

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

Are we doing enough to make education safe for girls?

Fatima Jahan Ena and Syeda Afrin Tarannum are journalists at The Daily Star.

FATIMA JAHAN ENA and SYEDA AFRIN TARANNUM

When the idea of a routine is established in a child's life, it almost turns into a mental checklist and usually sticks with them into adulthood (a mantra of sorts)—a checkbox to tick through before walking through the door. In our time as schoolgirls, the checklist comprised of making sure we have all our books, packed our lunch, wore our ID cards, and not to stay in an empty classroom or in the presence of a male teacher or staff alone in a room. What seems like an innocent ritual actually serves as a harsh reminder of how girls aren't safe anywhere, even in their educational institutions.

According to a survey conducted by Plan International in 2022, 74 percent of the total 2,232 female participants aged between 10 and 24 years, reported incidents of violence and harassment at educational institutions. Reportedly, children in Khulna division face the highest instances of violence and harassment (89.7 percent), followed by Barishal (80 percent) and Rajshahi trailing after closely at 78.8 percent, the research said.

While the statistics may seem glaring, one needs to remember that these are only some of the reported cases. The actual number of cases that are intentionally swept under the rug or hidden, influenced by the fear of social ostracisation or intimidation, may be even more drastic.

When it comes to identifying the perpetrators, teachers and staff members usually make up the bulk of the culprits. Earlier this month, in Khagrachhari, an Indigenous schoolgirl was sexually assaulted by her teacher, Abul Hasnat Muhammad Sohail Rana, who according to news reports, had been arrested in a case of attempted rape of a 10th grader in February 2021. After his release, he returned to work at the same school despite protests from other students. Furthermore, according to multiple reports, a Kushtia school's investigation in 2018 found that Rana had sexually harassed several students.

The Khagrachhari rape case echoes the case of Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a madrasa

student from Feni who was set ablaze when she refused to withdraw a sexual assault case she had filed against her principal, Siraj Ud Doula. Another instance occurred when two teachers of St Scholastica's Girls' School and College in Chattogram city's Patharghata area were sued for sexually abusing a fifth-grade schoolgirl for over a year. Whenever she tried to resist them, they reprimanded her in class and threatened to fail her in exams.

It is important to note that not only were the perpetrators inherently responsible for the safety and well-being of the students, but that these people, even after violating the conditions of their duties, were put in a position of power once again to be able to continue their wrongdoings and put other children through the same horrors.

While a higher number of cases reported were from outside Dhaka, it would be wrong to conclude that this issue is prevalent only outside the capital. In February of this year, Murad Hossain Sarkar, a senior teacher of Viqarunnisa Noon School and College's Azimpur branch in Dhaka, was placed on a two-day remand in a case lodged for allegedly sexually harassing a student.

This goes to show that children, most of whom are girls as per the reported cases, are not safe to go to school anywhere. The perpetrators are not just teachers or administrative staff but other trusted individuals as well (within or around the schools) and even other children themselves, which begs the question—who or what do we blame for this? And why do a large number of victims continue to stay silent for days, months or (as the St Scholastica's case illustrates) even years?

While the perpetrators, and especially the adults, are of course to be blamed, the culture surrounding young girls, the objectification they are subjected to, and the questions surrounding the validity of their autonomy in our society at large create the perfect recipe for this systemic disaster. The aforementioned cases highlight the systemic issues that are prevalent within our education system. Even

if the students do speak up, they usually face more repercussions than the culprits themselves. Generally, corporal punishment and blackmail are used alongside threats as intimidation devices. Girls may not even be aware that they are being abused, or may worry that they are going to face consequences for speaking up.

This further contributes to the culture of silencing the victims, as they do not have the provisions to obtain justice on an administrative level in their educational institutions. Often, the overall reputation of

boy or an underage girl to get married in some exceptional cases. This provision may just legitimise the marriage of a child who happens to be a rape survivor, with the rapist within the scope of "special provision" as well.

An estimated 60 percent of the country's schools and colleges are yet to form sexual harassment complaint committees despite a High Court directive issued a decade ago. Even with the very few institutions that have created such anti-sexual harassment cells, students have reportedly been confused about where they should register a complaint, and

impact the entire female demographic, and their pursuit of education which hinges on the decisions taken by parents, guardians or society at large. Consequently, girls are robbed of the opportunity to further or even pursue their education. Another survey by Plan International, conducted with the participation of 4,305 households, found that around 35.3 percent of parents think that fear of sexual harassment is a big factor that leads parents to marry off their underage daughters while 25.6 percent of parents get their underage daughters married out of concerns of social exclusion.

So, what can be done? What is certainly non-negotiable is the need for safe, unbiased, and inclusive committees to ensure confidential and safe reporting mechanisms in schools. Students must never feel unsafe or vilified if and when they choose to report cases of any form of sexual violence. Moreover, the members of a committee should come from a diverse range of backgrounds, equipped to even deal with such matters with utmost sensitivity. The children should also be familiarised with them otherwise they might not trust them enough to report incidents. In case a member of the committee itself is at fault, contingent procedures must be in place.

In Bangladesh, the implementation of comprehensive sexuality education is severely restricted given how the subject matter is viewed through a heavily stigmatised lens. Therefore, even if implementation of comprehensive sex education in all schools is a faraway idea, rudimentary knowledge regarding "good touch/bad touch" and consent should be disseminated across students, administrators, staff, and parental bodies.

In dealing with "women's issues," the foremost idea that almost always shines through is that women need to have access to education, and that education is the only sustainable way for them to gain agency. However, the systemic barriers that hinder girls' pursuit of education have continued to remain deeply ingrained in our society. Every year, we are shown statistics of women excelling in their board examinations and reports of their accomplishments, which are portrayed to be a direct result of all the efforts made by said society to empower girls, but are we as a society doing enough to remove the barriers that have prevailed?



The systemic barriers that hinder girls' pursuit of education have continued to remain deeply ingrained in our society. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

certain teachers for being good educators, or their popularity with other students, leads to people around the victim questioning their motivations and resorting to virtue signalling in favour of the perpetrator. It may even go as far as to publicly humiliate the victim, and assassinate their character in an attempt to restore the perpetrator's image—leading to further vilification. And thus, the cycle of horror goes on.

What certainly does not help is that the Parliament of Bangladesh passed the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2017 with a special provision allowing an underage

the cells only existed on paper. At this point, it is impossible to ask what could possibly take an institution over a staggering 10 years to form a committee that seeks to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their students.

All in all, the narrow avenues of holding the perpetrators accountable traps the young girls in such a situation where they generally have to continue their education in the presence of their abusers, or face dire consequences or stigmatisation if they choose to speak up. The impacts of such violence are not limited only to the particular victims who experience the ordeal themselves, but rather

Why university rankings should matter



M Shakhaowat Hossain is director in charge of the Institutional Ranking Cell and senior lecturer of English literature at North South University (NSU).

M SHAKHAOWAT HOSSAIN

When the University of Zurich announced its withdrawal from the international university ranking published by Times Higher Education (THE) in March 2024, many in Bangladesh supported the decision and called for Bangladeshi universities to do the same. This opinion quickly went viral across social media. However, did these people consider the various factors the Swiss university evaluated before making its decision, or were they content to simply note that the university had withdrawn from the ranking?

The University of Zurich boasts enviable metrics, such as its number of research citations, employment outcomes, and academic environment. Additionally, the university, which is over 191 years old and has produced 12 Nobel laureates, including Albert Einstein, has established a certain standard of excellence. Given these, it becomes clear that even without participating in any ranking platform, the University of Zurich would continue to provide high quality education and create ethical research.

While the Swiss university can afford to ignore such rankings, Bangladeshi universities do not yet enjoy such privileges. The challenges faced by educational institutions in the country extend beyond academic issues, encompassing, as Dr Sazzad Siddiqui noted in an article, "excessive politicisation, opportunistic academic practices, parasitic clientelism, and restricted freedom of speech." Moreover, both the regulatory bodies overseeing education in Bangladesh and the internal authorities of the universities seem hesitant to address many academic policies.

There are also those who have, as Prof Shamsad Mortuza describes, a "love-hate relationship" with university rankings. "We love university rankings, especially when our names grace the list. Without this recognition, we'd easily find 10 reasons to criticise the process." Such an attitude suggests that rankings are not viewed as imperative.

Nevertheless, participation in ranking platforms has brought positive social pressure

to Bangladeshi universities and society as a whole. Thus, rankings are essential for improving university standards. While Sarah Amsler argues that "the practice of ranking is an act of symbolic violence and a mechanism of social exclusion," it still appears to drive improvements in institutional practices.

Some argue that universities should focus on ensuring quality education rather than pursuing good rankings. But who will verify if they are providing quality education? Most of these reputable platforms are data-driven,

Some argue that universities should focus on ensuring quality education rather than pursuing good rankings. But who will verify if they are providing quality education? Most of these reputable platforms are data-driven, even though they may lack what Dr Siddiqui calls a "context-sensitive approach." Still, rankings can expose a university's weaknesses and help it to address them.

even though they may lack what Dr Siddiqui calls a "context-sensitive approach." Still, rankings can expose a university's weaknesses and help it to address them. It seems, then, that ensuring quality education and pursuing rankings can go hand-in-hand.

Bangladeshi universities in general are primarily teaching institutions rather than research-oriented ones. This teaching-focused nature is likely one reason why Bangladeshi universities do not rank highly in international rankings. However, change is on the horizon. The number of courses faculties teach is reducing, and the class size is becoming smaller, allowing faculties to conduct research

and pay better attention to students. While some may question the quality of this research, it's worth noting that publications in indexed journals are favoured, not those in dubious outlets. Top researchers are rewarded, and universities, especially private ones, often cover the article processing charges (APC) for open-access journals, which can be quite expensive, sometimes ranging from \$100 to over \$5,000.

It's also important to consider that the heavy assessment load in Bangladesh's academia—quizzes, sit-down tests, reports, viva voces, etc—is often a nightmare for faculty. However, the positive pressure from international ranking platforms seems to be shifting the focus in academia towards quality rather than quantity. Although some stakeholders prioritise revenue generation, a balance between quality and revenue is becoming more evident, particularly at private universities.

Those who have studied abroad are well aware of the benefits of interacting with both faculty and peers from diverse backgrounds. International campuses are quite diverse. However, the number of international students in Bangladeshi universities—or international faculty members—is quite small. Hopefully, this will change in the near future as rankings emphasise internationalisation. A diverse campus can enrich understanding, broaden horizons, and promote open-mindedness among everyone.

Ranking platforms also encourage inclusivity and respect for diverse opinions and lifestyles. As universities are the torchbearers of any nation, they should be the first ones to ensure progress. Whether today or tomorrow, an inclusive society will become a reality, regardless of attempts to prevent it. The responsibility now lies with the universities; they must decide whether they want to stay ahead of the curve and climb the ranking ladder today or remain silent during a time of revolution in academia.

While no ranking platform is entirely comprehensive or flawless, it is better to participate in reliable ones. Thanks to the ongoing criticism and feedback, these platforms have continued to evolve. Although rankings are not immune to flaws or criticism, it's best to accept them in relative terms. The ranking platforms frequently revise their criteria, indicating their own evolution. This pressure from various quarters helps ensure that things stay in check. Instead of dismissing rankings outright, we can work to improve them—or even create new ones to address specific needs.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS
 - 1 Penalized
 - 6 Linen type
 - 11 Yucca's kin
 - 12 Cost as much as
 - 13 Ark measure
 - 14 Man of morals
 - 15 Laptop's kin
 - 17 Luau strings
 - 18 Count starter
 - 19 Treated tenderly
 - 22 "Far out, dude!"
 - 23 Rover's rewards
 - 24 Holiness
 - 25 On the beach
 - 27 Reggae's kin
 - 30 Audit
 - 31 Cartoonist Key
 - 32 Important time
 - 33 Was rude, in a way
 - 35 Makes do
 - 38 Plain silly
 - 39 Garth Brooks's birthplace
 - 40 Mink's cousin
 - 41 Pricy
 - 42 Approaches
- DOWN
 - 1 Element
 - 2 Scaly pet
 - 3 Caught
 - 4 Malevolent
 - 5 Sensor's job
 - 6 S&L offering
 - 7 Regret
 - 8 Disparaging remark
 - 9 Feeds the furnace
 - 10 Had aspirations
 - 16 Bullfight stars
 - 20 School punishment
 - 21 Week part
 - 24 Greek consonant
 - 25 Ventilate
 - 26 Paper fastener
 - 27 Layers
 - 28 More acute
 - 29 Venomous vipers
 - 30 Splinter groups
 - 34 Poker price
 - 36 Language suffix
 - 37 Easy mark

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9	10
11						12				
13						14				
15						16			17	
18					19	20	21			
22					23					
			24							
	25	26						27	28	29
30								31		
32						33	34			
35			36	37			38			
39							40			
41							42			

OCTOBER 5 ANSWERS

M	O	L	A	R		C	A	R	A	T	
A	D	O	R	E		A	L	O	N	E	
P	E	C	K	S		P	A	C	T	S	
			K	I	T	S		S	K	I	T
O	V	E	N			P	I	K	E		
K	I	D			P	A	R	A	D	E	S
R	E	T	R	O			I	N	T	R	O
A	D	H	E	R	E	S		H	A	S	
			E	A	T	S		P	E	S	O
C	A	D	S			S	L	A	B		
A	L	O	O	F			A	L	O	E	S
S	T	O	N	E			T	I	A	R	A
H	O	R	S	E			E	N	T	R	Y

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com