



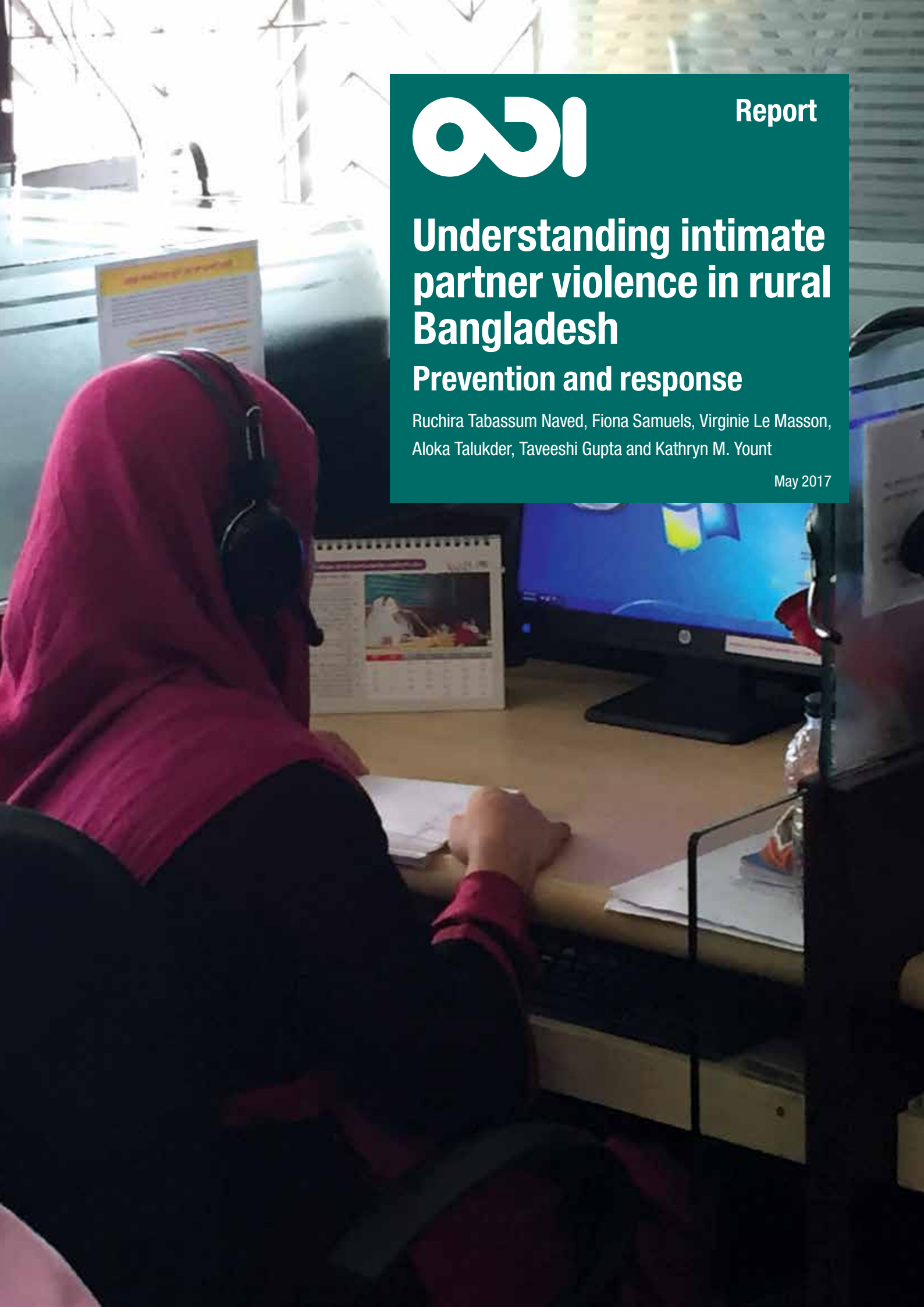
Report

# Understanding intimate partner violence in rural Bangladesh

## Prevention and response

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# Abbreviations

<b>BASA</b>	Association for Social Advancement
<b>ASPADA</b>	Agro-forestry Seed Production and Development Association
<b>BBS</b>	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
<b>BDHS</b>	Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey
<b>BLAST</b>	Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust
<b>BRAC</b>	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
<b>BUHS</b>	Bangladesh Urban Health Survey
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>CLS</b>	Community Legal Services
<b>CMES</b>	Centre for Mass Education in Science
<b>DSK</b>	Dushtha Shasthya Kendro
<b>EVAW</b>	Ending Violence Against Women
<b>FGD</b>	Focus group discussion
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>GEMS</b>	Gender Equity Movement in Schools
<b>Icddr,b</b>	International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh
<b>ICRW</b>	International Center for Research on Women
<b>IDI</b>	In-depth interview
<b>IGT</b>	Intergenerational trio
<b>IPV</b>	Intimate partner violence
<b>KII</b>	Key informant interview
<b>MoWCA</b>	Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>NIPORT</b>	National Institute of Population Research and Training
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>PI</b>	Principal investigator
<b>POPI</b>	People's Oriented Program Implementation
<b>P4P</b>	Partners for Prevention
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>UP</b>	Union Parishad
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence against women and girls
<b>WBGSN</b>	World Bank Survey on Gender
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization



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# Executive summary

Intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh is pervasive, with 1 in 2 ever-married women aged 15 and over reporting physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime (1 in 4 during the past 12 months). Our research highlights the tensions between traditional gendered norms and changing gender roles, responsibilities and dynamics as a result of women's increased access to education, employment, which has in turn increased their mobility and empowerment – tensions that can drive IPV directly and indirectly. There is a relatively supportive legal and policy framework, with laws against child marriage, domestic violence, and granting equal rights to file for divorce. But this has yet to change the lived reality for women and girls, in which male perpetration of IPV is considered normal and is even expected to correct 'bad' behaviour – i.e., when a girl or woman transgresses (or is perceived to transgress) rigid and conservative gender norms that reinforce women's inferior position relative to men.

The report presents findings from a literature review and from qualitative research conducted in 2016 with women and men from five villages in two districts of Bangladesh, Gazipur and Mymensingh, selected because of their high rates of IPV. Interviews were also carried out at national level in Dhaka. Research methods included key informant interviews with a wide range of stakeholders (government and non-government), in-depth interviews with young men and boys and female survivors of IPV, focus group discussions (with single-sex groups) and intergenerational trios (male and female). This research is part of a broader study of three South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan) to explore the underlying drivers, triggers, risks and influencing factors for IPV.

## National context

Despite a seemingly strong legal and policy framework, IPV remains widespread in Bangladesh. Prevalence rates range from 49.6% for physical violence to 28.7% for psychological violence and 27.2% for sexual violence. Existing laws and policies do not cover all types of violence (e.g. rape within marital relationships is not recognised as a crime unless the wife is younger than 13, nor is 'mental torture' or emotional violence considered a crime).

The research considers four categories of violence: physical, sexual, emotional/psychological, and economic violence, as well as exploring new forms of violence (such as cyber violence) linked to the spread of new technology,

particularly among younger people and unmarried adolescents.

The literature review identified individual-level risk factors for male perpetration of IPV as including poverty, education level, age, and childhood exposure to violence (either witnessing or experiencing violence at home). Risk factors at the household/relationship level include women's increasing economic power, quality of the marital relationship, the number of partners a man or woman has, and the number of children. And at the community/society level, risk factors centre on social norms that define masculinity, norms around dowry and bride price, norms around acceptability of violence, and norms around religion.

## Prevalence of IPV

Although many participants suggested that IPV was not widespread and not tolerated (with male informants denying that IPV occurred in their community), when probed, the reality seemed somewhat different. Demands around dowry emerged as a strong driver of IPV, either at the time of marriage or subsequently. Physical IPV is expected (by men and women) as part of a man's duty to discipline his wife. The most common reasons given to justify wife-beating included a woman not obeying her husband, not seeking his permission to go out or take a decision, and intervening in matters regarded as his domain. Other reasons included not taking proper care of her in-laws or quarrelling with them, or religious commandments (Hadith). Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to violence given that IPV is most prevalent in the early years of marriage. Yet many informants felt that young girls in particular are not ready for the demands placed on them in marriage, which can put them at greater risk of IPV.

While informants categorised emotional and economic violence perpetrated by husbands as IPV, there is no concept of sexual violence within marriage. When probed, it became clear that most informants believed that marriage affords men unconditional and unlimited access to their wife's body (women are only allowed to go unpunished for refusing sex on the grounds of illness).

## Perceived changes in IPV over time

Most informants believed that IPV has reduced over time, and physical IPV has become less severe. Reasons cited included: poverty reduction; increased education (of boys and girls); greater employment opportunities for women;

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laws on divorce, dowry, child marriage and violence against women and girls; nuclear families becoming more common; increase in age at marriage; improvements in spousal communication; impact of NGO programmes; greater mobility of women; and greater exposure to mass media and new technology. Women being granted the right to instigate divorce, and apparent greater willingness to protest against IPV, were also mentioned as contributing to a reduction in IPV.

## Key findings on the multi-level influences driving IPV

Our research found that the main factors driving men to perpetrate IPV at the individual level were: adverse childhood experience; low level of education (men and women); child marriage; male unemployment; addiction to gambling, alcohol or substance abuse (which has become a major social problem recently in the study sites); extramarital relationship/sex; and wife engaged in work outside the home. At the family/household level, the key drivers were found to be: poverty; attitudes and norms (among natal and marital families alike) that reinforce gender inequality and condone gender-based violence; and lack of support from a woman's natal family. At the community level, drivers include: violence within the community or peer groups; the practice of village exogamy; impunity of perpetrators and short or derisory sentencing for those convicted of crimes; and negative attitudes/stigma towards divorced women.

We also found evidence of a strong backlash against state and NGO efforts to promote gender equality, with many men perceiving legal changes and NGO programmes that target women as being disadvantageous to them. There was a perception that NGO educational activities were undermining traditional religious institutions for children (*madrassas and makhtabs*) where they learn Arabic, the Quran, and Islamic way of life. And in terms of divorce, there seems considerable resentment among men about the banning of *talak* (a traditional system of divorce triggered by the husband uttering the word 'talak' three times). If the wife requests a divorce, the husband now has to repay the *kabin* (bride price) as well as a subsistence allowance for her and any children. This is thought to have increased IPV as husbands try to end the marriage without making such payments, or even use extreme violence, hoping to drive the wife away without filing a formal divorce request.

### Gendered norms driving IPV

IPV is considered socially acceptable in the study sites and across the country; moreover, it is expected (by women and men alike) as a way for men to correct the behaviour of wives perceived to transgress certain norms. While there are numerous influences and drivers of IPV, informants also noted that some men seem to need no reason to inflict IPV

other than as a means of venting their feelings of anger.

Although in theory women now have equal rights to file for divorce, in practice, the stigma and exclusion faced by female divorcees act as strong disincentives for women to pursue this route to escape violence. A woman's marital and natal family both typically advise women to tolerate IPV or change how they behave so as not to give cause for the husband to commit further acts of violence. Even when a woman applies for divorce, she rarely receives due compensation as she is unable to access the necessary legal services to do so.

### Changing attitudes among younger people?

Adolescent boys and young men share similar views to adult men, initially claiming that IPV is unacceptable but endorsing it when probed about certain scenarios in which it might be justified.

Interviews with a purposively selected sample (albeit very small) of adolescent boys and young men, and adolescent girls and young women, found that they tended to agree with older participants that women are to blame for IPV because they bring it upon themselves by behaving in ways that are not accepted.

### Women's greater access to education and employment opportunities

Girls and women now have more mobility due to relatively recent increases in access to education and employment. In some cases, this can act as a protective factor, in that women's valuable contribution to household income helps challenge gender inequality within the marital relationship – a core determinant of IPV. In other cases, though, it can put women at greater risk of being accused of dishonouring their family (as they challenge social norms related to their mobility and the role of men as breadwinners). Many men feared losing control over their wife's sexuality should she be employed outside the home. Men also commonly perceived that working women were no longer observing *purdah* and conforming to other expected behaviours.

Although there was a perceived reduction in IPV, there appears some debate as to whether IPV is just becoming more private, perpetrated behind closed doors, as government and NGO messaging about the unacceptability of IPV merely moves it out of public view.

## The response to IPV

### Services for survivors

The government (through its Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women) and NGOs are heavily involved in providing medical, legal and psychosocial support for survivors of GBV/IPV. The Multi-Sectoral Programme (launched in 2000 in partnership with the Danish government and led by the Ministry of Women

and Children Affairs) has created 20 regional trauma centres, 30 one-stop crisis centres, and violence prevention committees, as well as free telephone helplines. The NGO, Naripokkho, implements a UNICEF-funded Women-Friendly Hospital Initiative, while BRAC runs a helpline and other services to ensure that victims of violence get appropriate support. However, while services are relatively easily accessible for women and girls in urban and peri-urban areas, their rural counterparts have only limited access to support services (if at all).

One criticism of the multi-sectoral programme approach to IPV services is the lack of attention to prevention, and Bangladesh is no different in this respect. Informants noted that the government has limited capacity to do prevention work; key agencies and departments are understaffed, staff are poorly trained, and activities are constrained by poor coordination and leadership. In addition, women are almost invisible in debates and dialogues on GBV and IPV.

### Justice systems (formal/informal)

At village level, justice systems involve a combination of traditional informal structures (*shalish*) and formal structures (village courts). *Shalish* is a traditional arbitration system whereby a small panel of influential people come together to help community members resolve any disputes (typically around land/money). *Shalish* rarely rules in favour of women; thus, many women do not use this channel to seek justice, fearing not only their husband but also criticism and scapegoating by the wider community, as well as loss of their family honour. Should the *shalish* fail to reach a settlement, cases can proceed to (government-established) village courts.

Men convicted of GBV/IPV typically receive minor punishment (if at all), with many out on bail. Reasons for this include violence within relationships being seen as a 'private' matter, and the general acceptability of violence (even apparently severe violence) against women and girls.

### Norm setters creating pathways for change

Despite strong forces maintaining discriminatory gender norms and gender-inequitable attitudes that condone violence, reports from the study villages suggest that some forces are proving to be agents of change:

- the state has played a vital role, introducing laws and policies on child marriage, divorce, dowry, and violence against women, and enshrining gender equality in the Constitution;
- NGOs have extended women's networks and horizons beyond their immediate family, raised awareness of gender issues and rights, and contributed to women's economic empowerment through microcredit programmes; they have also raised awareness about key legislation such as the Dowry Prohibition and Child Marriage acts;
- media and other communication channels have also been used to raise awareness of gender issues and women's rights;
- working women (and, in some cases, their husbands/partners) have been agents of change, forging more gender-equitable relationships as economic growth has opened up job opportunities for women (particularly in the manufacturing sector and as migrant workers overseas).

## Conclusions and recommendations

Our research found a divergence between the interests and opinions of young men and young women around gender norms. While many men (and older women) uphold the expectations and attitudes on which conservative gender norms are based, young women's opinions and expectations in many domains often favoured the nascent changes being observed. A small group of men also belong to the latter group.

Recommendations suggested by informants include the following:

- **reducing women's dependence on men through economic empowerment** (including, importantly, more home-based employment) and increasing women's agency through more education and developing their leadership and other skills, supporting them to form networks such as women's organisations;
- **increasing education and employment opportunities for boys and men** given that low education and unemployment is a significant risk factor for VAWG;
- **improving spousal communication** to avoid misunderstandings and conflict, which often lead to IPV;
- **targeting several generations at the same time** (including fathers-in-law and mothers-in-law), and creating spaces within households and communities to discuss sensitive topics that have never been discussed openly between the generations before;
- **encouraging men to learn from other (positive) role models in their community** who take a more gender-equitable approach to marital relationships (e.g. one man explained how he actively tried to avoid conflict and IPV in his relationship, taking time to try to understand his wife, her needs, and how best to approach her about different subjects);
- **developing broad-based campaigns to prevent VAWG** that engage men and boys as well as women and girls and other influential community members, taking advantage of social media and other popular communication channels as vehicles for getting messages across;
- **implementing existing laws more effectively**, criminalising certain IPV behaviours (such as marital rape) and prosecuting IPV perpetrators, with harsher sentences for convicted offenders;

- 
- **providing additional training on responding to VAWG within the police, the courts** and other parts of the judicial system, including tackling corruption, which acts as a barrier to women reporting and pursuing cases of IPV.

Broader recommendations include the following:

- **promoting broader definitions of IPV** that include psychological, physical, sexual, economic and cyber violence (and adequately capturing regional variations within Bangladesh on IPV attitudes and behaviours);
- **engaging with men and boys to better tailor programme interventions** by identifying entry points (such as mosques, schools, youth groups, cafes and sports clubs) where different groups are most likely to be receptive to messaging, and remaining mindful of the risk of backlash, especially if such efforts are not carried out in a culturally conservative way;
- **addressing men's exposure to GBV/IPV in childhood;**
- **mapping key institutions at different levels** and engaging them strategically, strengthening service providers' capacity to prevent, screen for and respond to IPV (across the justice, legal, protection, health and education sectors);
- **working with existing justice structures at village level** (formal and informal) by gathering learning around promising practices, and through measures to enhance reporting of IPV;
- **responding to the multi-level influences on IPV** through an intersectoral and multi-level approach, facilitated by a national coordinating agency or inter-agency working group. As well as developing programming that addresses IPV specifically, IPV prevention and response should be mainstreamed through programming in a range of other areas (women's health, livelihoods, economic empowerment).

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# 1. Introduction and study objectives

## 1.1. Introduction

Rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh are high, with 1 in 2 ever-married women aged 15 and over reporting physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime and 1 in 4 reporting such violence during the past 12 months (BBS, 2016). The detrimental effects of IPV on women's physical and mental health and functionality have been well documented. Thus, in urban Bangladesh, difficulties with daily activities were likely to increase by 50% if a woman was exposed to physical and/or sexual IPV (Ellsberg et al., 2008).

Azziz-Baumgartner and colleagues (2014) found that more types of victimisation were associated with higher reporting of distress by urban women from low-income households in Bangladesh. Another study finds positive association between physical IPV and depressive symptoms (Kabir et al., 2014). Women exposed to emotional IPV were 2 to 3 times more likely to have suicidal ideation, while experience of severe physical violence increased this likelihood threefold to fourfold (Naved and Akhtar, 2008).

IPV also affects the children of abused women, with literature showing that children of abused mothers are more likely to suffer from diarrhoea and pneumonia (Asling-Monemi et al., 2009a; Silverman et al., 2009), from malnutrition (Ziaei et al., 2014) and from growth hazards (Asling-Monemi et al., 2009b). Moreover, IPV also contributes to child mortality. Thus, female children of mothers who are exposed to severe physical violence or a number of controlling behaviours are more likely to die before the age of 5 (e.g. Asling-Monemi et al., 2008).

IPV is widely recognised as a violation of human rights, with multiple adverse consequences on health and development (Campbell, 2002; Devries et al., 2013; Ellsberg et al., 2008). This recognition is also reflected in social and women's movements in Bangladesh and in government initiatives to address IPV. One major outcome of this is a strong national legal framework – the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010. However, despite the legal framework and numerous programmes implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and women's activist organisations to address IPV, the level of IPV in Bangladesh remains alarmingly high (BBS, 2016; NIPORT et al., 2009). This

raises questions about how well the drivers of IPV are understood and targeted.

Research on IPV in Bangladesh is primarily based on women's reports of violence. Part of this literature explores drivers or triggers of IPV in relation to individual and household-level factors such as age, education, income, household wealth, etc. (e.g., Bates et al., 2004; Islam et al., 2014; Murshid, 2015; Naved and Persson., 2005; Sambisa et al., 2011). According to these studies, certain factors – including young age, education lower than secondary level, witnessing inter-parental violence, and low household wealth – increase the likelihood of a woman experiencing IPV. Some recent work also examined correlates focusing on men who perpetrate IPV (e.g. Aklimunnessa et al., 2007; Fulu et al., 2013; Johnson and Das 2009; Sambisa et al., 2010). The findings show that young age, low education, IPV-condoning attitudes, extramarital sex, drug use, and childhood exposure to violence increased the likelihood of men perpetrating IPV.

Despite the growing literature on IPV in Bangladesh, we still know little about the community-level factors contributing to IPV. The emerging literature on this topic shows that inequitable gender attitudes in the community increase the likelihood of IPV (Yount et al., 2016b). Although for a woman, marriage after 18 was a protective factor against IPV, in communities with higher prevalence of child marriage (before age 15), women married after 18 were more likely to be abused (Yount et al., 2016a). Women with a higher level of education than average for their community were less likely to experience IPV (Krause et al., 2016).

The literature presents evidence that for policy and programmatic purposes, it is particularly important to understand the attitudes and practices of young men and adolescent boys and to work closely with them to address IPV (Verma et al., 2008; Barker et al., 2010). Unfortunately though, in the field of IPV research in Bangladesh, a focus on young and adolescent boys is scarce, and in addition, there is no in-depth understanding of how discriminatory gender norms shape IPV.

This report draws on primary qualitative research undertaken in 2016 to provide unique insights into research gaps in the evidence base on IPV by exploring the multi-level influences – including gender norms that

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devalue women and girls – which shape adolescent boys’ and men’s attitudes and behaviours regarding IPV. The findings discussed in this report are part of a broader regional study looking at men and boys’ perpetration of IPV across South Asia, focusing on Pakistan and Nepal as well as Bangladesh.

In line with a substantial body of global research on IPV, this study defines IPV as any behaviours within an intimate relationship (i.e. husband, boyfriend, romantic partner) that cause physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship (Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002). We also draw on a definition by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2012), which identifies a set of behaviours as falling under IPV, these include, but are not limited to the following:

- physical aggression (slapping, hitting, kicking and beating);
- psychological abuse (insults, belittling, constant humiliation, intimidation [e.g. destroying things], threats of harm, threats to take away children);
- sexual violence (forced sexual intercourse and other forms of sexual coercion);
- other controlling behaviours (isolating a person from family and friends, monitoring or restricting their movements, and restricting access to financial resources, employment, education or medical care).

To the above we also add economic violence, which includes a man controlling a woman’s ability to access, acquire, use and maintain economic resources (see e.g. Adams et al., 2008; Yount et al., 2015). We also focus on patterns of IPV that are particular to the contexts of our research, including (for instance) violence perpetrated by in-laws (for further details see Samuels et al., 2017).

## 1.2. Research objectives

Given the gaps in understanding dynamics of IPV as they relate to male perpetrators, including attitudinal,

programmatic and policy issues, this report has three central objectives:

- to understand the multilevel drivers of male perpetration of IPV in Bangladesh, including the relative importance of conservative gender norms;
- to investigate how broader political economy dynamics shape attitudes, behaviours and service provision around IPV;
- to determine the types of policy and programming that exist to tackle male perpetration of IPV, and associated policy and practice implications to strengthen responses to IPV.

## 1.3. Structure of the report

To address these objectives, section 2 outlines our conceptual framework that was applied across all three focus countries. Section 3 describes the methodology, including the study sites, data collection instruments and tools, ethical considerations and analytical strategies used. Section 4 gives an overview of the national context, in terms of policies and legislation on violence, as well as existing evidence on the patterning and reported levels of IPV in Bangladesh. We then discuss the individual, household, community and societal-level risk factors that are found to shape experiences of IPV among perpetrators and survivors<sup>1</sup>. Section 5 explores the discriminatory gender norms that underlie IPV, including norms around marriage and relationships, the ideal man/woman/husband/wife, norms around divorce, norms around adolescence, and norms around the acceptability of IPV. Section 6 uses our qualitative findings to explore types of IPV and perceived changes in prevalence over time, as well as the multi-level influences on IPV. Section 7 discusses the policy environment and responses to IPV, including the formal and informal justice systems and entry points for prevention and other programming. Section 8 presents our conclusions and recommendations for future policy and programming.

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1 Following accepted convention, we use the term survivor to refer to any person who has faced IPV. We also recognise the overwhelming structural challenges that underpin women’s vulnerability to IPV and thus do have some sympathy for more recent feminist efforts to reclaim the language of ‘victims’ at the collective level. For further details of this ongoing debate see <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/rahila-gupta/victim-vs-survivor-feminism-and-language>



## 2. Conceptual framework

The starting point of our conceptual framework builds on an integrated ecological model (see e.g. Heise, 1998, 2011; Fulu and Miedema, 2015), which emphasises the interaction of factors at each level of the social ecology – individual, family/relationship, community, society/culture – and the ways in which they contribute to perpetuation of IPV (see Figure 1).

In order to better understand the drivers of male perpetration of IPV, our framework starts with adolescent boys and young men at the centre. We disaggregate the factors that shape boys and young men's individual wellbeing. These include: their coping repertoires (negative and positive, which could therefore include substance abuse among other things); childhood legacy effects (e.g. witnessing gender conflict between parents); relationships with parents; peer relationships; relationships with a partner (including the extent to which this is gendered in terms of division of labour, conforming to social norms, sharing/caring); current psychosocial status; and purposeful choice or agency (e.g. the ability to resist dominant gendered social norms).

Following the ecological framing, these individuals are located in diverse households, the characteristics of which are likely to shape adolescent males' behaviours, attitudes and early adulthood trajectories. Characteristics which we hypothesise, based on existing literature, are likely to influence IPV attitudes and practices include the economic status of the household, education levels of the household adults, the level of social capital the family enjoys, and parental and sibling role models (positive or negative). We also consider the importance of intra-household dynamics, especially the gendered interaction between parents, between parents and children, and between siblings; these interactions can occur in a number of dimensions, including income-generation activities and the gendered division of labour (domestic chores and the care economy).

Beyond the household we emphasise the role played by the community, including the influence of gendered social norms (around marriage, sexuality, education, household division of labour, the acceptability of disciplinary/rewarding behaviours, and income-generation opportunities for men and women) in shaping adolescent boys and young men's experiences (e.g. Marcus and Harper, 2014; Mackie et al., 2012; Bicchieri, 2015).

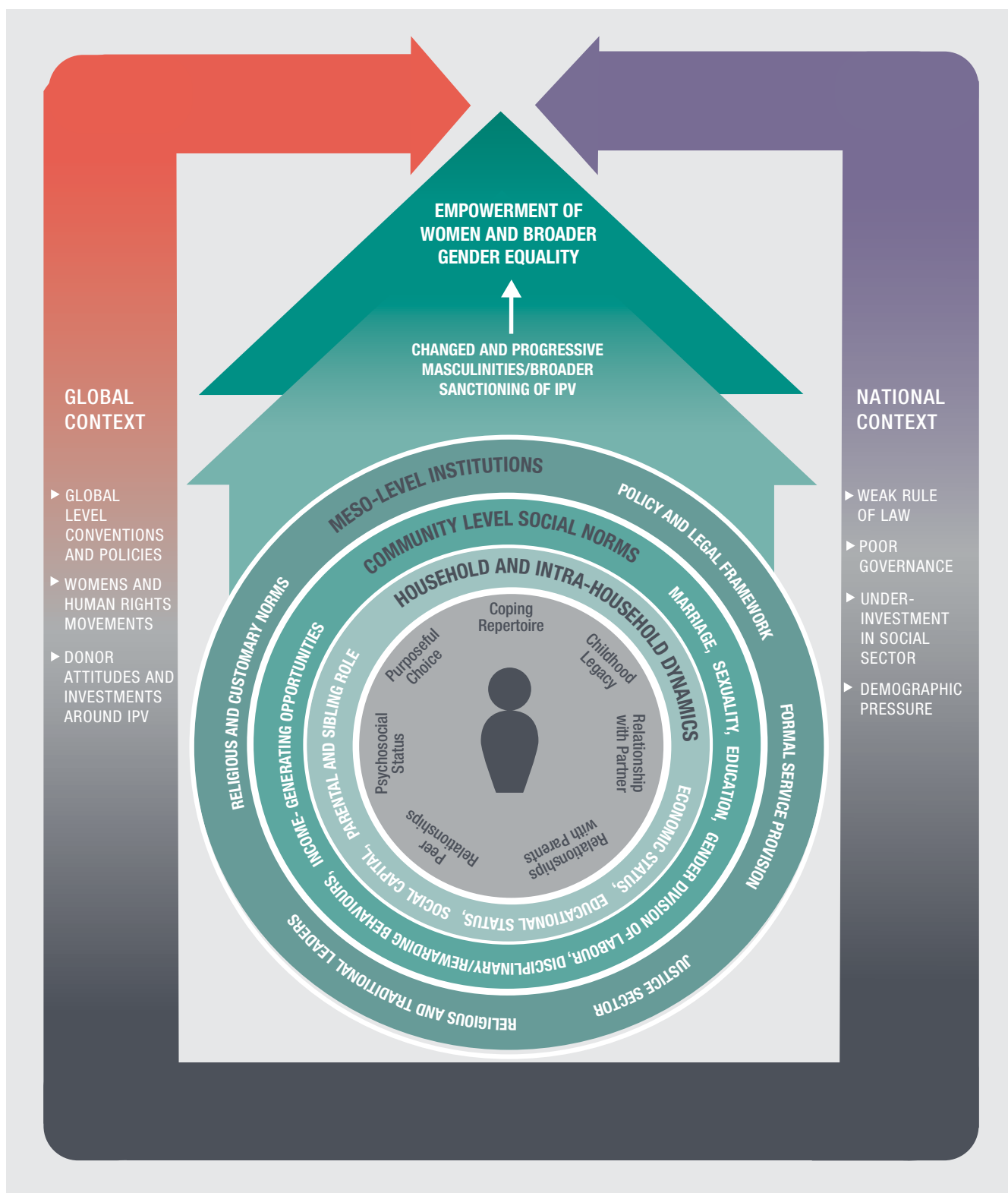
Less well-conceptualised in the literature, and where our research aims to make a significant contribution, is the role of what we term meso-level institutions – the vital

intermediary routes through which national-level resources and priorities for addressing IPV are refracted (Roberts and Waylen, 1998; True, 2012; Denny and Domingo, 2013). These institutions span formal and customary structures: at the formal end of the spectrum, we have policy and legal frameworks (including on family law, divorce, child custody, property inheritance, and sanctions relating to IPV and gender-based violence (GBV)) and formal service provision, which can include services provided by government, NGOs and women's rights groups (ranging from shelters to counselling centres and various forms of social assistance). Also included here is the justice sector, which consists of formal and customary institutions, and includes the application of related laws and policies by courts, police stations, and legal aid, legal protection and family mediation. At the customary end of the spectrum, it is also important to consider the role of religious norms and their relative resonance in the community, as well as religious and traditional leaders, who are often the first port of call when people are trying to resolve local conflicts.

These local-level ecological domains are in turn situated within broader national and global contexts (represented in Figure 1 by the two side arrows). Different national contexts (the right-hand side of the figure) are characterised by differing degrees and types of fragility, ranging from weak rule of law, poor governance and under-investment in the social sector to under-resourced responses to demographic pressures (Hickey et al., 2015). Finally, on the left-hand side of Figure 1, we also factor in the global context, which consists of global-level conventions and policies as well as women's and human rights movements championing action vis-à-vis GBV and IPV which may be domesticated to varying degrees at national level (True, 2012; Roberts and Waylen, 1998). Donor attitudes and investment in tackling GBV and IPV also play a role in highlighting these issues.

At the top of Figure 1, the broad arrows represent the changes that are envisaged through efforts to address the inter-related risk dimensions in the ecological model, leading to changed and progressive masculinities and broader sanctions against IPV. The ultimate aim is to work towards a society where there are gender-equitable norms and behaviours, given what is known about the positive dividends between gender equality and women's empowerment specifically, and between poverty reduction and development more generally (Kabeer, 2008).

Figure 1. Conceptual framework – seeing IPV through an ecological and institutional lens in fragile-state contexts



Source: ODI, 2016



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# 3. Research methodology and description of study sites

## 3.1 Research methodology

### 3.1.1 Methods and tools

This study was conducted in five villages in two districts of Bangladesh (Gazipur and Mymensingh), with a set of key informant interviews also carried out at national level in Dhaka (see section 3.2). Primary qualitative data collection comprised: 40 key informant interviews (KIIs), 23 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with young men and IPV survivors, 7 intergenerational trios (IGTs) with men and women, and 11 single-sex focus group discussions (FGDs) with married men and women (see Table 1 for a breakdown by locality). The KII sample was chosen purposively with support from field staff of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b) working in each locality. IDI, IGT and FGD participants were recruited using snowball sampling and assistance from icddr,b field staff. All the interviews and discussions were conducted following semi-structured guides.

#### Key informant interviews (KIIs)

KIIs were conducted to obtain a broad overview of perceptions, patterns and trends around gender-based violence (GBV) and IPV, as well as legal policies and frameworks, available services and their impact, and gaps and challenges at various levels. Interviewees included political and civic representatives from different line departments and organisations working with GBV/IPV survivors or playing a role in raising awareness about the issue. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of the Multi-sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women (VAW) under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), the police department and the judiciary. We conducted interviews with GBV and IPV service providers (government and NGOs) at different levels. Key informants at the community level included teachers, local politicians and village leaders (e.g. male and female Union Parishad (UP) members, young men from local clubs, etc.), NGO workers, health service providers, legal service providers, village police, etc.

#### In-depth interviews (IDIs)

**In-depth interviews with adolescent boys and young men (aged 16-28):** These were conducted to obtain a detailed description of attitudes, perceptions, and practices around GBV and IPV, as well as to ascertain people's knowledge of support structures (including available support services), and the remaining gaps and challenges in addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) and IPV. IDIs used life history techniques, particularly emphasising childhood experiences. Additional questions asked to married men covered history and type of IPV, and key triggers and drivers. In selecting the sample, care was taken to include married and unmarried men. Six of the participants in Gazipur and three in Mymensingh were married men; four participants in each district were single men.

**In-depth interviews with female survivors of IPV (aged 20-30):** A similar strategy was followed in conducting IDIs with IPV survivors. They included a detailed account of history and types of IPV, its frequency and severity, and triggers; consequences of IPV; coping mechanisms; and gaps and challenges in addressing IPV. Although the focus was on younger women, older women were also interviewed to gain a broader perspective of how norms around IPV might be shifting.

#### Intergenerational trios (IGTs)

Intergenerational trio discussions were held (with a boy, his father and grandfather; and a girl, her mother and grandmother) to explore continuities and changes in perceptions around: adolescence and adolescents; the ideal man/woman, girl/boy, wife/husband; expectations around marriage, education and employment; social norms surrounding GBV and IPV; knowledge of support structures and available support services; and gaps and challenges.

A total of seven IGTs were conducted – four with girls/women and three with boys/men. Participants from each generation were interviewed separately.

**Table 1. Total number of interviews (by type and by site)**

Tools	Gazipur	Mymensingh	Dhaka/national level	Total
Key informant interviews	11	10	19	40
Focus group discussions	6	5	-	11
In-depth interviews (boys / men)	10	7	-	17
In-depth interviews – IPV survivors	3	3	-	6
Intergenerational trios	4	3	-	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>81</b>

### Focus group discussions (FGDs)

The focus groups explored perceptions, behaviours and attitudes around adolescence and adolescents, masculinity and femininity, and IPV and GBV in each locality, as well as prevalence and trends of IPV and GBV, service provision and opportunities, and gaps and challenges. Five FGDs were conducted with married men and six with married women.

#### 3.1.2 Training and piloting

We conducted extensive training of data collectors to ensure adherence to relevant ethical research guidelines (WHO, 2001). The study team benefited from a five-day rigorous participatory and interactive training workshop on gender, ethical issues, qualitative research methods and our current research. The training was led by the country principal investigator (PI) with support from the designated country lead at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

The research tools were adapted to each country context and translated, with role-plays carried out to ensure that data collectors were using their data collection skills effectively (e.g. avoiding leading questions, using appropriate probing questions, etc.). Five cognitive interviews were conducted to pre-test the interview guides, after which the data collections tools were finalised.

#### 3.1.3 Data collection and respondent recruitment

Data were collected between 14 and 31 May 2016. Villagers' preoccupation with a local election and closing of the study sites to outsiders 72 hours ahead of the election compelled the research team to stop data collection before reaching the desired number of male IDIs, FGDs and IGTs in Mymensingh.

In both districts, the research team received assistance from community health promoters of another research team of icddr,b working in the same study sites. These health promoters were local residents who were knowledgeable about the communities and were able to

guide us in contacting potential study participants. The interviewers and moderators were sex-matched. Four men and three women with a Masters degree in social science/ anthropology collected the data. One of them assumed the role of field coordinator too.

Informed oral consent was obtained from the participants prior to the interviews, which were conducted in private and recorded. All participants agreed to follow-up visits. In some cases, follow-ups were conducted either face-to-face or over the phone to fill gaps in the data. The research team held regular debriefing and brainstorming sessions at the end of each working day to share interesting findings and challenges and to plan subsequent fieldwork. A template was developed for preparing daily reports for senior researchers.

#### 3.1.4 Data processing and analysis

The recorded data were transcribed and translated. Data were coded in MAXQDA with support from the ODI wider team and based on the study objectives. Researchers involved with the study carefully read the transcripts from each interview and group discussion several times for coding and analysis. Once coding was completed, the data were retrieved by codes and further analysed by themes. Researchers engaged in repeated discussions, allowing enough scope to examine the data critically, enhance the rigour of analysis, and reflect on the findings.

#### 3.1.5 Ethical issues

Given the sensitive nature of the study, care was taken to address the ethical issues involved. Verbal informed consent procedures were followed. Participants were informed about the risks and benefits of participating in the study and their right not to participate or to withdraw their participation at any time during the interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. Verbal consent was requested and obtained on the following grounds: (1) a request for signature on the consent form may arouse the participant's suspicion and create misunderstanding as to the purpose of the study (this may

confound the study by unnecessarily increasing the rate of non-response); (2) confidentiality is further challenged when the participant's signature is placed on the form. In this situation, asking for a thumbprint would further raise suspicion and introduce additional complexities. Thus, interviewers only recorded on the questionnaire that the consent procedure was administered and noted whether or not permission to conduct the interview was granted. In case of interviewing minors (those aged below 18), verbal consent from a guardian was sought.

Most of the participants were married women and men, and, in most cases, were living apart from their parents. According to guidelines for adolescent health research published by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research (1978) and the Society for Adolescent Medicine (1999), married minors and minors living apart from their parents may be classified as 'mature minors'. Using these criteria, all the married minors in this study were treated as mature minors and their informed consent was sought. For female married minors, the husband is usually considered the guardian. However, as husbands are potential IPV perpetrators, we refrained from seeking their consent, as this could further jeopardise women's safety and confidentiality of the study. Thus, in adherence with relevant standards, consent was sought directly from female married minors.

A safe space and an appropriate time were identified for data collection to ensure confidentiality and minimal disruption. The research team provided information regarding available services to all participants. FGD participants were offered refreshments. The data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. Audio tapes were erased once preliminary analysis had been completed. The study was approved by icddr,b's ethical review committee.

### 3.1.6 Study limitations

The small sample in our cross-sectional study means that the findings are not generalisable. Therefore, the findings on the changes presented here mainly concern community members' perceptions. Being a qualitative study, it captures the emic perspective on VAWG/IPV, which is often quite subjective. It was apparent from the interviews with men that their sense of responsibility to present the community in a positive light did not allow them to talk openly about incidence of VAWG/IPV. This was clearly visible in numerous contradictory statements (for example, their claims of widespread IPV perpetrated by women were not supported by any concrete evidence). Due to limited access to the study villages, the research team was not able to conduct the same number of IDIs and FGDs in Mymensingh as in Gazipur. Despite these limitations, the data gathered were extremely rich and provided numerous insights on which our findings are based.

## 3.2 Description of study sites

This study was conducted in five villages in Gazipur and Mymensingh districts, selected because of high prevalence of IPV (see Figure 2 for a map, and Table 2 for a profile of each village). **Gazipur** has a total population of 3,403,912 (female: 1,628,602; male: 1,775,310) with a male to female ratio of 1.09. The literacy rate for those aged 7 and above is 62.6%, which is higher than the national rate. Around 58.9% of women are literate compared to 66.0% of men (BBS, 2014). About 51% of ever-married women of reproductive age reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence from their spouse (Amin et al., 2013).

In Gazipur, two villages (named A and B) were included in this study. Village A is about 10km from the UP, while village B is 6km away. Village B is much larger than A, with 1,100-1,200 and 700-800 households respectively (personal communication with PLAN International and icddr,b field staff). There is one **bazaar** (market) in village A, while village B is located between two **bazaars**.

**Mymensingh** district has a total population of 5,110,272 (female: 2,571,148; male: 2,539,124) with a male to female ratio of 0.99. The literacy rate for those aged 7 and above is 43.5%, which is below the national rate of 51.8%. Around 42.2% of women are literate, compared to 44.9% of men (BBS, 2012). Approximately 64% of ever-married women of reproductive age reported being exposed to physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by their husband (Amin et al., 2013). Our fieldwork in Mymensingh was carried out in Dhanikhola UP (the lowest tier of local government), which is in Trishal Upazila (sub-district).

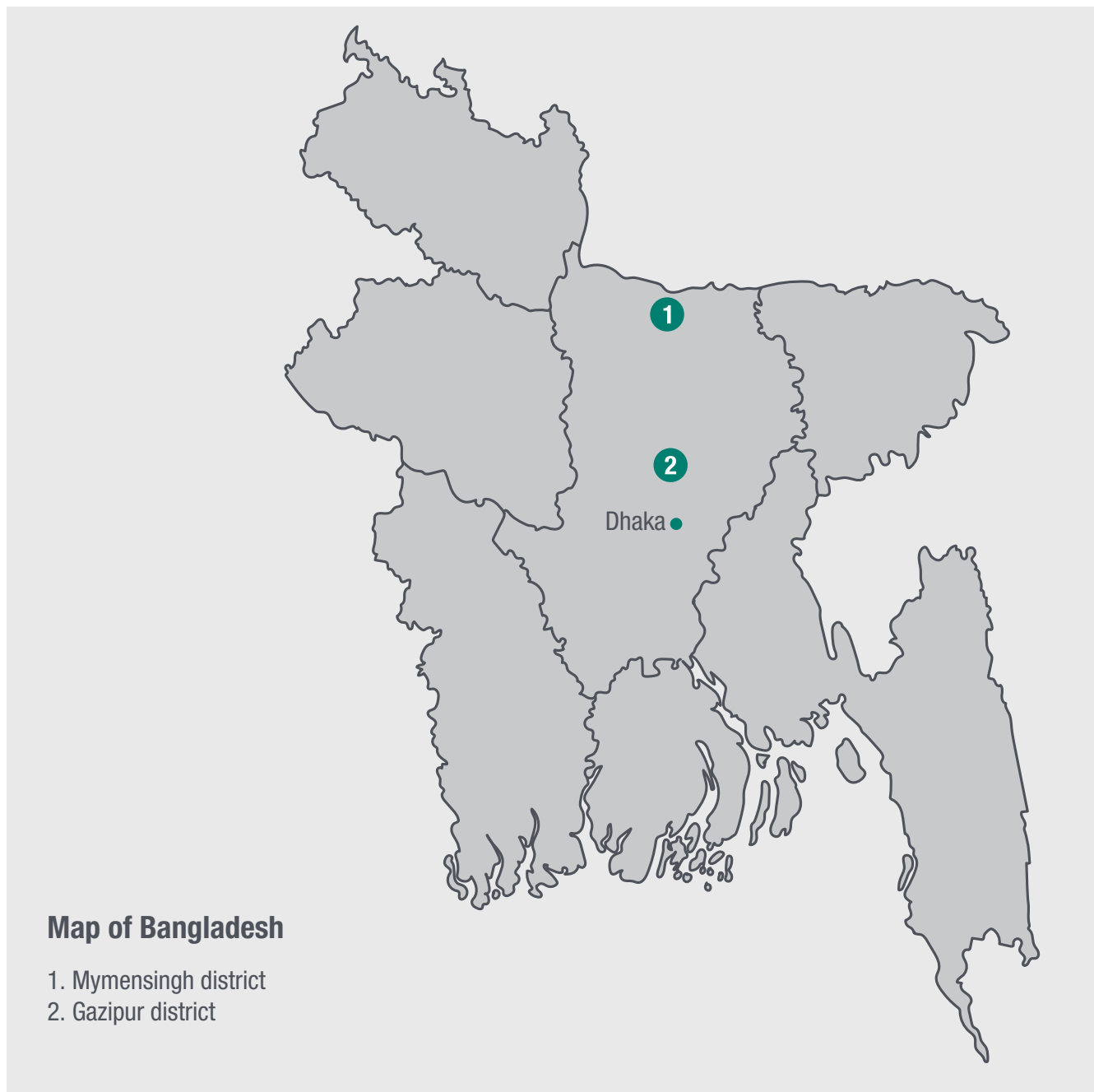
Three villages from Mymensingh (C, D and E) were part of this study. The nearest villages, C and D, are 1.5km and 2.5km away, while the furthest village E is 7km from the UP. Village D (12,000 households) is the largest; village C has 500-600 households, while village E has 400-500 households (personal communication with BRAC and icddr,b field staff). While there is a common bazaar for villages C and D, village E is located in between two bazaars. Paved roads connect the villages with the upazilas in both districts. All the roads in village E are unpaved, while the roads in the other villages are either semi-paved or unpaved. Electricity is available in all the study villages.

### 3.2.1 Livelihoods

In all study villages, agriculture is the main source of livelihood but local men are also employed in daily wage work in other sectors, such as transport, service, construction, garment factories, and small or medium-size businesses. Fish farming (which engages men and women) has become very profitable and thus attracts investment in all three villages in Mymensingh.

Most of the women in the study villages do not work outside the home. However, more and more women are

**Figure 2: Map of study sites**



becoming employed in garment factories located nearby. In Mymensingh, some women are employed as domestic workers. Some women from both districts are self-employed and a few are NGO workers. The proportion of working women is lower in village E compared to the other study villages. Interestingly, there are also overseas migrant workers among women in all of these villages. Migrants usually go to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Dubai, Jordan, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Lebanon and make an important contribution to their household income.

### **3.2.2 Power structure**

In the study villages, the elders (known as Murubbi), wealthy people and villagers with political connections (often known as Matbor) are most influential. Murubbis and Matbors usually participate and/or lead local bichar-shalish (arbitration) in the village jointly with other influential community members (e.g. elected government representatives such as the chair and members of the UP).

**Table 2. Profile of study villages**

Items	Gazipur district		Mymensingh district		
	Village A	Village B	Village C	Village D	Village E
Upazila (Sub-district)	Sreepur	Sreepur	Trishal	Trishal	Trishal
Union Parishad (UP)	Rajabari	Rajabari	Dhanikhola	Dhanikhola	Dhanikhola
Distance from the Union Parishad, km	10km (close to Upazila)	6km	1.5km	2.5km	7km (far from Upazila)
Households, no.	700-800	1,100-1,200	500-600	1,200	400-500
Bazaars nearby, no.	1	2	1	1	2
Road connecting Upazila to UP	Paved	Paved	Paved	Paved	Paved
Roads inside the village	Semi-paved & unpaved	Semi-paved & unpaved	Semi-paved & unpaved	Semi-paved & unpaved	Unpaved
Electricity	Available	Available	Available	Available	Available
Main occupation	Agriculture	Agriculture	Agriculture	Agriculture	Agriculture
Overseas and within country migration for work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Educational institutions					
Public primary school	2	-	1	1	1
BRAC school	-	-	1	1	1
Kindergarten	-	3	-	4	-
Maktab	4	5	2	1	5
Madrassa	-	1	2	-	-
No. of NGOs in the village	4	1	5	4	1
No. of NGOs working on VAWG/ sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)/ child marriage	-	-	1 (BRAC)	1 (BRAC)	1 (BRAC)
No. of NGOs working on VAWG/ IPV	-	-	1 (BRAC)	1 (BRAC)	-
No. of local youth clubs	1	-	1	-	-

### 3.2.3 Educational institutions

The two villages in Gazipur are quite distinct in terms of educational infrastructure. While village A has two public primary schools, B has none, despite being much larger. However, village A has no kindergarten or madrassa (Islamic school/college), while village B has three kindergartens and one madrassa. Each of the three villages in Mymensingh had one public primary school and one BRAC school. Village D had four kindergartens, while village C had two madrassas. There are maktabs (local mosque-based elementary school for learning Arabic/the Quran and Islamic way of life) in all the villages, but more per household in the remotest village (E).

### 3.2.4 NGOs and other organisations

There were a few NGO programmes that had been implemented recently in the two districts that were of particular relevance for this study. In Gazipur, the Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES) was active between 1978 and 2016, working to address child marriage and targeting disadvantaged adolescent boys and girls and women aged 25-35. Its activities included social awareness campaigns (on gender sensitisation and child marriage), advocacy, and vocational training for school dropouts. Another NGO, Plan International, also worked in Gazipur between 1996 and 2010 to prevent corporal punishment in schools and to tackle child marriage in collaboration with two local partners, Dhaka Ahsania Mission and Dushtha Shasthya Kendro

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(DSK). They implemented community-based initiatives targeting adults, children and adolescent boys and girls, and mobilising local government, teachers, lawyers, social workers, imams (religious leaders) and business owners. Its activities included social awareness campaigns (training, meetings, rallies and street theatre), advocacy, and supporting health care in collaboration with local government and other NGOs (e.g. DSK). NGOs currently active in Gazpiur (village A) all focus on provision of microcredit for women, and include the Association for Social Advancement (ASA), Society for Social Service (SSS), Polli Mongol, and Pidim. They arrange training for income-earning activities such as sewing, tailoring, agriculture, poultry farming, etc. None of these organisations are involved in preventing and/or responding to VAWG/IPV.

In the study villages in Mymensingh, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) started its Social/Community Empowerment Program (CEP) in 1980, targeting poor women and girls. Its activities around VAWG include social awareness campaigns, advocacy, mobilising communities to prevent violence, and providing medical and legal support for survivors of VAWG/IPV. Capacity building of local government (particularly female UP members) is a major priority in addressing VAWG locally. BRAC also encourages its female members to participate in local government elections so that they can play a leading role in addressing issues related to women and girls, including VAWG/IPV.

In Mymensingh, there were five NGOs working in village C, four in village D and one in village E. Those working in village C were ASA, People's Oriented Program Implementation (POPI), Agro-forestry Seed Production and Development Association (ASPADA), Grameen Bank, and BRAC. In village D, ASA, POPI, BRAC and Food for the Hungry were active. Most of these NGOs focus on microcredit and community empowerment but also carry out social awareness campaigns against drug addiction, particularly among young people. Maternal and child health and nutrition were the focus of BRAC's activities in village E. BRAC (operating in villages C and D) provides legal and medical support to survivors of VAWG/IPV. The research organisation was working in all the study villages, focusing on maternal and child health and nutrition.

There are some local youth clubs: a sports-based club in village A (Gazipur), some of whose members were previously involved with Plan International activities; and a somewhat less active club promoting education and peace in village C (Mymensingh).

### **3.2.5 Available services for survivors**

There is a one-stop crisis centre (OCC) (part of a government-run programme, see section 7.1.2) and a shelter for IPV survivors in Gazipur district, although the community had no knowledge of it. The villagers in Mymensingh did not know about any such services in the district.



# 4. The national context

The research on IPV in South Asia suggests that IPV is pervasive, frequent and acute. However, it should be noted that IPV per se is generally not recognised, as it is subsumed under gender-based violence (GBV), domestic violence, or violence against women (VAW). This section describes prevalence of IPV in Bangladesh according to the literature by type of violence (physical, sexual, psychological/emotional and economic). It then discusses the risk factors for male perpetration of IPV at the individual, household and community/societal levels. In Bangladesh, there is a strong legal framework that recognises 30 different types of violence, including dowry-related violence, acid attacks and abduction (see box 1). The government has acted to protect women's rights and improve their status through legislation such as the Dowry Prohibition Act (1980), the Nari-O-Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain (2000) (Law on the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children), which expanded the definition of rape and sexual assaults, the Domestic Violence and Prevention and Protection Act (2010), and the National Women Development Policy (2011) (Hossain et al., 2014).

Adolescents in the region are particularly vulnerable to violence given that IPV is most prevalent in the early years of marriage (e.g. Mensch et al., 2005; Jejeebhoy et al., 2013); and since early marriage is common in South Asia, it is likely that married adolescents face high rates of IPV.

## 4.1 Prevalence of IPV in Bangladesh

Our literature review (covering surveys of women and men in rural and urban areas) found estimates of lifetime prevalence of IPV ranging from 28% to 74%, while past-year prevalence (physical violence) ranged from 4% to 34%. The recent Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) survey found that 28.7% married Bangladeshi women reported psychological violence, 27.2% sexual violence, and 49.6% physical violence (BBS, 2016).

### 4.1.1 Prevalence by type of violence

Below we describe prevalence rates by type of violence, using categories defined by WHO: physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence (see section 1.1). As Figure 3 shows, the most recent United Nations (UN) multi-country study on men and violence (Fulu et al., 2013) shows that emotional violence is most common, with over 20% of men in urban areas and 18% in rural areas reporting that they commit emotional violence.

### Box 1: Bangladesh: conventions ratified, and policies and legislation enacted relating to violence against women

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979)
- The Dowry Prohibition Act (1980)
- The Family Courts Ordinance (1985)
- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989)
- Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, 2000 (the Nari O Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2000 (NSA))
- Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act (2010)
- National Children Policy (2011)
- National Women Development Policy (2011)
- Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Rules (2013)
- Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) Act (2014)
- (Draft) National Psychosocial Counselling Policy (2014)

Source: fieldwork

Sexual violence is more prevalent than physical violence for rural men, and economic violence is least reported on by men (details discussed below; Naved et al., 2011).

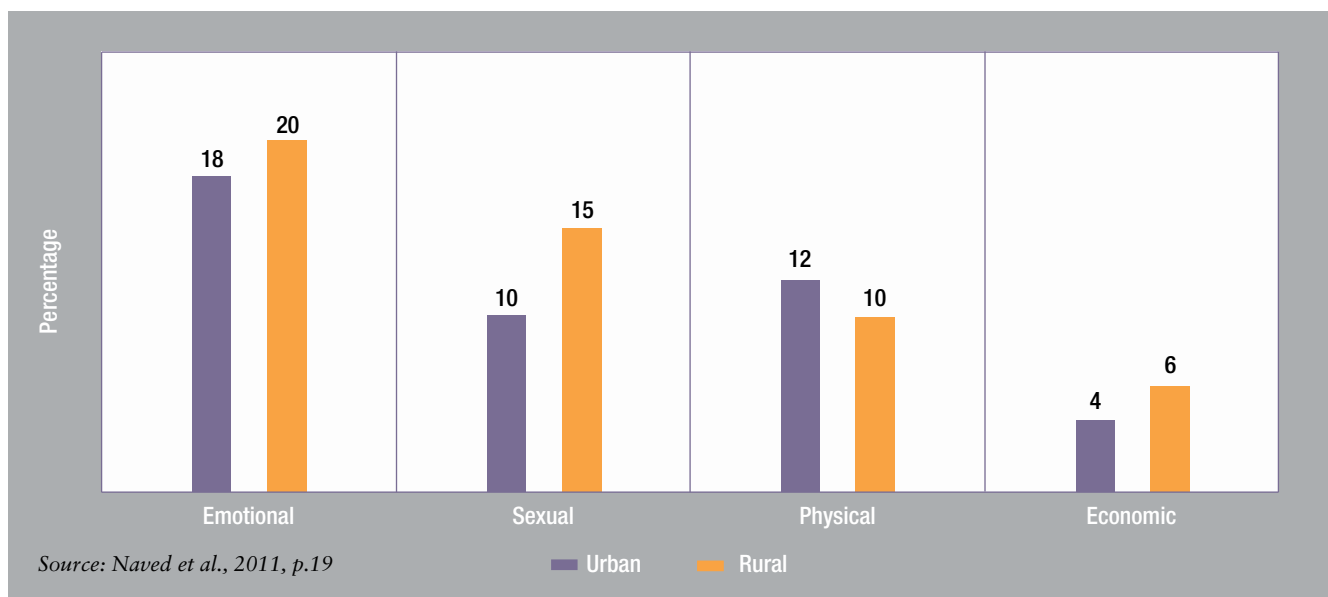
#### 4.1.1.1 Physical violence

Physical violence can be further categorised as severe acts (which include punching, dragging, kicking, attempted strangulation, burning or murder) and non-severe acts (which include slapping, pushing, shaking, shoving, and arm-twisting).

*Severe acts of violence:* The 2004 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) analysed by Johnson and Das (2009) found that men reported punching their wives (15%), kicking or dragging them (11%), and strangling or burning them (2%). The BDHS 2007 showed lower estimates, with 6% reporting kicking and dragging and 1% reporting choking their wives.

Men are more likely than women to report higher

**Figure 3. Prevalence of rural and urban men's perpetration of different form of violence in the past 12 months, Bangladesh**



prevalence of physical IPV, but less likely to report committing severe physical violence (NIPORT et al., 2009). The Bangladesh component of UN multi-country study on men and violence found 17% of urban and 18% of rural men reported hitting their wives/partners with their fists; 8% of urban and 7% of rural men reported kicking, dragging or beating their wives/partners; and 2% of urban men and 1% of rural men reported threatening or using a weapon (Naved et al., 2011).

*Non-severe physical violence:* in 2004 BHDS 41% of men reported ever pushing or shaking their wife (13 in the past year), while 62% reported ever slapping their wives or twisting their wives' arms (23% in the past year) (Johnson and Das, 2009). The 2007 BDHS found lower prevalence rates: 55% of men reported slapping their wives (15% in the past year), 28% reported pushing or shaking or throwing something (7% in the past year), and 9% reported punching (NIPORT et al., 2009). The UN multi country study found similar trends in 2010 in Bangladesh, with 48% of urban and rural men reporting slapping, and 38% reporting pushing or shoving (Naved et al., 2011).

Women's reports of experiencing IPV include severe and non-severe physical acts, the most common being slapping, pushing or shaking, arm-twisting, punching, kicking, dragging, strangling, burning, and being threatened with a knife or gun. The level of severe physical violence reported by women from slums in 2006 was much higher than that reported by non-slum women (Sambisa et al., 2011). Thus, 32% of women from the slums reported being punched and 25% reported

being kicked and dragged. This study also reported a much higher percentage of women whose husband had attempted to strangle, burn or kill them (9%) Men in slums were less likely to report severe violence such as attempted strangulation, burning or murder (1.9%) compared with (8.7%) women (NIPORT et al., 2009). Women's reports from the BDHS 2007 also indicated high levels of severe physical violence: 30% reported having something thrown at them (11% in the past 12 months); 17% reported that their husbands had punched them with their fist or something that could hurt them (7% in the past 12 months); 15% reported being kicked, dragged, or beaten, having their arms twisted or their hair pulled (6% in the past 12 months); 5% reported being choked or burned (3% in the past 12 months); and 2% reported being threatened with a knife, gun or weapon (1% in the past 12 months) (NIPORT et al., 2009).

In terms of non-severe physical violence, 59% of women living in slums reported having been slapped or had their arms twisted (NIPORT et al., 2008), 42% reported being pushed or shaken, and 32% reported having things thrown at them. Moreover, the same study noted that women in non-slum areas are much more likely to report less severe abuse than those in slum areas (though this does not hold true for kicking). The BDHS 2007 found that 46% of ever-married women in Bangladesh reported ever being slapped (17% in the past 12 months). As in NIPORT's analysis (2008), rural women are slightly more likely to report both physical and sexual violence than urban women. Moreover, similar to NIPORT's analysis, although men are more likely than



women to report less severe acts of physical violence (e.g. slapping), they are much less likely than women to report more severe acts such as punching, kicking, choking, burning, or use of a weapon.

It is notable that vulnerable populations such as migrant women or displaced women are at even greater risk of IPV. Azziz-Baumgartner et al. (2014) report that out of 205 low-income, ethnic, and/or displaced mothers who experienced IPV, 53% reported ever being hit with a fist or some other object, 44% were kicked, dragged or beaten, 24% were choked or burnt, while 13% were injured with a knife or gun. Post-birth of their child was a greater risk factor for these women since out of 133 mothers who reported that their husband hit them with a fist or other object, 89% were hit before the birth of their child and 74% after.

#### 4.1.1.2 Sexual violence

Johnston and Naved (2008) found that sexual violence has received relatively little attention in the literature compared with physical IPV. Johnson and Das (2009) found that 27% of men reported having physically forced their wives to have sex even when their wives did not want to (17% in the past year). The BDHS 2007 showed that 9% of men forced their wives to have sex, 4% in the past year (NIPORT et al., 2009). Unlike reports of physical violence, men in the BDHS were half as likely as women to report sexual violence. The Bangladesh Urban Household Survey (BUHS) in 2006 and 2008 found that prevalence estimates of forced sex based on men's reports were 19% (slums), 15% (non-slum) and 24% (district municipality) (see NIPORT et al., 2009). Naved et al. (2011), in the UN multi country study, found that approximately 10% of the urban sample and 14% of the rural sample reported having ever perpetrated sexual violence against any woman (partner or non-partner).

From women's reports of IPV, analysis of the BUHS 2006 by NIPORT et al. (2008) found that 23% of women in slums, 16% in non-slum areas and 17% in district municipalities reported having been forced to have sex by their husband. Women living in slums reported the highest levels of forced sex, but men from district municipalities reported the highest levels across all three areas of residence. As per the BDHS 2007, 8% of currently married women reported having been forced to have sex sometimes in the past 12 months, compared with 3% who said they were forced to do so often. About 37% of urban women and 50% of rural women reported lifetime prevalence of sexual violence, while 20% and 24% of urban and rural women respectively reported being sexually violated by their husbands in the past year (Naved, 2013).

Naved (2013) also found that women who suffered physical violence also tended to experience sexual violence: 48% of rural women and 41% of urban women reported having experienced both types of violence. Naved (2013) further analysed these data and found

that physically forced sex was most common (34% in urban areas, 46% in rural areas), followed by sex out of fear (21% in urban areas, 32% in rural areas). A small percentage of women reported having to engage in something that was degrading/humiliating (3-4%). Women also reported that they were abused more than once and reported experiencing multiple types of violence (83% of women in urban areas and 69% in rural areas). Though overlap between sexual and emotional violence was greatest (20%), almost 50% of women experienced all three forms of violence (sexual, physical and emotional).

In Azziz-Baumgartner et al.'s (2014) study of low income predominantly Bihari women living in Dhaka, 75% of 250 mothers in the sample reported sexual abuse, 61% were forced by their husband to have sex, and 65% were threatened or coerced into sex.

#### 4.1.1.3 Psychological/emotional violence

Johnston and Naved (2008: 368) noted that even though physical and sexual violence are 'more readily quantifiable than emotional abuse', emotional abuse may be more 'devastating than physically-abusive acts'. Male reported emotional violence in the UN multi-country study (Naved et al., 2011) indicated that 52% of urban men and 46% of rural men reported lifetime prevalence of emotional violence against their partner, with the most common acts being intimidating, threatening harm, and making insults. The same study noted that urban men reported higher rates of emotional violence than rural men.

Johnston and Naved's (2008) analysis of data from the WHO's multi-country study found that 44% and 31% of urban and rural women respectively had experienced emotional violence in their lifetime (29% and 20% respectively in the past 12 months) (ibid.).

In Azziz-Baumgartner et al.'s (2014) work, 89% of displaced mothers reported emotional violence (i.e. being insulted or made to feel bad about themselves), 80% were scared or intimidated, 55% were belittled or humiliated in front of other people, 32% were threatened with injury, and 42% were threatened with harm to someone close to them. Asling-Monemi et al.'s (2009a) study of 3,132 rural mothers found that 28% had experienced emotional violence from their family in their lifetime.

#### 4.1.1.4 Economic violence

As mentioned earlier, there are very few studies on economic violence in Bangladesh. However, the UN multi-country study (Naved et al., 2011) found that 16% of urban men and 18% of rural men reported lifetime prevalence of economic violence (4% and 6% respectively for the past year). Types of economic violence included prohibiting their partners from work (10%) and taking partners' earnings against their will (13%).



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## 4.2 Multilevel risk factors underlying IPV

### 4.2.1 Individual-level risk factors

The literature identifies various factors at the individual level that make boys and men more likely to perpetrate IPV (Stith et al., 2000), including poverty, education level, age, and childhood exposure to violence (either witnessing or experiencing violence at home).

In Bangladesh, **education** (for men and women alike) appears to be protective against IPV (Bates et al., 2004; Koenig et al., 2003; Johnson and Das, 2009; Johnston and Naved, 2008; Naved and Persson, 2005; Sambisa et al., 2010), albeit with some caveats. For women, Bates et al. (2004) found that having at least 6 years of education is protective, while Koenig et al. (2003) found that any level of primary school attendance is protective against IPV. For men, being educated beyond 6th grade in urban areas (and beyond 10th grade in rural areas) had a protective effect against IPV (Naved and Persson, 2005). Johnston and Naved (2008) suggest that in rural areas, education may act as a buffer against harmful gender norms.

A recent study of India and Bangladesh found a more complex relationship emerging when one spouse has a very different level of education from the other. Among 4,195 women in Bangladesh (and 65,610 women from India), Rapp (2012) found that level of education was a protective factor: couples with primary education or less had the highest rates of IPV, while couples with secondary education or higher had the lowest rates. Moreover, women who had attained a higher level of education than their husbands were less likely to experience IPV than women who had less education than their husbands (ibid.).

Additionally, analysing the UN multi-country study data, Yount et al (2016b) found that men's exposure to violence in childhood predicted higher likelihood of physical IPV perpetration in adulthood. A large proportion of urban men (70%) and rural men (63%) reported **experiencing emotional abuse as a child**. This ranged from seeing their mother being beaten, to being verbally abused themselves or experiencing physical abuse during childhood. Of the men who reported family history of witnessing violence, 40% of urban men and 36% of rural men reported past year prevalence, while 57% and 53% respectively reported lifetime prevalence (see also Stöckl et al., 2013). The same holds true for sexual violence. Naved and Persson (2005) also found that the strongest risk factor among their study sample was a history of abuse.

Other risk factors include age. Similar to global trends younger **age** in Bangladesh is consistently linked with higher likelihood of committing IPV (Johnson and Das, 2009).

### 4.2.2 Household/relationship-level risk factors

Only a few risk factors have been identified at the household/relationship level as being IPV risk factors: women's economic power, quality of the marital

relationship, the number of partners a man or woman has, and the number of children.

Several studies have attempted to disentangle the relationship between **microcredit programmes** and likelihood of experiencing violence, though Johnston and Naved (2008) suggest that the debate is inconclusive. For instance, Schuler et al. (2013) found that in a qualitative study in four villages, participants were almost unanimous in stating that wife-beating had recently declined – which Schuler and colleagues attributed to women's increased involvement in income generation (mentioned in all 11 group discussions). However, other studies have found that increased economic empowerment has led to an increase in IPV (Naved and Persson, 2005). For instance, Hadi (2000) found that women's involvement in credit programmes (and, consequentially, greater financial contribution to their households) was significantly associated with sexual violence and with severe violence if their involvement exceeded five years. Wahed and Bhuiya (2007) found that although women's likelihood of experiencing violence increases initially upon joining a micro-credit organisation, it tapers off as their involvement increases. Schuler et al. (2013), building on Jewkes (2002), argue that when women experience empowerment, men feel the need to reinforce their dominance and masculinity.

While many studies found that higher **socioeconomic status** can be a protective factor (Ahmed et al., 2006; Bates et al. 2004; Koenig et al. 2003; Sambisa et al., 2010, 2011), Johnston and Naved (2008) state that this relationship is unclear (see also Naved and Persson, 2005). Das et al. (2008) found that controlling for several confounding variables (such as attitudinal, regional and demographic characteristics) women from poor families were at greater risk of IPV. In a multi-level contextual effects analysis, VanderEnde et al. (2015) found that women from higher-income households had a lower risk of experiencing past-year physical and/or sexual IPV.

Another risk factor for IPV is **polygamy**, a phenomenon that is rooted in discriminatory gender norms in Bangladesh. For instance, Khan (2005) found that desiring or having another wife was an underlying cause for torture or murder of the first wife. Similarly, Siddique (2011) found that 6.2% of women experienced more violence after a second wife joined the family. Das et al. (2008) also found that men who reported having been unfaithful to their wives were much more likely to report recent violence. Conversely, good spousal communication has been found to be a protective factor against IPV (Naved and Persson, 2005).

Das et al. (2008) found that men who report **sharing decision-making about household finances** are less likely to have been violent toward their wives in the past year. In the UN multi-country study, inequitable attitudes around household decision-making were widespread (78% of urban men and 92% of rural men believed a woman's most important role was to take care of her home and

cook for her family). They suggested that the greater the inequitable attitudes, the higher the likelihood that men would perpetrate physical IPV. However, Naved et al. (2011) found that the link between sexual violence and inequitable attitudes of individual man around gender roles was not significant. In the rural site, however, men who held the most gender-inequitable attitudes about sex (e.g. men are entitled to sex) were 1.80 times more likely to perpetrate sexual violence against a woman.

### 4.2.3 Community/society-level risk factors

At the community level, risk factors that drive men to commit IPV are rooted in social norms that define masculinity, norms around dowry and bride price (see section 5.1), norms around acceptability of violence (section 5.3), and norms around religion that condone violence.

Yount et al. (2016b) found that junior men living in communities, where senior men's attitudes are most gender equitable are less likely to perpetrate physical IPV.

Another risk factor for IPV is **son preference**. While studies in Nepal find that women continuing to get pregnant until they bear a son is considered a form of violence, studies in Bangladesh have not documented this. However, according to Johnson and Das (2009), men who have a preference for sons are more likely to report having been violent to their wives than men who want equal numbers of sons and daughters. Norms around son preference are discussed in section 5.1.5.

Traditionally in Bangladesh, Muslims exchanged *denmohor* (bride price) but this seems to have been replaced by *joutuk* (dowry), which became illegal in 1980 (Khan, 2005). Despite this, Naved and Persson (2010) found that dowry was demanded in 53% of marriages in rural Bangladesh and 14% in urban areas. In a six-village study, Bates et al. (2004) found similar estimates (46% of married women had dowry agreements). The rate of dowry involvement was much higher in marriages of girls aged 15-19 (72%) in the same study villages (Islam et al, 2004).

The relationship between dowry and IPV is fairly strong though there is still a lack of clarity around whether absence of dowry is a protective factor (Das, 2008). According to Naved and Persson (2010), the patriarchal attitudes that surround dowry are the underlying reason for this link. Dowry suggests that women are a commodity and devalues their humanity. In some cases, women who bring a dowry may feel more assertive and confident – something that is not welcomed in a daughter-in-law. In other cases, families that demand dowry are also likely to find violence against women more acceptable. Bates et al. (2004) suggested that unpaid dowry may result in dowry-related deaths, but also found that women with a dowry payment were 1.5 times more likely to report IPV in the past year than those without. Naved and Persson (2010) found that absence of dowry demand (in rural areas) lowered the likelihood of a wife experiencing physical

abuse. On the other hand, Suran et al. (2004) found that paying dowry was linked to higher likelihood of IPV (cited in Naved and Persson, 2010: 833).

Most of the research coming from Bangladesh on **acceptability of violence** is secondary data analysis of population-based surveys such as the BDHS or BUHS, which generally find high levels of acceptance (Bhuiya et al., 2003; Wahed and Bhuiya, 2007). The BDHS 2004 indicated that 55% of men agreed with wife-beating: 49% thought it justified if the wife goes out without telling her husband, 28% if a wife argued with her husband. The BDHS 2007 found that the most common justification for violence (47%) was if the wife disobeyed the husband. Table 3 shows the reasons given to justify wife-beating (according to men and women's reports).

NIPORT et al.'s (2008) analysis of the BUHS 2006 and 2008 found that 48% of women in slums, 32% of women in non-slum areas and 30% of women in district municipalities agreed with at least one reason for wife-beating.

Rashid et al. (2014) examined the BDHS 2011 data and reported similar findings to those in Table 3. They also found that women from low- and middle-income backgrounds, those with primary or no education, and those from rural households were more likely to justify wife-beating than women from higher-income backgrounds, those with higher education, and those from urban households. Moreover, women who were unemployed (and therefore living in low-income households) were more likely to experience wife-beating.

In addition to national-level surveys, other studies have shown much higher rates of approval of IPV. For instance, Schuler and Islam (2008) found that among 1,200 women and men from six villages, 84% of women and 92% of men agreed with wife-beating for at least one reason. Similarly, Sayem et al. (2012) found that 84% of their sample of 331 women named one or more scenarios in which they said IPV was justified; older women and less-educated women and men tended to agree with these reasons more often. Interestingly, Schuler et al. (2006) also found that women who accept violence as normal are less likely to experience it, though it is possible that those who condone violence are more likely to report it when surveyed.

The vast discrepancies between acceptability rates found in DHS surveys and other studies can be explained by Yount et al. (2012) and Schuler et al. (2011), who suggest that limitations in questionnaire design in the BDHS may under-represent the proportions of women who justify IPV. For instance, Yount et al. note that many women tend to switch responses within the context of a single interview, suggesting that one survey may not capture the full picture of IPV.

**Religion** plays a strong role in everyday life in South Asia as in other regions, with religious leaders and institutions playing a major role in upholding norms and beliefs around masculinity and femininity. It can also be

**Table 3: Reasons given for acceptability of violence, BDHS 2007**

Reason	Women %	Men %
Without any reason	31.1	7.1
Financial crisis	27.1	12.3
Wife neglected household chores	20.7	23.6
Wife disobeyed husband	15.7	46.9
Wife refused sex	15.3	2.6
Wife neglected children	14.4	8.7
Dowry issue	11.5	1.2
Envy or malice	7.4	14.0
Food crisis	5.5	2.5
Wife went out without permission	4.9	5.8
Husband unemployed	4.6	0.6
Other	11.6	10.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>771</b>	<b>468</b>

used to justify IPV. In Bangladesh, Schuler et al. (1996) found that men use religious texts to justify violence as a means of control over wives, a finding corroborated by Johnston and Das (2008). Using the World Bank Survey on Gender (WBSGN) 2006, Das et al. (2008) found that older women are less likely to report ever experiencing violence

if they practice *pardah*<sup>2</sup> (though this was not a robust relationship and it did not hold true for younger women). Men were less likely to support violence (66%) and reduced their likelihood of committing violence by 37% if women practised *pardah*. The norms around *pardah* are strongly enforced.

2 Whereby a female does not physically appear before men (except selected males, e.g. father, husband, brother) without covering all parts of the body (except her face, feet, and wrists).



# 5. Gendered social norms, risk factors and triggers of IPV

In this section we describe a range of gendered social norms in the study communities that often form the basis for men perpetrating IPV. First, we explore norms around marriage and the expected behaviours and roles of husbands and wives. We then move on to discuss norms surrounding adolescence. Then, we discuss norms around the acceptability of violence within marital relationships, at the same time highlighting the burgeoning problem of sexual harassment and violence against unmarried adolescent girls.

## 5.1 Norms around marriage and marital relationships

### 5.1.1 Marriage patterns and age at marriage

Arranged marriage was the preferred type of marriage in the five study villages in Gazipur and Mymensingh. A marriage in which the bride and groom chose each other, informed their families and the families arranged the wedding is also accepted by many in the community. However, an own-choice marriage without the involvement and approval of the family is considered unacceptable.

Despite widespread knowledge of the law, which defines the minimum marriage age as 18 years for a girl and 21 for a boy, child marriage is common, with many girls married by the time they are 15 to 17 years. According to study respondents, child marriage is usually motivated by poverty, concerns about protecting family honour, or the prospect of hypergamy (i.e. marriage into a family deemed to be wealthier or higher status). Similarly, being exposed to sexual harassment can also result in a girl being withdrawn from school and her marriage expedited (see also section xx below). The following dialogue illustrates the adverse consequences of sexual violence, abduction and **prem** (romantic relationships) for girls.

*Participant 1: If a boy pulls a girl by her hand or abducts her, that girl loses her **maan-shomman** (honour) in the society.*

*Participant 2: If a boy is disturbing, a girl cannot go to school anymore.*

*Participant 3, 4: That girl doesn't have scope for continuing her education anymore. When something like this happens in a rural area, the parents have to marry off the girl for saving **maan-shomman** of the family.*

*(FGD8, married women, Gazipur)*

When asked how it is possible for under-aged girls to marry, informants explained that it is achieved by bribing the **kazi** (marriage registrars) (FGD10, married women, Mymensingh). '*These marriages take place in secret*' and nobody can stop them (FGD7, married women, Gazipur).

For young men, regardless of the minimum legal age, marriageability is '*defined by whether or not he is financially independent*' (FGD9, married women, Mymensingh). However, an exception to this norm is where marriage is used as a correctional measure for a boy who is involved with **neshapani** and **meyebaji** (having sex with multiple female partners). In such cases, a marriage is arranged regardless of his financial independence or age. Thus, sometimes boys are married as early as 17 or 18.

### 5.1.2 Spousal relationships – ideal wives and ideal husbands

The nature of the relationship between the spouses is well defined. A husband is perceived as the active element in a marriage. He marries and usually brings a wife to his home in his village, while she is given in marriage to live with and serve him and his family, and to continue his lineage. A husband is the **poribaer korta** (household head), the main breadwinner, who takes major household decisions.

This notion of a husband as the provider for a woman who is usually not allowed to earn an income has led to marriage being described as **bhat khaowa** (eating rice). So, '**ami or bhat khamu**' (I'll eat his rice) means 'I'll marry him' or 'I'll continue to be his wife'. Equating marriage to provision of a very basic human need (food) indicates the high level of women's dependence on men and on marriage

for their survival. Thus, a husband is glorified as the provider, the saviour, and superior to his wife. According to a popular proverb mentioned by several informants: 'A woman's heaven is underneath her husband's feet'.

Thus an ideal wife is expected to respect, fear and obey her husband and be careful not to do anything that might damage his **maan-shomman** in any way, and if it is damaged the likelihood of the wife facing IPV is increased. The strongly hierarchical nature of spousal relationships in these communities is manifested through age difference between the spouses and how the wife is expected to address her husband. Thus a husband is expected to be older than his wife, and any exception to this is highly frowned upon; it is considered embarrassing and damaging to **maan-shomman** of the husband in particular: 'Of course wives need to obey the husbands. No matter how much they [the husbands] abuse them, they are still older [than the women]' (FGD11, married women, Mymensingh).

A good/ideal wife is supposed to address her husband as 'apni' (the honorific form of 'you' and demonstrating a relationship of authority), whereas a husband addresses a wife either as 'tumi' (form of 'you' usually denoting an equal relationship) or 'tui' (the form used to address someone with a lower position in the relationship hierarchy), clearly reflecting differences in their positions. Any deviation from this custom is perceived to threaten the socially prescribed hierarchy in spousal relationships, to men's disadvantage: 'I haven't allowed my wife to refer to me as **tumi** ever since our marriage' (FGD1, married men, Gazipur). It is also believed that a wife should not address her husband by his name, as it is considered disrespectful.

Although arranged marriage is still most common, own-choice marriage is becoming more common, reflecting the expansion of girls' education and employment, particularly in peri-urban areas. It is clear from the data that in this rapidly changing society, how a wife addresses her spouse may become extremely important for sustaining the status quo and even the marriage itself. Changing gender roles are leading to changing gender dynamics within marriage. While a woman may expect a more egalitarian relationship within marriage, most men do not seem ready for changes that may compromise their **maan-shomman** or **morjada** (honour or respect) in this patriarchal society. Although some men may go along with these changes initially, others perceive they are merely storing up trouble further into the relationship, as the following quote shows:

*'[Indicating to another FGD participant] See that man? His father married two to three times. They are all still alive. None of them [the wives] has the courage to lift their face and look directly at his eyes [perceived as a sign of supreme respect and fear]. The women now fall in love and once married ask the husband whether it'd make him happy or not if she continues addressing him by his name. What can the husband do in such case?'*

*He tells her that he'd be happy. But soon this happiness would turn into thorns for causing pain.'*

(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)

A good / ideal wife is also supposed to make everyone happy in the family by using her virtues (**shongshar shukher hoy romonir guney**). This also implies that an unhappy family is easily perceived as a result of her failure and creates scope for blaming her. Interestingly, the rest of this well-known proverb, which could save her from taking all the blame, was not mentioned by any informant. The rest suggests a husband's role in making the family happy, 'Upojukto poti jodi thakey tar shoney' (i.e. only if she has a suitable husband).

There are very high expectations from a **bou** (wife). She should be calm, subservient and patient. She should rarely speak, and when she does, she must take care not to anger anybody. She should never retort back or demonstrate her anger, and should never quarrel. A wife is expected to be loving and caring towards her husband, show him respect and **sheba** (serving) him well.

A wife must stick to her role regardless of whether her husband fulfils (or fails to fulfil) his. Any deviation from this calls for (socially justified) violence by the husband. Indeed, a man is expected to control his wife and to use violence to correct her mistakes. While anger is perceived as a desirable attribute in a man, it is perceived very negatively in a woman: '**Raag** (anger) makes a man a **rajah** or **badshah** (king), whereas it makes a woman a **beshya** (prostitute)' (FGD10, married women, Mymensingh).

A wife also has to live up to the ideal image of **Lokkhi**, a Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity, fortune, beauty and grace (Samsad Bengali to English Dictionary), whose name is popularly used in Bengal for referring to a well-behaved, good natured and subservient person. As mentioned by some informants, '**Bou holo ghorer Lokkhi**' (the wife is the **Lokkhi** of a home), specifically mentioning the place where she should stay.

Women and men have quite different notions of what constitutes a good husband. According to men, a good husband has power and control over his wife and divorces her if she challenges the status quo. A wife's obedience is perceived as an indicator of his power and control over her and confirms his masculinity.

*'I am a man. I have the right to order her. I ordered her not to do something, not to talk to someone, but she did not obey me... This was actually 'overtaking' me in my own house. As you understand, I am a man. So, I got angry (raag, jid) and decided if she doesn't obey me I'll divorce her. If I am overpowered by her I'll be treated as less than a man.'*

(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)

In contrast, women define a good husband as one who ignores criticism from the community and makes decisions jointly with his wife, allows her to earn an income, and shares household work with her. Some women believe that mutual understanding and harmony between spouses make the family happy and prosperous:

*‘A good couple shares all work, earn an income, have mutual understanding and ignore what the others say. They consider that listening to others may invite trouble. If they can live in harmony their family will prosper.’*

*(FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)*

Islam also plays an important role in defining relationships between a husband and wife, as the following narrative shows:

**‘Hadith** *[sayings of the Prophet]* also said that a husband will be responsible for whatever his wife does – good or bad. If the wife does something bad – for example, leaves her husband for another man – the husband will have to answer for that. If the wife doesn’t cover herself up, the husband will be treated as a sinner’.

*(FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)*

Interestingly, these women are not passive receivers of these messages; they pointed out the contradictory sayings regarding equal rights of men and women. It seems that although the **Hadith** commends equal gender rights, this is not widely supported or practised within the community.

As part of being obedient and subservient, a wife must allow her husband unlimited and unquestionable sexual access to her body, and tolerate and accept all violence perpetrated by her husband. Religious beliefs hold out the promise of certain rewards for this acceptance; thus, if a woman worships her husband, ‘heaven will be bestowed upon her’. It is important to note the perception of reward for tolerating IPV – i.e., the body parts hit by the husband would go to heaven. In contrast, the penalty for a wife misbehaving with her husband or not appreciating him is not even being worth **Jahannam** (hell).

### 5.1.3 Triggers of IPV in relation to marriage and marital relationships

If a woman is perceived to transgress certain gender norms and expectations of the husband and the marital family, this can trigger IPV. Our qualitative research found particular triggers around the following: conflicts around dowry; tensions inflamed by mothers-in-law; suspicions around extramarital affairs; a wife’s mobility; and transgression of **purdah** norms.

IPV due to **joutuk** (dowry demand) is a widely known

phenomenon in Bangladesh and our study sites were no exception. The amount of dowry demanded upon marriage has increased over time, creating considerable pressure on a bride’s family.

*‘Dowry is the most common [type of violence]’*

*‘Yes, dowry causes most of the violence’*

*‘Parents-in-law, husband mostly torture due to this’*

*‘In the past, the demand was less. For example, they demanded bicycle, an umbrella, a watch, and all sorts of trinkets. Now they want motorbike, ghor shajani [furniture and other household items, e.g. TV, refrigerator, etc.]’*

*(FGD6, married women, Gazipur)*

Failure to make the full dowry payment often leads to emotional and physical IPV against the wife (and our informants suggested that IPV occurs even after the full dowry has been paid). Although traditionally, dowry was demanded at the time of the marriage negotiation, post-marriage demands are very common. Sometimes, a marital family does not demand any dowry at marriage but begins demanding resources from the bride’s family subsequently (see box 2). It is notable that dowry seems to be less prevalent in Gazipur, where the female employment rate and incidence of own-choice marriages are higher than in Mymensingh.

The role of mothers-in-law in encouraging IPV is well known, though perhaps less is known about the role of a husband’s siblings or other close family members in encouraging or perpetrating IPV. As one married woman explained:

*‘When the husband returns home [the mother-in-law] instantly starts complaining, “Your bou said this and did that”. Does he need anything more than that [as an excuse]? He would not ask any questions. Without knowing the head or tail [of what happened], he’d start beating her non-stop with a stick.’*

*(FGD7, married women, Gazipur)*

Although the nuclear family unit is becoming more common nowadays, a woman’s mother-in-law usually lives in the same compound as the couple, and thus her scope for increasing tensions within the relationship or even encouraging IPV remains substantial. Our data show that even if a mother-in-law is living and/or working abroad, she can still interfere in her son’s marriage.

To maintain their control, men usually impose **purdah** as well as restrictions on the wife’s mobility and interactions with the opposite sex. Male suspicions about a wife’s fidelity and/or a wife’s lack of adherence to these restrictions often trigger IPV. According to study informants, this is why IPV is more common among men with working wives (see next subsection). It is also



## Box 2: Social norms of masculinity, femininity, corrigibility of women and sanctity of marriage

Joya, 19, comes from a broken family in rural Gazipur. Her mother divorced when Joya was very young, and both her parents remarried. Her turbulent childhood affected her studies, and she left school after completing sixth grade. Her mother's family quickly arranged her marriage to Jasim, a well-off man, aged 22, just back from work in an Arab country.

For Joya, everything was fine for the first few months after marriage, but the situation changed when tenants close to Jasim's family started to complain about her. They claimed that before marriage Joya had a romantic relationship and spent three days with another man while supposedly visiting her mother. The tenants and Joya's mother-in-law began poisoning the relationship between the newlyweds. The mother-in-law started telling Jasim to punish Joya, and his attitude towards his wife changed. He became suspicious of her fidelity and honesty.

One day, Jasim lost his gold ring. He suspected that Joya stole it. He slapped and punched her. Then throwing her on the bed he hit her repeatedly with a broom made of cocconut twigs and with a spatula breaking her arm. Then, he attacked her with a boti (a big curved knife). When Joya blocked herself, her hand hit the boti causing a deep injury. It was later discovered that Joya's brother-in-law, Kashem stole the ring.

No dowry was demanded at Joya's marriage. But soon after the marriage the mother-in-law began criticising Joya's family for not giving the couple anything. So, Joya's mother gave Jasim Tk 30,000. Jasim demanded more money and used to beat Joya up if she did not bring it. One day, Jasim blamed Joya for stealing Tk 6,000 and beat her up severely, left her at her father's house and disappeared. When Joya called him, he advised her to initiate divorce.

On behalf of Jasim's family the tenants started pressurising Joya's family for a divorce. They wanted Joya to initiate it so as to avoid paying back the *kabin* (brideprice) and alimony.

Joya's mother filed a case against Jasim. Jasim reached a compromise with the court and got Joya back home. Upon her return Joya discovered that Jasim got involved in extramarital relationship. While Jasim went on a pleasure trip, Kashem began to make sexual advances towards Joya. Joya's resistance met with severe physical abuse. Meanwhile, Joya's grandfather fell ill. She asked her husband's permission over the phone and left home informing Kashem. After she left, Kashem claimed that Joya has fled home without notifying anybody. Sensing trouble Joya came back home with her

mother. But Kashem did not let her in. The tenants came and made Joya ask Kashem's forgiveness by touching his feet for allegedly verbally abusing him. Jasim returned from his trip when this drama was still on. He asked Joya's mother to take her back as he did not wish to have her as his wife anymore. Joya's desperate mother embraced Jasim's feet and pleaded him to forgive Joya for any mistake she might have made.

The next day, Kashem informed Jasim of Joya's pregnancy, announced by her mother the previous day. Hearing this Jasim started beating her ferociously demanding to know whose baby it was. Kashem joined Jasim. The brothers made her take some tablets hoping to induce an abortion. Enthusiastic Kashem hit Joya repeatedly with a bamboo cane making her bleed. He kicked her in the abdomen making her roll over reeling in pain. Joya resisted, cried, and pleaded with them over and over again not to kill her.

A few days later, Kashem attacked Joya again in the courtyard. He made her swallow contraceptive pills and then kicked her abdomen hard. He dragged Joya inside from the courtyard pulling her by hair. Joya began bleeding profusely and lost the child. Jasim was home during this incident. He sat aloof and did not intervene.

The next day, Kashem made preparations to hang Joya. He had the noose round her neck. When he was about move the stool from underneath her feet his father-in-law stopped him. According to Joya, Kashem used to take it out on her for not cooperating with his sexual intensions. Joya complained to Jasim about his brother's misconduct. Jasim retorted back that she is the bad woman and she should not blame his brother.

From time to time Jasim used to disappear for two to three days at a stretch. Her sister-in-law spent the whole day at school. Meanwhile, Kashem abused Joya as much as he could. Once he asked her to fry some pitha (Bengali cake). When she was busy at it he entered the kitchen, gripped her hand and dipped her fingers into the boiling oil. He threatened to pour the oil on her face if she made a sound. So, Joya bore the pain in silence while he burned her fingers. Often he used to tie her and lock her up in a room. He would release her just before Jasim came home and warn Joya not to tell Jasim anything.

When home, Jasim would beat Joya almost every night. Twice he threw her out of the house late in the evening making her spend the whole night in the yard. Once he undressed her, tied her hands and legs and left her in their water tank for two days. Joya is still hoping to patch up the marriage somehow.

commonly believed that women who talk to men other than the husband should be punished, since this indicates she is having an extramarital affair:

*'Many women have the habit of talking to many men over phone despite having a husband. When the husband returns at night he checks the phone for identifying the persons she talked to. Even if she lies that she has not talked to anybody he would see from the phone who she talked to. In such situations the husbands often beat wives.'*

*(IGT, daughter, grade 8, student, Gazipur)*

Some women informants pointed out that, despite these common triggers of IPV, some men abuse their wives for no apparent reason other than habit:

*'People from the neighbouring houses abuse the wives for nothing all the time. They'd abuse them verbally, beat them and torture them huda huda [for no reason at all]... They always beat them... It is their habit to beat them. There are some men who wouldn't even allow a wife to utter a single word. If she does, he'd grab a shoe or a stick for beating her.'*

*(IGT, mother, grade 2, Mymensingh)*

### 5.1.3 Expectations about men's work and women's work

According to study participants, gendered social norms dictate that women should stay at home and do housework while men should work outside the home. However, activities assigned exclusively to women at home can be undertaken by men outside the home, as long as they receive payment. Thus, it seems that place of work and payment for work are important factors in the spousal division of labour. Although things are slowly changing, the ideal scenario for men remains one where women stay at home and do household chores.

While one or two generations ago, married women were not supposed to earn an income, things have changed with the spread of NGO activities, particularly provision of microcredit often targeted at women. Even so, women are expected to engage in home-based income-earning activities such as poultry raising or sewing. If a husband does not fulfil his role as provider for the family, his wife should first try to convince him to work. It is only justified for her to work outside the home when it is impossible to run the household without her earnings:

*'If a woman works in a garment factory despite the fact that her husband is capable to provide for the family, she will not be considered an ideal woman ... She needs to stay home and not work outside.'*

*(FGD5, married men, Mymensingh)*

Fear of losing power and control over his wife lies at the core of a man's opposition to her taking up employment outside the home. The data repeatedly reveal men's fears that if this is allowed, he will be considered incapable of providing for the family, a wife may earn more than her husband, challenging the status quo and possibly resulting in the wife disobeying him. Multiple strategies are employed to stop a wife in getting employed outside home: Islam is commonly cited as not in favour of women's employment; some men threaten wives with divorce; and one informant threatened to obtain paid sex if she leaves home for work. The following excerpts from a focus group discussion with men highlight men's concerns:

*'It is best if a woman stays home and her husband earns an income. There is much more problems and conflicts in a family if a woman earns... Earlier men used to hold power. So, they used to beat women. Now that women have the power, they order the men, "Come and listen to what I say [using tui form of address]". If the discussion is not to her liking, she'd slap the man twice and call him names.'*

*(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)*

Women also noted that in households where a woman works, the husband often stops providing for the family, and demands that the wife hands over all her earnings.

Many men feared losing control over their wife's sexuality should she be employed outside the home. Men also commonly perceived that working women were no longer observing **purdah** and were wearing more provocative clothing to attract other men. Similarly, employment outside the home is perceived to allow other men access to the **bou** (i.e. they will see her, talk to her, and will also be able to do something sexual to her). This is completely unacceptable to many men; most agreed that their suspicions about their wife's infidelity while working outside the home become unbearable, such that marital conflict was an obvious consequence of such employment (see also Box 3)

However, our research found that **female employment** has contributed to a reduction of IPV in some cases. Women's home-based income-earning has, according to study respondents, reduced marital conflict linked to poverty, which has in turn resulted in a reduction of IPV. Greater employment opportunities for women outside the home have also broadened their horizons, allowing them to become financially more independent and making divorce a viable option, although women who choose divorce still face considerable exclusion and stigma (see section 5.1.4). Greater employment opportunities have also given some women a route to escape violent marriages, as the following narrative shows:

### Box 3: Men's fears about women working outside the home

Men also expressed concerns about greater scope for extramarital relationships (on the part of the wife) and subsequent marriage breakdown.

*'My wife was offered jobs two to three times. She went to work one day without telling me. Once I came to know this I threatened her publicly with divorce. [I told her] "I'll fulfil all your wants. If I fail, you can get a job. [But] if you need a lot of money you better leave my house. You can't work and talk to another man while you live in my house. Do you expect me to see the face that ten other men see? I don't need you to have such a job." Other men may have given their wives equal right and so they work [not me]' (FGD1, married men, Gazipur).*

*'The woman turned into a man. She is feeding the family by earning income, while the husband is cooking [for the family]. He is also fetching her home [when the office bus drops her off]. While he waits for her, he observes her talking to other men [co-workers] ... He "minds" and beats her. This is what is actually happening ... Again, there are incidences when wives abandon the husband' (FGD3, married men, Gazipur).*

*'The reason [that IPV has reduced] is that aubhab [scarcity] has reduced in the families. Also, women have become smarter these days. They raise duck, chicken and goat at home. They save money from those resources in secret ... When the husband doesn't buy something for them they can buy that on their own using own money. There are also garment factories in Dhaka, you see ... They go to work in the garments factories if the husband doesn't give them money.'*

*(IGT, mother, G-2, Mymensingh)*

#### 5.1.4 Norms around divorce

The word **talak** is commonly used in the study sites to refer to divorce initiated by a husband, while the word **divorce** refers to a wife-initiated divorce. Community members have long been familiar with **talak** as it was practised in Muslim families for generations. However, **divorce** is regarded as a relatively new phenomenon introduced by the government through its divorce law in line with the 'new' policy of gender equality, which gives women the right to divorce. Marriage and divorce both have to be officially registered now.

According to our informants, **talak** has been affected by the law on gender equality. Thus, it is no longer valid for a man to utter the word **talak** three times for divorcing his wife. While **talak** in its old form did not involve any

financial liabilities, upon divorce, a man has to pay his wife the full **kabin** (brideprice he committed to pay upon marriage), and an allowance for subsistence for the wife (for three months) and any children until they become adults.

Equal rights of spouses to initiate divorce have boosted divorce initiated by women, which was perceived by some respondents to have reduced IPV:

*Participant 1: 'Previously women stayed in marriage, putting up with physical violence. Now, they rush for divorce as much as they rush for marriage. If the man crosses the limit, she says "I won't continue this marriage. I'll better eat by doing a job."' Again, there are many men who you cannot like. Some smoke hashish, some drink and some engage in varying types of worse things. Many women leave such husbands to marry again.'*

*Participant 2: 'Earlier women used to think a lot before getting a divorce. They were compelled to stay in marriage ... They are now leaving after one or two episodes of violence.'*

*(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)*

Despite the law, though, it is not easy for a woman to initiate divorce, as social norms uphold the ideal of a woman marrying only once in her lifetime. Women internalise this ideal as they grow up. Thus, a woman usually aspires to this ideal regardless of her husband's character, including whether he commits IPV. Our study informants repeatedly affirmed that women internalise such beliefs, reinforcing their submission to the husband, acceptance of his inadequacies and wrongdoings, and tolerance of violence. Where a husband has alcohol, drug or gambling problems, a good wife is not expected to divorce him, but to convince him to change his ways without damaging his honour. As one male focus group participant from Mymensingh said:

*'A good woman believes that she will be married only once in her life, no matter whether the marriage is good or bad, or the husband drinks or smokes pot. Once married, she must try to cope well with it'*

*(FGD2, married men, Gazipur).*

As the informants noted, women have to carefully consider the pros and cons of divorce given the sanctions and stigma it brings. Even generations ago, a woman divorcee always had a compromised reputation or **maan-shomman** and was subjected to derogatory comments and treated poorly, as she was blamed for causing it. A woman initiating a divorce is all the more devalued and criticised because not only does she damage her own reputation but also that of her natal family, which she is usually heavily dependent on. Even if the natal family supports her, poverty may be a deterrent. Issues pertaining to any children within





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the marriage can also prevent women proceeding with divorce (e.g. child custody; financial difficulties in raising children alone; potential harm to children living with father and a stepmother, etc.): *‘Let us suppose, I have three children and my husband got married again. He doesn’t care about the children. But I love them dearly. This is why I won’t be able to leave [all participants nod in agreement]’* (FGD3, married women, Gazipur). Additionally, a female divorcee’s re-marriage prospects are reported to be very low.

### 5.1.5 Norms and practices around son preference

Male FGD participants (aged 20-42) strongly and consistently emphasised that they themselves have no son preference and that it is usually older members of the community that do. Despite this claim, some observed that people in general and men in particular are often disappointed if a girl child is born:

*‘Everybody desires to ensure survival of the family lineage. If a son is born the lineage gets extended. A daughter is given to another family in marriage and she extends the lineage of that family.’*

*‘A man’s parents expect a grandson once a man gets married. They want to celebrate the birth of a grandson.’*

*‘5kg sweets are distributed if a daughter is born, while 10kg sweets are distributed in case of birth of a son.’*

(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)

*‘The villagers most commonly mention the male child as gold, and the female child as ash.’ ‘To a ma (mother), there is nothing more respectful than to give birth to a son.’*

(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

Female study informants also linked son preference to the belief that only sons can continue the family lineage. Other reasons mentioned were that a son has privilege over females (e.g. not criticised for mobility; not blamed for sexual violence, etc); has better prospects; can earn money; can bring dowry; can bring a wife who looks after the household; can inherit parental property; and provides old age security to his parents. In contrast, a daughter often has to be married with a dowry. Families do not want daughters because once they marry, *‘they will be sent to someone else’s family, while the son will stay. He will ... look after [the parents] when they are old’* (IGT, daughter, G-11, student, Mymensingh). Fatema’s story (see box 4) highlights some additional aspects of why having a son and grandsons is essential.

This narrative and the comments of our informants reflect the highly patriarchal structure of Bangladeshi society, based on patrilineal kinship relations, patrilocal marriage and child marriage, among other things (see section 6.3.3.1), etc. It also reflects deeply rooted male

#### Box 4: Fatema’s son

Fatema’s son has five daughters and no sons. He was the sole earner in the family. All his daughters were married off early to families in other villages and are now busy raising their young children. Meanwhile, Fatema’s son has been diagnosed with cancer and was admitted to the district hospital several months ago. His daughters cannot take care of their ailing father because of their own household duties. So his wife, who had never gone this far from home on her own before, has to take his food to the hospital every day.

As there are no other family members earning an income, it has become very difficult to pay for his treatment. Fatema lamented that the absence of grandsons has brought misery upon the family. She believes if she had grandsons they could contribute to the family’s earnings and arrange treatment for their father. They could take turns to care for him at the district hospital, saving their mother from having to make the trip every day and contravening accepted norms around women’s mobility (IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Mymensingh).

advantages over females (e.g. rigid gender roles and clearly defined separate spheres for males and females, which limit opportunities for the latter). Son preference is the natural outcome of a patriarchal system such as this.

Although son preference is a strong social norm, some study participants pointed out that there is variation in how this norm is observed. Thus, for example, in families that already have a number of sons, the birth of a daughter may be more welcome than that of another son. Some families may also want sons and daughters. It is also noteworthy that some female informants reported no negative experiences of not having a son. Some women were critical of the notion that a son is the carrier of the lineage and provides security for his parents in old age, believing that sons and daughters alike can fulfil this role (citing concrete examples of women who are doing this) if they are ‘properly’ educated and raised. However, this is not yet commonplace, as most women usually live away from their natal family due to patrilocal marriage and village exogamy. In contrast, sons usually live either in the same household or in the same compound as their parents.

According to study participants, if a woman does not bear a son, she is blamed for it, something which also becomes a potential trigger of IPV. She is criticised by her in-laws and husband. She also may be teased and criticised by her neighbours as *atkurha* (a woman who cannot bear a son). To satisfy the marital family she often has to bear children until she gives birth to a son. At the same time, a woman giving birth to girl children only is usually not valued in the marital family. Her opinions carry no

weight and she is usually neglected, lacking food and other necessities. She is also often threatened with divorce and her husband may marry again expecting a son (FGD2, married men, Gazipur; FGD4, married men, Mymensingh; FGD5, married men, Mymensingh). One of the six IPV survivors interviewed for this study experienced all these consequences after bearing a female child (IDI, IPV survivor, illiterate, garment worker, Mymensingh).

Regardless of age, gender and site, most study participants believed that son preference has weakened over time due to changes in gender roles (e.g. a narrowing of the gender gap in primary education, high rates of NGO participation by females, increased rates of women's employment, increased awareness of rights to gender equality, etc.).

## 5.2 Norms and practices around adolescence

### 5.2.1 Definitions and markers of adolescence

The concept of adolescence (in terms of the ages when girls and boys go through adolescence) varied in the study sites. Those exposed to standard vocabularies either through the school curriculum, NGO interventions or the media readily used the terms **kishor/kishori** to refer to male and female adolescents, and referred to the commonly recognised ages for this stage of life (i.e. between 10 and 18 for girls and 12 and 18 for boys). Others used the terms **dangor** or **sheyana**, which could be applied to a broad range of age groups. In general, there seemed to be more consistency and clarity in defining when girls reach adolescence than boys. For girls, adolescence was considered to begin at puberty or menarche, and commonly believed to continue until adulthood at 18 years of age.

Once girls reach menarche they are labelled as **shabalika** (the male equivalent is **shabalok**). Breast development and menarche are commonly recognised physical features of female adolescents, while voice change and growth of moustache and beard are considered as characteristic of male adolescents. According to informants, adolescence makes boys and girls nervous and curious about the changes in their body. They begin to feel attracted to the opposite sex. The boys become restless, many of them lose concentration in their studies, do not listen to the elders, do not work, become naughty and chase girls. As boys enjoy a lot of freedom compared to girls, they can even experiment with sex (FGD5, married men, Mymensingh). Due to social taboos around discussing sex and sexuality, adolescents cannot share their new emotions, feelings, interests and challenges with older family members, who usually have more experience and may be able to guide them. Most adolescents gain information from their peers.

Adolescence is recognised by community members as a highly vulnerable period. Many study informants believed that if the family environment is not conducive for healthy

development, an adolescent may become frustrated and engage in risky behaviours, including choosing the wrong company or getting involved with someone who is not good for him/her.

### 5.2.2 Norms around education of adolescents

Overall, female education is perceived as good for society – not because it leads to women's empowerment, but because it enables women to support their children's education (FGD5, married men, Mymensingh) and/or supports the development of religious piety, a desirable quality in a wife (IGT, father, illiterate, farmer, Gazipur). Some informants said that education for girls up to grade 8 or 9 is sufficient:

*'A girl should study till class eight or nine at best as per the expectations of people of the society. They don't want girls to be much educated.'*

*(FGD5, married men, Mymensingh)*

In contrast, it is expected that a boy should continue his education for as long as the family can afford it and he can proceed through the grades.

Although some informants advocated for female education beyond grade 8 (IGT, son, grade 8 in *madrassa*, student, Gazipur), most girls were reported to be married off and therefore not receiving much education beyond this grade (IDI, unmarried young man, grade 9, student, Gazipur).

Whatever the community expectation and parents' aspirations about education of boys and girls, there was a perception that adolescent boys generally have less access to education than girls owing to positive discrimination in the form of government stipends for girls' secondary education. According to men, this policy, combined with poverty, often leads parents to send boys to work rather than to receive higher education (FGD4, married men, Mymensingh; FGD6, married women, Gazipur):

*'A boy has to earn after he grows up into an adult person. He will study and become educated. But that doesn't happen in reality. The parents of that kid push him into daily earning without making him educated. He gets married without having proper earnings.'*

*(FGD6, married women, Gazipur)*

While boys and girls are expected to attend school, girls are also expected to receive **madrassa** education. Male informants expressed frustration about the disappearance of religious teaching, which they felt has been replaced by English-medium schools. They link the emergence of this new phenomenon to an educational programme implemented by PLAN International in the area, involving English and mathematics. They believe that as a result of this programme, Islam has almost been abolished from the area. Reportedly, people are now intent on getting their children



admitted to English-medium schools to ensure that they can compete in the job market. They also believed that non-observance of **pardah** by women is linked to education in English-medium schools. They did not, however, mention any adverse impact of such schooling on boys.

In another FGD, male participants sounded extremely bitter and sarcastic about perceived de-Islamisation. First, they linked lower attendance at religious schools, mass media and the communications technology boom to de-Islamisation. Then, they linked de-Islamisation to unacceptable gender roles for women and blamed foreign agencies and the government for introducing and promoting/nurturing such undesirable changes. It is noteworthy that expectations of a girl from within their own family seemed different from expectations for females outside the family and community.

*'KG e korsey desh beji [i.e., kindergarten (KG) schools have converted this country into an animal (weasel)]. There was Forkania madrassa instead of KG schools. Now, KG schools are run in the morning. So, instead of going to the Forkania madrassa the children have become digital [taunting the government's declaration of converting the country into digital Bangladesh]. Everything has become digital!... We are Muslims. What would we have if we don't teach Arabic?! We can't become religion-less!'*

*(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)*

### 5.2.3 Norms around mobility during adolescence

In terms of mobility, an adolescent boy is not expected to go to 'bad' places (such as a brothel), whereas an adolescent girl can hardly go anywhere (except for education and family events). These expectations indicate that the boundaries in a girl's mobility are well specified and heavily enforced, while boys have few such restrictions on their mobility. Boys, for instance, do not have to ask a parent's permission to go out, whereas a girl must request and obtain permission before she leaves home for any purpose.

In terms of changes in mobility over time, mobility of adolescent girls has increased substantially mainly because of sending them for education or (for some girls) to engage in work. Some men perceive this change as from a civilised way of living to an uncivilised way. Thus, an elderly man said:

*'Females in our day were much shobbho [civilised] ... They used to stay home'.*

*(IGT, grandfather, illiterate, farmer/security guard, Mymensingh)*

### 5.2.4 Norms around conduct and responsibilities for adolescents

As **maan-shomman** of a family and of an adolescent girl largely depends on her conduct, the family and community carefully supervise and monitor her, disciplining her if

she contravenes expected behaviours. The girl is blamed if she becomes a victim of sexual violence or any slander involving a relationship.

Interviews and FGDs elicited a long list of codes of conduct that a girl must follow in how to carry herself, behave, dress, etc. In contrast, boys had no such codes of conduct. The community prescribes that girls should talk sweetly in a low voice; walk without any **ghotor-motor** (sudden or noticeable moves); and dress decently. **Purdah** observance is demanded exclusively from girls. Thus, a girl is expected to cover her head and also to wear a **burkah**. Girls are not supposed to mix with boys.

Girls are also expected to carry out household chores, while boys are not; girls' responsibilities also include taking care of parents and younger siblings. Once a girl enters adolescence she begins to be **bujhdar** (understanding) and helps the mother with regular household chores, taking on more responsibilities at times of family crisis. One woman gave an example of her 15-year-old granddaughter. She said:

*'... two months ago my youngest daughter broke her leg. My eldest granddaughter cooked for two months, fed the family and attended school regularly.'*

*(IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Gazipur)*

This kind of upbringing is regarded as essential to prepare girls for life in the marital home (IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Mymensingh). However, increased participation in education, along with increased pressure to study, means that girls often have less time to do household chores (IGT, father, illiterate, farmer/security guard, Mymensingh).

In general, an adolescent boy is not considered capable of being **bujhdar** of the family's needs and is not expected to assume any responsibilities in the home. Boys therefore have time to engage in various games and socialise with their peers (IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Mymensingh). According to study participants, this represents a considerable change from previous times, when adolescent boys were supposed to help their fathers and contribute to family income whether or not they were studying (IGT, grandfather, illiterate, farmer/security guard, Mymensingh). Study participants linked this change to a reduction of poverty and widening of educational opportunities. These factors have changed the life of adolescents in Bangladesh, including freeing up boys from the need to work, while girls are only partially freed from carrying out household chores and taking care of their parents and younger siblings (IGT, father, illiterate, daily wage, Gazipur).

Despite this general trend, the data show that not all adolescent boys conform to these norms; some adolescent boys are actually **bujhdar** and help their parents at times (IGT, mother, grade 5, Mymensingh), while some adolescent girls are perceived as disobedient and do

not comply with expectations (FGD5, married men, Mymensingh).

Recently, rising crime levels, widespread antisocial activities, easy access to **neshapani** (drugs and alcohol) and negative attitudes to involvement in politics have created new community expectations for adolescent boys. For instance, it is now frowned upon for a boy to hang out with bad company, become a gang member or engage in hooliganism and politics.

As mentioned earlier, adolescence is recognised as a highly vulnerable life stage, with parents concerned about protecting adolescent daughters from sexual harassment and violence, such that safeguarding girls and the family's honour becomes crucial. In the case of boys, parents' fears are mostly around sons' involvement with **mondo** (bad company), **juwa** (gambling), **nesha** (substance abuse), and **mayabaji** (having sex with multiple female partners). The informants pointed out that freedom of movement, **dushto** (naughty) and **ussrinkhol** (undisciplined) nature and lack of proper guidance increase adolescent boys' risks of becoming involved in harmful activities. According to them, it is much easier to control adolescent girls, who stay at home most of the time and tend to be obedient. However, when a girl leaves the home either to attend school or for some other purpose, she is considered at risk of being exposed to sexual harassment, sexual violence, abduction or **prem** (romantic relationship).

The data indicate that the consequences for a girl and her family are much greater than the consequences of a boy's wrongdoings. Incidents involving girls give rise to a great deal of rumour around the girl's character, tarnishing her and her family's reputation. In general, the community is very critical of such incidents and almost without exclusion blames the girl for them. In cases of sexual violence, the community usually intervenes by making sure that the girl marries the perpetrator. In case of **prem**, the community puts pressure on the family to immediately arrange her marriage to another man.

Participants suggested that given the high risk of rumours and the impact they can have on a girl/family's reputation, early marriage can be perceived as a protective/pre-emptive action. One girl who married aged 17 said:

*'I am married now. So, I am out of danger... The girls who study are at high risk. Boys in this area are so bad! They disturb them [the girls] repeatedly and then one day they rape them. We told you about Tonu [victim of post-rape homicide from another district]. You must have also heard about the girl from this locality [another post-rape homicide victim]. This girl used to study [in a college]. On her way to the college she was being harassed by some boys. Later they raped her and then stabbed her [to death].'*

(FGD7, married women, Gazipur)

According to study respondents, adolescent behaviours

have changed over time. Whereas previously, adolescent girls were shy and timid and could not even talk to their mothers about menarche, nowadays, exposure to communication technology and mass media, including cell phones, internet, TV and films, has made adolescents bolder and more willing to discuss things with their mothers, which was unheard of previously. The mother-daughter relationship has evolved to a much closer and friendlier relationship for many, due largely to conscious efforts on the part of the mothers who recognise the importance of creating a space for girls to share their problems, which in turn allows the mothers to help the girls solve their problems. According to female FGD participants:

*'Now a mother tells her daughter, "Whenever something happens to you come and tell me directly. I mean, you need to share things with me as to a friend. If you do that I can help you solving the problem".'*

(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

According to study findings, adolescent boys are less fortunate in this regard, as they are supposed to be more independent and capable of resolving their own problems without seeking advice from their parents. Thus, they usually depend on their peers for information and advice, despite the fact that these sources are often not reliable and may lead them to a wrong path. Many female informants felt that an adolescent boy could avoid going off track if he had a better relationship with his father and was guided by him appropriately. Unfortunately, socially prescribed age and relationship hierarchies inhibit such close relationships between fathers and sons.

Changes have also been seen in relations to dating or romantic relationships. Due to access to TV, films, mobile phones and internet, girls and boys are exposed to romantic relationships, sex and sexuality at a much younger age. Thus, they begin experimenting with these at a much earlier age. Community members perceive this change, linked to modern technology, in a very negative light:

*'A six-year-old boy now knows everything, while we didn't know what **prem** is even when we were in grade 10. This is due to this digital era.'*

(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)

In general, romantic relationships are not approved by the community. Thus, while girls now have more scope to mix with the opposite sex due to increased regular mobility linked to schooling and employment, the community has become very cautious and vigilant regarding the risk of romantic relationships. Community members and families try to isolate boys and girls beginning from primary school level, while previously such gender segregation



## Box 5: Violence as discipline

*'It is his [the (husband's)] right to beat the wife. He will beat her. What do you expect? He'd earn and feed you, but he won't be allowed to beat you?'* (FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)

*'If anyone tries to stop them they say they are shashon kortasey [disciplining the woman]. They'd throw challenge by asking "Is this abuse?" Can't we even shashon the wives anymore?'*" (FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

*'Suppose she did not serve meal to the husband instantly after he returned from work. He chatted with other people. So, when he returned, he found cow*

*dung left unclean at the doorstep, dishes not done, the children crying, while she is parha berhailo [visiting the neighbours]... Some wives... don't sheba-jotno [take care and serve] the parents-in-law, [they] quarrel with sisters-in-law, treat the children harshly... They are not part of a civilised society... So, they have to be disciplined.'* (IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Gazipur)

*'Slapping in instances of minor disobedience is all that happens now. There is nothing more serious than that ... [For example] I asked her to do something, which she did not do.'*

*'This is something between the two of them. You came and hit her and then instantly peace was made ... This is not violence.'* (FGD4, married men, Mymensingh)

used to be implemented only from secondary school level (FGD9, married women, Mymensingh; IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Gazipur). Thus (for instance) if a girl talks on a mobile phone, or talks to a boy face-to-face, or repeatedly goes to the market, she is suspected by the community of having a romantic relationship, prompting gossip. She is labelled as *kharap/noshto/meyer choritro bhalo na* (a bad or characterless girl). The girl and her family are perceived to lose their *maan-shomman* (honour). The community members start to put pressure on the family to get her married immediately in order to prevent greater damage to the community, family and the girl.

Sometimes, in order to scare a girl out of a relationship, the parents threaten her with an unfavourable arranged marriage. As one informant said,

*'[on discovering a girl's secret relationship] ... her mother threatened her that the family would marry her within one day. Her mother even said that she would settle her marriage with a rickshaw driver.'*

(IDI, unmarried young man, student, Mymensingh)

## 5.3 Norms around IPV

### 5.3.1 Violence as acceptable, as a man's 'duty'

Quite contradictory views were expressed regarding norms around IPV in both study districts. Many men firmly claimed that it is not right to abuse a wife, and during interviews and discussions they completely denied individual and community acceptance of IPV. However, these responses must be treated with caution, as people in the study sites have been well exposed to messages from the government and NGOs regarding the unacceptability of violence against women and the existence of laws prohibiting it. Despite declaring zero tolerance of physical IPV, for example,

statements from study informants clearly indicate that this is not necessarily the case in practice. Thus, despite repeatedly declaring that physical IPV is unacceptable, many men ended up endorsing wife abuse when probed about the acceptability of wife abuse in different scenarios. The data show a tendency to downplay IPV by interpreting it as necessary (even men's 'duty') to discipline women as a way of maintaining male control over women, protecting male honour or maintaining the social order.

Participant 1: *There is not much wife abuse in this locality.*

Participant 2: *There is only a bit of shashon (disciplining) around some small things ...*

Participant 1: *No, there is no wife-beating.*

Participant 2: *Shashon may be carried out verbally or physically ...*

Participant 1: *Most of the times women accept this as a husband may beat due to anger. It is [actually] his duty to discipline her. A child is disciplined by its father and a wife is disciplined by her husband.*

(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)

One of the most important justifications of IPV is thus the perceived need for a man to discipline his wife. Islamic commandment was also cited as one justification for wife abuse. Women, particularly older women, argued that *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet) gave men the right to abuse their wives in return for providing for the family (see also Box 5).

The most commonly mentioned scenarios in which wife-beating was perceived to be warranted included not obeying the husband, not seeking his permission to go

out or take a decision, and intervening in matters regarded as the husband's domain, as well as not taking proper care of the in-laws or quarrelling with them. Elderly women readily endorsed beating a wife who engages in conflict with parents-in-law or does not take proper care of them.

*'It is right to beat a wife if she doesn't obey her husband... Why won't she look after her parents-in-law?'*

*(IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Mymensingh)*

IPV is not only justified for disciplining women or for following religious commandment, but also by norms surrounding masculinity, which dictate that men are supposed to be angry and aggressive (see also section 5.1.2), with violence as an acceptable means of releasing their anger. The following quote from a female FGD participant suggests that women sometimes contribute to the husband's anger by quarrelling:

*'He [a husband] beats when he gets angry. Men are hot-tempered. It is only natural that they'd beat when angry. Do women beat? [No] they just quarrel, which leads to beating.'*

*(FGD7, married women, Gazipur)*

A wife is supposed to tolerate violence in silence and the community actually puts pressure on women to remain silent:

*'People say, "You cannot retort back just because your husband has hit you or scolded you. A husband can always scold you, but it doesn't allow you to talk back".'*

*(FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)*

The norm that women should tolerate abuse also appears to be maintained by the idea that IPV is not an issue to be publicly spoken about, but rather is a private matter. As one woman informant from Gazipur (KII13) commented:

*'People say that this is a private issue/family matter and they will resolve it internally. As these situations are tied to social status and family honour, people think discussing or getting outside help will harm their social image. Even if someone tries to intervene, they are bluntly told that "It's our headache; we'll worry about it."'*

Similarly, as one male informant said:

*'Nobody should be aware of problems of my family. There are some women who tell others about them.'*

*Suppose there is a quarrel in my family and my wife goes to others and tells them "My husband has done this and that ..." [In short], I prefer she doesn't do that. Telling another woman about husband will bring ill-reputation to her and her husband. A wife says a lot of bad things about a husband, which is not right.'*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 5, barber, Gazipur)*

### 5.3.2 Changing attitudes around IPV among younger people

In this section we explore whether the attitudes of younger people and adolescents to IPV are changing. Although the male and female adolescents from the two districts expressed varied opinions, there are some commonalities that we can tease out from the data.

#### 5.3.2.1 Adolescent boys and young men

Adolescent boys and young men share the notion of adult men in the community that women are to blame for IPV. Thus, when asked how IPV could be prevented, they often suggested that women must modify their behaviours. Thus, for example, a young man from Gazipur said:

*'Women need to be corrected for preventing violence. They need to treat the elders well and not show them any disrespect. Violence will reduce if the women turn good. The women are hot-tempered and violence is high because of this... For example, she may misbehave with her mother-in-law. Suppose the mother-in-law is asking her to cook rice on time and she is not complying with her... If the husband, for instance, asks her to wash his shirt, she may retort saying she'd do that later... Demands that her husband takes her to her father's house otherwise she threatens going on her own, breaking things, not returning from father's house.'*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 5, shopkeeper, Gazipur)*

Out of 15 adolescent boys and young men interviewed, one was in complete denial that IPV occurred in his locality. Most of the others (10 out of 14) endorsed one or other forms of IPV in different scenarios. Six of the 14 endorsed wife-beating in situations where a woman disobeyed her husband, argued with him, insulted the husband in public, disclosed family matters (including IPV) to outsiders (thus jeopardising the husband's reputation), went out without seeking his permission, quarrelled with in-laws, burned food, refused the husband sex (when she was not ill), wore a revealing dress, talked to other men, or had an extramarital relationship. Similarly to adult men, most of the adolescent boys and young men initially claimed that IPV was unacceptable, but endorsed it when probed about different scenarios.

*‘Wife-beating is sometimes justified. For example, when she scolds husband in front of others and people notice that a woman is scolding a man. Some people scold the husband for failing to discipline his wife. In such case, the husband needs to give her several light slaps to make her understand the gravity of the situation.’*

*(IDI, unmarried adolescent boy, grade 8, student, Gazipur)*

Overall, adolescent boys and young men from Mymensingh seemed to endorse IPV more than their peers from Gazipur. Some discussed the issue of IPV in light of Islam. Interestingly, their views differed, with one claiming that Islam rejects the idea of wife-beating, while others suggested using IPV to make their wives adhere to the commandment of Islam:

*‘Wife-beating is not allowed by Sharia. Allah has mentioned in the Quran that a husband cannot beat his wife. This is because the women are created from Adam. If one is compelled to hit her he better use his jib lathhi [tongue used as stick]. It [the Quran] further said that if you still hit her, do it lightly so that no mark is left.’*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, madrasa student, Mymensingh)*

*‘... Islam instructed us to kill the one who expresses excessive sexuality ... In other words, body of the person who goes beyond the sexual limit should be dissected and her head should be chopped off. Instead if I can bring my wife back to the path of Islam by slapping her twice, I’d of course consider that as a foroz [a divine commandment].’*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, grade 12, army trainee, Mymensingh)*

Some adolescent boys and young men considered sex as a husband’s entitlement. So, in a scenario where a wife refuses sex, some justified wife-beating, some justified emotional abuse and some suggested getting a divorce. (It was only deemed acceptable for a wife to refuse sex in case of illness.) But refusal over a long period of time or after a long absence of the husband was not deemed acceptable by adolescent boys and young men.

*‘If you find that she is not sick, but she is still avoiding her husband and that she is not interested in sex... in such case, slapping is the only way to get sex. What else can you do?’*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, grade 12, army trainee, Mymensingh)*

*‘If the husband has the urge, it is her duty to obey his order... She has to be scolded. She needs to be*

*threatened with talak (divorce), which may make her comply... Threat of divorce is more [effective] than beating as women are very much afraid of divorce. Uttering the word talak the first time implies warning... that if you don’t obey me I’ll divorce you... If she still doesn’t comply, you are allowed to beat her.’*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, madrasa student, Mymensingh)*

*‘If she is sick it is okay if she refuses. But if there is no sex for a month or two because of her anger, then force may be used [to get sex].’*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, grade 11, welding worker, Gazipur)*

### 5.3.2.2 Adolescent girls and young women

It is clear from the data that social norms around IPV are well internalised by adolescent girls and young women. A total of 20 adolescent girls and young women were interviewed (including in the IGTs) in this study. While it is difficult to generalise the findings from such a small sample, the unmarried adolescent girls interviewed seemed to endorse IPV more than married young women. As with adolescent boys and young men, most of these adolescent girls and young women seemed to hold women responsible for IPV, agreeing that a wife should submit to her husband.

*‘A woman has to manage many things while she cooks. She should be careful not to burn food for avoiding disturbance in the family... Suppose the husband is angry and scolding the wife.. the wife shouldn’t retort back instantly. Actually, it is best not to speak at all.’*

*(IDI, IPV survivor, married, grade 6, Gazipur)*

*‘A woman needs to understand everything including how to deal with her husband. I need to understand if my husband is saying something for my own good. It is not right if a husband says, “You have to wear a burkah to go to that place” and she refuses, saying “I’d wear ordinary dress”. Maybe the husband wants her to follow the local custom so that she was not singled out.’*

*(IGT, daughter, grade 5, Gazipur)*

All except one of the adolescent girls interviewed endorsed wife-beating in the case of involvement in an extramarital affair. Some even endorsed wife-beating for women engaging in ordinary interactions with other men. They suggested that a wife needs to understand a husband’s expectations, and what kinds of behaviour he allows, and to act accordingly in order to avoid experiencing IPV:

### Box 6: Adolescent boy supports a girl to take action against sexual harassment

Toufik, aged 16 (and in grade 9), once saw a boy from his school making lewd remarks to a female classmate. The boy then took a photo of the girl in a dress drenched in rain. Toufik talked to the girl later. He warned her about the trouble she might get into if the photo was altered and shared with others. Toufik told a teacher what had happened and suggested that the girl ask the teacher for help.

When the girl met the teacher, he suggested she file a complaint. He assured the girl that she would not be harmed. The teacher submitted the complaint to the school management committee, of which the boy's father was an influential member. In this way, the boy came to know about the complaint and started harassing

the teacher involved. The president of the committee brought the boy and his friends (who accompanied him during the sexual harassment) forward; they were beaten and were asked to apologise to the teacher. They were warned against harassment of girls and the teacher, then sent to the police station.

However, these measures had no impact on the boys. They continued to harass the teacher, following him on the street and pushing him. If he asked the reason, they used to slap him. At one point he couldn't help and hit back. However, the perpetrators were not discouraged and continued to abuse him. Not seeing any hope in correcting them, the teacher finally gave up protesting. Although Toufik and his teacher were not fully successful in dealing with the perpetrators, Toufik claims that the experience turned him into a better person. He does not tease girls anymore since this episode.

*Interviewer: If she speaks to or mixes with other men should a husband beat her?*

*Respondent: Yes, he will beat her then as it is his right to beat her in this circumstance.*

*(IGT, daughter, grade 5, Gazipur)*

*'A husband will of course beat a woman if she engages in sex with another man... No husband wants his wife to speak to other men... He would be angered if he sees this. He would beat her as well because of this... Many women make this mistake and bring disturbance in the family.'*

*(IDI, IPV survivor, married, grade 6, Gazipur)*

Adolescent girls and young women expressed differing opinions as to the acceptability of wife-beating if a wife goes somewhere without seeking her husband's permission or does not take proper care of her in-laws or children. Some felt she should be beaten for this while others felt that she should be persuaded verbally not to continue these transgressions in future. All adolescent girls and young women considered wife-beating unacceptable when it was related to dowry demand or unfavourable physical features of the wife.

#### 5.3.2.3 Beacon of hope? Supportive young men

A few young male informants expressed their disapproval of sexual harassment/violence against unmarried adolescent girls and reported supporting the survivors. Their narratives show that it is extremely difficult to achieve a solution to this problem and even more difficult to achieve a lasting solution (see Box 6):

*'I always disagreed with my friends when they plan to harass girls ... I told them that this is not right ... Many of them say that you don't get involved in this if you don't like it.'*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, BA (1st yr), student, Mymensingh)*

## 5.4 Sexual harassment and sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls

According to media reports, sexual harassment and sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls is a burgeoning problem in Bangladesh. Informants distinguished between sexual harassment and sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls. They defined sexual harassment, referred to locally as *eve-teasing*, as including the following: (1) Intimidation by making sexual signs and gestures, winking, making sounds, making sexual comments; (2) following a girl; (3) stopping a girl on the street and proposing her an intimate relationship; (4) pulling her *orhna* or scarf; (5) holding hand or touching; and (6) embracing.

Acts of sexual violence mentioned in our study sites were: (1) attempts to coerce a girl into an intimate relationship using threats of rape or other violence; (2) abduction and forced marriage; and (3) rape. Generally speaking, male informants denied that rape and other kinds of sexual violence and harassment occurred in their own community. Some men reported cases where girls had been sexually harassed by outsiders. Only a few men acknowledged that sexual harassment and rape occur in the community:



*'In our locality, there are some characterless boys. Suppose a girl is going to school from my house, they would stop her on her way and want to have sex ... This happens to 10% of the girls.'*

*(IDI, married young man, BA student, Mymensingh)*

Men denied that rape occurs (or if it does it was said to be something that occurred in the past). Yet it was clear from our other data that at least three adolescent girls had been raped in Gazipur study sites in the recent past. The quote below suggests that the informant knew of a case of rape and may even have been the perpetrator:

*'We had a cousin sister. She was physically attracted to me. She used to tell me that I have abused her emotionally, I treated her badly and I engaged in bad behaviour [sex] with her. She tried to marry me in using many strategies ... She was younger than me by one year ... She used to like me since childhood ... I don't like to get involved with any cousin or other relatives ... She said that I abused her and raped her. She said many bad things to the local leaders.'*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, BA student and shopkeeper, Gazipur)*

In contrast to male denials, most women's reports gave the impression that sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls is a serious concern and is on the rise. Women believed that girls from two to three households out of ten were exposed to this kind of violence, while men suggested it affected only one in ten.

Apart from sexual harassment and rape, abduction was repeatedly mentioned as a problem. Abduction is not only related to sexual violence but also to forced child marriage:

*'Yes, this happens [forced intimate relationships] ... Girls are abducted ... Suppose, I don't like the boy [who proposed to me], then he'd abduct me.'*

*(FGD11, married women, Mymensingh)*

### 5.4.1 Consequences of sexual harassment and sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls

Sexual harassment and sexual violence in the community create strong feelings of fear and insecurity as well as heighten concerns about individual and family honour. This often results in adolescent girls dropping out of school to avoid the risk of being subject to this kind of violence. Dropping out of school tends to increase the likelihood of child marriage, which is itself a risk factor.

*'Many girls quit their studies because of such boys. They would tease her on her way to school. So, the girls sit home quitting their studies. Then their guardians marry them off ... The boy follows her on the street. The boy*

*talks to her, but she doesn't reply ... He tries to take her to somewhere else. He pulls her orhna or scarf or tries to hold her hand. Seeing this, the community members start gossiping. They say many [bad] things. Then the girl stops going to school out of shame and complains to her guardians about this violence ... The girl's education gets stalled. Even if the guardians want her to continue, she doesn't, out of fear.'*

*(IGT, daughter, grade 11, student, Mymensingh)*

Men often use sexual harassment and threats of graver sexual violence to coerce girls into an intimate relationship or marriage, which sometimes leads the girl to attempt suicide.

*'He threatened to marry her forcibly. He regularly sent her proposal for establishing a love affair with him. Finally, the boy started to put a lot of pressure on the girl and she took poison, not being able to cope.'*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 12, garment worker, Gazipur)*

### 5.4.2 Coping strategies

Coping strategies of the girls exposed to sexual harassment/violence differ by household socioeconomic status. Girls from poor households rarely seek recourse. If the girl belongs to a powerful/influential family, there is a greater likelihood of taking some action. This difference is clearly demonstrated in the quotes below:

*'Sometimes the girls protest. However, if they are helpless or lack financial means, they fear getting into trouble. So, they tolerate [the violence] in silence.'*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, BA, Madrasa student, Mymensingh)*

*'The girls in our family always wear burkha when they go out. Everyone in this locality knows us very well. Even the schoolteachers know us very well. That is why nobody can do anything to us. They cannot abuse our girls. It is our family's privilege ... They do not dare to treat our girls badly ... If they do, we arrange arbitration and no one dares to do the same in future.'*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, grade 12, Mymensingh)*

As discussed in section 7.2.2, often, the family is the first environment in which violence will be reported. Families adopt different strategies for dealing with such reports. In case of sexual harassment, they can complain to the guardian of the boy involved; they can threaten him and his family; they can physically assault him; or they can give out false information about filing a case against him:

*'A boy from the neighbouring house often disturbed her [his cousin's sister] on her way to school ... She reported this to her family. Then all her cousin's brothers and uncles got together and went to the boy's house for demanding an explanation. However, sensing trouble, he disappeared ... He continued disturbing her. We complained to his guardians. He still did not stop. Then he was beaten. We informed him that a case of violence against women has been filed against him ... Only then he stopped.'*

*(IDI, married young man, BA student, Mymensingh)*

If the family cannot put a stop to the violence, the village elders may get involved. However, their attitudes typically uphold prevailing discriminatory norms that reinforce gender inequality and condone violence, which means they rarely sanction proper punishment of perpetrators of GBV/IPV. Usually, they just scold the man and ask him to stop.

*'Punishment is given if he perpetrates any violence such as rape, holding hand, or embracing. In such case, the village murubbi (elders) and matbor (leaders) scold him. There is seldom any case filed.'*

*(IDI, married young man, BA student, Mymensingh)*

Some girls complain about sexual harassment to their teachers, particularly when the perpetrator is also a student at the same school or college. However, the outcome depends on the social status of the perpetrator and his family. For this reason, teachers may not always be able to help a girl or woman experiencing GBV/IPV.

### **5.4.3 Multi-level influences on sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls**

#### **5.4.3.1 Individual influences**

Individual-level factors mentioned by informants as contributing to sexual harassment and violence against unmarried girls were: girl's age, male's age, and drug/alcohol use by males. Girls from grades 9-12 were described as particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment/violence. Young men aged 14-20 were believed to have strong sexual urges and fantasies, and because of their life stage, were thought more likely to perpetrate violence against unmarried girls.

*Interviewer: What types of girls are victimised most?*

*Faruk: School girl in grade 9-10 ... or studying higher secondary.*

*Interviewer: Are the girls from poor families or the girls from better-off families being more victimised?*

*Faruk: Girls from all kinds of families get victimised.*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, BA student, Mymensingh)*

*'At this age [14-20] boys happen to be in urhu urhu [flying mode]. They wear nice jeans pants and nice shirts and imagine themselves as heroes. They look possessed. At that time see a girl through a special lens. Every girl his eyes meet looks so beautiful to them.'*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, BA student and shopkeeper, Gazipur)*

#### **5.4.3.2 Household-level influences**

On the one hand, some respondents perceived that men from rich and poor households were perpetrators of sexual violence against unmarried girls, as the following shows:

*Interviewer: What types of boys do these [sexually harass or abuse girls]?*

*Respondent: Those who hang out in the street, or in a tea stall and nothing to do ... They may come from either poor families or wealthy families.*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, BA student, Mymensingh)*

On the other hand, it was perceived that men from wealthy households were more likely to perpetrate sexual harassment or violence towards girls from poor households due to the power imbalance between their respective families; in such cases, it becomes extremely difficult to stop the violence:

*'They [the perpetrators] are the spoiled boys from rich families. They have the money and the power. He gives bad proposal when a girl from a poor family walks by. That poor girl does not have the power to stop him ... Not all boys do this. Everyone is not the same. The son of a [UP] member, who has money, fame, and is well known, would dare to do this ... Now, suppose there is a fisherman boy, who does not care about his honour in the society, may also engage in this in the street. It is, however, not possible for boys like us who come from middle-class families.'*

*(IDI, married young man, BA student, Mymensingh)*

#### **5.4.3.3 Community-level influences**

At the individual and community levels, gender-inequitable attitudes persist about sexual harassment and violence against unmarried adolescent girls. Thus, men sometimes blame the girls themselves for causing such violence. This view is clearly articulated in the following quote.

*'You will find a common thread behind every rape – the perpetrator being subject to serious insult. These girls*

### Box 7: Rape, homicide and culture of impunity

A son of a rich and influential man in the locality used to harass a girl. The boy and his peers were addicted to drugs. The girl was from an extremely poor family and was an excellent student. Therefore, the community members financially supported her to continue her studies.

The boy proposed marriage to her family. They declined the proposal, wishing to let the girl study. The boy and his friends attacked the family, raping the girl and assaulting her and her mother and brother. The

girl and her mother died instantly; the severely injured brother survived, but developed mental health problems. The perpetrators also killed a female neighbour in their attempt to leave behind no witnesses.

However, one of the perpetrators left his cell phone at the crime scene, enabling the police to identify him. But the perpetrators had rich and influential fathers, who influenced the investigation by bribing the police. Initially, only two perpetrators were arrested, and soon received bail. No one was ever convicted of these crimes.

*may have hit him with a shoe, slapped him or spat on him in public. For example, a boy is standing in front of a girls' school. It is normal for the boys to engage in sexual harassment in front of the school. When a boy pulls the orhna (a piece of cloth covering breasts) or the scarf or her bag, she would either slap him hard or spit on him. Now, the boy was with his friends and all the students witnessed this. They saw that she had spit on him or heard her swear that she'd hit him with a shoe. Rape increases further for these reasons ... It increases, because the boy gets furious. Incidents like acid-throwing also occur for these reasons. The boys plan to spoil her looks. Some of them get fixed on establishing intimate relationship with her or on not letting her get married or on abusing her [in other ways].'*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, grade 12, army trainee, Mymensingh)*

Widespread social acceptance of VAWG, the culture of blaming girls for violence, and the reluctance of the community to punish the perpetrators due to their family status or connections – all these factors underlie sexual harassment/violence against unmarried adolescent girls, which ranges from non-severe to severe acts, including murder (see Box 7).

*'Actually, we have laws to punish them, but they are not implemented. So, if the boy is influential or his father is powerful, then initiatives for punishing him by the girl's side would not work ... Usually after 2-4 months, the incident [of violence] dhama chapa porey jaye (gets buried).'*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 11, student and tutor, Gazipur)*



# 6. Intimate partner violence – definitions, prevalence multi-level influences

This section draws directly on our qualitative research to illustrate the types of IPV and changes in perceived prevalence over time, providing further evidence of the multi-level influences on IPV.

## 6.1 Types of IPV and perceived prevalence

**Bou pitano** (wife-beating) is most commonly recognised as IPV in the study sites. Emotional and economic violence perpetrated by the husband were also considered as IPV. However, sexual violence within marriage was not categorised as IPV; when probed, it became clear that most study informants believed that marriage affords men unconditional and unlimited access to their wife's body. Thus, there appears to be no concept of sexual violence within marriage. Further discussion revealed that most men only exempted an unwilling wife from sex on the grounds of her being ill.

Men and women held different opinions about other scenarios of sexual IPV. A sense of sexual entitlement seems to lie at the core of men's beliefs about what constitutes sexual violence within marriage. Most men endorsed forcing sex on an unwilling wife. Even men who initially said it was unacceptable to force an unwilling wife to have sex ended up saying that she should be coerced into sex using seduction or threats. Only a couple of men recognised having sex with an unwilling wife as violence:

*'Suppose she is sick or she has some problems [indicating period]. Now, if he tries to force it, it'd be violence... There are hundreds of ways to convince a woman. For example, I can say, "bou, I have seen two girls in front of a shop. After seeing them, I am feeling the urge and I can't control it. I have to have it now. Now, if you refuse, I will go somewhere else." You can get many things if you spend 250 taka for a girl nowadays.'*

(FGD1, married men, Gazipur)

In contrast, most women recognised that forceful/coerced sex with their husband was a violation of their rights and most labelled this as a type of IPV:

*'Even if no one understands it, it is still a type of violence. This [sex] is a matter of mutual interest. If one is not willing and another one uses force, then it becomes violence.'*

(FGD7, married women, Gazipur)

Some definitions of IPV went beyond physical and sexual violence, with women in particular noting that controlling behaviours carried out by the husband that limited a wife's freedoms also constituted IPV.

The perceived rates of physical IPV in the study villages varied widely. While some male informants denied that there was any type of violence within the community, others reported extremely high rates of abuse of wives, with variation in type, severity and frequency. By contrast, none of the female informants denied that IPV existed in the community. Interestingly, despite almost all the male informants initially saying there was no IPV in the community, they went on to mention IPV at some point during the interview or discussion. It was also interesting to note that while previously it was perceived that mothers-in-law were the main people inflicting violence on wives, now it was husbands:

*'In the past, women were tortured by her mothers-in-law, but now they are tortured by the husbands'*

(FGD8, married women, Gazipur).

The same FGD participants also noted that this violence was pervasive, in all families.

Men's denial of IPV was clear from the in-depth interviews. In 17 IDIs with men, only one married man reported physically assaulting his wife and one unmarried man reported assaulting a girl due to her refusal of his proposal of a romantic relationship. Both reported using moderate physical violence (slapping). The married man talked about physically assaulting his wife as a way of disciplining her. He also mentioned assaulting her when he is annoyed with her and gets angry:

**Table 4: Acts of different types of IPV reported in in-depth interviews, Gazipur and Mymensingh**

Controlling behaviour	Emotional violence	Economic violence	Physical violence	Sexual violence
Depriving of food	Shouting	Demanding dowry	Slapping	Forced sex
Not providing treatment	Name calling	Not providing for the family	Punching	Imposing frequent sex demand
Not allowing to go out	Avoiding/ignoring	Not working	Kicking	Avoiding sex with wife
Not allowing to talk to men	Finding faults all the time	Not allowing wife to work	Hitting with object (stick, cane, bamboo, branch, wooden/ iron spatula, wooden stool and brick)	Admitting another man to <i>bashor ghor</i> (nuptial chamber/ bride-chamber) for putting to test her fidelity
Not allowing contact with own family	Making her beg forgiveness for something she did not do	Grabbing her earnings	Strangling/Chocking	-
Not allowing questions or complaints	Allowing others to abuse her	Grabbing her property (i.e., land and shops)	Stabbing	-
Locking up	Suspicion and false accusation of varying nature (infidelity, theft, not doing household chores, etc)	-	-	-
Throwing out of house or not letting in	Not providing proper care during pregnancy and after delivery	-	-	-
Tying up	Severe child abuse (beating, chocking)	-	-	-
Leaving naked and tied up in a water tank for 2 days	Deception of various types (i.e., hiding information about previous marriage, extramarital relationship, paid sex, etc)	-	-	-
Forcing abortion	Pressure for divorce	-	-	-
Depriving custody of breastfed child	Threats of killing	-	-	-
-	Disappearing without any information	-	-	-

*‘Naturally, I have to sometimes shashon [discipline] her... I have laid hands on her four or five times at most. Sometimes our child cries and screams. She does not remain alert. I have to wake her up and tell her that he has urinated and that she needs to breastfeed him. Sometimes I criticise her for her lacking in carrying out chores. I would sometimes slap her once or twice if I get angry.’*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 10, business, Mymensingh)*

Six IDIs with female survivors of IPV in the study villages revealed a large number of different types of violence perpetrated by men (see Table 4). Acts of controlling

behaviour included depriving wives of basic needs such as food and health care; not allowing questions and comments; restricting communication with other men, natal family, and neighbours; and throwing the wife out of the house/ locking her up. Most survivors mentioned common acts of emotional violence, which included scolding, screaming, and calling names, finding fault all the time, and suspicions of infidelity. Acts of economic violence included not providing for the family, demanding dowry, demanding money for gambling, drugs or alcohol, demanding the wife’s salary, claiming ownership of her assets, etc.

The range of acts of physical aggression captures moderate to extremely severe acts, as the quote below illustrate. **Chorh-thappor** or **thabor** or **thabrha** (slapping)

was the most commonly mentioned act of physical IPV. Survivors also mentioned acts of severe violence such as punching, hitting with a heavy object, kicking, dragging by hair, burning, stabbing, strangling, attempt to hang, and killing.

*Participant 1: [Wife] Beating is prevalent. It [actually] corrects women. [Wife] Beating starts with slapping.*

*Participant 2: They [men] beat so hard that their hands get swollen.*

*Participant 3: Yes, slapping is minor. When it gets serious, and a lot of swearing is exchanged then they [men] would grab a stick.*

*Participant 1: There is no better way of beating than with sticks.*

*(FGD5, married men, Mymensingh)*

*‘Look, he hit her in the waist with a stick and her bone broke. Her blood was clotted... Now, she can’t move her legs and waist. She cannot go out. She screams throughout the night. She screams the whole day. How ill-fated we are! Don’t you see how skinny she is?’*

*(IGT, grandmother, illiterate, Mymensingh)*

## 6.2 Perceived change over time in IPV

Most informants believed that IPV in general – and physical IPV in particular (including its severity) – have reduced over time. They cited varied reasons for this, including: poverty reduction; increased education (of boys and girls); greater employment opportunities for women; laws on divorce, dowry, child marriage and VAWG; increasing number of nuclear families; increase in age at marriage; NGO programmes; greater mobility of women; and greater exposure to mass media and new technology. Moreover, these changes are also believed to be creating a different culture where perpetration of IPV is linked to damaging a man’s *ijjat* or *maan-shomman*. This is linked to improved communication between spouses and greater readiness to compromise, which appears to be reflected in reduced perpetration of IPV in public.

The quotes below highlight that physical IPV is less severe now; women have the option of divorce and have gained more courage in protesting against IPV.

*Participant 1: When we were young, we saw our fathers beat our mothers almost to death if she was at fault. Our mothers did not protest out of fear ... They used to stay in the relationship and they are still in that relationship...*

*Participant 2: Now, they may give a slap or two only.*

*Participant 1: If the situation were the same as in the past, 80% of the women wouldn’t stay in that marriage.*

*(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)*

Household poverty is a widely recognised underlying factor for marital conflict. Therefore, poverty reduction in Bangladesh was identified as a major factor in reducing IPV. This happened particularly due to reduction of violence around scarcity in the family.

*‘The country is developing day by day. There was no law before; and the laws were not strict before.’*

*‘Everyone has rice. There was no aubhab (scarcity) like before. There was severe poverty before. Now, poverty has reduced. There were lower employment opportunities before. Now, employment is available everywhere.’*

*‘Greater problems accompany poverty. There is an appropriate saying: Scarcity affects human character.’*

*(FGD5, married men, Mymensingh)*

Education is also regarded as having played a critical role in reducing IPV. People believe that increased education (for girls and boys), alongside poverty reduction, has directly and indirectly helped to reduce violence.

*‘People are more educated now. Their conventional thinking and mentality have changed. Perhaps the previous generation did not have that much exposure to education. Now the days have changed. So, I think people have been inspired by the change. Maltreatment [of wives] or spousal conflict around earning and other things have decreased a lot.’*

*(IGT, daughter, G-11, student, Mymensingh)*

Informants also claimed that IPV has reduced even among uneducated men, who have been influenced by educated people: *‘Now many husbands have learnt from observing those who were educated. So, they help out their wives’* (FGD10, married women, Mymensingh).

According to study respondents, women’s employment and their important contribution to household income has helped tackle gender inequality within the marital relationship – a core determinant of IPV – and thus resulted in a reduction of IPV.

*‘What I observe is that everything is okay if the husband and the wife are equal. Suppose my husband does a job and so do I. Then my husband would not be able to find fault with me and I would not be able to find fault with him either. This is because he has come home after a day’s job and so have I, do you understand? Now, quarrels and tortures are for people like us who*

don't hold a job and unable to earn even ten taka for the family. So, they torture us. Now if we ... ask for something he would not buy it the first time. If we ask for it the second time, he wouldn't buy it either. There would be **kotha katakati** [verbal dispute] if I ask for it again. Then he would get angry.'

(IGT, mother, G-2, Mymensingh)

Most of the female informants believed that working women's empowerment is recognised by their spouses, who have become more cooperative and now share household chores:

'The wives with money master more power. In those families, husbands tend to do as the wives wish. Many of [these] husbands look after the children when the wives are at work. [These men] are good cook as well.'

(FGD 8, married women, Gazipur)

Although child marriage was highly prevalent in the study villages, informants felt that a reduction in very early child marriage has reduced IPV. It was also felt that IPV has reduced with the rise of the nuclear family unit, since co-residence with in-laws created many pressures and fuelled tensions.

A combination of all these factors – poverty reduction, increased levels of education, greater employment opportunities for women, alongside state policies promoting gender equality and addressing VAWG, as well as NGO programmes and the influence of the media and other channels of communication – has led to a shift in the culture around how men and women interact within marriage. Thus, in contrast to the past, spouses now communicate more and try to resolve problems through discussion and compromise, which has in turn contributed to a reduction in IPV. The following quotes highlight some of these changes, though notably they confirm that IPV does persist:

'... in my father's generation the men used to ask a few questions before they started hitting. Verbal dispute used to lead to beating. In my generation, physical violence occurs only if the dispute drags on for a long time.'

(IDI, married young man, grade 10, migrant worker, Gazipur)

'Now, people try to understand the situation and the problems. They compromise in a few things and sometime they resolve problems through discussion. Now, beating is not at the level it was in the past anymore. It has reduced a lot compared to the past. In the past, people used to beat their wife in the street. They'd

demand to know "Why did you do this in this way or why did you do this in that way?" Then they'd grab a stick and start beating. Violence used to be perpetrated in this way. Now, these things are not there. Now whatever is happening is happening **ghoro boiya** [inside the house].'

(FGD1, married men, Gazipur)

## 6.3 Multi-level influences on IPV

Data from this study show that different factors at individual, household / family, community, societal and global levels contribute to IPV either directly or in interaction with other factors.

### 6.3.1 Individual-level influences

Most prominent among the individual factors driving perpetration of IPV seem to be: adverse childhood experience (men); low level of education (men and women); child marriage; male unemployment; man's involvement in gambling or substance abuse; man's involvement in extramarital relationship/sex; and wife engaged in employment.

#### 6.3.1.1 Adverse childhood experience

Informants stated that IPV is a learned behaviour and as such, a boy that witnesses his father abuse his mother is quite likely to become a perpetrator of IPV in adulthood:

'Children will learn from their childhood whatever their parents do ... If we continue verbal abuse, beatings, then our children will learn that. It is like that. Do you understand? They will learn whatever they watch from the beginning.'

(IGT, mother, grade 2, Mymensingh)

'... I think it [the environment around the development of adolescents] does [affect them], because they would learn whatever they see in that age. If they see bad things in their family, they will learn that. He'd argue that his elder brother or his uncle have behaved that way, why wouldn't he? ... This becomes a tradition. Many people turn out like that. There are, however, many who think even if my uncles behaved that way, I won't. He may think, "When I become a father I won't treat my wife the way my father treated my mother." He might try to refrain from abusing ...'

(IGT, daughter, grade 11, student, Mymensingh)

#### 6.3.1.2 Low level of education (both spouses)

It is generally believed that low or no education is a risk factor for IPV:

*'It [wife-beating] is generally seen in uneducated families or families where the husband is uneducated, the wife is uneducated and the parents-in-law are uneducated.'*

*(IGT, son, completed Hafezi (Quran memorization), student, Mymensingh).*

Similarly, referring to physical IPV and throwing the wife out of a room if she refuses sex, women over 25 were in agreement that:

*'the husbands who are educated usually don't do these things [violence].'*

*(FGD 10, married women, Mymensingh)*

### 6.3.1.3 Child marriage

There was consensus among women that child marriage is a precursor of IPV. They explained that a young girl is not ready for marriage and the enormous expectations of a **bou**, including performing all the household chores, taking care of the husband's family, and fulfilling his sexual demands. The mismatch between a girl's age, social skills and level of maturity on the one hand, and the expectations of a **bou**, gives rise to IPV:

*'When a girl gets married at an early age, they jamai chinena [don't understand sex], they can't do household chores – that's when the mother-in-law and the husband start abusing her.'*

*(FGD6, married women, Gazipur)*

One of the female focus group participants gave a concrete example of IPV that she experienced herself as a child bride. Her perceived shortcomings were met with emotional violence by the husband and mother-in-law. She was scolded and humiliated. In order to discipline her, the in-laws used to gather all the family members around. It was humiliation enough for her and she did not even care to elaborate what went on in these gatherings. She described her predicaments as a child bride (see box 8).

### 6.3.1.4 Women's employment

The increased opportunities for women's employment in the study villages was thought to influence IPV, as men can feel threatened by their wife earning an income, perceiving this as the wife challenging their superior role as the family breadwinner. A wife going out to work is also perceived to challenge men's role as the controller of female sexuality who can keep women at home and in **purdah**:

*'... this [marriage breakdown] has increased a lot due to female employment in the garment factories and emergence of mobile phones.'*

### Box 8: A child bride

*'Mine was a child marriage too. I was not of age when I got married. I could not finish my study because of my early marriage. When I came to this house, I was very young. I didn't know what a family is about. I didn't know how to handle a family, how to work, even the concept of a husband was not quite clear to me [indicating sex]. I didn't know anything ... I didn't do much at my father's house. After finishing my meal, I didn't even wash my plate ... I have learned all this after coming to my in-laws' house. My mother-in-law and husband used to scold at me a lot when I made any mistake. They used to quarrel with me a lot. What else did they do? They used to call my parents and brothers. They called the whole family and relatives including my maternal grandmother, maternal uncle, maternal uncle's wife, maternal aunt – everyone [for complaining about me]. I didn't understand things at that time. Now I have grown up, now I know which mistake would cost me what. So I don't make any mistakes now.'*

*(FGD7, married women, Gazipur)*

*(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)*

### 6.3.1.5 Gambling, drug and alcohol use

Gambling, drug and alcohol use have become widespread social problems in parts of Bangladesh in recent years, including in Gazipur, where informants suggested that substance abuse is so common that IPV occurs more for this reason than over dowry demands. It was reported that demand for money for such purposes often leads to IPV and contributes to household tensions (with some men spending money needed for household expenses on drugs or alcohol, for example). Some men demand that their wife brings money from her natal home to cover the cost of their addiction and resort to violence (emotional and physical) if she does not. Some also sell household assets.

*'It seems that people are more drug addicted in this village, drug-addicted husbands torture their wives more.'*

*'They [the addicts] will ask their wives and parents whether they would give them money. If they do not, the addicts will break household objects.'*

*'Drug-addicted people go crazy over money and beat their wives.'*

*(FGD8, married women, Gazipur)*

Gambling, alcohol and drug use among young men have also become major problems in one of the study villages in Mymensingh. In some instances, their families try to resolve the problem by marrying the boys young. Thus,



marriages are arranged for very young adolescents, even at age 12-14. However, experience shows that the boys soon get bored with their wives, with reports that they severely abuse them and threaten them with murder to drive the wife away. When they succeed, the young men marry again and the same story repeats itself.

### 6.3.1.6 Extramarital relationship

Husbands engaging in extramarital affairs often perpetrate violence against their wives. As a female FGD participant explained:

*‘Wife abuse may occur in the situation when the husband has an intimate relationship with another woman. If the wife comes to know about this, there will be problem between the couple ... When the wife comes to know about the affair, the husband will definitely get angry and then beat her out of anger.’*

(FGD1, married men, Gazipur)

## 6.3.2 Family / household-level influences

Family or household level factors that are perceived to mainly contribute to IPV are poverty, gender inequitable and violence condoning attitudes of the marital and natal families, and lack of support from natal family.

### 6.3.2.1 Poverty, husband’s unemployment/irregular employment

Household poverty remains a risk factor for IPV, driven by marital stress and tensions over scarce resources.

*Participant 1: Those who are poor become hot tempered when they do not have money.*

*Participant 2: They don’t work regularly. So they don’t get money. Then they torture wives.*

(FGD11, married women, Mymensingh)

### 6.3.2.2 Gender-inequitable attitudes of natal family and IPV

Attitudes held by members of the marital and natal family that reinforce gender inequality and condone violence also help perpetuate IPV. As we have already seen in the previous section, in-laws not only hold attitudes that condone violence towards daughters-in-law but also sometimes instigate IPV themselves. Attitudes of the natal family are also important, and as some women explained, due to the social acceptability of IPV, even a woman’s natal family see no reason to protest when their daughter experiences IPV (see box 9).

We did, however, find some cases where the parents support their daughter if she experiences IPV and try to end it. There are also cases when parents bring their daughter home if they see no other way to stop the

## Box 9: Natal family attitudes towards daughters and IPV

A girl or young woman’s own family usually prepare her to tolerate IPV upon marriage and even violence by her in-laws. If the daughter returns to them after experiencing IPV, they generally try to persuade her to go back to her marital home to save the marriage and to uphold her own and her family’s honour.

*‘She goes to her parents at first [when facing IPV]. The village-dwelling parents, however, do not want to get involved in trouble. They try to convince their daughter that marriage is always like that and she should try to adjust with it. They say such things and stroke their daughter’s head.’*

(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

*‘There are women who try to bear the torture, thinking that if they go back to their mothers, the mothers would have to beg more to provide for her or else they’d have to marry them again. So, it is better to put up with the kil-guta [punching and poking] rather than going back and making mother suffer more.’*

(FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)

violence. Other evidence suggests that the absence of a parent (especially a father) can make things worse:

*‘You will see that a woman who doesn’t have a father, but has a mother, I mean, an orphan, gets tortured more. Why? When a daughter has a father, it is easy for him to go either to her father-in-law or her husband and demand to know the reason for torturing his daughter.’*

*‘Often times, if a daughter has a father, he does not let her go back to her marital home in case of torture.’*

*‘A mother can’t do much about these things [without a father]. People won’t consider it good, if a mother goes to her daughter’s marital home [with a complaint]. That is why men think that [in the absence of father-in-law] even if he maira-kaita phalaileo [beats her and cuts her], there is no one to come to rescue her.’*

(FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)

## 6.3.3 Community-level influences

Numerous community-level factors contribute to IPV, including violence within the community or peer groups, exogamous marriages, attitudes that condone violence and reinforce gender inequality, impunity of perpetrators, and negative attitudes towards divorced women.

### 6.3.3.1 Violence within the community and/or peer group

Just as men learn to copy violent behaviour they may have witnessed within their own family, they also learn to copy

violence they see within the community. Thus, men from communities characterised by widespread violence are more likely to learn and practise violent behaviour. This was explained by an unmarried adolescent from Mymensingh:

*‘Look, we usually learn by seeing what the others do. There are a lot of people in this locality who follow others. Many people in this locality are experts in beating their wives. Many learn from them ... They learn how to beat a wife, pulling her hair.’*

*(IDI, unmarried young man, grade 12, army trainee, Mymensingh)*

In rural Bangladesh, most marriages follow the convention of village exogamy, so a woman’s marital home is usually located in a different village from her natal family, which means she is cut off from her own support network. She enters an environment where her husband and her marital family enjoy privileged status compared to her and her natal family. Should the girl’s family seek redress from the marital family or village, the husband and his family get the upper hand, and the woman is usually blamed. Thus it is common that suggestions or advice as to how to smooth things over are given to the victim rather than the perpetrator, and community elders usually end up blaming the victim too. As will be seen in section 7.2.3, the informal courts (*shalish*) typically take the side of boys / men in instances of IPV.

As also discussed in section 5.1.4, rigid gender norms around marriage and divorce dictate that daughters fulfil their duty to their parents by sustaining the marriage, bearing children, and upholding the family’s good reputation. Thus, a divorced woman is perceived to jeopardise her own and her family’s honour. She is usually blamed and criticised for marriage breakdown and treated badly by the community.

*‘If a woman leaves her husband for his mistakes, people start to blame her for that. There is such negative attitude towards women. This is why women suffer.’*

*‘What a woman from a poor family would do? She thinks that her parents struggled a lot to arrange her marriage. She thinks, “if I tell them about the violence how can they bear it?” They can’t even maintain their own family, how would they feed an extra mouth? People would talk as well! How can I leave [the marriage]? That’s why she decides to spend her life putting up with the violence.’*

*‘Women neither get shelter in their parent’s house nor in their husband’s house. That’s why they decide to have patience [to continue the relationship].’*

*(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)*

### 6.3.4 Societal-level influences

A number of societal-level factors are also seen to contribute to IPV, including increasing employment of women (as migrants as well as local workers), equal rights to divorce, and NGO programmes. Men perceive all of these developments as being disadvantageous to them, and often result in a strong desire on their part to introduce harsh punishment for these things, which are interpreted as women under their control transgressing gender norms.

#### 6.3.4.1 Perceived male disadvantage labelled as violence against men

Male informants expressed strong resentment about loss of power and control over women, family and community, and a great urge to manifest their power and control through imposing more rigid restrictions and using more violence against women, justifying their actions (intended or actual) by referring to interpretations of Islam. At the core of men’s frustration lie three things: (1) a sense of betrayal by the state, perceiving policies to favour women and discriminate against men; (2) being bypassed by NGO initiatives that target women; and (3) discrimination in the domestic as well as global labour market. Men labelled this perceived male disadvantage as violence against men.

Although gender equality was enshrined in the Constitution many decades ago, people in our rural study villages only learned of this in the mid-1990s through TV, which had become commonplace in rural areas by then. Thus, there is a misperception that the government made this declaration relatively recently, which has given rise to considerable resentment among men, who suggest that this is responsible for many of the changes taking place in the attitudes and practices of women and institutions. They believe that this policy of gender equality has in fact resulted in men being devalued in relation to women.

*‘What the [gender] equal rights policy achieved is that while in the past, women used to value their husbands, they don’t do it anymore.’*

*(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)*

Men perceive that women are now treated better than men by formal institutions and services such as the police and the courts.

*‘It [declaration of gender equality] took place in 1995. I don’t understand date and time much. Since 1994, I have seen her going to the police station and when she goes there, the policemen offer her chair and make men leave their seat.’*

*(FGD1, married men, Gazipur)*



There is also resentment of the state policy of promoting female education through a secondary school stipend programme, which has helped improve gender gaps in primary and secondary education over time.

*'[The boys] remain unemployed after matriculation [secondary school]. They cannot study any farther. They don't have the money and their father can't afford to pay [for education]. The girls get scholarship and they continue.'*

(FGD4, married men, Gazipur)

### 6.3.4.2 Female employment opportunities

The increase in employment opportunities for women in recent years has also caused resentment among some men, who perceive it as contributing to the power imbalance by empowering women and disempowering men. Some men even went so far as to suggest that working women were 'male abusers'.

*'Earlier men used to hold power. So, they used to beat women. Now that women have the power they order the men, "Come and listen to what I say [using tui form of address]." If the outcome of the discussion is not to her liking she'd give him a couple of slaps and call him names.'*

*'This you'll find in 6 to 7 households out of 10 – i.e., the household where women are employed ... [This is because the woman is earning income and the man is cooking for feeding her.] Thus, the woman has turned into a man.'*

(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)

*'Yes, equal rights have been given. When a man earns he has to give it to his wife, but if a woman earns she doesn't have to give it to her husband – this does not reflect equal rights.'*

(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)

According to men, women are also favoured when it comes to overseas employment. Also, the remittances are much higher from a female overseas migrant worker than from a male worker. Men attribute this difference in size of remittance to differences in the nature of male and female employment overseas. Men claim that most female migrant workers engage in sex work abroad, bringing in a much higher income.

*'Suppose a woman left for overseas work ... They usually earn 40,000 to 50,000 taka [per month]. She becomes healthy and beautiful. She starts scolding her husband. She then gets involved in intimate relationship with big shots and leaves the marriage.'*

(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)

### Box 10: Equal rights to divorce – a double-edged sword for women?

Interestingly, concrete examples from the study sites suggest that even if a man initiates divorce, the wife rarely receives due compensation. This is because women can rarely access legal services. So, these men resort to extreme IPV hoping to drive the wife away without filing a divorce request. Such divorce ends up being negotiated by leaders of the man's village, where he usually possesses greater negotiating power. When the marital village gets involved in negotiating a divorce, in the best-case scenario, the woman receives the dowry her family paid and nothing more. The following quote describes how a woman was deprived of reimbursement of the dowry her family paid when she married.

*'A girl from my neighbouring house was married off with a dowry of 40,000 taka ... Her husband is addicted to drugs and he does not work. He just lies around all day long. If he goes to work one day, he stays home for four. Food was always scarce in the household.'*

*'Her husband and her in-laws abused her in many ways. None of the members of her husband's family spared her. The girl went back to her mother when she could take it no more ...'*

*'Her husband filed a case against her and they were separated ... Because she was poor she got nothing, not even the dowry money her parents paid her husband.'*

(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

### 6.3.4.3 Equal rights to divorce

The divorce law has become a double-edged sword. As mentioned in section 5.1.4, the law does not recognise verbal **talak**, which was until recently widespread in Bangladesh and provided an easy way out of marriage for men, leaving them with no liabilities. Legally, a man now has to pay his wife **kabin** and maintenance upon divorce. In theory, it allows women to escape an abusive relationship and avoid destitution, though the reality is often different (see box 10).

Granting women equal rights to divorce and the consequent rise in the number of divorces initiated by women were repeatedly mentioned by male informants as a major problem. This change is perceived by men as resulting in (unjustified) empowerment of women and divorce settlements that are against them in favour of the woman. Men pointed out the perceived injustice of financial burden in a divorce initiated by a wife, as the husband has to pay the wife the amount committed as dower in the **kabinnama**. Moreover, in such case, a man has to pay maintenance funds for his wife and children, while women do not bear any financial responsibilities if they initiate divorce.

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*‘Men do not get compensation for divorce [by a wife]. This is violence against men. If a man gives divorce then the **shomaj** [leaders representing the community] get together and as per the **Kabinnama** [marriage contract] arrange payment of the dower money [to the wife]. A joint decision is taken to provide [the wife] alimony for six months.’*

*(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)*

#### **6.3.4.4 NGO programmes**

Although very few NGOs were operating in the study villages, many men regard them as playing a very negative role in their community. (However, conversely, NGOs were also identified as norm setters – see section 7.4). Men believe that NGO education programmes are responsible for a reduction in enrolment in **madrassas** and **maktabs**, which

teach children Arabic, the Quran, and Islamic ways of life, and where female students are expected to observe **purdah**.

*Participant 1: People are forgetting Arabic day-by-day. At present, almost 80% of people can't read Arabic. 80% of people know nothing about it.*

*Participant 2: This is because they are not sent to **maktab** in the morning. When A [pseudonym of an NGO] came here, they started an education programme in the morning. It did not include Arabic; rather it included English, Maths, and other subjects. It disrupted Arabic lessons. Thus, people stopped learning Arabic. Nowadays, people are busy with the success and failure of their children in the job market; they are not concerned about other things.’*

*(FGD1, married men, Gazipur)*

# 7. Policy and responses to IPV

This section looks at the national policy framework for addressing GBV and IPV in Bangladesh, focusing on the government's multi-sectoral programme, which has established a range of services for survivors of GBV/IPV. It then describes the broad response environment including medical responses as well as the formal and informal protection mechanisms, focusing on areas that could play a greater role in preventing IPV and potential entry points for programming. It ends by discussing the key role of 'norm setters' – the state, NGOs, media and other communications channels, and working women (and, in some cases, their husbands/partners), also touching on the role of religion and religious leaders.

## 7.1 Policy framework and government multi-sectoral programme

### 7.1.1 Existing policy framework to address GBV and IPV

As noted earlier, the policy framework in Bangladesh encompasses a number of conventions and laws on violence against women (see Box 1, section 4.1). According to Naripokkho, a women's activist NGO engaged in research and advocacy on violence against women, the national law recognises 30 different types of violence, including dowry-related violence, acid attacks and abduction. However, many KIIs considered the law inadequate, due to a range of issues from use of language and terminology to lack of enforcement.

In terms of language, for example, prevailing gender norms even influence terminology used to describe violence against women, such as 'eve-teasing'. As the gender policy adviser of a UN agency in Dhaka (KII22) explained:

*'Within the last couple of years the women's lawyers association went to court to have the terminology "eve-teasing" changed – a term which already implies that a woman is bringing it on herself. However, eve-teasing is still widely used.' Other biased terminology includes the concept of 'bad girl', whereby boys identify a bad girl according to her behaviour and clothes (e.g. girls not wearing a head scarf).'*

(KII BRAC-Centre for Development)

Biased interpretation of what constitutes a crime is also a problem. For instance, the law does not recognise rape within marital relationships as a crime unless the wife is younger than 13. Naripokkho also stressed that mental torture (a term used very often by informants to describe violence within the household) or emotional violence are also not considered a crime, presumably because such cases are difficult to prove. Another key informant (KII38 CLS) also pointed out violence between partners who are not married is also not recognised:

*'People don't talk about IPV – i.e. violence between non-married partners. It is difficult to seek any legal support because it is not recognised.'*

Many informants also commented that laws are not strongly enforced, partly due to lack of awareness of policies by service providers. According to a representative from the international NGO, CARE, [KII30 CARE], there is a lack of institutional awareness of national legislation on GBV and IPV. According to BRAC, the current policy framework is also inadequate because violence occurs across all sectors, and other policies (e.g. on education or industry) should also address GBV/IPV.

Naripokkho further stressed that the law is ineffective and inadequate as it *'doesn't help survivors and does not provide information on the implementation of procedures'*, citing the reluctance of police at village level to apply the law properly.

### 7.1.2 Multi-sectoral programme

The Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women implemented jointly by the Bangladesh government and Denmark aims to develop a holistic and multidisciplinary approach to tackle GBV. Created in 2000 (with the third phase ending in 2016), and led by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), working with nine other ministries and non-government agencies, the programme focuses on:

- improving and consolidating integrated services related to VAW;
- increasing awareness on VAW and related public services among relevant institutions and the public;
- developing institutional capacities of MoWCA and

key government agencies to improve inter-ministerial coordination and action on VAW;

- achieving targeted legal and procedural reforms to enhance prevention and redress for cases of VAW / formulation of what constitutes as VAW.

The programme has more than 700 staff and includes 20 regional trauma centres, free telephone helplines, and more than 30 **one-stop crisis centres (OCCs)** in Dhaka and other districts, which provide legal, medical and psychological support to victims of GBV (see also section 7.2.1). Since 2009, OCCs have supported 8,653 women and children (MoWCA website). While 80%-90% of victims are referred from hospitals and NGOs, 10% self-refer. After assessing the severity of the case, the OCC helps file a case to the police if the victim is willing and/or refers them to a shelter (see section 7.2.2.2).

The programme has also set up a free telephone **helpline** service that connects callers to police and women's representative units in their district and at upazila level. Those staffing the helplines are mostly women, university-qualified and with dedicated training. All calls are recorded and to date more than 71,000 women have benefited from the helpline service.

**Violence prevention committees** have also been set up at UP, sub-district (upazila) and district levels. They comprise police officers, chairmen and village elders amongst other people; the UNDP has been helping to make these committees functional in 7 districts and 44 unions (under Dhaka, Nauvshindi) (KII37).

A proposed fourth phase of the multi-sectoral programme aims to set up nine more OCCs in Dhaka and eight more trauma centres, coordinated by the national trauma centre (see also section 7.2.1). It also plans to address trafficking (common in border areas and traffic flux towards India, Nepal and China through Myanmar) and child marriage.

### 7.1.2 Limitations of existing policy framework

One of the limitations of multi-sectoral models in general is a lack of attention to prevention. This appears to be the case in Bangladesh too, with Naripokkho (among others) highlighting that the government's approach focuses on responding to rather than preventing VAWG. Prevention work implies addressing the root causes of GBV, which sometimes go beyond addressing unequal gender relations. In Bangladesh, unemployment, poverty/scarcity of resources and male drug addiction have all been cited as risk factors of violence (see also 6.3.1.5). For example, one male respondent from Gazipur (KII1) explained that:

*'The dominant reason behind continuation of violence against women is drug addiction. Eradicating drug abuse... would greatly reduce violence against women. The government should become proactive in this regard.'*  
To tackle the variety of different but connected risk

factors requires greater efforts for a cross-sectoral, coordinated and decentralised approach.

Despite a supportive policy framework and the provision of decentralised services at district level, there seems to be a disconnect between government action and the services needed locally. Village arbitration systems (see section 7.2.3.1) still play a crucial role in people's lives, illustrating that powerful and enduring traditional norms and hierarchies still hold sway over the formal institutions tasked with protecting citizens' rights. According to one male representative of BRAC in Mymensingh (KII16), though government initiatives exist, they are not well advertised or well known by people. *'Union council [UP] has the power to do something about it, but they do not take any effective steps in this regard, they are too busy with themselves. Most government organisations and NGOs work with post-VAW and post-IPV situations. No one is effectively raising awareness beforehand to prevent VAW/IPV.'* In a similar vein, one government representative (MoWCA, KII24) considered it the responsibility of NGOs to inform people. *'People have the phones [but] people don't know about the number [speaking about the hotline] and facilities. In rural areas, people cannot remember many numbers or names of NGOs.'*

### 7.1.3 Punishment for perpetrators of GBV/IPV

Despite the raft of laws and legislation, enforcement remains weak and offenders often receive minor punishments if at all. According to study respondents, there are two reasons for this: the fact that IPV is considered a private matter and therefore is rarely reported in the first place; and violence perpetrated by a husband being socially acceptable.

According to one representative from a UN agency (KII25 UNFPA):

*'[The] policy and legal framework is adequate but the trouble is the implementation. The legal framework only talks about taking action against the perpetrators but when you don't have any legal action against those... to ensure prevention of violence. That kind of punishment should be there for local authorities but it is not there.'*

In fact, four key informants suggested that one way to reduce violence would be to develop stricter laws to punish perpetrators and/or enforce existing punishments more effectively.

The level of impunity for perpetrators of violence was illustrated by informants at government and local levels who again emphasised that abusing women and children is the norm, and is socially acceptable. One coordinator of women's empowerment working at CARE (KII30 CARE) explained that *'Men always try in justifying their act... "Yes, I am the husband, she is not obeying me, she can't provide me with food on time, she is neglecting her children, she is not performing her household*

*responsibilities properly, she does not gratify my physical needs...” Thousands of things to justify wife-beating.’*

For one representative of a donor agency in Dhaka (KII28 DFID), implementation of laws is crucial to address gendered norms that continue to discriminate against girls and women and put them at risk of violence:

*‘There needs to be a sense of responsibility. There is a sense of impunity in this country. There needs to be an accountable system put in place ... There are good laws but the implementation is weak, rates of conviction are low. Women don’t come forward or they back down later. It takes a long time to convict perpetrators.’*

According to another informant (KII27 UN Women), conviction rates are very low because judicial actors (judges, magistrates at district level, police, lawyers) are not aware of the policies and enforcement is not effective. This lack of enforcement was highlighted at district level too. One man from Gazipur (KII1) explained that *‘Even though there are laws to protect women from violence, often they are not properly enforced. For that reason, a victim of violence or her family does not usually seek support from the law enforcement agencies.’*

These findings on impunity echo the conclusions of a BRAC/UNDP report (Naznin and Sharmin, 2015), which found that the conviction rate under the *Nari-o-Sishu Nirjatan Daman Ain 2000* is extremely low. In addition to the reasons already given, others include issues with legal technicalities, filing of false cases, framing of charges under inappropriate sections of the law, weak police investigations, out-of-court settlements, and case backlog.

Finally, as pointed out by the We Can Campaign coordinator [KII28], laws do not change people’s mindset:

*‘My friends who have a PhD, who are working for women’s rights, when they are going to marry they will say, they don’t want women like my type because it will create problems in the family’.*

## 7.2 Response to GBV/IPV

### 7.2.1 Medical treatment, healthcare and psychosocial support for survivors

At the forefront of the response to GBV/IPV is the provision of medical services. The OCCs (part of the multi-sectoral programme, see section 7.1.2) are a major component of the government’s response. Eight OCCs have been set up within the Medical College Hospitals in Dhaka and in other districts, providing all necessary services for victims of violence free of charge and in one place. Each OCC is staffed by medical officers, nurses, a social welfare officer, police officer, counsellor, lawyer, and maintenance and administration staff.

Combining service provision in one place helps survivors

not only access healthcare but also to go through the medico-legal process of reporting a case. For instance, when a rape takes place, any person may report it to the Officer-in-Charge at the police station, and this report will be recorded in a First Information Report. The Officer-in-Charge then designates an Investigating Officer who must make sure the complainant is medically examined by an authorised medical officer within 24 hours of the incident. Hence, the OCC can help overcome time delays and support victims to prepare the paperwork needed (putting together the order of the court, pictures, consent form, medico-legal report form, etc.). However, medical examination facilities, which are vital to support a case in court, are mostly only available at district level and not at upazila level.

NGOs have also been active in providing healthcare services for survivors of GBV/IPV. Thus, for instance, one of Naripokkho’s recent projects includes the third phase of a Women Friendly Hospital Initiative, which involves creating and implementing a protocol for management of VAW cases in government hospitals. That project is now being run by the government and funded by UNICEF in a number of district hospitals, all of which now have violence against women service centres.

The provision of healthcare and the proximity of other basic services for survivors of GBV differ between rural and urban areas. According to a coordinator from CARE, women in urban areas have easier access to legal systems or medical care, whereas such services are much more limited in rural areas. The lack of transportation and women’s limited mobility in rural areas also restrict their ability to access support services. One female interviewee from Mymensingh (KII21) explained that in her area, there is only one community health promoter (BRAC staff member) who works only with pregnant women. She, herself, acts as a community health promoter working for icddr,b, but there is no other organisation working to prevent VAW in this area because of *‘the backward and inconvenient commute system of the area. Even no chairman visits this area, thus there is no development here.’*

#### 7.2.1.1 Counselling and psychosocial support

As part of the government’s Multi-Sectoral Programme, a National Trauma Counselling Centre was set up in Dhaka during its second phase (2008-2011) to provide mental health support to women and children who had experienced violence. However, very few informants mentioned this centre as a resource for survivors; indeed, only 33 clients were listed as patients between January and April 2016.

A National Helpline Centre offering a free telephone helpline was also set up to help women and children who have experienced violence. The helpline informs callers about their rights, gives them legal information and can refer them to relevant services. Since 2012, the number of calls to the helpline has increased dramatically, from less than 5,000 to more than 90,000 in 2016 (see Table 5).



**Table 5: Calls to telephone helpline (part of the Multi-Sectoral Programme) by year and type of assistance required**

Types of services	June- Dec 12	2013	2014	2015	Jan-Oct. 2016	Total
Medical facilities	103	101	394	356	260	1,214
Counselling	174	156	760	453	912	2,455
Police assistance	263	257	713	1,381	3,390	6,094
Legal help	1,615	1,420	2,726	3,163	6,844	15,768
Information	1,784	9,039	36,927	65,028	77,934	192,912
Others	885	1,604	2,965	3,308	4,048	12,810
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,824</b>	<b>12,577</b>	<b>44,485</b>	<b>73,689</b>	<b>93,388</b>	<b>231,253</b>

Source: Mo WCA website [www.mspvaw.gov.bd/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=191&cmp=1&adfile=0](http://www.mspvaw.gov.bd/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=191&cmp=1&adfile=0)

## 7.2.2 Protection

### 7.2.2.1 Informal means of protection in rural and urban settings

The first means of protecting victims of violence is the role played by the woman or girl's immediate relatives and neighbours. This can vary depending on the geographical location though, with some key informants highlighting the lack of support for women in urban areas compared with rural villages. As one donor representative based in Dhaka (KII DFID) noted, there is a 'huge difference between urban and rural areas, women are more vulnerable to violence in slums. In rural settings, there are social settings, people know each other. Slum inhabitants are forced to live with each other, there are no social networks. So the support needs to be provided quicker.' This perception was shared by respondents from BLAST, an NGO that provides legal advice and healthcare services in 15 slums in Dhaka. The coordinator of the We Can campaign (a platform of civil society organisations, individuals and institutions that aim to end VAWG, which is active in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries) also recalled:

*'In my childhood, I used to go to the shop to buy my family daily's needs... [now] people are not doing [this] because of [fear of] daily sexual assault ... because of urbanisation and with so many migrants, people don't know each other. So the community feeling is decreasing. If I don't know her, if she comes from a different family, then I don't feel any responsibility.'*

Urban life also creates new spaces of interaction between people, such as public transport, which may also subject women to new forms of violence. As one female respondent from Mymensingh (KII24) explained:

*'Women do not speak out even if they fall victim to sexual harassment in transports and it encourages the perpetrators to continue harassing women.'*

They further note, when also discussing women using public transport:

*'...If the seat beside me is empty then I put a bag on it so that a man would not be able to sit on it. Huh? If a woman takes the seat then it is okay. But whenever a man sits beside me I notice that he slowly starts to grow larger [other participants laugh]. There is a general view that greater empowerment for women (which includes them having greater mobility, and using public transport) increases the range and incidence of violence against women.'*

(KII27 UN Women)

### 7.2.2.2 Shelter homes

These are an important part of the response system in Bangladesh and are run by both government and NGOs (see Box 11).

### 7.2.2.3 Economic empowerment of women as a protective factor against GBV/IPV

Economic empowerment of women was often mentioned by key informants as a prerequisite for tackling VAWG. According to a senior researcher from BRAC (KII32), 'Women being dependent on men is a big obstacle... economic independence is the way to come out of the violence'.

At the local level, some informants suggested a link between being a woman being financially independent and having a voice in decision-making processes within the household. For instance, one woman respondent from Gazipur (KII14) explained that if girls get more opportunities to work, they will become financially well-off, which in turn can improve their status within their household as well as within the wider community. In her case, she teaches at the local school and is engaged in further studies, thus she is able to make a monetary contribution to the household, noting that if she gives an

### Box 11: A government-run shelter for women and girls in Gazipur

The shelter in Gazipur was set up in April 2011 under the government's Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women. It has 15 staff and has capacity for 100 survivors. At the time of our fieldwork, only 17 survivors were living in the shelter, more than half of them adolescents (aged 13 to 15). The residents had come to the shelter under court order, either because they had filed a case against their partner or because the police found them homeless.

More often, though, adolescent girls were there because their parents had filed a case against them due to the girl embarking on an under-age marriage that their parents had not consented to. In cases where under-age brides are willing to go back to their parents, the court allows them to do so. But in many cases, the girl refuses and wants to live with her husband. As one

supervisor in the shelter explained, *'the court cannot let her stay with her husband because she is under 18, so she stays here under custody'*. This means that adolescents stay at the shelter for several months or even years until they reach the age of majority (18 – most had married at age 15 or 16). Hence, survivors of violence and under-age brides live in the shelter together and share rooms. Some residents were pregnant when they arrived or had their children with them, so the children live in the shelter too.

None of the women and girls are allowed to go outside for security reasons, unless to go to court. If they have permission from the court, they can receive visitors. The shelter is not linked to the one-stop centre in Gazipur. Every week a doctor and lawyer visit women at the shelter. All services are free and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs contracts lawyers to act on behalf of the residents. A counsellor and primary school teacher used to provide support as well, but this has stopped.

opinion now, it is taken seriously. In Mymensingh, one male teacher (KII16) also explained that:

*'students are advised to become self-dependent. They are encouraged to get married after getting jobs.'*

However, empowerment does not necessarily always lead to positive change, as a number of study respondents pointed out. According to one (KII28 DFID):

*'There is the assumption in Bangladesh that economic empowerment will solve the issue but it is only one component.'*

Women who are victims of violence but who control their own financial resources might have more means to report cases of abuse and to face the consequences of a potential divorce. Yet, informants stressed that the social stigma associated with divorce acts as a powerful disincentive for women to report violence and to choose the route of ending the marriage. According to another respondent (KII32), women do not report abuse because they do not want to be left alone, and to have to leave their family, even if they are financially independent. They put up with IPV to preserve their sense of belonging to their home, and their children.

Furthermore, while gaining access to financial resources might help women's position within the household, it does not automatically lead to a decrease in IPV. Some key informants, for example, spoke about financial independence creating new/different tensions for a woman within her marriage and household, particularly if she earns more than her husband, which can also result in violence. Others mentioned that violence now occurs in

new spaces such as at work, in the streets, online (see section 7.3.3) and can also take more hidden forms (e.g. psychological violence).

### 7.2.3 Justice systems

This section explores informal and formal judicial responses to GBV/IPV at village level as well as the barriers that prevent IPV survivors from accessing legal or other support.

#### 7.2.3.1 Informal justice systems: village-level arbitration (*shalish*)

Community members and NGO practitioners alike stressed the continuing importance of the traditional local arbitration system (*shalish*), whereby influential local figures form a small panel to help resolve community disputes, including those related to land, marriage, divorce, illicit relationships, and marital disputes where GBV/IPV may also be involved. As explained by a woman informant in Mymensingh (KII22):

*'When a husband and wife call for an arbitration, the [arbitrator] sits in his or her house or a house nearby in that area... When complaints are received regarding IPV, the shalish tries to reach a compromise between spouses so that marriage breakdown can be prevented.'*

Similarly, according to one male representative of BRAC in Mymensingh (KII16): *'Here, most of the VAW/IPV cases are resolved by local elders and influential individuals.'* He explained how, in the case of the *talak* divorce (husband-initiated divorce – see section 5.1.4), the *shalish* tries to make husbands as well as parents-in-law understand their responsibilities. The aim is generally to help the husband and wife work it out *'Shami-stree ke miliye deyar cheshta koren'*.



## Box 12: Informal systems for saving a marriage

Our informant reported that some years ago, one of her neighbours, a girl who was unable to tolerate the abuse of her ‘house husband’ (*ghor Jamai* – an arrangement where the husband lives in his wife’s family home), was on her way to the marriage bureau (kazir office) to divorce him. There was a big quarrel about it and neighbours were talking about it.

On her way home, she (the interviewee) heard the chaos, and asked the neighbours and the girl what was going on. After hearing of the situation, she told the girl, ‘How can you get a divorce? You have a child!’ She went to the girl’s home, took it upon herself to encourage them to reach a compromise and not get a divorce. In

her own words, ‘I came out from my car and said to her, “Hey! Why do you want to divorce your husband?” The girl started to cry. Then she (the interviewee) said, ‘You have a child. How can you divorce him then? You both might get married again but what will happen to the kid?’ Then she started to convince the wife and the husband’s parents to reach a compromise.

The interviewee also talked to the husband to convince him to try to make it work. She also told the Kazir that she wants to see this marriage work. When asked if doing this was beneficial in any way, she replied positively, saying that the couple continued their marriage and had two more children together.

*Source: Fieldwork interview, Gazipur*

However, several accounts suggest that the traditional village arbitration system for IPV and divorce can be even more informal. In Mymensingh, one woman (KII22) explained that: *‘shalish are not always formal. Sometimes they try to resolve this as soon as possible, informally’* (see Box 12).

However, informal systems for resolving potential divorce cases, which encourage the woman to remain with the husband, tend to reinforce gendered and discriminatory norms. As another woman from Gazipur (KII13) pointed out:

*‘Most of the arbitrations happen to take care of land/territory disputes. Shalish do not usually take place for divorce-related matters or conjugal disputes. In cases like this, elders from both the husband’s and wife’s side sit for a discussion; they try to resolve the problem by talking. This meeting does not take place as an informal arbitration, rather a family meeting to resolve family matters. And they decide and tell the [abused] women to go back to their abusive husbands and manage. All the advice and suggestions for avoiding VAW is always targeted towards women [the abused]. Men are never advised or warned not to abuse. This is inculcated in the collective mindsets of these family discussions – that women should suffer and tolerate abuse against them. They should try to continue their marriage no matter what.’*

Another barrier to accessing support is the role played by influential and older people in the village who appear to obstruct the process of informal arbitration. According to one male informant in Mymensingh (KII18), there is a group – typically comprising middle-aged and older people (men and women) – who spread rumours to create misunderstanding between husbands, wives and their families. These people take advantage of all parties,

sometimes taking bribes and advising the aggrieved party not to file cases but rather to resolve things on their own. According to the informant, if any of the parties is poor, then they will take sides with the richer party. As a result, in most cases the women (sometimes the men too) are deprived of fair judgment.

Several interviewees from Mymensingh confirmed bribing practices sometimes involving the UP Chairman and Members, who receive financial incentives from both parties. One respondent (KII16) also reported: *‘In cases of VAW and IPV, if the ruling decision goes against the husband, he bribes the influential people in that meeting/ arbitration to bend the decisions to his favour.’* Hence, *shalish* judgements often seem biased or even obstructed, as confirmed by another male informant from Mymensingh (KII17). As a result, many women do not seek justice through this route as they fear not only their husband, but also criticism and loss of status/dignity for the family. As documented by Alim (2006), *shalish* can be used as a mechanism for rural elites/ elders to control norms and values in their community and to maintain harmony through resolving disputes between villagers.

In addition, while the *shalish* can be a means to resolve disputes, the institution can also be problematic, discriminating against women, who are often excluded from *shalish* processes. According to one key informant in Mymensingh (KII23), women UP members are not invited to most arbitration/*shalish* cases when the dispute concerns violence against women; their signature is only obtained when required.

### 7.2.3.2 Formal justice systems: the police and courts

In parallel to the traditional arbitration system, **village courts** are government institutions that deal with civil and criminal cases but follow an informal procedure of dispute settlement (Valters and Jahan, 2016). The panel of

village courts consists of five members, including the chair of the UP and two UP members each for the parties to the dispute, selected by them.

A few key informants at local level explained that the justice system to deal with cases of abuse follows a clear hierarchy: the *shalish* is supposed to help establish a mediation process and resolve the dispute at local level. If it cannot settle the case, it is presented to a village court (*gram adalat*), led by the chairman of the UP and which includes UP members. If the case is still not settled, it goes to the court at the upazilla level. However, it is not clear whether survivors are informed by NGOs and government service providers that they should go directly to the police, or if they can contact the police at the same time as pursuing the *shalish* route, or any other formal procedure. Many key informants' accounts suggested that survivors first go to the local arbitration and village court, but one interviewee from Mymensingh (KII2) also mentioned people going directly to the district court to file a case. Overall, our research reveals a lack of clarity and knowledge around the legal reporting process (which institutions should be contacted first, and at which level), which may also contribute to creating legal loopholes and low levels of reporting of IPV. These findings echo previous research by Valters and Jahan (2016), suggesting that cases do not necessarily follow a linear process and may be passed from village court to *shalish*, from the district court to village court, or from *shalish* to village court.

There are multiple barriers that prevent IPV survivors seeking help through formal institutions. Reporting an incident of violence also incurs a financial cost, which can be an additional barrier for survivors and their families, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Expenses associated with reporting a case include transportation to the OCC, the hospital or the police station; and even paying bribes (see next subsection). Poorer people living in rural and remote areas are usually at more of a disadvantage since these services are largely non-existent locally, so they have to travel further (and pay more to do so).

As already mentioned, the family also acts as a critical obstacle – and, according to a male respondent from Mymensingh (KII12), the primary obstacle – preventing survivors accessing legal support: *'It is forbidden by the family to get into any legal case... In some cases, the woman protests on her own if the family does not support her.'*

Hence, family honour and fear of retaliation by in-laws also act as barriers for women seeking help through formal institutions. As pointed out by another respondent (KII19), *'It is difficult to oppose one's husband while living in his family. Women cannot oppose their husbands or file cases against them out of fear of torture by in-laws, shaming by the local community or because of their own weakness.'* According to the same respondent, women are being deprived of justice not only due to legal loopholes but also the lack of cooperation of the police and difficulties with filing cases.

### 7.2.3.3 Corruption

According to representatives of a local BRAC office in Mymensingh (KII23), victims and their families often face corruption when they go to the police to report GBV/IPV. This is particularly the case when victims are unaware of their legal rights and if they are not accompanied by aid workers or other intermediaries/ representatives. The informant noted that if a woman goes to the Thana (upazila) through BRAC, she does not need to bribe the police. One female respondent working in Mymensingh (KII17) to support GBV survivors also described police corruption practices:

*'They do not ask for money in our presence. When we are not with the plaintiff, police would demand money from them. They say that superior officers won't sign a case file without money. We have filed many domestic violence cases. Once the verdict is delivered, we get warrants. The police cause a lot of trouble when it comes to issuing warrants. The police station harasses the plaintiffs. They are only interested in money. They do some work when we are involved but if the plaintiff goes to police station alone, they ask for money. Bribery is the problem; the police do get the job done but only when bribed.'*

Corruption on the part of service providers can be an extra financial burden and disincentive for survivors to seek justice and report/pursue a case. Where a victim approaches the police or services with the support of an NGO, the experience can be very different (see Box 13).

### 7.2.3.4 Filing a legal case

Reporting a case of GBV/IPV implies that survivors and/or people who support them are aware of the possibility to file a case, which is often not the case. As already noted, people in rural areas tend to have even less access to information than those in urban areas. Practitioners from two NGOs, Community Legal Services (CLS) (see below) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), highlighted the lack of awareness of rights among women in rural areas and therefore the need to target these areas to help prevent VAWG and seek justice for survivors.

Reporting a case to the police is only the beginning of the legal process, which can be obscure and daunting for survivors and their families. As a senior researcher from BRAC said: *'Reporting violence is a very difficult process, and many people would drop back mid-way.'* A gender adviser from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (KII22) also explained that not only is violence perpetrated by a husband considered normal, but if a woman brings a rape case to court, there need to be two or three witnesses of the rape or crime: *'Who will admit to that, and even if they do, who will come forward? It is seen as shameful. The whole system is already set up against it.'*

### Box 13: Knowing where to get help

BRAC is present in Dhanikhola Union (Trishal Upazila in northern Bangladesh). In a ward located far away, an 8-year-old girl was raped by a paternal uncle. She received treatment in the hospital for a month. Nobody came to assist the family and they did not get any information from any source (government or NGO).

The girls' family went directly to the Thana (upazila). The police officers at the station demanded a bribe. The girls' father was a rickshaw-puller in Dhaka and hence used to stay away from the house most of the time. His wife lived at home with their son and two daughters.

The uncle who raped the girl threatened her mother that if they proceeded with the case, he would kill their son. He threatened her in different ways too, as she was frequently alone with her children. They were poor people and hence could not pursue the case with the police regularly.

They came to know about BRAC from one of their relatives. Then they talked with BRAC's district-level legal aid worker by phone. BRAC offered to help the family. In cases of rape, BRAC can provide Tk 1,000-2,000 at the local level and can cover expenses should survivors need to travel to Dhaka.

Source: Fieldwork interview KII23

#### 7.2.3.5 NGO support for survivors of GBV/IPV

Some NGOs have programmes to raise people's awareness about legal services they can refer to in cases of GBV/IPV. BLAST, for example, provides free legal advice and assistance in criminal, family, civil, land and constitutional law matters through 19 offices and a head office in Dhaka. Its mission is to make the legal system accessible to poor and marginalised people, including helping women to claim their sexual and reproductive health rights, as well as working on related issues such as domestic violence, child marriage, the right to consent, and workers' right (given the high proportion of women engaged in factory work or domestic work).

Community Legal Services (CLS) is a five-year programme funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), which aims to provide legal services, advocacy and research, and to build the capacity of development partners to deal with IPV survivors. CLS builds the capacities of programme staff who then deliver training to UP-level facilitators (e.g. applying principles like confidentiality, how to document case files, etc.). CLS's local partners (30 organisations such as lawyers' associations or local NGOs) have offices at the union level and provide a range of services, including: legal information and advice, mediation (through *shalish* with NGO support or directly offered by NGO staff/lawyer), litigation (referring a case to court through a partner's legal aid provider such as BLAST, which pays clients' transport and food costs to travel to court) and referrals to other legal service providers or village courts, arbitration councils, District Legal Aid Committees (DLAC), shelters, OCCs or NGOs. The CLS programme mainly operates in rural areas 'to bring the CLS services to the door of the community' (KII CLS). In principle, the CLS programme bridges the gap between demand for services from GBV survivors and the existing services to process cases. In practice, however, not many respondents at local level mentioned knowing about or benefiting from the programme.

The work of NGOs such as CLS and BLAST is crucial to compensate for weaknesses in capacity of service providers (government or non-government), which was identified as a major issue by most key informants.

### 7.3 Prevention: building community awareness to tackle GBV

The majority of NGO programming and activities implemented by UN agencies and donor organisations include a strong component on awareness-building on violence against women and girls (VAWG). They aim to inform the public that GBV/IPV constitutes a crime about as well as the policy framework and services available to tackle the issue. As pointed out by a male respondent in Gazipur (KII6): 'The government has made law to prevent violence against women because of the system of dowry... Yet many people are not aware of it.' In fact, raising awareness of GBV/IPV was considered a priority to prevent violence by most of the key informants at both local and national government levels. Below we outline a number of ways in which awareness-raising around GBV/IPV is happening.

#### 7.3.1 Facilitating dialogue at household and community levels

According to most key informants, campaigns to raise awareness about VAW and IPV are a priority, at the household and community levels. Run largely by NGOs, initiatives at community level include running seminars and discussion groups (particularly targeting young people) and organising street theatre. TV and radio programmes have also played an important role in raising awareness about VAW and IPV.

Overall, informants highlighted the need to create spaces for discussion at both household and community levels on the key concepts of respect and equality. There is often limited communication and dialogue between family members of different generations. Thus the director of a

shelter for women in Gazipur (KII9) explained that efforts by NGOs and the government should facilitate discussion between young people and parents: *'It is because young people cannot have discussions with parents that they get into unhealthy relationships.'* Some key informants also mentioned fathers-in-law (*shashur*) and mothers-in-law (*shashuri*) as being important target groups for programming, since they would be critical in teaching respect to children. As one female respondent from Mymensingh (KII24) explained:

*'... I was taught by my mother [ma] and paternal uncle's wife [chichi] that "men cannot be uncles" (purush manush khalu nai). I had been hearing that for a long time. Now that I am a grown-up I realise why they used to say that. It is a proverb.'*

Given that the notion of equality in relationships between men and women is not yet established, according to a representative from CARE (KII35), further work is needed in this area: *'There needs some kind of tipping point where women say "this is not acceptable, you don't have the right to hit me".'* Hence, CARE's programming includes relationship-building activities, with workshops where couples come and talk about expectations, roles and responsibilities. This aims to motivate actions to change behaviours around violence within families (KII35).

Another critical entry point for prevention activities is engaging with men and boys in order to change their attitudes and behaviours regarding their interactions with girls and women. This engagement occurs through, among other fora, village meetings where a range of stakeholders (including locally respected people, educated individuals, religious leaders and government employees) meet regularly to discuss pertinent local issues, including IPV and GBV. Among its other programmes, CARE engages men and boys as advocates against violence. The overall aim is for men to play an active role in bringing about change and supporting women's empowerment as this is considered the most sustainable strategy in preventing violence (KII30 CARE). The messages focus on establishing joint household decision-making between husband and wife – as well with other family members – alongside a more equitable sharing of household responsibilities, freedom from IPV and reducing women's workload. The coordinator of the We Can campaign also pointed out that:

*'Women start to work outside but men are not working inside ... so women are overloaded with work ... If a man stays home, it should not bother anyone.'*

However, a coordinator for women's empowerment at CARE (KII30) underlined the difficulty of engaging men in discussions on these issues given the continued acceptability of domestic violence. To overcome this problem, CARE works through community volunteers

who live in the villages to easily reach immediate relatives and neighbours, as well as through Village Development Committee focal points who can help target men in the village. Volunteers conduct household visits, often in the evening, to reach men at convenient times. Identifying role models within the community can also help to show positive examples and engage other men. BLAST uses a similar strategy, using community volunteers to pass on messages and spread awareness among men and boys.

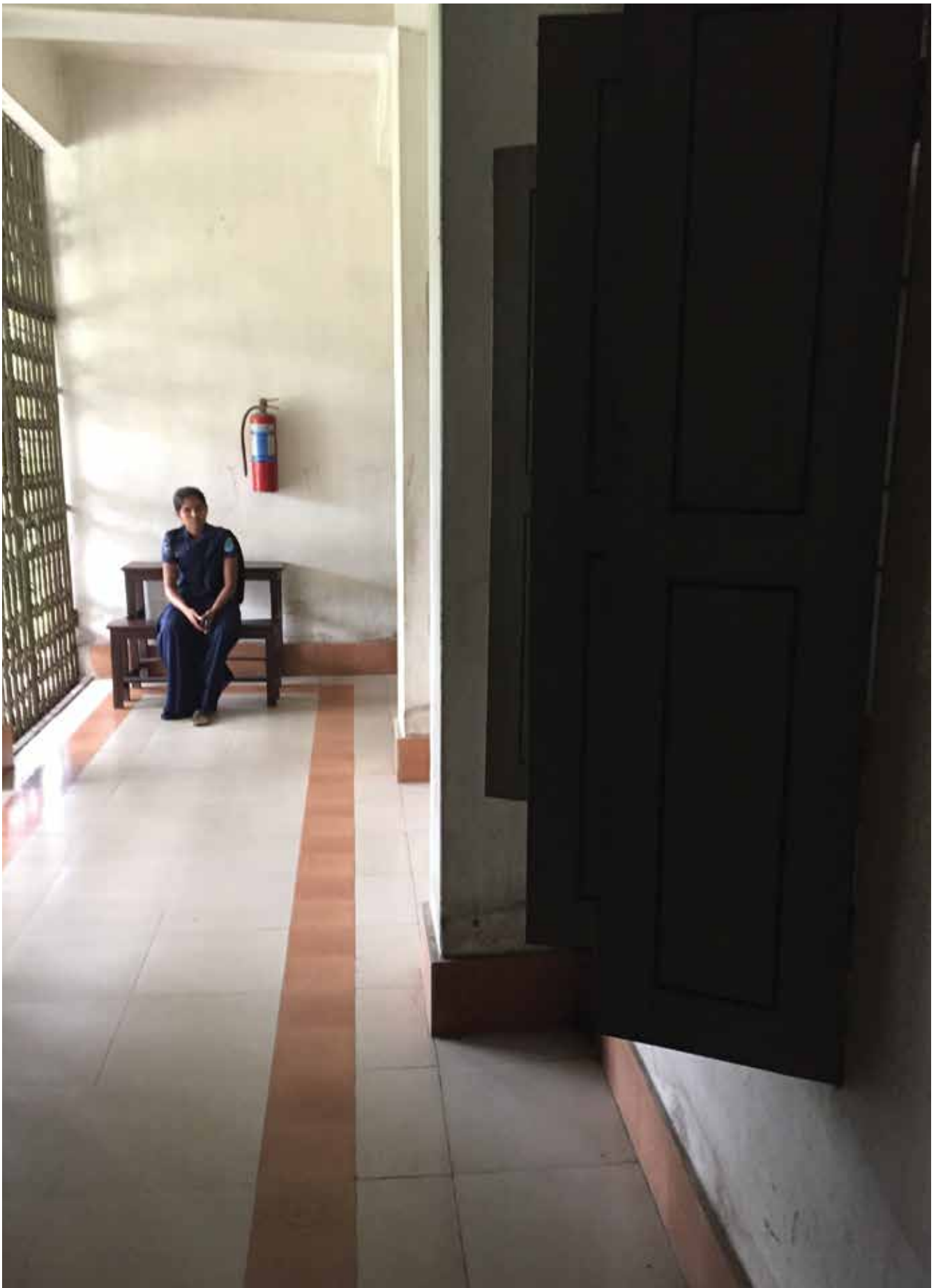
According to study respondents, the creation of committees and other community fora to which women can report violence is another important step in moving away from the notion that IPV/GBV is a private matter that should go unreported. As pointed out by representatives of UN Women (KII27) and CARE (KII30) respectively:

*'Once married, people don't bother about what happens in the home.' 'Culturally there is a tendency not to disclose information out of the household.'*

To overcome this obstacle, CARE has been supporting the creation of a prevention forum (Ending Violence Against Women – EVAW- forum) to tackle violence collectively and in partnership with government bodies, collecting and archiving information in written format. One aspect of CARE's programme facilitated this work: it used existing groups (in Sunamganj (north east), Dinajpur and Dhangadi) that had been discussing issues of food security; given that it is not easy to talk publicly about IPV, using the existing groups facilitated these conversations. Another international NGO, Plan, has addressed issues of violence, working through village development committees, where members gather monthly to exchange information about violence. According to a key informant who used to work as a volunteer for Plan, this led to a decrease in violence because people began to feel it was less socially acceptable.

However, despite perceptions and narratives around the importance of raising awareness about prevention of GBV/ IPV and of building equality and respect among men and women and boys and girls, gendered and discriminatory norms persist. Thus, according to one interviewee (a teacher) from Mymensingh (KII16), he tries to make girl pupils aware about violence against women and what lies ahead of them. In his class, he would say:

*'You will go to your husband's family one day. You should live in coherence with others there and you should listen to your parents-in-law [shoshur-shashuri]... The husband and the parents-in-law in a family should become more aware in preventing violence in the family. They have to be tolerant to the trifling mistakes and flaws of the bride and treat her as one of their own.'*



A security guard sits outside a ward at the Gaizpur Hospital, Bangladesh © Fiona Samuels 2016



Hence, while trying to raise awareness about VAW he is also stressing that girls must remain under the control of their husband and in-laws; any problems are the fault of the woman, thus denying her any form of agency and empowerment and ultimately complying with the prevailing attitude – commonplace in present day Bangladesh – that women bring violence upon themselves.

These discrepancies between some study respondents' discourses and perceptions and the headline messages of awareness campaigns suggest that the scale of intervention needs to be reconsidered. According to one informant (KII19), awareness-building programmes should start at ward or village level, because working only at UP or upazilla level is not adequate or effective.

### 7.3.2 Educating people (particularly young children)

Starting education initiatives with young children through schools and other institutions and doing regular activities was seen by all informants as a key entry point for prevention. Most informants at local level emphasised the need to educate men and women and boys and girls about equality in relationships to prevent VAWG. According to the director of a shelter for women in Gazipur (KII9):

*‘Teachers should start teaching students at young age what it means to have healthy relationships.’*

The school environment is a critical starting point for engaging boys and teenagers. BRAC, for instance, supports various programmes that engage adolescent boys and girls, helping them interact on an equal basis to challenge existing power relations. According to representatives of BRAC, there are also other ways to facilitate respectful interactions (e.g. through sport or cultural exchanges).

There have also been efforts to carry out prevention activities in tertiary-level education. UN Women works at university level to tackle sexual violence, raise awareness among employees (including academics) and students, and develop strategies to prevent and report violence (e.g. forming multi-stakeholder groups, creating formal committees, through the university grants commission (UGC), supporting international campaigns such as UNITE, or the He for She campaign).

UNFPA has also been working through schools and other educational establishments. It implemented an initiative in rural districts of Patuakhali and Barguna and in two cities (Dhaka city and Barisal town) targeting 300 schools, 50 madrassas and 150 clubs. The programme has several components: awareness-raising through school clubs, radio shows and board games, capacity-building at government level, curriculum development, and counselling support via hotlines (different from the national government helpline and BRAC helpline). In school clubs, the programme raises awareness of sexual

and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender to instigate a ‘positive attitude towards the opposite sex’. The programme has also introduced an ‘equity and violence prevention curriculum’, adapted from the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS) developed by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). UNFPA ‘took the GEMS curriculum and adapted it to Bangladesh context with relevant ministries to develop text books’. The curriculum covers topics such as child marriage, violence and life skills, and targets 10–14-year-olds.

The role of schools, however, has to be nuanced by the accounts of some respondents, given that the discourse of teachers is still shaped by traditional gendered discriminatory norms that reaffirm girls and women’s low status compared with men. At the national level, the coordinator of the We Can campaign also stressed that although education rates are increasing, this does not automatically lead to a decrease in violence. Similarly, various respondents noted that while awareness and education may be increasing, violence is both continuing and taking different and new forms. Thus, for instance, rather than greater incidence of physical IPV/GBV against women, which is relatively easy to recognise and therefore report, respondents reported that psychological violence may be becoming more common, especially among educated men and elites. Not only is this form of violence more hidden, but it is also more difficult to identify, recognise and therefore report.

It was also noted by some respondents in relation to the relatively recent phenomenon of girlfriends and boyfriends that while university students were beginning to openly form such relationships (thus demonstrating their modernity, acceptance and tolerance), privately the boy was continuing to impose certain behaviours on the girl (e.g. not allowing her to move around freely, to mix with other boys and even beating her), thus also continuing to perpetrate forms of IPV towards her. Institutions, teachers and school management committees also institutionalise rules for women about what they should wear and do, thus also reinforcing women’s subordinate role to men and perhaps indirectly sustaining the perpetration of violence against women.

### 7.3.3 New technology and cyber violence

Access to new forms of communication such as mobile Internet access and social media was often cited as a major source of new problems in relation to VAWG, particularly for girls. According to study respondents, one means through which girls become subject to abuse is through agreeing to pose for photos or videos, when boys and men then use to blackmail the girls, threatening that they will post these photos and videos publicly unless the girls do what they want. This constitutes a form of cyber violence against women and girls; other online forms of violence include hate speech, hacking (intercepting private



communications), identity theft, online stalking (criminal harassment), uttering threats, convincing a vulnerable person to end their life (counselling suicide or advocating genocide) as well as facilitating trafficking and the sex trade.

According to a senior researcher from BRAC, *‘The use of technology such as mobiles has increased violence by increasing interactions between girls and boys, more than before, but most boys and girls have not learnt yet how to behave with one another, and technology has come too fast. Thus many girls are not prepared to protect themselves yet, but are exposed to boys ... A lot of rape cases are related to partners [boyfriends].’* One representative of CLS (KII38) also stressed that *‘Women are not aware of what to do and to avoid these sort of cases. Education is important and legal provision, but when girls agree to have photos or videos taken of them, they might give their consent but not necessarily to share them on the public domain. So there is a lack of law for guaranteeing consent.’*

Hence, many NGO practitioners emphasised the need to build awareness of cyber forms of VAWG. In early 2016, an expert consultation involving practitioners in the areas of law, media, technology and women’s rights in Bangladesh aimed to take stock of the extent and types of online/cyber violence and harassment against women and girls and its impact on their daily lives (BLAST, 2016). It highlighted issues around social stigma for victims of online violence (e.g. women called ‘bad women’) but also how people understand ‘consent’ in the context of using technology.

While new technologies contribute to a new platform of abuse against women and girls, increasing access to mobiles and the Internet can also be a factor in preventing and responding to violence. For example, one of the awareness campaigns developed by UNFPA is to run and broadcast radio programmes targeting young people (KII25). *‘Many adolescents now access mobile phones, their own or through their parents’ or friends’ mobiles and can listen to FM radio.’*

### 7.3.4 Building gender awareness among the police force

The police are often the first port of call for many survivors of GBV/IPV at community level. However, their capacities are limited and (as already discussed) corruption is commonplace. Various organisations have been working to improve capacity of the police force. Among others, Naripokkho’s recent projects include regular monitoring of police stations, hospitals and courts in order to make government services more accessible to GBV survivors. As one Naripokkho representative explained, *‘We are trying to monitor the process of the implementation of law ... where are the gaps, what are the limitations of the service providers. And we share our recommendations and findings in a positive manner so that they can realise what*

*actually is wrong.’*

Improving provision of services in police stations is a priority for Naripokkho, which stressed that the police are potentially the most influential service provider for survivors, despite being under-resourced. However, despite recent and ongoing efforts, police stations remain highly gender-segregated environments, with most services staffed and delivered by men. With this limitation in mind, an important focus of Naripokkho’s work has been to create women-friendly services provided by men and women police officers. Among other things, the organisation has provided training for police officers on gender issues; these officers in turn have also trained their colleagues. At the same time, Naripokkho has been training community members to monitor police services, thus beginning to instill community-based forms of accountability.

In a related effort, UNDP supported the government’s Police Reform Programme (PRP), which aimed to develop capacity of police officers while at the same time advocating for gender equality in the service, and in particular more female officers. It also aimed to improve interaction between the community and the police through setting up model police stations and community policing forums. Between 2009 and 2014, the number of female police officers more than doubled, from 1.8% to 5.24% (UNDP website).

### 7.3.5 The lack of government capacities on prevention

Many key informants explained that one of the reasons for the lack of effectiveness of prevention initiatives is the limited capacities and resources dedicated to tackling VAWG. In Gazipur, one male respondent (KII4) explained that:

*‘The government programmes addressing issues of abuse against women are understaffed ... Government workers should regularly socialise with the community they are serving. They usually only react once there is an incident. It would be great if there were officers responsible for specific relevant issues like a government officer monitoring child marriage only.’*

To ensure sustainability of programmes, it is critical to increase the capacity of government, since NGO activities (see section 7.2.3.5) are largely dependent on donors, whose changing timeframes and funding priorities often result in challenges for long-term programming and planning. As the same male informant (KII4) commented, *‘The various committees [child protection group, child forum, ward group] of Plan must remain operational because Plan is going to shut down the programme in the near future. So the issues of dowry, child marriage, healthcare of women and children would not be so effectively dealt with as it is happening now due to Plan’s activities.’*

According to a UNFPA representative in Dhaka (KII25), not only are the government's efforts to raise awareness relatively weak (mostly it is NGOs that work on raising awareness), but there is a lack of capacity within relevant departments as well as a lack of coordination between ministries. 'MoWCA is the focal ministry on VAWG but I don't see a ministry who is a champion.'

At the local level, the lack of effective programmes to prevent the persecution of women at the level of Union Parishad is identified by some key informants as one of the main obstacles to address IPV. Despite the existence of prevention committees, informants from Mymensingh [KII23] said that nobody attends these committees. Furthermore, having female members of the local government structures does not seem to make much difference according to women respondents in Mymensingh [KII24]:

*'Women members of union council are not taken very seriously when it comes to the issue of abuse against women at local level. But the situation has changed a little compared to the past because nowadays educated women are being elected as members of the union council. These educated members can present their opinion, still their role is not really significant. [...] Women members are like showpiece. Just like flowers in the flower vase. It's like three men will sit, and one woman will sit beside them.'*

## 7.4 Norm setters

Study informants mentioned some important drivers of change in gender norms, including the state, NGOs, the media, and working women (and their spouses). These are discussed in more detail below.

### 7.4.1 The state

The state has played an important role in changing gender norms by enshrining certain rights in the national Constitution and introducing supportive laws and policies. Among other things, gender equality was declared in the Constitution in 1972 and *talak* was declared invalid in 1962. For further details of legal provisions related to IPV, see Annex 6 in Samuels et al, 2017<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, in 1993, the government introduced stipends to promote girls' education (at primary and secondary levels) to work towards gender parity.

*'The government is at the core of change [in gender relationship]. Earlier there was ekok right [exclusively men's right]. Now, there are equal [gender] rights.'*

(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)

People are also aware of the dowry prohibition law, the child marriage law, and the law against VAW. They believe these laws have contributed to a reduction of IPV.

*'Wife abuse has reduced over time. It has actually reduced a lot over time ... This is because the country is developing. [Also] there were no such stringent laws [against IPV] earlier.'*

(FGD5, married men, Mymensingh)

The government policy of promoting girls' education has been very effective in removing gender differentials in enrolment at primary and secondary levels. Increased education is widely recognised by community members as playing a role in reducing IPV. However, as explained in section 6.3.4, legal and policy frameworks in support of gender equality and greater access to employment for women have led to something of a backlash, with some men perceiving that women's rights amount to abuse of men.

### 7.4.2 NGOs

Even if NGOs did not work directly to address IPV in the study villages, they had some impact in widening women's networks beyond their kinship group. They have promoted greater mobility of women; made women aware of gender issues and rights (e.g. the Dowry Prohibition and Child Marriage acts); and provided them with access to microfinance. As a result of NGO programmes, many women have become more confident, more vocal, and more economically empowered.

*Woman 1: Now we go to many meetings and hear many things, we get to learn and realise many new things. We can now answer questions.*

*Woman 2: In the past, women were not so courageous.*

*Woman 4: When I got married I was scared of my mother-in-law and my husband. I did not talk much in front of them ... I felt a deep-rooted fear. When my husband used to call me, I felt scared, thinking if his mother told him about any of my mistakes then he might beat me. But now, if they say something unjust, then I protest immediately. Why would they impose blame on me? I can now unveil their injustice face-to-face. Once I do that, my husband has to consider the injustice before speaking to me. Isn't this a change within myself?*

(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

3 <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11468.pdf>

### 7.4.3 Media and other channels of communication

Mass media and other channels of communication such as TV, cell phones and internet have created broad awareness about the principle of gender equality and relevant government legislation.

*'In early days, the government decisions were known through radio. Now, people have cell phone and TV. Most importantly it is the era of the internet now. If anything happens now, the whole world gets to know about it through Facebook.'*

(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)

Access to information on gender rights and laws addressing gender discrimination were perceived by study informants as contributing to the reduction of IPV. However, informants also pointed out the nuanced nature of these impacts, as mass media and other channels of communication (particularly TV soap operas) have sometimes reinforced patriarchal gender roles and relationships. Many people believe that soap operas contribute to escalating tensions within families, as well as promiscuity and extramarital relationships, which in turn can drive IPV and lead to marriage breakdown.

*'This [women-initiated divorce] started in 2008 ... Since we had access to Star Jolsha [a TV channel] ... There are no serials in Star Jolsha, where a wife is not leaving with another man.'*

(FGD1, married men, Gazipur)

The quote below captures how the role of the state, NGOs and the media interact.

*'There is no household without a TV in the village nowadays. Everybody is receiving these messages. The government has created opportunities for women in all areas. Then the NGOs work on these issues and on legal and health issues. Their work has made even the least-educated people conscious. In the old days, when NGO male workers used to come, then women would stay away. Even if the worker wanted to gather them, the women were not allowed to go. Now, all women – including old women, married women, and even those who have become mothers-in-law – would go to NGO meetings.'*

(FGD10, married women, Mymensingh)

### 7.4.4 Working women and their spouses

We found evidence that working women (and, in a few cases, their spouses) are agents of change. The expansion of economic opportunities for women (within Bangladesh and abroad), particularly in the

manufacturing sector, has reduced women's financial dependence on men. This is widely believed to have empowered women and increased their decision-making power in the household.

*'In families, where a wife earns, the decisions are often made by the wife. But in other families a wife can rarely make a decision.'*

(FGD8, married women, Gazipur)

Opportunities abroad have also allowed women migrants to earn a substantial income and make large contributions to the family through remittances. For some women this has led to greater mobility, earning power and decision-making power within the family. In Gazipur, the proportion of working women is higher than in Mymensingh. In contrast to women from previous generations and to their non-working peers, these women make an important financial contribution to the household. In most cases, they earn more than their husbands, making them the breadwinner. Men consider this as a threat to men's power and control over women and their sexuality.

Although there are far fewer female migrants than male migrants, their number has increased substantially in recent years, particularly the number of young women going overseas to find work. Female overseas work is reported to be more beneficial to families as the costs of female migration are much lower and the remittances much higher than for male workers. According to the data, female migrants are believed to engage in sex work and are thus regarded extremely negatively in their home communities. Although people recognise that not all female migrants engage in sex work, they still do not change their attitudes. However, it has also been reported that women who have earned significant amounts of money are generally appreciated in the family. We heard of one case where a woman had gained political power using the money she earned overseas (from working in Kuwait), although people suspected that she earned her money through sex work:

*'... But there is nothing more valuable than money nowadays. So when a girl earns millions people do care about her. Thus, for example, such a woman was a candidate in the last election in our community. She earned billions. She spends 300,000 to 400,000 taka just as monthly rent for accommodation. We don't know how she earned such a huge amount.'*

(FGD2, married men, Gazipur)

Data from other informants show that families of married female overseas workers often undergo turbulence and face marriage breakdown. Sometimes the worker herself ends her marriage and sometimes the husband gets a divorce.

*'Suppose for ten years a man was married to this woman. Now, after going abroad she forgets him. She does not have any communication with husband and she does not send him any money ... The husband goes off track, not receiving her love and her financial support. The husband's life gets messed up.'*

*(FGD3, married men, Gazipur)*

The following quote lends support to a notion of nascent change in these rural communities, illustrating that some men appreciate empowerment of their spouses, which can strengthen cooperation between the two and promote peaceful sharing of power within the household. These couples do not pay attention to criticism from the community for deviating from the prevailing gendered social norms.

*'The wives who have money master more power. In those families husbands tend to do as the wives wish. Many of [these] husbands look after the children when the wives are at work. [Men] who are good cook as well.'*

*(FGD8, married women, Gazipur)*

However, there is also a sense that men who deviate from their socially prescribed role as a husband are penalised and criticised by the community. They are mocked, teased, taunted, and ridiculed and treated as a lesser man. Below are some examples of what is said about such men:

*'He is boupagol [crazy for his wife].'*

*'He doesn't come out from underneath her anchol [end of her saree].'*

*'His bou must have kept him under the influence of tabij-koboj [black magic].'*

*'In this bou-dominated household the husband is virtually the wife.'*

*(FGD9, married women, Mymensingh)*

#### **7.4.5 The role of religion and religious leaders**

The role of religious leaders is critical in terms of their influence in enforcing gender norms as well as defining which attitudes and practices are considered 'appropriate'. However, key informants provided conflicting views as to whether religious leaders should be involved in programmes to tackle GBV/IPV.

One male respondent from Mymensingh (KII16) stressed that: *'The imams and muezzins should discuss*

*about these issues to build social awareness. They have to play a more active role in this.'* Hence, some NGOs are targeting religious leaders to involve them in prevention activities and to communicate messages based on teachings in the Quran. For example, Save the Children explained that religious leaders are supportive in areas of Bangladesh where it works. During and after weekly prayer, religious leaders talk about child rights, the harmful effects of sexual abuse, and the fact that the family is the first place where children can be abused by relatives and neighbours. At the national level, several UN agencies were working with imams to implement projects to raise awareness of GBV and SRHR. However, according to one key informant, there has been little assessment of the effectiveness of messages delivered by imams.

Similarly, according to a representative from DFID (KII28), more work needs to be done in collaboration with religious leaders, madrassas and Islamic NGOs – people and institutions that are largely ignored by the mainstream NGO sector because they are considered too fundamentalist, or because such work is politically sensitive. *'Their value system is difficult ... It will take a very long sustained engagement. But we do not invest on that. But then we are not touching millions of Bangladeshis.'*

In contrast, one representative of an NGO (KII35) was more cautious about working with religious leaders, suggesting that imams may not be as influential as they used to be as society becomes more capitalist and less influenced by religion. According to this informant, teachers and the media are becoming more influential channels through which to convey messages and instigate social change. Having worked with religious leaders in the past, she explained that while, on the surface, they may be aligned with the messages NGOs want to convey, their guidance of community members remains influenced by discriminatory traditional gender norms and religious norms. According to this informant, religious beliefs are inherently constructed in a way that requires women to remain unequal.

Additionally, the growth in religious conservatism was mentioned by a few key informants based in Dhaka as a factor that impedes progress on women's rights. According to a BRAC researcher, this religious fundamentalism originates from migrants who have returned from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia. Their conservative views are imposed on their families with negative consequences for women and girls, echoed by some accounts of GBV survivors who described having been subject to violence after their husband returned from the Middle East.



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# 8. Conclusions and recommendations

## 8.1 Conclusions

Some of the factors driving IPV in rural Bangladesh at the individual, family/household, community and societal levels are similar to those driving IPV elsewhere in the region. They include (but are not limited to) poverty, level of education, adverse childhood experience, child marriage, women's employment, substance abuse (typically by men), extramarital relationships, and unemployment (Fulu et al., 2013; Naved and Persson, 2005; Sambisa et al., 2011; Johnson and Das, 2008; Yount et al., 2016a, 2016b). Besides identifying some new factors contributing to IPV, this study has also shed light on why and how some of these factors contribute to IPV.

As already noted, child marriage and women's employment and mobility outside the home can be perceived as challenging male dominance, with men using IPV to reassert their control. Gambling and substance abuse, increasingly widespread, are more recent factors that are driving IPV. A new and interesting finding is that, in some geographical pockets, substance abuse is also acting as a driver for families to marry their sons at a young age, believing this will get them back on the 'right' path. However, experience shows that marrying early does not stop boys gambling and engaging in substance abuse; moreover, it heightens IPV.

This study indicates that men's perception of male disadvantage relative to females also contributes to IPV. This perception is based on recent (and not so recent) state programmes and policies supporting gender equality, female education, increased employment opportunities for women, equal rights to divorce, and also NGO programmes that aim to empower women. Men regard all these initiatives as detrimental to their power and control over their spousal relationship and their broader status within the household, community and society. Men's resentment of these policies and programmes and heightened fury make many of them deal with the changed everyday realities by retaliating with IPV.

In many cases, men's urge to regain power and control over women make them fall back on Islam. Some of them justify the current level of IPV as a moderate and necessary tool for making women conform to social norms. Some believe that Islam and implementation of **Sharia** law, which includes harsh penalties, will prevent more women transgressing social norms in the name of

upholding moralities and authenticity (White, 2010). These men perceive NGOs as agents of modernity and imperialism, and consider NGO activities as going against Islam. They also perceive employment opportunities for women within and outside the country as interfering with women's prescribed gender roles. All of this resonates with Hussain's (2010) observation that the Islamic movement in Bangladesh is a call for returning to Quran and **Hadith**, which (according to our data) has reached rural men. As Hussain rightly points out, there is a tendency to modernise Islam for accommodating some inevitable changes in society. Thus, it is often not female mobility or employment per se but rather a lack of strict observance of **purdah** that is condemned by men. Some men accept female employment as long as the women involved remain subservient to men. Similarly, girls' education is generally accepted, but Islamic education is the preferred option.

Clearly, there is a tension between conventional gendered social norms and changed gender roles, responsibilities and gender dynamics due to increased female education, employment, mobility and empowerment. This tension is an important driver of IPV. The varying degrees to which a man or family internalise gendered social norms may lead to different IPV outcomes. Thus, for example, female employment may result in IPV in households where the husband is against female mobility or women earning money, but not in all other households. In some households, employment has the opposite impact, giving the woman relative economic independence and greater household decision-making power.

Growing perceptions of male disadvantage in the current era and men's resulting fears about loss of power and control over women are a major driver of IPV, and in such cases, IPV is justified by the ideology of political Islam. Thus, attitudinal change among men is a prerequisite for addressing IPV. The importance of educating and working with men cannot be over-emphasised.

Evidence shows that it is usually easier to change the attitudes of adolescents and young people compared to older people (Verma et al., 2008; Barker et al., 2010). However, this study suggests that in Bangladesh, adolescent boys and girls (aged 15 and over) hold very similar attitudes to adults when it comes to gender equality and condoning GBV/IPV. Thus, it seems that conventional gendered social norms are already entrenched among older adolescents. Therefore, we



recommend working with younger adolescents (aged 10-15 years) to promote gender equality and make IPV socially unacceptable (in public or in private).

The main norm setters identified in this study were: the state, NGOs, media and other communication channels, and working women (and some of their spouses/partners). It seems that in general, the interests and opinions of men and young women regarding gendered social norms diverge in different domains. While the expectations and opinions of men and many older women uphold conventional gender norms and ideas, young women's opinions and expectations in many domains support positive changes observed in the prevailing gender norms. A small group of men belong to the latter group. There is, however, huge resistance to these changes from most men and from older women. Women who transgress gender norms are usually penalised and stigmatised; therefore, considerable efforts are needed to turn these positive changes into precursors of much bigger and radical progressive changes in gender norms (Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014). First, positive changes need to be protected and nurtured. Second, a much larger group of men need to be mobilised as allies in supporting these positive changes using systemic interventions and mass media campaigns.

It is essential to engage men of different ages in IPV prevention work to protect the achievements made so far and to deal with the backlash generated by policies and programmes that support gender equality.

## 8.2 Recommendations

### 8.2.1 From study respondents

A number of recommendations emerged from the study respondents, some (from men) clearly concerned with reasserting men's control over women, while others (also from men) aimed to redress the power imbalance between men and women. Some men suggested that the government should pass a law on female dress codes, while others suggested that TV campaigns should encourage women to obey their husbands. All of this, they believed, would result in a reduction in IPV.

On the other hand, some men talked about the need to reduce women's dependence on men through economic empowerment (including importantly, home-based employment), and to increase women's education and awareness through, for instance, forming women's organisations and developing women's leadership potential and skills. Some of these opinions are summarised in the narrative below:

*'I think, in our society men and women do not have equal right. One group is more privileged than the other; though this is not true in every case. I think the first step would be to make education available for each male and female. Education will help them understand*

*the problem and to find a proper solution... Women would be emancipated if they get enough opportunity to work. In my view, the most important problem for them [women] is their subordination to men. So, they cannot do anything. The difference between males and females will reduce if women can earn. The government needs to create employment opportunities for the females and support their education.'*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 11, student, Gazipur)*

Given that lack of male education and employment was widely recognised as a risk factor for VAWG, men and women alike suggested increasing education and employment opportunities for boys and men. Men also pointed out the need to **improve spousal communication** to avoid misunderstanding and conflict, which often led to IPV. Improved spousal communication was also believed to lead to better decisions.

While most men considered it a woman's duty to try to understand a man's needs and serve him accordingly, one man adopted the opposite strategy to avoid conflict and IPV in his relationship, trying to understand his wife, her needs, and ways to approach her that would not give rise to conflict:

*'Every woman is unique. From the very beginning of our married life, I tried to understand how to approach her in a way so that she doesn't start showing her temper or argue with me. So, I explore the situation first. I have to understand what exactly does she want, and what type of speech will she understand. Thus, for instance, my wife always asks me to buy this or that and I never refuse... I may not actually buy it, but [saying yes] has positive effect on the situation.'*

*(IDI, married young man, grade 12, garment worker, Gazipur)*

Other recommendations from men included ensuring that the in-laws treat women fairly when dealing with issues around IPV and do not automatically take the man's side; similarly, that a joint family initiative was important: *'All the family members should sit together and reach a solution'* (IDI, unmarried young man, Honours (3rd yr), washing factory worker, Gazipur). They also suggested that VAWG prevention campaigns were important, particularly those run by NGOs. However, for these campaigns to be successful, it is critical to involve not just women but also men, village elders and other influential people with more progressive and gender-equitable attitudes. These campaigns need to go beyond village level and include the wider media (e.g. TV), and other interventions such as conflict resolution and providing even more opportunities for women's employment.

According to study respondents, awareness campaigns

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should inform people about laws, legal provisions and services available to address VAWG/IPV. Many respondents also noted that laws needed to be implemented more forcefully to achieve their intended outcome, with some noting that police corruption needs to be addressed to ensure that officers take proper action when dealing with reports of VAWG/IPV:

*'If the police did not accept bribe and did their job properly, then people would be cautious.'*

*(FGD8, married women, Gazipur)*

## 8.2.2 Broader recommendations

**Promote broader definitions of IPV that include psychological, physical, sexual, economic and cyber violence.** This can be done by building on standardised measurements for IPV as well as identifying culturally resonant indicators as agreed by academics, educationalists and regional bodies. Opportunities include future regional meetings and fora where dialogue can be promoted among academics, civil society and educationalists. One foreseeable challenge is to ensure that definitions of IPV adequately capture the regional variations within Bangladesh on IPV attitudes and behaviours.

**Engage with men and boys, including from a very early age, to better tailor programme interventions** by identifying entry points where different groups of men and boys are most likely to be receptive to messaging – including religious institutions (e.g. mosques), schools, youth groups, cafes and sports clubs. This could also be achieved by influencing curricula development, and working with role models of positive and progressive masculinities, including celebrities or progressive religious leaders. However, efforts should be mindful of the risk of backlash by boys and men,

especially if such efforts are not carried out in a culturally conservative way.

**Map key institutions at different levels and engage them strategically** by expanding the availability of information and building the skills and knowledge of service providers to prevent, screen for and respond to IPV (this should include referring cases of IPV within and across the justice, legal, protection, health and education sectors). This can also be achieved by legal reforms to criminalise certain IPV behaviours (such as marital rape) and by prosecuting IPV perpetrators, with harsher sentences for those convicted. Opportunities for such actions can be maximised by harnessing existing local structures, including formal and informal justice systems, by gathering country learning around promising practices, and through measures to enhance reporting of IPV to better test and strengthen justice and police systems. Several challenges include limited resourcing and lack of gender budget monitoring. Other challenges include the lack of demand for IPV services, given the hidden nature of IPV, as well as limited awareness of existing services, and problems around legal loopholes and elite capture that undermine reporting, prosecution and transparency / accountability.

**Programming approaches must respond to the multilevel influences on IPV and the regional patterning of IPV.** This can be done by promoting an intersectoral and multilevel approach through a national coordinating agency or inter-agency working group. Attention must be paid not only to programming that addresses IPV specifically, but also to opportunities to mainstream IPV prevention and response through programming in a range of other areas, including women's health, livelihoods and economic empowerment, food security, and infrastructure and transport.

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