



November 24, 2017

Statement in Commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, 25th November 2017

Violence against women is endemic in Bangladesh. Women and girls are subjected to domestic violence, rape, dowry and its related violence, acid violence, stalking and sexual harassment, etc. As per a 2015 survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, more than 80% of married women in the country are abused at least once in their married life, be it physically, sexually, financially or emotionally.

Dowry is an epidemic and exists in all sections of the society. One of the major causes of domestic violence is dowry. A majority of dowry deaths and physical abuse are caused by husbands and/ or in-laws in the impoverished section of the society – where women are not educated, depend upon their husbands and in laws and are considered as burdens. When dowry greedy husbands or in-laws cannot extract dowry from the girls' parents- they physically abuse and even kill on the hapless wife. Various forms of discrimination also determine the amount of dowry. Parents of 'older' girls, or girls have darker skin are forced to pay more dowry. According to Odhikar's statistics, from 2012 to October 2017 it is reported that seventeen minor brides (below the age of 18 years) were killed for dowry; and many faced severe physical abuse. In a recent survey in Bogura and Jamalpur by the Population Council, it was found that the amount of dowry demanded is taka 50,000 if the girl's age is less than sixteen. It becomes 80, 000 if the girl's age is 16/17 (the daily Prothom Alo- November 16, 2017). Many parents marry off their minor daughters by taking the opportunity of having to pay less dowry. Dowry is not always money. It can also be movable or immovable property and in many cases it is a repeated demand by grooms and in-laws. In spite of the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 and the Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000 (amended in 2003) which contain punishments for dowry and dowry related violence respectively, due to non implementation of law and lack of awareness in the society, dowry and it's violence continues. Moreover, special provisions in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 may give more opportunity to a child marriage prone society to arrange more child marriages, where less dowry is sought.

Rape is also a major worry in Bangladesh. In most of the cases the perpetrators are influential or have political connection with the ruling party -and thus they can influence police and due to the ineffective criminal justice system, many victims do not get justice. It is so alarming that data shows child rape outnumbers the number of reported rapes of adult women. According to statistics gathered by Odhikar from 2012 to October 2017 a total of 2788 minor girls were raped, whereas 1597 women were raped during the same time. However, this data is assumed to be the tip of the iceberg. Due to social stigma and further harassment and abuse, most of the incidents of rape are not reported.

According to Odhikar's statistics- from 2012 to October 2017 225 women and 56 girls were victims of acid violence. The major reasons of acid violence against women and girls are due to refusing proposals of marriage or love; dowry demands, land related conflicts, decision of divorcing husband etc. Though Acid Control Act (2002) and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2002) exist, due to the unchecked availability of acid and an ineffective criminal justice system the crime is still going on.

Stalking is also a worrisome phenomenon. Many girls are victimised by stalkers and some of them were killed, abused and even committed suicide. Also out of fear of stalkers, girls are dropping out of school and child marriages are being performed. Family members of victims are being killed or beaten by gangs of stalkers when they protest. The High Court Division's directives of 2011 are yet to be implemented to stop stalking. Compare to the last 30/35 years, many more women are working in both the garment sectors and other different sectors. However, from public transport to her workplace even to walking along the street, women face violence and humiliation.

Meanwhile, Rohingyas are facing genocide in neighbouring Myanmar and are fleeing to Bangladesh for refuge. Rohingya women and girls were victims of gang rape, torture, and kept as sex slaves. They eye witnessed killing, torture, rape, abuse of family members and looting and burning of their homes by the Myanmar military and Buddhist criminals. After coming to Bangladesh, these women and children are also at risk from traffickers and the crime of rape and violence- if not protected carefully. They are also highly traumatised after experiencing such brutal genocide.

Odhikar's recommendations to stop violence against women:

In order to lessen the risk of violence against women and ultimately stop such crime the following suggestions are made:

- The government should have strong political will to ensure proper implementation of the existing laws and High Court Division's Directives to stop violence against women;
- Violence against women cases should not be withdrawn under any form of political consideration;
- Judiciary should act independently and cases of violation against women should be brought under speedy trial procedures to ensure justice;
- Print and electronic media, including textbooks must make long-term awareness programmes of violence against women and gender equality at all levels.
- The government should enact a victim and witness protection law to ensure that victims and witnesses of acts of violence are able to give statements and evidence under protection and with no fear of further threats.
- The international community needs to take strong efforts in order to establish the civil and political rights of Rohingyas in Myanmar and fight for the justice for Rohingyas; Ensuring the security of Rohingya women and children and arranging trauma counseling to help them to cope with their genocide related trauma is an urgent necessity.

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