



# A Home Without A Heart: Navigating Violence

*Written by Sofia Amir and Dr Ayesha Khan*

In Dhoke Hassu, the city works because women, the hidden half, make it work. They stretch meager household incomes, soften shock after shock, manage children, elders, illness, addiction, and scarcity. Largely unseen and unappreciated. By day, the settlement hums with activity: women bargaining at carts, fetching water, minding children between tasks. By night, the streets retreat into darkness, and the city's promise of safety fades.

“

Women do not move freely through the city; they calculate it.



Urban policy often treats violence as an episodic incident to be reported, prosecuted, and resolved. But for women in informal settlements, violence is all around. It is built into infrastructure gaps, economic vulnerability, and social norms that narrow choices long before physical risks emerge. The danger is not only what happens, but what women must constantly anticipate.

Women in informal settlements often do not move freely through space; they calculate it. Routes are chosen for visibility, timing for safety, clothing for invisibility, speech for survival. The city is navigated as a risk map. Research across South Asia shows this pattern repeating: poor lighting, distant transport, overcrowding, and mistrust turn public spaces that women endure rather than freely inhabit. In Dhoke Hassu, this risk management is second nature, shaping daily life completely, constantly.

## Violence That Doesn't Look Like Violence

Inside the home, a sanctuary, the risk can intensify for some. Domestic violence is rarely described as such. It arrives diluted: a slap framed as discipline, money withheld "for your own good," education dismissed as impractical, mobility restricted in the name of honor. Language softens harm: tension, adjustment, these things happen. Women themselves may not label these acts as violence, not because they are just unaware, but because categorization hurts, and there is little escape when their situation becomes too real.

Ayesha's story reflects this quiet erosion. As a girl, her schooling beyond class 10 was deemed unnecessary; what for, were the explanations, she wasn't going to work. Her husband earns well, and her aspirations to fill her time are met with anger and raised voices that fill the house. She

“

Care is not a private burden; it is a public good that keeps our homes and cities alive.

reassures herself and others that they are discussing possibilities of work, a familiar justification that none of her in-laws support. This moral accounting is common where women’s economic dependence appears to remain unchanged in recent years.

Similar patterns appear in India’s urban Bastis, where studies from Delhi and Mumbai show women normalizing control over mobility and income as a marital duty, even as it erodes autonomy. In Bangladesh’s informal settlements, NGOs working with garment workers note that domestic abuse often spikes when women’s earnings threaten male authority, yet reporting remains rare, because exit options are fewer still.

## Addiction and the Collapse of Boundaries

Substance dependence deepens this instability. Addiction most often among men bleeds public harm into private space. As earnings vanish, and mood swings surge, children shrivel in fear. Violence becomes unpredictable. Women adapt by becoming hyper-vigilant caretakers, managing crises quietly to protect children and preserve fragile routines. They clean, soothe, cover, and carry on.

This is where the “care economy” turns coercive. Women absorb damage to keep households functioning, even as their own well-being deteriorates. Policy frameworks rarely recognize this hidden labor. In developing economies, addiction services, mental health care, and domestic violence support remain taboo or missing, forcing women to navigate overlapping crises alone.

In Dhaka, community-based addiction and counseling programs embedded in slums have shown modest but important gains, not because they eliminate violence, but because they reduce unpredictability. In Dhoke Hassu, the Rawan mental health project with NUST shows that proximity matters: services that women can reach without public exposure or permission.

## Quiet Resistance, Not Heroism

Women are not only victims. Resistance here is not loud or ideological. It is practical. Women bend rules without breaking them. They attend adult literacy classes when husbands are away. They seek family planning without spousal permission. They save small sums of money – in jars, under mattresses, informally. They gather in stitching centers, not just to learn skills, but to exchange information, laughter, and momentary relief.

Ayesha visits a local stitching center when her husband is out driving his Qingqi rickshaw. Officially, she is improving her skills. Unofficially, she is building a social lifeline. These spaces matter because they allow women to find strength as a virtual collective in bargaining power within households and outside, not by confronting norms head-on, but by making women’s time and networks economically visible.

These acts are not rebellion. They are survival strategies in constrained environments. Feminist urban scholarship calls this “agency under constraint,” choices made within tight boundaries, where even small expansions matter.

## What Policy Must See

Simple improvements via local government in neighborhood-level infrastructure: lighting, safe transport, and nearby clinics reduce everyday exposure to harm more effectively than distant protections.

Bringing integrated services for domestic violence linked with mental health and addiction care for marginalized households within their economic pathways. Working with local NGOs and CBOs for confidential, community-based entry points: support that does not require public disclosure or male permission.

In Bangladesh and India, programs that combine livelihood support with peer networks and legal awareness rather than standalone “empowerment” messaging have shown greater durability. The insight is blunt: women engage when solutions fit the texture of their lives.

Thousands of cities like Dhoke Hassu run on women's invisible labor. They stabilize families, buffer shocks, and manage scarcity so the urban economy can keep moving. Yet until women's everyday negotiations with violence, care, and constraint are made visible in policy and markets, cities will continue to lean on women while refusing to see them.

*Follow along for more.*