



Division for the Advancement of Women



"Violence against women: a statistical overview, challenges and gaps in data collection and methodology and approaches for overcoming them"

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**Violence against women : A statistical overview, challenges and gaps
in data collection and methodology and approaches for
overcoming them**

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Violence against women is a common occurrence in most societies whether the violence is physical or mental. In South Asia it is a daily and often deadly fact of life for millions of women and girls. Women and girls are generally looked down upon, trapped within cultural framework, molded by rigid perceptions of patriarchy. As a result violence against women is viewed as a 'normal' phenomenon even from the women's perspective. South Asian women suffer multiple forms of violence including domestic violence, rape, dowry deaths, sexual harassment, suicide, forced marriage, trafficking and other psychological and financial oppression. Violence against women has become one of the most visible social issues in this region.

Violence Against Women in Bangladesh

As a South Asian country, Bangladesh is no different from its neighbors. Violence against women is amongst the most serious threats to overall development and progress in Bangladesh. Widespread violence and repression in numerous forms puts women's lives at risk in almost all parts of the country. This is further compounded by the gender bias against women in the society. Before discussing the nature and extent of violence against women it is important to focus on the general socio-economic and legal rights of women in Bangladesh.

Socio-economic status of women

Women in Bangladesh are not a homogenous group; they belong to the rich, middle and poor classes and are from different cultural and ethnic minority groups. They are also differentiated by rural and urban settings. Although women constitute half of the population, various indicators reveal that the status of women is much lower than that of men. Their literacy rate is only 43.2 percent, much lower than that of men 61.0. Excessive mortality among women due to discrimination has resulted in a sex ratio in the population of 105 men to every 100 women.¹

Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality and legislative and other affirmative interventions, the status of Bangladeshi women is on the whole dismal. Women are subjected to discrimination and violence within the household, at the workplace and in the society. Their inferior status can be traced to the patriarchal values entrenched in the society which keep women subjugated, assigns them a subordinate and dependent role, and, prevents them from accessing power and resources. Men hold the power and resource within families and control any property and family income. Women are considered as men's property, their sexual activity, income and labor being systemically controlled by the men in their family. Social expectations still pivot around child rearing and household management. The practice of *Purda* (seclusion), although changing, is still socially valued. Social norms, education, employment and legal rights and gender inequality in Bangladesh are all perpetuated by patriarchy. From their childhood, women are forced to live in a culture, which tolerates and even permits inhuman treatment to them.

As more women are entering the workforce, conflict is growing between the patriarchal social norms and women's urge for economic independence. In recent years there has been a significant change in the attitude towards women taking up outside employment. With the breakup of the extended family, greater numbers of women are seeking employment. At home, however, workingwomen do not have

¹ Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh, 2001

control over their own income, rather her husband dictates how to spend the money. The influx of women into the employment market has resulted in further potential forms of violence. Working women face the threat of violence from the public because they are outside the home and from their employer, who are usually male, who are skeptical about women holding positions of responsibility. Furthermore, it is difficult for a woman to get paid employment and when they do there is a lack of parity between her wages and her male counterpart who undertakes similar work.

Women's Legal Status

A reflection of the low status accorded to women is the discrimination against them in the law. Although the Constitution of Bangladesh states that women have equal footing with men in all spheres of public life², it also recognizes religious personal laws³, which are unequal to women. According to the Constitution, the State takes responsibility to ensure non-discrimination among its citizens and maintain gender equality. However, in the personal sphere, the state does not specify its responsibility to ensure non-discrimination. Similarly in spite of the declaration of equality in the Constitution, women are deprived of their guaranteed rights by some of the discriminatory civil and religious laws. For example, according to the Citizenship Act, 1951 the right of citizenship can be transferred from the father, neither a woman's husband nor her children have entitlement of citizen through her. Apart from this, the four most important events in the life of a woman: marriage; divorce; custody of children; and, inheritance rights are governed by personal laws. Since personal laws are based on religious and social value systems, and male dominance is entrenched in the culture, personal laws have reinforced age-old patriarchy and hindered women's enjoyment of equal rights under the law.

In Bangladesh, the majority of the population is Muslim, although several other minority groups exist. Both Muslim and non-Muslim women face gender discrimination under their personal laws. For example, under the Muslim law of inheritance a son receives double what a daughter receives. Similarly a Muslim mother's custodial right is severely restricted; a mother loses her custodial right the moment she marries a man unrelated to her child. This reinforces the patriarchal notion that children belong to their father's family. Polygamy of up to four wives is permitted for a Muslim man if he has legally taken written permission from his current wife. In practice, however, the wife's permission is obtained through coercion, threat and violence. Similarly, a Hindu woman receives only a limited share of the paternal property. Under no circumstances does she have recourse to bring a suit of divorce. The situation is awful when a Hindu widow is incapable of contracting a second valid marriage.

It is clear therefore that inequalities in the personal laws act as a considerable obstacle to achieving women's right. It must be remembered that the enactment of legislation alone does not result in immediate change in women's actual situation. The government of Bangladesh has from time to time enacted or amended several Acts to

² All Citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of the law (Article 27 of the Constitution), The state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 28(1), Women have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and public life (Article 28(2).

³ Personal laws are those laws that govern a particular religious community and apply to the regulation of that community and its adherents.

safeguard women's legal right or to improve their status. These laws however are often hardly enforced or are misused. Since women form the most vulnerable group in the society, they repeatedly suffer from the existing discriminative legal system also.

In Bangladesh, a victimized woman usually tries to avoid the legal process as she becomes more stigmatized by the society. She dares not file complaints; fearing negligence and harassment in police station, courts and society. The members of the police in most of the cases look down upon the oppressed women and will not take their complaints, unless they are compelled to do so by pressure from a higher authority. In cases of sexual violence the police often advise the victim to submit a medical document. However, the offender may 'manage' the police, the medical officer or witness to say that the offence did not happen and the case is not pursued further. The existing legal process is elaborate, time consuming, expensive and often discourages women from taking legal action and enforcing their rights in the court. As a result of the harassment and complexities of the court procedure, survivors are often compelled to accept out of court settlements. The expenses involved in seeking legal redress; lawyer's fees, court fees, and other incidental expenses, make it very hard for poor, illiterate, and disadvantaged rural women to even consider legal action. Moreover, whilst government legal aid is available, the aid procedure is complicated and the majority of women are unaware of this provision. As a result Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and private volunteer organizations, rather than the State, become the main actors in undertaking legal awareness campaign.

Violence against Women: An Overview

Violence against women remains a prevailing social problem in contemporary Bangladesh. Brutal attacks on women have become commonplace and widespread across the country. Daily news reports are filled with atrocities including physical and psychological torture, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, dowry related violence, trafficking, forced prostitution, coerced suicide and murder. The rate of reported violent acts against women has risen consistently and at an alarming rate, especially since the early 1990's⁴. The following data has been taken from 22 police stations in the capital city over the last three years.

Reported incidents of violence against women in police stations

| Year | Rape | Sexual Harassment | Abduction | Dowry | Child Trafficking | Women Trafficking | Acid Throwing | Burn | Ransom | Total |
|---------|------|-------------------|-----------|-------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------|------|--------|-------|
| 2001-02 | 228 | 74 | 262 | 274 | 31 | 25 | 13 | 16 | 35 | 959 |
| 02-03 | 281 | 87 | 380 | 381 | 36 | 29 | 15 | 20 | 25 | 1254 |
| 03-04 | 291 | 136 | 425 | 451 | 38 | 67 | 9 | 22 | 47 | 1486 |
| Total | 800 | 297 | 1067 | 1106 | 105 | 121 | 37 | 58 | 107 | 3699 |

Considering that violence against women remains one of the most under reported crimes in Bangladesh it is implicit that the reported figures are a gross underestimate. Therefore, whilst statistical data is incomplete there is a consensus that the general trend overwhelmingly suggests that women in Bangladesh are at increasing risk of being victimized. Several factors have contributed to this situation. First, as has been mentioned earlier, patriarchal attitudes are deeply entrenched in society. Traditionally men have been in a dominant position and women in a submissive one. This is perceived not only traditional but also natural. Furthermore, there is a tendency, particularly in village areas, to legitimize the patriarchal attitudes on the basis of

⁴ Annual report on Violence against Women in Bangladesh, 2002

tradition and orthodox religion. Secondly, various community leaders actively oppose women's rights in order to maintain their own power positions within the community. Local leaders try to enforce age-old patriarchal traditions and discourage women's empowerment. Furthermore, they often remain silent and fail to protest against violent acts against women, sometimes blaming the victims for the crimes. In this way, they legitimize violation of women who assert rights outside their traditional roles. Thirdly, although many laws are in place to protect women, enforcement of these laws is lax and ineffective. Without proper law enforcement and court procedures, laws are virtually useless. The general public is well aware that law enforcement agencies often accept bribes, ignore serious complaints, destroy or lose evidence, and free criminals. In addition, the judicial system has several structural and procedural barriers. Political affiliations and motivations often affect court decisions. The lack of separation of the judiciary has resulted in a compromise of impartial justice in Bangladesh. As a result of the lax law enforcement, the general public has diminished trust and confidence in the system. On the other hand, criminals recognize that there are loopholes in the system, and they might easily avoid punishment. Finally, the community has become desensitized to the sufferings of others. Community members, having a host of problems themselves, fearing retaliation by gangsters and hoodlums, and perhaps aware of the lax law enforcement; they fail to take a proactive role to end violence against women

Many other factors have also contributed to the current situation of women in Bangladesh and the alarming increase in the rate of violent acts against women. The factors are interrelated and the problem is very complicated. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix to the current problem of violence against women. It has become increasingly evident that laws and policies alone will be ineffective, rather collaborative multifaceted efforts are required to address this serious social problem.

UN Definition on violence against Women

In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, the first collaborative international human rights declaration exclusively addressing the issue. The UN declaration emphasizes that the global problem of violence against women crosses national boundaries into the realm of basic human rights. As such, the declaration states that violence against women violates a woman's fundamental human rights and freedoms and that the international community has an obligation to protect and promote those rights.

Article 2 of the declaration takes on the difficult task of defining violence against women. The definition of violence against women in the declaration is the internationally accepted definition and states violence against women shall be understood to encompass, but not limited to, physical, sexual, and psychological violence perpetrated by family members, the community, or the state. The forms of violence specifically mentioned in the document include battery, dowry related violence, sexual abuse of children, marital rape, rape, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, trafficking, forced prostitution, and others. This definition does not claim to be all-inclusive and recognizes that various other forms of violence exist around the globe. The declaration is, therefore, somewhat arbitrary in that it does not provide sufficient guidance regarding controversial issues such as, for example, whether control over a woman's reproductive rights constitutes violence against women. Nevertheless, despite its lacking, the declaration offers the first

internationally accepted definition of violence against women and a strong basis for the struggle to eliminate gender violence around the world.

Major trends in violence

In light of the above discussion the most common manifestations of violence in Bangladesh are detailed below. Available data from the Police Department give some indication of the extent of these types of violence. This data indicates that in 2004 there were 3081 crimes for dowry, 3083 women were raped, and 198 women were injured from acid attack. The most significant part of this data is only one seventh (5584) of the total (34061) number of accused were arrested.

Outbreak of violence against women January ~ December 2004⁵

| Torture for dowry | Acid throwing | Abduction | Rape | Murder or injury after rape | Murder | Hurt | Others form of violence | Total no of violence | Total no of accused | No of arrested Accused |
|-------------------|---------------|-----------|------|-----------------------------|--------|------|-------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| 3081 | 198 | 1608 | 3083 | 17 | 62 | 134 | 4563 | 12746 | 34061 | 5584 |

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence, or violence perpetuated in the home or family environment, is a major social problem in Bangladesh. Domestic violence incidences are fairly common and widespread across the country. Women of all economic strata are vulnerable to maltreatment and abuse by husbands, in-laws, and other family members. Available data suggests that the number of cases of domestic violence is increasingly being reported in the newspaper.

Reports of Domestic Violence in 9 Daily Newspapers 2001 ~ 2004⁶

| Year of Reporting | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|---|------|------|------|------|
| Number of Cases of Domestic Violence Reported | 530 | 540 | 587 | 1164 |

Despite the severe consequences to women's physical and emotional health, domestic violence is not recognized as a serious social problem and society does not perceive domestic violence to be a serious crime. Rather, it is viewed as a personal matter that should be resolved privately within the family. As a result, law enforcement agencies are reluctant to get involved in cases of domestic violence and women are often victimized with no recourse. The implicit indifference of society in matters of domestic violence perpetuates the notion that domestic violence is legitimate and male domination in the family is acceptable. While men take advantage of this right to exert authority, women's tolerance of domestic violence further entrenches domestic violence into the fabric of daily life in Bangladesh.

Naturally, questions arise as to why women are silent and do not speak out against domestic violence? Why do so many victims continue to stay with abusive spouses? First, one has to bear in mind the social context in which women are raised. Bangladeshi women, as part of a patriarchal society, are from an early age, taught to be submissive, tolerant, and self-sacrificing. Furthermore, the social belief that a woman's place is in her husband's home is also deeply rooted in women's self-view and self-worth. These social values make it extremely difficult for women to assert themselves and speak out against domestic violence. In cases of marital and family conflict, society generally places the blame on the wife and holds her exclusively

⁵ Collected from the Monitoring Cell on violence against women in Police Department.

⁶ Resource Center, BNWLA, Report from 9 leading dailies.

responsible for failing to build a strong foundation in the family. Consequently, women are reluctant to complain of domestic violence or file cases against their husbands out of fear of unrelenting social stigmatization.

A second major reason that women rarely assert themselves in these matters is that women have few alternatives to staying with their husbands. In some cases a woman might return to her paternal home and find shelter with her parents or siblings, but in most cases, women lack family or community support. With no alternative, women realize that they have no choice but to tolerate domestic violence and make the best of their tragic situation.

Torture by Husband/Wife Beating

Wife beating is the most commonly occurring act of domestic violence in Bangladesh. An international report published by the United Nations in September of 2000 ranked the country first in wife beating and found that nearly half of the adult female population surveyed reported physical abuse by their husbands. This fact may be startling to the international community, however, in Bangladesh it is common knowledge that husbands exert their authority and physically assault wives for even minor mistakes, such as an unsatisfactory meal, an untidy room, a conversation with another man, or any act of disagreement or disobedience.

Men have been socially conditioned to genuinely believe in their own superiority. From childhood they are treated differently from their sisters. They grow to believe that they are more valuable and more deserving than women, and that their opinions and views should have more weight than any woman's. Furthermore, predominant religious misinterpretations have further legitimized these feelings. These religious interpretations have also provided men with the justification to chastise wives for disobedience and bring them back to the so-called correct path. In this way, men are able to delude themselves into believing that abuse of their wives amounts to a religious duty and they are completely justified in their actions.

Dowry-Related Violence

The practice of dowry demand (*Joutuk*) is not deeply rooted in Bengali Muslim tradition, but has emerged as a major social evil in recent years. Generally dowry means the property that the bride's family gives to the groom or his family upon marriage. However, in Bangladeshi law, dowry has been given an extended meaning 'whatever is presented whether before or after marriage under demand, compulsion or pressure as consideration for the marriage can be said to be dowry'⁷. The emergence of dowry is more due to greed and commercialization of marriage than the impact of traditional culture. Rising unemployment has contributed to the phenomenon; as more and more young men are unable to find employment, their families use marriage and dowry demand as a source of income⁸. Prospective grooms and their families demand large sums of money or property from the would-be bride's family as a precondition to the marriage agreement. Although dowry demand is illegal the practice persists in the rural communities. In fact, few marriages in the rural areas are performed without a dowry condition. In most cases the complete dowry is not paid at the time of marriage. Rather the bride's family pays part of the dowry before the marriage and

⁷ The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000

⁸ The Annual Report on violence against women in Bangladesh, 2002.

promises to pay the remainder soon after the marriage. When the bride's family fails to meet the deadline, her husband and in-laws verbally and physically abuse her to compel her family to pay. In many cases the abuse becomes severe in nature, for example, the woman has acid throw on her face, is burnt, severely beaten, and in some cases even murdered.

High-Risk Pregnancy

For the most part, married women in Bangladesh are not aware of their own sexual and reproductive rights, and have only limited control over their own bodies. A woman's freedom of choice regarding sexual intercourse, birth control, pregnancy, pre-natal care, and abortion is restricted by the collaborative decision-making of her husband and his family. A man has complete autonomy to determine when he will have intercourse with his wife. In this situation, the husband is the aggressor and the wife merely a passive participant. Similarly, a wife's personal convictions on birth control and family planning are irrelevant in decision-making; once again she plays a passive role to her husband's wishes. If the husband dislikes birth control, for whatever reason, then the wife has no way of protecting herself from unwanted pregnancies.

Often there is a pressure from the husband's family for the wife to produce offspring, particularly male offspring. The family is mainly concerned with the birth of heirs, not the good health of the mother. As a result, a young woman might begin conceiving at a very early age and endure several consecutive pregnancies in the hope of a male offspring. The in-law family pressures the woman to give birth to sons, as if she has control over biology, and if she fails to meet their expectations, they inflict various forms of physical and psychological abuse on her.

Although everyone is involved in the decision for the couple to have a child, nobody is involved in providing adequate pre-natal care to the expectant mother. Only 5% of the reproductive aged women access existing health care facilities. Many women remain neglected and abused in the in-law's home; they often endure low calorie intake, insufficient nutrition and insufficient medical attention through the course of their pregnancy and as a result are at serious risk of birth complications and maternal mortality. In fact, 37% of all deaths of reproductive aged women are due to maternity related issues. In Bangladesh three women die every hour because of maternal related complexities and nine million women whose lives have been saved following maternity related complications continue to suffer from other long-term diseases.

Rape

Rape is one of the most brutal forms of violence against women in Bangladesh. In a culture that holds a woman's chastity sacred, rape crimes are particularly injurious to a woman's self-identity and social future as well as her physical and psychological well-being. The ever-increasing rate of rape crimes is an alarming phenomenon and depicts the diminishing value of women in society.

Reported Cases of Rape in 9 Daily Newspapers 200-2004⁹

| Year of Reporting | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Number of Cases of Rape Reported | 564 | 605 | 1434 | 1550 | 1043 |

⁹ Resource Center, BNWLA

It appears that increasing numbers of men perceive women to be nothing more than an object used to satisfy one's sexual urges. Furthermore there is evidence that men not only rape women, but also physically torture and murder the victims as well. In the last few years, gang rape has become the prevalent form of rape in Bangladesh. Several men kidnap a woman, take her to an isolated place, and take turns raping her. This new trend is particularly alarming; first because the attack is much more brutal and damaging to a woman, and second because it shows that rape is an accepted activity in many men's peer groups. Men are discussing and planning gang rapes with their friends, no longer ashamed of their disgusting intentions. As such, rape is being normalized in the male community.

Trafficking in Women

Trafficking of women and children is a significant problem in developing countries around the globe, and particularly in South Asia. In the absence of social protection, economic security and legal support, an alarming number of women and children from the poor, marginalized and disenfranchised sections of the community (an overwhelming majority of the population of South Asia) become easy victims of trafficking. The demand and supply factors that push women into trafficking are numerous and complex. As trafficking and sexual exploitation is a crosscutting issue in this subcontinent, it has become a growing concern especially across borders. The problem is more acute for a country like Bangladesh that shares a porous border with India. Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked both within the country and internationally. The never-ending demand for women and children make trafficking a highly profitable business. The organized gangs of traffickers often lure young women with false promises of better jobs or false proposals of love and marriage. Victims of trafficking are generally trafficked for forced prostitution, but sometimes also for other purposes such as organ transplants and slave labor. Accurate statistical data about the number of women, young girls and boys trafficked from Bangladesh to serve the sex trade in neighboring countries is absent. The trafficked victims end up in brothels where they are sold for sexual exploitation or serve as street sex workers in India, Pakistan and the Middle East. Although the government has enacted stringent laws and implemented various policies to combat this menace, trafficking continues to be a significant problem in Bangladesh.

Acid Violence

Acid violence is a crime that has been popularized in Bangladesh. The flinging of acid on the bodies and faces of women became a common means of taking revenge by rejected suitors in the 1980s but has reached the highest peak in recent years. Bangladesh has the highest worldwide incidence of acid violence and, acid burns constitute 9% of the total burn injuries in Bangladesh¹¹. Acid violence involves throwing acid at a person's body to disfigure and scar the person for life. A recent study reveals that land disputes account for 27% of acid attacks, followed by 18% for family disputes, 10% for refusal of sex, 8% for refusal of romantic relationship, 5% for dowry conflicts, 4% for marital disputes, 3% for refusal of marriage proposal, 2% for political enmity, and the remaining 23% for unknown reasons. Despite new harsh laws, acid violence has been increasing over the last few years.

¹¹ Fifth Annual Report of the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF), 2003.

Numbers of Cases of Acid Violence Reported.... 2000 ~ 2004¹²

| Year | No. of incidents | Female victim | Male victim | Children less than 18 years | Total |
|------|------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| 2000 | 172 | 114 | 39 | 73 | 226 |
| 2001 | 250 | 138 | 94 | 111 | 383 |
| 2002 | 366 | 221 | 139 | 124 | 484 |
| 2003 | 335 | 204 | 117 | 89 | 410 |
| 2004 | 266 | 183 | 63 | 76 | 322 |

The physical effects of acid are hideous; it melts skin and muscle, and can dissolve bones. Loss of sight in one or both eyes is also possible. The scarring and disfigurement is often permanent. Victims are as young as less than one year, and are mostly from poor families that cannot afford the extensive surgery needed to repair the damage. Besides the immense physical pain of acid attacks, the victims also suffer from a lifetime of stigmatization, resulting in loss of self-esteem and an inability to study or work, living in shame, hiding the disfigurement with a veil, and retreating to social isolation. It is unlikely that a burned woman will ever marry, dramatically affecting her life economically and socially. In addition her own family may also reject her.

Victimization By *Fatwa*

According to Islamic teaching, *fatwa* is a religious edict based on Islamic principles pronounced by a religious scholar. In Bangladesh, however, this notion has been totally misconceived and is used by half educated village *mullahs* (clerics) who actually are not scholars in Islam. These *Mullahs's* through the informal village justice system (*shalish*) punish women for so-called anti-social or immoral activities. In almost all the cases women are brought before the *shalish* simply for their involvement in extra marital affairs, marrying a man from different religion, giving birth to a child before marriage, complications due to oral divorce pronounced to a woman by her husband and so on. Although these punishments are not legal per se, because the *Mullah's* exert considerable autonomy and power in the rural areas, the punishments are generally carried out against the helpless women. People's lack of knowledge about the law and religion, poor education and absence of social awareness are the key factors, which allow *fatwa* to be issues. Punishment awarded by a *fatwa* is variable but include awarding *hilla* (intervening marriage) to another man¹³, punishing with lashes, social boycott, stoning, divorce, and physical violence.

Number of Fatwa, 2000 ~ 2004¹⁴

| Year | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|
| No of incidents | 31 | 45 | 32 | 46 | 37 |
| Cases filed | - | 7 | 9 | 5 | 2 |

Data on Violence against Women: Problems Encountered

In Bangladesh there are no comprehensive official statistics on violence against women. Certain provisos must therefore be kept in mind when analyzing available statistics on the issue. There are two primary sources of data on gender-based violence; court records of cases (prosecuted) and police records on reported crimes. Hospital records and newspaper records are also regarded as important sources for

¹² Study on Violence against Women, 2004.

¹³ According to Muslim law once a divorce between husband and wife has become official, the man cannot remarry the same woman unless she goes through an intervening marriage with another man and the second marriage is lawfully terminated after consummation. The object of this law was to prevent Muslim men from arbitrary divorce.

¹⁴ Resource Center, BNWLA

collection of data. Statistics on gender-based violence are collected by the six divisional offices of the Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs. In addition the police headquarter established a cell on violence against women complaints in 1993. Data on complaints made by women are collected from all the police stations and from the district women's affairs cells¹⁵. Another cell in the police department was established in 2004 under repeated pressure from NGOs and the donor community to document human trafficking cases. Whilst this initiative is praiseworthy, the source of information is police records. Therefore only incidents of trafficking reported to the police can be taken into consideration. In the absence of reliable statistical data and owing to the illegal nature of trafficking, it is almost impossible to ascertain an exact estimate of the number of women and children that have been trafficked in and out of Bangladesh.

Government statistics are on the conservative side. The statistics rely on victims reporting their crimes to the police and lodging complaints. Police stations and courts are not properly equipped to maintain computer-based data and therefore there is a significant doubt about the quality and accuracy of this data. More importantly, considering the numerous obstacles to registering complaints, particularly if they are sexual in nature, it is likely that this data represent a very small number of incidents of violence against women. In addition women are fearful of being stigmatized or blamed for the incident, and this act as a tremendous pressure not to report incidents. They are also extremely wary of the police and fearful of possible retaliation by the accused in the absence of a government run victim protection mechanism and this inhibits them from reporting the incident.

In rural areas people prefer to solve their problems in *Shalish*¹⁶ as it is less time consuming, and less expensive. Though *shalish* is supposed to provide resolution of small dispute, in reality it is matter of concern that many 'cognizable' cases (those cases where police can arrest without warrant like rape, trafficking, torture for dowry, sexual violence) are also tried by *shalish* in absence of awareness of law. It is estimated that two thirds of the disputes never enter the formal court process and are either settled at the local level through informal settlement of the local leaders or a village court or remain unsettled. This huge numbers of complaints and settled cases remain undocumented.

In addition home office statistics usually remain unpublished. It has also been observed that the annual statistical yearbook produced by the government has yet to recognize violence against women is a serious issue. This yearbook contains data only on rape and unnatural deaths. Even they are reluctant to publish violence against women record maintained by the home ministry.

Aside from official statistics several non-governmental organizations compile data based on newspaper records. This data is also undoubtedly under representative since organizations only take account of a few national dailies and are dealing only with those cases that are published in the leading newspapers. It should be noted that that newspapers have a tendency to cover sexual crimes rather than domestic violence

¹⁵ In every district there is a women affairs cell to provide free legal aid to the distressed women and children. This data is compiled in yearly basis based on the received complaints.

¹⁶ *Shalish* means informal local mediation councils to provide a traditional alternative dispute resolution.

cases. As a result, reports of maternal mortality or suicide get less attention and adultery, child marriage, eve teasing, forced marriage and forced prostitution receive little coverage unless there is an alleged murder.

Domestic violence and torture for dowry or dowry deaths generally occur in the privacy of the husband's home and with collusion of his family members. Often police reports record cases of dowry deaths or forced suicide as unnatural deaths. In most cases, due to lack of proper investigation, the facts of these cases remain unexplored. Often the murder of a wife for dowry is disguised as suicide and some are even called 'accidents' as if they are natural deaths in some epidemic. In rural areas most of the suicide or accidental deaths are predominantly female. Suicide is looked upon with much prejudice in Bangladesh as Islam prohibits this action. As such many suicidal cases are falsely reported as accidents. In case of wife beating or domestic violence wives do not usually report the abuse to the police. In offences like wife beating police either file a case on a specific provision like dowry or make the case lighter by making a charge attracting a lesser penalty. It should also be noted that with the exception of torture due to dowry or dowry deaths, there is no specific laws on domestic violence/wife abuse in Bangladesh. As a result the police has no power to arrest the husband for these matters. This is one of the main reasons for not having any official statistics on offences like domestic violence. Similarly, many battered women get emergency treatment (in case of grievous hurt) in the local hospital or health complex. These hospital registers also remain undocumented.

Problems encountered in accumulate research based data

Beside official statistics a lot of NGOs accumulate data by conducting research. However, this research is conducted in selected areas and there are very few pieces of research that have covered the whole country. Here I would like to share some problems that we have encountered in conducting research on violence against women. While conducting research on wife abuse it became apparent that interviewing a wife at home is difficult as the presence of the in-laws makes it hard for a women to speak out. Furthermore the husband also does not allow his wife to speak to strangers. As a consequence, the research was confined to the victims of wife abuse who actually came to the agencies. As victims of wife abuse rarely appeared in these agencies, there were low numbers of possible respondents in the research. Moreover, a woman would promise to be available to be interviewed the next day, but by the next day her husband might have called and persuaded her to return home. Due to the sensitivity concerning violence against women, respondents are often reluctant to answer questions due to social stigma or do not answer honestly due to social pressures. Similarly victims of trafficking and prostitution who have been rescued often do not want to share actual information or give false evidence because of social stigma. In many cases they cannot remember what has happened to her life and thus provide inaccurate information. As a result we need to repeatedly crosscheck this information.

Alternative sources of data such as hospital data also proved to be insufficient Public hospitals are used primarily by the economically disadvantaged, with the wealthy able to use private doctors and hospitals which are less open to researchers.

Recommendations

In Bangladesh there continues to be a need for systematic data collection mechanism on violence against women. The following recommendations focus on three areas.

1. **Accurate and systematic reporting of incidents of violence against women**, by various governmental (e.g. police, courts, OCC or local government) and non-governmental organizations. This should include:

- **Computerized database maintained by Police department:** Based on cases reported to the police. To operationalize this system all the police stations should be properly equip with computerize network under a single centralize server so that any remote user can retrieve the necessary data for taking immediate action for combating violence against women.
- **Computerized database maintained by local government:** *Union Parishad* is the basic, elected local government institution in the grassroots level of Bangladesh. Information on unreported data on violence against women gathered from the *shalish*, village court or any other informal system should be preserved in a computerized data bank by the *Union Parishad* under the supervision of it's elected Chairman. Each *Union Parishad* has three elected women members who may monitor and verify the accuracy of data.
- **Computerize database maintained by NGOs:** Bangladesh has the most vibrant NGO movement than any other country. Many of these NGOs have a common agenda to work on women's rights issues. These NGOs, working under a common umbrella of ADAB (Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh), can share their computerize data to help the government mechanism in formulating policy to combat violence against women.
- **Computerize database maintained by the Judiciary:** The government of Bangladesh has already established a Women and Children Repression Prevention Special Tribunal in all district headquarters to try offences related to violence against women. Data from these courts could be incorporated into a computerize database as a means of keeping data on case report and conviction on crime against women. A project has been implemented by the government to maintain a properly equipped data base system, which integrates cases information and convictions between the lower and higher judiciary. This may help policy makers to predict the nature, extent and trend of violence against women and formulate necessary laws to combat it.
- **Computerized database maintained by One Stop Crisis Center (OCC):** OCC was established on the concept of integrated and coordinated team work of multi-sectorial and inter agency network for the management of survivors of violence against women. The OCC is mainly operated by the government, but functions in cooperation with reputable NGOs. The OCC maintains data related to legal aid, medical care, counseling and crime reporting which will provide necessary assistance to the policy makers to make policies and effective strategies.

A national database can be established by integrating all the above-mentioned data banks operated under different identity. Such data bank of different nationalities can be used as a integral part of global data bank that will actively operate to eliminate violence against women globally.

2. **Routine community based prevalence studies of violence against women:** The primary responsibility to conduct this study should rest on government but the NGO with the cooperation of UN organization also could conduct this type of research once every two to three year.

3. **Open access to data:** Data on violence against women should be freely available to organizations and individuals who wish to access this information.

Access to this type of accurate data, which is collected on a routine basis, would have significant implications for policy development in Bangladesh and would enable appropriate and targeted interventions to be devised. Currently governmental and non-governmental organizations have a good understanding of the types of violence against women which occur in Bangladesh, however, accurate data would, for example, allow them to assess the extent to which these incidents occur, which sub-populations are particularly vulnerable, whether there are particular trends in particular geographical areas, and the extent to which women and girls access services. This information would provide a firm basis for the development of government policies in which these problems could be prioritized and strategic decisions made regarding how these issues could be addressed and which interventions would be appropriate. Currently the issue of violence against women, which is seen as a major problem in Bangladesh, does not receive appropriate budgetary support. Accurate data regarding the extent of this problem would contribute enormously to lobbying for budgetary allocation. In addition data could be used to provide an ongoing baseline, which would enable governmental and non-governmental organizations to set realistic targets, for example, increasing the percentage of women who have been abused accessing legal services, and allow them to assess the impact of these interventions. This would help government make informed decisions about the efficacy of policies and interventions and subsequent revisions to policy. Furthermore, if an environment could be created in which this data could be easily accessed by interested parties without fear or prejudice, the best interests of the survivors and the organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) would be more readily met.

Conclusion

The overview of the scope and nature of violence against women in Bangladesh leads one to conclude that there are certain critical gaps in our knowledge and policy. One of the main reasons is that the policy makers either do not feel it is necessary, or do not want to make public its failure to provide necessary protection to women. As has been mentioned earlier, there is no systematic documentation of women's status due to a lack of proper survey or research methods and the tendency to concentrate data collection in some areas at the cost of others. It is necessary to turn one's attention to the creation of a systematic database. The purpose of a database on violence against women, whether gathered officially or unofficially, is to assist planning interventions to combat and prevent violence. Once a systematic database is built, it can be used to determine women friendly policies, proper budget allocation, enact or amend legislation, along with identifying funding priorities and evaluation of existing measures, steps, interventions and laws. Besides law and order and criminal justice administration, data on violence against women could also be used by a range of other agencies and academic disciplines committed to improving the position of women in Bangladeshi society.