

## **Abstract**

The thesis examines women's experiences of domestic violence in Bangladesh. While significant research has been undertaken on domestic violence against women in Bangladesh, no research examines the issue from the point of view of the women who were brutalized, evicted from their marital homes and now live at state funded shelters. I focus on the experiences of women living in Bangladeshi shelters as they related them. The two main research questions addressed in this thesis are:

1. What are the factors that contribute to domestic violence against women in Bangladesh as drawn from the experiences of a specific group of survivors who are living in state funded shelters? How is domestic violence affecting their lives and well-being?
2. How do these women experience their lives in those state funded shelters?

These questions are addressed against the social, cultural and structural context of gender relations in Bangladesh. Women's position in both private and public domains are delineated and the international literature on domestic violence is reviewed. A discussion follows on the importance of gender relations in areas such as marriage, family, education and employment. The analysis of how domestic violence arises, is perceived, sustained and dealt with, leads to the finding that patriarchal social arrangements are one of the root causes of domestic violence on women perpetrated by their husbands and other family members. Other contributory factors are also investigated. The second major concern of this thesis is to explore the survivors' experience of living in shelters.

The thesis is grounded in interviews with sixteen women who were resident in shelter homes in different locations around Bangladesh during 2012 to 2013. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews explored women's experiences of abuse from husbands and other family members and their experience of living in shelter homes. Survivors were mostly economically dependent on husbands and had typically concealed their experiences of abuse to comply with rigid gender constructions, even though they suffered physically

and psychologically. It was only when the women were thrown out of their husband's house, abandoned or secretly divorced that they sought support from shelters. Interviews with fifteen policy makers, NGO executives, women's activists and government employees (shelter staff) were also conducted to identify their perspectives on issues related to domestic violence. This data was then thematically analysed. I engaged an integrated feminist model that includes consideration of psychological and sociological aspects. The objective of the feminist perspective of this thesis was to give voices to women who were completely voiceless in the patriarchal society, which ultimately caused their suffering.

Through analysis of the data collected, it became clear that there is a strong linkage between domestic violence and the patriarchal social and institutional structures in which gender relations have been socially, religiously, culturally and legally constructed. This thesis identifies how Bangladeshi women survivors, especially very poor women, experience many forms of domestic violence, not only abuse by their spouses but also by their mothers-in-law. Women's dark skin colour is also identified as a risk factor for DV, which has not been previously recognised in Bangladesh. In identifying women's dark skin colour issue and the mothers-in-law's presence and their active role either in initiating violence or supporting their son's violence against their daughters-in-law, new knowledge is generated about the nature and causation of domestic violence in Bangladesh.

In the exploration of the survivors' experience of the shelter homes I found that most of the survivors experienced mistreatment and abuse by shelter staff while they were living in shelter homes though these provided the roof over their head when they had nowhere to turn. Analysis of interviews with shelter staff found that most of them held strong patriarchal values and beliefs that subjugate 'other women', who are viewed as a subordinate class. I argue that the shelter staff adopted the mother-in-law's position in dealing with survivors in the shelter. As the position of mother-in-law is one of the most powerful positions that women in Bangladesh can aim to achieve, intentionally or

unintentionally it offers a model for structuring unequal relations between women in settings outside the family.

With the findings about mothers-in-law's' violence and the shelter homes in particular, the conclusion drawn from this study is that the problem of domestic violence is more complex than has been previously understood and that the solutions, such as shelter homes, are not as simple as they seem. The implications for policy and service provision that arise from my enquiry highlight the need to work from a new paradigm to challenge the existing power structure by redefining the social and cultural construction of women's roles and responsibilities. The findings also alert shelter home staff that they must adopt more 'women friendly' attitudes so that survivors can be best supported to start an independent life free from violence. It is also necessary for policy makers in all sectors to formulate and implement effective, timely and sustainable anti-domestic violence measures both in laws and programs.