

Working Paper 536

**Domestic Violence Against
Women – A Case Study and
the Role of Civil Societies
from the Sundarbans Region
of West Bengal**

**Anamika Das
C M Lakshmana**

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN – A CASE STUDY AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETIES FROM THE SUNDARBANS REGION OF WEST BENGAL

Anamika Das¹ and C M Lakshmana²

Abstract

The main purpose of the present study is to understand the issues of Domestic Violence against Women and the role of civil societies to address the issues of domestic violence in Sundarbans region. This study has utilised four case studies (from 155 respondents), collected from a primary survey conducted in two blocks (Jaynagar II and Kultali) of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and the role of existing civil organisations and NGOs to address the issue of domestic violence against women. However, it is found that a socially-accepted norms in Indian patriarchal society such as the practice of dowry, preference of the male child, the practice of early age marriage and lack of understanding between spouses are the major causes of domestic violence in the study area. Added to the issue, it is also revealed that the dependency of women on husbands is also a cause of physical, emotional and sexual violence. Those who have separated from their husbands face major economic difficulties in taking care of their children. Due to this reason, women migrate to Kolkata and surrounding urban areas for work. The findings also revealed that most women are not aware of their rights. Added to the issue, existing civil society organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) namely, Sundarban Janasramajibi Mancha, Samadhan, and Missing Link Trust are creating awareness and counselling to victims who had come forward and sought support and help. They have taken the initiative to educate and empower the most vulnerable children, women and girls in the Sundarbans through skill training such as tailoring, computer training and spoken English classes. Skill training, to some extent, worked as a remedy to prevent domestic violence against women. But still, domestic violence is rampant in West Bengal as well as in Sundarbans region of South 24 Parganas district. Hence, there is an urgent need to strengthen the PWDV Act - 2005 by appointing more Protection Officers at the village/block level where they should play a more active role by involving Police, Panchayat members, civil society and NGOs to provide counselling and justice on time to the victims of domestic violence. Further, they should create more awareness in preventing and reducing domestic violence at the village level.

Keywords: Domestic Violence against women, Issues, Civil Organisation, Non-Governmental Organisation, Sundarbans Region, West Bengal

Introduction

Domestic Violence against Women (DVAW) is considered a universal issue that occurs irrespective of every culture and social group in society. In India during the 1970s 'wife beating' as a form of domestic violence were raised by many women's movements namely, Shahada Movement, Anti-arrack Movement (Sahu, 2021). The Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, 1995 in Beijing stated that, "Violence against Women (VAW) is a manifestation of the historically unequal power relation between men and women"; and the 1996 UN World Health Assembly declared, "Violence against women as an important public health problem". However, World Health Organisation's (2013) global figures on domestic violence indicate that worldwide about one in every three (35 per cent) women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by their partner or non-partner, during their lifetime. As a part of this issue, it is also argued that much of this violence is intimate partner violence. Women who have been physically or sexually abused by their partners report higher rates of several important health

¹ PhD Scholar, Development Studies, Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore- 560072. Email: anamika@isec.ac.in

² Professor, Population Research Centre (PRC). Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore-560072, E-mail: lakshmana@isec.ac.in

problems. They are 16 per cent more likely to have a low-birth-weight baby. They are more than twice as likely to have an abortion, almost twice as likely to experience depression, and, in some regions, are 1.5 times more likely to acquire HIV, as compared to women who have not experienced partner violence. The study "Violence Against Women Increases the risk of Infant and Child Mortality" by Monemi A, (2003) has revealed that several adverse health effects on women, i.e., arthritis, migraine, stammering, stomach ulcers, chronic pelvic pain, sexually transmitted infections, spastic colon, frequent constipation, indigestion, diarrhoea, etc. Fatal outcomes are suicides, homicide, death; non-fatal outcomes are pregnancy-related like, gynaecological problems, psychosomatic problems, physical consequences, self-destructive, mental health-type of consequences. These affect not only the woman but, in the long or short run, affects the entire family. It is also affecting the children's education, growth and development. Therefore, the main purpose of the present study is to understand the issues of domestic violence against women and the role of civil societies to address the issues of domestic violence in Sundarbans region. The study areas are selected purposively for the present study.

Objective

- To examine the issues of Domestic Violence against women in the study area.
- To analyse the role of civil societies in addressing the issue of domestic violence against women.

Data Source

This article is developed from the researcher's thesis titled, "Domestic violence against Women and its impact on Women and Child Health in West Bengal." The study has utilised four case studies (from 155 respondents), collected from a field survey conducted in six villages of two blocks of South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal with the help of local NGOs namely, Sundarban Janasramajibi Mancha, Samadhan, and Missing Link Trust and also analysed how existing civil societies and NGOs address the issues of domestic violence against women in the study area.

Methodology

The data collection for the study was done between December 2018 and March 2019. The present study has used a multistage sampling technique to select women who faced domestic violence in their married life. In the first stage, two blocks namely Kultali and Jaynagar II from South 24 Parganas district were selected purposively, as several incidences of domestic violence had been reported there according to the data given by the National Crime Records Bureau³. In the second stage, three villages from each block, namely, Madhusudanpur, Katamari, and Baikunthapur in Kultali Block; Nalgora, Sonatikri, and Chuprijhara in Jaynagar II Block were selected purposively, as high incidence of domestic

³ In West Bengal, district South 24 Parganas has the highest i.e., 3,504 cases registered under cruelty by husband and relatives, among all crimes against women in the district (National Crime Records Bureau, 2014). Between 2005 and 2007, the Sundarbans region recorded the highest cases of crime against women. In the case of crimes against women, Jaynagar I and II block ranks highest, followed by Kultali Block (Development and Planning Department Government of West Bengal, 2009).

violence was observed by local NGOs. In the third stage, the random sampling method was used for the selection of households to collect data from ever-married women (EMW) who faced domestic violence.

Operational Definition

Domestic violence against women is defined as any act of force or coercion (physical, sexual, emotional and economical) by their husbands or relatives (connected to her through marriage, family relation, or acquaintanceship) that seriously endangers the life, body, psychological integrity, or freedom of women in a family. The following definitions are referred from the National Family Health Survey Report (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2007).

Table 1: Operational definition of Domestic Violence against Women

Violence type	Respondent questions
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. throwing something, pushing, shaking b. slapping c. twisting arms, pulling hair d. punching or something that could hurt you e. kicking, dragging or beating f. choking and burning g. attacking with a knife or any sharp weapon
Sexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. trying forceful sexual relationship b. unnatural sex you dislike c. faced an unwanted pregnancy
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. verbally aggressive or something to humiliate in front of others b. threaten to hurt or harm you or someone close to you or commit suicide c. insult you or make you feel bad about yourself
Economical ⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Denial of access to food b. Denial of access to basic necessities c. Denial of access to financial security

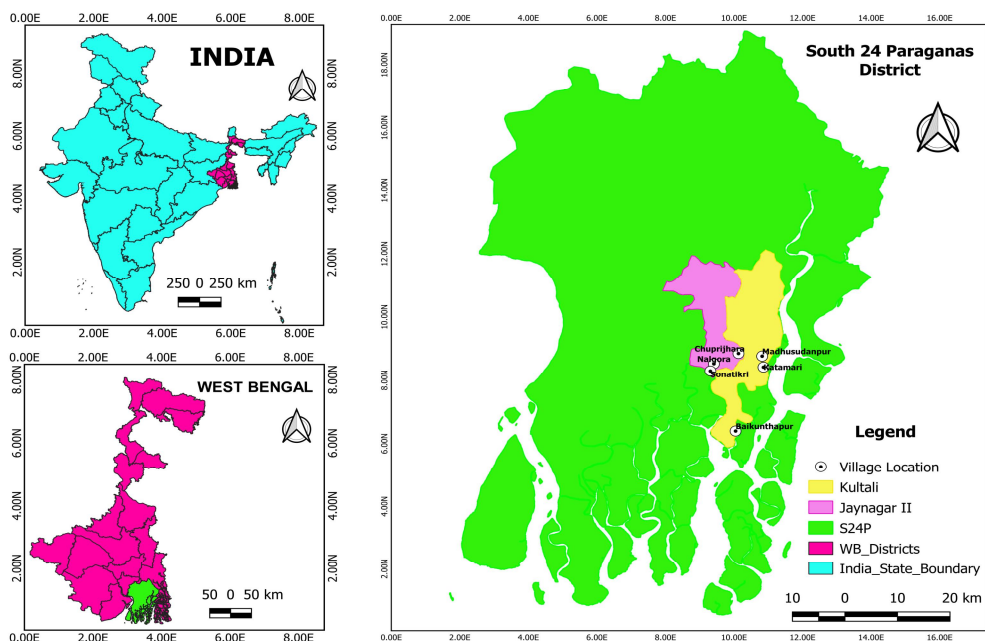
The Study Area and Villages

The district of South 24 Parganas, selected for the study, is situated between latitude 21°29'00" N to 22°33'45" N and 88°03'45" E to 89°04'50" N longitude approximately. South 24 Parganas is the largest district of West Bengal state comprising 29 C.D. Blocks and the second-most populated district (8.1 million out of which, 4.1 million male and 3.9 million female populations). The highest Scheduled Caste Population of the State is located in the South-East corner of the State. The Sex Ratio of the District is 956 (No. of females per 1,000 males) is higher than the State's Sex Ratio i.e., 950. The district has a literacy rate of 77.5 per cent which is higher than the State average of 76.3 per cent (Census of India, 2011).

⁴ Economic violence is referred from the definition of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA, 2005).

South 24 Parganas is a riverine district with almost a third of the population living on islands of the southern Sundarbans⁵ blocks. Fishing is a natural occupation choice for a large part of the population (Development and Planning Department Government of West Bengal, 2009). Some households derive a larger part of their incomes from wage work as a daily labour in the agricultural or non-agricultural sector is seasonal and volatile (daily / agricultural / other physical labourer). Majority of the households who own land primarily depend on farming for their livelihood, even though they use the majority of their produce for household consumption. Those who reside near the forest areas depend on forest resources (wood, honey collecting etc.) to meet their day-to-day needs. To achieve the goal, six villages (Madhusudanpur, Katamari, Baikunthapur, Nalgora, Sonatikri, and Chuprijhara) from two blocks - namely Kultali and Jaynagar II⁶ were selected purposively for the study (Fig: 1). The economic profile of both the blocks is not very impressive. The majority of the inhabitants live on a "hand to mouth" existence (Missing Link Trust, 2015). These blocks have agriculture as their main source of income. Women living in this region face several difficulties in carrying out their daily chores. The female workforce participation rate of Kultali Block, according to the 2001 census, stands at an abysmal 9.75 per cent, which is one of the lowest in the district of South 24 Parganas (Karmakar, 2013). The per capita income of the South 24 Parganas district is lower than the State average (Human Development Report, 2004).

Figure 1: Location Map of the study region of South 24 Parganas District.



Source: The author extracted the above map with the help of the Geographic Information System (GIS).

⁵ The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove forest in the world, comprising numerous islands on the estuary of the Bay of Bengal. The Indian Sundarbans are situated on the eastern coast of India, in the state of West Bengal. The region comprises 19 blocks from two districts of West Bengal, namely, North 24 Parganas (6 blocks) and South 24 Parganas (13 blocks).

⁶ Joynagar II and Kultali are two Community Development Blocks among the 13 community development blocks of Sundarbans in South 24 Parganas.

Narratives of Women Facing Domestic Violence in Sundarbans

Regions:

Shreya (name changed) is a 28-years-old who resides at Katamari village in the Kultali Block of South 24 Parganas district. Presently, she is separated from her husband. She stated that she wanted to study. At the age of 14 she got married. She never completed her schooling after her marriage. She had an extended family with her mother-in-law and father-in-law. After six months of marriage, her father-in-law died due to a heart attack. At the time of marriage, she had brought dowry that was demanded by her in-laws. She had no control over financial matters in the household. Her mother-in-law and husband were taking all decisions and she had to follow all instruction. They denied her permission to go out to purchase something for her basic needs. After a few weeks of marriage, her mother-in-law started complaining and demanded more dowry. Her husband was an alcoholic who used to torture her physically for dowry. Her mother-in-law and husband often sent her back to her parents home asking her to return only with the dowry that they demanded for constructing a pond for fishing business and building a toilet in the house. During her first pregnancy, her husband often tried forced sex against her will and due to this she was senseless and had to be hospitalised. Her drunkard husband along with her mother-in-law beat her severely as she did not prepare proper food. They banged her head against the wall and kicked her forcing her to drink kerosene oil. They tried to kill her that night. She shouted and ran outside for help. Neighbour's took her to a hospital. She was traumatised after that incident. She was in a constant state of fear and insecurity and threat of death till the date of her separation from her husband.

In a patriarchal society, men are considered to be the breadwinner of the family and it seems that men are more likely to indulge in domestic violence against a woman to express their masculine dominance. The next case study is about the experience of Riya (name changed) who was subjected to domestic violence by her alcoholic husband and could not give birth to a male child.

Riya is a 35 years old woman and has been married for 22 years. She was 13 years old when she got married through an arranged marriage. Her husband does a small fishing business earns around ten thousand per month. He is the breadwinner of the family and controls the finances of the household. All decisions regarding the household purchase, medical emergencies and family planning are taken only by the husband. After one week of marriage, she got to know that her husband is an alcoholic. Her husband most of the time came home after spending most of the money he earns for the day. They have four daughters but her husband always wanted a boy who will continue the family name and take care of the family. During her fourth delivery when he got to know it was a baby girl he tried to kill her by pressing her neck through his leg. He was very angry and started beating her. He hits her head against the wall. One day he poured kerosene oil on her to burn Riya but fortunately, her daughter came and saved her. Whenever her husband gets drunk he tried to have unnatural sexual relationship with her. Because of this she was not able to do her daily household chores.

The structural position of men with a sense of masculinity influences violence against women. Added to the issue is the discrimination against girl child and alcoholism are one of the root causes of domestic violence. The next case is about Diya's (name changed) explains the vulnerability and undue domestic violence.

Diya stated that since childhood she has been working as a domestic maid. She never went to school. Apart from this, she was the only bread earner of her five-member family till her marriage. Unfortunately, after her marriage, her husband's income is so meagre that she had to continue to work as a maid to sustain her children's health and education. At the age of 17 years, she got married. Her husband works as an agricultural labourer and earns a meagre wage, around Rs 3,000 per month. After one week of marriage, she came to know that her husband was an alcoholic. He treated her cruelly and often bashed her up. Often, physical violence resulted in injuries and bruises. Whenever her husband got drunk he tried to force her to have sex with him, much against her will. He often humiliated her in front of neighbours. As a result, Diya went through severe depression and had thoughts of committing suicide to save her self-respect. She said, "My husband will not try to kill me... I wanted to end my life. I tried to burn myself but fortunately, my mother-in-law saved me and admitted me to a hospital. My hands, partial part of body and neck had been burned".

The next case study highlights the suppression and coercion of Laxmi (name changed) by her husband who intended to control her body, sexuality and indulged in domestic violence.

Laxmi is a 26-year-old married woman. Her husband often took her to his friend's home and shared dirty jokes in her presence, using abusive language in front of others. She objected to their misconduct but her husband took everything very lightly. He would drink and smoke with them till late into the night and she was forced to sit with them even though she felt uncomfortable in their company. One day her husband forced her to have sexual relations with his friends. When she refused he beat her up in front of them very badly. She ran away from there. He slapped, pushed, twisted her arms, pulled her hair and kicked on her stomach. After physical violence, her husband forced her into unnatural sexual activities. Her vagina bled and she suffered a miscarriage due to continuous physical torture. Laxmi got admitted to a hospital for a week and after that, came to her parents' home. After one month everything was fine and her husband came and took her to her marital home. But after two-three weeks he started torturing her again. When she was three months pregnant she ran away from her matrimonial home and approached a police station to file a case under 498A regarding cruelty by her husband and relatives.

Role of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Addressing Domestic Violence in the Study Area:

Sundarbans Jana Sramajibi Mancha is a civil organisation. They work for the rights related to unskilled workers of the Sundarbans area establish the laws of Fisheries Act 2006, the right to save lives and food and organise social security and social welfare for the peoples of Sundarbansregion. They have been working to create awareness and provide necessary co-operation.

Table 2: Shows the activities of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

Name of the Civil Society	Awareness regarding Domestic Violence Act,2005	Counselling	Capacity Building for Women	Help in the legal process	Training Programme for Children
Sundarban Janasramajibi Mancha	✓	✓	×	✓	×
Samadhan	✓	✓	×	✓	✓
Missing Link Trust	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

SJSM provides awareness programmes to village women regarding the Domestic Violence Act and collaborates with Missing Link Trust NGO and Human Rights Law Network (HRLN). They give counselling to victims for mental support and also help them file complaints against perpetrators. Pabitra Mandal (President of SJSM) said, *"Domestic violence is rampant in South 24 Parganas district and alcoholism and early age marriage are the main reason for domestic violence. In 2012 we started working on women and child-related issues such as women and child trafficking, domestic violence against women, prevention of child marriage, as well as working on preventing illegal drinking and alcohol consumption. We started creating awareness and counselling campaign collaborations with Human Rights Law Network (HRLN). Every Friday, we organise meetings between natal and matrimonial homes and try to resolve issues privately. We provide awareness and counselling to both the families, especially husband and wife."*

Samadhan is another NGO in South 24 Parganas District. It is mainly working for Child Education and Welfare. It also organises different training programmes for children i.e. spoken English (age group of 10 to 16 years) classes, computer classes (age group of 7 to 16 years) and art and craft classes. At the same time, since 2003, they provide awareness of domestic violence and counsel victims to strengthen their mental and physical health and help in legal process to prevent women trafficking in the south 24 Parganas district. This NGO does not provide any capacity building programme for women in the study area.

Missing Link Trust is another NGO that is a mainly civic and social organisation founded in 2015 by Leena Kejriwal. It works against trafficking by using art and technology to create awareness, mainly sex trafficking. Since 2017, it has started working on domestic violence against women in Kultali and Jaynagar II blocks. Centre coordinator of Missing Link Trust said, *"In Madhusudanpur village (Kultali Block), majority of women and adolescent girls are going for domestic work to Kolkata and surrounding urban areas. Some of these women are working in the red-light area i.e., Sonagachi⁷, Kolkata. This is forced migration⁸ towards urban areas like Kolkata and any other cities due to domestic violence, lack of income and availability of work in their local areas. Due to these reasons, most of adolescent and married women have been kidnapped and trafficked."* That is this NGO has taken the initiative to educate and empower the most vulnerable children, women and girls in the Sundarbans through skill

⁷ Sonagachi is Asia's largest red-light area in Kolkata. The narrow, rat-infested lanes of Sonagachi are now home to some 11,000 sex workers (Deepanjan Ghosh, 2018).

⁸ A Simple term for forced migration is when people are made to leave their homes or homeland due to violence, persecution or any natural hazard.

training such as tailoring, computer training and spoken English classes. Through these skill training and awareness programme, they have prevented domestic violence and women and child trafficking to some extent.

Discussion

While describing the present study we must say, the cases of domestic violence are very important to understand the present situation in the study area. They are all unique or even unusual in several ways, yet similar too. The findings indicate that most women are not aware of their rights. Added to the issue, it is often difficult to research violence against women since most women are reluctant to disclose information as they consider it confidential and intimate. Even, many scholars have argued that most of the time domestic violence against women is underreported because many women feel that it is a part of their life and some do not know about the opportunities available to them and whom to report their plight. Due to these factors, many women suffer in silence and resign to their fate from which they cannot escape. However, it is found that a socially-accepted norms in Indian patriarchal society such as the practice of dowry, preference for the male child, the practice of early marriage and lack of understanding between spouses are attributed as the major cause of domestic violence in the study area. The most common types of violence were physical, emotional and economic as respondents are not financially secure in most cases. If a woman needed money she has to beg her husband or in-laws. However, dependency is also treated as a cause of physical, emotional, sexual and economic violence in the study area. Women who have separated from their husbands face major economic difficulties in taking care of their children. Due to this reason women go to Kolkata and work as domestic servants. National Family Health Survey report (NFHS-4) also stated the prevalence of domestic violence against women in West Bengal affected the marital status and household structure of women.

Conclusion

In Indian society, a woman shoulders the entire responsibility of preserving the family as her duty; hence, she makes all adjustments unilaterally in her husband's home. Despite the extreme physical and psychological violence meted out of many women, they do not seek divorce as they feel their trauma and that of their children is too great a price to be paid. Thus, to a great extent, she accepts domestic violence as part of her family life and fails to recognise sexual violence or marital rape as a criminal offence. However, we can say that the roots of domestic violence lie inside the socio-political system of our country as the state fails to provide security as well as awareness to these helpless women. Added to the issue, existing civil organisations and local NGOs namely, Sundarban Janasramajibi Mancha, Samadhan, and Missing link Trust create awareness and provide counselling to victims who had come forward and sought support and help. They have taken the initiative to educate and empower the most vulnerable children, women and girls in the Sundarbans through skill training such as tailoring, computer training and spoken English classes. Through this skill training, to some extent, the NGOs have tried to prevent domestic violence and women and child trafficking. Domestic violence, however, is rampant in West Bengal and as well as in Sundarbans regions of South 24 Parganas district. According to the National Crime Records Bureau or NCRB's initial report for the year 2016, West Bengal witnessed

the highest number of cases of domestic violence in comparison with the other 28 states of India. Hence, there is an urgent need to strengthen the PWDV Act - 2005 by appointing more Protection Officers at the village/block level where they should play a more active role by involving Police, Panchayat members and civil and NGOs to provide counselling and justice on time to the victims of domestic violence. Further, they should boost the awareness of preventing and reducing domestic violence at the village level.

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Dr V K R V Rao Road, Nagarabhavi P.O., Bangalore - 560 072, India

Phone: 0091-80-23215468, 23215519, 23215592; Fax: 0091-80-23217008

E-mail: balasubramanian@isec.ac.in; Web: www.isec.ac.in