misdemeanour, at the expense of our safety. However, no one should have to fend off violence alone while a crowd watches it unfold and plays the blame-game. Voluntary silence and discriminative attitude give leeway to perpetrators and they go unpunished.

Nuzha is unsure where her life is headed. Send her happy thoughts at nuzhaoishee1256504@gmail.com



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Did the pandemic make me a worse person?

TAASEEN MOHAMMED ISLAM

When universities formally resumed in-person classes, I was ecstatic beyond belief, about not sitting aimlessly in front of my laptop all day.

While going to 8 AM classes was an extreme sport on its own, the terrible traffic and the weather being as angry as my mother did not make things better. Still, I was determined to make the best of an already dire situation.

While Covid-19 no longer stands in my

way of world domination, post-pandemic social awkwardness has taken its place. After nearly two years of being holed up in my room judging my questionable classmates while half-heartedly attending monotonous online classes, I practically forgot how to interact with strangers in the real world. For example, when an acquaintance asked me my major, my brain ordered the mouth to cough out the name of my former school.

The blunders do not end there, as I have become prone to talking about people who are in my immediate proximity. I have also retained the habit of muttering under

my breath loud enough for teachers to notice and then ask me if I have something to say. And, apparently, it's rude to roll your eyes at someone mid-conversation. The glaring stares of disapproval I get in return make me question if I was always this impolite.

Jokes aside, small talk is not as easy as it once was. Stumbling and tripping over your words are now a habit, while the number of awkward silences and stares have increased exponentially. I have also become immensely self-conscious about myself, which results in my fight-or-flight response activating whenever I see a known face. Consequently, about half of my conversations nowadays is an internal rollercoaster of emotions.

Unfortunately, social awkwardness and anxiety being a package deal means that now I am dealing with both. The fear of tripping over my words keeps me from asking questions. Presentations are now twice as hard because I'm convinced that everyone is

judging me. Additionally, the inability to properly communicate can sometimes result in feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and lonely, despite being in a busy environment.

In the past two years, most of the socialising we have done was online, devoid of human contact and emotion. But there lies a solution to our problem; it's time for us to move beyond social media, and confront our issues by going out and speaking out.

Covid-19 was a significant and radical change in our lives, and most of us are still rusty from two years of social isolation. So, while the pandemic hasn't made me a worse person, it's made socialising that much harder for me.

Turns out Taaseen Mohammed Islam can write semi-decently at the expense of being able to do basic math. Send him pointers at taaseen.2001@gmail.com

