

# Researching Violence: A Focus on Social Capital

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## Abstract

This qualitative research entails the understanding of the importance of social capital from the perspective of a woman who has been victimized by domestic violence. Because research in the area of domestic violence has its limitations, the researcher mainly relied upon convenience sampling.

The analysis involved the review of transcripts to identify common themes and to examine the underlying assumptions and effects of the language used to talk about relationship violence. Data from in-depth interviews of 50 abused women in Bangladesh suggest that NGOs facilitate trust and network formation indicative of social capital. Through participation in domestic violence support group run by NGOs, women have secured the opportunity to engage in relational self-examination and evolutionary risk-taking in a safe, social arena. In a setting of trust and safety, they begin to view their experiences in a comparative light rather than through the singular lens of guilt and shame.

## Introduction

Within the social sciences, the majority of research on domestic violence has focused on issues like poverty, homelessness, and welfare as many battered women find themselves in such predicaments throughout the course of and after leaving violent relationships (Russell, 1990; Rhodes and McKenzie, 1998; Mallick, 2002). Only in the past decade or so did research begin to focus on the effects of violence on social capital (El-Bassel et al., 2001; Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Wilson & Daly, 1996). But studies investigating characteristics and extent of social capital within domestic violence among the urban are lacking in the South-Asian context. Moreover, the relative scarcity of research on social capital within the subcontinent has made it difficult to effectively explore strategies towards individual-level and community-level social change. Again, whatever little theories on social capital have evolved is rather western, and in recent times there has been much debate on the need to consider culture and ethnicity.

The qualitative study undertaken by the researcher entails the understanding of the importance of social capital from a woman victim's perspective in the South-Asian context. It aims to answer the question: Do victims of domestic violence in Bangladesh draw upon social capital to tackle their situation? More important are the allied questions: If so, do women call upon groups and networks like non-governmental organizations (NGOs)? What are the respondents' subjective perceptions of these key institutions that shape their lives? How do these institutions help in the restoration of social capital?

The researcher provides a wider universe, expanded information set to bring out the cause-effect relationships between domestic violence and social capital on a generalized scale and to help to enhance the resource base of the researches available in the South-Asian context.

### *Literature Review*

Borrowing from others (Larance, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000), social capital is discussed in two related ways. The first, relating to sociologists like Portes and others, refers to the resources (information, ideas, support) that individuals are able to procure by virtue of their relationships with others. These resources are said to be 'social' in the sense that they can be accessible in and through relationships only. The second, which relates to Putnam and others, refers to the nature and extent of one's involvement in various formal and informal civic organizations. From chatting with neighbours and friends to engaging in political activities, social capital is used to characterize a myriad of ways in which community members interact.

Prior research suggested that women, who have been victimized by domestic violence, often have diminished stocks of social capital available for their use. This is so because they have usually been secluded from supportive familial and friendship networks by their abusers, who have kept them isolated and dependent (Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Wilson & Daly, 1996). As the domestic violence increases in a woman's relationship, her social contacts often decrease (Tan, Basta, Sullivan, & Davidson, 1995). Furthermore, her friends are often reluctant to intervene on her behalf (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). Likewise, a woman's embarrassment about living in an abusive relationship may prevent her from approaching family and peers (Browne, 1987). Social capital among battered women is so important because it has been found to have a positive influence on their ability to emotionally adapt to their situation or, conversely, make the decision to leave the abusive relationship (El-Bassel et al., 2001).

But, social capital can have negative effects. When family members are distant or emphasize maintaining an intact family, they limit women's choices (Bauer et al., 2000; Bui, 2003, 2004, 2006; Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996; Huisman, 1996; Rasche, 1988). At the community level, cultural resources can also have negative results for abused women (Gillum et al., 2006; Latta & Goodman, 2005; Short, 2000). Religious leaders and religious group members who maintain patriarchal practices and beliefs about marriage may feel that intimate partner violence is acceptable (Latta & Goodman, 2005; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002), discouraging women, for example, from calling the police (Boehm et al., 1999; Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Richie, 1996). In some community, efforts to address violence against women are often resisted or downplayed by community leaders and members who promote traditional culture and family because such efforts threaten the image of the group (Abraham, 2000; Erez, 2000; Menjivar & Salcido, 2002).

The connection of social capital to help-seeking among abused women has not been thoroughly studied in South-Asia. Research on how social capital affects abused women's efforts to get help through NGOs will improve knowledge on help-seeking among victims of domestic violence.

## **Methodological Framework**

### *Community and sample*

Norms governing segregated and asymmetric gender roles and restrictions on almost all aspects of women's lives and behaviour through the social institution of *purdah*[1]—the social, economic, and frequent physical seclusion of women—remain central realities in the lives of most Bangladeshi women (Amin 1997; Mandelbaum 1988). Domestic violence—or often as much the fear of such violence — plays a key role in maintaining such asymmetric gender roles and in controlling and circumscribing women's capacity or initiative for independent, autonomous actions. Often, the first sexual encounter is unwanted and forced for many women and girls. Wife-beating is common. Qualitative data from Bangladesh describe a range of situations—from the failure to perform domestic chores adequately, to insubordination to the husband or members of the extended family, to inappropriate interactions with male outsiders and/or concerns over fidelity — in which physical beating of the wife by the husband is considered an appropriate and justifiable response (Abdullah and Zeidenstein 1982; Hartmann and Boyce 1983; Schuler et al. 1996, 1998).

In spite of its prevalence, the subject matter of domestic violence is so hidden and sensitive in the urban-setting in Dhaka that initially it was impossible to find women who would be prepared to talk about it without any ground preparation like getting in touch with different women's organizations, consulting the counsellors there about the subject area of research and meeting the respondents time and again to build trust and confidence so that they would be comfortable in intimating the researcher about their experiences of violent acts. Hence researching violence was a difficult and time-consuming issue.

Respondents were identified through Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), an ideology based NGO established in 1986 by a group of committed women activists with the aim of establishing equal rights for women. The NGO provides services like counselling through support group programme that serve female victims of domestic violence. There are several entry points through which an abused woman may access services in BNPS. The 24-hour domestic violence hotline, contact with legal advocates during court proceedings, and community referrals are the primary entry points. 50 women, who enrolled for this non-residential support group programme at BNPS, were interviewed. Those 50 women are the focus of the analysis for this paper.

In selecting the 50 respondents from the NGO, purposive sampling was used. The researcher had to 'go where the respondents are' (Padgett 1998: 51) that is to the site where respondents congregate. As Padgett notes, 'qualitative studies sample to capture depth and richness rather than representativeness.....qualitative researchers feel no need to apologize for sampling strategies that make quantitative researchers cringe... the atypical cases remind us of the richness of human diversity'(p.50). The sample was restricted to women in the age group of 18 to 35 years, who were or had been facing serious and repeated violence in their marital lives for at least one year. They were either currently involved in a violent relationship and have walked out of the abusive relationship not more than 6 months ago with the help of BNPS or the violence has stopped with the intervention of BNPS or have been temporarily left by men who return to them for monetary demands and the violence continues. 10 women have walked out of the relationship, 5 women now lead a violent free life and violence has not stopped for the remaining 35. The respondents belonged to different socio-economic strata of the society so that the variations in the responses could be gauged appropriately.

### *Definition of violence*

This research focused on physical and sexual violent acts. The emphasis was on 'contact' violence as the researcher preferred to call it. The researcher's choice of researching on contact violence was a deliberate choice as there are difficulties in measuring emotional abuse. Moreover, in Bangladesh, where violence by men against women is best understood as part of a patriarchal society that subordinates women through social norms, the true subjective elements of abuse are not very clearly understood by the women themselves, particularly by those who belong to the marginalized section. Hence, restricting the definition to 'contact violence' enabled women respondents from all backgrounds to produce clear and identifiable responses. Physical abuse was defined as any form of violence against her body, such as being hit, kicked, punched, restrained, or deprived of food or water. Sexual abuse was defined as being forced, threatened, or deceived into sexual activities ranging from touching to intercourse or rape.

### *Data Collection: Questions and Interviews*

In this study the data collection was stopped at the fiftieth person as no new observations and insights were seen at this point. 'The emphasis is on quality and not on quantity, qualitative researchers sample not to maximize numbers but to become "saturated" with information about a specific topic' (Padgett 1998:52). Initially, the researcher had to build rapport with the participants so that they would feel comfortable to discuss this sensitive issue. Hence two rounds of interviews were conducted with each of them. The interviews, which lasted for 45 minutes to 120 minutes, were audio-taped and later transcribed. Conversations were mainly in Bangla, the national language of Bangladesh – mother tongue of the respondents. The bilingual researcher (a native Bangla speaker) translated the interview schedules into English for analysis. The period of data collection was from January to April 2008.

The interviews were wide-ranging in order to explore the cross-sectoral links. The interview schedule, which included both close-ended and open-ended questions, included questions based on the literature on vulnerability to domestic violence, help-seeking, and the author's previous study (Morash et al., 1999; Basu, Das & Basu, 2005). The researcher took resort to an interview style which allowed women to discuss issues which were not only important to the area of research but to them too.

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis involved reviewing of all transcripts. The transcripts were analyzed both to identify common themes and to examine the underlying assumptions and effects of the language used to talk about relationship violence. Each transcript was read over three or four times. The first reading of the transcript focused on the material content of the narrative and asked, "What are the participants telling us?" Several themes were identified within each transcript following approaches similar in concept to "grounded theory" and "local integration" (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Weiss, 1994). The second reading shifted to the discursive level and asked, "What does the participants' language suggest about the ways in which their experiences have been produced by the available discourses and their social positioning within those discourses?" Language was seen as something that not only described experience but also as something that constructed it. Analyzing the discursive content involved looking at the dichotomies that were

created. The third reading was made for comparisons with themes. This approach to qualitative data analysis is consistent with those described by other psychologists working from feminist and social-constructionist frameworks (e.g., Marecek, 1999) where experience is seen as a key source for action and empowerment, and is also seen as a socially constructed text. Social capital was treated as sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954) that provided direction for examining the qualitative data.

### *Limitations*

To build up a workable and productive methodology the researcher had to be aware of the inherent constraints of the purported project from the very beginning. Time and resources were very limited. The researcher could not resort to the method of advertising for volunteering battered women to be interviewed. Even surveys using self-administered questionnaires by mail could not be utilized because of wide illiteracy among the women folk. Even in-person survey method could not be easily used, as women would not usually talk to a woman from the same city due to the fear of non-confidentiality, and the method itself is time-consuming. In fact, it was difficult to search and approach appropriate respondents singly and at random.

## **Findings**

### *Description of the sample*

The study participants had diverse demographic characteristics and violence experiences. The mean age was 30 years. The women tended to have low levels of education and limited English proficiency. The largest group (22 women or 44%) experienced both types of abuse (physical and sexual abuse). The second largest group (19 women or 38%) experienced only physical abuse, and the remaining 9 (18%) only sexual abuse. More than half of the women (30 women or 60%) were currently not working. Four women worked from their homes, in a family business, and the rest of the employed women (16 women or 32%) were in jobs. Several women (35 or 70%) indicated that they had no leisure activities, but of those who did, 90% said that their leisure time was spent fully or almost fully with family members.

### *Domestic violence support group*

An abused woman's first contact with the NGO is a pivotal experience, as it may be the first time she links action to the insight that she is abused. Thus, it is also her first step toward establishing trust and the foundation of a network that consists of helping professionals, trained volunteers, and other abuse survivors. To be eligible for support group services at BNPS, women must have experienced a history of abuse by an intimate partner or family member(s) who exercises a pattern of power and control for the purpose of domination. Once a woman enrolls in support group programme, initial assessment of her access to supportive networks of family and friends often reveals varying degrees of social isolation and damaged, if not severed, personal relationships.

*Social isolation*

The restricted mobility of an abused woman and shying away from the community due to shame or embarrassment lead to social isolation. Often the mother is not only branded as psychiatric case but the children are taken away from her.

*'I used to feel that I will not be able to do any work independently. I have developed an apathy towards interactions..... Don't even feel like speaking to people I know.'*

*'I feel like a mad person.....or is that they have started to call me a mad person and I am internalizing the fact? I don't know.'*

*Livelihood impacts*

As a result of this lack of trust, erosion of social capital and building of distrust among the abused women a tremendous impact is felt on the livelihood pattern of these women. Women have to quit job or leave university, college or any training that she intended to complete.

*'I avoided my friends....stopped going to the university.'*

*'When my cousin threw acid on me I had to leave college. My education is discontinued.'*

*'I decided to quit job. Neighbours, co-workers came to know about my abusive relationship. I was unable to take it any more..... it was such a relief to shut myself up in home.'*

*Building up distrust*

The abusive undesirable behaviour from the closest of kin develops a sense of fear and distrust among a large section of the victims for all others who are socially connected. This hinders the process of networking and strengthening of social capital.

*'I have been cheated and manhandled by my husband... I don't believe anyone now... I find it difficult to reconcile. ..I am also afraid to send my daughter to my husband's house.....her uncle might also do something nasty to her...'*

*'My neighbour has been so unkind and misbehaved.....do you think with this experience I can go to any of my neighbours for help?'*

*Effect on child*

Building trust and networks instill the betterment of cognitive or social development of a child or young person (Coleman, 1988). Social capital is productive in the sense that it makes possible the attainment of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence and social capital is forward looking as it in-builds the set of resources that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or young person.

*'My child used to scream in the middle of the night. I see his happy face now when he comes here. He forgot to smile.'*

*'Tuttu, my son, had gotten to a point where he was just terrified. He got to a point where he wouldn't eat when his father was around, he wouldn't sleep while his father was around, and he wouldn't even play or watch TV. He would just sit there like a mummy and wouldn't do anything. That's how terrified he was of his father. That's a lot for a 2-year-old. Now he is much better. Apa [NGO worker] advised me to bring him here, move him out from that place.'*

### *The Support Group Process*

The support group services provide abused women with access to knowledge, skills, and social support necessary to develop or increase protection from abuse—regardless of their ability to pay for services. During the intake session, the counsellor offers basic information about domestic violence and encourages questions. Services are described and group structure and purpose are explained. The group, it is told, will provide her with information about the dynamics of abuse, offer her the opportunity to meet other women and share stories, provide opportunities for her to decrease her isolation, and enlarge her social support system. The intake opens the door for a woman's realization that she is not alone in her experience.

### *Confidence building*

Through participation in the support group process, women have an opportunity to engage in relational self-examination. When a victimized woman takes part in social network for the first time, she often experiences the duality of curiosity and apprehension. But after initial entry, most women assume an informal air and familiarity in their social interactions that sharply contrasts with their relationships at home. Trust begins to form through the predictable, familial network format that is repeated regularly. She gets a direction to which she must orient her behaviour to tackle the problem faced by her. It often clicks and she gains in confidence.

*'My confidence was shattered...I shied away from others. Refused to talk to my friends even when one of them took me to a counselling center. I did not want to divulge my sorrows. But regular visits build up my strength of mind even in intra-family interactions'*

### *Connectedness*

A woman's ability to trust sympathizers and other women with similar experiences begins with her gradual trust in the support networks. Personal trust then transforms into social trust as each woman begins to directly interact with other members and is confident in her ability to relate to them. She acquires mental strength from her being connected with others – she knows she is not alone. As women become more familiar with each other, they begin to connect with other women with whom they feel especially comfortable. At that time, women will share a glance, a touch, or a statement that demonstrates formation of an initial bond. When women observe their peers' reactions to their personal sharing, they begin to make decisions about extending their interactions. As women test their feelings and begin to trust their newly developed inner guidance system, they begin to extend their overtures and seek one another's company. As they do so, they find the conversational means to forge new emotional connections.

Sometimes by subdividing the group into dyads or smaller groups, each woman also exercises her freedom and individualism to choose her own relationships.

*'How I enjoy my intimacy with my friends here. I feel I'm not alone. I share experiences with them. It's a relief from the stifled atmosphere at home.'*

*'I couldn't suffer any more in my loneliness in facing my problems..... sharing feelings with others gave me a bond of friendship.'*

*'Somehow I was lucky.. My maternal uncle came forward to support me, to give me moral strength to face my problems.'*

### *Interactions*

Both personal and social trust are nurtured as women learn to individually challenge the bonds of enforced social isolation and develop healthy relationships with other group members based on their common experiences. Many women state that their group experiences are valuable to them individually and that they, in turn, perceive individual value. These experiences seem to enlarge the sense of self and the possibilities of contributing to and altering the social order. This interplay between personal and social trust is highlighted in the exchanges that include embracing, problem solving, sharing pictures of children, bringing food to enjoy for all women, passing tissues to tearful peers, and laughing together because of the irony of similar experiences or revelations. Group members' social involvement—getting together for pleasure or support—outside the agency is an indicator of a network becoming denser. As new social bonds are formed, they find a solace that is lacking in relationships that do not permit the emergence of their true feelings.

*'My life was total zero till I met members of the group..... interactions with them gave me pleasure.....consolation in my handicapped position.'*

*'I felt helplessness when my parents and friends advised me to adjust with my in-laws....that is the place for me. At this condition of despair I was lucky to come across the group and interaction with its members helped me to dispel despair.'*

### *Building space for choices*

Women chose to become involved with one another through interactions. Some women may share transportation to and from the group meeting; better childcare services; help each other move out of a partner's house; engage in tearful comfort or validation; exchange skills such as haircutting or tailoring instructions; attend court and proceedings with a member who needs additional support etc.

*'I was in need of legal advice. My friend, here, referred me to the legal seminar.'*

*'My group gave me two jobs from which I chose one to stand on my own feet.'*

## **Conclusion**

### *Discussion*



A Bangladeshi woman's identity and relationships are traditionally decided by patriarchal practices and *purdah* norms, which contribute to her isolation and therefore limit her involvement in community life and more so, in case of a victim of domestic violence. The researcher's observations at one NGO have shown how involvement with NGOs can change this dynamic. Without intact or available personal support networks, NGO intervention can be life-sustaining for survivors of domestic violence because it provides women the opportunity to establish trust and form social networks that may not be present or are unavailable but necessary for the survivors' ability to cope and change their lives. As female victims of domestic violence gather to tell their stories, they courageously give voice to their experiences. It may be the first time they have done so in the presence of others and in deference to their ever-evolving selves. By letting their voices resonate with the group chorus— silent or otherwise—they gain strength and power and gradually learn to trust themselves while building community, which is the essence of social capital. These groups provide abused women the opportunity to establish trust and build networks. Extra-familial group member actions and statements have demonstrated that those relationships and networks can be banked upon for support or for enjoyment. This social capital that many women form as a result of their group participation also provides them with a framework for building future trustful networks. Many may not have had the experience of being able to trust someone by relying on them and then reciprocating that trust. But as stories evolve, social capital is reinforced.

The findings are validated and strengthened by consistency with other research. According to Aries and Johnson (1983), "talk is the substance of women's friendships"; it is the "central feature of women's friendships" (p. 354). With the opportunity to talk, group members individually "develop a sense of inner security and self-esteem" (Aries & Johnson, 1983, p. 355) through their interactions. Women's conversations within the group are essential to their trust and network formation. The researcher has witnessed that contained within these interactions is a common respect among group members for each woman's intellectual ability and potential (Aleman, 1997). These friendships seem to positively affect each woman's self-worth, as they seem to view each other as necessary for self-discovery and growth.

The research suggests that support groups are organized in a way that "creatively combines individual choice with collective engagement" (Putnam, 1993, p. 41). Women are then able to decrease their isolation while building social trust and life-sustaining networks—all of which compose their social capital.

#### *Implications for practice*

Domestic violence policies and programmes need to address the issue of community norms and values, a part of social capital that serves as social control by imposing constraints on women. Without change in norms, in time of crisis women can be isolated even when surrounded by family and friends, because orthodox views of kin and community about marriage and gender roles are that domestic violence is acceptable behavior, and seeking help is not appropriate (Yoshihama, 2002). Community-driven efforts to combat domestic violence also need to focus on changing the community's view of gender relationships in general and on domestic violence and getting help in particular. Needless to say that more NGOs and support groups rendering help to abused women are required to flourish.

**Notes:**

[1] According to Blanchet (1984: 119), '*purdah* is an Islamic norm which secludes women because of the moral danger promiscuity represents in a society of men'.

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