

## Violence against Women: Policies, Practices and Challenges in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

*Violence against women (VAW) is a global phenomenon. As many as 87% married women suffer physical, psychological, sexual even economic violence by their spouses in Bangladesh (VAW 2011, 2013). The first half of the paper offers a comprehensive review of the prevalence of different types of violence against women such as physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence by their partner and non-partner; and causes, consequences, risk factors and perceptions about these violence against women. The second half of the research points out the major policy guidelines especially Women Development Policy 2011 combating violence against women to guarantee equality, social justice and sustainable development in Bangladesh. The study maintains quantitative tactic of data analysis using the data of Violence Against Women Survey 2011 conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). It also includes reviewing the violence against women related research, reports and other documents as well as thereby recommends possible policy measures to combat violence against women in Bangladesh. The findings of the study reveal that violence against women causes physical and mental health problems as well as loose of right and access to financial and other resources. Evidences show that poor practices of policies and lack of holistic participation have geared up the challenges battling violence against women in Bangladesh. Instead of current ideology, there is great scope to use postmodern feminist standpoints; and proper implementation of policies to safeguard social justice.*

**Keywords:** Violence against women, Causes, Effects, Policy and Challenges

### Introduction:

Sex differentiates between male and female biologically while gender is socially constructed Giddens(2006). The construction of gender assigned the role of male and female and polarized the gender relations in society. To

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understand the gender relations, traditional and cultural construction of femininity and masculinity are the key factors indetermining the perceived differences between the male and the female in a developing country like Bangladesh(Khair,1999).The social organizations of Bangladesh are highly deterministic in terms of the dominance of the social force, patriarchy. The patriarchal system distinct between male and female through the conception of public and private sphere respectively. Plus, the behavioral difference such as how the female should act and what would be male's behavior against his counterpart are normalized by patriarchy. For the traditional society like Bangladesh, the male holds the authority of the family, consequently possess power to implement his decision uponhis family. On the contrary, female are in a subjugated position compared to the male member of the family as well as society.

The patriarchal norms legalized violence against women and the male are benefitted due to the subordinate position of the women structured by the conventional beliefs of the society. Violence against women (VAW) or the gender based violence can be termed as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN General Assembly Resolution 48/104 *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*, 1993). Female are perpetuated by the male and also by the female and in each case the female are the oppressed one. Among all types of violence in Bangladesh, the prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) is huge that manifests itself as physical, emotional, sexual and economic. The VAW (Violence Against Women) report 2011, indicates that about 87 percent married women of Bangladesh suffer from physical, psychological, sexual violence and economic deprivation perpetuated by their spouses. The consequences of violence against women have pitiable impacts upon the survivor, her family, community and society, which in turns transmit into the national level. The severe consequences of violence against women and its impact upon individual and society encourage the researchers to find out the causes and the costs of the consequences experienced at individual and community level. Due to pervasive violence, women may experience the consequences like fractures, hemorrhaging, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, homicide, suicide, pregnancy related problems, lower income and productivity, expenditure by the family, marginalization and social isolation due to stigma etc. (Heise, et.al 1999, Garcia-Moreno, 2002; UN General Assembly, 2006).

To combat violence against women and reduce the sufferings of the victim, different policies has been implemented at national and international level. Now, the burning issue is how far the policies and plans are possible

to enact inelminating all forms of violence against women. There are gender policy and the national women development policy 2011 to ensure social justice for the Bangladeshi women. In spiteof these gender polices, violence is not possible to reduce at tremendous volume. This piece of research tried to found out the strength and loopholes of the exiting polices through focusing on the possible solution against violence. At different stage of life –cycle such as pre-birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence and at the stage of elderly, women and girls are at risk of psychological and sexual violence (Ellsberg and Heise, 2005). Extreme gender inequality and discrimination are the root causes behind violence against women (Ending Violence against Women and Girls Programming Essentials, June 2013). This study shed light on the causes of the gender inequality with a focus of an empathic understanding of the women's situation in Bangladesh. In this regard, the post-modern feminist stand point has been incorporated to sketch out the victim's sufferings empathically and proper implication of policies for the safeguard of social justice.

### **Methodology**

Violence against women is a global phenomenon. Women are the victim of partner and non-partner violence categorized into physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence. This study was conducted using post-modern feminist standpoint to understand different types of violence against Bangladeshi women and also their sufferings. In this regard, the study had maintained quantitative tactic of data analysis using the data of the Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2011 conducted by BBS. The VAW Survey data had been collected from 12,600 eligible women over 15 year old, using two staged cluster sampling design. The sample had been selected randomly from seven divisions of Bangladesh such as Dhaka, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barishal, Rangpur, Sylhet and Chittagong and the data had been carried out during 18 to 29 December, 2011. Plus, the qualitative section had been analyzed thorough reviewing violence against women research, reports and other documents as well as thereby recommends possible measures to combat violence against women in Bangladesh. The major policy guidelines especially Women Development Policy 2011 had been thoroughly reviewed to combat violence against women and guarantee equality, social justice and sustainability in Bangladesh.

### **Results of the Study**

#### **Violence Against Women in Bangladesh: An Overview**

World Health Organization (WHO, 2013) recognizes Bangladesh as one of the countries in the South Asian region where intimate partner violence prevalence pose an inconceivable threat to women and their development in the social sphere. In Bangladesh, Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2011 is considered to be the first nationally representative survey, which

sheds light on discriminatory dispossession of liberty for women. It also acknowledges and enlightens society by highlighting the nature, various developments and dimensions of violence experienced by women in Bangladesh.

#### *Psychological violence*

Subordination and oppression of females is deeply embedded into the formation of a patriarchal society such as Bangladesh. Home to the fourth largest Muslim population in the world, the society at large is no exception to embracing customs and values which are to a large extent male-dominated. Reilly (2009) states that in a patriarchal society, combined factors such as the low status of women in the economic, social, cultural and political spheres are responsible for the violation of basic rights of females in a society like Bangladesh. The VAW survey has broadly classified psychological violence in to two broad spectrums naming, (i) psychological tortures; and (ii) controlled behavior. Results derived from the VAW survey indicates that the highest percentage of any type of violence experienced by women in Bangladesh can be primarily contributed to psychological violence. Prevalence of psychological violence is reported to be higher in rural than urban areas, where over 80% respondents reported being victim to it in their lifetime. Insulting (27%) was the most commonly reported act followed by humiliation (16%) in front of others and verbal threatening were reported by women to be means of experiencing psychological violence in contemporary Bangladeshi society.

#### *Physical violence*

The VAW report indicates that women belonging to the age group of 20-39 were found to be the most vulnerable target group and were also among the highest in terms of being exposed to spousal physical violence over the last year in Bangladesh.

Breiding, et.al (2015) defines intimate partner violence as “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner.” Over half (65%) of married women reported their current husbands to be the offender for them to have had experienced physical violence. Frequency of such incidence is high as about half of married women reported experiencing such violence during the course of the previous year. The report also found that more than half (50%) of the women surveyed received medical treatment as a result of inflicting such violence by their partners. However, an alarming one third of the women did not seek medical attention in fear of their husbands and in the fear of social stigma. Almost 9% women reported ‘social prestige’ as the key determinant for not seeking medical treatment.

#### *Economic violence*

The Survey states that in Bangladesh, unabated practise of dowry, especially in rural areas of Bangladesh is a key factor, which contributes to women becoming victims of economic violence. At present, one third of women (33.7%) in Bangladesh have paid dowry for their current marriage. Hossain, K. and Suman, M. (2013) note that in lower socio-economic classes inability to meet dowry demands due to poverty contributes to different types of violence against women which in worst case scenarios can lead to women committing suicide and become targets of mental and physical torture. Pervasiveness of such economic violence is noted to be marginally higher in rural areas compared to urban. About half of ever married women have been victim to economic violence while one third reported being exposed to it in the past one year. The trend of such violence seems to be higher amongst younger women in comparison to their counterpart older women in contemporary Bangladesh.

### *Sexual Violence*

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) define sexual violence as sexual activity where consent is not obtained or freely given where the person responsible for the violence is typically male. The VAW survey found married women between the age group of 20-34 to be most susceptible to spousal sexual violence compared to other age groups in Bangladesh. Incidence of women experiencing such violence is higher in rural areas in comparison to urban areas. It is estimated that more than one-third (36.5%) of women experienced sexual violence perpetrated by their current husband in their lifetime. Over the last twelve months, one-fourth of married women reported being victims of such violence. Sexual intimidation as a result of physical force alongside fear of consequence is reported to be most common sexual violence perpetrated by current husbands. The survey found 26% of women were ever forced to fornicate with their husbands while over 10% of women found themselves helpless victims to such sexual violence in the past twelve months. Fear of adverse reaction from husbands as a result of refusing to perform sexual intercourse were reported by 30% of women to have sex despite wanting to. In terms of quantifying the pervasiveness of sexual violence that women experience by non-partners, which leaves a detrimental effect on self-identity as well as physical and psychological wellbeing half of the women surveyed (50%) indicated that they were forced into having sex while they were fourteen years old and below. The VAW survey also revealed that three quarter of the respondents (77.8%) were forced into having sex while they were below the age of 19 and below, which further epitomizes the ever despicable value of women in Bangladesh's society.

### **Policies Regarding Violence Against Women**

In a country where estimated prevalence of acts of violence against women is high and is considered as an un-avowed Human Rights violation, it is of utmost importance that law, policy and service delivery are molded in order to be responsive to the diverse needs of women to safeguard women from any form of physical, sexual and psychological oppression they may come in contact with. Upon gaining independence in 1971, the Government of Bangladesh has recognized the importance of safeguarding the rights of women, as they possess the same potential for contributing to the overall development of the country alongside their male counterparts. Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights for both men and women in all spheres of the state and public life. Notable article(s), which patronizes the sentiment to uphold women's right in society, include:

*The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth- Article 28 (1)*

*Nothing in this article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favor of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens- Article 28 (4)*

In addition to that Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has also formulated the National Women Development Policy (2011) which aims to establish equal rights of men and women in areas of state and public life, ensure safety and security of women in all areas of state, ensure socio-economic, political, administrative and legal empowerment, remove existing male-female disparities, give recognition to women's contribution, establish gender equality in politics, administration, education, innovate and import technology favoring the interest of women, ensure priority of women in provision for proper shelter, reflect gender perspectives in the mass media including positive image of women and ensure active role of women and their equal rights in all the National economic activity among other pro-women fundamentals to ensure achievement of women's rights in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has also signed its commitments to the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984 as well as endorsing Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) in 1995 without any reservations and committed to ensuring its implementation at national level. Hossen (2014, p.1) state "Bangladesh Government has been proactively adopting in adaption of preemptive policies, legislations, strategies and taking national affirmative action plans and program for accelerating the implementation process in achieving the goal of holistic empowerment of women in Bangladesh." In order to protect women's legal rights and elevate social status the following laws and policies has also been formulated by the Government of Bangladesh:

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- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980 which forbids anyone from giving or receiving dowry
- The Nari-O-Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (Law on the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children, 2000) expanding the definition of rape and sexual assaults
- Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2000 and Acid control Act, 2000 as a primitive measure to protect from the acid violence
- Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act, 2010 and National Women policy, 2011 was adopted for the empowerment of women
- Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010 established to ensure protection of women and children from family violence which is also a guarantor to the United Nation (UN) charter on prevention on all forms of discrimination to women
- Mobile Court Act (2009) which empowers the executive magistrate power to take steps by linking Section 509 of the Bangladesh Penal Code to prevent eve teasing and sexual harassment of women.

### **Implication of gender policies and It's Challenges in Bangladesh**

Women in Bangladesh are the victim of different types of violence and the reasons behind violence against women is structural that cannot be resolved by making technical adjustment to intervention. Radical change can only be achieved through focusing on the gender inequality and subordination in political mobilization and lobbying (Baden et.al, 1994). Economic liberalization, industry, employment, human resource development etc. should be given top most priority than creating special program for women (Jahan, 1989).

The national women's policy incorporates issues like equal rights, equal opportunity for employments and equal distribution of resources for women. Some success stories regarding equality like equal opportunity for women particularly for the primary school education for girls has been ensured at a larger scale. On the contrary, the equal distribution of resources are yet neglected both at household and national level; about 80.9% men and 19.1% women have ownership of land at national level (VAW Report, 2011). Policies has been failed to eradicate violence against women. The outcome is the VAW Survey 2011 where 87 percent women are the victim of domestic violence. VAW Survey 2011 also indicates that at national level, 7.09% women attempted for suicide due to the physical torture of their current husband while the rate is larger 12.86 perpetrated by the previous husband. These occurrences are clear indications that the acts on violence against women are not implementing in proper way.

The major challenges in policy implications are there no effective policies to ensure women's security at home, educational institutions, road, organizations and the like. Increasing violence against women is now a grave concern. First of all, the security issues needed to be addressed so that women and girls can enjoy equal opportunities like the male; Secondly, massive campaign and awareness against community violence is a crying need and last but not the least is the understanding women's position from a liberal point of view.

The postmodern feminist standpoints can be incorporated to understand women's sufferings. If the male member of the society are failed to understand women's importance and their contribution in society then the situation will never be improved and the incidence of violence will occur at every home on a regular basis.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of the existence of current legislation and pro-women policies women are still the most disadvantaged group in Bangladesh. Results derived from the data gathered from Violence against Women (VAW) Survey 2011, conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund has made it evident that existing policies need to be re-analysed and an alternative action plan should be devised in co-operation with government, NGOs and activists in society to promote gender equity through the empowerment of women. Involvement of men and youth is essential in policy development in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh as they hold the key in deconstructing the dominant and subordinate order and allow females to participate in all areas of the social spheres on equal terms alongside men. Awareness and capacity building among women are also equally as important to ensure active participation of women in all types of development activities to make violence against women an issue of the past and move women forward to brighter days ahead in the future for women in Bangladesh.

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