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Laila Pervin, a senior business development official at a multinational company, believes that it is her fault that she cannot please her husband sexually, which is why her relationship is deteriorating day-by-day. "My husband is addicted to porn and he always wants me to act like porn stars. He even wanted to film us to watch it later. I tried, but he was not even satisfied with that. He angrily hurts me for my inability and I feel ashamed," says Laila.

Lack of support from other female members of these women's families is equally perturbing. Afroza Akter, who works as an assistant manager at a travel agency, says that her husband kicks her and insults her whenever she does not want to have sex, even when she is going through her periods. When she informed her mother-in-law, this is what she was told: "Women who sleep keeping their husband unsatisfied, are cursed by the angels the whole night". Afroza still tries to make her relationship 'work.'

Although 2015 BBS data shows only 27 percent of women face sexual violence by their intimate partner, researchers and activists believe that that number does not paint the real picture since an overwhelming number of women don't want to share their misery in public. The BBS data also highlights that women who earn their own income experience slightly higher rates of physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime (61 percent), compared to non-earning women (53 percent).

Why leaving an abuser is not easy
Getting out of an abusive relationship is always difficult, because there are many elements that influence women while taking this decision. In our culture, there is a strong societal pressure to be in a perfect relationship. Stigma and the overall silence surrounding intimate partner violence make these women hesitant of leaving, even if they suffer bodily harm and emotional abuse.

What makes it even more difficult is sudden change in their partner's behaviour after the abuse. Laila and Afroza believe that their husbands are only abusive because of their unmet sexual needs and still find them to be the men they fell in love with. After being abused, both their husbands apologise profusely and say they will not hurt them again—these women fall into a cycle of never-ending emotional abuse as well.

Atoshi, for instance, thinks that get-

ting a divorce will completely destroy her family's reputation. No one in her family has ever done something like this. She also feels bad when she thinks of the fact that her father spent nearly Tk 20 lakh on her wedding.

Women also find it difficult to leave an abusive relationship or file a case against their husband when they have children or shared finances. Runa Hossain, a BCS cadre, has not spoken to her husband in months (he lives in the city for work while she lives with her in-

laws in the village) but doesn't leave him because she doesn't want her son to belong to a broken family. Five out of 11 women I spoke to don't want a divorce because they either have or will have children or have a shared home or loans.

Neena Goswami, deputy director at Ain o Salish Kendra, a legal aid organisation, who has worked on many such cases explains many women are even afraid to utter the word 'divorce.' "Parents advise them to cope with their partners. Women's general instinct to stay in

the circle of a family is another reason for them to tolerate violence at home," she explains.

Stories of Atoshi and Afroza can leave anybody flabbergasted. How can someone still not file for divorce or continue in such an abusive relationship? But then again, their stories are timely reminders that tell us how broken our society still is—how broken we ourselves are.

Names of the interviewees have been changed.



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Endless debates have tried to analyse the causes of sexual harassment or stalking. The media was blamed for encouraging pornography. Young girls were warned against sexual intimacy. Religious texts were quoted on sexual morality. Fatwas were issued denouncing young girls for stepping beyond social norms of dress and behaviour. The blame once again fell on women, for encouraging men by their mode of dress and behaviour.

Parents, guardians and administration demanded protection of girls in the public

space, some insisted on segregation and strict supervision. There was a call for stricter policing, for dire punishments of young men, for cloistering of young women. Police were quick to act against young men and women enjoying a stroll in the park, but remained passive when faced by an incident of harassment or stalking. This interference in private lives merely served to intensify the insecurity and vulnerability of women. It did not stem the tide.

In many cases, law enforcement appeared to be biased and ineffective.

This has corresponded with a gradual erosion of respect for the law, as law enforcement personnel or political cadres get away with acts of violence. A play of political rivalries has bred a gang culture through which male immunity and power percolates within the family and in the community and is propped by the political system.

More than that, gendered violence indicates the failure of our social system to create a space that offers security with freedom, independence with mobility, so that both women and men enjoy equal

opportunities, and can interact and participate without restraint. It is through the pursuit of freedom that citizens can learn to take on their responsibilities and realise their rights. It is by respecting each other that women and men can learn to value their freedom. It is by sharing and working together that we can learn tolerance and respect for ourselves and for others.

Hameeda Hossain is a prominent Bangladeshi human rights activist and writer.