

# Intimate Partner Violence against Women: Experiences from a Woman-focused Development Programme in Matlab, Bangladesh

Syed Masud Ahmed

*Research and Evaluation Division, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, BRAC Centre,  
75 Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh*

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the association between microcredit-based development programmes and domestic violence against women perpetrated by their husbands. A sub-set of cross-sectional data collected in 1999 from 60 BRAC-ICDDR,B study villages in Matlab, Bangladesh, was used. Data were analyzed to characterize group-level differences among study women regarding the reported occurrence of violence (physical and/or mental) and to identify its predictors. About 17.5% of women had experienced violence from their husbands in the past four months, the proportion being greater among BRAC households ( $p=0.05$ ). Results of logistic regression identified age, schooling, age of household head, and self-rated poverty status of household as important predictors of violence, but not level of BRAC membership. The study concludes that the greater level of domestic violence reported during the initial stages of BRAC membership subsided with the introduction of skill-development training among participant women over time.

**Key words:** Violence; Domestic violence; Empowerment; Microcredit; Women's status; Women's role; Bangladesh

## INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence against women is increasingly being recognized as a matter of global concern (1-4). In 48 population-based surveys worldwide, 10-70% of women reported being hit or otherwise physically harmed by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (5). Today, the phenomenon is perceived as a threat to women's health and well-being and a serious human rights issue (6,7). Psychiatric morbidity, such as depression, stress-related symptoms, chemical dependency and substance abuse, and suicide are consequences observed in the context of violence in women's lives over time (3).

Correspondence and reprint requests should be addressed to:  
Dr. Syed Masud Ahmed  
BRAC Research and Evaluation Division  
BRAC Centre  
75 Mohakhali  
Dhaka 1212  
Bangladesh  
Email: syed.masud.ahmed@phs.ki.se  
Fax: 880-2-8823542

Domestic violence perpetrated by an intimate partner, such as a husband, has become a universal phenomenon and cuts across socioeconomic, religious and ethnic borders (8-12). An 'ecological framework' integrating various individual, contextual and sociocultural factors is offered by researchers to explain the causes underlying domestic violence (13). In developing countries, like Bangladesh, the traditional patriarchal system where women remain subordinate to men in all realms of life (14) combines with other cultural, legal and political factors in aggravating the existing situation.

In 1993, the World Bank reported that intentional injury during pregnancy, motivated by dowry disputes or shame over a rape or a pregnancy outside of wedlock, caused 6% of all maternal deaths during 1976-1986 (3). In another study, Paltiel found that severe beating, usually by husbands, accounts for 49% of household deaths in Bangladesh (15). Dowry, or the money given (in cash or kind) to the groom's family, also contributes substantially to domestic violence against women in

Bangladesh (16). On the other hand, increased education, higher socioeconomic status, non-Muslim religion, and extended family residence were found to be associated with lower risks of violence against women in Bangladesh (17).

It is assumed that opening up economic opportunities for women through access to credit, awareness-raising activities, and skill-training for income-generating activities would enhance women's self-esteem and status within households and change their relationship with their husbands, hence reduce domestic violence. Studies have shown that microcredit programmes have a varied effect on men's violence against women. Results of a BRAC (the largest microcredit-based non-governmental organization in the country) study showed that the prevalence of physical violence among women participating in credit-based development programme was 19% compared to 40% among eligible non-participants (18). Results of another BRAC study showed that the risk of sexual abuse was less among women who participated in credit programmes and financially contributed to their families (19). Others contest this effect of microcredit on reduction of domestic violence and argue that getting involved in credit programme and bringing cash home may rather create tension within the household and precipitate domestic violence, resulting from newly-adopted non-traditional roles by women (20). Again, by breaking the barriers of traditional norms and behaviours ascribed to women by patriarchal society, microcredit may generate anxiety and tension among its participants, thereby interfering with their emotional well-being (21). In a recent review of the causes and prevention of intimate partner violence, the author concluded that women who are more empowered educationally, economically, and socially are more protected, but below this high level the relation between empowerment and risk of violence is non-linear (22).

This paper aims to contribute to the current debate by exploring the association between microcredit and domestic violence (excluding sexual violence) perpetrated by husbands from a set of cross-sectional data in rural Bangladesh. It is expected that this will help policy-planners in designing violence-sensitive interventions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project

The joint research initiative of BRAC and ICDDR,B was initiated in Matlab in 1992 to examine prospectively

the relationship between women-focused development interventions and the health and well-being of the rural poor (23). BRAC, an indigenous non-governmental organization, is involved in poverty alleviation (24), while ICDDR,B is an international centre for health and population research (25). ICDDR,B has been operating a demographic surveillance system (DSS) in Matlab since the early 1960s [Later renamed Health and Demographic Surveillance System (HDSS)]. The project began when BRAC moved into Matlab with its development interventions. BRAC's development programme targets poorer households in the community with special emphasis on improving their health and socioeconomic conditions through group formation, non-formal education, skill-development training, and collateral-free loan for income-generating activities. The eligibility criteria for participation are that the household possesses less than 0.5 acres of land, including the homestead, and that the household sells manual labour for at least 100 days a year for survival.

### Sampling and data

This study used a sub-set of data from a cross-sectional survey undertaken by the above project during the third quarter of 1999 in 60 BRAC-ICDDR,B study villages in Matlab HDSS area (26). In all, 422 currently-married women, aged 15-49 years, from BRAC member households and 1,622 women from poor non-BRAC households formed the study population. In BRAC households, only members were interviewed for eliciting violence-related information. Trained interviewers administered a pre-tested structured questionnaire to collect data on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the study households, and different aspects of women's lives, including domestic violence. The questionnaire on violence elicited information on both physical violence, e.g. slapping, kicking, beating, etc., and mental violence, e.g. verbal abuse, threat of divorce or second marriage, money and/or ornaments/land/livestock, etc. taken away against the woman's will, not allowing the woman to visit her natal home. Female interviewers asked the women whether any of the above incidents had happened between herself and her husband in the preceding four months and, if so, these were recorded accordingly. Together, these were analyzed as 'any type' of domestic violence. Both prior to and during the survey, the interviewers received rigorous training on questionnaire content, probing techniques, and strategies to establish rapport and neutrality essential to sensitive data collection. Sexual violence-related data were excluded

because of the difficulty of collecting such information in a large quantitative survey.

### Data analysis

Data were analyzed in two stages. First, bivariate analysis was done to characterize group-level differences in the occurrence of 'any type of violence (physical or mental)' among the study women. Variables were selected based on their relevance to domestic violence informed by empirical literature. Next, logistic regression was run to explore the influence of different variables with respect to the occurrence of 'any type of violence' in three closely-related models. Four individual-level variables, three household-level variables, and a 'BRAC membership status' variable were successively introduced in the models. 'BRAC membership status' was categorized as eligible non-members; members with only savings; members with savings and credit; and members with savings, credit, and training.

## RESULTS

Around 14.5% of women had suffered from some type of violence from their husbands in the preceding four

months, the prevalence being greater among women from BRAC households than among those from non-member households ( $p=0.05$ ).

The sociodemographic correlates of reported violence are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, it decreased with age, more pronouncedly in poor non-member households. Women with some schooling reported less violence, while women with children reported more violence, irrespective of BRAC membership status of households. Contribution to household income presented a mixed picture: a greater proportion of violence among poor non-member households and a lesser proportion among women of BRAC households. Higher age (35 years+) and schooling of household head and non-deficit status of household were associated with lower reported violence.

In logistic regression, three models were tested (Table 2). In the first model, variables relating to individual characteristics of women were included; in the second model, in addition, household characteristics were included; and lastly, in the third model, BRAC membership status was added along with the previous variables. This latter variable was included as a proxy for the depth

**Table 1.** Reported occurrence of any type of violence (four months recall) by sociodemographic factors and BRAC membership status of households, Matlab, 1999

Characteristics	Women from			
	BRAC-member households		Poor non-member households	
	No.	%	No.	%
Age (years)				
≤29	25	22.1	100	16.4
30-39	38	17.7	91	13.2
40-49	11	11.7	31	9.7
Years of schooling				
None	49	18.7	164	15.1
Some	25	15.6	58	10.8
Contribution to household income				
Yes	3	15.8	10	19.6
No	71	17.6	212	13.5
Currently-alive children				
No children	2	7.1	17	11.8
Have children	72	18.3	205	13.9
Age (years) of household head				
≤35	25	31.3	63	15.8
35+	49	14.3	159	13.0
Schooling (years) of household head				
None	48	18.8	156	14.2
Some	26	15.7	66	12.5
Perceived poverty status				
Deficit households	40	22.2	118	15.3
Non-deficit households	34	14.0	104	12.2

of membership and duration because, with the ageing of membership, inputs such as skill-training are gradually added to the intervention package. In all three models, age and schooling emerged as significant predictors for reported violence: violence decreasing with increasing age and some schooling. In the second and the third model, self-rated poverty status emerged as the single most important predictor of reported violence among women. Lastly, the BRAC membership status failed to emerge as a significant predictor, although a trend

of increasing violence with successive introduction of savings and credit inputs and a decrease with additional introduction of skill-training were noted.

### DISCUSSION

In Bangladesh, extreme poverty, patriarchy, systematic discrimination from birth, illiteracy, early marriage, and unequal power relations make women vulnerable to gender-based violence, especially domestic violence.

**Table 2.** Odds ratios of factors predicting occurrence of any type of violence against women perpetrated by husbands, Matlab, 1999

Characteristics	Model I		Model II		Model III	
	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI
Age (years)						
≤19	1.00		1.00		1.00	
20-29	0.69	0.34-1.40	0.65	0.32-1.32	0.61	0.28-1.28
30-39	0.47*	0.23-0.97	0.46*	0.22-0.95	0.39*	0.18-0.84
40-49	0.30**	0.14-0.66	0.30**	0.14-0.67	0.25**	0.11-0.58
Schooling (years)						
None	1.00		1.00		1.00	
Some	0.62**	0.47-0.83	0.63**	0.47-0.86	0.59**	0.42-0.83
Contribution to household income						
No	1.00		1.00		1.00	
Yes	1.52	0.82-2.83	1.50	0.80-2.80	1.86	0.98-3.53
Currently-alive children						
No children	1.00		1.00		1.00	
Have children	1.70	0.99-2.94	1.62	0.93-2.81	1.45	0.80-2.60
Age (years) of household head						
≤35			1.00		1.00	
35+			0.82	0.60-1.10	0.89	0.65-1.23
Schooling (years) of household head						
None			1.00		1.00	
Some			1.02	0.77-1.36	1.00	0.74-1.38
Poverty status of household						
Non-deficit			1.00		1.00	
Deficit			1.41**	1.10-1.82	1.38*	1.05-1.82
BRAC membership status						
Eligible non-member					1.00	
Passive member (savings only)					1.36	0.79-2.36
Active member (savings+credit)					1.47	0.93-2.33
Skilled member (savings+credit+training)					0.64	0.25-1.66
-2 log likelihood	1,661.850		1,653.031		1,410.497	
Overall predicted (%)	85.5		85.5		86.6	
*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 CI=Confidence interval						

Moreover, the patrilocal marriage system, where the young bride moves to the in-law's household away from her natal home, makes the situation worse. One way of preventing it can be empowerment of women through education and increasing income-earning opportunities in a women-friendly social environment. In Bangladesh, microcredit organizations are addressing these needs of poor women to improve their status in society, thereby empowering them to achieve a better quality of life (27-29). This paper studied the association of such an indigenous organization, BRAC, with domestic violence against women and explored underlying factors mediating such an effect.

In this study, data on violence were collected through structured interviews. Information on both physical violence of different degrees, such as slapping, beating, kicking, etc., and emotionally-abusive behaviour was collected. There might have been a bit of under-reporting which is plausible, because without long-term sensibly-good rapport-building, women would not disclose facts on such a sensitive issue to an outsider as it is a prestige issue. However, a shorter recall period improved accuracy of reporting.

Multivariate analysis identified younger age as a risk factor for violence as observed elsewhere (9,30). This is plausible in a culture like that in Bangladesh where early marriage is the norm. When a woman at her early teens enters into a husband's household leaving the security of her natal home, she is thrown into an unknown social realm and is in a vulnerable situation. The expectations of in-laws, especially the mother-in-law, and her husband regarding gender and social norms are still unknown, and errors in failure to comply may result in violence against women. Also, the role of women's education in lessening violence found in the study is consistent with current knowledge (31-33). Education empowers women through social networking, increased self-confidence and capacity to use information and resources available in society, besides being translated into income-earning. The findings of the study on the strong relationship between violence and poverty as reflected in reporting of greater violence among women from deficit households and labour-selling households, corroborate findings of other studies (9,30-34).

In this study, status of BRAC membership was not a significant predictor of domestic violence against women perpetrated by the husbands. Thus, it can be said that participation in BRAC was not significantly associated with a greater level of violence in the study women. However, this study illustrates the dynamics of

BRAC membership on the occurrence of violence within households. Compared to non-members, female members faced a greater level of domestic violence when they first joined BRAC, and the occurrence of violence reached its peak when credit was subsequently introduced. Then there was a substantial decrease in the occurrence of violence with the introduction of skill-training over time. Skill-development training in self-employment activities is usually given after a year or more of membership. A few explanations can be put forward to address this observation. Membership in a credit group opens many windows of opportunities for women. It raises their level of awareness through group meetings, various educational interventions, and interactions in the public arena over time. Access to knowledge and information through membership also helps women gain power and autonomy. Training for skill development accelerates this process. It places women in a position where they are better able to negotiate conflict and avoid violent situations with greater confidence, knowledge, and information. Alternatively, it may be that the husbands become habituated to the economic role of women, and initial resentment gives way to acceptance and even appreciation. The greater visibility of women in the public domain relating to participation in BRAC activities, and changing familial and societal attitude vis-à-vis their activities may make it less possible for husbands to get away with violence without incurring social scorn. Hussain *et al.* found that, after being involved with BRAC for four years, women became independent, and they could move more freely, household violence decreased, and husbands dare not be too violent (25).

The current study contributes to the ongoing debate on the relationship between microcredit and domestic violence by reiterating the importance of the level of membership, i.e. degree of involvement with (in terms of receiving successive inputs) microcredit institutions for reducing violence against women perpetrated by their husbands. It raises further possibilities for in-depth investigation on the dynamics and management of credit entering into the poor household, the role of skill-training on the incidence of violence and how these interact in the context of microcredit to affect the prevalence of domestic violence against women.

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