

'I'm alive but not living': Survivors of Bangladesh's rape crisis

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With four reported rapes a day and many more unreported, survivors and activists say anyone could be next.

Sharmin*, a 28-year-old housewife, is one of the thousands of traumatised survivors of a rape epidemic blighting Bangladesh.

It has been three months since she says she was raped by a man from the neighbouring village just outside the capital, Dhaka. She describes how he gripped her neck and stomach as he raped her and how she has not been able to eat solid food since it happened.

"If I try to swallow food I can still feel him pressuring my neck and stomach," she explains.

Sharmin has developed an eating disorder and can only have a few spoons of "panta bhaat", a soft liquid-like rice, each day.

In 2018, 732 rape cases were reported in the country, according to the Bangladeshi human rights group, Ain o Salish Kendra. The cases almost doubled to 1,413 in 2019. Now with almost 1,000 cases reported so far this year, Bangladesh is seeing more than four rape cases per day on average.

These numbers are thought to be just the tip of the iceberg, according to aid agencies, who report that most women are too afraid to report rape and do not believe they will get justice if they do.

Amnesty International [points](#) to the government's own figures. Over the past 19 years, according to the government's One Stop Crisis Centre, only 3.5 percent of rape cases went to court under the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act 2000, and only 0.37 percent of cases resulted in convictions. Overall, according to [Human Rights Watch](#), fewer than 1 percent of reported perpetrators are ever convicted.

'I have difficulty breathing'

"Having to live with it is more challenging than my inability to eat," says Sharmin. "When I do my daily chores I get unprovoked flashbacks of my rape. My body starts to tremble uncontrollably and I have difficulty breathing."

She explains how she tries to divert her thoughts but the flashbacks sometimes freeze her body until the whole rape is played out in her mind. If she goes to a doctor with this issue she says she believes he will say she is possessed by a jinn, or spirit, and that people will find out and gossip about her.

"But I would rather have people think I got possessed by a jinn than raped, it saves me the humiliation," she says.

Protests have taken place in several cities across Bangladesh following the surge of violence against women. The protests were initially sparked in late September this year by the [news](#) that a woman was gang-raped by a group of seven men while her husband was tied up and beaten in the northeastern district of Sylhet.

Further protests erupted following the [emergence](#) of a video showing a woman being stripped and abused by a group of five men in the southeastern district of Noakhali. The video, which had been filmed by the men on their phones, circulated on the internet for weeks before being taken down this month. Protests have since been mobilised to challenge sexual violence and misogyny.

While the country's information minister [blames](#) pornography for rising rape cases, protesters and aid agencies insist rape culture and gender-based violence are deep-rooted issues that go beyond "just pornography".

Protesters from Feminists Across Generations, an alliance formed to tackle gender-based violence in Bangladesh, argue that society is embedded with strong conservative and patriarchal values. Activist Umama Zillur, 25, says: "These patriarchal values exist on a structural level, producing strong institutional sexism and social hierarchies that fail to prioritise the rights of women. As a result, cultural and social practices that perpetuate violence against women remains pervasive."

'My in-laws won't eat with me'

The physical and emotional trauma from rape is not all that victims must contend with in Bangladesh: the stigma attached to rape, and the fear of humiliation discourage many survivors from seeking medical help or reporting attacks to the authorities.

Naila Hossain, 32, a social activist working with sexual assault victims in Bangladesh, explains that survivors do not find it easy to come forward as they fear being blamed and ostracised by their communities.

"If an unmarried woman is raped, she may be shunned by society altogether and deemed not worthy of being married or, in some cases, married off to her rapist to preserve the family's 'dignity'," Hossain explains. "Raped women often also flee their homes to avoid such rejection and sometimes even commit suicide."

Women's lives are dictated by a rape culture which stigmatises and revictimises the victims, further impeding their physical and psychological wellbeing.

"The social stigma from rape produces a strong sense of shame for the victims," says Hossain. "Alongside shifting the blame onto the victim, it associates a woman's honour with their bodies. Essentially all honour is lost when a woman is raped and this stigma is translated in societal hostility and rejection."

Worse still, if a survivor has been abused by a family member, she is at risk of being ostracised by her own family.

This is what has happened to Rahena*, a rape victim whose name we have changed to protect her anonymity.

Rahena, a 26-year-old cleaner from Mymensingh, a city north of the capital, Dhaka, says she was raped by a relative of her husband's in their village two months ago.

"My husband won't sleep with me, my in-laws won't eat with me, my parents won't have me around,

and nobody in the community will acknowledge me,” she tells Al Jazeera. “But everyone knows the truth. How can they pretend to be oblivious to it? Is this a life worth living? What he has done to me is worse than murder because I am still alive but I am not living.”

‘There is never any justice’

Hossain says that a lack of effort by police to apprehend and punish rapists also dissuades women from coming forward. Largely “nonchalant attitudes towards cases”, she says, negligence, a lack of commitment to solving cases, along with social stigma, all trivialise sexual abuse and delegitimise their experience, so victims continue to stay silent.

“They don’t report their rapes or assaults to the authorities because they’re afraid nothing will be done,” says Hossain.

Rani*, 19, another survivor who does not wish to disclose any personal details, echoes these concerns about coming forward. She says she believes reporting rape is ineffective because the police will always choose to believe the perpetrator – who will deny the allegations – and will dismiss the case.

She refuses to “fight a battle she has already lost”. “I already know the outcome,” she says. “There never is any justice for people like us, why would there be? What are we even worth?”

She says coming forward may also put her at risk of being attacked by her perpetrator again, as revenge. “It is impossible to report him, he won’t go anywhere because he is very powerful. But what about me? I have to live in constant fear of being raped again.”

Rani now lives her life in fear, worrying that he might attack her again and describes her situation as “impossible to escape”.

“The coronavirus lockdown situation made it worse because he knew I was always home,” she adds. “He could have come again any moment but thank God he hasn’t.”

‘Do we just continue living in fear?’

Umama Zillur, a 25-year-old social activist from Dhaka, says she has become “deeply enraged at the state and society that has contributed to the continuous violence against women”.

“At the core of it, it shows me I am not seen as human,” she says.

Another university student who has taken part in the protests, 21-year-old Fariha Rahman, who also lives in Dhaka, says she wants to see change on a “structural and society level”, or else “anyone can be the next victim”.

“Girls in this country live in fear of being attacked. The fact that my evening classes are made up mostly of men and morning classes by girls just illustrates our fear. I once took an evening class. When I was on my way home my heart sank to my stomach and I almost had an anxiety attack because it was dark and I thought someone would attack me. Do we then just continue living in anxiety and fear?”

Kabita*, 24, from the southeastern city of Cumilla who also did not wish to be identified, says being able to go outside is her only form of escape from her family, with whom she has a poor relationship. But the fear of rape and the coronavirus lockdown have put paid to any freedom she might have.

"This lockdown has meant months of verbal and mental abuse for me from my parents. When they read about the rapes they become concerned for my safety and overly paranoid that something might happen to me.

"Now they're restricting me from going out but they are my real abusers. Not safe to go outside but not safe to stay inside, either. How is this fair for me?"

Kabita adds that although she has not been diagnosed, she feels she has developed symptoms of depression and self-harm tendencies from staying at home.

Death penalty for rapists

On October 12, Bangladesh's government set measures to allow the death penalty for rapists in an amendment that elevates the maximum punishment from life in prison to death. Bangladesh's Minister of Law, Anisul Huq, said he believes the law will result in a decrease in the number of rapes.

Activists, however, do not see this measure helping. The introduction of the death penalty is a short-term solution – a way to curb the protests and to hamper the movement, they say. And activists are not accepting it, adds Zillur.

"Specific rape law reformation needs to be implemented, followed by larger societal conversations that address root causes," she says. "The government should consider proposals put forward by [The Rape Law Reform Coalition](#) that set forth 10 points for addressing the shortcomings in the legal and institutional framework and offer a set of solutions."

As for the death penalty acting as a deterrent, Rani says she knows men will never be convicted due to their privilege of "being men" and "staying well-connected in society".

"I don't think there will be any use of the death penalty. My fate was already decided when I was raped. Nothing will ever change for people like me."

**Some names have been changed to protect the anonymity of victims.*

Umayma Khan

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