Victim Blaming In Contemporary Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study on Rape Victims in Tangail

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Abstract

The study addresses victim blaming experiences of rape victims regarding victim roles in rape and its associated factors in contemporary Bangladesh. It also explains a dynamic relation between victim blaming and social construction of rape victim based on aftermath reaction by different actors in our society. The author conducted in depth interviews with 9 under-trial rape victims of Tangail district. Women provocation in rape, character related blame, loss of virginity or chastity and victim as a social burden are predominant blaming on victims as explored in study findings. The study revealed that marginal status of victim and social construction of rape victim based on patriarchal tradition are strong predictors of victim blaming in our society. Study suggested blaming experiences of rape victim and its aftermath societal reaction must be taken into account of academicians, policy makers and law enforcement agencies for controlling rape effectively in our society.

Keywords: Victim Blaming, Rape Victims, Patriarchal Tradition, Women's Marginality

Introduction

Victim-blaming has been identified as the issue of most concern to academicians and human right activists in recent days. It is a phenomenon that has been happening since at least the beginning of recorded history but has only recently been identified as a dynamic used to empower the criminal and maintain the status quo (Schoellkopf, 2012:33). Public conversations about victimization and victim blaming in the United States began in the late 1960s and 1970s, influenced by forces such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, an increased focus on crime response and control, and the growth of the mental health profession (Best 1997:8-10; Karmen 1956). In Bangladesh recently different reports in print and electronic media highlighted the blaming experiences of rape victims that attract the attention of academicians and researchers regarding this issue.

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Early concern with the victim can be found in the work of Mendelsohn (1937) and Von Hentig (1948) that challenged conceptions of the victim as passive actors and focused on those characteristics of victims which precipitated their suffering and on the relationship between victim and offender(Zedner, 1994). Mendelsohn (1937) drew particular attention to the victim provocation in violence. In addition to this, Wolfgang (1958) and Schafer (1968) also highlighted on the role of victim as co-precipitator of the crime. The issue of victim precipitation has been subject of much criticism of different feminists researcher, particularly the most controversial application of 'victim precipitation' in Amir's *Patterns of Forcible Rape* (1971). He argued that 19 percent of rape were victim precipitated (Silvestri and Dowey, 2008:92). Eminent Feminist scholar Brownmiller criticized the notion of 'shared responsibility of victim' and cogently argued that beliefs such as "women provoke rape by their physical appearance" and "women want to be raped" have led to the victimization of women (Tang et.al 2002:968-996). She also told that these beliefs enhance male dominance and provide justification for those who commit crime as well as blaming the victim. In particular, feminists focus on culture and social structures that establish and maintain male dominance.

According to feminist social construction theorists, the psychoanalytic literature have also provides an important intellectual foundation for victim-blaming explanations (Allison & Wrightsman, 1993; Scully, 1990), lending support to some of the cultural myths about victim blaming. In rape, these cultural myths include "It isn't rape, only rough sex"; "Women say no when they mean yes"; and "Women enjoy rape." (Tang et.al 2002:968-996). In addition, Marxist and Critical victimologists opined that system of patriarchy and structural pattern of capitalist societies penetrates victimization of women as well as victim blaming in modern era (Walkate, 1996)

Eminent scholar William Ryan coined the phrase "blaming the victim" in his 1971 book *Blaming the Victim*. In the book, Ryan described victim blaming as an ideology used to justify racism and social injustice against black people in the United States (Kirkpatrick: 1987). Ryan wrote the book to refute Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 work *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. He describes victim blaming as a way to preserve the interest of the privileged group in power. On the other hand, Schwartz and Legget (1999:251-271) defined that 'victim blaming is where individual find instances within the victims' behavior, such as drinking alcohol, to hold the victim at least partially responsible for the incident (Hayes et al. 2013:202). After coining the phrase "blaming the victim'' by William Ryan advocates for crime victims, particularly those of rape, have adopted the phrase. The present research is also tried to explore the blaming experiences of rape victims and its associated factors in the context of Bangladesh.

It is notable that rape is one of the least-reported of all violent crimes in contemporary days. One study estimates that only one to four rapes in every 10 committed are actually reported to the police in America, though most studies estimate that between 25 percent and 50 percent of actual and attempted rapes are reported (Williams, 1984:456-467). At present Bangladesh, the uncontrolled nature of rape incidents creating a 'culture of fear' among women in the society (Rezina and Mustfee 2007). From January, 2001to February, 2007 a total of 5816 women and children were reported to have been raped across the country. Among these numbers, 636 women were killed after being raped and 69 committed suicide after the incident (Elan, 2007). According to the reports of human rights organization, in 2009 the total numbers of reported rape incidents were 456 and it increased in 2010 and 2011 that was 556 and 771 accordingly (Odhikar, 2010:64-67, 2011:112-114). Though among violent crimes rape is a least reported crime in Bangladesh but these data indicated the increasing rates of rape in our country. Now rape has been treated the most violent crime against women in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, women are blamed from different level of society for their victimization particularly when she becomes a victim of sexual offences such as eve teasing, adultery, rape and so on. But blaming is being more serious, heinous and harmful to the rape victims than any other women victims in our society. A rape victim is especially stigmatized in cultures with strong customs and taboos regarding sex and sexuality (Wikipedia, 2014). During the early seventies different feminist researchers in developed country vividly criticized the issues of victim blaming specifically in rape and argued that focusing on the victim's involvement, attention is diverted from the structural causes of women's victimization. But in the context of Bangladesh, victim blaming is an ignored area of research still now. Though Rezina and Mustfee (2007) highlighted the nature, extent and prevention of rape in Bangladesh; Khatun et al., (2012) explained the socio- psychological condition of rape victims in Bangladesh. But no research has been conducted by the scholar, academicians and professionals on rape victim highlighting their blaming experiences in our society. The present research is an attempt to remedy this situation. The research plan was developed on the basis of two major objectives. Firstly, to addresses victim blaming experiences of rape victims regarding victim roles in rape and its associated factors in contemporary Bangladesh and secondly, to comprehensively understand the dynamic relation between victim blaming and social construction of rape victim based on aftermath reaction by different actors in our society.

Research Methodology

Exploratory research design was used to understand the victim blaming experiences and its associated factors of rape victim. The study covered the entire area of Tangail District. The rationality of study area selection was

the unique nature of rape statistics, availability of rape victims, crime proneness and heterogeneous character of the area and easy access to researcher. The study was conducted in 2011 and involved in-depth interviews with twelve (12) rape victims who reported experiencing rape and sexual coercion in a heterosexual relationship. All of the cases of rape victims were selected as population for the study, which were under trial in the Tangail District Judge Court between 1 January 2011 and 30 June 2011. Data were collected from the rape victims from July 2011 to September 2011. Besides in-depth interview the researchers have also used the others secondary sources: court, judges and police records. Firstly, rape related information and statistics was collected from court and police stations. Then, interview was taken of rape victims in settings chosen by the participants preferably in their homes. Both narrative (Riessman 1993) and semi-structured interviewing (Mason 1996) approaches were used in the study.

The interview was started with a series of questions to obtain socio-demographic information and following covered a wide range of questions related to victim blaming and its associated factors, societal reaction and their coping strategies to the wider societies. The interviews lasted from one to two hours and some needed multiple sessions. Among 12 cases for the incompleteness of the interviews researcher selected to analysis 9 cases for the present study purposes. All the women experienced complete sexual assault with one girl being raped by strangers, five by acquaintances and three by date rape. The demographic and assault information of the study participants is provided in the appendix. The researcher takes notes during the interview and transcribes the notes into a detailed written report which serve as the text data for the following analysis. Thematic analysis technique was used to data regarding blaming the victims.

Findings

Demographic and Rape Victims information of the Study Participants

The study revealed that among the types of rape, only one of the victims faced stranger rape while maximum (five) victims faced acquaintance rape. Rests of the three victims were raped when they were in date with the offenders. So it can be said that in maximum cases (in case of acquaintance rape) the sexual activities are imposed upon the victim by someone they know before. Secondly, if we notice the style of rape, six of the victims were raped by the single perpetrator and rests were raped by groups. It is noticeable that, in case of single offender, all the offenders were previously known to the victims. During group rape, two of the victims admitted that they were victimized by known people while the rest one was victimized by unknown offenders. The related information of rape focuses the offender-victim relation and possible causes of victimization. Refusal of love and marriage was the most predominant factor of occurring rape. It is frustrating that in some extents victims had love affairs with the offender and at a time

she was raped by his beloved. In some cases, the offender followed some fraud techniques. The offender made fake marriage registration and then raped the victim. In a case of acquaintance rape, offender had good relation with victim and later she was raped in absence of her husband. But the stranger rape was committed by a group of offender while the victim was in dark place. In response of these rapes, cases have been filed in most incidents while two of the cases are in FIR stage. The more alarming matter is that police could apprehend offender only in three cases. So it can be said that in most cases the offenders are escaping from the eye of the criminal justice system. Regarding the demographic information, it is found that all the rape has been committed in rural area except one case. The age distribution of the victims represents that maximum victims are of young ages and belongs the age group between 13 to 20 years. The victims belong to Muslim religion in eight of the cases and the other belongs to Hindu religion. Concerning marital status it is found that five of the victims were unmarried while being raped and others four of the victims were raped after got married. The occupational status of the victim shows that four of the victims were housewives and three of the victims were students. So the students and housewife is in higher risk groups for rape victimization that woman of other professions. Lastly, the findings also show that most of the offenders were unemployed and vagabond in nature. So person without having without jobs are involved more with rape.

Thematic Analysis

The study analyzes the blaming experiences of rape victims in the context of Bangladesh society. Findings from the in-depth interview regarding victim blaming researcher identified some common themes experienced among the rape victims. Based on the both existing literature on victim blaming and societal reaction to rape victims in our culture this author identified four themes: women provoke rape by their appearance and attitudes, only bad girls experienced rape, raped girls and women lost their virginity and chastity, rape victims are the burden of family and society.

'Women provoke rape by their appearance and attitudes '

When a crime occurs, usually the role of offender gets more attention in the discussion of that incident. But in case of sexual offence, the role of victim is being highlighted rather than offender. Especially in rape cases the role of victim viewed seriously than offenders and often victims are blamed for their victimization. This study found that, among nine interviewed victim three of the rape victims has been blamed for their provocation in rape. One victim of date rape (DR-07) indicated, she was blamed by the member of her family and neighbors for the incident. They told, 'as you went for dating with the rapist so you were interested to make sexual relation with him. Without your provocation never it will happen to you.' Another victims of acquaintance rape (AR-08) stated, when she was raped her husband was in

abroad. The members of her father in laws family and neighbors blamed that, 'in the absence of her husband she presents herself seductively to the perpetrator to fulfill her biological need'. One survivor (DR-09) in absence of her husband, involved in an affair with her neighbor and she was raped by him. After knowing the incident of rape the members of her father in laws family and also her parents blamed that , 'when a married women can make an affair , it is very natural that she can provoke anybody to make sexual relation with her. So, you are fully responsible for being raped.'

'Only bad girls experienced rape'

Characterological blamed as bad girls or women is a predominant feature among most of the interviewed victim of rape. One victim of stranger rape (SR-01) indicated that, as she was a maid servant, her master and his wife raised different types of questions about her character after being raped. Justifying the rapist activities they told, 'a bad girl like you deserved it.' They always used slang language to me and ordered to keep a distance with her daughter. Another victim of acquaintance rape (AR-05) stated that, before raped she had been faced teaching several times by the rapist. Her parents also complained to the local chairmen against the teacher. But the victims did not get justice from local authority. After some days when she was raped by the same person, the all members of society blamed her as a bad girl. They told, 'the rapist also knew that you are not a good girl, so he will be able to make sexual relation without any resistance from you.' The study found that, the victim's family members also faced different types of blamed about their character. One victim's (DR-07) sister indicated that, one of her neighbor said, 'I think you have also a desire to make sexual relation like your sister, if you share the experience of your sister in details with me I will do the same thing with you.'

'Raped women and girls lost their virginity and purity'

Loss of virginity or purity is also a predominant concern among interviewed victims and their family members. In our culture women's respectability mostly depends on their premarital chastity and marital fidelity. Women who have been raped one viewed her as damage goods with law value, consequently blamed about their purity become a part of their daily life. Particularly, blame turned into a highest severity to the unmarried rape victims. According to three unmarried rape victims (SR-01, AR-03, DR-07) stated, after knowing the rape incidents their parents first response was,' 'What we will do with such a damage girl?' Parents of every unmarried victim of acquaintance rape tried to arrange marriage with the rapist rather than file charges against them. Because they believed no other man would marry a girl with such experiences. When they failed to do these then they go to police station for filing a case against rapist. Though most of time the police arrest the rapist but in a condition of marriage the guardian of victim withdraw the case. Even married rape victim also faced blaming about their bodily purity. In this study two married survivor (AR-02, AR-04) indicated,

though their husband was in abroad but they said, 'we don't want to continue our conjugal life with such a dirty girl, who have lost her bodily purity.' The members of their laws family blamed them and forcedly send their parents home.

'Rape victims are the burden of family and society'

The study found that, the entire rape victim often faced negative responses from their social network. Though a rapist get acceptance in their family, move freely in the society on the contrary, victim's arena of social life has become congested. Ultimately they are blamed and treated as a burden of family as well as society also. One married victim (AR-04) opined that, a rape incident has destroyed her total life and everybody avoids her deliberately in all interaction. After rape when she seeking help from the police to file a case against rapist, police also blamed her by asking many embarrassing questions. Her mother blamed her, 'we have lost our all prestige as we the parents of a raped women like you. Only your death can be a solution of this harassment.' By knowing this victim takes attempt to suicide. Another victim (DR-06) was raped by a kidnapper but her parents said, 'all time we faced different types of harassment and blamed by our neibours only for you.' One married survivors (DR-09) said, as a rape victim when she returned her father's home, the members of society pressured her parents for not giving entrance her in their family. They told 'if you allow your raped daughter, we will not celebrate Eid-Ul-Ajha with you.' In addition victim said, my parents frequently asked to Almighty, 'why you are not taking the life of my raped daughter? She will destroy the life of my younger daughter, nobody will marry her.' Another survivor's (DR-09) indicated, 'only for me nobody invites our family in any social ceremony or cultural celebration. They believed if they faced us it will bring sufferings for them.' Victim's mother also blamed her and said, 'sometimes I wished to murder you with poisoning your meal for getting relief from the burden of you.'

Discussion and Conclusion

The study explores a dynamic understanding of victim blaming experiences of rape victims regarding victim roles in rape and its aftermath reaction by different actors in society. This study interviewed 9 rape victims and analyzed their blaming experiences in relation to the socio-demographic and economic status of rape victims. The study also explained the relation between victim blaming and social construction of rape in Bangladesh society. Women provocation in rape, character related blame, loss of virginity or chastity and victim as a burden of society are the predominant blaming on victims as explored in the study findings.

In our society when women are victimized by sexual offences particularly rape, we derogate victims, holding them more responsible for

having been victimized then perpetrator or rapist. Radical feminists argued that, ironically we tell girls not to talk to strangers, but they are more likely to be harmed by someone they know (Curren & Renzetti, 2001). Acquaintance rape victims were blamed more than stranger rape victims (Pollard, 1992:307-326). The study also found that most of the rapes are acquaintance rape, which is the victim is familiar with or knows her rapist. In acquaintance rape, victim faced more blaming of provocation in rape. The severe blaming experiences have also been observed to the victims of date rape. Here women being treated fully responsible for their victimization. As in our culture women's involvements in date bear negative meanings about their attitudes and behavior. In these cases rather than rape incidents, the victim's participation in date is a matter of concern to the all members of society.

Blaming as bad girl to the married and unmarried women for loosing virginity or chastity was evident among the interviewed rape victims. Female who do not behave in a manner consistent with the cultural stereotypes of a "good girl",... will be blamed for leading their partners and will be regarded as deserving to be raped (Burt,1991:217-230). These types of construction of rape victim are also dominantly prevailing in Bangladesh society. In our culture male portrayed having much more sex drive and argued that it is very natural that he will fulfill his desire in a favorable given situation. On the contrary women treated as having less sex drive and seemed that, it is the responsibility only women to preserve their virginity and chastity. When women involves in premarital or extramarital affair and being raped by her lover, all blames goes to the victim. Reasoning that, this type of women's involvement is not compatible with the cultural expectation of 'good girl' in our society. Consequently rape is treated as fate of bad or disobedient girls or women who deserved it as well as they are considered as a burden of society.

It is evident from the study that, marginal statuses of women particularly lower level of income and educations leads to victim blaming to the rape victims in our society. In *Blaming the victim*, William Ryan (1971) explores the systematic derogation of those who are poor and badly educated for failing to rise above conditions to which society may predispose them(Howard,1984:270-281). In Bangladesh, rural women faced the larger extent of abuse and negligence due to poverty, ignorance of law dependence on what is imposed on them by the social and religious elite and the locality (Khan, 2000). In the study most of the interviewed survivor's were poor and lack of education was also predominant features of them. As a rape victim their double marginality as women and lower socio-economic status deprives them to get justice from society as well as criminal justice system. Moreover all the member of society blamed her for the rape incidents.

Patriarchal cultural tradition is also closely related to the victim blaming experiences among the interviewed rape victims. Patriarchy is a system of social stratification, which means that it uses a wide array of social control policies and practices to ratify male power and to keep girls and women subordinate to men (Renzetti and Curran, 1999). Patriarchal tradition enrolls with male dominancy and which is always oppressive, allows male perpetrators to blame their victims for the justification of their actions in order to avoid punishment and maintain freedom to abuse in future (Schoellkopf, 2012:33). The patriarchal tradition of Bangladesh society often place men is a superior and dominant role and women in an inferior or submissive role. The similar reflection of patriarchal traditions also observed in the construction of the rape incidents in the context of rural society. In the study most interviewed rape victims were rural background. Here found that, for the dominating status of male a rapist can easily avoid punishment, freely moved in society, whereas victims face blaming for victimization and become a burden of society.

The study was an initial attempt to explore the blaming experiences of rape victims in the context of our society. The limited number and homogeneous nature of the cases are major shortcomings of the study to reach a generalization from research findings. Additionally, research involving victim blaming in rape poses difficulty because victim feel embarrassed and unsecured to discuss their experiences with researcher. Overall, the study revealed that marginal status of victim and construction of rape based on patriarchal traditions demonstrably influenced the blaming towards the rape victims in our society. It also found that, blame on victims diverts attention away from rapist responsibility in rape and cultural and structural factors in our society that oppress victim and foster this types of violence against women. This study recommended that the victim blaming experiences in rape and its context must be taken into account for effective controlling this crime in our society.

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