

A social evil less talked about



I was at an urgent care centre on a November morning following a severe allergic reaction to some cough medication I took the night before. It was 8 a.m. and after filling out some forms, I was sitting in the waiting area, waiting to be called. As a woman walked through the front door, I nonchalantly looked up at her. I was not at all expecting to see something that I never saw before, but I did.

The woman, who was Caucasian, appeared to be in her 40s, and had a split lower lip and a black eye, which she tried to cover with her hair. I had seen victims of abuse and domestic violence in pictures and videos before, but it was the first time I saw one in real life.

I did not look at her twice though. She was clearly in a lot of mental and physical pain and I didn't want to add to her discomfort. But I was breaking inside. I felt like going up to her and telling her that things would be better for her sooner than she thought. But of course, I did not do any of that.

I wanted to leave her alone and I am sure she wanted the same. I just peeked at her hands once to see if she was engaged or married – she had a ring on the fourth finger of her left hand.

According to the website of National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, an organisation that works to end domestic violence in the United States, one woman is beaten or assaulted every 9 seconds here in America. That paints a pretty grim picture of the most powerful country in the world. And it makes me shudder even thinking about the condition of women in the developing nations, where most domestic violence victims have limited or no access to medical or legal help.

A lot of victims of domestic violence in the developing world cannot even find a safe place to live after they decide to leave their husbands. Many victims do not or cannot share their stories with anyone because they are too frightened, embarrassed or both.

Sabera Sultana, 30, was married to a businessman ten years older than her. On

the second day of their honeymoon in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the couple bickered over the tourist attractions they should visit the following day. At one point during the course of their argument, the enraged husband slapped his newly-wed wife in the face, sending her several feet away to the corner of a writing desk in their hotel room – she suffered a bruise on her left cheek and a cut on her forehead.

The aforementioned incident was just the first in a series of abusive treatments that Sabera endured throughout her short-lived marriage. It took her five long months to share her stories with her mother.



Like many women, she was frightened and also embarrassed to relate to her family the physical abuse she suffered at the hands of her then-husband. Sabera is now single again – single and happy. The days of attaching stigma to a divorcee are coming to an end in our society.

But domestic violence is not only physical (shoving, slapping, choking, punching, striking with a knife or weapon, etc) in nature. Abusive people also abuse their partners psychologically (threats of abandonment, name-calling, undermining a person's self-esteem, and isolating the person from her children, friends and family); sexually (non-consensual sexual con-

tact or behaviour); and economically (total control over finances, withholding one's access to money, and preventing one from attending school or their workplace).

In countries where living with in-laws is the custom, the abuser is not even always the spouse. Victims' in-laws, especially their mothers-in-law, also abuse them physically and psychologically.

Domestic violence takes place everywhere, in every stratum of our society. Education and economic status does not always prevent it, but definitely gives more power to the victims and makes it easier for them to seek medical and legal assistance.

Bangladesh, domestic violence cases often remain under-reported because the victims are too shy or afraid to share their stories with the world.

According to data available to Ain O Salish Kendra on domestic violence in Bangladesh, from January through September 2015, 167 women were murdered by their husbands and 31 by their in-laws. 45 victims of domestic violence committed suicide during this period of time – an alarming reality for Bangladesh.

Unlike in many countries, domestic violence is punishable under the law of Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government has criminalised domestic violence with the passing of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010. But the prevalence of corruption, and lack of resources and awareness, prevents proper implementation of this act.

In many cases, the law enforcers themselves cannot fathom the magnitude of this crime and treat it as a 'family matter' or a 'private issue.'

Fortunately, having said all this, it does not mean that help is not available to the victims of domestic violence. Help is available. But certainly, Bangladesh needs more resources and social awareness to protect its women and prosecute the domestic violence perpetrators.

Change should also come from home. Teaching your male child to respect women, or protesting when you see your son abusing his wife can be the first steps to preventing and fighting domestic violence.

Children who see their fathers behaving disrespectfully with their mothers grow up thinking that behaving this way with women is normal. Fathers should therefore be careful about how they treat their wives in front of their children, and also in private of course.

Last but not least, women should come forward to protect and help each other. A newly-wed woman's mother-in-law can and should be her strongest ally as she begins her conjugal life under a new roof away from her own family.

By Wara Karim
Photo: Collected

Domestic Violence and Bangladesh

According to a nationwide study titled 'Violence Against Women Survey 2011' conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 87 percent of married women in Bangladesh are abused by their husbands, and 77 percent are abused regularly. The study was conducted on 12,600 women across the country's seven divisions. Half of the victims said that their injuries were so serious that they had to seek medical care.

A third of the women surveyed admitted that they have been raped by their husbands. It should be noted that in