

Why Is It So Difficult for Bangladeshi Women to Get Justice?

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In 2015, Salma's husband and his parents held her down and poured nitric acid down her throat because they wanted more than the Tk 100,000 (USD 1,100) that her parents had already paid in dowry. For months since the wedding, her father-in-law had beat her repeatedly, demanding more. Salma went to stay with her parents to escape the abuse. But when villagers started gossiping about her broken marriage, her parents told her to return to her in-laws. When she said she was being physically abused, they told her "you just need to endure." Now, she is fed through a tube in her stomach.

Salma's story is disturbingly common in Bangladesh, where over 70 percent of married women and girls have faced some form of intimate partner abuse, about half of whom say their partners physically assaulted them. But the majority of women never told anyone about this abuse and only three percent take legal action.

In many cases like Salma's, survivors seeking help are turned away—by family, community, and the police—and can be in even more danger when forced to return to their abuser. When Salma tried to escape the violence, she was met with stigma and—with only a handful of government-run shelters in the country and limited access to support services—she had nowhere else to go.

Salma has fought for a legal remedy for over five years now, but to little avail. Her father, meanwhile, had a stroke and the family cannot afford to continue pursuing justice. The public prosecutor bringing the case told her that her in-laws were paying more bribes so she "should pay more money." "That is how you will get justice," he told her. He too, of course, requested bribes, she said.

Every time they go to court to find out the status of the case, court officials, police and the prosecutor all ask for "tea and snacks costs," Salma said. Now she says she is telling her father, "You have been going to the courts for the last five years and nothing is happening. Let's just give up."

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