

# The growing rape incidences seems an epidemic turn of sexual violence in Bangladesh: A letter to the editor

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Violence against women is the most prevalent form of human rights infringement, with severe physical, mental, and social consequences for the victim. Sexual violence includes “rape” defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “A physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration—even if slight—of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object.”<sup>1</sup> Bangladesh has faced an alarming increase in rape incidences over the last few years. According to data from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), a legal aid and human rights organization of Bangladesh, rape cases have increased by 122% in the span of 3 years from 2018 to 2020.<sup>2</sup> In a desperate attempt to deter sexual assailants, the Bangladesh government introduced the death penalty as the maximum punishment for rape cases on 12 October 2020.<sup>3</sup> However, there seems to be no stall in the increment of rapes, with 978 rape cases occurring between January and August of this year (Figure 1). These numbers greatly under-report the actual rape count, as many women remain fearful in reporting their rapes due to social stigma.

Sexual violence against women has always been prevalent in Bangladesh.<sup>6</sup> Domestic aggression and brutality against intimate partners are all too frequently seen, with 60% of Bangladeshi men reporting to have committed violence toward an intimate partner and 35.7% men even justified such abusive behavior.<sup>7</sup> Bangladesh holds the second-highest position in lifetime prevalence of sexual partner violence against women (49.7%), ranking only behind Ethiopia (58.6%).<sup>8</sup> Of additional concern, reports are suggesting a surge of rape cases and sexual violence against women in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

Several factors are contributing to this dismaying rape culture in Bangladesh. First and foremost, the country's judicial system is frail in ensuring harsh and rapid punishment against rape incidents.<sup>10</sup> Failure of courts to make convictions in rape cases has led victims to become wary of the judicial system and hesitant to come forward seeking justice.<sup>11</sup> Between 2011 and 2018, only five rapists out of

4372 cases were convicted in six administrative districts of Bangladesh.<sup>12</sup> The reasons behind these low conviction rates are complicated trial systems, intervention by influential figures, administrative delays, and some intentionally fake lawsuits. However, the government of Bangladesh has approved the death penalty as the highest punishment in rape cases in October 2020 for speedy trial, fair investigation without any political or other interventions.<sup>12</sup> Second, Bangladeshi people live in patriarchal societies, where male domination reigns supreme.<sup>13</sup> In some patriarchal societies, rape is a method of asserting sexual dominance rather than satisfaction and is a tool for morally twisted men to project their social control over women. Third, victim-blaming is quite common in Bangladesh. Law upholders, religious extremists, community leaders, and social media influencers often blame the indecent dress-up of women, their lavish lifestyle, and freedom in movement for sexual violence against women.<sup>14</sup> Rape survivors often refuse to disclose the crime committed against them in fear of further trauma from victim-blaming.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, many causes of rape remain unreported and act as an incentive for perpetrators to keep repeating their offenses. Fourth, addiction to abusive drugs is associated with the increment of rape incidents. Association for the Prevention of Drug Abuse (MANAS), an anti-drug campaign group, reported that Bangladesh has an estimated 7.5 million drug addicts. Also, they noticed that 43% of the unemployed population are abusing different narcotic drugs in Bangladesh.<sup>15</sup> The most popular drug is yaba, a combination pill of

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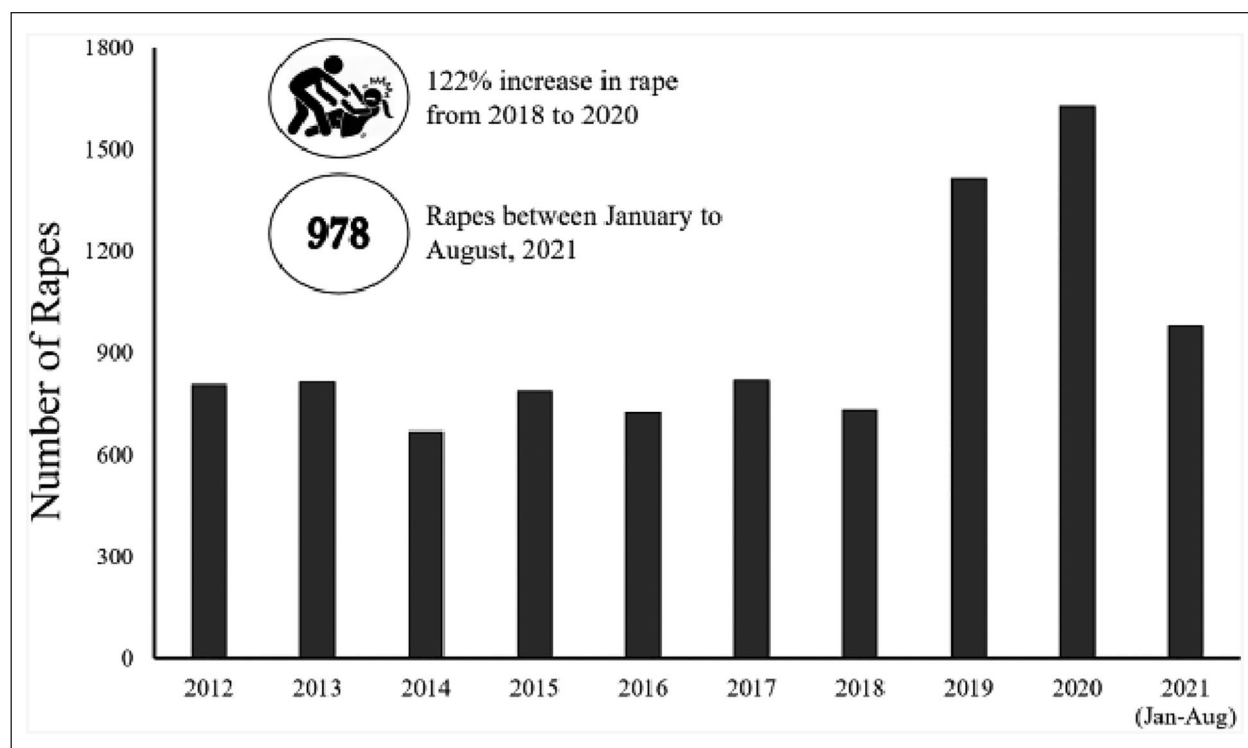
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**Figure 1.** Rape incidences in Bangladesh over the last 10 years. We collected data from Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) and Odhikar Foundation.<sup>4,5</sup>

methamphetamine and caffeine that greatly arouses sexual stimulation, making abusers rape-prone. According to the country's Department of Narcotics Control, 80% of rapes and murders after rapes are connected with drug addicts.<sup>16</sup> Finally, responses against the COVID-19 pandemic have created more opportunities for perpetrators to perform sexual violence against women.<sup>6,17-21</sup>

The government of Bangladesh needs to undertake several initiatives to combat this trend of rape culture. The authority should pay attention to reformulate the judicial system and ensure fair and speedy prosecution against sex offenders. Human rights organizations can advocate the government authority to improve and formulate a gender-responsive justice system to handle rape incidences and sexual violence against women and children. Approval of the death penalty does not seem to be deterring perpetrators. They usually try to kill the victim after rape to hide evidence of the crime. Therefore, it is more important to execute justice to all the pending rape trials and set a message of zero-tolerance against sexual violence. The authority should conduct awareness programs for raising voices against sexual abuse. Human rights organizations and social workers can play a vital role in disseminating knowledge to women on where and how to seek legal justice against sexual violence. Emergency telephone hotlines dedicated to receiving complaints against domestic violence need to be introduced, so that rapid police action can be taken against male domination at home. Rigorous

training programs focusing on the proper upbringing of male kids and teenagers also need to be implemented. Proper sex education has proven to be effective in reducing risky sexual behaviors in developing countries.<sup>22</sup> Thus, curriculums in schools and colleges need to include sex education so that male students can learn about the importance of gender equity, respect, and mutual consent. Drug addiction problems need to be dealt with as well as drug abusers prone to sexual assault and domestic violence.<sup>23</sup> Preventive measures such as rigid monitoring of drug smuggling through borders, interfering with the drug distribution channel, bringing drug dealers and addicts to justice need to be implemented. The authority can launch awareness campaigns targeting parents focusing on the symptoms of addiction and how to keep children away from drugs. Finally, victim-blaming needs to stop. Rape survivors require social and psychological assistance to return to their regular lives. Community leaders and social media influencers can play their role to stop victim-blaming by speaking against the social stigma that haunts rape victims. Rapid implementation of the law, proper sex education of males, and change of attitude toward rape victims cannot stop this alarming increment of rape incidents in Bangladesh. Moreover, we need to create community awareness against rape incidents. We can empower our girls and women by teaching them self-protection measures. We should also develop our boys in a way that they can value and respect girls and women. Together we

should come forward to raise our voice against rape regardless of our sexes.

### Author contributions

F.I.R. and S.A.E. were involved in the conceptualization, data curation, and writing the original draft of the article. M.R.I. was involved in the conceptualization, review, and editing of the article.

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