

Gender Violence among the Middle-Class Families in Bangladesh: Insight from Case Studies

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Abstract

The present study analyzes gender violence among middle-class families in Bangladesh. It highlights the characteristics and different types of factors which play an important role in the gender violence. Although there is a considerable literature on the subject, there remains an insufficient understanding of issues involving gender violence. The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 1972, which is the supreme law of the land mentions that it will be the fundamental aim of the state to ensure a society free from all discriminations and a society established on the rule of law. After the adoption of the constitution, forty-four years have passed but the dream of an egalitarian society has not been achieved yet. In the absence of adequate security for women, they are facing increasing violence both at home and in the public sphere.

In this regard, this study provides a comprehensive picture of different types of violence against women including domestic violence like torture by husband/wife beating, dowry-related violence, polygamy, extra-marital relationship, high-risk pregnancy, adultery, torture by family member, etc. Although this is an exploratory study, it will provide a new perspective for understanding gender violence in future.

Keywords: Gender violence, middle class, family,

Introduction

From the early history of human civilization women are always subject to violence. Though family violence cuts across class and location, collected data shows that women are more vulnerable to family violence, there are a lot of issues related to non-reporting of violence by the higher income families and the difference in rural-urban attitude to family violence. The highest numbers of women become victims of violence due to a family feud. In Bangladesh, the study has focused on all relevant information regarding forms, nature and intensity of violence against women among middle class (Jahan and Islam, 1997; BNWLA, 2003)

Though a large number of reports and field work studies of violence have been done and published, information is still sporadic and disjointed. In spite of the fact that these reports and studies are likely to have a significant bearing on theory and future policy, they are not adequate to develop more focused policies for ending gender violence. We need more micro studies to get an insight into gender violence that seems to pervade our society. More importantly, it will provide original qualitative data and its analysis for better understanding of gender violence among middle-class families in Bangladesh.

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Background of the study

Gender violence is a violation of human rights. It causes fear, physical and psychological harm. Living with family violence has a profound effect on children and young people and may constitute a form of child abuse. According to a World Health Organization (WHO) report, one in three women worldwide is a victim of physical or sexual violence, resulting in a global health epidemic. Most of these females are attacked or abused by their boyfriends or husbands. This is an everyday reality for many, many women (BNWLA, 2003)

Violence against women is responsible for a variety of acute and chronic issues. These health problems range from immediate injury to sexually transmitted infections, to HIV, stress and depression and alcohol-associated health condition. In certain areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa, female victims have a 1.5 times increased probability to become infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that causes AIDS (Zaman, 1999).

According to recent research by International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research-Bangladesh (2006), “60 percent of women in Bangladesh experience some form of domestic violence during their lives. One Stop Crisis Centre, a Bangladesh-based NGO that supports women victims of violence, reveals that almost 70 percent of sexual abuses suffered by women occurs within their own homes. (Khatun and Rahman, (2012).

Physical abuse or beating wives by husbands is almost a universal form of family violence against women. Worldwide 10-70% of women found being physically violated by their intimate partners in their lives (Ahmed, 2005). Bhuyia et al. (2003) in their study demonstrated that around seven in ten (66.8%) women were vulnerable to abusive words against them and their parents by their husbands, and most of the women were physically abused by their husbands.

About 90% of women in Bangladesh are practicing Muslims, which indicates that many Muslim women are victims of physical domestic violence in this country. From a World Health Organization (WHO) study, of which Bangladesh was one of ten participating countries, it was found that less than 2% of domestic abuse victims seek support from the community to resolve abusive situations, primarily because they know that they won't receive the support they need to remedy the situation. (Khatun and Rahman, 2012).

Objectives of the study

The major objective of the present study is to find out the existing position of women's status and gender violence among middle-class families in Bangladesh. But more specifically, the study will be conducted to accomplish following objectives.

- Examining the characteristics of violence against women in Bangladesh focusing on middle-class families;
- Nature and types of violence against women in middle-class families.
- Identifying the causes of violence against women in middle-class families;

Operational and conceptual framework

Gender violence

Generally, the term gender violence is defined in various points of view, based on the context in which it is used. The meaning of gender violence is varied over time and vary in different parts of the world. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary - domestic/Gender violence is the inflicting of physical injury by one family or household member on another, also a repeated / habitual pattern of such behavior.

In 1993, the United Nations offered the first official definition of such violence when the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993. According to the Article 1 of the declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993 Violence against women include:” Any act of gender-based violence that result in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life”(Cited in BNWLA,2003,pp-10).

Article 2 of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 1993 clarifies that” the definition of violence against women should encompass, but not be limited to acts of physical, sexual, and psychological violence in the family and the community”(Cited in BNWLA,2003,pp-11).

Gender violence against women is now defined very broadly to include any act involving the use of force/coercion with the intent of perpetuation/promotion of hierarchical gender relations in all social structures: family, community, workplace and society (APWLD, 1990). Defined this way, it includes any violation of women’s basic rights on the ground of gender as an act of violence (Jahan and Islam, pp-6).

The concept is mostly associated with physical violence. Moreover assaultive behavior against women may take the following forms: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological violence and vicarious violence, i.e. violence directed against something or person held dear by the victim (Jahan and Islam, pp-6).

Literature review

World Health Organization (2005) conducted a Multi-country Study on Gender and Women’s Health, and this study found a grim scenario of human rights violation across the world. WHO studied ten countries including Bangladesh, focused that most of the women in their study areas experienced physical, sexual and spousal violence in their lifetime. The study showed that, in Bangladesh, gender violence against women is a very common practice which denies women’s equal opportunity, security and dignity in the family and broader society.

UNICEF (2008) in its study shows that gender violence constitutes various types of abuse and aggressive behavior such as choking, slapping, beating and threats, etc. are perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members.

The study of United Nations (1993) stated that gender violence against women is the result of unequal power practice among men and women which creates discrimination between them. The study also found that the discrimination against women compelled them to belong to the subordinate position than men.

Jahan and Islam (1997) indicate that the highest number of women become victims of violence due to family quarrels. Non-payment of dowry was the reason for which the next highest number of women became victims of violence. Their study clearly demonstrates that the law designed to prevent dowry has not had the desired effect. Moreover, this issue relates to other issues of ineffective implementation of laws designed to deter or reduce violence which need to be addressed (Jahan and Islam, pp-11).

Zaman, (1999) demonstrated that women are dominated in a patriarchal society like Bangladesh because of their economic dependence and powerlessness. He also found that discriminatory inheritance law and marriage rules are important elements which create barriers to women's well-being in their life. BNWLA (2003) identified that

... violence in women's life is typically conceptualized as a series of abusive, horrible or tragic events. From her birth (even before from her birth when she is in the womb of her mother) to death, a woman is a target of violence simply because she is a woman. From the aborting of female fetuses to intimate homicide, girls and women encounter numerous oppressions during infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and as elders. Some of these are confined to one stage in the lifecycle; some continue to subsequent stages (BNWLA,2003, p-3).

Ahmed, (2005) showed that assaulting behaviour by husbands or intimate partners is almost a universal form of domestic violence against women. He identified that 10-70% of women faced different types of violence by their intimate partners in their lives.

Morgaine, (2007) found that age of women and the duration of marriage life are closely linked with violence. Younger women are more at risk of domestic violence than the older women (Schuler et al., 1998; Koenig et al. 2003), and longtime marriage life has less risk of violence.

According to the article of Vina Das (2008), history of gender violence was characterized by the symbol of power and domination. This study focused the inter-link of violence, gender, and subjectivity and pointed out that gender violence is closely linked to the social and cultural order and disorder.

BBS report of Bangladesh on violence against women (2011), a survey nationally conducted on violence against Bangladeshi women showed that women suffer from all types of violence. Violence against women is global phenomenon and Bangladesh is no exception in this regard. It operates at all cultural, geographical, religious and social environments. The survey identified that most of the newly married women had experienced at least one type of violence by their current husbands and most of the time it was psychological violence. More than fifty percent of the victims reported that they had experienced physical violence during their lifetime.

Khatun and Rahman (2012) pointed out that women's experience of domestic violence with its consequences are under-reported because, most of the cases, violence is considered as personal or family matter. Besides this, the way of treating women socially is not gender-sensitive and the reality is that the fears of increasing sufferings or vulnerability reduce the number of violence to be reported. Another important factor is that, a large number of domestic violence in Bangladesh go under-reported due to social stigma; women are accused of provoking the violence by their disobedience, failure as a wife or infidelity etc. They also stated that,

... most of the women in Bangladesh experienced domestic violence in their lives which took different forms of abuses, i.e. physical(slapping, beating, stabbing, burning, choking etc),psychological(threats of abandonment or abuse, to take away custody of the children, verbal aggression etc),sexual abuse(forcing unwanted sexual acts),economic(refusal to contribute financially, denial of food and basic needs etc)(Khatun and Rahman,2012,pp-21).

The following table present the physical/sexual violence against women at different ages.

Table-1: Experience of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15 and in the 12 months before the interview, by type of perpetrator (%)

Age group	Partner violence			Non-partner violence		
	Since the age of 15(%)	In the past 12 months (%)	<i>n</i>	Since the age of 15(%)	In the past 12 months (%)	<i>N</i>
18-29	20	6	5,976	26	9	6,827
30-44	23	5	11,317	23	5	11,580
45-59	23	4	12,192	21	3	12,471
60+	19	3	10,622	17	3	11,017

Source: FRA, 2012,p.13

Table 1 shows that youngest girls suffer most from both partner and non-partner violence. Even the oldest females aged 60, and above could not escape from violence.

The analysis according to respondents' background characteristics was undertaken with respect to both physical and sexual violence in the past 12 months, and physical and sexual violence experienced by the age of 15. Although the latter prevalence rate offers a long-term on violence experience, the respondent's characteristics measured at the time of the survey may not reflect the respondent's situation (such as employment status) when the victimization took place.

In many cases, the analysis of these features does not reveal notable differences between the various respondent groups and their experience of physical or sexual violence. This suggests that women in various socio-economic groups are equally exposed to victimization, regarding both partner and non-partner violence.

Table-2: Study Report on Violence against Women, 2002

Nature of case	Number
Domestic Violence	211
Sexual Assault	159
Burn	41
Others ward	9
Total	429

Source: BNWLA,2002,p.33

Table: 2 indicates that, in 2003, OCC handles 420 cases where 211 cases were relating to domestic violence, 159 cases were relating to sexual assault, 41 cases were handled by the burn unit and 9 cases were handled by other wards. The services provided by the OCC in the year 2003 can be motioned in the following chart.

Table 3: Domestic Violence,Bangladesh 2003.

Type of Violence	Age					Not Mentioned	Total	Case Filed
	7-12	13-18	19-24	25-30	30+			
Torture by husband	-	5	10	8	2	10	35	5
Torture by husband's family members	-	10	5	10	5	8	38	5
Torture by own relative	-	-	5	10	4	2	21	-
Murder by husband	-	10	50	45	20	30	155	60
Murder by husband's family member	-	5	10	10	5	10	40	25
Murder by own relative	1	-	10	6	5	20	42	20
Total	1	30	90	90	40	80	331	115

Source: Documentation Unit, Ain O Salish Kendro (ASK),BNWLA, 2003,p.19

Table: 3 shows, in the year 2003, 35 women were reported to be tortured by husband, whereas 38 were tortured by husband's family members and 21 were tortured by the women's own relative. Only 10 cases were filed against these incidents, and not a single case was filed in the police station when the woman was tortured by the members of her own family. 155 women were murdered by husband while 40 were murdered by the husband's family members, 42 were murdered by the women's own relative.

In the second part of my paper, an attempt has been made for exploring the issue of violence among the middle class in greater depth through case study method. I believe that these case studies would reveal to some extent the pervasiveness of gender violence in Bangladesh. Middle class women are more educated; they have greater family support and often they earn money, even they tend to suffer from violence which is occasionally serious. If these women suffer from violence, it is not difficult to imagine the fate of others who are less fortunate.

Methods of data collection

This study mainly focuses on middle-class families, the broad group of people in contemporary Bangladesh society who fall socio-economically between the lower and upper classes. In this study, primary sources of data were collected in the form of case studies. For the secondary sources of information mainly relied on various books, journals, Statistical information in daily newspapers, the internet etc.

In order to fulfill the objectives of the study and also support in collecting reliable and meaningful data, easy access to the study area, time, budget, etc. the work was done at the shyamoli area of Dhaka city in 2014. It is part of a large study which would take one year. The case study includes various professionals as service holders, businessmen, teachers, politicians and different category of occupations respectively.

Analysis of Case studies

By the use of case study method, one can realize the whole scenario of individual's life and can present it properly.

Family violence among the middle class is pervasive, but it has hardly attracted scholarly attention. It is almost impossible to collect data on gender violence among the middle class because of the reluctance of the respondents to share their experiences. The five case studies present some of the incidents which occur more frequently. The case studies present different facets of gender violence among the middle-class families in the Shymoli of Dhaka, one of the largest megacities of the world.

Shurovi's Story

Shurovi (fictional name), age 34, works on private farm. She had no children, and she got married eight years ago. She experienced all type of violence from her husband at different stages of her marital life. It happened frequently. When her husband got disturbed, he immediately became aggressive to her. Shurovi's husband was medical promotion officer in the pharmaceutical company. In this case, the main cause was her husband's family member especially shurovi's mother- in- law and sister- in- law always complained against her. They mainly accused her of not performing household activities properly and contributed full salary. They influenced her husband to show such kind of behavior. They always made her responsible for their childlessness but their medical report was positive. Actually, they wanted to remarry their son, (Now she doesn't live with her husband). During this time, her husband doesn't contract with her and doesn't give any maintenance.

Salma's story

Salma Akter (it is not her real name), age 37, housewife and mother of three children. Her first daughter has affected by polio and is fully disabled child. She has completed her graduation degree from a Govt.college. She maintained all her three children and total household activities but her husband was never satisfied to her. In addition, he felt disturbed by their first child and always told that this child was a burden to them. But as a mother Salma didn't avoid her baby. Salma's husband involves a small scale business. Her husband used to demand money from her and tortured her if she denied giving so. (Noted, she looks good). She did not say anything in order to save her social status and to continue her marital life. When the torture of her husband reached extreme level, then she shifted her living place from her husband's house to her mother's house and started to live there. In the meantime she knew her husband has married other woman and flew away to India (noted here, this is the second marriage of his second wife but got some money from this wife). After a few days, he came back and sent a divorce letter to Salma. So, the fact is that as a mother Salma couldn't avoid her disabled baby but as a father Salma's husband did it.

Ayesha's story

Ayesha (fictitious name), age 39, has completed masters degree from a reputed university. Now she works in the office of a daily newspaper, and she has two children, one son (eight years old) and a daughter (five years old). She lives with her husband, children and two unmarried sisters-in-law. Her father-in-law and mother-in-law frequently visit her house. Ayesha's husband works in a reputed private organization and is well established. It is to be noted here, Ayesha contributes to the family half of her total salary, but her husband is never satisfied for this partial contribution. He frequently demands money (not directly) for various purposes. If Ayesha can't give the money she has to face various misbehaviour from her husband. In addition it is worth noting here, Ayesha's husband has no physical relationship with her husband for three years due to his impotency. For this reason her husband is always suspicious of her and often becomes angry at her.

Kakoli's story

Kakoli is not her real name. She is 28 years old and has completed her graduation from a private university. Kakoli's father is no more, and she has no brother. She lives with her mother and only one disabled sister. When she was studying at the university, she fell in love and after a few years she married her lover. Kakoli's husband joined as a teacher in a reputed coaching center and earned handsome salary. Initially, their conjugal life passed happily. After three years, Kakoli gave birth to a son and after that she faced a variety of misbehaviour from her husband. Main reasons of her husband's misbehaviour were often silly, such as taking care and rearing of their child and her daily activities. Day by day he became rude, and his behavior was unbearable. One day her husband proposed her to shift their residence to her mother's house and wanted to start a business by using her father's property. But, Kakoli's mother and her disabled sister were fully dependent on her father's property. Her husband never understood this situation and went on quarreling with her regularly. She was forced to collect her share of the inheritance from her mother. In this way, she was able to satisfy her husband somewhat. It had reduced his misbehavior to some extent. But it did not revive their earlier happy relationship. This story shows clearly the coercion for the property from the wife which takes place quite commonly in Bangladesh. It is a frequent form of husband's oppression over the wife.

Sumi's story

Sumi is 29 years old (it is not her real name). She has passed MBBS from a private medical college. Her father is a businessman and she has only one brother. When she was a medical student, she got married without informing her family. After two years of her marriage, her family accepted their marital relation. Sumi's husband was a service holder, and his family was not economically solvent. On the other hand, Sumi's father gifted a flat to them. Later on, her husband resigned from the service and joined her father's business. Initially, everything was going fairly but after a few days, Sumi noticed that her husband was behaving differently. Gradually she had the shocking realization that her husband had become an addict. He was not only an addict; but he was also having sexual relationships with several other women. She became extremely hurt and upset. She began to protest her husband's addiction to both drugs and women. As a result, misunderstanding and quarrels became common with her husband. Often her husband became violent, and she faced various types of aggressive behaviour including kicking, punching, and slapping. Sumi and her family tried to correct his character, but they failed. In the end, Sumi had to seek divorce and thus her marriage ended.

Findings and Analysis

Generally domestic violence is common among the middle-class families of Bangladesh. Actual violence by the husband and his family members will never be quantified as victims rarely reveal it. A large number of the victims are not prepared to complain about their situation. Among all women in our study one third had experienced physical violence in their lifetime. Among them, a few had experienced in the past one year either physical or mental violence.

My case studies show that gender violence is much more widespread than our assumption. One reason is that most middle-class women believe that their husbands have the right to discipline them even by torture. It has come beautifully in a newspaper story of Lata (not her real name). She told Asia News that her husband considered women as weak and, therefore, believed that men had the right to dominate women, even including beating." I am a university graduate, and I take care of our two children. But my husband does not listen to me, and if I do not do what he says, he beats me." In the context of the patriarchal society in Bangladesh, women are compelled to be submissive and silent in the face of violence because of the prevalent social and cultural conditions.

Generally, after the marriage a woman becomes a part of her husband's family. But after marriage rarely a woman gets helpful family environment and a considerate male partner. So, most women's life simply turns into misery. In a patriarchal society of Bangladesh, most women suffer physical or psychological torture irrespective of her education or social status, whether she admits it or not. Family support is an important element in this matter. If a family strongly supports the daughter, violence never happens. But in our society, especially in the middle-class mothers often tell their daughter to obey the husband's order and endure everything to preserve the marriage. It is because divorce brings in shame for the woman's family. In such cases, women face violence regularly.

Gender relationships do not mean the only particular relationship between husband and wife; it has a broader relationship which is linked with family, culture, society economy and state. In spite of ongoing debate on gender as a concept, it is more or less accepted that gender is culturally and socially constructed. The five case studies discussed above reveal that gender relationships are related to violence in a complex way in which individual attributes, family, and social environment play an important role.

Every story of gender violence is different and painful and reveals the working of different social and cultural factors. These differences can be best grasped through specific histories of the complexity of violence in conjugal relationships. Marriage and marital relationships have great importance in our society. In this research work, an effort has been made to understand gender relationships through violence. Here class and gender relationships are closely related. Although women of the middle class are economically better-placed and conscious, even they find it hard to escape violence. It shows the strength of patriarchy which operates at all levels of Bangladesh society including the megacity of Dhaka.

Conclusion

We can conclude the discussion of this study by suggesting that social and economic circumstances are mainly responsible for the wide spread of domestic violence. Social change is producing new desires and aspirations among women and as a result, women are increasingly deviating from their traditional roles. In this changing environment, people want to expose their behavioral change on various social issues. In this context, gender inequality, poverty and the practice of dowry appears to exacerbate prevalence of domestic violence. Beside this, the socio-cultural ideology of patriarchy operates strongly in Bangladesh that has a powerful impact upon the ordinary conjugal relationship. Finally, we must emphasize on the basis of these few case studies that the interplay of economic, social and ideological factors influence the domestic violence in the evolving context of Bangladesh.

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