

Gender Violence in Bangladesh

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In Bangladesh, there is much evidence to suggest that women and girls are disproportionately affected by crime and violence. In particular, the problem of acid-throwing as a result of family and land disputes or dowry demands has been well-documented. As a result of gender discrimination and their lower socio-economic status, women have fewer options at their disposal to avoid or escape abusive situations. Further, they have fewer resources at their disposal to seek justice. Indeed, international crime victimization surveys have consistently shown that there is a huge 'dark figure' of unreported crime against women around the world.

In response, there are now a number of international human rights treaties which expressly prohibit violence against women. For example, Bangladesh has ratified many key articles of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Bangladesh has also adopted specific policies and programmes for women's advancement. For example, the UN Population Fund Report showcased an advocacy project set up to end gender-based violence in Bangladesh and highlighted many of the good practices, remaining challenges and key lessons to be learnt (UNFPA, 2000). Another key international human rights instrument is the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. This is the first international human rights instrument to exclusively and explicitly address the issue of violence against women. Article 1 defines the term 'violence against women' in the following way – “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

Time and again, the UN Declaration, CEDAW Committee and many international reports have made clear that states have a duty to protect all individuals within its jurisdiction and to bring perpetrators of abuse to justice. The concept of 'due diligence' requires states to adopt legislation, practical policies and comprehensive measures to address gender-based violence. States also have a duty to act appropriately and effectively to protect women from violence before it occurs. It means states and especially the criminal justice sector have to be proactive, not just reactive. It means states have to develop proactive policing strategies to prevent and reduce gender-based violence.

In principle, police can play a very important role in protecting women's right to physical integrity and their right to life. In practice, we know from international police research studies, victimization surveys and UN Special Rapporteur on

Violence against Women reports that violence against women is still trivialised and that police frequently fail to investigate complaints or turn women away. For example, the World Health Organization (2005) study on 24,000 women in 10 countries (including Bangladesh) shows that women often suffer family or sexual violence in silence. Most victims cannot rely on police for protection. As critics have argued, 'weak implementation of legal procedures and ineffective and improper investigation by the police often result in low rate of convictions and high level of acquittals in violence against women cases' (Miles and Sengupta, 2006).

A recent survey confirms the on-going problem of violence against women in Bangladesh. In 2009 German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) commissioned a survey of 2000 women and adolescent girls and 1000 men and adolescent boys in four districts (Mymensingh, Madaripur, Bogra, Thakurgaon) (READ, 2009). The survey covered a number of issues related to perceptions of crime, fear of crime and insecurity, crime victimisation, views and experiences of policing. Overall, the survey found a high level of crime victimisation (notably theft and family violence) and a prevailing sense of anxiety and insecurity amongst the female respondents, including fear of murder; fear of being hijacked, raped, attacked, robbed, harassed; fear of accidents; fear of police or other law enforcers. Only 14% of female respondents in the survey said they felt 'safe' outside the home whilst 77% said they felt 'safe' within the home.

Both male and female victims were reluctant to make known their crime victimisation. The main reasons cited for non-complaining or non-reporting was 'no justice is received/no benefit/no result', followed by 'fear of harassment and/or further torture', 'fear of losing dignity and prestige', and 'family pressure'. Overall only 24% of victims complained or reported to any informal or formal sources. Even when victims did make known their crime victimization, they were inclined to turn to traditional and customary structures in society rather than the formal criminal justice system. Women and adolescent girls were more likely to complain to informal sources such as the family and relatives, '*matbars*' (village leaders) or neighbours whilst men and adolescent boys were more likely to complain to semi-formal sources such as local '*Salish*', Union Parishad Chairman or member or the local community police committee. Reporting to the police was rare particularly in cases of family violence: only 1% of female victims of family violence reported the crime to the police.

Clearly, much more needs to be done to prevent violence against women and other vulnerable groups in society, to improve their access to justice and to sensitise the police and other criminal justice agents. International experience over the last decades has shown that policing strategies against gender-based violence that proved effective in one socio-economic and cultural context may not be equally

effective in others. That is why governments, NGOs and activists have aimed to adapt strategies to incorporate local knowledge and to ensure local ownership of policing strategies in the long term. The challenge of developing gender-responsive policing is certainly immense in the Bangladesh context where there is a long history of police violence and corruption (International Crisis Group, 2009).

References

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