

#RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY

CHOOSING FREEDOM

Rebuilding a life after marital abuse

Trapped in an abusive marriage, Sadia's journey from fear to freedom reveals the hidden scars of emotional abuse. Sabrina N Bhuiyan tells a poignant story of resilience and the quiet strength it takes to reclaim one's life.

"When we first met, he was everything I could dream of. Warm, intuitive, kind. Slowly he became my whole world and everything, everyone else faded in the background, paled in comparison to the love and affection he showed me.

"I was madly in love...to the point that it blinded me to his flaws. Were the signs there from before? Perhaps. But that is love, right? You focus on the good and overlook the bad? And then it started very, very slowly, especially after our marriage," recounts Sadia (not her real name), a survivor of an abusive marriage.

It's a pretty self-explanatory term at this point, but what is truly intriguing are the things that it entails. Abuse in itself means many different things — using cruel behaviour or words towards a person with malicious intent, using something to bad effect, or violent conduct towards someone. It is interesting how all these aspects apply directly in a marital relationship where one comes bare to the other, guards down, to love and to be loved but is mistreated gravely.

The subtle erosion of self

Words often go unnoticed in their impact, yet they possess the quiet power to build or destroy. For Sadia, it began subtly — with comments about her appearance.

Her husband would make casual, seemingly offhand remarks: how jeans didn't suit her "massive" hips, or how black made her look "skinnier." Without realising it, she started dressing more conservatively — not out of personal preference, but because his voice had begun to shape her perception.

The influence didn't stop there. Her circle of friends soon came under his scrutiny. These were the people Sadia had known her whole life, yet his disapproval planted seeds of doubt. One by one, she pulled away from them, choosing instead to spend time with his acquaintances.

Slowly, visits to her own parents and relatives dwindled, replaced by time spent solely with his side of the family. Her husband had, over time, convinced her that her loved ones were a "bad influence". Looking back, Sadia can't help but feel bewildered at how methodically and quietly her world had been altered — until nothing of her own seemed to remain.

Dr Abdul Hamid, a renowned psychiatrist

at Monobikash Foundation, considers such behaviour as narcissistic where a spouse intends to gain control over his or her better half through constant criticism. With the intent of exploitation via manipulation and emotional control, narcissistic individuals have little to no empathy towards their victims. In a marriage where two people's lives are intertwined such form of abuse encompasses all aspects of life and can be extremely damaging for the victim.



The turning point

By the time they had been married for two years, following a year of courtship, Sadia had already begun to feel flickers of doubt about her husband's behaviour. But major life events kept those doubts buried. The birth of their child, a move to another country, and her decision to give up a promising career had made her increasingly dependent on him, both emotionally and financially.

When their daughter was around three months old, things began to unravel quickly. The warmth and affection that once defined their relationship had vanished. In its place came relentless criticism — an unending stream of complaints that left Sadia emotionally drained and physically exhausted.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. Her husband lost his job, and the family had to rely entirely on his parents for support. As their financial situation worsened, his demeanour grew more volatile.

What hurt the most wasn't just the words — though they were cruel and cutting — but the psychological toll they took. To the outside world, he appeared charming and polite, always ready with a pleasant smile. Behind closed doors, however, he was a man transformed — aggressive, temperamental, and frightening.

Sadia, physically smaller than him, began to feel the looming threat of his physicality. Intimidation became part of her daily life.

Small disagreements over household matters would quickly escalate. His temper was unpredictable, his emotions entirely unchecked. Sadia remembers the breaking point vividly — One night, as she was gently putting their eleven-month-old daughter to sleep, he stormed into the room without warning. He flipped on all the lights and started yelling at her. The baby, startled awake, clung to her in silent terror, her tiny eyes wide with fear.

The sight of her daughter's frightened face shattered whatever resolve she had left. She knew then that they were not safe — not anymore. Her husband's towering frame blocked the door, but she managed to slip past him in panic, rushed to another room, and locked the door behind her. Shaking, she called their elderly neighbour.

The woman responded immediately. Calm and composed, she arrived at their door and reminded Sadia's husband, in no uncertain terms, that the police were only a phone call away. She then gently led Sadia and her baby to her house, where they spent the night in safety.

and created a safe life for herself and her daughter, now three.

When asked why she stayed, she explains: "Leaving a relationship is never easy... But the signs — they're always there. You just need to open your eyes and see them."

Her voice is no longer shaped by fear but by strength.

A broken system

While this is one incident where the victim turned her life around in the best possible way, others are not so lucky. Without a shadow of a doubt, our society is still patriarchal at large, women are facing grave challenges. Abuse can take many different shapes and forms and it can range from mild to extreme, even more so in a marriage where the abuser is in close proximity to the victim.

It gets especially complicated when children are involved; financial matters are also to be considered with a level head. Most women are incapable of providing for themselves and their children as they take on the role of primary caregivers following the birth of children while their careers fall by the wayside. In Sadia's case, the husband had the upper hand financially which he



Even as she retells the incident, Sadia's voice trembles — the fear and trauma still fresh in her memory.

Reclaiming life

Sadia returned to her parents' home two weeks later. Her husband kept trying to erode her confidence, but she stayed firm. She filed for divorce, revived her career,

had used to perpetuate his abuse as his wife was dependent on him.

According to Dr Hamid the entire "system" is to be blamed for this. Women in general are conditioned in our society to be docile, and the onus to keep a family together almost always falls on them.

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