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## No let-up in sexual abuse of female univ students

Kamrun Nahar Sumy | Published at 12:19am on August 06, 2022

Sexual harassment of female students has been continuing at public universities around the country.

Especially, recent back-to-back sexual assaults have made female students at public universities feel highly insecure and scared.

While the victims are afraid of even treading paths leading to male dormitories, female students generally avoid going outside alone at night or take trusted male friends by their side whenever there is an emergency taking them out after daylight.

Ashrafi Nitu, a fourth-year physics student of Chittagong University, said, 'We do not feel safe on the campus, not in daylight or at night. We now try to move with our male friends in the event of a necessity at night.'

The involvement of outsiders in some of the recent incidents of harassment, along with university students, shocked female students to their core for it exposed them to any number of attackers because some campuses are not protected by boundary walls or guarded by security staff.

Five people, including two CU students, stripped a female student of the university and filmed the incident near Preetilata Hall while she was returning to her hall on July 17.

The perpetrators also beat up the student's male friend who was with her at that time and tried to save her.

Many of the inadequate number of security cameras installed around the campus are out of order, adding to the general sense of insecurity among the female students.

'A female student was harassed on the campus by an outsider recently, but the accused could not be identified as the nearby CCTV camera was out of order. In such a situation, we won't even know who the perpetrators are if such incidents happen, let alone get justice,' Taposi Dey Prapti, a fourth-year student of Jahangirnagar University, said.

The street lights in front of the female dormitory are mostly broken and the administration does not fix them until students create pressure, she added.

Public university female students are also taunted by their male classmates or even by their male teachers over what they wear.

‘Our teachers make derogatory remarks about our being dressed as we choose and rebuke us for sitting and chatting with boys in the evening or at night. If our teachers hold such hostile attitudes towards us, how can we feel safe on the campus?’ a master’s student of Rajshahi University posed the question.

Two RU business students complained in March 2021 that a teacher, his wife and a guard scolded them for wearing an ‘inappropriate dress in an inappropriate way’.

The intensity of fear that has gripped female students is so deep that they think twice about what they should wear apprehending derogatory comments from male classmates and teachers alike.

‘Some in the hall administration harass female students, including calling their parents, if they fail to come back to their halls by 10:00pm,’ Taposhi said.

Two CU female students of communication and journalism were harassed by four 2nd-year students of the university for staying out at 11:30pm in September 2021.

It is not only the female students who are not safe on university campuses, but females from outside are also unsafe.

A 23-year-old woman filed a case with the Shahbagh police station in the capital, complaining that a motorcyclist had molested her and tore her dress in front of Sir AF Rahman Hall of Dhaka University while she was on a rickshaw on June 9.

On May 18, a former female student of Islamic University in Kushtia filed a written complaint with the DU Proctor Office that two DU students sexually harassed her in the Suhrawardy Udyan park on May 16 evening.

She was spending time with her friends near Shikha Chironton in the park.

Students and teachers blamed the passive role of university sexual harassment prevention committees and the indifferent attitudes of administrations with regards to such incidents for university campuses becoming unsafe for female students.

The other reasons that they pointed out included a lengthy procedure to settle complaints, a culture of impunity and the influence of powerful people behind those accused of committing such crimes at public universities, they added.

The High Court in 2009 issued a guideline on preventing physical, mental or sexual harassment of females at workplaces, educational institutions and other public spaces.

The court also directed forming a sexual harassment prevention committee at every educational institution, asking all universities to raise awareness against sexual harassment, including by holding seminars and discussions, a directive which was hardly implemented.

JU student Taposi Dey Prapti said that the committee of her university had never organised any seminar or workshop on the issue, adding that many even do not know that such committees exist.

‘Even if anyone tries to lodge a complaint, she has to face unpleasant questions,’ Taposhi added.

Professor Jebunnesa, head of the JU sexual harassment prevention committee, said that the university would start holding seminars for the upcoming honours 1st-year students on the issue.

University sexual harassment prevention committees frequently violate the HC directive to submit the investigation report, along with recommendations, to the authorities concerned within 30 days of the incident, a time period which can be extended by another 30 working days if required.

One of the CU communication and journalism student victims said that the university authority — pressured by the protest that erupted after the sexual assault on another student by five youths on July 17 — expelled the perpetrators for one year on July 25 after 10 months of the incident.

‘We communicated with our proctor and members of the university sexual harassment prevention committee several times, but they bypassed their responsibility on various excuses. In the meantime, the perpetrators threatened us to withdraw the complaint, put the matter at rest and even teased us publicly with derogatory comments,’ said the victim.

In some cases, the administration let the perpetrators, who are affiliated with a political party, especially the ruling party, off the hook.

The two students, expelled for harassing the two CU communication and journalism students, meanwhile, appeared for the 2nd-year final exam on August 3. The accused are affiliated with Bangladesh Chhatra League.

‘We are even more scared. Now we stopped passing by the male halls,’ the victim said.

GH Habib, professor of English at Chittagong University, said, 'The perpetrators attached to the ruling political party get away without being punished in most cases. The culture of impunity makes female students more unsafe.'

It is the University Grants Commission's responsibility to oversee the formation of university committees and activities, according to the HC directive.

The UGC usually prefers not to take any tougher action against committees. It usually gives recommendations and warns, UGC acting chair Professor Dil Afroz said.

'We can take actions as per the law. But we usually don't fearing repercussions from the universities,' Professor Dil Afroz said.

The UGC, she assured, would take steps if a victim complains to it with evidence after being denied justice at the university.

One hundred and fourteen universities, 42 public and 72 private, have sexual harassment prevention committees among the 160 universities. However, only 41 universities submitted reports and reported only 26 sexual harassment incidents in 2020, according to the UGC 2020 report. The UGS is yet to publish its report for 2021.

The report reveals that universities in most cases let the perpetrators off the hook with a mere warning. In some instances, the victims withdrew the claims halfway through, fearing social stigmatisation or being threatened by influential quarters.

Afroja Shoma, assistant professor at American International University-Bangladesh, said, 'Our educational institutions are highly gender-insensitive. Everyone, from security guards to the university vice-chancellors, should receive orientation in this regard.'



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