

The Role of Religious Leaders in Promoting Safe Access for Victims/Survivors to Support Services & Justice

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During Covid-19, in addition to overall suffering, atrocities on women, children and minorities irrespective of religion caste and creed have increased in general. Women and children, such as minorities, being comparatively weaker groups in society, are particularly vulnerable. Notably, the age group of rape victims in recent weeks varied from 3 to 80 years. Reports of different organisations from 2020 also reflect the same.

A) Access to Support Service:

Religious leaders can play a supporting role but it is society that has to take the main responsibility and play the central role.

In a society like Bangladesh, rape always puts a stigma on the victims/survivors and even their families suffer trauma, sometimes even resulting in suicides. Religious leaders, also society, should start to consider these unfortunate incidents as 'accidents' rather than searching for blame on the side of victims and campaign in that perspective. Not to misunderstand, this campaign is for standing next to the victims/survivors and their families and not for legal actions against the culprits.

Awareness campaigns in every educational institution starting from young children to university level and educate everyone irrespective of gender. This campaign may be extended to all religious organisations, mosques, temples, pagodas and churches also.

Support the victims/survivors organisationally, both religiously and socially, to educate/train leading to self-dependency and becoming established in life. In this context, a campaign for 'special quota' in recruitments, like underprivileged and others, may be an option.

B) Access to Justice:

We have laws but their execution are the main challenges both at government level and also in society. Social acceptance and practice of the same also matters a lot. For example, in Hinduism, at the initiative of Raja Ram Mohon Roy 'Satidaha' (a widow sacrificing herself by immolating herself on her deceased husband's funeral pyre) was revoked in 1829 and 'Bidhoba Bibaho' (remarriage of widows) was introduced at the initiative of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in 1856. But the reality is 'Satidaha' had been accepted and was being practiced. The law is definitely a strong tool but not the absolute one.

We have special 'Nari Sishu Nirjatan Daman Ayne' and for legal support of that law we have separate 'Nari Sishu Nirjatan' court in every District and Upazilla. Punishment for culprits of rape and similar offences can be the death sentence even, but the crude reality is that victims and their families are stigmatised and society is not accepting of the victims/survivors, especially in case of settled marriages. In other words, culprits may be in a 'condemn cell' till their execution but the victims/survivors with no fault from them are also in a 'family or social condemn cell' throughout their lives.

Confidentiality of victims' identity must be maintained at all levels, especially during police verification and prosecution. Unfortunately, in most of the cases victims at every step of police investigations and court trial procedures continue to suffer. To overcome this and giving mental and social support 'Camera Trial' may be suggested not as an optional but as mandatory.

Religious and other community leaders can play a major role in bringing these unfortunate victims and their families back to normal life. Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad being apex organisations of minority communities, also having committees in all Districts, Upazila even at union levels, can join hands with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to collaborate on this.

SUGGESTIONS:

- Awareness campaign in general also in families.
- Rape should be considered in families and also in society as an unfortunate accident with no fault on the side of the victims.
- Teaching this should be included in academic curricula at all levels from primary to university.
- For maintaining confidentiality and the mental well-being of the victims, mandatory 'Camera Trial' should be introduced.
- Victims/survivors may be given privilege of special quota in services like underprivileged.
- Last but not the least, minorities being the weaker communities in society are the most vulnerable at all levels. Apart from day to day atrocities, minorities have to experience extreme brutality leading resulting in their household properties being reduced to ashes, mass looting, burning of temples, torture, rape of women and children, particularly before, during and after important political elections.
- The ICRC may take up a Pilot Project and if so, religious leaders along with committee members of Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad will give all out support for promotion and implementation of same.