

OPINION

Harassment in DU

Recently the conscience of the country has shaken by repeated events of sexual harassment in Jahangirnagar University and later in Dhaka University. Being a faculty member in the University of Dhaka, I am anxiously following all the news items from here, Bloomington, Indiana, USA. Unlike many others, I am not willing to take a stand against or for the event. But I felt an obligation to say something about the current issue.

My experiences suggest me to confess that we, the teachers of the Dhaka University are not doing right in many instances. Sexual harassment as a term may be too strong, but gender bias, maltreatment of students and so forth have been taking place for a long time. During my student years in the late eighties and early nineties, we had known to many such untoward developments in the campus. Almost entirely, all the victims were not bold enough to face adverse social reaction for filing sexual harassment cases. In contrast, there were also some students who were willing to take their gender advantage to get a few extra points, and there had always been a few faculty members who also took advantages of the situation.

These types of events have always been an "open secret" in all the departments, at least among the students. Of course, many stories are simply rumour. Nevertheless, no mechanism exists to check these events. Therefore, all the teachers who are involved in such unethical and unconscionable misdeeds continue their activities unquestioned and unpunished. On the other hand, unlike other generations, nineties

Zahid Hassan Chowdhury generation of students of the universities is brave enough to reveal their own cases.

This is of course a positive development. But we have to remember that there is always room for harassing teachers by raising an allegation of sexual harassment against a teacher. During 1996-97, I expelled almost 30 honours and masters' examinees due to duplication, misconduct, and other reasons. Most of the expelled students did not even say a single word except requesting for a minimal punishment. A few students threatened me to assault physically. The then president of one of the two major student organisations (who is elder brother of my classmate and friend) one day stopped by in my room to advise me to move carefully and asked me to inform him if situation worsened. But what unsettled me most was not threat of physical assault. At least in two occasions, two students threatened me to raise allegations of sexual harassment.

"Fortunately" though I did not drop my charges against them, they did not raise any false allegation. Readers might suppose that why should I be worried since I was not involved with these types of misconduct? Our society is framed in such a manner that everybody is ready to believe sexual or any sort of misconduct without verifying reliability of the news. For example, in early 1997 a complaint was filed against a student, of the Department of Political science that she took her honours final exams in the room of a professor of the department. In 1996-97, a lecturer in the Political Science

Department, and I were officially assigned to guard, and therefore, were present in all the exams and we knew that there was no such misconduct. Eventually the complaint was dropped, but I met many people who believed that the complaint was right. I hate to mention but it has been proved that sometimes faculty members are also involved in conspiracies to destroy personal images of their enemy colleagues by raising allegations of sexual misconduct.

Our psyche is inclined to accept sensational news more readily. Therefore, news media is also eager to publish negative news only, and rarely, if ever, pays similar attention if the event is being proved wrong. From here I can only urge not to let one's conscience be a slave of media sensationalism. Please don't try to crucify someone wrongfully accused.

Of course, I am not saying that Dhaka University is moving towards the right direction. Rather I do believe it needs a rigorous re-organisation to ensure quality education. The question is intertwined with the issue of teachers' accountability; however, I have no intention to discuss the issue here. But investigating and trying only this case will be like closing our eyes like camel to avoid sandstorm. What we need is to establish a permanent structure to mitigate all types of harassment, including sexual harassment, of the students by the teachers.

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