

# WOMEN'S NARRATIVES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND HELP SEEKING BEHAVIOUR IN COASTAL AREAS OF BANGLADESH: A FEMINIST SOCIOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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## Abstract

In Bangladesh, various forms of violence are much higher in the remote areas of the southern coastal districts than in any other part of the country. Though there are a number of legal support-related organisations available in the country, they have limited presence in the coastal areas. Hence, based on ten in-depth interviews, this paper focuses on women's personal reflections on their experience of domestic violence and their attitude towards seeking help to protest against violence. The research findings reveal that although domestic violence takes place inside the family, however, is strengthened by the broader patriarchal structure and legitimised through the practice of negative socio-cultural discourses, religious beliefs, norms, and gender bias legal systems. The findings further establish that patriarchal mentality, traditional norms and discourses, women's insecurity, lack of education and economic dependency of women create hindrance from receiving legal assistance, which in turn create further scope for domestic violence.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence, Women, Survivors, Help seeking behaviour, Norms, Patriarchy

## Introduction

Family is generally considered a place of solace, love and comfort. For a long time, sociologists have considered family as a harmonious and egalitarian space (Giddens, 2001). It is from the 1980s that feminists have started questioning such "all positive" and "peaceful" image of family. Focusing on the endless exploitation and profound unequal treatment towards women inside the family, feminists tried to bring into light the dark side of family (de Beauvoir, 1973; Firestone, 2003; Friedan, 1963; Giddens, 2001; Millett, 1977). The worst form of such treatment is manifested in violent attitude towards women. With a variance in degree of

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violence, every society experience domestic violence<sup>1</sup> much pervasively yet, such violence is often overlooked or denied considering a family matter that needs to be solved privately (Khatun & Haque, 2010; Rohn, 2021).

Despite the remarkable achievements in the field of women's development and bearing a glorious history of women's movement, women in Bangladesh traditionally are sufferers of diverse types of violence both within and outside the family. Survey data from various studies inform that violence against women (VAW) within family premise has always been a persistent phenomenon. For instance, a study carried out by ICDDRB as early in 1994, reveal that about 14 percent mothers die due to domestic violence. In 1997, six women were murdered every day in Bangladesh, 60% reported lifetime incidences of spousal violence in a survey in Dhaka and 47% reported spousal violence in rural areas of Bangladesh (Daily Star, 2010; Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association [BNWLA], 2004). In the same year, every month three women were burned with acid in Bangladesh due to matters related to family. In 2000 this monthly rate increased to more than 11 cases a month. In the year of 2006, several newspapers reported about 1500 incidents, which includes acid burns, dowry<sup>2</sup> related violence, rape, fatwa and violence against domestic workers. Only within January and February 2007, the numbers stand at 332 and 462 respectively (Khatun & Haque, 2010). In the period between January and March 2007, Ain Salish Kendra (ASK) documented 126 rape incidents including 10 deaths and 2 suicides, 67 dowry related violence with 34 deaths and 4 suicides, and 28 acid burns (Khatun and Haque, 2010). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2015) reveals physical violence by partner is the most pervasive among different types of violence and almost 72.6% of ever-married women in Bangladesh experience some form of partner violence in their lifetime, which was 60% in 1997 (2015, p. 15). Among 72.6%, nationally 28.2% women and 30.5% women in rural areas were tortured due to failure in providing money/property as dowry (ibid., p.95). More recent data in a survey report by MJF in the month of May in 2020 shows – among a total of 15906 women, 11323 faced some kind of violence; among whom 11025 women were subject to domestic violence (Manusher Jonno Foundation, 2020, p. 4).

What more alarming is, every year these incidents of oppressions are increasing at an alarming rate, and thus has become a serious development issue (Huda et al., 2022). The irony is, the majority (72.7%) of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by partner did not disclose it to anyone, with these rates being similar between urban and rural areas (BBS, 2015, p. 32). There has been a long need to reveal the socio-cultural as well as legal aspects of such phenomenon.

Although, there are available quantitative studies and a few in-depth studies on VAW<sup>3</sup>; nonetheless more in-depth study with nuanced focus to address such current trends of VAW inside the family is needed (Huda et al., 2022, p. 607). Therefore, the present paper attempts to address this gap by exploring violence survivor's experience of domestic violence in conjugal relationship and their help seeking behaviour in the context of southern coastal areas of Bangladesh. The paper is based on in-depth research carried out in Patuakhali Sadar Upazila, which is situated in the southern coastal areas of Bangladesh. Using Galtung's model of violence triangle (1969; 1990) the paper further reveals how enduring domestic violence and delayed help seeking behaviour might actually contribute to justify and sustain further direct violence. According to Galtung (1990) any aspect of a culture can be used to legitimise violence in its direct or structural form although it 'does not kill or maim like direct violence' (ibid., p. 291). Thus, the paper builds on the existing feminist sociological knowledge of domestic violence against women.

### **The Research Journey**

This paper is based on primary research that has taken its inspiration from feminist research methodology. According to Harding (1987) and Hammersley (1995) feminists are critical of traditional theories which have a limited capacity to understand women's participation and contribution in social life. For example, traditional social science research faced criticisms for often beginning its analysis from men's perspective. It has asked questions about social life that appears problematic only from men's social experience. On the contrary, feminist methodology stresses on the inclusion of women's questions, even more significantly, questions that are dreaded to be asked and generates instead of imposing research problems on women (Harding, 1987). Bearing in mind the sensitivity of the research topic – "domestic violence", the best conceivable way for collecting information is collecting stories or narratives of women. Instead of asking structured questions, an openness in the interview guide is also necessary which can allow as well as encourage women to talk about their sufferings and survival strategies. In keeping with such methods, in-depth interview was used to generate data. The research area was Patuakhali Sadar Upazila. In Bangladesh various forms of violence are much higher in the remote areas of the southern coastal districts than any other parts of the country. Women in these areas are the most vulnerable section in all forms of poverty and deprivation. They are traditionally affected by dowry, child marriage, and domestic violence. Though there are some legal aid organisations available in the country, they have limited

presence in the coastal areas towards ensuring supports to the violence survivors. From this perspective Patuakhali Sadar Upazila, was selected as the study area.

Ten in-depth interviews in total were conducted to collect women's lived experiences of violence. The interviews lasted from 90 minutes to two hours, encouraging the violence survivors<sup>4</sup> to speak freely and flexibly. A checklist/ open ended interview guideline was used for interview. Considering the sensitivity of the topic and also as most of the respondents were either uneducated or had gone through little academic education, rapport was built with them first, to create a trustworthy relationship. Before the final interview, the researcher had many informal sittings and chats with the survivors that reduced the possible initial inhibition of talking about personal experience of violence. As Harding's (1987) "strong objectivity" would postulate, the researcher being a woman was in a relatively better position, with whom they could unfold their painful stories and deepest insecurities and fears. Besides, some contacts with local NGOs working on combating violence, further helped the researcher in rapport building with the survivors. "Snowball" method was applied to reach to the respondents. The first two respondents were through a local NGO who were receiving legal assistance from them. With their help the researcher contacted the other survivors. The research concentrated specifically on those violence survivors who were not only victims of violence from intimate partners, rather actively searched for assistance either from family, relatives, Government law enforcing agencies or from local NGOs. Consequently, apart from violence survivor's experience of violence, this also enabled the study to reveal their perceptions towards legal assistance as well as how the law enforcing agencies respond to them. After a close reading of the collected narratives, the data and findings have been generated using thematic analysis approach.

The researcher followed standard academic rules of ethics set by a particular institute of the University of Dhaka which included seeking written/oral permission from the respondents before interview; clearly explaining the objective of the research and the researcher's interest, before starting of the interview; pausing the interview at any moment if any respondent wanted; informing respondents about their rights to withdraw from interview until a certain time; using pseudonyms; and finally, going back to them after the interpretation of data to validate and to obtain their permission to use this data for the research and any possible future publications. Besides, in terms of narrating their violence experience, when a survivor willingly talked about the abuse only then it was noted down. However, the survivors were friendlier and rather eager to share their experiences.

Nevertheless, the paper is not beyond limitations. Instead of describing every small detail of the survivor's helplessness and the torture they face in everyday life, the paper eventually limits its focus within the help seeking behaviour of the survivors. The reason that should be mentioned – being a woman and having a long academic background on gender issues, the author personally believes that when a violence survivor is forced to narrate every detail of a torture, which is similar to be tortured again. Therefore, such an action was not encouraged. Moreover, considering the limited time and support the research that this paper is based on, essentially limits its focus within poor and less-educated women from a particular coastal area. Further research in future, across different social classes can contribute more to address the issue of domestic violence.

### **Research Findings and Discussion**

The interview guideline had three parts around which the various conversations with women survivors took place. Firstly, the survivors were asked whether they would prefer to reflect briefly on acts of violence that they have encountered in their conjugal life (except Maksuda, who was unmarried during the interview stage). Secondly, how and to what extent they asked for help and/or legal help to subside tortures done on them. And finally, how useful they found the organisations that they approached for legal assistance. Although, the responses to the latter questions were expected to be reflective of their intent to receive legal help and the pragmatic issues around that, however, the narratives were embedded in a complex web of everyday experience of violence starting from intimate partner violence to structural as well as cultural violence. Therefore, in answering the key queries of this paper, it is obvious that the issues of VAW will come recurrently, as it is intertwined in all the aspects. The following discussion analytically reflects on these findings gathered from the interviews.

#### ***Types, Underlying Causes and Extent of Violence among Intimate Partners***

Before focusing on the help seeking phenomenon of the violence survivors, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the types of violence and their underlying causes; as the latter significantly contributes to their help seeking attitude – apparent in the research findings.

The survivors mainly mentioned about five types of violence that they had undergone, namely: physical violence, economic violence, controlling behaviour, emotional violence and sexual violence. These five categories of violence have

also been identified as the most pervasive among the married women by the BBS Survey report (2015). These five kinds of violence included specific violent acts as mentioned by the survivors; for instance, physical and verbal abuse more specifically kicking, slapping, intentionally kicking pregnant wife, refusing to give food, calling names, pushing, dragging or pulling by the hair, beating with a stick or beer bottle, threatening of remarriage or *talaq* or sending to natal home, treating badly for not being able to pay dowry or failure to fulfil financial needs and rape by in-law. The underlying causes and extent of these violence among intimate partners are further evident in the following discussion.

Among the underlying causes of violence, dowry or failure to fulfilling husband's monetary demand has been mentioned mostly by the survivors. Dowry is a reflection of low self-esteem and negative socio-cultural perceptions towards women. It is essentially interlinked with women's secondary status in the society (Kumari, 1989). Although the emergence of dowry has a precise religious and historical context, over time its practice has rather become a tradition, a mark of family status and an integral part of a marriage. The major findings of this research suggest that dowry is the key reason of domestic violence in Patuakhali. Among the respondents Selina, Nasima, Shakila, Fatema, Khadija and Tahamina were both physically and verbally abused as they refused to pay money for dowry. Selina was tortured by her husband and mother-in-law as she refused her husband's demand for more dowry. Nasima's husband asked for 50,000 taka and became violent as she could not fulfil his demand. He repeatedly beat her and even kicked, although she was pregnant. He abandoned her from the house, refused to bear her maintenance and told that without money he would not take her back. Shakila's husband often tortured her to pay for his alcohol addiction. Another survivor Fatema who did not want to bring money from her parents for her husband was tortured in such a brutal way by not only her husband but the in-laws, that she became bound to go back to her parent's house. Khadija's mother-in-law asked for money and being refused she started to abuse Khadija both verbally and physically. Khadija's husband sent her to her parent's house and threatened her of *talak* (divorce) in case of failure to pay dowry. Similarly, when Tahamina refused to pay dowry, her husband grabbed her by the hair, dragged her to a corner, beat her by beer bottle and threatened her of *talak*. In the research out of ten violence survivors six mentioned that they were abused for dowry. Thus, the problem of dowry is very pervasive in the study area. This has been further supported by Mannan (2003) who argues, the request for dowry and putting pressure for more dowry plays a crucial role in understanding and addressing the issue of marital domestic violence. The percentage of women

under constant pressure to contribute more in the form of dowries was as high as 46% in Sirajganj and 40% in Comilla - two of his study areas. This incident continues in many other families in Bangladesh where millions of women – be educated or not, be rich or poor, go through serious torture inside home due to unfulfilled dowry demand.

In Maksuda's case the cause of violence was sexual as well as structural. Maksuda was brutally raped by her sister's brother-in-law. And the after scenery was - the rapist was freely moving but Maksuda had to confine herself in a small cottage due to social stigma against rape and also to keep her sister's marital life intact. The patriarchal mindset as well as the traditional society of Bangladesh sets high value on women's chastity and virginity. This has two-fold repercussions; on the one hand such stigma considers rape as an ultimate loss solely for the woman and her family. On the other hand, the fear of losing virginity through these types of occurrences certainly results on creating pressure on the poor families to marry off their daughters as early as possible even in exchange of high dowry. Thus, the demand for dowry never ends. Despite various acts of violence, how often the survivors made protest or sought for legal assistance? The subsequent discussion provides answer to this.

### ***Help Seeking Behaviour of the Survivors***

The research findings reveal that all of the ten survivors protested against domestic violence and sought help from own family, arbitration and local NGOs, and three of them directly went to police station. However, there was a certain verging point until which the survivors tried to accept violence as a regular part of conjugal life. They continued to do so to save their marriage at any cost. Such evidence is also observed in Rohn (2021); survivors tried to put up with violence to continue their conjugal life until they were no longer able to endure further torture; only at that phase, all of the survivors went to their natal family to seek help. In the following discussion I highlight the situations and issues that the survivors mentioned in focusing on their help seeking behaviour.

Tolerance capacity of torture in conjugal life delays help seeking

Discussions with survivors reveal that there is a silent acceptance towards abuse by the husband, as being part of masculine trait. Therefore, any attempt to initiate legal procedure are often discouraged by the relatives as well as society; rather, the survivors are told to keep patience.



The violence and abuse men inflict on women is rooted in the patriarchal structure that legitimises male torture as an expression of male supremacy (Galtung, 1990; Kandiyoti, 1998; Mannan, 2003). From the case studies it is clear that the violence survivors had to accept husband's torture up to a certain level to continue their conjugal relationship. For the first two or three times, Selina brought money from parental home on her husband's demand. But the pressure of demand was increasing and in a stage of continuous physical and mental torture she made protest. Nasima's husband beat her with a stick and kicked her. Nasima asked for legal help only when her husband sent her to natal home not to take her back. Ashim often abused Shakila to manage money for his intoxication. Being physically and verbally abused she often used to weep alone. Fatema became physically and verbally abused by her husband and in-laws; even they stopped her food. Fatema tried to endure everything, but they tortured her in such a brutal way she became bound to go to her stepmother's house. Another survivor Kulsum did not want to be abandoned by her husband, so she tolerated torture for eight years. She asked for legal help only when her husband left her and threatened her of *talak*.

Such silence towards domestic violence is not limited to the research area only, rather studies have mentioned similar cases in other places too. For example, Mannan (2003, p.26) states, '[...] it was only when the torture became unbearable, or the women became ill that most women talked about being beaten by their husbands'. This attitude is further explained in Dobash & Dobash (2003) who argue that women leave home not to end the marital relationship, but for a brief period in order to escape violence as well as to negotiate and rebuild the relationship on a non-violent basis. Because of societal tolerance towards wife abuse in Bangladesh woman has to accept marital violence. However, this case is not any exception to Bangladesh as Gelles (1997) says that such torture often gets societal approval in the name of "disciplining wives".

Hegemonic patriarchal structure discourages help seeking attitude by normalising violence

The violence and abuse men perpetrate against women is embedded in a very old hegemonic patriarchal structure. Such structure sanctions superiority, privileges, authority and power only for males, and legitimises male dominance within family and society (Krishnaraj, 1991). Therefore, it seems "normal" that husbands would beat their wives to discipline them. Failure to obedience towards husband might result into *talak* and remarriage by the latter, mentioned by all of the violence survivors. For instance, according to Khadija, it is her husband's personal matter



whether he would get a second marriage or not. Selina argues that a husband has the religious right to polygamy, and there are many males in her locality who marry at-least two or three times to secure dowry. Even these husbands are incapable to bear their wives' maintenance, rather force them to work to bear daily expenses. The violence survivors in the study area were same in their opinions that the husbands often threat their wives of *talak*. According to them husband has the supreme authority to give *talak* and they take benefit of it. When Shakila, Khadija and Kulsum refused to pay dowry their husbands threatened them of *talak*. Selina also confirms that women in her locality tolerate their husband's torture in fear of getting *talak*.

The violence survivor's fear of getting *talak* and their husband's privilege of possessing the Islamic right to polygamy is based on a religious misinterpretation. There is a common belief that Muslim males can marry up to four times, and in many places, it is practiced in this way. Notwithstanding the historical context, which in order to restrict polygamy fixed it up to maximum four times, which also depends on certain conditions<sup>5</sup>. These conditions are overlooked by the males who think that Islam has given them the supreme right to polygamy. Thus, religion is often used as a tool to justify male aggression over women, which discourages women to protest or seek legal help against such ill treatment.

Traditional attitude, discourses and norms act as hinderance to receive legal assistance

Negative socio-cultural discourses regarding women validates domestic violence. For instance, many of the respondents believe as Eve was created from Adam, so it is obvious that the woman was not created with equal importance to man; hence, it is divine system that women are unequal to men. Based on negative discourses about women some also consider that women always lack something compared to men; women are inferior creatures; and all above women are created to serve men. Such conceptions generate specific set of rules for women, that eventually serve to control them. For instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that one such well-accepted religious discourse is – when a wife is beaten by her husband that particular part of her body directly goes to Heaven. Such discourses establish domestic violence as an indispensable part of the conjugal life, and thus act to normalise domestic violence. This is explicit also in the research area where traditional beliefs hinder women from protesting against domestic violence and patronise further violence. In Khadija's words, 'A husband can do anything; even he can spend a whole night with another woman, as society permits this'.

Similarly, Fatema, Kulsum and Tahamina believe that it is the best option for a woman to stay with her husband and continue her conjugal relationship. Being a woman Fatema thinks that it is her duty to serve her husband; she wants to continue her conjugal life with that man who tortured her so brutally that she became bound to leave home. Kulsum believes that a wife should continue her married life by any means. She asserts, 'for the last eight years I am being physically and verbally abused but I did not want to be deserted by my husband so remained quiet'. However, at last she was abandoned by her husband when failed to fulfil his money demand. Afterwards, Kulsum has charged a case against her husband; but still, she believes that a wife should continue her married life by any means. So, if he comes back, she will not continue the case. In fact, she charged the case to threaten him so that he comes back to her. Likewise, Tahamina opines,

Women's creation is for men; Eve was created for Adam. Without a man, a woman has no value of her own. A wife, away from her husband, how could she be happy?

Thus, a culture of tolerance towards violence persists, which eventually influences women to postpone the arbitration or suit or impedes them from asking for any legal assistance. This tolerance towards violence often animates further violence as Kabir (1988) argues that the implicit approval of crimes by forgiving and forgetting them ensures that they will be repeated since there is no fear of punishment.

Negative socio-cultural values attach to the discourses also create certain norms that regulate women's body and sexuality. These norms set high value on women's virginity, and so when a girl is raped or sexually harassed immediately it becomes a shame for herself and her family. This puts her family honour in question, and therefore with a view to safeguard family honour often the girl as well as her family conceals the incident, and it remains under-reported. Anecdotal evidence suggests that very often a common solution is applied in this case; either the perpetrator's family gives marriage proposal so that the girl can be married off or some sort of compensation is offered. For instance, instead of reporting it to the police, Shakila was married off to that very guy who used to sexually harass her. Almost same thing happened to Maksuda; her father did not report the incident of rape thinking that it is not wise to call for arbitration repeatedly; lest it can hamper their family honour. Though Maksuda's parents went to a local NGO and informed about the rape incident, however, were not interested to report it or file a rape case. Rather, thinking about family honour they were willing to solve it internally and accept the rapist's offer of compensation. Thus, in the name of protecting family honour

as well as with a fear of being socially ostracised, the survivors prefer to solve any sexual violence issue within the family bound rather than 'taking it too far to the courts' – opines Maksuda. Nevertheless, due to excess delay in disbursing compensation, Masuda and her father finally had to contact lawyers to negotiate the monetary issue.

#### Lack of financial resources and other impediments to continue legal battle against violence

The research findings significantly reveal that lack of economic resources hinders women from receiving legal assistance. All of the survivors were poor, earning barely to make their ends meet. Being poor Nasima was unable to continue her case; rather she wanted to go back to her husband for her maintenance. Nasima's case is similar to Rahman (2007) who rightly said many grass roots women know about laws that can protect them from various forms of violence, but when the issue is a domestic one economy becomes the main factor. Because protesting or taking legal help may result in leaving husband's family or conjugal life and nobody wants to become an unwanted burden in the natal home.

Kulsum's case further reveals that under the patriarchal structure of Bangladesh women feel insecure and consider family as a relatively secure place for them. In her words, 'a single woman is like a *khola math* (open field); anyone can come and take her like a land grabber'. Therefore, after divorce, she got married again for her security. She further mentions, 'Women cannot live alone, she needs security; she needs a tree which will shade her, protect her and only a husband can play this role'. But Kulsum's second husband did not prove a shading tree for her, rather he took away whatever savings she made from her little floating *sari* business and left her. Kulsum filed a lawsuit only to threaten him and eventually would discontinue if he comes and takes her back. Thus, financial burden as well as women's insecurity in a patriarchal world leaves them in a non-favourable situation. Hence instead of seeking legal help many continue to bear the tortures as long as they can.

#### State's ambiguous role influencing a lack of trust among the survivors

At the policy level there is no shortage of promises, laws and policies from Government's side to reduce violence. Different government organisations are working to reduce violence. Bangladesh is one of the few countries who have separate ministry for women; *The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs* was established in 1978. The National Policy for Women's Advancement 1997 and 2011 give emphasis on eliminating all forms of oppression and violence against

women and adolescent girls. Bangladesh is a signatory to Universal Declaration of Human Rights and CRC and has ratified CEDAW. The Bangladesh Constitution has ensured equal rights of women, as evident in article 27 of the constitution, 'All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law'. The Government has made necessary amendments on several Acts and Ordinances to protect women's legal rights. The penal Code 1860 (second Amendment 1984), Muslim Family Law Ordinance (1961), Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 (Amendment 1984 and 1986), Child Marriage Restrain Act (Amended Ordinance 1984), The Acid Control Act 2000 (Amended 2010) and The Acid Attack Crime Repression Act (2002), The Suppression of Immoral Trafficking Act (1993), The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (Amendment 2003 & 2020) and Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 are some of these laws. The Millennium Development Goals in Bangladesh paid special attention on the violence issue 'By 2015 reduce substantially, if not eliminate totally, social violence against the poor and disadvantaged groups, especially violence against women and children'. The 'Ministry of Women and Children Affairs' is paying special attention to women and children's issues, and it has also set up one stop crisis centre. Recently, it has also started providing a "national emergency service" through "999" and people have gathered positive experience from this service.

However, at the implementation level serious lacking have been pointed to by the survivors. The respondents said that most of the government initiatives are cantered to the capital city Dhaka. Most of them are unaware of the Govt policies and laws related to combat violence. None of them know about any dowry prohibition act, neither do they expect to receive any legal assistance from Govt. Lack of access to government legal services often makes the violence survivors apathetic towards asking help. The inactivity of this sector often fails to gain survivor's trust which is evident in research findings. Shakila, Kulsum and Tahamina being tortured by their husband fell in a vulnerable situation. Shakila went to the Union Parishad chairman, but he said that it would take Taka 10,000 to arrange an arbitration. Kulsum went to Khepupara police station to report violence committed by her husband, but the police refused to take her case. Tahamina went to the police station, and they told her to go to the Judge Court. At last being informed by others they came to a local NGO and asked for help. The Bureau of Women's Affairs is just beside that NGO, yet the survivors do not have any idea about it. Sometimes, in case the criminal is influential, and has connection with the local political leaders that also discourages people asking for legal assistance. On the contrary, in fear of losing the opportunity to be elected, Union Parishad Chairman often refuses

to stand by a victim when the criminal is politically influential. Among the ten violence survivors three directly went to the police station, and only one of them received help.

There is also discrimination at the policy level. To regulate polygamous marriage Bangladesh follows Muslim Family Law Ordinance 1961, which permits polygamy only under "necessary and just grounds" and with the consent of existing wife or wives (Section 6) and the Arbitration Council has the authority to decide whether any individual should be permitted to marry again. However, nothing is explicitly mentioned concerning "necessary and just grounds", which makes it ambiguous. In addition, permission of the existing wife/wives is certainly gained forcefully; which is obvious in Kulsum, Nasima, Shakila and Tahamina's case. Consequently, instead of preventing polygamy this law has proved a farce for women. The sexual harassment policy is not women friendly, mentioned Shakila. Moreover, the existing law regarding rape asks medical proof of rape which in most cases are damaged by the "victim" unconsciously/consciously. In addition to that, in both cases reporting in police station or filing a case, requires the "victim" to repeatedly describe the incident, which also seems a mental torture as mentioned by the respondents. Therefore, to keep these incidents hidden appear more logical, and thus, has become normal which in turn generates further space for crime. Although the state has obligations, commitments and laws to combat violence, but these also have many loopholes, through which the perpetrators can easily slip away. State's such actions often work in the favour of perpetrators creating an environment which permits domestic violence.

### Women's Experience of Violence, Help Seeking Behaviour and Galtung's Violence Triangle

The research findings from the in-depth interviews point towards Galtung's (1990, p. 294) "violence triangle", and thus reflect that the violence between intimate partners as not only personal rather structural as well as cultural. According to Galtung (1990, p. 302) starting at any one of the three levels either direct, structural or cultural, violence easily transmits to the other two levels with direct approval from cultural traditions and myths, existing discourses, religious interpretations as well as ideological thoughts. With the violent structure institutionalised and the violent culture internalised, violence tends to become institutionalised, repetitive, logical and even ritualistic. Galtung's (1969, p.173) "structural violence" is static and silent but its effect is long lasting. It is unchallenged and considered essentially natural, too enormous, as if a mammoth to fight against. The personal

violence is seen as wrong and registered at some point; like the findings show all of the survivors fought against domestic violence at certain phase of their lives. However, much ironically the fight was directed towards gaining conjugal life back. As if men are their ultimate saviour; the threat of *talak* by men or being divorced is synonymous to “annihilation” – a status no woman wants to attain; as if whatever the upshot be, women ought to live within a family boundary, under a man. ‘Threats of violence are also violence’ suggests Galtung (1990, p. 292) who identifies such practices as embedded in broader patriarchal structures, silently “educating” women from generation after generation to endure torture lest they lose their marital identity.

Galtung (1990, p. 295) specifically focuses on the strategic line of structure, through which violence is learned or overlooked or normalised. For instance, male supremacy makes society think that women are inferior and may be treated badly. Such is the case of Maksuda, which is a perfect example of nihilism. She is the one to be raped, stigmatised and preached over to isolate herself; yet the perpetrator remained free to go anywhere, do anything of his choice. Exploiting one of her basic rights, in this case making Maksuda destined to live a life of other’s choice is no less than depriving her of her basic human needs, falls under the typology of Galtung’s structural violence.

Galtung (1990, p. 302) further views inferior treatment as a result of “cultural violence”; the culture which permits *self*-versus *other* distinctions, and thus possesses a tremendous potential for domestic violence by justifying the unjustifiable. This is particularly the case for Bangladesh, where physical as well as mental violence has become a part of conjugal life irrespective of women’s socio-economic status or other material gains and women have to bear this torture to continue marital life. There are “social norms” and “discourses” that establish domestic violence as an indispensable part of the conjugal life, and thus act to normalise such violence. This is explicit in the research area where traditional beliefs hinder women from protesting against domestic violence and patronise further violence. Such violence is often normalised and labelled as a private matter. Galtung refers to these discourses for creating a ‘culture (that) preaches, teaches, admonishes, eggs on and dulls us into seeing exploitation and/or repression as normal and natural, or into not seeing them (particularly not exploitation) at all’ (Galtung, 1990, p. 295). Finally, Galtung as noted in Winter et al. (2014) perceives a repetition of direct violence inherited across generations if violence embedded within structure is left invisible and unpunished. As justice delayed, justice denied. The violence survivors in this research mentioned about inadequacy and frigidity

of legal system from Government's side which also puts off women from asking legal assistance. Lack of policy implementation, survivor's limited knowledge about different structures of legal services as well as the loopholes in some laws itself like sexual harassment law and rape law mentioned earlier, runs the risk of violence being unidentified and unpunished; thus is transferred or inherited across generations – as would confer Galtung.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The paper departs from questioning a well-accepted view that considers family as a peaceful and harmonious realm, full of love and comfort. Nevertheless, bringing into light the complex issues of domestic violence the paper contributes to the understanding that family can also be a convergence point of tension, conflict and self-interest. Focusing on the findings of a qualitative research conducted in the coastal areas of Bangladesh the paper discusses women's lived experiences of domestic violence from their intimate partners. These unpack the complex web surrounding domestic violence which although occurs inside family, however, is strengthened by the broader patriarchal structure and legitimised through the practice of negative socio-cultural discourses, religious beliefs, norms and gender bias state legal systems. The research findings reveal that patriarchal mentality, traditional norms, discourses, crisis of family honour, feelings of insecurity, lack of education and economic dependency of women create hindrance from receiving legal assistance, which in turn create further scope for domestic violence.

To conclude the paper would like to offer the following recommendations:

- Both men and women need to avail proper education which would challenge and break the socio-cultural discourse of women can be treated badly.
- Lack of financial resources is a key cause to domestic violence. Proper measures should be undertaken to ensure women's financial rights.
- State, through its local governing body can offer free legal services to those violence survivors who cannot continue their legal battle due to lack of financial resources.
- Proper measures need to be at place to change social attitudes and beliefs that legitimise male violence and the notion of male supremacy.
- The problem of domestic violence is a complex one which changes over time and places. Hence, strict to stricter punishment of the perpetrators is required to keep domestic violence under control, if not completely eliminated.



- Finally, more in-depth studies on domestic violence are needed across social classes and generations to investigate the issue further to explore different and emerging viewpoints with the change of time, people and locality.

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### **Notes**

- 1 Domestic violence is manifested in physical as well as mental torture; for instance - murder for dowry, assault, battering, female feticide, food deprivation, absence of health service, malnutrition, control over reproductive rights, restricting women's physical mobility etcetera. In this paper domestic violence indicates violence that has occurred among the intimate partners in a family.
- 2 According to Section 2 of the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980, dowry is defined to mean any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given at or before or after the marriage as consideration for the marriage.
- 3 See for instance, Bangladesh Country Paper (1999), BNWLA (2004), Dobash, & Dobash (2003), Ellsberg et al. (2001), Guhathakurta (1985), García-Moreno et al. (2005), Hadi (2000), Huda et al. (2022), Jansen et al. (2004), Kandiyoti (1998), Khatun & Haque (2010), Mannan (2003), Naved (2013), Rahman (2007) and The Millennium Development Goals Report Bangladesh (2004).
- 4 Instead of "victim" the author prefers to use the phrase "violence survivor". Because they are not simply objects of torture or helpless victims. They are also change agents and within their limited capacity are trying to make protest against violence.
- 5 As verse 3 of Sura Nisa in holy Quran states 'If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women [...] two, three or four, but if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one, [...]' (Islam, 2007; Nasreen, 1992). Verse 129 further says 'you are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire'. Therefore, the religious basis of polygamy has a very explicit historical context, which certainly depends on strict conditions and is denied upon the non-fulfilment of the conditions.

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