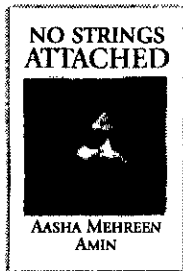


Why we couldn't protect Khadija



REMEMBER Suraiya Akter Risha? The eighth grader of an English medium school in Dhaka, who was stabbed by her stalker, a man who worked at the tailoring shop she used to go to with her mother? Most of us will have forgotten the names of those bright

young women – there are too many of them – victims of stalking, a crime that is apparently punishable by law that is rarely enforced.

Yes, the tailor was picked up from Nilphamari by the cops; it was easy, he was a nobody so the law enforcers just had to put pressure on his family members to get to him. But what about Khadija who has slim chances of surviving the gruesome hacking she was subjected to on Tuesday in front of dozens of people? Khadija, who had just finished an exam from a women's college in Sylhet and who would have sat for another one the next day, if it hadn't been for the ghoulish nightmare she had to go through. Many may question the callousness of bystanders who stood and watched or even took videos of that young girl being mercilessly stabbed on her head and all over her body. But when the attacker has so much political clout that even law enforcers are often hesitant about intervening, how much bravery can an ordinary citizen risk when there is no guarantee that there will be no repercussions even for saving a person's life?

The reality is this. No matter how much we boast about our high enrolment rates of girls, the overwhelming number of GPA 5s they attain and the amazing possibilities they have the ability to explore, the truth is that we have no way of protecting them from stalkers who will psychologically and sexually torture them and may eventually cut their beautiful lives short. It is a brutal truth that many will try to evade.

Not that there haven't been sincere efforts by activists and human rights lawyers to put an end to the abuse. As far back as 2011, the

High Court declared the stalking of girls and women illegal and directed the government to regard the offence as sexual harassment in the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act. According to the Act, the maximum sentence for sexual harassment is ten years of imprisonment, and the minimum is three years. This was in the wake of an overwhelming number of reports of women being killed, committing suicide after harassment and those who had stood up for them being attacked or killed by the stalkers. The HC bench delivered the verdict following

a public interest writ petition filed by Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), seeking protection of women and girls against stalking.

The court, moreover, ordered the government to set up separate cells at every police station that would address stalking cases and send monthly reports to the police high-ups, who, in turn, would have to hold meetings and take action against cases of stalking. The cells would submit monthly reports to respective superintendents of police, or commissioners of police, who

would discuss them at the meetings of District Development Committees under the deputy commissioners. Even mobile courts were recommended by the court so that stalkers could be apprehended quickly and punished (before a girl could be hacked to death or forced to take her own life to escape the mental trauma).

So how why haven't such laudable directives helped Khadija – and Risha and Tonu – remember Tonu? Or is her name to be erased from the books since so far even the cause of her death has been questioned, let alone her

murderers (those who caused her death, in case there is some confusion) identities? The answer to the first question is that despite the fact that the court's directives should be treated as law (when a specific law to address the said crime is absent) there has been absolutely no movement to do so. Had these directives been taken seriously by the relevant ministries and implemented by law enforcers, Risha and many other bright young girls would probably still be alive, Khadija would not be on the brink of death.

There is however a major difference in the case of Khadija and if we dare talk about it, in the case of Tonu. Khadija's attacker has been reported in the media as a self proclaimed activist of the ruling party's student wing who was once her tutor. According to newspaper reports, although the organisation has denied his membership, his Facebook status and some of his friends have said that indeed he belongs to that organisation. Funny how facts just change overnight.

And as for Tonu, whose smiling face in a yellow scarf is fast fading into oblivion, her killers who have the 'cloak of invisibility' over them, seem to have disappeared along with all the evidence surrounding her mysterious murder.

At the time of writing this, Khadija is still alive, barely though, her attacker has left her with serious skull and brain injuries and her doctors have not given us much hope. Our home minister has promised that Khadija's attacker will be brought to justice. The bloody video footage of a young girl being repeatedly slashed while onlookers do nothing would be considered in bad taste if we were living in a society where such barbarism was a rare occurrence. Unfortunately, that is not so, and without such footage, as horrific as they are, the gravity of a crime is not taken seriously and the culprits can get away by fuzzing the facts with influence and money. As the voice of the helpless, powerless majority, our plea is that the harshest punishment be given to all these sexual predators irrespective of their affiliations or badges. Let girls like Khadija breathe freely. Or just breathe.

ILLUSTRATION: PINTEREST

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, The Daily Star.