

The Face of Intimate Partner Violence in Bangladesh: Revealing Patterns from the Existing Literature

Syeda Tonima Hadi*

Abstract:

The magnitude of intimate partner violence in Bangladesh has driven many Bangladeshi researchers to examine this social problem since the early 80's. Although IPV is an issue both in marital and non-marital relationships, Bangladeshi researchers have focused mainly on marital relationships in exploring IPV. This paper reviews some important work by Bangladeshi researchers and notes a few patterns in the issues revealed by their work from rural vs. urban context. Notably, Bangladeshi researchers blame the patriarchal social, cultural, and family norms as the main factor behind IPV. Within this family system, the rural couples are influenced more by the religious beliefs, combined with patriarchal beliefs, when it comes to IPV. Although the urban couples have not received as much attention as the rural couples by researchers, evidence suggests equal prevalence of physical violence in both these contexts. The urban IPV victims, however, reveal suffering more in the form of psychological abuse compared to the rural victims. Micro-credit programs, effective in the rural context, are often observed to have positive consequences for the IPV victims. The overall help-seeking behavior of the IPV victims is similar both in urban and rural context. Regardless of where they are from, majority of the IPV victims prefer not to reveal their sufferings to anyone outside the families. IPV is considered to be private matter and thus dealt with by the members of the family.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, at almost all levels of the society, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)¹ is recognized as a significant social problem and naturally has received due attention from researchers, social workers, and activists from non-government (NGO) and government organizations as well as the legislative bodies (Jahan & Islam, 1997; Bangladesh Women's Lawyers' Association [BNWLA], 2003; Jahan, 1994). Over the last two decades, violence against women has become one of the most visible and articulated social issues in Bangladesh (Jahan & Islam, 1997). Zaman (1999), a socialist feminist, explained that the transformation of violence against women from a non-issue to a social issue is a major contribution of feminist movement. She noted that women's oppression in Bangladesh became real apparent at the time of liberation war during 1971 when Bangladeshis were fighting for their independence from Pakistan. During this period of war, over 30,000 women were raped. These women were labeled as 'birangana' (war heroines) by the then Bangladeshi Government, later used as a derogatory term against women. In the post-independence period, a period of lawlessness, indicated Zaman, violence against women continued by armed Bengali gangsters. These extreme victimizations of women brought together many middle class women to fight against the oppression. This new feminist consciousness was

* Senior Lecturer, Independent University, Bangladesh. Email: hadi@iub.edu.bd

¹ One of the current working definitions of IPV in Bangladesh is: "any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in the physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering of women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life." (Khan, 2002, p. 13) Another definition by BNWLA (2003) identifies this violence as a violence perpetuated in the home or family environment against women of all economic strata by husbands, in-laws, and family members.

further promoted by two important developments at that time (Jahan, 1994; Zaman, 1999): 1) United Nation's declaration of the Women's Decade (1976-85) and 2) the publicity given by newspapers and various women's rights groups to the abuse of young married women due to non-payment of dowry. Thus, the issue of spouse violence, mainly concentrating on dowry related violence, started being researched in the early 80s in Bangladesh (Islam, 1982).

With the attention received from social researchers and two decades of careful examination of IPV, the magnitude of this social problem draws more concern. A recent UNFPA State of the World Report (2000) noted that 47 percent of the women in Bangladesh testify to having been physically assaulted by a male partner (in Blanchet, 2001). Also, Blanchet in her research on marital violence indicated that Bangladesh ranked second on a list of twelve countries with high rate of violence against women. The contemporary studies, apart from revealing the magnitude of the prevalence of IPV in marital relationships, reveal some more patterns in the causes and consequences of IPV. The discussion that follows presents such commonly observed patterns in the Bangladeshi IPV studies.

Patriarchy - the Primary Factor behind IPV

Researchers in Bangladesh, like the U.S. feminist researchers², emphasizes upon the socio-economic and structural inequalities of women as the main factors behind IPV. Bangladesh is a society which is characterized with stark patriarchal domination of women. This domination is clearly visible through women's positions in families and subsequently in the society. In Zaman's (1999) words, the domination of women in Bangladeshi family context become apparent to us:

Ritualistic discrimination practices begin at the time of birth in Bangladesh. For example, the birth of a male child is announced through *azan* (Muslims' call for prayer), welcoming the person to the Muslim community. In contrast no *azan* is given when a girl is born, and thus her arrival is not ritually recognized by the family and the community...In general boys are considered to be assets who remain in the family to carry out responsibilities in later life. In contrast, a daughter is likely to be regarded as a burden by her family. (Zaman, 1999, p. 41)

Typically, in Bangladeshi families women's statuses are determined by their marital statuses through the husbands (Zaman, 1999). They are expected to give up any self-fulfilling ambitions and be submissive to the husband's needs from the day they are married (Blanchet, 2001). Blanchet explained, "The selfless devotion of Bengali wives has been highly celebrated and women who excel in the role have been compared to goddesses. The myth hides the difficulty many women experience in forgetting their own needs and interests and it conceals the violence

² The first and most widely proposed explanation of IPV grew out of the U.S. violence against women movement in the early 1970s (Dutton & Bodnarchuk, 2005; Kilpatrick, 2004; Kanuha, 1996; Tjaden, 2004; NIJ,OJP, 1998; Yodanis, 2004). The feminist perspectives viewed patriarchy as the root cause of violence against women and therefore saw "male violence toward women" as the defined problem.

meted out to those who are unable to stand on the pedestal on which they have been placed.” (p. 9) Women’s vulnerability in families is enhanced/supported by Islamic laws. The precedence accorded to *sharia* (Islamic personal law) limit women’s rights in every personal or family matter (Zaman, 1999; Jahan, 1994). Men are given the right to polygamy, unilateral divorce, double share of inheritance, and guardianship over wife and children.

The family law ordinance, amended in 1982, modified the *sharia* - personal laws to some extent, but women’s socio-economic vulnerability and lack of knowledge about rights, prevent proper implementation of such laws (Jahan, 1994; Bhuyia, Sharmin, & Hanifi, 2003). Moreover, no matter how positively the law has been changed, religion still plays a vital role through the Islamic leaders in controlling people’s rights. Till this day, in the rural areas of Bangladesh, religious leaders in their personal village courts (*shalish*) solve the family and community disputes, mostly in favor of men (Jahan, 1994, Blanchet, 2001). Thus, in Bangladesh socio-cultural-religious norms and values clearly reflect strong patriarchal views, which support domination of women at every level, starting within the family. Researchers propose the examination of these broader patriarchal values of the society reflecting within the day-to-day treatment of women in Bangladeshi families as factors behind IPV.

Jahan (1994), a prominent feminist researcher in Bangladesh, distinguished two causes that contribute to family violence: 1) the *general* context and 2) the *specific* context. She explained, “The general context of gender violence includes the socio-cultural norms, values and beliefs about family life, family structure and power hierarchy within family, gender being the most important variable.” (p. 10) On the other hand, specific factors include, “class position, location, structure of the specific family, the dynamics of interactions of the couple, the personality and the world view of the aggressor and the victim, the immediate reasons leading to violent incident, the extent and volume of resources brought to the marriage by both.” (p. 11) Jahan decided to emphasize on the general contextual factors more than the specifics, as according to her the specific factors originate from the general social context. In her words, “the wider socio-cultural and structural factors leading to gender violence in the family is emphasized more as such violence is regarded here mainly as a social problem and hence amenable to interventions through organized social action.” (p.11) Jahan echoed the same feminist explanations behind IPV as many of her contemporaries did.

Within the general context (Jahan, 1994), a major determinant of women’s position is her access to education and thus her economic independence. A prominent Bangladeshi IPV researcher, Ahmed (2005), found in her study that women’s age and education is negatively related with their experience of violence within families. The younger the women enter a marital relationship the

less educated she is supposed to be and the more socio-economic vulnerabilities she is presumed to have. Moreover, with education women are empowered through social networking, increased self-confidence and capacity to use information and resources available in society. Thus, women's socio-economic independence is considered a crucial determinant of her position in the power hierarchy within family, which has implications for the violence she will or will not face. Ahmed noted, "It is assumed that opening up economic opportunities through access to credit, awareness-raising activities, and skill-training for income-generating activities would enhance women's self-esteem and status within households and change their relationships with their husbands, hence reduce domestic violence" (p. 96)

Although women's education is receiving more importance in the recent times, not too long ago women's education was the least of priorities in Bangladeshi families, especially in the rural context. Jahan in her study (1994) on rural respondents of married couples, found that the level of education of the abused women (the wives) were very low. Almost half of them had no formal education and some only knew to sign their names. A number of them were taught to recite the verses of the Holy Quran, which reflected the allegiance of the families of origin to traditional emphasis on teaching religious values to the children. The level of the husbands' education, although not very high, reflected the parental concern with son's education as most of them had reading and writing skills.

However, education alone cannot predict IPV in Bangladesh, since it has been found that urban women although having better educational qualifications, are almost equally vulnerable to IPV (ICDDR,B, 2007). The socio-economic dependence of women combined with the patriarchal values and beliefs of their families are crucial in women's experience of IPV. The patriarchal views within family and its relation to women facing IPV are clearly reflected in a study conducted by Bhuiya, Sharmin, and Hanafi (2003). In their study on 190 rural women, Bhuiya et al. examined some attitudes behind wife-beating in Bangladeshi families. According to their findings, the women reported that they faced violence for the following reasons: wife questioned husband in day-to-day matters (29%), failure of wife to perform household work (11.5%) or take proper care of children (10%), not conforming to veil or other expected behavior (3%), refusal to bring money from natal family (3%), and husbands day-to-day frustrations (2%).

Moreover, false interpretations of Islamic values by religious leaders lead many Bangladeshi families to believe that women do not have the right to refuse sex with husbands at any point. This leads to many cases of marital rape or sexual abuse of women by their husbands (Hadi, 2000). Also, within Bangladeshi families women's position is determined through her ability to produce male heir, and thus her inability to do so becomes a reason for increased violence. In a

study by Johnson and Das (2008), men who preferred to have more male children than equal number of male and female children, were about 30% more likely to report physical violence on their wives.

The findings of Jahan (1994), ICDDR,B (2007), Bhuiya et al. (2003), Hadi (2000), and Johnson and Das (2008) presented women's family status within the patriarchal Bangladeshi society. Women, in many families, are perceived as mere properties of men and so, under men's control. This huge gap in the power relations of men and women in Bangladesh is the primary factor associated with IPV.

Now that we have identified some major factors behind IPV, the broader social structural and cultural beliefs systems that reflect in the patriarchal and rigid religious values within the family systems of Bangladesh, we further our discussion with some specific data from IPV studies of Bangladesh, revealing some patterns of IPV in the rural vs. urban context.

Rural IPV Victims and Religious Dominance

The rural IPV victims are often subjected to religious decree, which is not common in urban IPV victims. Zaman (1999, p. 44, see "The case of Nurjahan, 1993, 1994) in her article presented the following case exemplifying the power of religious leaders in the rural Bangladesh, especially in case of sensitive issues related to IPV:

Nurjahan (age 21), from the village of Chatakchara in the Sylhet district, remarried after divorcing her first husband. Her parents arranged the second marriage. The local *mullahs* (religious leaders) alleged, however, that her second marriage was not performed in accordance with Islamic law. A local *Shalish* (informal village court) found the second marriage "un-Islamic" and sentenced Nurjahan and her husband to death by public stoning. According to the *fatwa* (religious opinion), Nurjahan was to be buried in the ground up to her chest and stoned publicly for allegedly having an adulterous relationship. Nurjahan survived the stoning but allegedly committed suicide in humiliation.

Fatwa, religious opinions of clergies based on their interpretations of the Koran, having no legal sanction in Bangladesh still holds great power to influence and add to the misery of women suffering in violent relationships, especially in rural areas (Zaman, 1999; Jahan, 1994). Although, legal efforts are increasingly attempting to address IPV issues in Bangladesh, for instance, the recent legal provisions for up to death penalty for violence against women (Bhuiya et al., 2003), the accessibility of legal services to rural women from poor economic background is questionable. Legal services are city based, lot of hassle to access, and also very costly. The deterrent provided by legal provisions is somewhat limited to extreme forms of violence or killing. Thus, Bhuiya et al. predicted that the law is unlikely to have a major impact on the reduction of IPV in the near future.

Micro-credit Programs and Involvement of Rural women

In the mid-70s credit programs were introduced in Bangladesh by nongovernmental organizations to rural women (Hadi, 2000). The type of programs included not only collateral-free credit for the rural women but also a package of support services, such as skill training, non-formal education, health and legal awareness programs etc. Hadi (2000) found negative association with participation in such credit program by rural women and the sexual violence they faced in families. He speculated that with the ability to bring home resources from the program participation reduces some of the poverty related stress and thus helps reducing some violence stemming from poverty. Similar findings by studies (Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996; Hadi, 2005; Ahmed, 2005) among rural women respondents supported the negative association of IPV with micro-credit program participation. All these studies supported that with such participation, economic independence, and increased self-esteem empower women with the ability to negotiate their rights in the family and thus, the violence level decreases. It is not clear however, how urban married women's participation in the labor force or their economic independence are associated with IPV. Not enough studies could be found in related field on urban married partners.

Equal Prevalence of Physical Violence

Although many of the Bangladeshi studies concentrate on ever-married poor rural women, there are studies that recruit both rural and urban women. Nevertheless, the comparison of the IPV within rural and urban partners is not clear. It is however revealed in a study by ICDDR, B (2007) that rural and urban women are almost equally physically abused by their husbands. The outcomes showed, 40% urban and 41% rural women had been physically abused and about 19% of the women in both areas experienced severe forms of physical violence (hit with a fist or object, kicked, dragged, beaten up, choked, threatened or injured with a weapon or object of some kind).

Psychological Consequences of Violence within Urban Victims

Although in the Bangladeshi studies, rural IPV victims in marital relationships are often revealed to have been facing more physical violence (Ahmed, 2005; Bhuiya, Sharmin, & Hanifi, 2003; Blanchet, 2001; Hadi, 2000; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996), the urban victims of violence appeared to have more symptoms of psychological violence (Naved & Akhtar, 2007). Naved and Akhtar (2007) in their study on suicidal ideation among ever-married women in Bangladesh found that more urban women (14%) reported contemplating suicide compared to

rural women (11%). Among those who contemplated suicide, 26% urban women compared to 8% rural women actually attempted suicide. The outcomes of Naved and Akhtar also suggested that better spousal communication, women's position in the family with age, and natal family support were negatively related to respondents' suicidal ideation.

Lack of Help-seeking to Formal Sources within Marital Relationships

Revealing violence even in marital relationship is a matter of shame. A study conducted by Naved, Azim, Bhuiya, and Persson (2006) found that two-fifth of the ever-married women surveyed under their study experienced some sort of physical violence. Most of these abused women (75% of the moderately abused women in the urban areas and 86% in the rural areas) never told anyone about their experiences. There were many reasons why these women did not reveal their experiences, including fear of jeopardizing family honor, stigma that will damage women's reputation, securing child future, fear of repercussions from husband, hopelessness, expectations that things would change, threat of murder, and belief that violence is husband's right. Women only revealed violence in cases of severe injury, murder threats, and harm caused to children.

Among the women who told someone about their experiences, according to Naved et al. (2006), mostly revealed those to informal sources such as parents, siblings, or in-laws. Most of such informal sources might not even provide any sort of help to the victims. As Jahan (1994) indicated, "The prevailing nature of non-combatant family members generally is to try to overlook the 'disturbance of peace' in the family caused by the violent ones and to involve non-family members as little as possible." Yoshika and Choi (2005) rightly pointed out that culture plays a vital role in how women experience, perceive, and deal with IPV in that given context. For instance, in a collectivist culture like Bangladesh, more emphasis is given on obedience and harmony within groups and families. IPV perceived as a factor negatively influencing family harmony, especially if non-family members are involved, is often ignored by Bangladeshi community. As a result, although there are limited provisions for women to go to formal institutions (health service or legal authorities) in Bangladesh, almost none of them go to those sources for the same reasons they do not reveal their experiences of abuse in the first place and also because they are rarely encouraged by the family member or friends or the community to seek help stepping outside the home.

Concluding Remarks

From the discussion so far, we have analyzed the Socio-cultural and familial context behind IPV in Bangladesh and within that context the IPV patterns and levels in rural and urban context have been explored. Some notable patterns suggest that although IPV is a sensitive issue which both rural and urban families tend to keep within the family. The overall conservative family system in Bangladesh makes women in marital relationships, both in rural and urban context, vulnerable to health risks and lack of legal redress. Moreover, the Islamic laws that limit the rights of women, especially rural women, are also a point of concern.

With the overwhelming amount of studies among the rural married women, the Bangladeshi urban women are often not adequately represented. But, there are evidences that urban married women go through more psychological and almost equal physical violence in their relationships. Thus, there should be more studies comparing the rural vs. urban women in order to explore many unanswered questions in the context of Bangladesh.

At the end, amidst all the patterns this paper has summarized from the Bangladeshi studies, it can be concluded that we have too many issues to deal with when it comes to IPV. A change is required, in the overall socio-economic and cultural context of Bangladesh. Religious sanctions need to be analyzed carefully in light of the existing laws of the country before they are implemented. There should be many support services available to women, but, more importantly, families should be willing enough to voice their IPV complaints. More studies should be conducted comparing the situations of rural and urban women, particularly with the aim to provide them appropriate services.

IPV has just been acknowledged as a social problem in our nation, thanks to the many social workers, activists, and researchers. But, their work has just begun. The magnitude and multiple complexities surrounding this problem needs more work of perhaps many more decades. Thus, this paper ends with the suggestion of many more research in the field of IPV from various different points of views and contexts within Bangladesh.

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