

## **Violence against Women: Nature, Causes and Dimensions in Contemporary Bangladesh**

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***Abstract:** This article is an attempt to discuss some of the major dimensions of violence against women in Bangladesh. Different types of violence against women take place quite frequently in Bangladesh such as domestic violence, acid violence, rape, gang rape, murder, forced prostitution, "Eve-teasing". The present paper, using data from various secondary sources, examines the nature, causes, magnitude and trend of violence against women in Bangladesh.*

### **Introduction**

Violence against women is no new phenomenon in Bangladesh. But today, its magnitude tends to be alarming, particularly in rural areas - generally among the poorer section. It inevitably involves particular social meaning and occurs in particular social hierarchies. Different types of violence against women take place in Bangladesh, such as domestic violence, dowry-related violence, acid violence, death, rape, rape followed by death, forced or induced abortion, forced prostitution, sexual harassment, violence at work place and trafficking. Also 'eve-teasing' has gained tremendous importance as an alarming violent phenomenon in recent times.

Bangladesh is a patriarchal society. Oppression and subordination by males over females is the common feature in this society. As a patriarchal Muslim society, the customs and values are largely male-dominated. It is also observed that sometimes seclusion put the women in vulnerable situation. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women's position, prestige, power etc., are generally determined and dominated by males. Accordingly, males' attitude towards females is important and it does not generally give equal and due treatment to the female counterparts. Violence against women is largely embedded in gender norms. Generally the low status of women – economically, socially, culturally and politically tend to be responsible for the violation of basic rights of females by males in a society like Bangladesh (Reilly 2009; McMillan 2007). The nature of strong patriarchy is responsible for this.

Violence against women is largely the result of perceived differences (such as wealth, power, status, prestige) between men and women as ascribed by norms of patriarchy (Hossain, Imam and Khair 2001). Sociological perspectives on violence such as resource theory and exchange theory have shown that power is based on resources and that violence is the ultimate resource for securing compliance. In this model, domestic violence by males over females tends to be a natural phenomenon (Gottfried 1998; Gelles and Loseke 1993). In this article, we shall, however, deal

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particularly with the nature, causes and dimensions of some important forms of violence, especially domestic violence in Bangladesh.

### Methodology

This article is written primarily by taking help of the secondary sources such as news, features, reports published in different national and local daily newspapers. We also used data compiled by national NGOs such as Ain-O-Salish Kendra (ASK). However, these data in tabular form are redrawn by present authors. Additionally, available published research reports and articles are taken into consideration while developing arguments and analysis of different dimensions of violence against women. Authors' own observations are also incorporated while analyzing the nature and causes of the problem.

### Violence against Women: Types and Trends

It is important to get a general idea of the nature, trends and dimensions of violence against women in Bangladesh. Following table lists the types and trends of violence in Bangladesh. This table is redrawn taking data from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) and Odhikar covering a 7 year period from 2004 to 2010. It may be mentioned that ASK has collected and compiled data from a number of national dailies (both Bengali and English).

**Table-1: Violence Against Women: Types and Trends**

Year	Types of Violence					Eve teasing/ Stalking
	Domestic Violence	Dowry Related Violence	Rape	Gang Rape	Acid Attack	
2004	264	352	618	359	228	
2005	333	356	585	250	130	
2006	301	334	515	226	142	
2007	283	294	436	198	95	
2008	312	296	486	127	80	
2009	281	285	446	199	63	
2010	397	395	626	290	153	216

Source: Redrawn from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) Documentation Unit, 2011 and Odhikar, 2011

Table-1 shows different dimensions of violence against women that took place during the period of 2004 to 2010 in Bangladesh. It may be noted that in this table, data on eve-teasing is available only for the year 2010 and the occurrence of eve-teasing in that year was 216. We see that the figure for domestic violence was 264 in 2004 while 397 in the year of 2010, which shows increasing trend. The Table shows similar trend in case of dowry related violence and single rape. However, if we look at the figures of acid attacks, we observe a decreasing trend from 2004 to 2009.

It may be noted that ASK data are also available for the six months from January to June, 2012. The

data show that due to sexual harassment/violence 10 females committed suicide. During the same period 31 females became victims of acid violence, 457 females were raped out of which 59 were murdered after rape. In the same period, 300 females became victims of dowry related violence. In addition, it is also reported that 54 domestic help faced different types of violence (The Daily Prothom Alo, July 2, 2012, P-7).

It is important to mention that in a traditional value dependent society like Bangladesh, many incidents of violence against women are not reported to the police or in the media. Those women who are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence in the past are likely to be fearful or embarrassed to talk about their experiences. Often victims or victims' families do not want to make such incidents public because of social stigma (Begum 2000). Some researchers analyzed violence against women from legal perspective. Their opinion highlighted the limitation of legal definition of violence. They discussed two different types of violence as domestic violence i.e. dowry demands and polygamy. They also discussed the issue of religious decree and violence in the guise of religion which describes the extent, nature and frequency of violence against women in rural Bangladesh (BNWLA 2004; Rahman 1997).

In the absence of dependable national data it is really difficult to talk much on the basis of inadequate quantitative information regarding violence against women in Bangladesh. However, when we go through daily newspapers, we generally find more than one incident of violence against women every day in the country. Such news covers a wide range of different forms of violence against women in our society. These are discussed below.

### **Domestic Violence**

In Bangladesh, most of the people know what is meant by domestic violence such as dowry related violence, child marriage, marital rape or violence, verbal abuse, harassment, humiliation and physical torture (Begum 2005; Hossain, Imam and Khair 2001). Due to patriarchy and in the absence of adequate empowerment situation of women, domestic violence by men against women is a common phenomenon in Bangladesh – both in rural and urban areas. It is more pronounced among the poorer and relatively less educated class. Generally these types of violence against women are done by the males. Power and control over resources were most frequently at the core of events leading to the use of violence in domestic situations (Barrier 1998; Gelles and Connell 1988). Patriarchy subordinates women through existing social norms and values. This system allows men to dominate women within their families and also allows men control over the productive resources (Schuler, Hashemi and Badal 1998). As a result, traditional value under strong patriarchy tends to trigger, dictate and provoke different forms of violence, including domestic violence against women in Bangladesh (Hossain 2002).

**Table-2: Domestic violence (2008-2010 year)**

Nature	Age (in years)				Total	Case filed
	18 and below	19-24	25 and above	Age not reported		
Physical and mental torture by husband	1	12	46	23	82	12
Physical and mental torture by husband's family		3	9	11	23	10
Physical and mental torture by own family members	1	1	5	5	12	2
Murder by husband	71	160	229	166	626	309
Murder by husband's family	6	22	50	22	100	49
Murder by own family members	10	5	20	13	48	22
Unbearable torture resulting in suicide	7	22	15	18	62	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>258</b>	<b>953</b>	<b>419</b>

Source: Redrawn from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) Documentation Unit, 2011

Table-2 depicts different types of domestic violence that generally take place in Bangladesh. Table shows that 626 cases were victims of murder by husband while 82 became victims of physical and mental torture by husband. Due to unbearable physical and mental torture, 62 committed suicide. A significant number of the victims of different types of domestic violence as shown in this table belong to the age category of 25 years and above (374 cases). It is also important to note that out of 626 victims who were murdered by husband, only 309 cases are filed against the offenders.

Domestic violence is a very pervasive, serious social malady in both developed and developing countries. Severe domestic violence has been documented in almost every country in the past decade. In some Western countries, 21-28 per cent of adult women are battered in marital relationships. Foshee, V.A., K.E. Bauman, et al. (1999) in their study showed how family violence and adolescent dating violence take place. It was found in Hindin's (2003) study that husbands' attitudes toward wife beating are generally found in five major situations: a) if a wife goes out without telling her husband, b) neglects the children, c) argues with him, d) refuses to have sex with him, and e) burns the food.

Women who are victims of domestic violence do not only suffer from health related complications, they also suffer from low self-esteem, feeling of isolation and powerlessness, and often suffer from a sense of guilt (Islam and Rahman 2006). As a result females, who are victims of domestic violence, are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide than those who do not experience such violence (WHO 2002).

### Dowry related domestic violence

Dowry (though legally prohibited) is being practiced unabated, particularly in rural areas of Bangladesh. It is observed that dowry related domestic violence (often death) against women is increasing in an alarming rate.

**Table-3: Dowry related violence (2008-2010 year)**

Nature of violence	Age (in years)				Total	Case filed
	18 and below	19-24	25 and above	Age not reported		
Physical torture	85	366	213	294	958	158
Acid throwing	1	7	3	5	16	9
Murder	40	244	96	165	590	353
Suicide after experiencing physical and mental torture	5	14	3	3	25	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>631</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>467</b>	<b>1589</b>	<b>526</b>

Source: Redrawn from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) Documentation Unit, 2011

Table-3 demonstrates that in order to realize dowry, different types of violence are resorted to by the husband/husband's family. During the period of 2008 to 2010, there were 958 females who became victims of physical torture and 590 became victims of murder. It may be noted that most of the victims of physical torture (366) and murder (244) belong to the age category of 19-24 years. Out of total 590 who became victims of murder, 353 cases were filed against the outlaws.

In this connection we would like to mention one news report from a Bengali national daily newspaper. The Daily Janakontha of September 5, 2006 (quoted from the survey report done in 2006, by Bangladesh Human Rights Commission), reveals that from January 2006 to August 31, 2006 (approximately 8 month period) there were 136 dowry related deaths. Same source discloses that 254 were raped where 68 were raped followed by murder. During this 8 month period 78 became victims of acid violence.

It is observed that taking money is the most common form of dowry practiced in the lower socio-economic classes. Inability to pay the dowry demand causes different types of violence against women. Sometimes, some women even commit suicide due to unbearable mental and physical torture.

Verbal abuse, mental torture, humiliation, physical torture, death, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and violence on house maids etc., are perceived as common practices of domestic violence against women by men. Such incidents are reported in national dailies almost every day.

Who are the offenders/perpetrators of domestic violence on women? Answer is – generally males and more particularly husbands. Fulfilment of the dowry demand often fails due to poverty and other reasons in bride's family. Husband at this stage keeps on repeating the demand to the wife to recover the dowry. When she fails to convince her father/family members to realize the dowry demand or her father/family members cannot meet the demand for different reasons (e.g. poverty), torture begins at home – generally from verbal abuse, mental torture to slapping, beating, hitting, kicking, dragging etc., by husband or husband's family members. Since in rural areas of Bangladesh, practice of dowry is very common, domestic violence relating to dowry demand is equally very common. Apart from verbal abuse, mental and physical torture, deaths also take place as a result of dowry demand (Mannan 2003; Martin et al., 2002; UNICEF 2000).

#### **Social stigma and violence on wives**

Married women who are found incapable (generally confirmed without medical test) of giving birth to a child, usually face humiliation, verbal abuse, mental or physical torture by husband or husband's family members. At this stage socially she becomes stigmatized. Often husband divorces her or marries another wife.

Son preference is another important aspect in this male dominated society. If a wife does not give birth to a male child, husband tends to convince or force his wife to conceive again and again until a male child is born. Even if she gives birth to a male child, but husband desires to have more than one male child, she has to conceive again in order to agree with husband's decision. This is very common in rural areas. This situation of wife's subsequent pregnancies generally causes pregnancy related complications, physical injury, malnutrition, ill health and other related diseases (Akhter 2005).

#### **Violence against domestic help**

Domestic help often comes across different types of abuse, humiliation and violence by male or female members of the household. Making some mistakes in the domestic work, working slow, breaking crockery and other utensils etc., are the common causes of such abuse and violence against female house maids. Additionally, male members (e.g. husband, adult son) sometimes resort to sexual harassment and violence against female domestic help. Such violence ranges from touching female organs, cuddling and molestation, to forced sexual coitus (rape) on house maids. Due to severe poverty, need for survival becomes primary consideration for the victims. As a result, victims usually cannot protest such offences. These kinds of violence against house maids remain usually concealed. Sometimes, however, some of them leave the house and take jobs in a different house.

But in some cases, they fall victims of similar sexual violence in the new work place as well. At this point, they get disgusted and frustrated. Carrying this awkward and sad mental state of mind, some of them even get involved in commercial sex work. Such cases were found in a recent study on Female Sex Workers (Hossain, Habib and Imam 2004).

**Table-4: Violence against female domestic help (2008-2010 year)**

Nature	Age (in years)				Total	Case filed
	18 and below	19-24	25 and above	Age not reported		
Physical torture	61	2	5	12	80	41
Rape/attempt to rape	13			8	21	9
Death after physical torture	27		4	6	37	29
Rape followed by murder	4	1	1	1	7	2
Physical and mental torture resulting in suicide	11	-	-	3	14	3
Physical and mental torture followed by murder	47	16	9	12	84	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>108</b>

Source: Redrawn from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) Documentation Unit, 2011

Table-4 illustrates that most of the victims (163 out of the 243) belong to the age category of 18 years and below. Also we see that in the same age category, out of total 163, 61 female domestic help became victims of physical torture where 47 faced physical and mental torture followed by murder.

#### **Female child marriage and violence**

In rural areas, we see a sizeable number of female children between 13-15 years of age get married because of the family's desires and decisions. Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) conducting a representative national survey in 2004 reveals that of all the married respondents, approximately 8.0% were found in the age category of 10-14 years (Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2005:92). Even if the law prohibits, such marriages take place unabated in rural areas of Bangladesh. However, existing law prohibits marriage for females less than 18 years of age and for males less than 21 years of age (Hossian 2006).

It is very difficult for a tender age girl of 13 or 14 years of age to understand and adjust with the new situation of husband's family – family's desires, expectations, socio-cultural demands. Inability to meet

the demands and desires of the husband/husband's family members results in verbal abuse, humiliation and sometimes physical torture on the newly married girl by her husband or husband's family members (both males and females).

Apart from this familial adjustment problem, the girl also faces emotional, sexual, social and practical adjustment problem with her husband whose age is generally 18 years or above. Also the question of establishing mutually agreed sexual relation becomes nearly impossible in such unequal marital relation. Husband's desire to have sex with his wife generally turns out to be undesirable for her. In such situations, when husband forcibly has sex with his wife, it turns out to be a sexual violence. Wife, instead of sexual gratification, often sustains injury, pain etc., in her female organs. This may be termed as marital rape (Akhter 2005). Early age pregnancy is also an important feature resulting from early marriage. When subsequent pregnancies take place at early age without proper spacing, a female faces malnutrition and ill health (Krug, E.G. et al. 2002).

### Rape

Rape is a type of physical assault involving sexual intercourse by the perpetrator(s). Generally this kind of crime takes place when one or more males initiate such an act against another person (generally female) without consent of the victim. It may be noted that such an act may be carried out by physical force, coercion, abuse of authority etc. 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 is particularly injurious to a woman's self-identity and social future as well as her physical and psychological wellbeing. The ever-increasing rate of rape is an alarming phenomenon and it depicts the diminishing value of women in society. It may be mentioned that sometimes rape is followed by murder, particularly when gang rape takes place.

**Table-5: Incidents of Rape (2008-2010 year)**

Nature	Age (in years)				Total	Case filed
	18 and below	19-24	25 and above	Age not reported		
Attempt to rape	27	3	9	71	110	55
Single rape	366	44	35	402	847	444
Gang rape	106	44	42	312	504	279
<b>Total</b>	<b>499</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>785</b>	<b>1461</b>	<b>778</b>
Rape followed by murder	76	22	23	96	217	92
Suicide due to rape	8	4	2	6	20	8

Source: Redrawn from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) Documentation Unit, 2011

Table 5 shows that out of total 1461, a large number of single rape cases (847) occurred while a significant number of gang rapes (504) were also committed during the period of 2008 to 2010. We also observe that out of total number of victims (1461), 217 cases were rape followed by murder and 20 cases committed suicide. It is also important to mention that only 92 cases were filed where there were 217 victims of rape followed by murder.

### **Marital Violence**

Marital violence is not a new phenomenon in the Bangladesh society, it has been existing in our society since the patriarchal values had taken over to rule over the social norms and functioning. It is a weapon used to maintain the unequal power dynamics between men and women. In this context 'marital rape', coerced sexual intercourse, between husband and wife, is not recognized as a criminal offense in Bangladesh. The predominant cultural context supports the notion that any sexual intercourse between husband and wife is lawful and a private matter and interference by outside parties is unacceptable. In many empirical research, almost half of the respondents stated that their opinion is ignored during sexual intercourse by their husbands. But the current cultural context suggests that while women are socially and religiously bound to have sexual intercourse with their husbands, men do not feel the same pressure to fulfil their wives' sexual desires and women in most cases remain sexually unsatisfied. With no alternative, women realize that they have no choice but to tolerate domestic violence and make the best of their tragic situation. Some argued that marriage exhibits unequal gender position especially the socio-cultural and legal sanction of husbands' propriety rights over a wife (Begum 2000; Jahan 1994; Gells and Cornell 1988).

### **Acid Violence**

Acid violence involves throwing acid at a person's body to harm/disfigure and scare the person. Acid violence is a crime that has been quite alarming in recent Bangladesh. Acid attacks generally occur when men want to take revenge for the refusal of proposals for sex or marriage, or when demands for dowry are not met or when there is a political or land related dispute. Additionally, a few other causes of acid attack may be mentioned here such as family dispute, protest against husband's second marriage, infertility, getting divorce from wife.

The severity of impact of acid violence does not only mean physical harm and pain, the victims also may suffer from prolonged/lifetime social isolation or stigmatization, resulting in loss of self-esteem and inability to study or work, living in shame, hiding the disfigurement with a veil etc. Usually acid is thrown on the face of a girl or a woman in order to damage her appearance. Generally, it is used as a weapon to attack females. However, males also sometimes become victims of acid attacks. Among other organizations, Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) in Bangladesh has taken noteworthy steps for victims' treatment as well as rehabilitation.

**Table-6: Acid Violence (2008-2010 year)**

Reasons	Age of the victims (in years)				Total	Case filed
	18 and below	19-24	25 and above	Age not reported		
Family Disputes	4	6	14	6	30	18
Dowry	1	3	6	5	15	6
Enmity	5	1	18	7	31	9
Land related disputes and conflict	6	7	21	9	43	14
Refusal against bad proposal	3	3	1	4	11	3
Refused to marry	5	3	3	1	12	5
Refusal against love	5				5	3
Resist husband's extra-marital relationship		2	3		5	2
Failure in love	4		1	4	9	3
Because of divorce notice			3		3	2
Because of case not withdrawn	1		4		5	2
After rape	1		3		4	2
Reasons not reported	9	3	30	9	51	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>85</b>

Source: Redrawn from Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) Documentation Unit, 2011

Table-6 shows primary causes behind acid attacks in Bangladesh from 2008 to 2010. This table demonstrates that as a result of land related disputes (43) and family disputes (30), there were 73 victims of acid attacks out of total 224. It is also found that in the age category of 25 years and above, 107 out of total 224 became victims of acid attack.

### **Eve-teasing**

Eve-teasing is a great concern today in the discussion of violence against women in Bangladesh. Eve-teasing is not a new problem in Bangladesh. However, recently its magnitude has increased and it has become a big social crisis for the country. This emerging phenomenon, nowadays, is dealt with seriously by different types of professionals, especially social activists and academics. The term 'Eve-teasing' is an activity where the girls are teased by the boys. More specifically, it means when a boy or a group of boys try to disturb a girl or girls by yelling, showing sexual gesture and instruments,

obstructing, offering bad proposal etc., while she is walking on the street, staying somewhere, or riding on any vehicle and other places. It causes vulnerability and insecurity for the girls.

A recent study carried out by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) showed that almost 90 percent of the girls aged between 10 to 18 years have undergone the experience of this problem. The harassment can take a variety of forms and the perpetrators come from multiple walks of life (BNWLA 2004). Generally speaking, almost every day one or more girls become victim of eve-teasing. However, some of these incidents are reported and some are not. It may be mentioned as reported in the newspaper, 'The Daily Prothom Alo' in 2011 (from June 15 to August 15); that 25 females became victims of eve-teasing in different places such as while coming back home, bus stands and in educational institutions such as schools, colleges.

It may be mentioned that eve-teasing has now become a serious social disease in Bangladesh. It is also observed that this undesirable phenomenon is increasing (as reported in print and electronic media) day by day. However, government, NGOs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and other social organizations are trying their best to combat the situation by enforcing existing laws and implementing motivational/awareness raising activities.

It is important to mention that some sensational incidents of intolerable eve-teasing resulting in suicide were committed by Trisha, Pinky, Elora, Simi Banu and others in recent years. Till November 14, 2010, almost 20 girls committed suicide due to eve-teasing (Ethirajan 2010). It may be significant to state that some including parents, teachers and local people who protested against eve-teasing, became victims (ranging from physical assault to death) by the teasers and their associates.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion on violence against women in Bangladesh, particularly domestic violence, gives us a brief understanding of the problem. It is found that different types of violence against women are increasing. Recently eve-teasing has become a serious social problem in the country. In order to arrest this increasing trend of violence against women, proper intervention strategies need to be undertaken. Existing laws regarding protection of women's rights should be enforced effectively. Law enforcing agencies need to handle the situation with sincerity, honesty and with strong commitment without any hesitation and bias. Awareness and capacity building among the women are also important. Under the existing social values and norms, males' attitude and behaviour towards females need to be changed as well. In this regard relevant agencies of the Government, NGOs, researchers, lawyers, activists and media need to come forward and work together for advocacy and campaign against violence on women in Bangladesh.

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