

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Safe at home or scared at home?

Domestic violence, the silent pandemic



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If one is asked, where do you feel most safe and secure? The answer will invariably be "my home".

Unfortunately, that is not true for millions of women around the globe who suffer domestic violence at the hands of intimate partners every day of their lives, living in constant fear of being beaten, sexually or verbally abused. As per a WHO study, 35 percent women worldwide suffer physical or sexual intimate partner violence and as many as 38 percent of all murders of women are committed by their partners. One in every four women have suffered domestic abuse at least once in their lifetime. What more evidence is required to prove WOMEN ARE NOT SAFE IN THEIR HOMES?

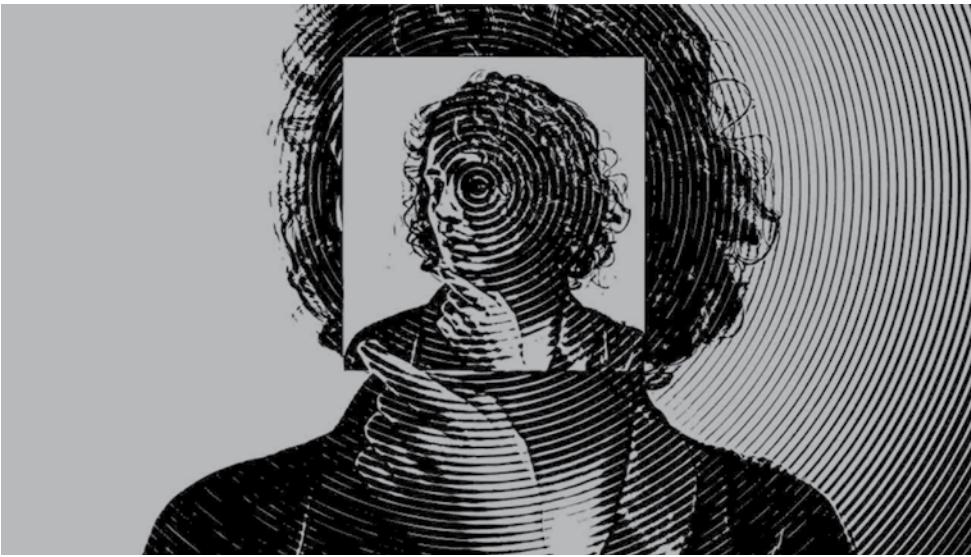
The scenario in Bangladesh is no different. The BBS reported in a 2011 study that 87 percent women have suffered some form of domestic violence out of which 65 percent faced direct physical abuse. The number came down to 80 percent in the 2015 survey with physical violence at 49 percent, but the report nonetheless states that on average almost two thirds (72.6 percent) of every-married woman in Bangladesh have experienced some form of partner violence in their lifetime.

By all accounts this is a damning indictment of the position of women in their families and the way they are treated. With already such high prevalence of domestic violence, the present pandemic and ensuing lockdown only exacerbated an already grim situation. As per a Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) survey, from April to September, 37,512 women and children in selected locations suffered domestic violence ranging from physical, sexual and

mental abuse. Early marriage increased as parents were eager to get rid of their "burden" when income came down and one can only imagine the sexual violence endured by these young girls during the lockdown. Across Brac's 408 legal aid clinics, there was a 69 percent increase in violence against women and girls in 2020 compared to the year 2019.

Of all forms of violence, domestic violence is the most pervasive, carried out over a long period of time with little hope of getting justice. The much acclaimed Domestic Violence Prevention Act 2010 has been almost impossible to implement. Ten years after its enactment, only a few cases have been lodged (234 by ASK and 147 by Blast). The economic vulnerability of women prevents them from filing cases against their husbands, as one woman said, "Tare niya gele amra khamu ki?" ("what will we live by if he is taken away?"), proving that mere enactment of laws without appropriate structures of support does not ensure implementation.

Domestic violence has its roots in socio-cultural norms and practices. Condoned by religion and tradition it is another manifestation of patriarchy that thrives on unequal power relations within the family and stems from the pervasive belief that men are superior to women and therefore have the right to control every aspect of their lives. Discrimination starts from birth with male preference and continues throughout a woman's life cycle. Even with gender parity in education, a girl is most likely to drop out from school during any crisis, financial, natural or health related. More than 50 percent of girls are married off before they reach the legal age of 18 and pushed into a physical and social relationship that they are not prepared for. Marital rape is not recognised in laws enacted to protect women from violence—I would like remind readers of the recent death of a 14-year-old girl from Tangail due to genital bleeding a month after



her marriage to a 34-year-old man.

The social acceptance of domestic violence even by victims themselves is what makes it so dangerous and insidious. Another study revealed 34 percent women aged 14-59 believe that a husband hitting his wife is justified (UN & BBS). A rural woman went as far as to say, "If my husband beats me and I bleed, that blood will go to heaven". It is precisely this kind of brainwashing through sermons and misuse of religion over the years that has reinforced a husband's right to use physical violence and has instilled in the minds of women that it is okay to be beaten by their husbands.

There is no doubt that women in Bangladesh have made great progress. However, women are not one homogenous group and while middle class educated women have negotiated for themselves a relatively better position, the majority of women continue to suffer discrimination and unequal treatment by family members

and society at large. While we have attained gender parity in education, there are few options for employment for young girls who come out of schools as a mother once asked me: "I have taken great pains to educate my daughter till 8th grade, now you tell me what should I do with her?" The situation of women who stay home as homemakers is even worse. There is no recognition of their contribution as even their productive work is considered "household work"—of little value. During lockdown, a jobless man exclaimed, "I have fed you for so long don't bother me anymore," which means the woman supposedly did nothing but consume while he did all the work. Women get no respect for the countless hours they spend taking care of every need of the family and beyond, plus little recognition for the fact that the entire care economy depends on them.

The BBS report of 2015, that almost two thirds (72.6 percent) of ever-married women in Bangladesh have experienced

some form of partner violence in their lifetime, is not only a shocking revelation for society but also an indictment of what we as women rights activists have been doing for several decades. Perhaps it is time to reflect on our strategies and interventions. Have we been able to convey the right message to men, boys or families? After all, these men who abuse their wives are members of the society that we live in. What makes them behave in such abusive ways? Is it something in their socialisation or is it our education system that does not teach respect for all human beings? The traditional image of women in their pre-determined roles is ingrained in the psyche of men, on the other hand, society's expectation of men is to be tough, in control and if need be, brutal to prove their manhood. This lethal combination can only be addressed by challenging patriarchy which lies at the root of women's unequal position.

Finally, our experience tells us that addressing domestic violence is the most difficult. The challenges are at various levels, cultural, traditional, religious and economical. However, we have seen changes over the years. What was considered a family concern has been brought out in the public domain. Women are willing to complain, talk about it and seek help. Many more men and boys are standing in solidarity with us and raising their voices. We have to amplify these voices, launch massive campaigns to change societies perception about women. Most importantly, raise our girls to be confident to resist violence and teach boys that abusive behaviour and actions are unacceptable, is against the law and will have consequences. Only then, someday perhaps, we will be able to say women are not living in constant fear and are safe in their homes.

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THE DAY DEMOCRACY WON

On December 6, 1990, military dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad stepped down in the face of a mass upsurge and handed power over to a caretaker government ending his nine years of autocratic rule which began through grabbing power in a coup on March 24, 1982. It was a watershed moment in Bangladesh's history that brought together staunch political rivals, students who played an instrumental role in the anti-autocracy movement, civil society—basically people from all walks of life to stand united against an undemocratic, military rule. Here we reprint two editorials published on December 6 and December 7 in the Bangladesh Times and images of the front pages of the two main English dailies that announced the victory of democracy and the people.



Majesty of the masses

ONCE in a long while there comes a time in the life of a nation when it faces its appointment with destiny. That is a time history chooses to test whether a nation has acquired the ability during the period of its existence to begin a journey towards greater freedom, peace and progress.

The nation has come upon such a time. People's power has triumphed. The regime of President Ershad has collapsed before the majesty of the masses and it ends as soon as the formalities for transition to a caretaker government are completed.

The final phase of the mass upsurge began on October 10 when the mainstream political parties ringed the Bangladesh Secretariat in Dhaka at a sit-in demonstration to back the demand for resignation of the government and fresh elections under a neutral interim government. This led up to events that stirred public feelings to new heights and in an amazing display of a chain reaction of people's total support to the movement for fundamental rights, political freedom, and economic emancipation, members of all professional groups and people from all walks of life were united to wage a heroic struggle. The All Party Students Unity (APSU) played a unique role in mobilizing the whole nation to topple an autocratic regime.

Since then the days had been eventful and turbulent—electrifying to the movement and traumatic to the people. The period was marked not only by a new dynamism in the movement but also by the promulgation of emergency regulations, suspension of fundamental rights and imposition of press censorship. The people braved all dangers, defied all challenges. Many gave their lives when demonstrations were fired upon in many places of Dhaka and across the country. They went through the agony of detention, harassment and humiliation on account of curfew that continued for long hours through days. The state machinery and economic life of the nation were paralysed and, as rarely happens, the country went without newspapers for more than a week.

The success of the movement heralds a new era of enormous opportunities dictating to the leaders the imperative of strengthening unity that has brought them to a new horizon of national life. The need of the hour is an unexceptionable sense of realism which demands the upholding of the principle of consensus that has contributed to their reaching the present glorious stage.

The nation is faced with a formidable challenge which has already put its political wisdom, steadfastness of its will and sincerity of purpose to a test of utmost rigour. It is indeed a very hard time. And no matter how hard the ordeal is, we must overcome it. There lies our survival and our unhindered journey towards the goal of attaining an ever-increasing measure of success in our efforts for development in various fields—human rights, democratic ideals, individual liberty, economy and so on.

We must overcome the challenge because there are no options other than victory in this battle for a fuller fulfilment of the aspirations of the people. We must pass this test for graduation so that we may guarantee a brighter future for the posterity. This is the time to face the challenge with the highest degree of calm, patience, pragmatism and, above all, foresight.

CALL FOR CALM

WITH the victory of the people in their heroic struggle against an autocratic regime, the first task of reorganising a caretaker government in preparation for holding free and fair elections to parliament is under way. In actual fact, the process of fulfilment of the aspirations of the people, for which a mass upsurge convulsed the nation, will begin after the true representatives of people will constitute a sovereign parliament in about three months from now.

There is an urgent need now to expedite and facilitate efforts for restoration of democracy in order that socio-politico-economic objectives are realised in the best democratic tradition in accordance with the wishes of the people.

This is a critical time for the nation. The journey to the actual restoration of democratic order is going to be an arduous one. Peace and discipline at all levels of society—government, economy, education, business, commerce, transportation, agriculture,

social work and so on—are an indispensable condition for ensuring a smooth passage to that goal.

The transition from today's distorted democratic setup to a sound system must needs be orderly and peaceful. In recognition of this fact the political alliances and leaders have made strong pleas for maintaining calm, patience, and restraint in the society. The Acting President Mr Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed emphasised that an atmosphere of peace and discipline in the society and realisation of the ideals for which the people did not reckon any danger great would be easy of achievement.

The creation of the right environment for restoration of democracy dictates the firm establishment of the rule of law and the supremacy of law must be clearly perceived and respected. Anybody taking the law into his own hands will do it at his peril. That any obstruction in the free operation of law will be prejudicial to the interest of the nation these difficult times must be understood by all.

Every man and woman should mount vigil against any manner of violence provoked by a spirit of revenge, jealousy, animosity, selfish interest or any

differences.

The arduous task will, however, not be over as soon as elections will be held. That will only be the beginning of a major national undertaking.

In a proper democratic environment, the nation can march forward towards attaining economic goals and there are formidable economic challenges facing the nation. The economy must be rescued from its present stagnant condition, investments need to be increased, new jobs created and population growth rate curbed.

These are difficult tasks indeed, but the country has vast potential which can be harnessed for promoting people's well-being. The important point is that these resources can be best utilised for the development of the nation under a democratic order. The national effort now has to be directed towards hastening the process of restoration of democracy.

(This editorial was originally published in The Bangladesh Times on December 7, 1990)