

Nature of Domestic Violence against Women in a Rural Area of Bangladesh: Implication for Preventive Interventions

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports finding from a study carried out in a remote rural area of Bangladesh during December 2000. Nineteen key informants were interviewed for collecting data on domestic violence against women. Each key informant provided information about 10 closest neighbouring ever-married women covering a total of 190 women. The questionnaire included information about frequency of physical violence, verbal abuse, and other relevant information, including background characteristics of the women and their husbands. 50.5% of the women were reported to be battered by their husbands and 2.1% by other family members. Beating by the husband was negatively related with age of husband: the odds of beating among women with husbands aged less than 30 years were six times of those with husbands aged 50 years or more. Members of micro-credit societies also had higher odds of being beaten than non-members. The paper discusses the possibility of community-centred interventions by raising awareness about the violation of human rights issues and other legal and psychological consequences to prevent domestic violence against women.

Keywords: Violence, Domestic; Women's status; Women's role; Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against women (DVAW), especially beating wives by husbands, has been common in all culture perhaps in all times (1-3). Bangladesh seems to be no exception. Newspaper reports in the country clearly indicate that the prevalence of violence against women is very high (4,5). National data on the general population do not exist. However, small-scale studies support the above conviction (6). As of now, the estimate of the prevalence of physical violence against women by husbands in Bangladesh varies between 30% and 50% (7,8). Despite the seriousness of the problem in terms of violation of human rights and public health consequences (3,9-12), there is a dearth of knowledge on the extent, nature, and the context of DVAW in Bangladesh and

other developing countries for various reasons. Of them, methodological difficulties in studying the topic are the important ones.

Interventions to alleviate the problem have mostly been driven towards reducing the harm after the incidence through medical treatment and counselling (3). Preventive efforts, on the other hand, have been limited to enactment of punitive legislative measures against the aggressor for abusing women. Although the incidence of domestic violence against women directly involves husband, wife, and other family members, and is possibly perpetuated by the societal context (5), a family and/or community-centred approach to alleviate the problem has largely been absent so far. It is with this background that this paper seeks to generate knowledge about domestic violence against women with a special focus on the nature, extent, and correlates of domestic violence against women in Bangladesh, using an alternative data-collection technique. Based on the findings and their careful review, the possibility of family/community-centred interventions to reduce the incidence of violence against women has been discussed.

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

The field workers were from six unions (lowest administrative unit) with a population of nearly 140,000 in 2000. Like other parts of Bangladesh, the area is characterized by subsistence economy with dominance of agricultural activities by traditional means. Nearly 40% of the household heads are engaged in agricultural activities as day-labourers, 25% in farming for themselves, 20% in small trades, 10% in low-paid jobs, and 5% in self-employment. Female employment has been very rare in the locality.

The study site was one of the most conservative areas in terms of religion and openness to modern ideas, is also backward in terms of modern education. Nearly, half of the males and two-thirds of the females, aged over six years, had never been to school; only 7% of the male and 2% of the female population had more than 10 years of schooling. Ninety-one percent of the populations are Muslims, while the remainders are either Hindus or Buddhists.

Methods of data collection and analysis

Data for this study were collected during the third week of December 2000 from 19 key informants who had been working for ICDDR,B: Centre for Health and Population Research as field workers for a long time. Of the 19 field workers, six were male and 13 were female. They were in their twenties, permanent resident of the study villages, and had at least twelfth grade of schooling. Their main responsibilities have been to provide health education to the villagers, to promote primary healthcare, including immunization, to organize villagers to take collective actions for the improvement of health, and to assist the ICDDR,B medical doctors in providing health services.

To collect data on DVAW, the field workers were first asked to list 10 households, excluding their own, in the immediate surroundings of their own. They were then asked to list the ever-married women of these households. Subsequently, they were informed about the purpose of the listing. The questionnaire on DVAW was then explained to them, and they were asked to fill up one questionnaire for each ever-married woman. The process resulted in obtaining information about 190 wives (information about physical violence against one woman was not known) and 178 husbands. The number of men was less than women because there were 12 widows in the list.

The questionnaire included information on age, education, and occupation of women and husbands, and women's membership of *samities* (societies, formed by governmental and non-governmental organizations for providing micro-credit services). Information on violence, as the field workers actually witnessed or heard of in their lifetime, included verbal abuse (using demeaning and abusive words) and beating the women by their husbands and/or other family members. Reasons for verbal abuse and beating as perceived by the field workers and background information on the women and their husbands were also provided by the field workers. Data were subsequently coded and entered into computer for analysis. Occupation of husband was coded into three categories: with day labourers, boatmen, rickshaw drivers, and the like as low-earning; farmers, village doctors, mechanics, and small businessmen as middle-earning; and rich businessmen, regular job-holders, and teachers as high-earning groups. Relationship between wife battering and other independent variables was determined by cross-tabular analysis. Net effects of the independent variables on wife battering were assessed using logistic regression analysis (forward stepwise) with dichotomous dependent variable. Independent variables were dummy-coded in logistic regression analysis.

RESULTS

Background characteristics of men and women

The age of women and men included in the reporting by the field workers ranged from 17 to 70 and 21 to 75 years respectively. The mean age of women and men was 33 (with a standard deviation of 9.6) and 42 (with standard deviation of 10.9) years respectively. Of the women, 63.0% had received no schooling, 21.1% had one to five year(s), and 15.9% had six or more years of schooling. Nearly one-third of the women were members of organizations that give micro-credit. Of the men, 53.0% had received no schooling, 21.9% had one to five year(s), and 25.7% six or more years of schooling. 92.6% of the women were housewives, 5.3% were either day-labourers or maids, 1.6% were self-employed, 0.5% (1 woman) was in a salaried job. Of the total women, 177 were married, one separated, and 12 widowed at the time of collecting the information. Twelve of the total women had one co-wife, and one had two co-wives at the time of data collection. The major occupational categories for men were day-labourer (37.2%), followed by farming (28.2%), self-employment (18.2%), and salaried job (13.8%). 33.7% of the women were members of NGO groups.

Type and intensity of violence

Verbal abuse

It was revealed from the key informants that 66.8% of the women were verbally abused by their husbands and 23.7% by other family members. In verbal abuse, demeaning words were used against both women and their parents. In 70.9% of the cases, husbands abused their wives verbally using abusive words against only them, and in 17.9% of the cases, the words used were against only their parents. For some women (6.8% of the total 190), verbal abuse was a daily matter, and for many (37.8%), it was occasional. For 16.8% of the women, it happened infrequently. 37.9% of the women faced verbal abuse by husbands and 11.6% by other family members even during pregnancy.

were also battered by other family members. Hitting was mostly done by hand (85.4%), followed by stick/*lati* (63.5%), and leg (kicking, 51.0%) alone or in combination. The female key informants reported 20% higher battering than male key informants. For half of the women, the timing of physical violence did not follow any pattern; for one-fourth of the women, it was at night, and for another 15%, it was either in the morning or around noon.

Nearly half (47.9%) of the women who were subject to physical hitting by husbands were injured, and for 78.3% of the cases, it was necessary to consult a healthcare provider. 57.1% of the women who were beaten by family members other than husbands sustained injury, and for nearly half of the cases, a healthcare

Table 1. Percentage of women battered by husbands

Independent variable	No. of respondents*	% battered by husbands	Remarks
Characteristics of women			
All	189	50.8	-
Age (years)			$\chi^2=10.08$ p=.018
<30	65	60.0	
30-39	77	51.9	
40-49	33	45.5	
50+	14	14.3	
Education in years of schooling			$\chi^2=.49$ p=.78
0	119	49.6	
1-5	40	50.0	
6+	30	56.7	
NGO membership			$\chi^2=6.81$ p=.009
Yes	64	64.1	
No	125	44.0	
Characteristics of husbands			
Age (years)			$\chi^2=10.20$ p=.017
<30	20	80.0	
30-39	55	54.5	
40-49	54	53.7	
50+	54	38.9	
Education in years of schooling			$\chi^2=2.80$ p=.246
0	97	53.6	
1-5	40	60.0	
6+	47	42.6	
Occupational category			$\chi^2=1.51$ p=.47
Low earning	81	56.8	
Middle earning	61	52.5	
High earning	38	44.7	

* Total number for some variables may vary due to missing information

Physical violence

50.8% of the women were battered by husbands and 2.1% by other family members. A small proportion (5.2%) of the women who were battered by husbands

provider was consulted. Battering during pregnancy by husbands (20%) and other family members (2.6%) was also reported. 13.7% of the women were reported to have been throttled by husbands and 2.1% by family members other than husbands.

Reasons for verbal and physical abuses

As many as 68 reasons for husbands verbally abusing wives were mentioned by the key informants. Among them, the most frequently-mentioned reasons included the wife questioning the husband in day-to-day matters (29.1%), followed by failure of the wife to perform household work satisfactorily (17.6%), economic hardship of the family (11.5%), failure of the wife to take proper care of the children (10.0%), not conforming to veil or other expected behaviour (5.5%), inability to bring money from natal home (3.0%), not taking good

mediating role and appealed to the husband not to abuse verbally or hit the wife. Children sometimes cry (16.7%) when witnessing verbal and physical abuses by the husband. In 12.3% of the violence cases, children kept quiet. Grown up children normally took the mothers' side, and at times, confronted the fathers to protest the violence.

The neighbours, in 25.0% of the cases, advised the husband not to abuse verbally or beat the wife. In 30.8% of the cases, they remained indifferent, and in 5% of the cases, they were not sympathetic to the women. In 36%

Table 2. Results of forward stepwise logistic regression analysis of wife-battering by husband and other independent variables

Independent variable	Coefficient	Odds ratio (95% confidence interval)
Age of husband (years)	$\chi^2=8.08, p=0.04$	
<30	1.75	5.78 (1.67-19.98)
30-39	0.58	1.79 (-0.20-1.36)
40-49	0.57	1.76 (-0.22-1.36)
50+	Reference	1.00
NGO membership of woman	$\chi^2=3.57, p=0.06$	
Yes	0.63	1.88 (-0.02-1.28)
No	Reference	1.00
Constant	-0.62, $p=.04$	-
Model χ^2	14.50, $p=.006$	-

care of in-laws and relatives (2.0%), and husband's frustrations in relation to his various activities (2.0%). The rest of the reasons included supporting natal home, failure to produce children, over-producing children, dark complexion of children, revenge for family-feud between husband's and natal family, and suspected sexual relation with others.

The key informants mentioned 53 reasons for husbands to hit their wives. The patterns were quite close to those for verbal abuse. The most frequently-mentioned reasons included questioning husband (29.9%), followed by failure to perform household work satisfactorily (18.8%), economic problems (9.4%), poor childcare (5.1%), stealing (3.4%), and refusal to bring dowry from natal home (2.6%). The other reasons were also similar to those for verbal abuse.

Role of the family members and neighbours

In 23.9% of the cases, the family members, excepting those taking part in the violence, directly took a

of the cases, the neighbours took initiatives to stop the verbal abuse or beating. The neighbours arranged arbitration to mitigate the problem in 43.2% of the cases.

Reasons for women to tolerate violence

Fifty reasons for women to live with the violence were mentioned by the key informants. Of them, the most frequently-mentioned reasons included consideration of the suffering of children if they chose to leave (32.1%), followed by having no place to go (12.7%), and the social stigma associated with a broken marriage (12.2%).

Factors associated with wife-beating

Table 1 presents the percentage of wives beaten by the husbands by age of women, years of schooling, and women's membership in organizations that give micro-credit. The results of the logistic regression analysis of the above are presented in Table 2.

Of the six variables, age of women, age of husband, and membership of women in micro-credit-giving

organizations showed statistically significant relationship with husbands beating wives in a univariate situation. In the stepwise multivariate analysis, age of husband and women's membership in micro-credit-giving organizations showed statistically significant relationship with battering by husband. The lowest odds of battering were for the women with husbands aged 50 years or more, and the highest were for women with husbands aged 30 years or less. In a relative sense, the odds of a woman with a husband aged less than 30 years of being battered (by her husband) were 6 times that of a woman with a husband aged 50 years or more. Women who were members of micro-credit-giving organizations had twice the odds of being battered by husbands than non-members.

DISCUSSION

The study used information on neighbours given by key informants living next to them. Thus, the reliability of such information can always be questioned. In the absence of any comparable data, it is hard to make any firm comment on the quality of reporting. However, given the informal nature of rural society and the extent of interaction among neighbours, it is very unlikely that the information provided by the key informants would suffer from reporting problems. The fact that female key informants reported a higher incidence than males indicated that females are better informed than males. The figures on occupational distribution and educational level as collected through the key informants in this study compared well with figures derived from earlier studies.

The study revealed a widespread prevalence of domestic violence against women in the study area. The prevalence was higher for verbal abuse than beating. Both the figures are higher than figures reported in most other studies (7,8). One of the reasons for higher figures in this study could be that the data were collected from key informants in contrast to interviewing the individuals as is commonly done in other studies. It is understandable that reporting by the victims of domestic violence may always suffer from under-reporting for the sensitivity of the topic and social position of women (13). The finding that DVAW is higher among women who are members of micro-credit-giving organizations is also consistent with the findings from another study in other parts of rural Bangladesh (14).

As to the reasons for violence, one can see some clustering. Some of them are attributed to failure on the part of wife to perform her duties, such as household

work and childcare. Another cluster of reasons centred around inter-personal relationships, either not getting along with other family members, loyalty to the natal home, or suspected relations with a man other than the husband. Questioning of the husband by the wife also emerged as a separate entity. The husband's frustration with his sphere of social and economic life was also a separate dimension in the reasons for violence. Issues, such as dark complexion of children, too many or no children were also attributed to the woman's failure to fulfill the husband's expectations, and at times, triggered violence against women. The reasons for violence as revealed in this study are somewhat similar to the reasons revealed through another study in Bangladesh (3,6,15) and somewhat different from those found in a study in the USA (16). These differences are perhaps a reflection of the cultural and social variation, in terms of women's position and role in the society, across various nations.

The findings that wife-beating is more common among young couples may not be due to the recent increase in the level but may be due to changes in the life-stage, such as having had grown up children and old age. The reason behind the higher rate of physical violence against the beneficiaries of micro-credit programme is believed to be due to the tension that comes with a woman suddenly becoming worthy of credit and responsible for money, which is in conflict with men's role in society (8). However, it was observed that the level of DVAW decreases as the length of association of women with micro-credit programmes increases (14). Other variables, such as education and occupation, did show a negative relationship with DVAW; however, the relationship was not statistically significant perhaps because of the small sample size in this study.

If one takes the reasons cited by the key informants at their face value and examines them carefully, one can hardly find reasons serious enough to result in violence against women. Why then does violence take place? How much of it is due to the innate nature of men, and how much of it is due to the social context and relative position of women compared to men in the society? Exploration of the first inquiry is somewhat complex, and a study like the present one is unable to address issues relating to this. One of the contextual explanations can be that DVAW has always been present in this society. Any person, man or woman, growing up in this society, has seen violence against women as a common phenomenon and has taken it for granted. Thus, for men,

it is not any deviation from the norm, and for women, it is the kind of behaviour they get from husbands and in-laws. If one also examines the reasons cited by the informants for women to live with violence against them, the most important factors are 'having a situation to go nowhere', 'consideration of children's future', and 'shame'. The first reason reflects the overall economic and social dependence of women on men, and the concern for children is also somewhat related to the economic and social dependence. To consider leaving the husband in the face of violence as a matter of shame is a cultural factor. In a broken relationship, the woman is the first to be blamed, and the consequences also impact upon female siblings of the woman in terms of their marriage prospects. Thus, there is an interplay of economic and cultural factors in perpetuating violence against women in this community and perhaps in any society (17).

Let us now examine whether there is anything in the family or in the society that discourages violence against women. The recent legal provisions of up-to-death penalty for violence against women in Bangladesh are one of the most significant measures to discourage DVAW. However, the accessibility of legal services to women, especially for rural women from poor economic backgrounds, is questionable. Legal services are city-based and not hassle- or cost-free. The impression one gets from the discussion with villagers about DVAW is a mixed one. DVAW is neither condoned, nor it is completely condemned. The feeling is that, at times, one needs to resort to violence to control one's wife let alone considering it as a violation of human rights. The deterrent provided by legal provisions is somewhat limited to extreme forms of violence or killing. Thus, the law *per se* is unlikely to have a major impact on the reduction of DVAW in the near future. Then what can be done to reduce the incidence of DVAW? If fear of consequences can be of help, then fear of what? Obviously, the fear associated with the judicial punitive measures has limitations—for this to have effect, one needs to lodge a complaint, pursue the legal battle, and then prove that it was a case of violence against women. None of these can easily be done. Thus, something intermediate has to be found, preferably not counting much on external help. One of the ways could be to raise awareness among community members/family members that VAW is an extreme violation of women's human rights, is a criminal offense under the law, and also has serious psychological consequences for both women and

children. This can be presented as a crisis in our man-woman relationship; the objective of family life is happiness, and DVAW is a barrier to happiness, not only impacting the life of husband and wife but also for coming generations, as it also sets the ground for unhappiness for them. Such an approach has the advantage of targeting the whole community, both men and women, without labelling any particular man or couple for intervention. It is, in effect, a strategy to raise fear, fear of a different kind, about the consequences of DVAW. Since all men involved in DVAW may not be indifferent about the incidence, and in fact, there is evidence that some men regret afterwards and seek help to change their behaviour (16).

To conclude, the problem of DVAW can be viewed as a rock formed by centuries of sedimentation, with a very hard nucleus and relatively less harder surroundings. Interventions based on creating fear may only be able to act on the surroundings. The nucleus of DVAW, the product of complex power relationship between men and women, may remain until society discovers effective ways to reconcile the underlying factors triggering tensions between men and women.

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