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Is women's empowerment contributing to a decline in intimate partner violence against women in Bangladesh? Evidence from a qualitative study

Sidney Ruth Schuler^a, Rachel Lenzi^a, Sohela Nazneen^b, and Lisa M. Bates^c

Sidney Ruth Schuler: sschuler@fhi360.org; Rachel Lenzi: rlenzi@fhi360.org; Sohela Nazneen: sohela.nazneen@gmail.com; Lisa M. Bates: lb2290@columbia.edu

^aGlobal Health, Population, and Nutrition Group, FHI 360. 1825 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20002. USA

^bDepartment of International Relations, University of Dhaka. Dhaka-1000. Bangladesh

^cDepartments of Epidemiology and Population and Family Health, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. 722 West 168th Street, New York, NY 10032. USA

Abstract

The Bangladesh government, nongovernmental organizations, donors, and advocacy groups have attempted various interventions to promote gender equality and reduce intimate partner violence (IPV) against women, but rigorous evaluations of these interventions are rare and few published studies have yet to show that any of them has had a substantial impact. This study presents qualitative evidence from four villages in central and northern Bangladesh drawn from 11 group discussions (6 with men, 5 with women), 16 open-ended interviews with men, and 62 women's life history narratives. The findings strongly suggest that IPV is declining in these villages as women's economic roles expand and they gain a stronger sense of their rights. Periodic surveys are recommended to measure trends in the incidence of IPV in settings where transitions in gender systems are under way.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women is a global problem and is especially acute in societies where gender inequality is extreme (Levinson 1989; Yllo and Straus 1990). IPV has multiple adverse effects on women and children, both physical and psychological (Heise et al. 1994; Campbell et al. 2002; UN 2006; Ellsberg et al. 2008; Yount, DiGirolamo, and Ramakrishnan 2011). Some of the highest rates of IPV in the world have been reported in Bangladesh, and the context of gender inequality in which this occurs has been well documented (Cain et al. 1979; White 1992; Schuler et al. 2006; Schuler and Islam 2008). Estimates of lifetime physical IPV among married women in Bangladesh range from 32–72 percent (Schuler et al. 1996; Steele, Amin, and Naved 1998; Khan, Rob, and Hossain 2001; Koenig et al. 2003; Bates et al. 2004), and estimates among married women of prior year physical IPV range from 16–54 percent (Schuler et al. 1996; Bates et al. 2004; BIDS 2004; Naved et al. 2006). The most recent major survey to measure IPV in Bangladesh, the 2007 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), found that 53 percent of rural women had experienced physical or sexual IPV in their current or most recent marriage.

Bangladesh is a particularly appropriate site for research on gender and IPV because of its high rates of IPV, the evolution in women's empowerment that is under way (Schuler et al. 2006; Das et al. 2008; Nazneen, Hossain, and Sultan 2011), and the country's economic gains and reductions in poverty during the past decade or so, which may have influenced

rates of IPV over time. Concurrently, concerted efforts in recent decades by the government of Bangladesh and donors to extend access to primary and secondary education and reduce gender disparities have been successful. By 2001, the gross primary school enrollment rate reached 98 percent, with parity between boys and girls (World Bank 2003). In 1993, the proportion of girls completing each grade was less than that of boys; by 2004, girls had caught up and were ahead at every grade level through the end of secondary school (Schuler 2007). In 2005–06, girls constituted 56 percent of students enrolled in secondary school (Das et al. 2008). Debate has taken place regarding whether microfinance programs, which have an estimated 20.6 million (mostly female) borrowers in Bangladesh (Nazneen, Hossain, and Sultan 2011), have been empowering for women, but the general consensus is that they have been (World Bank 2006). The garment industry, which employs more than 3 million women (IMF 2011) has been another important catalyst in the promotion of women's empowerment in Bangladesh (Kabeer, Mahmud, and Tasneem 2001; Kabeer et al. 2011). Women's rate of employment has also increased considerably, growing at 4.3 percent each year between 2000 and 2005 (Das et al. 2008). Thus, the number of rural Bangladeshi wives who are more educated than their husbands is increasing (Das et al. 2008), and many wives contribute substantially to their families' income and/or provide a source of capital for their households through microfinance programs. Women's political empowerment has lagged behind (Nazneen, Hossain, and Sultan 2011), however, as has their participation in the formal labor force, and child marriage remains common (Das et al. 2008).

Evidence suggests that, at times, women's economic (Vyas and Watts 2009) or social (Jewkes, Levin, and Penn-Kekana 2002) empowerment may undermine IPV, and at times may trigger it. Similar to what Jewkes, Levin, and Penn-Kekana (2002) found in the context of female education in South Africa, previous research in Bangladesh suggests that men sometimes use IPV to enforce their dominance and reassert inequalitarian gender roles in marriage when women begin to become empowered through microfinance programs (Schuler, Hashemi, and Badal 1998). Jewkes and her colleagues theorize that as a woman begins to become empowered she may question rigid gender roles but her empowerment may not be sufficient to insulate her from the effects of such change.

In 2002, two of the present authors (Schuler and Bates) conducted a survey of approximately 1,200 married women of reproductive age in the six villages where we had been doing qualitative research since 1991. In multivariate analyses, controlling for socioeconomic status and various factors that community members themselves perceived to be protective against IPV, only women's education was associated with significantly lower odds of IPV. The odds were higher for women who had personal earnings that contributed more than nominally to the marital household (Bates et al. 2004). Naved and Persson (2005) report similar findings. These findings suggest that women's empowerment may influence their risk of IPV in complex and contradictory ways, and that their risk may vary with specific forms of empowerment.

In addition to education, microcredit, and employment generation, other interventions to promote women's empowerment have been (and are being) attempted by the Bangladesh government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), donors, and advocacy groups. These interventions include ideational change through media, legal services, community organizing, and legal reform (Azim and Sultan 2010; Chowdhury 2010). Rigorous evaluations of these interventions are relatively few, and little published evidence shows that any of these interventions has had an impact in reducing IPV. Our study presents qualitative evidence from a small number of sites showing that villagers attribute to these interventions, in combination with broader economic and social changes, remarkable declines in the incidence of IPV. The "ethno-ecological" perspective provided by this study suggests that, if this reduction in IPV is in fact real (not merely perceived), it reflects an interplay of factors

operating at multiple levels, fortuitous results of economic and social changes, and deliberate interventions by NGOs and the government.

METHODS

This study builds on 20 years of prior research regarding social and cultural processes affecting women's health and population growth in Bangladesh. It forms part of a larger research project investigating the individual- and community-level mechanisms by which women's empowerment is associated with their risk of experiencing IPV in rural Bangladesh.

Setting

The research sites are four of six villages in Magura and Rangpur districts where members of the current research team have been working since 1991: three are in Rangpur and one is in Magura. Although not randomly selected, the villages and the districts in which they are located are typical of rural Bangladesh (Bates et al. 2004). The villages are poor but not unusually so for rural Bangladesh. For example, indexes such as household ownership of consumer goods—for example, radio (26 percent) and television (14 percent)—and the percentage of households with electricity (28 percent) from our 2002 survey were comparable to those in the 2004 Bangladesh DHS (29 percent, 16 percent, and 30 percent, respectively). The villages are also somewhat but not unusually socially conservative and, as in most of the country, have a relatively homogeneous ethnic and religious composition, with the vast majority of villagers self-identifying as Muslim (96 percent) and Bengali (unmeasured but likely close to 100 percent). Each village has governmental and religious schools (madrasas) located either in the village or within 0.3–1.25 miles. At least one NGO is active in each village, working in areas such as primary health care, microfinance, schooling, legal awareness, and the promotion of gender equity. As of 2006, some women (as many as 40 percent from one village but only 2–5 percent from others) were working in rice-processing centers, as vendors, or in small rural factories near their villages, and a small proportion of women had migrated to the capital, Dhaka, or to district towns to work in garment factories or as cooks for factory workers. A few men from several of the villages had migrated to Dhaka or to Middle Eastern countries for employment. Migration to Dhaka appears to have increased since that time. A recent mapping exercise (Amin et al. forthcoming) using data from the 2007 Bangladesh DHS shows that Rangpur District, where three of the villages are located, had a relatively high prevalence (34–44 percent) of women reporting being beaten by their husbands within the prior 12 months, and Magura District, where the fourth village is located, was characterized as middle-range prevalence (23–33 percent).

Data

Most of the data presented here were drawn from 11 group discussions (GDs)—6 with men and 5 with women, 5–8 individuals per group—and 16 open-ended interviews (OIs) with men. Sixty-two women's life history narratives (LHNs) were reviewed for contradictory data, and a few illustrative quotes are included. All of the women interviewed were lower-middle or lower class, as were most of the men (6 GD participants and 4 OI participants were middle-class men.) The data were collected during four visits (one per village) between March 2011 and April 2012. Organizing formal focus groups with men would have been difficult because of the work demands of potential participants (and because we did not offer incentives). Thus, we took advantage of “natural groups” that the interviewers came upon when moving about the villages and sometimes asked neighbors or passersby to join in the discussions. The interview guide that was used with the 16 individual men was virtually

identical to that used in the GDs, and the findings from the GDs and OIs were consistent. No data from the LHNs substantially contradicted the GDs.

Participants in the GDs and OIs were first asked open-ended questions regarding changes in women's lives during the past generation, then regarding changes in men's and women's roles in the household, purdah (seclusion of women) norms, women's nature, the balance of power between men and women, and IPV and conflict between spouses. Sometimes the order of topics changed when subjects were raised spontaneously by the participants in the discussions. Topics also recurred in the course of the discussions. Here we focus in particular on the findings regarding household conflict and IPV perpetrated by men against their wives. The majority of the quotes presented are from the GDs, because this is where the most elaboration on the reasons for the perceived decline in IPV is found. The LHNs with women focused primarily on the women's own experiences. Near the end of these interviews, however, most of the women were asked questions such as: "What is the situation in your village regarding quarrels between husbands and wives, and what was the situation when you came here as a new bride? Has the situation remained the same or has it changed over time? Have quarrels and beatings decreased or increased?" These questions were tailored to the context of each narrative.

The field research team consisted of four Bangladeshis—two men and two women—who were experienced and had exceptional skill in conducting qualitative interviews. The team had worked in the same villages in previous studies and had established trust and rapport. The interviews were conducted in the local language, Bangla, and transcribed and translated into English in Dhaka. Field notes provided additional detail. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) and FHI 360. Verbal informed consent was obtained. The study was initially described to potential participants and other community members as a study of women's changing roles and the relationships between husbands and wives. In the GDs and OIs, participants were asked to comment on general trends in their communities and not personal matters; nonetheless, quite a few spoke about their own situations.

Analysis

The preparation and analysis of the qualitative data followed six steps: (1) identify key themes and develop, test, and revise coding guides, one for the LHNs and the interviews with men, and one for the group discussions; (2) code transcripts using the software program MaxQDA; (3) analyze the dialogues and juxtapose themes within interviews; (4) identify key themes and interpretations within and across interviews; (5) assemble and evaluate supporting evidence and counterevidence from coded data to test interpretations; (6) revise and refine findings and interpretations. Unless otherwise mentioned or illustrated, all of the causal factors offered to explain decreases in spousal conflict and IPV were mentioned spontaneously.

FINDINGS

Perceived Decline in IPV

In all 11 GDs, all 16 OIs, and 35 of the 37 LHNs in which the question was asked and the answer was intelligible, the participants said that violence against wives had declined in recent years. No one in any of the interviews said that it had increased. People associated this decline in IPV with a change in the balance of power between men and women and with changes among both women and men. For example, as was relayed consecutively in a female group discussion (FGD):

You know how a conjugal relationship used to be in the past, right? There was so much fear within a conjugal relationship. In the past, a wife used to fear her husband so much! A wife would have to live according to her husband's command. A husband would come home from work and charge her: "Why have you not finished this task yet?!" If the wife said one or two words in reply, then the husband would beat her, saying: "Why could you not finish your work? How could you not finish simple household tasks when I do so much work outside of this home?" [Wife of village doctor, age 65]

But such issues do not exist anymore. [Widow, age 50]

Similarly, when an interviewer in another female group discussion asked whether any changes have occurred regarding wife beating, two participants interrupted before she could finish, declaring:

Wife beating has decreased very, very, very, very greatly. Nowadays husbands do not beat their wives much. I think within a couple of years it will have stopped completely. Husbands won't beat their wives anymore. [Female family planning distributor, age 40]

IPV had not disappeared entirely in these villages. Of the 62 women providing LHNs, 10 said they had been beaten or slapped within the past year, 35 reported having been beaten or slapped at one time or another but not within the past year, and only 13 said they had never been beaten or slapped. In 4 cases, determining from the interview whether the participant had ever experienced IPV was not possible. Generally, however, the perception in all three types of interviews was that IPV had declined substantially.

Perceived Causes of IPV Decline

The most frequently mentioned and most emphasized factor said to underlie the perceived decline in IPV was increased economic prosperity, attributed in large part to women's greatly increased involvement in income generation. Education was seen as a factor in women's expanded roles in income generation. Education also enabled women to help their children with their homework (obviating the need for a private tutor) and to impart to the women self-restraint and skill in speaking, so they could better avoid antagonizing their husbands. Many participants also mentioned the influence of government actions (the declaring of men and women as equal and the passing of laws against domestic violence), legal and human rights education and assistance from NGOs, increased accessibility of means of recourse for battered women, and television dramas on the subject of IPV and its consequences (most likely a combination of commercial and public interest broadcasting). All participants—men and women, younger and older—mentioned one or another of these factors, and almost all participants mentioned economic factors.

Economic Improvements—In all group discussions, study participants attributed IPV to the stress caused by economic deprivation and/or identified improved economic conditions as a reason that IPV had decreased. Economic deprivation makes men's fulfillment of their traditional roles as providers difficult, which contributes to stress and IPV (Schuler et al. 1996).

The main reason behind all unrest is poverty. Men used to have hot heads due to their poverty. They used to beat their wives. But now they are becoming better off and this has helped to bring about a better understanding between men and women. [Male NGO worker, age 35, male group discussion (MGD)]

Increased economic activity was perceived as reducing IPV through promoting greater prosperity and diverting husbands' and wives' energy away from interpersonal conflict.

For example, in a family, you will find both the husband and the wife are busy doing their work, so they do not get time to quarrel with each other. [Male snack seller, age 22, MGD]

Asked what steps might be taken to stop oppression within the family, a woman answered somewhat playfully:

Give one lakh, two lakhs, four or five lakhs taka [US\$122–610] to every family! [Housewife, age 36, FGD]

Another member of the group added:

If neediness and hardship go away, there will no longer be a problem. All these things happen because of poverty. [Housewife, age 41]

Women's Economic Roles—Much of the improvement in family income was attributed to women's increased earnings through work in occupations previously unavailable to them. Women indicated directly that their role in income generation was a factor protecting them from IPV, whereas men indicated this indirectly by linking women's work to increased prosperity and increased prosperity to lower incidence of IPV.

Women have become much more industrious than before, which is the reason our society has prospered. Poverty has been reduced in our village, thanks to them. Many women in our village work along with their husbands. They do not feel embarrassed about it. We never saw anything like this before. [Male farmer, age 35, MGD]

I can sell goats, a cow, hens, or ducks from time to time. If I can earn some money every month by doing these things, then how would he beat me? But if I can't earn like this, I may have to take some beatings. I will get cutting remarks [from him] and eventually we will engage in quarrels. [Woman who raises livestock, age 30, FGD]

A participant in one MGD described how thousands (he probably exaggerated) of women lined up to seek employment when a rural garment factory opened nearby, pointing out that great demand for jobs existed among women and concluding that women wanted economic independence. Many of the LHNs revealed that husbands stopped beating their wives after the wives started working and earning income.

I was beaten so much after coming to this family. I doubt that any woman in the whole world has been beaten by her husband as I have been.... But he became convinced after a certain time, you know? I am now working more and more and we are fine. [She later said three years had passed since she was last beaten.] [Woman who works in neighboring homes, raises chickens and livestock, and buys and sells agricultural products, age 23, LHN]

Increased Gender Equality within Households—Study participants also attributed improved marital relations to increased economic collaboration between husbands and wives. The latter was associated with more companionate, less patriarchal modes of relating. Men helping their wives with household tasks was described as a natural correlate of women's expansion into economic activities that men historically performed. Performing traditionally female tasks and being more caring toward one's wife were no longer seen as signs of weakness, suggesting that the norms defining masculinity have begun to change. In answering a question in a female group discussion about whether spousal relationships have changed recently or remained the same, a housewife of unknown age answered:

Now husband and wife are equal.... In the past, women used to be afraid of their husbands and their husbands dominated them a lot [laughs]. Women now are not that scared, and husbands understand that they cannot dominate as they did in the past. Beatings do not happen now.

Male and female participants alike attested to the changes in gender roles and relations.

Suppose the wife is cooking. You will see the husband putting fuel wood into the stove or taking care of their children. Besides, women also help in men's work—that's why many men help their wives in doing their work too. [Male farmer, age 35, MGD] The girls now eat out and wander with their husbands.... The girls ride the motorcycle with their husbands ... and their hair flies free. [The rest of the group laughs.] [Housewife, age 70, FGD]

Very few participants made negative statements about men doing what has traditionally been and is still considered "women's work."

Interviewer (I): How do other people in the society view a man who does work that is considered "women's work"?

Well, there was a time when people would call a man varua [a weak man who is controlled by his wife] if he did women's work. People had a very negative view of such men. Varua is a very bad slur. But things have changed. Now, instead, people give credit to a man who helps his wife when she needs it. [Male NGO worker, age 35, MGD]

Interviews with men revealed not only their having become more comfortable with doing "women's work" but also their acceptance of women's capability of doing many forms of what had traditionally been "men's work."

This equal rights idea has come to our society. That women and men can do the same type of work is known to everyone. It seems people from all walks of life think this is true. [Male farmer, age 35, MGD]

Role of Mothers-in-Law—In the life history narratives, descriptions of mothers-in-law who dominated their sons and goaded them to beat their wives were plentiful, but few were current. Evidence from all three modes of interview indicated that, together with increased economic collaboration between husbands and wives, the power and importance of mothers-in-law is fast diminishing as education becomes more common among the current generation of brides and as husbands become more dependent on their wives' economic contributions. "Household division" (sons' moving out of their domicile of origin) was said to occur sooner after a son's marriage than was typical in the past, perhaps in part because the age at which women/girls marry is increasing somewhat. Not surprisingly, younger women described these changes in a positive light. Older women were sometimes positive and sometimes ambivalent or bemused.

Things have turned into their opposite. In the past, we had to work for our mother-in-law and father-in-law. Now we have to work for our daughter-in-law. [Midwife, age 50, FGD] My father-in-law and mother-in-law can't make money. We make money now. That's why they listen to us. [Housewife, age 25, FGD]

In one group discussion with six women aged 20–45, the older women seemed envious of the younger women because they had not had to experience beatings the way the older women had when they were younger. A 40-year-old housewife declared:

Nowadays, men worship and bow before their wives. They don't do or even say anything rude to their wives.

I: Do you like this change or do you regret it?

[Sarcastically] It feels good to see them bowing before their wives. It's because we had those beatings that these girls are getting bows from their husbands.

Decreased Dependence on Marriage—In several interviews with men and women, the notion that women's increased economic participation had created an option for survival outside of marriage was explicitly linked to the perceived decline in IPV. We did not find evidence that divorce instigated by women was becoming substantially more common, but many of the interviews conveyed a sense that a woman's ability to leave if IPV became intolerable was an implicit threat to male abusers.

Many women are migrating to Dhaka to work in garment factories. They work to earn money. A husband is not entitled to beat such a woman and expect that she will just put up with it. So these women go to Dhaka, leaving their family back in the village. A family is where both the husband and wife must live harmoniously and participate equally. Your wife is not your servant. You made the situation bad enough for her to go out in search of a job and now you beat her—that's not fair! So these women leave the village. They curse their husbands and their conjugal lives and leave for Dhaka, taking their children with them. [Male teacher in a religious school, age 50, MGD]

Access to Mechanisms of Recourse—Many interviewees also mentioned that women have improved access to mechanisms of informal (mediation) and formal (legal sanctions) recourse. This finding contrasted with what was indicated in interviews six to eight years earlier (Schuler, Bates, and Islam 2008). Women's access to recourse mechanisms (and men's fear of the law) was the second strongest factor linked to the perceived decrease in IPV, after economic changes. The degree to which these mechanisms have actually become functional, however, was not clear. Participants in several groups appeared to agree that access to legal recourse was an important factor behind the decline in IPV, but few actual instances were mentioned in which men were brought to justice. More than likely, legal intervention had taken place in a few cases (and not necessarily in these communities), and this was enough for people to begin to see it as a meaningful option or, in the case of male abusers, a threat.

Listen, [men] do not [take a second wife] anymore because it's against the law [without the first wife's permission].... If a woman is tortured and it is reported, then it will become a court case. That's why men remain silent in fear. They do not dare marry another woman. [Midwife, age 50, FGD]

Mention of the punishment of male abusers in television dramas also revealed the expectation of legal sanction.

The issue of access to legal recourse and informal mediation was raised primarily in the women's group discussions. When mentioned by men, it was framed negatively:

Equal rights are not a proper thing. Don't I have the right to regulate her? But this would create—suppose if I berate her, she would go to her natal home.... Maybe a petty matter will lead to a legal case and result in a fine. This fear acts on men at present and the result is that they become weaker.... A case will be filed then and certainly the government will give a verdict favoring the woman. The judge will declare that the woman is right and arrest him. And he will definitely be sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. [Muazzin (summoner to pray in a mosque), age 45, MGD]

Women described the same phenomenon in a positive light:

Now we have a better law. This is another reason why wife beating has reduced. Now a man knows that his wife may go to her parents' house and file a case against him if he beats her. [Woman who raises poultry and livestock, age 45, FGD]

In addition to legal recourse, participants also noted the role of informal mediation in their discussions of how IPV can now be redressed. In one village, an NGO—BRAC—appeared to be active in mediating disputes, in part by threatening legal recourse.

Do you know [name], who lives near [location]? He had married twice. After the second marriage, he would beat his first wife. Some neighboring women said to her, "You're a BRAC member, why don't you go to the 'sirs' [male BRAC workers] and complain?" After people spoke about the issue, the BRAC office threatened [the man]: "If you continue like this, we will take legal action against you!" Incidents like this happened in [village name], [village name], and [village name] in our area.... [Then] people from the neighboring houses put some pressure on [the abusive husband].... His first wife left in anger and went to her parents. She returned two or three days later, as she had left her children behind. She announced [to her husband], "I don't need your rice. I'll earn my own food." [The husband] was given some verbal threats and shown all signs that a case was going to be filed against him. He then got rid of the second wife in a compromise deal. [Male school teacher, age 45, OI]

I: Was it in fear of BRAC that [name] divorced his second wife?

It was due to the combined fear of BRAC and people from the neighborhood. Wherever [name] went, be it the bazaar or on his way to somewhere, women whom he calls bhabi [elder brother's wife] or chachi [father's elder brother's wife] would rebuke him, saying, "Hey, why do you beat your wife? Why do you beat her?"

I: Did anyone protest like this in the past?

In the past, women could not interfere in matters like this.... Now they go straight to the spot and give their protection.

These quotes suggest that the work of NGOs such as BRAC in legal education and mediation has strengthened the effect of women's expanded economic roles on creating realistic alternatives to abusive marriages. These organizations have promoted the concept of equal rights, helped women threaten legal action to intimidate abusive husbands, and inspired people to take action against IPV in their communities. Several women who provided life history narratives spoke of their own informal roles in confronting and trying to shame male abusers.

When I was in my nutrition job [as a community-based educator], I would face such situations [wife beating] regularly. I talked to so many men to make them understand that it was not right to engage in quarrels and beating. [Laid-off nutrition educator, age 25, LHN]

When an interviewer asked an LHN participant whether she protests if a man in her neighborhood beats his wife, she replied emphatically:

Yes, I protest when a man beats his wife! I tell him, "Why are you beating your wife? What is her fault? How mercilessly you beat your wife!" Then I ask him this and that. This is how I scold the husband. [Female garment-factory worker, age 25]

Sources of Gender-Ideational Change—Increased gender equality was frequently mentioned by participants. The existence of female heads of state appeared to be a powerful

symbol, opening up a conceptual realm of possibility for rural women, even if not changing their day-to-day reality.

Hasina and Khaleda [the current and recent female prime ministers] are our government. They are always against men and in favor of women. The power is given to women. [Midwife, age 50, FGD]

Study participants frequently cited education, the government, NGOs, technology, media, and returned migrants as sources of new ideas such as that of gender equality.

Men's Ambivalence Concerning Women's Economic Roles

Many of the men and women interviewed asserted that men's power had not decreased even though women's power had increased. In most of the group discussions with men, ambivalence or resentment emerged in relation to women's increased prominence and the government policies and other influences supporting this.

Women have become men.... Just take the case of road construction. Make an inquiry and see how many men are working there. All are women. And men are sitting idle. [Muazzin, age 45, MGD]

Men are falling behind, as the quota system is firmly in place everywhere. If you want to find a job in a school or college, you will find a quota guaranteeing a percentage of jobs for women candidates. This quota system is the main cause of men's falling behind. They can't find any jobs. [Post office worker, age 50, MGD]

I: Doesn't this create grievances among men?

Yes, it does. Often we hear men expressing their anger and frustration, saying, "What is this government doing? They are siding with women in a one-sided manner!" Men are not getting jobs.¹

Families are prospering but women do not value their husbands anymore. They say things like, "I don't depend on your money for my living, so don't you tell me what I am supposed to do!" [Male NGO worker, age 35, MGD]

CONCLUSION

The causes of IPV and the contexts in which it occurs are often analyzed from an ecological perspective, which can reveal the interplay of factors at various levels: at the individual, couple, family, and local-community levels, and in the economic, legal, and political spheres (Heise 1998). This study offers what we would call an "ethno-ecological perspective" on the factors underlying a recent perceived decline in IPV. In other words, the ecological model was not provided by the researchers but rather by study participants. We believe that these findings highlight the utility of ethnographic methods for understanding social and individual behavioral change from a holistic perspective, focusing on dynamic social systems.

Participants were almost unanimous in stating that wife beating had recently declined in their villages. Although a range of factors accounting for this perceived recent decline in IPV was mentioned by participants, the most frequent were economic improvements (first) and women's access to informal mediation and legal recourse (second). The primary explanation—economic prosperity—was attributed in large part to women's greatly increased involvement in income generation, which was mentioned in all 11 group discussions. The perceived economic improvements in the four study villages mirror a

¹With the exception of a few types of jobs such as that of primary school teacher, jobs set aside for women often go unfilled.

national trend: headcount poverty² was 57 percent in the early 1990s, 40 percent by 2005, and was projected to be 30 percent by 2009 (World Bank 2010)—a marked drop in a relatively short period of time.

In this study, female education was seen to play a part in women's expanded roles in income generation. In addition, women's ability to avoid violence by speaking tactfully and strategically was described as an effect of their education. Also frequently mentioned was the influence of government actions (the declaring of men and women as equal and the passage of laws against domestic violence); legal-rights education by NGOs and increased access to legal recourse for battered women; and television dramas on the subject of IPV and its consequences. Bangladesh's two female heads of state (who have alternated in the role of prime minister) seemed to have become powerful symbols of women's rights and potential for the rural villagers in this study.

In a much-cited article, Kandiyoti (1988: 286) introduces the concept of the "patriarchal bargain," which is "a set of rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated." In conditions of extreme poverty, as in Bangladesh in the 1970s, 1980s, and to a lesser extent the 1990s, chronic poverty may have interfered with men's ability to fulfill their end of the bargain, which included providing economic support to their wives and families (Cain, Khanam, and Nahar 1979), undermining the material base of classic patriarchy. Increasing landlessness (or reduced dependence on land) and the growing importance of other sources of income in rural areas also weakened patriarchy by making sons less dependent on their fathers (Dharmalingam 1994). When patriarchy enters such a crisis, Kandiyoti argues, women may respond by pressuring men to live up to their obligations if they do not see empowering alternatives for themselves. This phenomenon likely contributed to the high rates of IPV that were documented in Bangladesh through the 1980s and 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Data from the present study suggest that women have begun to find empowering alternatives to the patriarchal bargain that existed, that the terms of the arrangement are being renegotiated, and that in this renegotiation men are beginning to lose their "right" to use IPV against their wives.

A generally positive tenor was observed in men's descriptions of women's evolving empowerment—their education and worldliness, their intellectual skills upon which families increasingly rely, their transcendence of purdah restrictions when they began to work outside the home in greater numbers, their increased role in the management of family enterprises, and even their ability to leave their marriages and support themselves when necessary. Some of the men's remarks, however, revealed an underlying hostility to the women who had gained power in their society and homes, and others displayed ambivalence. Such views suggest that any decline in IPV that may have occurred in conjunction with women's empowerment is by no means irreversible, and that policies and programs should be sensitive to the possibility of a patriarchal backlash.

The longstanding acquaintance of the field researchers with the residents of the four villages is both a strength and a limitation of the study. The possibility of the researchers contributing to the spread of new ideas in the villages, if only by their own example, is real. The likelihood of "desirability bias," however, should be less than in unfamiliar sites because the villagers have become accustomed to talking with the researchers and have seen over the years no gain or loss from this interaction. Furthermore, the villagers are aware that the researchers know the villages well and probably understand that the researchers would thus be difficult to deceive. The amount of elaboration in participants' statements provides

²Headcount poverty refers here to the percentage of the population earning less than \$1.25 per day in 2005 dollars.

further evidence that these are not superficial attempts to impress the interviewers. In many cases, the study participants spoke in an exaggerated fashion, making clear that what they said was not literally true and that they probably did not think so themselves. We do not believe that such statements were in any way attempts to deceive the interviewers. Hyperbole is a common feature of informal speech in many cultures, including in this setting.

Perhaps the greatest limitation of the study (although from another perspective this is its strength) is that it is purely qualitative and, therefore, did not attempt to measure the actual prevalence of IPV. According to the 2007 Bangladesh DHS—the most recent nationwide survey—18 percent of women reported that they had been hit or beaten by their husbands within the past year. As noted earlier, the rates of prior-year IPV reported in smaller surveys between 1996 and 2006 range between 16 and 54 percent. In the four villages where the present study was conducted, the rate was 35 percent in a 2001 survey, the most recent survey we conducted. Thus, the IPV prevalence reported in the 2007 DHS is possibly lower than that of five to ten years earlier. (The 2011 DHS did not collect data concerning IPV prevalence, only attitudes.) Our data do not allow us to pinpoint the dates of the perceived decline in the four villages, because the reference point in our interviews was either “in recent years,” “in the past eight to ten years,” or “the year that the woman being interviewed married and came to live in the village.” The decline in IPV that the study participants perceived could plausibly have been concentrated in the five years between 2007 and 2012.

Our study was undertaken in only four villages, and clearly this is a limitation. Bangladesh is a large country and undoubtedly one could find villages where IPV has remained constant or has even increased—this may even be the case in the majority of villages. The striking consistency in the findings from these four noncontiguous villages, however, pointing to a decline in IPV, gives us hope that this reflects the beginning of a trend. Prevalence surveys in these sites, and surveys and qualitative research from other parts of the country, would be valuable in confirming or disconfirming this remarkable phenomenon.

Government and donor policies conducive to economic improvements and employment opportunities for rural women should be continued along with scholarships and other policies that have contributed to the expansion of education for girls and women, and the promotion of gender equity and negative portrayals of violence against women through television and other media. Continued donor support for women-focused NGOs will also be very important for continuing and sustaining reductions in violence against women. Inclusion of men in activities discouraging gender-based violence and media portrayals of nonviolent men as morally superior, prosperous, and “cool” may be helpful in discouraging a patriarchal backlash against empowered women.

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