

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Reclaiming the stories of women on screen

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The intransigent and often vicious treatment toward women across the board, the world, and our very existence is a debilitating fact that indisputably remains more pronounced for some than most. One can imply that it is less normalised in the context of the broader, more enlightened community. Still, there is no question that gender-based violence seethes and thrives around junctures where people, especially women, are at their most vulnerable.

However, the worst of it all is the perpetual implementation of violent acts against women in more ways than one—with voices raised against such atrocities almost always falling short in number.

Let's take a look at Bangladeshi filmmakers employing their work to voice the need for victims of gender-based violence to own their narrative.

The depiction of violence against women through varied mediums, including films or shows, plays a pivotal part in people being able to analyse and assess the assortments of brutality—even more so for those who fail to recognise the undue tribunals whilst experiencing it for themselves. These scathing punches are not just delivered physically but

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verbally, psychologically, sexually, and even socioeconomically. Then again, the depiction of raw or perceivable violence is not always capitalised perhaps because of the existence of strict censorship policies against showcasing such representations



VISUAL: DOWEL BISWAS

worldwide; not wanting to receive backlash from conservative groups; not having sufficient insight, grasp, or sensibility on the portrayal of violence against women; and the unfathomable stigma associated with being victims of violence.

The frameworks of portrayals of gender-based violence in our local productions can easily be said to have been birthed from the need to give voice to the oppressed *Biranganas* (war heroines)—as portrayed through several films or dramas throughout the years.

The late pioneering filmmaker Tareque Masud inevitably has become one to be named when mentioning the portrayal of the everyday woman in films. The documentary *Narir Kotha* (Women and War) from the year 2000, directed by Tareque Masud and his wife Catherine Masud, is a mouthpiece for women who

were subjugated to dual oppression during the Liberation War—providing weight to a second wave feminist theory that rings true to date.

Another documentary, *Rising Silence* (2018) by Leesa Gazi, tells of rape survivors still struggling to fight to obtain dignity. In times of war or unprecedented chaos, women are inevitably and doubly subjugated—by the patriarchal system and men's individual treatment of women.

Films like *Meherjaan* (2011) by Rubaiyat Hossain and *Shongram* (2014) by Munsur Ali, among others, play a landmark role in representing women who were once victims of war crimes. The women in these films navigate the trenches of both love and war, while becoming sufferers themselves.

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This, in hindsight, can be attributed to women being either in charge of the film production or co-directing a documentary.

The representation of marital woes experienced by victims of domestic violence is a monumental aspect that requires awareness. Local productions like *Haldaa* (2017) by Tauquir Ahmed, *Made in Bangladesh* (2019) by Rubaiyat Hossain, *Kuhelika* (2023) by Samiur Rahman, and *Sabrina* (2022) by Ashlaque Nipun, among others, take the plunge to address varied forms of subjugation of women within the supposedly safe confines of being married.

Kuhelika, directed by a male director, displays a rather vengeful take on a victim of domestic abuse. The character Nandini (Nazia Haque Orsha) in *Kuhelika* ends up murdering her abusive husband while she attempts to protect herself. This stance, however, reinvigorates her desire

to live peacefully with her brother and his daughter. The man she had chosen to marry turned out to be duplicitous in nature, and she suffered the consequences of having married him in spite of knowing him as a different man before their marriage.

Sabrina, on the other hand, is the story of a conniving, pathetic, and desperate man who became the reason behind the incidental raping and then burning of the character *Sabrina* (Nazia Haque Orsha). Although *Sabrina* ends on an incomplete note, the task of finding out the true identities of the culprits behind Sabrina's inception is undertaken by her namesake, played by Mehazabien Chowdhury. The constant vilification of your average woman is a towering aspect of this series.

Films like *Made in Bangladesh* and Abdullah Mohammad Saad's *Rehana Maryam Noor* (2021) flaunt the value of sisterhood and support victims inevitably need in order to sustain their emotional and mental health. The respective main characters, Shimu (Rikita Nandini Shimu) and Rehana (Azmeri Haque Badhan), innately support victims in need of assistance. They do so for their need to demand justice, regardless of the costs, and their personal lives often take the toll of their actions. Shimu ends up having to fight with a loving husband to run to do right by the side of her colleague sisters who work alongside her at a garments factory. Rehana, on the other hand, fights the institutional system and deceitful allegations to stand for her beliefs.

Interestingly, director Saad takes the help of publicly shaming the central character to illustrate her devotion to the cause, while Hossain relies upon the central character eagerly seeking support for the betterment of every other woman being oppressed by the capitalistic system of extortion.

When all is said and done, representations of victims of gender-based violence need to be heard, acknowledged, and seen on all fronts. Regardless of the gender of filmmakers or creators, the especially true stories of victims need to always be out there—to give them the dignity of knowing that it was never their fault.

NEWS

Daring to dream

FROM PAGE 12 resumed her education.

"I was told I'd only stay here for a month. But one month turned into six, and then a decade. This place became my home."

Consumed by the fears for her safety and of judgment from others, it took her years to begin her schooling again. "My life had barely begun, but all I wanted was for it to end. I kept asking, 'Why me?'"

Her encounters with the justice system only deepened her trauma. "When I was questioned at the police station, I felt so embarrassed. I didn't even understand what a court was or why people went there. But I had no choice — I had to relive that horrific moment over and over in front of strangers.

"In court, they questioned me so harshly, as if I was lying, I felt nervous, threatened, and completely defeated. Once, they even said I was making it all up. I wanted to give up.... I hated myself and wanted to get away from it all. But for the sake of justice, I had no choice but to keep enduring the same unbearable trauma."

During this time, Ritu's mother was forced to leave her maternal uncle's home as threats from her father escalated. He relentlessly harassed and beat her, ultimately forcing her to quit

her job.

Struggling to survive, Ritu's mother began selling flowers and later worked as a day labourer.

A year after moving to the safe home, Ritu lost contact with her mother.

"She started suffering from psychological issues and hasn't been in regular contact with me since then. She had to leave my younger brother with my father, and we lost communication," Ritu said.

Ritu later found her mother, whose psychological condition prevented her from further pursuing the case. The last time they met was over two years ago and last they spoke was around two months ago.

Despite repeated attempts, Ritu's lawyer could not be reached for comment. However, according to the Bangladesh Mahila Lawyers Association, the case remains at the evidence-gathering stage. Progress has stalled as Ritu's mother continues to be absent from court proceedings.

BNWLA lawyer Fahmida Akhter informed this correspondent that when a plaintiff misses several court dates in a row, the court typically acquits the accused.

In 2018, Ritu was granted self-custody due to her mother's condition. However, she remains in the shelter as she has nowhere else to go. "If I

leave, I'd end up on the streets like my mother."

Ritu passed her SSC exams this year and is now focused on pursuing nursing.

"I've always wanted to help people, but more than anything, I want to support my mother and give her the life she deserves.

"Worrying about my safety and future, my mother has become mentally unstable and now lives on the streets. For her sake, I need to quickly become self-sufficient.... That's why, I've decided to get into a paramedical nursing course to start working as soon as possible. I'll also continue my HSC and later pursue a full nursing degree," she said.

With no family or friends to support her, Ritu's only hope is BNWLA.

Advocate Salma Ali, president of BNWLA, said that despite financial challenges, they are trying to secure Ritu's admission to a nursing institution, where she can enroll in a paramedical nursing course.

Over the years, Ritu's resilience won everyone's heart at the safe home.

Its admin officer and house mother said, "Ritu's determination is extraordinary. She is focused on becoming self-reliant and supporting her mother. I'm confident she'll go far."

[Sunday]. The oil and LNG import process is also open to all," he added.

Badrul Imam, honorary professor of geology at Dhaka University, said like Nigeria, Bangladesh is rich in gas resources.

"In terms of gas resources, we have enormous potential. But we have always leaned towards imports."

Ijaz Hossain, a former faculty member of Buet, suggested that industries and businesses focus on building their resources by installing rooftop solar panels or waste-to-energy as alternative power sources to mitigate energy shortfalls.

DCCI President Ashraf Ahmed delivered the welcome remarks.

BSRM's Head of Corporate Affairs Saumitra Kumar Mutsuddi, DFDE's partner Barrister Shahwar Jamal Nizam, President of Bangladesh Solar and Renewable Energy Association Md Nurul Aktar, and Vice Chairman of Confidence Group Imran Karim also spoke, among others.

Tigers look to extend streak

FROM PAGE 12 "Whenever I play, I always try to give my best for the team. I'm happy that I could deliver my best," Nahid said in a video message, adding that he got tips from legendary pacer Courtney Walsh after the Jamaica Test.

"He told me to take care of myself and work on fitness. He told me to learn new things as there is no end to learning," he concluded.

Meanwhile, a Bangladesh Cricket Board official confirmed that the three Bangladeshi cricketers —

Soumya Sarkar, Afif Hossain and Rishad Hossain — who played in the final of Global Super League for Rangpur Riders on Friday night (Guyana time), are expected to join the Tigers in St Kitts on Saturday, ahead of the series opener.

West Indies, meanwhile, recently beat England in a three-match ODI series — their first series win in this format this year after defeats to Australia and Sri Lanka.

They lost Matthew Forde and Shamar Joseph due to injuries,

replacing them with Marquino Mindley and Jediah Blades.

"We look at any home series (with the aim to) win. However, we understand the opposition that we will play against, and we will not take them for granted. I love to focus on what we can do and what we have to do. I'm pretty sure we can do that," Windies head coach Daren Sammy said.

The match is scheduled to start at 07:30 pm (Bangladesh time) and will be telecast live on T Sports.

Faulty media reports portray Bangladesh unfairly

FROM PAGE 12 top investigative website, which built its reputation by covering some of the biggest corruption and human rights violation stories in Bangladesh," Shafiqul Alam said.

The press secretary said the Netra News report claimed that nearly all nine Hindu deaths, which the minority council attributed to communal hatred-related violence, were linked to other factors such as political, personal, and other reasons.

"Our expectations were that the unity council would respond to the Netra News report, for it raises serious questions about the way the council collects and files reports on violence against minorities in Bangladesh," he said.

He also said the unity council also made a similar controversial report on the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh in July this year.

"It said in the 2023-24 financial year, beginning on July 1, 2023, at least 45 people of minority faiths — mostly Hindus — were killed in the country. Again, Bangladeshi newspapers carried the story on their front and back pages. And not a single media outlet challenged the report despite there being serious questions about the veracity of the unity council's claims," Alam said.

However, according to the Ain o Salish Kendra, the country's largest human rights group, no one was killed in anti-minority violence in 2023 and only two persons were killed this year (January to October), he said.

The ASK is a secular group headed

by human rights defender ZI Khan Panna. He has told local media that he would be interested in defending Sheikh Hasina, the ousted prime minister in the July uprising, in trials.

Claiming that the Bangladesh Hindu Buddha Christian Unity Council's reports have a far-reaching impact, the press secretary said when a British MP recently spoke about the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh, he quoted the Council's report.

The report on the post-revolution attacks on Hindus was cited more than 11 million times in social media, he said.

"What I've learnt is that the powerful and deep-pocketed Hindu American groups, Indian national and regional newspapers, and top Indian commentators cite its report to portray the state of minorities in Bangladesh. Experts told me the Unity Council's reports have been the single biggest source of misinformation on anti-minority violence in Bangladesh," he added.

Alam said, "Violence against minorities happens in Bangladesh. We are still not the ideal country as far as communal harmony is concerned. We hear reports of discrimination based on religion. There are also regular bouts of violence triggered by allegedly blasphemous Facebook posts. And some fringe groups and figures often spread hate against minority people."

In recent weeks, he said, there have been greater efforts by the interim government, political, religious, and civil society leaders urging people to

stay calm during religiously tinged incidents.

Some of them have shown extraordinary political maturity in these events, he said.

However, he claimed, the Unity Council's reports have systematically exaggerated the violence perpetrated against the minority people.

"We hope top secular and liberal newspapers will do their own probe into the alleged cases of religious violence reported by the council. We also hope international rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International will also do similar investigations," the press secretary said.

The HRW did an excellent investigation into the massacres of Hefazat activists in 2013, he mentioned, hoping that the rights group would do a similar probe.

He said if the government does the debunking job, there is a strong chance that its reports will be seen with some sort of scepticism.

"Let the independent newspapers and rights groups probe these incidents. We think it is a serious issue, for Bangladesh has been unfairly portrayed in international media and top parliamentary hearings in influential nations," Alam said.

He said some even call for sending UN peacekeepers to Bangladesh — or intervening in the country — based on these reports, and that is why the interim government wants fair investigations into the alleged cases of minority repression.