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## COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS AND ACTIVISMS REGARDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: PERSPECTIVES FROM RURAL BANGLADESH

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Anisur Rahman KHAN\*

**Abstract:** *Community is a basic unit of social organisation, which influences many aspects in our lives and patterns of actions. The aspect of community is seldom addressed in the realm of domestic violence initiatives, although community's perception and role, who are within women's close network, is important in curbing domestic violence since members of the community easily see and hear what is happening against women. My research aimed at exploring community's perceptions and activism with regard to domestic violence against women at different rural settings of two Bangladeshi districts namely Netrokona and Mymensingh. Using interpretative qualitative approach, I excavated the perceptions and activism of the majority Bengali community as well as indigenous matriarchal Garo community. Living in strict patriarch rule, Bengali women usually are the easy victims of different forms of violence, but matriarchal structure also does not preclude Garo men to condone violence against women. Both the communities have some intervention mechanisms. Shalish or local arbitration is the most widely used community intervention in rural area although it has some in-built shortcomings. This study has significant implication in generating new knowledge and providing guidelines for future course of actions in redressing domestic violence.*

**Keywords:** *Bangladesh, community, domestic violence, Bengali community, Garo community, patriarchy, matriarchy, women, shalish*

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\* Faculty member at Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC), Dhaka, Bangladesh. Obtained bachelor and MSS degrees in Sociology from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh and an MA degree in Women's Studies from the University of York, UK. Currently a PhD candidate in Development Administration at the Graduate School of Public Administration (GSPA), National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Bangkok, Thailand. E-mail: khanpatc@gmail.com

## Introduction

Domestic violence or violence that takes place at home against women accounts for a major portion of the violence that occurs worldwide against women (Perillia, et al. 2011). It imposes enormous burden for women throughout the world and transcends in all social, economic, religious and cultural groups (Kyu & Kani, 2005). Specifically, domestic violence which is perpetrated by the husband or intimate partner is the major form of violence in the world and happens in all countries, cultures and social classes (WHO, 2002). Domestic violence against women by their husbands is widely prevalent and deep-rooted problem in Bangladesh although it is frequently misinterpreted as a private issue. It has been estimated that 50% of the murders of women in Bangladesh are committed by women's husbands (Heise, 1993 quoted in Khan, 2005). Different available empirical studies in Bangladesh also reported high rates of various forms of wife abuse ranging from 39% to 79% (Bates et al., 2004; Schular et al., 1996; Salam et al. 2006; Koenig et al., 2003; Naved, 2013). Studies on domestic violence in Bangladesh have the examined number of issues including forms and practices, causes and consequences, help-seeking and coping strategies particularly from victims' perspectives. Nevertheless, none of the study in Bangladesh has ever attempted to explore community perception and activism with regard to domestic violence. My research is an attempt to fill-in that gap in the existing literature.

Community is defined as a local social arrangement beyond the private sphere of home and family (Crow and Allan, 1994). Community may be small in scale but solid in structure and responds at the grassroots to fundamental human problems (Nisbert, 1960 quoted in Poplin, 1972). Community influences many aspects in our lives and patterns of actions including violence against women. Preventing domestic violence requires commitment from and engagement of the whole community (Michau, 2005). The aspect of community who are within women's networks rarely studied in relation to domestic violence, yet in the long run it may prove to be a key resource not only in establishing safety for women but also in beginning to decrease the prevalence of domestic violence (Kelly, 1996). Community networks know about domestic violence long before any outside agency. Community can either recognise it as a problem, can support women who are abused or ignore it (Kelly, 1996), and the risk associated with domestic violence even increases when the cause of the abuse is seen 'legitimate' by the community (Rao, 1997). However, community attitudes and actions with respect to domestic violence provide valuable information about the environment of domestic violence in a particular social setting (Abeya, et al., 2012).

Under the contextual premises mentioned above, I was strongly motivated to conduct a research in order to explore the perceptions and activism of rural community in Bangladesh with regard to domestic violence. The main research question was; what are the perception and activism of the majority Bengali rural community with regard to domestic violence against women? The sub-question was; what are the perception and activism of ingenious *Garó* community with regard to domestic violence against women? The reason to bring *Garó* community's perspective was find out the similarities and differences patriarchal community perspective and that of matriarchal community perspective. Notably, *Garó* is the only matriarchal indigenous ethnic group in

Bangladesh. By domestic violence, I meant violence that is directed against women by their husbands, and by community members, I meant only the important members of a rural setting who are involved in different community matters and community problems.

## Research Design

I conducted the study through interpretive qualitative research approach. Researchers in interpretive approach assume that there is not just one empirical world; everyone has their own personal views and perspectives of reality (Thiel 2014). Interpretive research typically tries to understand the social world as it is from the perspective of individual experience. Hence, all interests extend over subjective worldview (Rossman and Rallis 2012). The interpretive paradigm broadly manifests itself in phenomenological study through which individuals describe their experiences (Moustakas 1994 quoted in Creswell 2013). I broadly employed semi-structured phenomenological in-depth interviews to explore the experiences and perceptions of the participants. Semi-structured interview gives opportunity to capture more in-depth information; giving more depth to the reasoning and meaning (Jupp 1995). I also conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with members of the indigenous *Garo* community. On the other hand, I developed one case study on a community intervention called *shalish* (informal dispute resolution) based on observation and interview with a victim. Another case study was developed on community NGO activism based on interview with a concerned NGO official, and documentary evidences. Case study is used to thoroughly describe complex phenomenon in ways to unearth deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Moore et al. 2012), and helps to present unique and unusual situation (Creswell 2013). Observing *shalish* was an emerged event in the study, and was appropriate to frame it as a case.

In selecting participants, I paid utmost emphasis concerning the participants who were 'information-rich' (Hennink et al. 2011) in accordance with the objectives of the study. I employed both purposive and snowball sampling techniques in selecting participants. I selected participants through an array of networks from different rural settings of two Bangladeshi districts namely Mymensingh and Netrokoa. I conducted interviews with twenty-nine (26) community members from majority Bengali community. My participants were local public representatives (8), Muslim religious leaders (3), Hindu religious leaders (3), village elderly (2), Muslim marriage register (1), Hindu marriage register (1), Teacher (1), NGO official (1), other local leaders and social workers (6). On the other hand, all the seven (7) FGD members of *Garo* community were from of Tribal Welfare Association (TWA).

Participation in the study was voluntary. All interviews were conducted in the local language *Bangla*, and were recorded by a recording device with prior permission from the participants. While translating into English, I made myself deeply engaged over each narrative verbatim so that originality is maintained and errors are kept minimal. I employed thematic analytical framework in analysing data. Thematic analytical framework identifies and analyses themes and puts them together to form a comprehensive picture of the collective experiences of research participants (Braun and

Clarke, 2006). The data analysis followed the following consequential but interrelated procedures such as; organising data, generating categories, coding, collating codes into potential themes, defining and refining themes, and finally presenting the overall story the different themes revealed (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The textual presentation of the finding is done in first person “I” which articulates attention to my authorship and expresses my reflexivity and involvement as researcher. I conducted the study during August 2014 to November 2014.

## **Finding of the Study**

### ***Perceptions regarding the forms of domestic violence***

With regard to various forms of domestic violence, participants from the majority Bengali community put forward following observations.

#### ***Not only physical but also has other forms***

Most of the participants opined that domestic violence against women is not only physical but also psychological/emotional, sexual and economic. A local public representative said;

“Mostly women come to me with complaints of physical violence of their husbands, but when I inquire into their history of abuse, I find they are the victims of many forms of abuse, and some of them are even more pervasive than that of physical violence.”

Some participants said that the perception regarding domestic violence has changed significantly over a span of time. Specifically, the village elderly opined that in earlier days only physical violence was treated domestic violence. Even certain amount of physical violence was not considered as domestic violence and no woman was bothered about husband’s verbal abuse, forced pregnancy and practice of polygamy. They used to assume these practices as part of their lives. Today, domestic violence is being treated in a holistic manner. Women are more concerned about other forms of violence.

#### ***Sexual violence***

With regard to sexual violence community members said that it is, of course, difficult to trace how a husband sexually abuses her wife since it is her very personal matters. Nevertheless, they had had information about forced pregnancy, forced abortion, miscarriage. Notably, all the female community members in the study specifically informed that some women had shared their experiences sexual violence by their husbands including forced sex, sex during pregnancy and menstruation, abortion, forced pregnancy etc. Women now consider sexual violence as a part of domestic violence. A female public representative said;

“A girl who was married at the age of twelve evaded from her husband’s residence just after two days since she got scared about physical relations with her husband. Her mother came to me for suggestions---.”

### ***Psychological/emotional abuse***

Community members perceived that psychological/emotional abuse has become a part of many women’s lives. They are frequently verbally abused or name-called by their husbands and in-laws, often threatened to remarry, divorce or drive away from home. Some of them are the victims of husbands’ practices of polygamy and extra-marital relations which also cause psychological/emotional abuse.

### ***Economic abuse is the new form***

In their opinions, economic violence is a new addition to the list of domestic violence. Over the years, the extent of economic abuse has taken a pervasive form. Many rural women now a days are engaged in many small-scaled income-generating activities by borrowing money from the NGOs. However, quite often, husbands snatch their incomes, borrowed money, and also put pressure on how and where to spend the money and income. One local leader commented;

“Women borrow money from the NGOs. Quite often, their worthless husbands snatch their money. It is a problem for those women who want to earn independently.”

### ***Physical violence still dominates***

Although, community members viewed domestic violence as a combination of many forms, some community members considered physical violence as the most inflicting form of violence against women in the community. One participant cited the rural proverb, “if you want to control your wife, you have to batter her thrice in a day: morning, afternoon and at night”, and added physical violence against wives is the most frequent and the routine activity.

### ***Perceptions regarding the factors of domestic violence***

#### ***Patriarchy is the main cause of domestic violence***

Participants explicitly stated that patriarchy is extensively prevalent in the society. Being rigidly socialised as superior than women, men in the community use this institution as a means to control and dominate their wives. Patriarchal mechanism put women in such a position that they become the easy prey of male domination and violence. A Hindu religious leader said;

“Men consider women as subordinate and subdue women in all respects. Perpetuating violence is an effective means to subdue a wife in the family.”

### ***Early marriage: the gateway to domestic violence***

Most of the participants opined that early marriage is a harmful practice, which often leads to many forms of domestic violence. Moreover, it brings many detrimental and long-term effects on the physical, sexual and mental health of a young girl. Early marriage is one of the old customs in Bangladesh society. Parents always strive to get married off their under aged daughters even when they are not physically and mentally prepared. Although law outlaws early marriage, such marriage is registered through unfair means. One female public representative said;

“Majority of the girls become married before while they are adolescents. Their husbands perpetuate sexual violence against them. They cannot perform familial activities properly. Failure to comply the expectations of their husbands and their families, they become the victims of domestic violence.”

### ***Dowry demand: the stubborn custom leads to domestic violence***

Community members considered dowry demand (groom price) as the major source of domestic violence. There was notable consensus amongst the participants to consider dowry demand as a stubborn custom in the community. Dowry exists in the all levels of the community. A village elderly said:

“This is the unwritten custom in the community. Although government has enacted Dowry Prohibition Act, this Act is of no use. No one can think of getting her daughter married off without paying sufficient dowry. It is an evil but a necessary condition during marriage.”

Specifically, participants said that the problem associated with dowry demand is often not a one-time shot. Husbands and their family members continue with demands even after marriage. Women encounter violence if they fail to bring dowries for their husband. One public representative commented:

“Demand for dowry is often endless. If a woman can bring dowry her situation remains stable, but if she cannot bring dowry it worsens largely.”

### ***Involvement of and conflicts with mother-in-law***

Involvement of and conflict with mother-in-law was considered as a dominating cause by most of the participants for perpetuation of violence. Interestingly, not all the community people made directly liable the mother-in-law for perpetuation of domestic violence rather few of them also made responsible the daughter-in-law for their own fate. The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is a woman versus woman game. Each one is the enemy of another. One public representative shared a very interesting experience;

“A mother-in-law forgets that once she was a daughter-in-law and was abused by her mother-in-law as well. I received many complaints of daughter-in-laws against their mother-in-laws. Interestingly, these mother-in-laws, when they were daughter-in-laws, also complained me against their mother-in-laws.”

Mother-in-law makes considerable amount of impact on perpetuation of domestic violence against her daughter-in-law by creating troubles between her son and his wife. One community leader said;

“Naturally, a son is closely attached to his mothers. Whatever her mother says, he just carries the order. He does not verify what is true or untrue.”

Apart from the facets of involvement of mother, there were also aspects of conflicts with mother-in-law which also act as instigating factors of domestic violence. According to this line of thought, many daughter-in-laws do not like their mother-in-laws and do not pay respect to them. By doing so, they invite troubles for them since their husbands always expect them showing respects and honour to their parents. A village leader commented;

“Daughter-in-laws consider their in-laws as burden. They do not show respect to them. However, husbands punish them for their ill behaviours.”

### ***Extra-marital relations, practice of polygamy and inability to give birth to child/male-child***

Extramarital relations, women’s inability to give birth to child or male child and practice of polygamy act as instigating factors for perpetuation of domestic violence, opined by some participants. Extramarital relationship has been widespread in the rural community. Some of them viewed it as an erosion of social values as well as religious values. It is a deterioration of trust between a husband and a wife. One community leader commented;

“Extramarital relationship is problem in the community. When a married man engaged in extramarital relationship, his wife obstructs him in many ways. He becomes angry at his wife’s interventions and perpetuates violence.”

Interestingly, few community participants blamed women for being engaged in extramarital relationships. A husband always prefers faithful and devoted wife and never allows any illicit relationship of his wife. A local woman writer remarked;

“Chastity is a rule placed on women by patriarchy. There is no problem for a man if he is engaged in adultery or practices polygamy, but if a woman does something wrong, she must be prepared for dire consequences.”

Not only women are physically and mentally abused due to their interference into their husbands’ extramarital relationships, but also, quite often, they become the victims of husbands’ practices of polygamy, which invites troubles in the family. Sometimes women are divorced or abandoned for that. The most commonly reported factor of polygamy is associated with current wife’s inability to produce any child or male child. In that case, husband divorces or deserts his wife and gets married again. Women are usually blamed for childless or sonless state, husbands condone violence for that. A social worker observed;

“Still in the rural area, failure to bear a child or male child is considered a problem with a wife. A husband is reluctant to go to doctor. If ever a wife requests him to go to doctor, he abuses his wife.”

### ***Domestic violence is associated with poverty and low-income***

Many participants in the study related poverty and low-income as aggravating factors for domestic violence. The widespread prevalence of poverty and low income in the family often act as a source of conflict between a husband and a wife. Poverty and low-income create frustration and tension among the breadwinners and instigate them to condone violence. A village leader expressed his opinions;

“There is a proverb, when poverty comes in at the door, love escapes through the window. Many families in the rural areas live in extreme poverty state. When wives ask husbands about their low income, they become angry and use violent means to stop them.”

On the other hand, few participants also blamed women for creating troubles concerning the matter of poverty and low-income. In their opinions, women often fail to understand the ability of their husbands and the opportunities available for income.

### ***Perceptions regarding the consequences of domestic violence***

Community participants opined that domestic violence makes multifarious effects on women, children and on the overall state of the society.

### ***Effects on women***

There was a consensus amongst the participants with regard to the effect on women caused by various physical assaults. One village leader said;

“Many women in the community sometimes are seriously injured because of physical battering by their husbands. Sometimes husbands intentionally assault their wives in a grievous way, sometimes they are not aware of the consequences of assaults.”

With regard to sexual and reproductive health impacts, the dominant perceptions of the participants included complications during pregnancy, lack of nutritional and physical care during pregnancy, forced pregnancy or multiple-child bearing and various troubles associated with sexual/physical relationships with husbands. Some participants categorically mentioned about early marriage and the impacts related to pregnancy and the physical relationships.

Some participants pointed out number of issues with regard to mental health consequences on the victims. Women suffer from serious emotional and psychological disturbances and dejection due to domestic violence. A female writer said;

“In our society marriage is so important to a woman, when her husband threatens her to divorce or abandon her, she really gets scared and suffers from mental agony concerning her future.”

Another participant informed;

“When women fail to cope with domestic violence, some of them might develop suicidal ideation. In our area, a woman failing to comply with abuse, wanted to commit suicide by hanging from a tree.”

Domestic violence also economically disturbs women as many husbands grasp women’s money borrowed from the NGOs or even direct them on how to spend it. Moreover, husbands also sell or misappropriate women’s income earning sources. Husbands create many barriers to women’s economic empowerment. Many women in the community are indebted with numbers of NGOs to adjust their loans that captured by their husbands. One community leader informed;

“Women borrow money to become self-reliant or to help with family expenses, but when the money is captured by their husbands, they fall in deep trouble. Sometime women become burdened with numbers of borrowings.”

A handful of participants informed that women who opt to seek recourse to either formal or informal agencies also confront many bitter experiences. In their opinions, many women do not get proper justice through informal means, and formal justice system is cumbersome, lengthy and requires financial involvement. Moreover, if they seek recourse living within the marital relationship, they have to confront more violence from their husbands and in-laws. Women’s decision to help-seeking often adversely affects them. A village elderly commented;

“There are few examples of divorcing or abandoning women in the locality by their husbands after they made complaints with the community people about their problems. Their desire to make things normal turns into worse.”

### ***Social dislocation***

Social dislocation as an effect of domestic violence was treated as a consequence of domestic violence. In their opinions, finding no other alternatives many abused women decide to go to Dhaka or some other cities to work as garment workers. Sometime they cannot take their children with them. Many families finally break downs. Women also get disconnected with the villages. The following excerpt of one participant contextualises the fact appropriately;

“The trend of going to Dhaka and other cities by the poorer abused women for seeking garment jobs is escalating, and family break-ups are the ultimate consequences. Despite our efforts, we cannot tackle this trend.”

### ***Impact on Children***

Some participants were very concerned about the impact on children due to domestic violence against their mother, and with issues like divorce and abandonment. They said that the conflicts between father and mother adversely affect children in many ways. Children get scared of their father and, often, develop negative image about their father. Proper upbringing of the children is impossible in a violent environment.

### ***Perceptions regarding the coping strategies and help-seeking practices***

Under this theme, I have brought participants' perceptions with regard to issues related to women's coping strategies and help-seeking practices.

#### ***Disclosing is not the prime option***

According to most of the participants, abused women usually do not want to discuss and disclose about their experiences of domestic violence. They try to cope with violent experiences within themselves. Only in extreme cases, they disclose their experiences with others including parents, relatives and community people. There was a general consensus amongst the participants that usually women from lower socio-economic background disclose their experiences of domestic violence, women from middle-income and upper-income class hardly share their experiences with others since they consider disclosing is humiliating for them and their families. However, some issues such as; future of the children, stigma associated with divorce and separation, personal consequence also preclude many women not to speak out about their experiences of abuse to others. Under this milieu, women try to tolerate the abusive relationship so as to maintaining the family relationship. One female public representative said;

“Domestic violence is an endurance test for many women. They want to cope with the test.”

Coping strategies and help-seeking practices of women from Hindu and Muslim community vary quite significantly. According to most of the Hindu community leaders, the “no-provision of divorce” in the Hindu community has made the fundamental differences with regard to expressing the experiences of domestic violence. A Hindu community leader said;

“A Hindu woman hardly speaks out of her experiences of domestic violence to the public. As there is no provision of divorce amongst the Hindu community, a Hindu woman knows that she must maintain the relationship.”

#### ***Help is sought by those of who have no sense of honour and dignity***

Very interestingly, some participants viewed that help-seeking is preferred by those women who do not have any sense of shame and dignity. In their opinions, domestic violence is not a matter that should be frequently discussed with others rather it should be solved through familial means. They blamed that the lower class women lack in the sense of shame and dignity. Therefore, they bring their personal matters to the public. In so doing, they degrade themselves, their husbands and their families. One village leader opined:

“The poorer women do not have any shame. On and often, they get engaged in altercation with their husbands and abused by them. If they are abused in the morning, they would tell people at noon, but in the afternoon, they would go

back to normal relationship with their husbands. They would do the same thing in the following morning.”

In the preceding few sections I discussed the various perceptions of the community people regarding domestic violence concerning issues related to forms, causes, consequences, coping strategies and help-seeking practices. In the following section, I have brought various community activism concerning domestic violence.

## Community activism against domestic violence

### *Shalish- the most powerful community intervention*

*Shalish* (informal arbitration) is a very important community dispute resolution process through which local disputes are resolved very quickly. It is organised by the *shalishkars* (arbitrators). However, there is no definite rural structure and size of *shalish*. It usually comprises local leaders, local elites, local public representatives, religious leaders, and the elderly etc. This system in the village has been in place for centuries. It also helps the poorer people to avoid the hassles associated with seeking recourses with the formal justice system. Most of the participants had had the experience of working with this informal justice system. Participants said that when they act as members of *shalish* they always try on how to bring amiable solution between the parties. They impose fine and give minor punishments. Some participants admitted that in order to bring solution to a problem they deliberately do not highlight the problems of the victims rather force the victims and their families to accept their settlement. A public representative said;

“I admit that not all decisions on domestic violence are made fairly. During *shalish* we try to minimise the problems. We do not want to highlight women’s problems largely.”

Another village leader said;

“Often women do not get accepted justice from us. We make them understood that if they do not accept our solutions, their conditions might be worse.”

The decisions taken during *shalish* are highly male-biased, female public representatives are hardly invited to act as members in the *shalish*. On the other hand, participants also mentioned that at any cost they want to come to a decision in the *shalish* in order to help the poorer victims to avoid the hassles associated with the existing institutional support mechanism such as; the court and the police. Some participants also admitted that *shalish* process is not only male-dominated or male-biased, but also corrupt. Women’s husbands manage people involved in the *shalish* through unfair means and pull the decisions towards their favour. A village elderly said;

“Today’s *shalish* process is absolutely corrupt. Young village leaders dominate the whole process and they do whatever they like through unfair means. Victims cannot expect proper remedies for their problems.”

### ***Interventions of religious leaders and other community members***

I was informed sometimes victims also seek informal recourse with religious leaders. Although, the frequency of seeking recourse with the religious leaders has been reduced, still it is practiced. Similar to *shalish* arbitrators, religious leaders said that they try to bring some amiable solutions to family disputes. Muslim religious leaders said that their religious means include apprising men and women the messages of Quran and *Hadis* (teaching of prophet) regarding their responsibilities as husband or wife. However, Muslim religious leaders admitted that they have no absolute power like *shalish* organisers to impose any decision regarding family violence. An Islamic religious leader commented;

“When the victims or their family members bring to our notice issue of domestic violence, we just suggest them to have patience and pray to Allah. We suggest husbands to behave properly with their wives. Swear upon Allah! Without this, we can do nothing.”

On the other hand, imams of local mosques said that quite often they give message people regarding the rights of women in Islam and teaching of Islam against the harmful practices against women. One Imam said;

“During Friday *khutba*<sup>1</sup> I sometimes deliver lecture against violence. I do not know how much lessons people receive, but I try my best.”

Other than religious leaders, victims sometimes approach to other important members of the community such as; teachers, village elderly, rich people, land lords, higher caste and lineage members since they have considerable amount of importance over general villagers. Their approach to dispute resolution is also suggestive.

### ***Case study: community shalish failed to solve problems of a victim***

During October 2014, I was in my village for the purpose of my research. One afternoon, a young woman named Ritu came to me and sought help against violence of her husband and in-laws. Ritu, hardly around 17 or 18 years old, was from a nearby village and married just four month back. After marriage, her husband and in-laws pressurised and abused her in a number of ways for dowries. Failing to cope with violence at one stage she even wanted to commit suicide. On that day, her husband battered her seriously. Then, she decided to come to me with a hope that I could help her out. She knew about me from her neighbour. I was motivated to help Ritu. I decided to organise a *shalish* for her. Moreover, for the purpose of my research, I thought it would be good to observe a *shalish* process. At this stage, I adopted observation method. Village leaders who have experiences in conducting *shalish* were requested to conduct the *shalish*. Leaders listened to the complaints made by Ritu first, and then after, listened to the statements of Ritu’s husband and in-laws. They arbitrators ordered Ritu’s husband and his father to promise not to condone any violence against Ritu and take her back home. Ritu’s father-in-law promised to follow the order of the arbitrators. Suddenly, Ritu’s husband said that is not interested to

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<sup>1</sup> The guidance sermon that imam of a mosque delivers on *Jumma* (Friday) prayer.

continue the relationship and cannot promise not to condone violence. Everybody got surprised at his remarks. Ritu really got nervous, and said she would not return. If she returns, her husband would kill her. Suddenly, Ritu ran away for his family of origin and disappeared quickly from the scene. At the same time, Sumon also disappeared. This is how the *shalish* ended without any solution.

### ***Analysis of the Case***

Within a very short span of marital life, Ritu became a harsh victim of domestic violence perpetuated not only by her husband, but also by her in-laws. Most strikingly, by this time, she had developed suicidal ideation. She was in desperate need of supports. While listening to her history, I thought a *shalish* might have been an effective means to help her out. *Shalish* that I organised was heading to attain some fruitful results for both the parties. Arbitrators conducted the *shalish* professionally. Earlier, while I had discussions with some arbitrators, I came to know that the prime objective of a *shalish* is to minimise the problem, particularly the problems of women. I also noticed a similar tendency in this *shalish*. Members of the jury board specifically suggested Ritu to calm down with her complaints. I also came to know earlier that a *shalish* could be ended in failure if any of the parties does not agree to the decisions. It happened to this *shalish* as well. While everything was getting normal, suddenly a few haughty remarks capsized the process. So the earlier experiences of the community members with regard to failure of a *shalish* just repeated in this case.

### ***Case<sup>1</sup> on community legal services (CLS): a community based programme to combat violence against women in mymensingh district***

Community Legal Services (CLS) is programme of Bangladesh Woman Lawyers' Association (BNWLA). BNWLA is one of the oldest human rights organisation in the country founded in 1979 and its main goal is to ensure access to justice for all women & children particularly for the most disadvantaged women and children in Bangladesh. BNWLA launched Community Legal Services (CLS) to achieve the goal of protecting women from violence through community legal services by December 2016. The programme covers 16 sub-districts of 12 districts in Bangladesh including the Gofargaon sub-district of Mymensingh district. The key services of CLS include: i) work as grass root level legal information centre; ii) deliver legal services including counselling, complaints receiving, fact findings, mediation, rescue, victim and witness preparation, case filing, client follow up, access to safe shelter homes, long term social rehabilitation and reintegration.; iii) provide telephonic advice to the victims. Conducting yard meeting is one its core activities through which rural women are being aware of various forms and practices of violence, and available legal remedies. Initially,

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<sup>1</sup> This case was developed based on personal interview with Tasnina Ferdous Tanu, Solicitor, BNWLA, Gofargaon, Mymensingh. Information about the programme was also collected from Bangladesh Women's Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) website available at <http://bnwlabd.org/mwlr/>.

the project team received massive resistance from the local community particularly from the rural *shalishkarks* (arbitrators) since there is a huge vested interest lies with *shalish* at the local level. One official of CLS programme remarked;

“When we first launched our programme, many *shalishkaroks* (arbitrators) resisted us. They even said if CLS works here, they would have no activity. In traditional local *shalish* bribes are exchanged, and the arbitrators are benefitted out of the *shalsib*. Moreover, there were political pressures, pressures from the husbands and religious leaders. Over a short span of time, CLS has attained people’s confidence. Rural women now do not want to go to the arbitrators to seek recourse for their family problems, many of them come to us.”

Since inception to until October 2014, the four CLS centres of Gofargaon sub-district received considerable number (575) of complaints from the victims. Usually, upon receipt of a complaint, respective CLS centre organises *shalish* between the parties. One of the problems CLS face is that often the defenders do not respond to their notices, and they do not comply the decisions made in the *shalish*. Many *shalish* arrangements of CLS ended in vain. Moreover, the policy of filing legal case at its own cost is also insignificant since there is an instruction from the top just to file one case per year from each centre.

Up to now, I have discussed the perceptions and activisms of the majority Bengali community concerning domestic violence from two rural areas of Mymensingh and Netrokona districts. In the following section, I shall shift my focus on to indigenous matriarchal Garo community’s perceptions and activisms.

## **Shift from Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Perceptions and Activism of Garo Community**

Summarised findings from the focus group discussions with Garo community members are as follows.

### ***Perceptions about the forms domestic violence***

Most of the Garo community participants opined that despite being a matriarchal and matrilineal society, domestic violence in Garo community is not an unknown event. Women in the community also experience physical, mental, sexual and financial violence by their husbands. However, the prevalence of violence is not so pervasive than that of the greater Bengali society. For example; none of the participants in their lifetime heard of any incident of murder of a wife by her husband.

### ***Perceptions about the causes of domestic violence***

#### ***Men’s tendency to dominate leads to perpetuation of violence***

Garo social structure is very complicated. Women are the owner of the property, and the kinship system follows the matrilineal line, but men normally assume the formal roles of

leadership and authority. Men dominate the broader social organisation especially the public sphere. At the same time, they also want to dominate private spheres, which leads to conflict between men and women. One community member said;

“Matriarchy is often an abstract concept in Garo community. Women are only the owners of property, but social power lies with men. Garo men not only play dominant roles in public spheres, but also want to do the same in private spheres.”

### ***Land is the main cause of conflict***

Garo women are mostly the victims of financial abuse. Land is a source of financial abuse against Garo women. Most of the conflicts between men and women derive from issues related to management and ownership of lands. Although women inherit land from matrilineal line, men want to manage it. In most cases, men sell the lands without taking consent of women and force them to register. One community leader commended;

“Quite often husbands verbally sell lands, and pressurise their wives to transfer lands to the buyers. If they do not agree to register, husbands condone physical and mental torture. Many Garo women have become landless due to this practice.”

### ***Alcohol consumption***

Consumption of alcohol is a part of Garo culture. Both men and women consume indigenously prepared alcohol. On this point, participants opined that excessive consumption of alcohol ignites various forms of violence against women.

### ***Influence of patriarchal Bengali community***

Over the years, the Garo community has become a minority in their own territory by the deliberate infiltration of the patriarchal Bengali community. They have tactfully and forcibly captured the land and property of the Garo community. However, there has been an influence of Bengali life style on the Garo community. Their patriarchal ideologies and values are penetrating and infiltrating the ideologies and values of the Garo community. Most of the participants opined that this is one of the reasons as to why men, being not traditionally the head of the family, want to dominate women like their Bengali neighbours. One participant said;

“The Bengali people have migrated to our area from many parts of the country. The Garo community is influenced by Bengali patriarchal culture. It is a reason for familial conflict. Men want to dominate over their wives as they see men in the Bengali community dominate their wives.”

### ***Perceptions about the consequences of domestic violence***

Participants also said about various impacts on women caused by domestic violence. The most serious impact is due to losing their property and land. When women lose

their property, they become helpless and destitute. Their honour and dignity in the community also go down. To cope with the effects, they go to Dhaka or some other places and start working as domestic helps/household servants, and they also work as garment workers. Sometimes they also become sexually abused. Many Garo women are now completely dislocated from their roots, and sometimes with their children as well. One participant commented;

“Social dislocation of women is ruining our social fabric to the extreme. Once they go to Dhaka, they usually do not come back.”

### ***Perceptions about the coping strategies and help-seeking practices***

With regard to coping strategies and help-seeking practices, participants informed that usually Garo women try to cope with domestic violence within themselves. As there is no provision of divorce amongst the Garo community, many women silently indulge domestic violence. Moreover, women mentally weaker and modest. They do not want to make their problems public. Nonetheless, in extreme cases, Garo women seek help with their family members, *Mabari* (family clan) and also with Tribal Welfare Association (TWA). They never go to any community NGOs and do not seek recourse to any formal institutional mechanisms.

## **Garos Community Activism regarding Domestic Violence**

Community activism in dissolving conflicts is very strong in the Garo community. *Mabari* (family clan) is the first stair of community intervention. *Mabari* is a group of people descending from mother's lineage. *Mabari* head is a male, and usually the maternal uncle of women. Each *Mabari* resolves small social and family related problems in its own ways. On the other hand, there is a Tribal Welfare Association (TWA) and the members of TWA are elected through direct voting by different indigenous communities. If problems are not resolved through *Mabari* intervention, women might seek recourse with TWA. Upon receipt of a complaint, TWA follows the usual process of conducting *Shalish*. Participants said that TWA at any cost tries to resolve the family problems so that women do not need to go to formal institutional mechanism.

## **Discussion**

This chapter brings the perceptions and activisms of the local community with regard to domestic violence. I selected community participants who were strongly associated with local problems. Although, community perceived domestic violence in many different ways, in this discussion section, I shall limit myself only around the key points of their discussions. Participants' ideas with regard to forms, causes, consequences, coping strategies and help-seeking practices are consistent with almost all the earlier studies in Bangladesh which have focused on these issues. It is said if community does not view domestic violence as a problem, it would not take any action in favour of women since community attitudes and actions shape the social environment of domestic violence (Abeya et al. 2012). It is good to note that most of the community members recognised domestic violence as a problem for their community, and there are

certain intervention mechanisms in the community as well. Moreover, their apparent perceptions about the whole gamut of domestic violence indicate that community pays a close eye on this social problem.

There were some unique features of community perception about domestic violence. Although domestic violence is widely prevalent in Bangladesh society, community members broadly viewed that women from lower and poor socio-economic strata seek recourse, either formal or informal. Although, such perception is strongly opposite to western experiences where women with higher status and education seek more help (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Gelles, 1977; West et.al. 1998 quoted in Naved et al. 2006). Community also viewed that Muslim women seek more support than Hindu women do. In my opinion, it is an attempt to breaking typical patriarchal ideology of *pardab* (seclusion<sup>1</sup>) which is largely levelled with Muslim women. On the other hand, one of the important features of community perception is that it identified a change in people's perception with regard to understanding domestic violence in a holistic manner. It is not merely a physical violence, but a combination of many. It indicates that in rural areas, domestic violence issue is gradually becoming a matter of concern, and a matter of discussion and analysis. Notably, in domestic violence literature, physical violence is only a part of domestic violence, it has many other forms such as; psychological, emotional, economic sexual and emotional (e.g. The Advocates for Human Rights, 2010; WHO 2005). Although, community members identified various factors of domestic violence, I think, identification of patriarchy as a cause of domestic violence has valuable implication. Patriarchy is invariably linked-up with violence against women. It is the origin of women's oppression (Stacey, 1993), and the fundamental mechanism to historically maintained discriminatory practices against women (Dobash and Dobash, 1992). Early marriage, dowry demand, practice of polygamy and demand for male child are the reflection of women's subordination in patriarchal culture. Even the involvement and conflict with mother in law is a reflection of women's subjugation in patriarchal structure. With such a tendency, women becoming the enemies of women (Ganguli and Rew, 2011), and unknowingly acting in favour of the structure and system of patriarchy since their conflict surround men and they take advantage of this situation. On the other hand, by identifying economic violence as form of violence and its relation with micro-credit borrowing, community members cast doubt to the proposition of empowerment of women in Bangladesh. Notably, Bangladesh is globally recognised as the breeding home for empowering women through micro-credit financing, but obstructions created by the husbands on matters related to independently using women's credit money from NGOs questions the validity of such proposition. Since community members are closely associated with local problems, I think, validity with regard to women's empowerment is subject to examination. On the other hand, with regard to impacts of domestic violence, both Bengali community members and Garo community members identified social dislocation as an impact of domestic violence. In Bangladesh, many women and girls are employed in garment industries, and becoming economically sufficient. It is also considered as a source of women's empowerment in academic literature in Bangladesh. But the question is if some women leave their villages due to domestic violence, will mere

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<sup>1</sup> Is a practice assumed to protect women from men. In many societies value is placed to separate women from unrelated men by practicing *pardab*.

economic emancipation help them to overcome emotional distress, detachment from family and children? I think future research must study these aspects with critical insights. On the other hand, community members, identified many impacts on children due to domestic violence. On this point, I am equally concerned with them since studies found witnessing domestic violence by children might lead them to be fearful and anxious (Harne & Radford, 2008), and there is a powerful association between childhood experience of domestic violence and that of being potential perpetrators (Buzaza & Buzaza, 2003; Naved & Persson, 2005).

*Shalish* is the most widely used system of community intervention in rural areas for violence against women which is used by community NGOs also. It is interesting to note that in one hand, community perceived patriarchy as a cause of domestic violence, and on the other hand, the structure and process of *shalish* is notoriously male-dominated, male-biased and often acts in favour of the perpetrators. Women's problems are deliberately minimised in the *shalish* process. Such finding is consistent Khan's (2001) observation that states that money and male power play a role in influencing decisions of the *shalish*. Moreover, this mechanism becomes no effective if any party does not comply the decisions. One of the most unexpected incidents happened while a victim came to me to seek recourse for her domestic violence experiences. The *shalish* that I organised ended in failure due to non-compliance of the decisions made in *shalish* by her husband. Result of this *shalish* cast doubt whether this patriarchal system of rural dispute resolution has absolute authority to bring solutions for domestic violence incidents? On the other hand, there were evidences of failure of *shalish* arranged by the community NGO as well. Perpetrators often did not attend to NGO call. It indicates the stronghold of patriarchy amongst perpetrators and disregarding women's support mechanism.

In addition to that, I also did not find any significant differences between matriarchal Garo community's perceptions with that of patriarchal Bengali community's perceptions regarding domestic violence. Although women are traditionally the head of the family, but men dominate women in every respects which is similar to Bengali community. Their coping strategies are almost similar to Bengali community; but with regard to help-seeking, Garo women never seek support to formal institutional mechanism unlike the Bengali community since they have their own support system. Similar to my findings, previous studies on ethnic minority women in USA, confirmed that ethnic minority women seek support only from ethnic specific support services (Abraham, 2000). The influence of patriarchy also prevalent in Garo community. However, due to prevalence of patriarchy with relation to domestic violence, I term this community as 'pseudo matriarchal'. Women of Garo community are equally vulnerable to their Bengali sisters. Such assumption is consistent with the observation which states that women of all ethnic groups are equally susceptible to domestic violence (Gonzalez, 2010).

## Conclusion

Since it is a qualitative study, I do not generalise the findings of this study in the whole context of Bangladesh, but specific to the study areas. Nevertheless, this research has important implication in the literature of domestic violence in Bangladesh since it has

opened up new issues which never touched upon before. Finally, I suggest community can be an important gateway to redress domestic violence since community commonly identifies domestic violence as a problem, and there are certain community mechanisms to redress violence against women. If community's positive perception and their mechanisms can be properly mobilised and activated, redressing violence in the society would be easier. Government and non-government organisations must strive how to use community's positive perception in to transform it to better service delivery system.

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