



Domestic Violence: Many Fight Back

by Shaheen Anam

Whenever she complained, she was told that she was to blame, that she must have done something to deserve this punishment. She sought the help of her family, in-laws, village elders but the only answer she got was "mend your ways, try to please your husbands".

DOMESTIC violence spreads across class, culture and society. It is widespread, and pervasive. It humiliates and terrifies at the same time, shaking to the roots a person's self confidence and self esteem. Most damaging of all, it takes away from a person the will to resist the oppression, the will to fight back.

And yet, once in a while we come across an example of a woman who has in fact fought back. Through sheer determination she has negated the widespread belief that women are weak, vulnerable and will therefore tolerate any atrocity. She is like a beacon of light for her sisters to follow and to take courage from. Below is the story of Amina, one such woman. There are many, in fact thousands of Amina's in our society. All we have to do is find them.

Amina was only 17 when she got married to a poor landless farmer. There was never enough to eat, she recalls. Complaining was out of question, as she was expected to manage somehow. Her management did not satisfy her husband or her in-laws, as if somehow it was her fault that they were so poor. She gave birth to two children, two beautiful, healthy, normal children. Yet there was no joy in the family. Both of them were girls.

Her husband turned violent soon after the children were born. It started with verbal abuse which soon turned to physical assaults. Whenever she complained, she was told that she was to blame, that she must have done something to deserve this punishment. She sought the help of her family, in-laws, village elders but the only answer she got was "mend your ways, try to please your husbands".

One day Amina realized that

no one would help her, she would have to help herself. But what could she do? She was just a poor, helpless, illiterate woman. How could she fight the prevailing social norm? For sometime she had been hearing about a certain organization

which was helping women to learn skills that could be used for income generation. Once before she had expressed her wish to join it but this was vehemently opposed by her husband. One day after her husband had beaten her brutally

she just went out of her home and joined the group. She started getting training on weaving bamboo mats, along with basic literacy classes.

What followed is a story of self awakening and self realization for poor helpless Amina. She started gaining confidence and realized for the first time that she too was worth something. She did not confine this knowledge to herself but decided to share it with her sisters in the village who were in the same situation as her. She used her skill, her knowledge and most of all her self confidence to form a cooperative. It was very difficult to keep the group together as they faced resistance for every side. They were harassed, slandered and insulted but it did not stop them. It was inconceivable to the entrenched power that women were talking of independence and were refusing to live inside the four walls of their homes.

Today the cooperative started by Amina is an accepted part of the village. Women make simple items if every day use and a certain organization helps to sell them. Women who come for training have vowed that they will never allow their husbands to beat them again. They have found strength in unity and know that they are not alone in their struggle.

Today women all over the world are fighting domestic violence. It is no longer a personal or family problem, it is a societal one. The civic society, the State and the Government will have to take certain steps to eradicate this problem. One of the important steps is to talk about it. The time to shroud it in mystery and whispers is over. It is now time for proactive action both by men and women to rid our society of this menace.



'Mend your ways, try to please your husbands'

Quest for Women's Development

by Kazi Sufia Akhter

THE degree of development of a country can be identified by finding out the renting of their women folk in their society and country. Without establishing the equality of men and women, keeping the disparity in the society, the total development of a country is a far cry not to speak of peace and progress. How far the participation of women in national wealth has been ensured? What is the degree of opportunity to prove their ability, skill and authority at the policy making level? Are they allowed by their family or society or nation to enjoy the equal socio-economic, cultural and political opportunities with the male members of the society? The affirmative answers to these questions are the exposures of development and the negative answers are the marks of non-development of a country. This major class of the people should not only get the opportunity to have education, proper housing, health employment, etc but also should have the access equal distribution of national wealth production, capital investment, decision making liberty about child bearing, opportunities to prove their ability in intellectual work, participation in every stage of development process of the country, equal participation of policy making in order to be called the salient features of 'women development' definition.

Concept

A woman is a citizen of the world, own country and society and at the same time a member of her own family. Like all other citizen — a woman has also the right to live like human being, enjoy the civil rights and all other facilities. Tribal women, prostitutes, landless women also have the right to acquire education, to get the job opportunity and right wages and to have the right to protect her own culture and environment.

Women — whether they live in the country side or in townships — the upliftment of their living standards should mean 'Women's Development'. There should be no discrimination with respect to class, tribe, religion, caste, culture or creed.

Perspective

The level of education is one of the determining factor in ascertaining the efficiency in running the household affair. The educated women are more aware of nutrition, health and child care etc, than an ill-

literate woman. For this special reason more investment in women education has been recommended.

How do you feel about this attitude? Education is one of the basic right of human being. But in the case of women it is needed for household business and child rearing! These words show the traditional and chauvinistic outlook towards women of planners and policy-makers.

The second five year plan has stressed upon the introduction of capital intensive technology thereby replacing labour intensive technology in the agricultural products processing industries. With the introduction of new technology the women living in rural areas have lost their jobs. But no alternate opportunity for employment of these jobless women were created nor was there any effort to increase investment in this subsector. As a result, more problems were generated in the economy and society. How can the planners forget the scope for alternative job creation? Were not the women folk counted as human beings in their eyes.

The target to minimize the disparity in terms of development between men and women, which was envisaged

particularly in health, education and employment sector, could not be achieved in absence of appropriate strategy and investment in the sector. As a result the differences have become wider. Is it possible to achieve a uniform and sustainable development in a country without mutual and voluntary partnership between men and women?

Application

Without developing the women, the nation cannot prosper. Women development is again dependent on the over all development of the country. Although during 60's the development researchers started thinking of linking the women development schemes with the development of economy. But the UNO declared 1975 as world women decade and the period 1976-85 was declared as world women decade and requested the member countries to chalk out programmes for women development. In our country, the schemes for development of women are drawn as per the prescription of the donors and depend on their financing.

Foreign Aid

Poverty could not be alleviated rather the economy has become more vulnerable. The

knowledgeable quarters say that 75 per cent of this aid has not been spent on appropriately sector for the development of the people; rather 25 per cent of the spent amount have been misutilised for the benefit of people who mattered in the decision making.

Employment

The key to development lies in the creation of job opportunity for majority of the people and increase in the rate of real income.

Many programmes relating to women development are in progress in different sectors. All these activities sponsored by Govt, Semi Govt and NGOs should be evaluated properly.

The allocation for women development should be increased both in Govt and non-Govt sector. The allocation in this sector had always been meagre compared to the requirement.

Conclusion

Women are the most oppressed class in the society. In order to do away with this deprivation to ensure justice, the women should come forward. Women should work harder. They should work under women component to be visible and at the same time should be associated in common programmes and by doing so they should try to increase their share and participation.

The tussles — among themselves, doubts about each other, should be minimised with a view to gain strength. Without increased participation of women in policy making and planning, it would not be possible on their part to organise a platform or institution through which they would be able to realise their right in the family and society. Neither would it be possible to establish their status and honour at the national level. To achieve this target a network throughout the country is to be created and the Government should also come forward with honest and sincere political commitment. The problems of women should also be politicised by the parties otherwise exploitation and deprivation of women will not be removed from the society.

The only way by which the female can see the golden age is through the hard work by the women by undertaking well thought and chosen steps and implementation of policies. There is no second way to achieve this.



Women are actors, not targets

Women in Parliament and Electoral Process

by Dr Nazma Chowdhury

WOMEN'S representation in the Parliament has traditionally been weak and feeble in Bangladesh. The first woman to enter the legislature in the general seats (300), successfully contested by-elections for vacant seats to the second Jatiya Sangsad elected in 1979. The by-elections were for 'safe' and 'protected' seats. One was a seat vacated by a party leader who had won in multiple constituencies in the general election. The other vacancy arose due to the death of the incumbent, whose daughter was nominated for the seat. Among the women MPs elected directly to the third Jatiya Sangsad in 1986, apart from Sheikh Hasina all but one had well known or powerful male kin in politics. The fourth Jatiya Sangsad elected in 1988 demonstrated a similar or rather more pronounced trend. In the fifth or current Jatiya Sangsad, there are now five women members of Parliament elected directly from territorial constituencies. Two are leaders of their respective parties: Prime Minister Khaleda Zia who is the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the party that was founded and led by her late husband, and Sheikh Hasina the leader of opposition in the House and president of the Awami League, the party led by her late father. Of the remaining three, two had been active in politics for a long time, at least one of whom had unsuccessfully contested in the previous general elections. One woman was elected to a seat in the Parliament through by-election, the vacancy having been caused by the death of her husband. Thus, a trend is visible. Women's political identity is often linked to male kinship ties. But, subsequently many became active participants in the process.

In terms of numbers, women constituted an extremely small proportion of the membership of the Parliament. Table 1 reveals that women's representation in Parliament has registered a slow increase over the years though it still remains below 2 per cent.

Table 2 notes that women's participation in electoral process has also shown a slow increase. Thus in both electoral and representative arena of politics women's participation is meager: less than 2 per cent. This highlights the degree of women's political powerlessness, not necessarily in terms of individual women but in terms of a social category. Many factors are responsible. The androcentric biases of the profession of politics and male networking operative in the political arena contribute to keep women excluded from or marginalised in the political structures and processes. The

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notion of purdah and female segregation as well as the culture of the socialisation process prepare women for subordination and separate spheres. Women's relative lack of access to the resources of the family and state, such as education, ownership and employment, limit their opportunities to enter avenues that lead to the political arena.

However, dismal though the participation rates are as demonstrated by the Tables, they nevertheless reveal a positive trend. Women's participation has increased over the years. Also the votes received by women in the past successive elections indicate that

comparable to those obtaining in some of the other regions of the world. The provision of reservation which was intended to 'protect' women's representation in the parliament has been useful to the extent that it has secured 'visibility' for women in the House. At the least, 30 seats are occupied by women in the parliament which would otherwise have been practically devoid of women, as indicated the Table indicates. But the electoral method and the nomination process have to some extent undermined their representative status.

The reserved seats are elected by the elected mem-

Table 1
Number of General Seats Won by and Reserved Seats for Women in Parliament

Election Year	No. of women members	% of general seats	Reserved seats for women	Overall %
1	2	3	4	5
(1) 1973	0	0	15	4.8
(2) 1979	0+2	7	30	9.7
(3a) 1986	5	1.7	30	10.6
(3b) 1986	3+2	1.7	30	10.6
(4) 1988	4	1.3	30	10.6
(5a) 1991	8	2.7	30	11.5
(5b) 1991	4+1	1.7	30	10.6

Table 2
Percentage of Woman Candidates in Elections

Election Year	1973	1979	1986	1988	1991
Percentage of woman candidate	3	9	1.3	7	1.5

they have been able to create political credibility as candidates. In 16 constituencies in 1991 election they polled about a third of the valid votes cast. In five of these they registered more than fifty per cent electoral support. In a few constituencies women candidates lost by narrow margins. Inevitably, the electoral performance of Khaleda Zia and to some extent Sheikh Hasina contribute to this over-all positive trend in electoral figures. Nevertheless, these figures also indicate that women are no longer peripheral actors in the electoral arena but that they are active and mobile.

As Table 1 indicates, coupled with seats occupied by women under the reservation provision, the proportion of over-all women representation is impressive. The figures are

bers of the Parliament. The party obtaining majority seats and having the prospect to form the government are always able to fill these seats by their nominees. In the current Parliament 28 woman members from BNP and 2 from the Jamaat-e-Islami occupy these seats. By and large, the nomination process requires closer endorsements from the leadership which is traditionally male, and could be seen as being relatively less conditioned by party organisational or grass roots support. Also, the reserved seats seem to be more distanced from the constituency areas than are the general seats as the country is divided into 30 electoral zones for the former and 300 electoral constituencies for the latter. This leads to relatively weaker constituency base. All

Pressure in the Home lead Women to Break down

Cassandra Balchin writes from Lahore

WHEN Dr Riffat Malik discovered almost one in ten college girls in Lahore were abusing drugs, she urged college authorities to set up a counselling service.

A small-scale survey among all-girl colleges revealed that almost half the students had at some point used tranquillisers or amphetamines, many of them admitting to abuse over long periods.

All medical drugs are available over the counter in Pakistan. Since alcohol and 'hard drug' abuse by women is regarded as socially unacceptable in this conservative Muslim society, prescription medicines are the drug of choice.

The main stress factors which surfaced in the survey included the combined problems of adolescence and adjustment to college life, the intensity of academic competition in a segregated environment, and the absence of leisure facilities for young women in Pakistan.

Three years later the counselling service has established itself, although not without considerable opposition from some college administrators.

The most obvious impact, says Dr Malik, has been a softening in the lecturers' attitudes towards their students and a greater understanding of young women's problems. Although there is increased awareness among the girls of the dangers of drug abuse, Malik is sad that 'there has been no appreciable change in the levels of abuse'.

The reasons behind this are the continuing social pressures on young women and the lack of socially acceptable forms of physical and emotional outlet.

As successive governments come under increasing pressure from Muslim fundamentalists, social pressure on women has, if anything, increased.

Malik comments bitterly: 'Ignorance is bliss in this culture, where you are powerless to change things.'

It is not just college girls who are abusing drugs. Dr Riffat Malik, of the Punjab University's Applied Psychology Department, notes: 'Most women of the middle and lower classes seem to be suffering from chronic depression.'

The assessment is not surprising given the 'stress facing Pakistani women. On average a

woman will marry at 16.5 years old, have seven children and, if she lives in the rural areas, will do 14 to 15 hours of work in the home each day.

Says Khalid: 'When a woman comes to you and says her husband is an addict and has sold off her daughter, now her son is missing and she thinks he's sold him off too, and she's asking to be treated for depression, do you treat her or society?'

Even among the middle class, pressures on women have increased while positive outlets have decreased. The traditional extended family is breaking up while modern lifestyles hinder customary forms of female interaction.



LIVES OF STRUGGLE

Women all over the third world face hardship in everyday life

these factors contribute to make women unequal contenders for power, as is manifest in the sharing of cabinet positions. Except for the prime minister's office in the present cabinet, the nature of women's appointments to the cabinet over the years have not moved beyond a kind of tokenism. Women have not been able to politically challenge the inherently patriarchal tendency to view the appointment of more than a couple of women as far 'too many', nor the assumption that women are 'suitable' only for certain types of ministerial portfolios.

In the present House, as also in the Parliaments of 1973 and 1979, there are a few women in the reserved seats who have established fairly solid political credentials. If nominated for general seats they could have offered viable candidacies. They would also have faced certain amount of political risks inherent in such elections. The reserved seats on the other hand hold out no such risk; winning is assured for those receiving party nominations. Effective power however lies in the general seats as demonstrated by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and the leader of opposition Sheikh Hasina, who both led their parties to the polls and indeed contested from multiple constituencies for general seats.

Available statistics indicates that through the election years, while the over-all population of the country has increased, the proportion of male and female eligible voters has more or less remained static. Gender segregated voter figures are not available for 1973 election. Also, gender segregated data of valid votes cast in the elections are not available. This would have indicated what percentage of eligible female voters cast their votes.

The Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance 1991 laid down some stringent rules with a view to put a firm brake on electioneering expenses and to ensure financial accountability of candidates. Rigorous implementation of this Ordinance and strong curb on further increases in the ceiling by the Election Commission would auger well for women's electoral participation. The Code of Conduct for Jatiya Sangsad Election 1991, agreed to by political parties on the initiative of the Election Commission, prohibiting the use of arms, muscle and money in election is another positive move in this direction.

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'Now the housewife's life is so boring,' notes Khalid.

Dr Malik also blames the cultural norms of male-child preference for the cases of transvestism and transsexuality she has treated: usually young women around 16 or 17 years, old from the lower middle or working classes whose parents have an unfulfilled desire to have a son. In response to this pressure a daughter has filled the role.

Whereas in the West the display of stereotyped 'male' may not be commented on, in Pakistan parents are quick to worry about their daughters' sexual orientation because of their marriage prospects.

Malik describes the stigma about women's mental problems: 'Most doctors and relatives want to put the matter in purdah'; it affects their marriageability.

There are 60 women reportedly abandoned in Lahore's Mental Hospital, whose families left false contact addresses and names. Since there is only one small midway home for women in the province, they remain in the hospital often for the rest of their lives even though the psychiatrists have declared them cured.

Mental illness is also often used as an excuse for denying women their legal rights. The 1912 Lunacy Act makes it almost impossible for patients to discharge themselves from the Mental Hospital. The archaic Act also makes no distinction between the mentally ill and criminals, so admission to the mental hospital is regarded as sufficient grounds for divorce and denial of property rights.

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