

Problems and Challenges of Deserted Women in Bangladesh: An Observational Study

Neaz Ahmed

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology

Faisal Ahmmed

Shahjalal University of Science and Technology

As in other countries of the world, desertion is widely seen in Bangladesh especially in urban centers. Due to industrialization and urbanization, every year huge numbers of poor people migrate from rural to urban in search of work and usually settle in slums which are characterized by anonymity, mobility and absence of primary group attachment. Since marriage registration is a nominal matter to them, marital instability is of widespread concern among the women in slum areas. Due to the absence of male support, burden of family maintenance, gender division of labor, lack of access to income generating activities and overall social restriction, they face problems in every step of life. This paper has given attention towards the problems and challenges that are being faced by the deserted women living in Sylhet City located in north eastern part of Bangladesh.

Desertion has been seen throughout history, but the phenomenon of wives deserted or abandoned by their husbands has been growing invasively for more than a decade, especially in South Asian and other developing countries across the world. It does not mean that wife abandonment is entirely absent in developed countries, but divorce and separation are more common rather than desertion or abandonment in those countries, as socio-economic vulnerability is not prominent there. In present times, developing countries are urbanizing rapidly across the world. Bangladesh is not an exception. Due to enormous growth of cities, migrants from rural areas enter into urban centers in search of work and livelihood. Increasing flow of migration makes cities over crowded with dense slum settlements and worsening poverty. These slum areas are characterized by anonymity and “nuclear orientation”. It is easier for both men and women to hide their marital history, relocate and remarry without anyone knowing, and they are less likely to face sanctions (Jesmin & Salway, 2000). In many cases, migrant men start new families elsewhere, creating a new set of obligation and undercutting economic support to their first family (Bruce, 1995). Although deserted women are found in rural areas, marital instability/disruption and deser-

tion are widespread concerns among the women in lower income groups of urban slum areas and “is now gaining public attention in developing countries”.

Bangladesh is a densely populated country. It is known to be one of the poorest countries in the world, and Bangladeshi women are the poorest of the poor (Mannan, 2000). Among them, the most vulnerable section is the female headed households, particularly headed by the divorced, widowed, and abandoned women who formed the majority of hard core poor (Karim, 2001; Mannan & Ahmed, 2012; Asian Development Bank, 2001; Joshi, 2004; Chain & Khanam, 1985). Regardless of vulnerability and the increasing numbers of female-headed households, less are documented in our country. Official estimates suggest that less than a tenth of households are headed by women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1996), but Afsar (1997) found that the actual proportion could be around 20 to 30 percent. Among the female-headed households, over 95 percent of female-headed households in Bangladesh are considered to fall below the poverty line (United Nations Development Program, 1996). Among the destitute women, those who are divorced or old and have minor children are exposed to the most uncertainties. Particularly in the rural areas, most of the rural women of Bangladesh are basically housewives and their husbands are the only earning members of their families. Becoming widowed means losing the breadwinner and leading a harsh livelihood. This is also true for the women who are divorced, separated, or abandoned by their husbands. At present, widowed, divorced, and abandoned women constitute about 11.29 percent of total married women in the country (BBS, 2009).

Marriage dissolution and desertion profoundly affects financial, emotional, physical, and social conditions of South Asian women. Among them, the situation of Bangladeshi women is a comparatively dire one (Mannan, 2000). Patriarchal culture and social tradition confine most of the women within the home. They depend on male breadwinners from birth to death. A majority of the women are unskilled and unemployed, whereas in developed countries most of the women are engaged in income earning activities and, therefore, absence of a husband does not create economic havoc in life. Only psychological sufferings are found among them. But in a developing country such as Bangladesh, the absence of male breadwinner has serious consequences on women, as well as their children. It throws women into economic hardship and insecurity.

All female-headed families have serious financial consequences, but the actual experience is more difficult for the deserted women who lose spousal income and, at the same time, are compelled to meet the needs and demands of the family. In many countries, various alternatives and support system are initiated for abandoned women. The Indian Government introduced a scheme for providing financial assistance to the non-voluntary abandonment of the wife by her husband. If the husband—by his words—compels the wife to leave the matrimonial home or stay away without reasonable cause, he will be guilty of desertion, though the wife has seemingly separated from him. Desertion is frequently coupled with non-support, which is a failure to provide monetary resources for those to whom such an obligation is due. The scheme is a welfare measure to support Indian women in distress through the mobilization of the local Indian community in the endeavor and with some financial assistance from the government. The

scheme would be available to Indian women who have been deserted. Adequate means of support, however, are not found for these women in Bangladesh. The wife who secures divorce may legally arrange her financial settlement and social support, and the widow can get benefits from government social safety programs. But all of those supports and opportunities deny deserted women. Societal people feel fewer obligations to help these women. Rather than friendly help and sympathy, they are more often despised and blamed (Eubank, 1996). Lack of enough resources, social support, and burden of family force them to lead a vulnerable and regrettable life. Recently there has been growing concern about the condition of women in general, and our government has undertaken various interventions for securing women empowerment. But now, husband-deserted women are still struggling hard to survive due to miserable economic conditions. Though NGOs are active in the emancipation of women, they have no program especially for these destitute women.

The consequence of desertion on women and their children varies and it turns them into the disadvantaged group in the society. Bhuiya and his colleagues (1995) examined the predisposing factors leading to marital disruption and its consequences on the lives of women. Habib (2007) explored that the absence of a male breadwinner and the lack of tangible resources led to a situation of increased vulnerability for the female heads of households that, in turn, affected socio-psychological status of the female heads adversely. Due to lack of income and poor economic condition, education opportunity is very low among these families and hence lower level of cognitive development. This is due to the fact that many female heads find it very difficult to run the family with only one person's income, especially when the female's earnings were insufficient. That is why they engage their children in work to earn some extra money.

In Bangladesh every year a large number of women are deserted by their husbands. Various causes are responsible in this regard, such as faulty process of marriage, poverty, inability to provide family support, extra-marital relationships, anonymity, lack importance on marriage registration, unemployment, unpaid dowry demand, and drug use. Desertion has adverse consequences for women and their dependent children. Without male support and sufficient resources, they often face difficulties to maintain their family. Due to their lack of education and skill and a strict gender division of labor they often involve in work with low wages, even sometimes engaging in illegal activities to continue their survival.

Methods

Case study method was applied to elicit the struggles and nature of survival patterns of deserted women, with special attention to the problems and challenges they usually face in society. As there is no database about the deserted women, the research team visited different areas of Sylhet city and learned that deserted women usually live in slums. From that point of view, the study purposively selected the slum community. Ten deserted women living in slums were selected purposively as they agreed to share their personal experiences in front of the research team. All respondents were given an in-depth interview with the sup-

port of a pre-tested, open-ended interview guide. With consent from respondents, interview sessions were recorded through audio tape recording. Getting access to women respondents is not an easy task for male researchers in a conservative society like Bangladesh. To compensate this limitation the research team recruited a female research assistant who had experience in conducting in-depth qualitative interviews. Guided by the research team, the research assistant spent a fair amount of time in the field, and before formal interviewing she made rapport with selected respondents. This relationship helped the research assistant to gather authentic data in a cordial environment. The research team was sensitive towards privacy and confidentiality of respondents and carefully avoided questions that could affect their psychological wellbeing. Data was transcribed and analyzed following an acceptable manner of qualitative research.

Results

Background of Deserted Women

The study reveals that most of the deserted women had grown up in landless and wage earning families. Economic vulnerability of their natal family compelled them to engage in child labor from their early childhood rather than to go school or to continue their study. That is why most of the studied deserted women were illiterate, and a few of them were found who studied up to primary level. Only those who can write a signature learned it as condition for taking micro credit after desertion of husband. Besides economic vulnerability, parents' unconsciousness about the importance of education also played a significant role in their low education level. Deserted women were found hurriedly married without knowing enough information about groom. Some of them were married to their boy friend informally without any marriage registration-a legal protection of marriage. Dowry was a major influencing factor in the process of their marriage. As dowry demand is lower for child wives, most of their parents arranged marriage for them at their early age. Some goods like cloth, furniture, watches, household utensils, and rickshaw were given to husbands' families during their marriage from their parental family as gift. Parents had to arrange those for the expectation of a safe future and peaceful conjugal life for their girls. But most of the women were found to be unhappy in their conjugal life. Almost all of them have experienced severe torture and discrimination by their husbands and in-laws. Despite learning about a husband's extramarital relationship, they could not protest it, fearing conflict and disruption of marriage and always trying to maintain good relationship with their husbands.

Causes of desertion

Extramarital relationship of the husband was the most common cause of desertion cases. Among ten respondents, five claimed that they were deserted by their husband due to his extramarital affairs. This resulted in negligence towards the wife and, in the same way, to second marriage of the husband. Another dominating issue related to desertion was demand of dowry by the groom. When a wives' family was unable to continuously fulfill the economic demand of the

groom that resulted in torture of the wife and forcing her to leave the home with her minor children without any financial support.

Sometimes cultural, religious and social values are responsible for family desertion. Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim-populated country where Muslim marriage laws and Islamic religious law “*shariah*” permit polygamy under specific conditions. If permission is received from the first wife for a second marriage, a husband can get married for a second time, and he is bound by law to provide maintenance equally to all wives. However, in reality, polygamy is widely practiced without considering these specific conditions. Besides, patriarchal value causes people’s mentality to tolerate any activity against women by males. Moreover, as most of the marriages have taken place informally without legal registration, husbands do not feel pressure on any marital obligations towards their wives. For those reasons a man can continue a relationship easily with another woman keeping one wife at home or remarry and easily leave the first wife and her children. This practice is commonly seen in urban slum areas and among lower class people.

Housing Problem and Eviction

In urban slum areas, deserted women have to pay house rent and other bills such as electricity and gas on their own, which are very expensive considering their income level. They face the threat of eviction when they become unable to pay house rent in time. As they are landless, have less, and are not earning opportunity in rural areas, it becomes difficult for them to return from urban areas to their village. Moreover, most of them are denied support from their own family or from their in-law family. This reality forced them to compromise with other essentials for life like food and clothing. Sometimes this reality threw them into an inhuman life. One of the respondents stated ,

I am a poor woman and continuously struggling to earn for mere survival. I cannot pay house rent timely since I don't have regular income. My house owner sometimes tried to force me to be evicted from his house.

Stress and uncertainty always make them vulnerable, and they are under risk of sudden eviction. Getting accommodation in another slum becomes difficult for them. As they do have poor financial capability, low-cost housing is preferred by most of such women. But arranging low-cost housing is so difficult near to their working place. Working in a remote area from their house is not possible for them due to transportation cost and difficulty looking after their children. Some of the deserted women share residence with their close relative as a way to reduce housing cost. One respondent stated,

When my husband abandoned me I fall in a terrible economic condition. After passing some days I found it impossible to pay house rent regularly. Then I seek my father's help and started to share housing with my parental family. I give my entire income to my father's family. Now I am tension free regarding failure of pay house rent and free from threat of eviction.

In order to increase tenure security, another coping strategy adopted by deserted women is to maintain a good relationship with slum leaders. But sometimes its result brings more complexity for them. Taking advantage of their vulnerability, the slum leaders always try to practice unequal power over them and sometimes try to attain illicit goods through them or even oblige them to engage in illegal activities. The following comment reflects this issue:

In my previous habitat I had a good relationship with 'Sharder' (slum leader). Therefore I used to find chance to pay rent making delay. But one day he proposed me to transport liquor/drug. I agreed with his proposal thinking that if I refuse, he will evict me from the slum. But he started to oblige me such activities one after one in exchange of some money. At last I had to change my slum to protect myself from such criminal activity.

In few cases getting no alternative, deserted women have to live in a single room shared by family members. This environment is not suitable for maintaining physical integrity and privacy.

Financial Insecurity and Hardship

In Bangladesh, females are economically dependent upon male breadwinners for their support along with their children. Thus, married women living without a male breadwinner face severe economic crisis. Their miserable economic conditions are attributed to the fact that they have a lack of assets, low level of education and skills, limited employment opportunities, and a discriminatory structure of labor force. Being deserted, they lose both husband and his property. As this largely happens among a low-income group, parental property ownership is not seen among them. So being abandoned by husbands they become less resourceful. Female-dominated occupations, including household work, are low remunerative. Even such types of full-time employment cannot assure their financial security. Besides, many of the deserted women have large families. They work in the construction sector or other informal sectors as a day laborer without any steady pay and fight to maintain their family. Women who work as a day laborer find it difficult to sustain their job around the year, especially during rainy season, and such uncertainty of earning always creates tension for these deserted women about how they will maintain their family. One respondent spoke about her hardship in this way:

I have no permanent work. Every day I get up early in the morning, hurriedly cook food for my children and then I have to go to nearest busy street or market place where I wait with other laborer in search of work. The people who need worker hire us usually for one day. One day I find work but another day I don't. It becomes difficult for me to survive when I do not have permanent work. Sometimes I find work in household construction or road construction that continue for some days. This ensure my economic safety for those days but this opportunity is not frequently found. This reality always keeps me in uncertainty of earning.

Due to their uncertainty of regular income, most of them desire savings for mitigating future crises, but small income does not permit them to do so, as there

is usually no money left after mitigating everyday needs. One of the respondents opined that:

I always think of my future crisis and want to save some money. But I earn 2000 Bangladesh Taka (BDT, around 25 USD) monthly which is not sufficient to run a four members family. I am the only earning member in my family. So, how could I save money from my little income? I cannot make anybody understand about such plight.

Economic vulnerability has a profound effect on desertion and it threatens their survival. Their vulnerable economic condition forces them to be constantly worried about their present and future situation. As they fully depend on their physical strength for earning, fear of physical ailment is strong among them. If they get sick, they have to fight severe economic crises. To cope with this harsh reality they either have to take loans from others or frequently buy goods from local shops on credit. This also increases their vulnerability and compels them to remain in a vicious cycle of insolvency. One of the respondents explained how she manages herself during any crisis:

My daily income varies from 150-200 BDT (about 2-3 USD). But there is no certainty whether the job will be available for the whole month. In most cases forty per cent of days remain jobless and I have to maintain family with irregular and poor income. Sometimes I can't work due to my illness. At that crisis moments I have to borrow money from neighbors or money lenders who charge abnormal interest.

Physical Insecurity and Harassment

Apart from their economic insecurity and hardship, physical insecurity is also a serious challenge for them, especially for those who are young. Absence of a male guardian places them at risk of sexual harassment, and many of them are abused both at home and workplace. Rough and lecher people think of them as an object and want to use them to meet their sexual desire. If they refuse or protest, they are evicted from their habitat or lose their work. One respondent broke down in tears when expressing her sufferings:

When I was in a slum of Uposhor area, a voracious eye of slum leader fall on me and he proposed me to engage in sexual relationship with him. But I refused him and that's why he propagated rumor and blamed me that I am a prostitute. With the help of some offensive and bad men in that slum he tortured me and forced me to leave the slum. I prayed for justice to many influential people including owner of the slum but nobody helped me.

Another respondent illustrated her experience in following ways:

While my husband remarried and stopped contact with me, I fell in difficulty to cope with new situation. I became puzzle about how I will meet all needs of the family. In the meantime one of my known women provided mental support and brought me in this city. At first I took shelter in a slum situated in Amberkhana. As I had no training and education for engaging formal earning sectors, I wanted to work as household worker and went door to door in search of this job. But as my baby was so little, nobody gave me employment. At last with the help of my known woman I started work as a laborer. As no one was in my home to take care of my baby, I kept him lying under a tree beside my workplace. Sometimes I fed

him when he cries but my coworkers harassed me with different slang languages at that moment. I also faced problem of sexual harassment. As I was young and good looking, I always wear dirty and dark cloths to protect me from bad eyes of rough people. But this couldn't save me at last. A contractor of my workplace offered me for sex in exchange of money. I refused him and left the job.

There is group of people in slum that appear as perpetrators of sexual harassment, and if the woman refuges, she has to experience torture, exploitation, and threat of eviction. When their patience runs out, they complain to the local influential persons but hardly find justice; rather, it increases their insecurity. Most of the deserted women stated that they usually avoid complaining and tolerate all exploitations silently. However, this type of insecurity varies from women who live with a parental family and women living separately only with their children.

The risk of insecurity is most traumatizing for those deserted women who have a grown-up daughter in home. There is always the psychological pressure of maintaining their daughter's physical safety and virginity. In slum areas, low education attainment and unemployment are the most common features and thus deviant behaviors are frequent. Due to a close connection with the informal local power structure of the slum area, criminals and wayward boys always try to fulfill their evil motives. They always disturb the young girls, especially those who have no male guardian. Furthermore, they try to perform their vile nature through fake emotional relationships with such unpretentious girls. That is why deserted women sometimes find it difficult to continue their daughter's education or to keep them at home alone. As they have no male guardians, they always become worried about their protection and safety. Almost all the participants who arranged the marriage of their daughter at child age claimed that they did it fearing sexual harassment by the hooligans. One of the respondents shared her experience in this connection,

I always face insecurity for my elder daughter who is 14 years old. She worked as a domestic worker to generate economic supporter for the family. An addicted boy of our slum loved her and one day proposed her. But she never liked him and opposed his offer. From that day he started to irritate her. I complained to Sharder (slum leader) but as slum leader was his cousin, he didn't take my appeal in his consideration. And the boy increased his annoyance. One day he stopped my daughter on her way. Knowing this I ran to the spot and rescue my daughter with the help of some other people. After then he frequently threatened me. Finding no other way, I sent her to my brothers' house. All of which always keep me tensed about the insecurity of my daughter and also of my family.

Low Social Status

In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, husbands are considered as women's guardians, and a woman without male guardians is considered to be of lower social status. So in this social landscape, deserted women become a vulnerable group in the society. Social negligence and ill treatment becomes part of their everyday life, as if they brought the status willingly and should be punished and tortured by perpetrators. They are seen as deplorable by the other social people. Such negligence places them in a low social position. The society used to blame

them that they were not capable of performing the role of a ‘good wife’ and thus are being abandoned. If they talk to a male, propaganda rose by community people and accused the deserted women and pass bad comments towards them (This sentence is a little off. Maybe “If they talk to a male, the community spreads rumors about them, accuse the women, and direct bad comments towards them.”). The following comment of a deserted woman depicted their vulnerable status;

After untraced of my husband I was befriended with another person who promised to take responsibility of me and my children. But some days of our marriage he went away which made me very upset. But one of my neighbors offered me mental support. I always share my sorrow with him and seek his help when needed. I see him as brother. But some people in our slum can't see it positively. They blamed me that I restrain one after one man for earning money and to continue my evil propensity.

This is mainly due to the stereotypical belief of society that all the women working with men are always bad. In the case of deserted women this labeling is excessive as they live without male partner. One respondent spoke of it in this way:

Not getting alternative I engaged myself in construction work which is laborious and difficult for a woman. My neighbors always unreasonably criticize me and say that I am a woman with bad moral character and can't keep on without male partner. Not only this when my children do any wrong behave with others in our slum they call them badly using my name with unpleasant wording and my kids get hurt of it.

Problem of Rearing Children

Rearing children is considered a burden to deserted women. Due to lack of financial support, they are usually forced to engage in more than one job or have longer working hours. This consequently causes them difficulty in taking responsibility of rearing children. They work in an informal sector, which has no facility of child care. All studied women household workers having children with younger age mentioned that their house master did not allow them to keep their baby with them during work. That is why they have to depend on their elder children to rear up their younger children by stopping their school. The situation is complicated for those women who have no other member in the family to look after their children. They have the complete responsibility to take care of their infant in addition to their occupation and household chores. The studied women of this category said that they have chosen to enter into a day laborer's job as they have the chance to keep their child near to the working place. Though they have to tolerate scolding by co-workers for this, they accept the situation for the safety of their minor children. Though this arrangement can help them in reducing tension for the infant, other children remain unprotected inside the hostile slum environment. This reality is illustrated by a deserted woman who was a house hold helper:

I always worried about my children during my work. In absence of me they engage in quarrel and fight with other children. Sometimes taking break from work I visit

home to see them. I never agree to work in remote area in spite of better remuneration only thinking about them.

Lack of Assets

Deserted women own very few assets. It is found that most of them are deprived of a husband's property. Along with poverty, their unregistered marriage and lack of contact with their in-laws' family makes them asset-less. Among our respondents, only one was living with her mother-in-law in a small hut. But others have no household of their own. On the other hand, due to the poor condition of the natal family and existing societal culture, they are also denied inherent property. Though the government has enacted laws on property inheritance rights for women, in reality, most of the women are denied this right. Moreover, many of them are the only earning member of their family, and their little earnings are spent for meeting basic needs and could not generate any savings. That is why their resources are insufficient to obtain enough possessions. They only possess nominal low-cost household goods. Costly items are beyond imagination for them. This scene was illustrated by a participant:

I always face shortage of goods. I have no capability to buy all necessary items, only some cheap goods belonging to me. Apart from essential cooking utensils a single bed is in my house due to which some of us sleep on the ground. During rainy and winter season it becomes difficult for us to sleep without sufficient warm cloth. It becomes difficult to survive in hot day due to lack of any electric fan.

Conclusion

Deserted women in Bangladesh are placed in a deplorable condition and experience multifarious problems to continue their survival. Development projects frequently emphasize destitute women and target them into programs, but still now this segment of women are excluded from any services. Their vulnerabilities are taken into less consideration by both the government and larger society. It goes without saying that desertion imposes particular challenges and disadvantages for the women, as they are highly impoverished with very little or no access to both familial property and to social service schemes. Their employment options place them in utter impoverishment as they have to meet the demands of their larger family. Very few possibilities are left to meet their basic needs, and they experience continuous hardship to rear their dependent children. Stereotypical belief and bias against deserted women makes their struggling life more difficult. They are always deprived of and exploited by both family and surroundings. So, it is important to create effective policies, strategies, programs and action plans to ensure a suitable environment for them, which can improve their standard of living.

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