

# When our victim-blaming culture shrouds predators as teachers



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I remember being in 10th grade when I was protesting in front of the college gate of my alma mater Viqarunnisa Noon School and College. The protest was staged for the expulsion of Porimol Joydhor, a former teacher who had raped a classmate from another branch, and the suspension of the then principal Husne Ara Begum for her attempts to cover up the whole incident.

Thankfully, for all the noise we had created back then, the principal was removed from her post soon after, and the courts sentenced Porimol to life-term imprisonment.

The year was 2011. History has repeated itself this year, involving a similar predator with a different name—Murad Hossain Sarkar, a mathematics teacher at the institution's Azimpur branch.

During a protest rally, students came forward with allegations that for years, Murad has been sexually harassing their peers, a truth they refrained from disclosing out of fear. A report by *Dhaka Tribune* revealed the harrowing account of a former student who preferred to be anonymous. Murad used to single out one or two students from every batch for his predatory behaviour. In the guise of extra coaching, he found pretexts to keep these targeted individuals behind, subjecting them to sexual harassment.

Now, the students' collective outcry is for the administration to mete out exemplary punishment to Murad Hossain Sarkar, to serve as a stern warning against such reprehensible acts.

This past Thursday, Murad was incarcerated, leaving us grappling with a significant concern: how can students regain a sense of

safety within their classrooms? Furthermore, it raises the question of why the premier girls' school in the nation is struggling to create an environment where students feel secure enough to voice concerns about harassment.

Tracing back to history, I remember glimpses of how the school at that time dealt with the aftermath of protests against Porimol. Few teachers had resorted to victim blaming, questioning the victim's intentions or why she was in that sort of a position in the first place. Comments such as "Ek haate taali baaje na (you can't clap with just one hand)" used to be made in various discussions at coachings. Many male teachers started to passively joke about how they are afraid to conduct themselves around students with the charges circulating. The aunts had made sure that their daughters had

now just crying wolf. But they were just kids; they didn't know any better. What about the adults though?

The common denominator of the situation is that the victim is held responsible for her own abuse, not the perpetrator. And while this may surprise you that these practices still persist in such a reputed and historic institution, I'm disheartened to tell you that this is a culture I've witnessed spending 12 years at the institution, which is why I'm not even surprised that 13 years since Porimol's case, the students of Viqarunnisa are going through the same cycle. Let me explain the possible reasons behind this persisting issue.

There's a concept of being a *bhalo meye* (good girl) that's often used by teachers in the classroom. A *bhalo meye* is a girl who studies hard to become a doctor or dreams of studying in a public university, respects her teachers despite their flaws, whose sole focus and definition is her grades. She dresses modestly and is quaint, never assertive. She doesn't talk back and certainly doesn't question authority or societal norms. Therefore, anyone who doesn't fit this mould is termed a *beyadob* (a person without manners).

Schools play a crucial role in shaping young minds. Yet, in our

implications on the development of young girls, moulding their personalities during a formative period. When schools prioritise compliance over individuality, it enables an environment where speaking up is not just discouraged but often penalised. This teaches girls from a young age that their voices are less valuable, impacting their self-

to faculty management and hiring practices. During my time there, I observed incidents of many dedicated and skilled teachers choosing to leave due to the prevalence of internal politics affecting promotions. This not only resulted in the loss of valuable educators but also highlighted the systemic issues within the institution's administrative

traces of a similar rot in the system.

A 2021 study by Plan International revealed that around 74 percent female students in Bangladesh face violence and harassment at educational institutions. And yet, there has been little to no change in making recruitment processes strict and meritocratic, enforcing mandatory background checks



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHARYAR

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an orna wrapped around their neck, as if that would protect them from further harassment. Some of my classmates made conspiracy theories about how the victim was "involved in an affair" with the teacher and is

society, instead of fostering a culture that celebrates authenticity and encourages self-expression, there exists a troubling trend of teaching girls to be submissive. This educational approach has profound

esteem and diminishing their belief in their ability to effect change.

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There are also other problems that may have passively contributed to the scenario. The quality of education at the institution is significantly influenced by challenges related

processes. The teachers who opted to stay faced ongoing challenges, often feeling compelled to remain silent about the institutional realities to keep their job.

Furthermore, the recruitment process in recent years is also questionable since most hiring decisions appear to be influenced by nepotism or political affiliations, specifically connections with either the institution's governing body or local political entities.

What I'm describing isn't just an isolated situation for Viqarunnisa. Take the school's name out of the equation and put the names of Dhaka University or Jahangirnagar University or the many other institutions reeling from sexual harassment charges, and you'll find

on educators, or implementing comprehensive training programmes on gender sensitivity and harassment prevention. This inertia not only perpetuates a culture of impunity but also undermines the fundamental rights of students to learn in a secure and nurturing setting.

The consistent neglect of essential safety and equality measures within Bangladesh's educational system is more than just oversight: it's a clear sign of entrenched complacency that demands urgent, courageous reforms. It's time for the system to abandon outdated excuses and embrace a new curriculum of action, one that guarantees every student a secure and fair learning environment.

# Are the Fed and Biden engaged in a duel?



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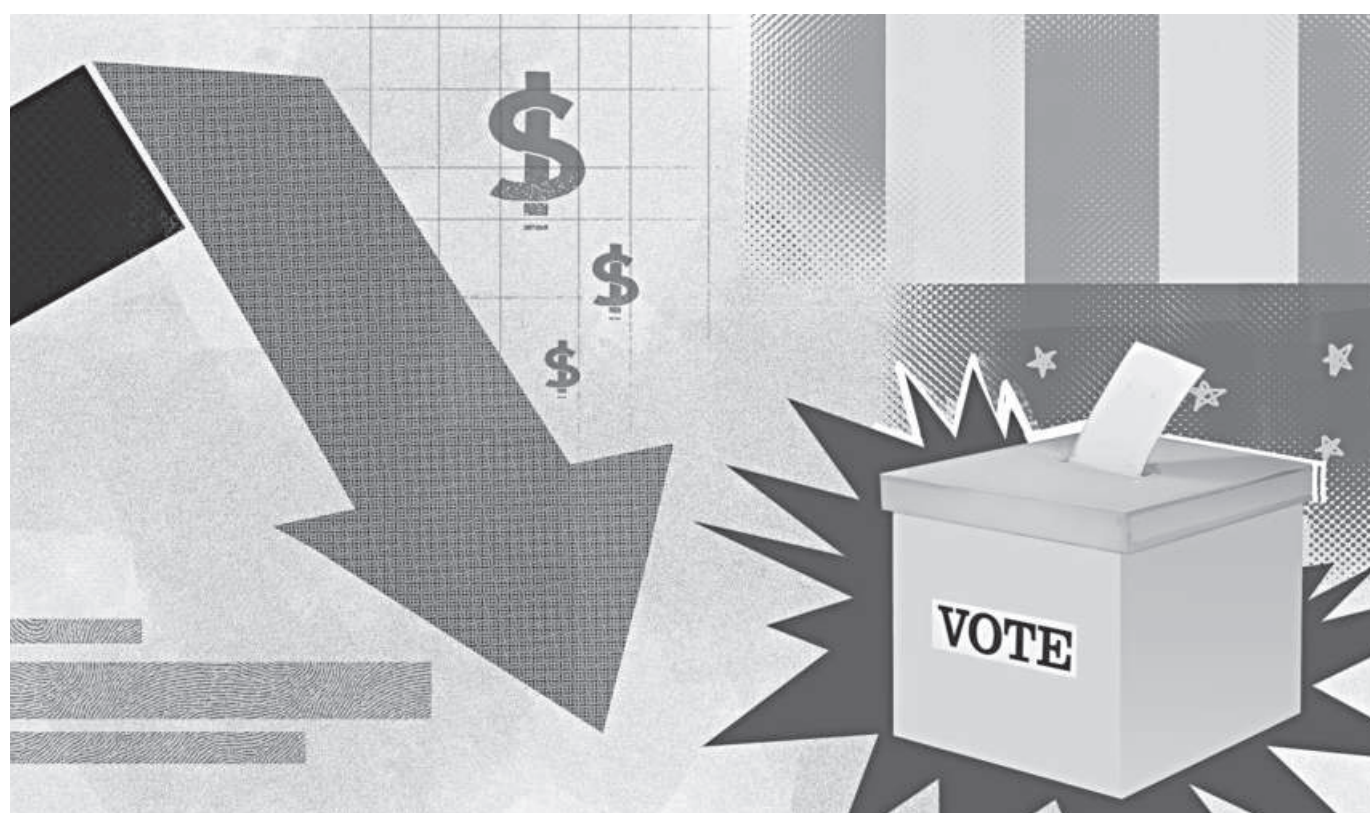
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ABDULLAH SHIBLI

For my readers, particularly those with a slight interest in presidential elections, the next few months will provide a golden opportunity to catch up on the art and science of economic policymaking, as the US proceeds to the run-up to the next elections, on November 5. The Federal Reserve System (Fed), the arbiter of monetary policy in the US, is facing a number of challenges. The most important decision it will make is when to start lowering the interest rate and how fast to go without unleashing forces that might rekindle inflation. However, there is a flip side to this decision. The Fed could simply bide its time, keeping the rate at the current high level, and set in motion a recession, a "hard landing" as it is now known. The latter option could be counted as a political faux pas by the Democrats and the incumbent President Biden.

One may ask, how did the Fed get into this possible lose-lose situation? It was only a few months ago that inflation was raging in the US and the rest of the world. Then, the twin wars in Ukraine and the Middle East overshadowed the economy and have been dominating the news cycle. However, the war on inflation is not over yet. The central banks in the US, Europe and Japan are now confronting a new dilemma which has political ramifications. In a word, the Fed and the other bankers face the question: "Should we take the foot off the brake pedal?" For most readers, a little background to the present crisis may help.

Monetary policymaking, particularly raising and lowering interest rates, is a process. It is a tool that has a time and a scale dimension. You raise the interest rate too fast and you risk a recession and higher unemployment. Now that most countries in 2024 have reined in the inflationary forces that we saw in 2022 and 2023, the next step for policymakers is to consider follow-up action. When do you



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

start cutting the interest rate, and by how much? In how many steps?

The Fed learned from its bitter experience in the 1970s that inflation rears its ugly head again if the Fed lowers its guard prematurely. It is now counting on a soft landing, which by definition is when the Fed is successful in bringing the inflation rate to its target of two percent without causing higher unemployment, negative GDP, and a recession.

The US economy was hit by record-breaking inflation after President Biden

took office in 2021. *The New York Times* reported that a recent internal analysis by White House economists suggests that no single factor is weighing more on consumer sentiment than grocery prices. Those costs soared in 2022 and have not fallen, though their rate of increase has slowed.

To tamp down the surging inflation by slowing the economy, the Fed raised the short-term federal funds target rate it

move could jeopardise the economy. The policymaking body of the Fed, known as the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC), meets eight times a year and its next meeting is scheduled for March 19-20. It is almost certain that the Fed will wait for additional data. GDP spiked to 4.9 percent in 3Q 2023 (not a good thing when the Fed is trying to fight inflationary pressures) but moderated down to 3.2 percent in 4Q 2023.

Again, the Fed would like to see it lower.

As can be expected, the financial markets are going with the flow and that is pinching home buyers. On February 23, 2024, the average interest rate on a 30-year fixed-rate mortgage jumped 17 basis points to 7.088 percent APR. The average rate on a 15-year fixed-rate mortgage rose 11 basis points to 6.292 percent APR, and the average rate on a five-year adjustable-rate mortgage went up five basis points to 7.951 percent APR. A basis point is one one-hundredth of one percent. Rates are

expressed as an annual percentage rate, or APR. With the availability of big data and artificial intelligence tools, the Fed can now bank on better modelling and decision algorithms to forecast whether the soft landing is here. In a National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) paper entitled "The Data Revolution and Economic Analysis," economics professors Liran Einav and Jonathan D Levin of Stanford University discuss how large-scale datasets greatly improve the way we measure, track and describe economic activity, as well as trace the consequences of different events and policies.

The inflation rate has dipped less than economists had expected in January after easing in previous months. Indications are apparent that the Fed is now saying, "Soft landing! Not yet," and has taken a "wait and see" attitude. Its economists are also aware that external shocks (tariffs, geopolitical risks, or other unknown shocks) can also upset the cart.

Reports on consumer and producer prices earlier this month have already shown inflation running unexpectedly hot to start the year. That has scrambled investors' bets on when the Fed might begin cutting interest rates this year. At the end of the last FOMC meeting, the Fed stated in a press release on January 31, "The Committee does not expect it will be appropriate to reduce the target range until it has gained greater confidence that inflation is moving sustainably toward 2 percent."

Obviously, this might not be good news for the administration because this is an election year, and Biden is already on very shaky grounds because of his past performance. "More Americans disapprove of his handling of the economy than approve of it," according to *The New York Times*. He and his party are counting on lower interest rates to provide the average person a little relief and boost his poll numbers.

As for the global economy, IMF last month boosted its forecast for global economic growth in 2024 to 3.1 percent, citing a better-than-expected expansion in the US and fiscal support from China. The central bankers will keep their eyes on inflation data, and probably follow the lead of the Fed.