

TEACHING AND LEARNING IN BANGLADESH: PROFESSORS STUDY SPOUSE ABUSE A WORLD AWAY

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CARBONDALE -- A trip a world away to teach became a learning experience for three Southern Illinois University Carbondale professors.

Sheila Simon at the School of Law and Michelle Miller of the sociology department joined sociologist Kathryn Ward in Bangladesh to study domestic violence in that developing country.

Ward said 47 percent of women in Bangladesh are abused at some point in their lives. However, she said there are no figures available to document the most severe abuse, which she said should be classified as torture. Ward said another problem with documentation is that much abuse does not surface until the woman is dead, either killed or by suicide.

Simon was invited to meet with Bangladesh attorneys as they work to create laws against domestic violence, and Miller analyzed shelters for abused women and children. Ward has been intensely involved with study of domestic issues since spring 2001.

Ward's primary research, funded through the National Science Foundation, focuses on women in the workforce. A second grant from the Alo Association Liaison Office of University Cooperation in Development -- USAID, has her researching domestic violence. Simon and Miller were in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, from Jan. 1 through Jan. 12. Ward returned stateside at the end of January.

"The purpose (for my presence) was to share my expertise on domestic violence, but I'm sure I learned way more than I could have taught," Simon said.

Ward said there are no laws in Bangladesh against domestic violence, and lawyers have little or no training on domestic violence legislation.

Part of Ward's research focused on the women's shelters and the protective custody system that is set up to help women and children victims of violence. Miller was brought in as an additional expert to focus on helping the shelters create a network.

"There are so many groups trying to make a difference," Miller said. "The legal system and the judicial system are not helpful (to women). The shelters are understaffed and underfunded -- but everyone is so dedicated."

As the professors see it, the traditional role of women has to change for violence against them to diminish.

"I brought along some copies of the Illinois Domestic Violence Act handbook, and it was worth its weight in gold," Simon said. "I hope it will help them see what their future could be. There is a lot of corruption and there is a lot of bribery that is commonplace. As an attorney in Jackson County, I never worried if the judge was going to be bought off."

The virtual absence of women from the economic life of the country presents problems from both a legal and a cultural standpoint.

"One of the reasons we can deal with (domestic violence) in this country is because women are less economically dependent on men," Simon said. "The women in Bangladesh are not traditionally part of the economy. They are noticeably absent from public places. There are times

when they were on their way to or from work in the garment factories that you'd see them -- but they aren't running the stands at the market, they aren't riding the buses, they certainly aren't driving vehicles. They just aren't visible in the economy."

"They have a system where they incarcerate women to protect them," Miller said. "They would say it is necessary to protect the women, often from their own families. Now they take them out of jail and put them in shelters, but they are still locked in at most of them. It's not a place where you would want to put a juvenile. There are no educational opportunities and the facilities are really minimal. There are a lot of children in these shelters. They stay there indefinitely until they can be returned safely to a family that may not be very welcoming."

"A lot of women don't want to go to the shelters because leaving your family is not a real good option for your reputation," Ward said. "We are studying not only what the problem is, but what is the attitude about it and what are the people willing to do to change it?"

Women who work in the garment industry tend to be a little more independent. Ward said she is concerned about what will happen to the women's rights movement if the garment industry becomes hampered by new trade agreements.

Ward said another problem for some women is the continuation of the dowry system, even though it has been outlawed.

"The whole concept is that a family pays to have a daughter married off," she said. "Sometimes there is an expectation of continued payment. If that is not provided, often the woman is the victim of violence -- not just from her husband, but the husband's family gets involved, sometimes the mother-in-law."

"It is culturally acceptable for a man to chastise a woman physically," Miller said. Besides women who have suffered beatings, some come to the hospitals with acid burns from punishment.

"It's hard to prosecute," Miller said. "A lot of the burns look like stove burns. The police in the shelters are very concerned, I think, but there is very little help for them once they turn in their report. There are a lot of holes where (the prosecution of an individual case) can fall out."

The professors noted the conflicting messages women receive in Bangladesh. The prime minister is a woman, and so is the head of the opposition party. A certain percentage of parliament seats are set aside for women as required by law.

"The biggest thing (to help them) is to work on developing a network of resources for women," Miller said. "They are disparate groups with different goals. They are really doing so much on their own. They have done all the right things -- they just haven't gotten coordinated. There is so much work there to be done. But there is an underlying sense of hope -- it's a very new, old country."

"There are a lot of strong women who are working very hard," Ward said. "That's one of the things that keeps me going when I'm over there."

Simon said she felt that she witnessed a time that will become very important.

"Meeting some of the attorneys I met was like meeting Thurgood Marshall or Elizabeth Cady Stanton," Simon said. "These are people who are going to be looked back on as heroes."

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Caption: Though many women in the Bangladesh work force are employed in the garment industry, some are able to find work other places. This woman is a cow handler. Kathryn Ward photo.



Southern Illinois University Carbondale professors pose with some of the people who helped them along the way. Pictured are Ripon Miah (from left), Sheila Simon, Sheikh Rumana, Kathryn Ward, Michelle Miller, and Badal, a tutor. Kathryn Ward.