

#16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM

Women and the hidden cost of DOMESTIC ABUSE

Drawing on insights from psychologists, religious scholars, and legal experts, this article puts the spotlight on girl children growing up in abusive homes. From the gaps in our enforcement systems to the cultural and religious narratives that keep women tethered to harmful marriages, the piece reveals how societal silence endangers the next generation and why breaking the cycle begins with protecting mothers and their children.

THE CYCLE BEGINS IN CHILDHOOD

"When children grow up around domestic abuse, their systems adapt to the chaos, making violence feel like a normal part of life," says Tarana Anis, Senior Child Psychologist at Evercare Hospital, Dhaka. Many even blame themselves for parental conflict. As they grow older, they step in—trying to fix their parents' relationship or becoming their mother's protector, often going to great lengths to keep her safe.

Toddlers, pre-teens, and teenagers in such environments often develop depression, anxiety, mood or personality disorders, along with sleep issues that affect their studies and peer relationships. Some also exhibit behaviours like panic attacks, bed-wetting, stammering, lying or aggression, while others retreat into isolation through excessive social media or gaming.

Tarana Anis explains that girls often learn to equate love with suffocation, control and abuse. Mirroring what their mothers endured. This confusion around relationships can erode their self-esteem and self-image, leaving them consciously or unconsciously drawn to similar men as their fathers.

Hence, some girls demonstrate fixer tendencies when their marriage is at stake, while others become the oppressor who abuses their husbands. In some extreme cases, one woman may even become the victim and the abuser as a result of maladaptive coping strategies.

Boys initially empathise with their mothers at an early age. However, as adults, they end up assuming the roles of their fathers even if he has been a dominating presence in their lives. This will gradually show up once he navigates adult relationships.

Ultimately, when boys and girls grow up, they consciously or unconsciously seek out those chaotic dynamics with partners, because they have internalised that trauma is a bond. This causes them to develop messy attachments with people.

In order to undo patterns learned at home, they must do a lot of emotional work. If they do not address their childhood baggage, their future relationships will bear the collateral

damage. Therapy for children alone is not enough — the parent trapped in the cycle must also seek individual or couples counselling to restore safety at home.

Anis observes that in domestic violence cases, families and society often focus on protecting themselves, treating abuse as a private matter that doesn't warrant intervention. "We need proactive bystanders, not silent spectators, when children and women are suffering," she says.

A LEGAL BATTLE: THE LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM

According to Mahjabin Rabbani, Advocate of the Supreme Court, women can seek legal intervention against an abusive spouse under the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010. This law covers the well-being, safety, and security of boy and girl children along with their mothers.

If a woman is being abused by her husband, she's allowed to end it as per the Muslim marriage laws. "She needs to take her kabin-nama, i.e., the marriage contract, to a Kazi office, along with two witnesses, to

proceed with the divorce. However, social and cultural barriers, along with resistance from husbands and parents, and lack of financial independence force these women into staying in a marriage that has run its course," she says.

However, if a woman still wants to contest her circumstances, she can file a General Diary (GD) at the local station, informing them of her predicament. This GD acts as an investigation tool for domestic violence, for a later appeal to the Magistrate's Court. This will safeguard the women in case their husbands file a false case in an effort to stop the divorce.

Mahjabin Rabbani informs, "In such scenarios, the wife can submit

a written statement on the dissolution of her marriage, mentioning children's custody and the personal belongings she's taking."

In circumstances where she's being pressured by her birth parents to return to her in-laws, the Prevention and Protection Act can also order family members to refrain from harassing her, even if she's living in the same space as them."

If they continue to violate the court-appointed suggestions, the complainant can draw their attention and have them arrested as ordered by the court.

Where child custody is concerned, mothers can appeal for a lawsuit to the family court. For this, you need to appeal under the Family Court Ordinance, 1985, which covers guardianship and custody for children.

"The law says that fathers are legal guardians of children, while the mother is the custodian. Mothers may get custody if their sons are seven years old and if their daughters are adolescents or unmarried. The court will assess which parent can ensure their child's welfare," says Rabbani.

However, if the child is still a minor, they may remain in the mother's custody. The father will be granted visitation rights during this time. Based on the children's lifestyle, the court will ask the father to provide a certain amount of child support every month. He is also to pay the financial security as outlined in the couple's marriage contract (kabin-nama).

Mahjabin Rabbani acknowledges that women in divorce and custody battles often struggle with trust issues after being failed by their families and society. Lawyers sometimes worsen the situation by pushing clients to file false dowry and child support cases.

"Many women seeking legal aid cannot proceed because their lawyers create false cases and they lack the resources to resolve them," she says. On top of this, the opposition can delay proceedings by skipping court dates, pushing hearings months ahead, and further hindering women from moving forward with their divorce.

