

Empowering the Vulnerable Women in Disaster Prone Areas: A Case Study of Southern and Northern Region of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: Bangladesh, because of its geographic location and geo-morphological conditions, has been one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. The country has been regularly suffering from floods, cyclones, earthquakes while the climate change induced hazards have been a major threat in recent years (Ali et al., 2012; Khan & Nahar, 2014). But the negative impacts of the hazards appear to affect people in different ways, mostly depending upon several forms of social stratification. Gender based stratification in Bangladeshi society remains high while several research has shown that disasters have an increased propensity of affecting the women negatively (Rahman, 2013; UN Women, 2016; Sharmin & Islam, 2013). Women tend to suffer more than men in terms of the post disaster crisis as well as their insecurity and lack of sufficient preparedness marks their pre disaster period vulnerability. Vulnerability of women in society has also been strongly proven and explained in several research which refers the gender based vulnerability largely happening due to patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system that enforces the social and economic dependence of women on men and prescribes the relative lower status of women (Hadi, 2009; Ferdoush & Rahman, 2011; World Bank, 2015; Parveen & Leonhäuser, 2004; NCBP, 2000). Reducing the vulnerability of marginal groups, especially the women, in face of disasters has been one of the prime focus of development programs of Bangladesh. It is a well-known fact that empowerment of women reduce vulnerability and increases resilience (CARE International, 2010; Habtezion, 2013; UNISDR, 2015). Therefore the development interventions of the government and other actors need to consider the issue of women empowerment and integrate this concept in the disaster risk reduction related interventions. Against the backdrop, this study has been carried out to understand the current scenario of women empowerment in the Shyamnagar Upazila of Satkhira district (Southern Bangladesh) and Dimla Upazila of Nilphamari district (Northern Bangladesh). Satkhira district has been battered by several climate change induced hazards over the years. The area remains consistently water-locked while rampant shrimp cultivation has threatened the livelihood by salinity intrusion. After understanding the existing conditions of women empowerment in the two regions, comparison has been made of the results to see if there exists any spatial dynamics of women empowerment in the context of natural disasters.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Community, Empowerment, Vulnerability, Women

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I. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of “Empowerment” covers a wide range of issues and subjects. Most of researches have focused on the definition of empowerment and the indicators to measure it. Oakley (2001) stated empowerment focuses on changing the existing patterns of power and its use by participation, democratization, capacity building, economic improvement and self-development so that the marginalized and oppressed groups can play an active role in development initiatives. Narayan et al. (2002) and Benett (2002) describes empowerment as the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diversified individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them. Friedmann (1992) and Chambers (1997) focus on the role of civil society and participatory development at both macro and meso levels of society for empowering women.

Feminist perspective in social science promotes the empowerment of women as well as vulnerable communities but variations appear regarding the concept and extent of interventions for empowerment of women. Women’s empowerment requires systemic transformation in not just any institutions, but fundamentally in those supporting patriarchal structures (Sen and Grown, 1987; Batliwala, 1994; Bisnath and Elson, 1999;

Kabeer, 2001). Sen (1993) defines empowerment of women as “altering relations of power, which constrains women’s options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well-being. The philosophy of empowerment of women as an integrated phenomenon invokes a balance of power between men & women, so that neither is in a position of dominance. It means that women have power alongside men to influence their destiny and that of their society, developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one’s ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one’s life, gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power, developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change and to create more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally (Teberg, 2011; UNWOMEN, 2016).

Several researchers have tried to measure & categorize the status of women empowerment in different communities and contexts. The subjective nature of the concept has led forward the development of hundreds of indicators and variables. Malhotra et al. (2002) identified six different levels related to the measurement of women empowerment, namely economic, socio-cultural, familial, legal, political and psychological. There are important roles of external factors, like development workers especially female development workers, in such aspect of empowerment in six different levels. The measurement of the empowerment of women requires an integrated approach, which focuses on calculating the status in terms of survival & livelihood needs, economic development, economic position of women as well as a level of awareness of the female population (Bhasin 1985; Schuler & Hashemi, 1994; Sharma, 2000).

Bartlett (2004) and Parveen & Leonhäuser (2004) developed a framework consisting of three common variables and six common indicators to measure empowerment of women; they further modified the framework and customized it to measure empowerment at local/national/global context. It is important to note that measures of empowerment must involve standards that lie outside localized gender systems and a recognition of universal elements of gender subordination (Sen and Grown, 1987; Bisnath and Elson, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Understanding that dimensions of empowerment is a complex issue with varying interpretations in different societal, national and cultural contexts, as well as in the household, community and broader arenas, the participants also came out with a tentative listing of indicators. i.e.: Economic Dimension, Socio-Cultural Dimension, Familial/ Interpersonal Dimension, Legal Dimension, Political Dimension, Psychological Dimension. There are a variety of variables to identify the empowerment of women in rural areas but these following five indicators would be enough to identify the situation of women in the study area. These are as presented below:

- a) Participation in household decision-making: regarding domestic, financial, child-welfare, reproductive health, farming and socio-political matters i.e. right to vote, involving in new financial ventures etc.
- b) Domestic violence i.e. Physical assault, sexual assault, mental assault and/or other abusive behavior faced by the women of study area.
- c) Awareness about organizational aid provided for the women facing domestic violence due to dowry problem, economic condition, domestic violence etc.
- d) Freedom of women that include the free and safe movement of women and girls outside their home without facing any kinds of teasing, harassment, problems etc.
- e) Involvement of women in community based organizations (CBOs) that made them aware of their rights, reduced their vulnerability through proper training and knowledge, and made them resilient against natural hazards.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods data collected from four villages of Satkhira and Nilphamari District. Questionnaire survey was carried out in two villages under Dimla Upazila of Nilphamari District namely, Daskhin Kharibari and Uttar Kharibari. The survey was also carried out in two villages under Shyamnagar Upazila of Satkhira District namely, Henchi & Borkupot.

Stratified random sampling method was used to select the sample. The following formula is used to develop the survey sample. For selection of respondents for the project area, the following general formula is used for Calculating sample size when population size is ignored.

$n = \frac{z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2}$ $= 895.5$	<p>Where: n = Sample size p = 0.7 = Estimate of the population proportion, (here it is assumed that 70% people of the area are beneficiary of the PROTIC) z = 1.96 (The standard value of z at 95% confidence level) e = 0.03 (Precision level 3%)</p>
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Primary Data were collected from 892 respondents (Uttar Kharibari 121, Dakshin Kharibari 280, Borkupot 359, Henchi 132). Though the proportion of male and female in the villages is nearly equal, but since the research focuses mainly women, hence 70% sample was taken from the female and rest 30% of the sample was taken from the male.

Key Informant Interviews with the disaster management experts were conducted in order to fix the questionnaires and selecting project areas. A reconnaissance survey was conducted to gather initial information regarding the project area and selection of sample size and developing the questionnaires for the specific areas whereas five indicators of women’s empowerment covering a wide range of attributes were comprehensively measured.

II. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Decision Making in Household:

As a consumption unit, the family or household functions like any other group with problems to solve and decisions to make, where each family member plays a role, some more active than others. In terms of some decisions to be made in household where both husband and wife play equally important role, e.g. conceiving a child, upbringing children, doing household chores, adopting new financial ventures etc. Majority of the respondents said that the decisions are made by both husband and wife, in very few cases the decisions are from only male or female. For example, having children, children’s education & marriage and buying household products, more than 80% of the families’ decision is made by both husband and wife.

In case of taking new financial ventures and selling or purchasing land, majority of respondents said decision is taken by male only, and less than 30% of the families’ decision is made by both male and female. The data shows, Women tend to have less access to financial institutions and saving mechanisms as well as they face tremendous barriers to market access and economic activity from their family. Most of the female respondents said that they don’t have access to job facility or even after they have a job, they can’t spend the salary without family’s consent. They don’t have any entitlement over land or property.

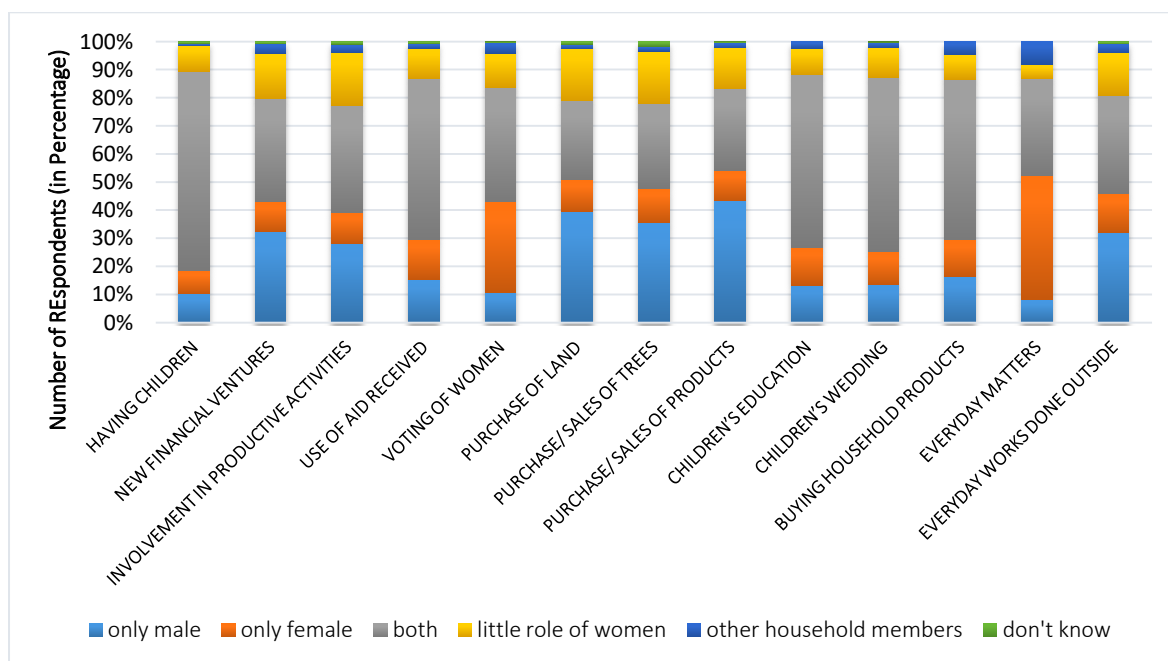


Figure 1: Decision Making in Household (females decision were neglected in every kinds of productive issues whereas most of the decisions were made by only males

b) Domestic Violence:

Domestic violence or abuse is the willful intimidation, physical/sexual assault, and other abusive behavior as part of a regular pattern of power and control executed by one intimate partner/family members against another. Most people think of domestic violence, as a situation where the abusive partner physically hurts the victim. But domestic violence can be physical, emotional, psychological, financial, or sexual. Being victimized by a situation of domestic violence can create feelings of helplessness and even self-doubt.

Mostly women are the worst sufferers of domestic violence in male dominated society. Though state of women in households are slowly improving in Bangladesh, in villages women are still living with this problem. The study findings reveal the upsetting but expected reality which shows that majority of the village women are

abused in the household. It is seen from the figure below that highest (two-third) percentages of women are abused in Henchi, while the percentage is lowest in Borkupot. People of those areas were pretty much reluctant to give answers to such questions. Most cases of domestic violence go unreported i.e. punch or a kick, choking, slapping etc. Many victims try to justify their abuser's actions, and try to convince themselves that the situation will improve. Concern for privacy, insecurity or social status might be the reasons behind this unwillingness. Hence, most of the people agreed about the matter while some strictly disagreed with it.

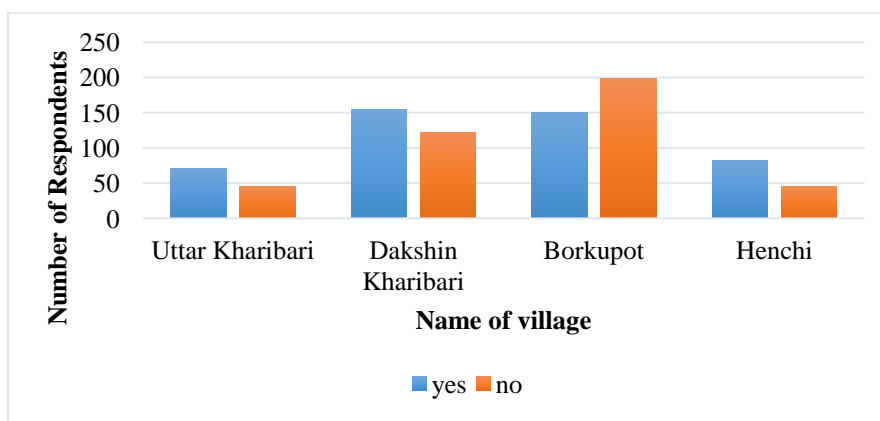


Figure 2: Evidence of Abuse (It depicts that only in borkupot domestic violence has lessened over the years as majority of the respondents denies the existence of violence, but the other areas show a negative picture whereas women are being tortured and harassed by male counterpart or other members of the family).

Most of the respondents said that the tendency of physical violence is decreasing day by day while many women in the area are abused psychological. Psychological abuse involves the destruction of the victim's self-worth, and is brought about by persistent insult, humiliation, or criticism and it appears to be quite common in unhealthy relationships. Few less than half of the female respondents claimed about psychological abuse and few more than one-third claimed about physical abuse. Two-fifth of the female respondents claimed during the study that they are mainly abused for dowry. Another important reason for abuse is their economic insolvency, nearly one-third of the female respondents claimed this reason and due to economic insolvency they are bound to tolerate such abuse. Domestic abuse is a matter of choice for perpetrators. They choose to exert power and control over their victims. Since the people are not willing to give detail or exact answer about abuses (possible reason might be social status) these are the assumed causes and types of abuses by the neighboring household who agreed about the injustice.

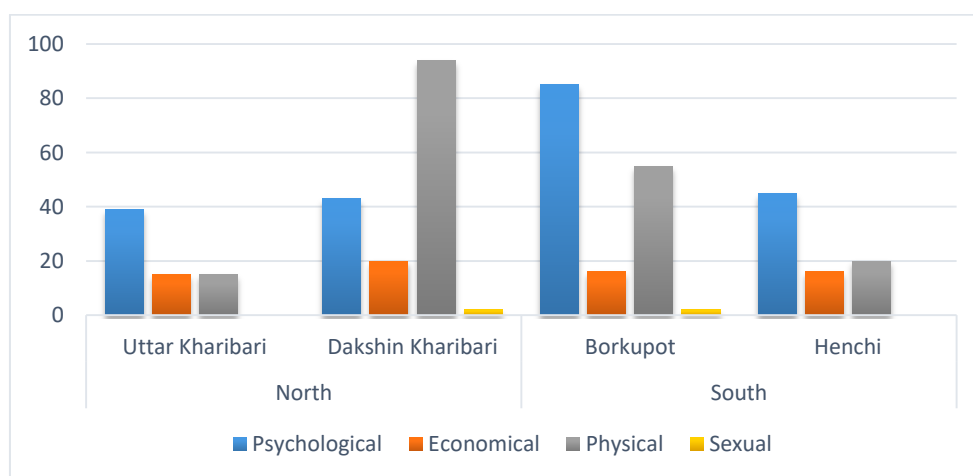


Figure 3: Types of Abuses

c) Awareness against Domestic Abuses:

Domestic violence thrives when women are silent; but if they take a stand and work together, they can end domestic violence. As the literacy rate is not very high there, most of the people are totally unaware about these legislations and its mechanism. They somehow know that there lies a law against violence that helps victims. According to the respondents, there might be legal help against violence but as they were not prey to abuses, they never tried to seek help. A major percentage was aware about getting help.

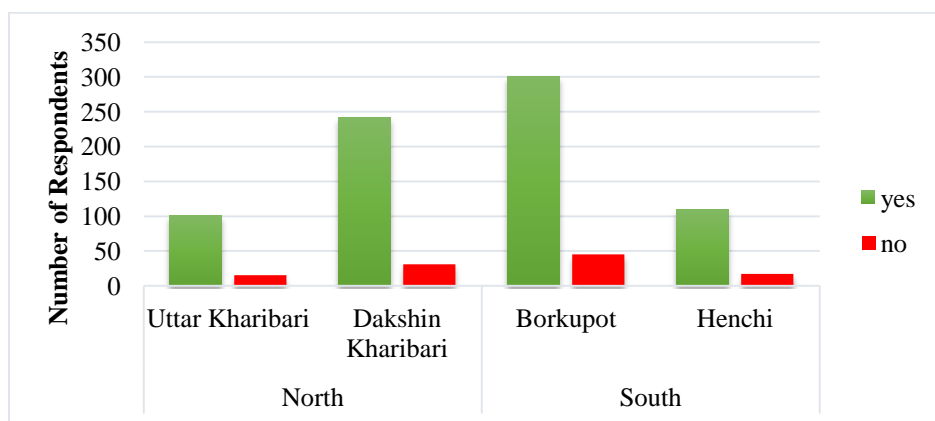


Figure 4: Awareness about aid of abused women

Resources are needed to strengthen the prevention of abuse and sexual violence, including primary prevention, i.e. stopping it from happening in the first place (for example- CBO or School-based programs to prevent violence). However, several other primary prevention strategies: those that combine microfinance with gender equality training; that promote communication and relationship skills within couples and communities and that change cultural gender norms, have shown some promise but need to be evaluated further. An appropriate response from the health sector can play an important role in the prevention of violence. Sensitization and education of health and other service providers is therefore another important strategy. To address fully the consequences of violence and the needs of victims/survivors requires a multi-sectoral response. Different NGOs play an important role in increasing understanding of the impact of domestic violence, and providing programs, aid and education that drive that change.

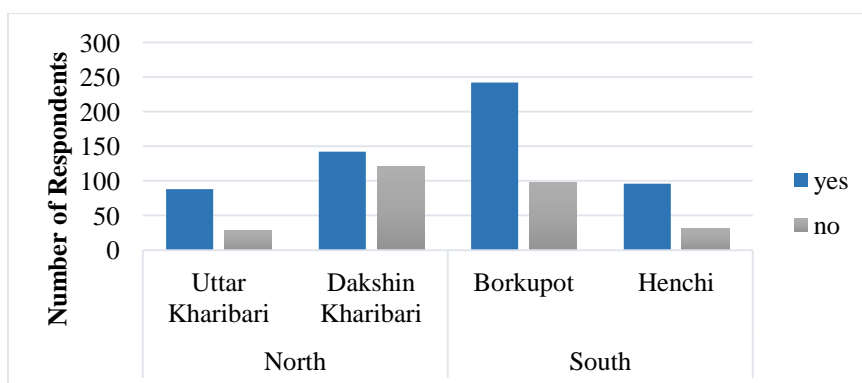


Figure 5: Aid from Organization for Women's Right

d) Equal Rights and Freedom of Women:

For many years throughout history, women haven't received the same rights that men have always enjoyed. Women couldn't vote, women were unable to work outside of home, and if they did, they were scorned and treated with little or no respect. Women were supposed to remain behind the men and were expected to be supportive without voicing an opinion of their own. After years of being kept down, though, many organizations and people have come forth through the years to help women get the rights that every human being deserves, regardless of their gender. In the issue of equal rights of women most of the respondents (more than 90%) agreed, but surprisingly there is still few respondents who disagree to provide equal rights to women. On the other hand, in case of going outside of the house only two-fifth of the women enjoy complete freedom, one-third enjoy moderate freedom, nearly 15% enjoy some freedom and 5% enjoy no freedom.

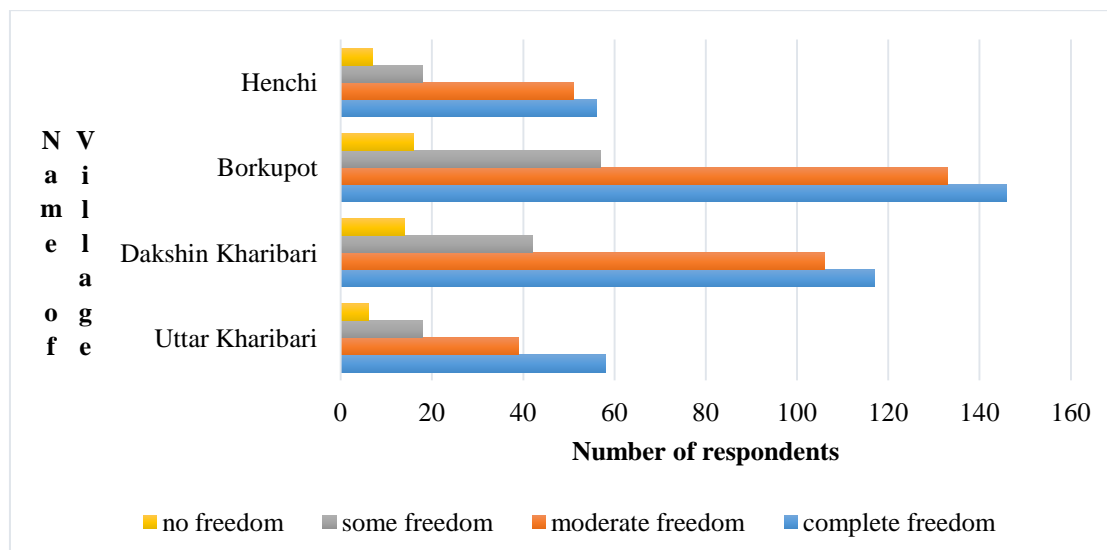


Figure 6: Freedom of women in household

e) **Involvement of Women in CBO:**

Vulnerable groups, such as the very poor and women often lack the skills and confidence to engage in community decision-making. It is argued that participation in local associations can empower women to engage in social and collective activities as social empowerment is the process of developing a sense of autonomy and self-confidence, and acting collectively to change social relationships and the institutions. Involvement with the social groups helps women to raise social and economic status as well as strengthen their unity as a group where they can freely discuss about their problems and can take opinion from others how to solve it. About two-third of the household have women involved with Community Based Organization (CBO), while the rest one third household do not have such involvement. Though the involvement rate is higher but their position in CBO is lower, only one-tenth are member of executive committee, the vast majority is only ordinary member.

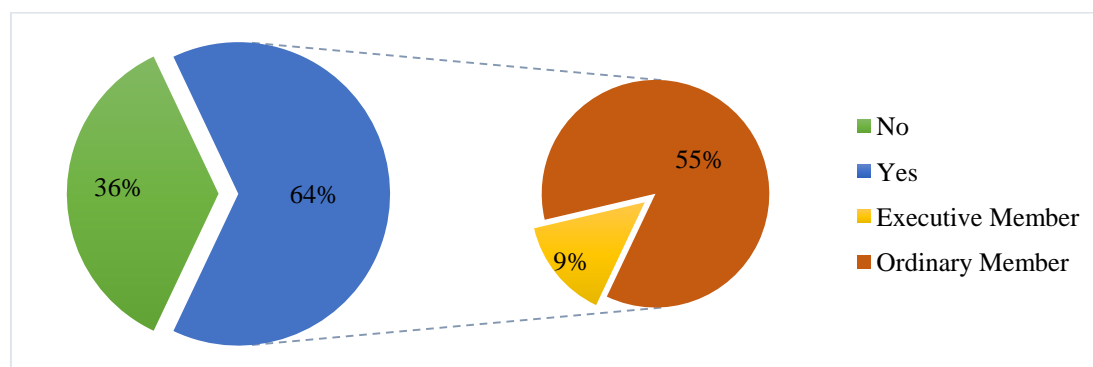


Figure 7: Women Association with CBO (64% of the studied women are involved in CBO among them 9% are executive members and the rests are ordinary members)

III. CONCLUSION

One-third of the females abused for dowry and two-fifth of them abused for economic insolvency. So the development project should take initiatives to create scope of income generating activities for the women, so that they can contribute financially in the family and get rid of the abuse due to their economic vibrancy. Apart from that, initiatives should be taken to ensure leadership of women in CBOs, so that they can protest abuse and get proper legal and medical aid after abuse. Education plays the vital role in women thoughts and believes. Their little knowledge stuck them in a little world. But things are about to change. With help of several NGO and women aid organization they are becoming self-independent which is a great turn over for the local society. The rate of violence or domestic abuses can be drastically reduced by the social welfare works carried away by the organization. As a result women would become more confident, self-sufficient not only within household but also in socially, financially and would become more conscious about education and health issues.

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