

**Intimate partner violence against women: experiences from a woman-focused  
development programme in Matlab, Bangladesh**

**Syed Masud Ahmed MBBS, MPH**  
*Senior Medical Officer (Research)*  
BRAC Research and Evaluation Division  
BRAC Centre, 75 Mohakhali, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh

*Correspondence and requests for reprints:*

Syed Masud Ahmed MBBS, MPH  
BRAC Research and Evaluation Division,  
BRAC Centre, 75 Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh.  
Phone: 880-2-8824180, Fax: 880-2-8823542, e-mail: [ahmed.sm@brac.net](mailto:ahmed.sm@brac.net)

## **Intimate partner violence against women: experiences from a woman-focused development programme in Matlab, Bangladesh**

### **Abstract**

**Objective:** This paper explores the effect of a credit-based development interventions on violence against women (excluding sexual violence) perpetrated by husband.

**Methods:** Data for this study originated from a cross-sectional survey conducted during 1999 in 60 BRAC-ICDDR,B study villages in Matlab, Bangladesh. Pre-tested structured questionnaires were used for data collection. Questions elicited information on both physical and mental violence perpetrated by husband during the preceding four months. Data were analysed to characterise group-level differences among the study women in the occurrence of violence and also, to identify its predictors.

**Findings:** About 17.5% women reported having suffered violence from their husbands in the past four months, the proportion being greater among the BRAC households ( $p=0.05$ ). In logistic regression, two models were tested. The results identified age (probability less as age increases), schooling (probability less if some schooling), household head's occupation (probability more with wage labour) and household's perceived solvency (probability more if deficit household) as important predictors in both the models. In the first model, involvement in BRAC was found to be a risk factor while in the second model, prevalence of violence lessened with improvement in the depth of membership such as receiving skill-training for various income-earning activities, in addition to involvement in savings and credit activities. This also indicated that the level of violence decreased with the duration of membership because with the ageing of membership, inputs like skill-training are added to the intervention package.

**Conclusion:** Domestic violence decreases as women becomes empowered through capacity development interventions of microcredit organisations over time.

*Key Words: violence, domestic violence, intimate partner violence, empowerment, microcredit, BRAC, Bangladesh*

## Introduction

Gender-based violence against women is increasingly being recognized as a matter of global concern (1, 2, 3, 4). In 48 population-based surveys worldwide, 10% to 70% of women report being hit or otherwise physically harmed by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives (5). Today, the phenomenon is perceived as a threat to women's health and well-being as well as a serious human rights issue (6, 7).

There are different forms of violence against women such as domestic violence, rape and sexual coercion, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, trafficking, etc. Of these, domestic violence perpetrated by intimate partner such as husband, has become a universal phenomenon and cuts across socioeconomic, religious and ethnic borders (8, 9, 10, 11, 12). An "ecological framework" integrating various individual, contextual and sociocultural factors is offered by researchers to explain the causes underlying domestic violence (13). The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women defines violence against women as "*...any act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life*" (2). Domestic violence is said to happen when "*... violence (is) directed against a female member at home*". Women may be subject to domestic violence from an intimate partner like husband or boy-friend or a female member on whom they are dependent e.g., when maid servant is abused by the house-wife or any woman member of the family. Among the many forms of domestic violence wife-battering, verbal abuse, dowry-related deaths and acid throwing are some of the most common ones. Psychiatric morbidity like depression, stress-related symptoms, chemical dependency and substance abuse, and suicide are consequences observed in the context of violence in women's lives over time (3).

In case of developing countries like Bangladesh, traditional patriarchal system where women remain subordinate to men in all realms of life combines with other cultural, legal and political factors in aggravating the existing situation. Lack of access to economic opportunities, education, and decision making power perpetuate women's subordination to men, and makes them more susceptible to violence. In these societies, marriage usually occurs under unequal socioeconomic condition and with age gap of 3-20 years between spouses, inviting marital disharmony in later life. There is dearth of information on domestic violence in Bangladesh. In 1993, World Bank reported that intentional injury during pregnancy, motivated by dowry disputes or shame over a rape or a pregnancy outside of wedlock, caused 6% of all maternal deaths between 1976 and 1986 (2). In another study, Paltiel found that severe beating, usually by husbands, accounts for 49% of household deaths in Bangladesh (14). Dowry, or the money given (in cash or kind) to the groom's family, also contributes substantially to domestic violence against women in Bangladesh (15).

It is assumed that opening up economic opportunities for women through access to credit, awareness-raising activities, and skill training for income-generating activities would enhance women's self-esteem and status within households and change their relationship with husband, hence reduce domestic violence. However, studies show that micro-credit programmes have a varied effect on men's violence against women. A BRAC study showed that prevalence of physical violence among women participating in credit-based development programme was 19% compared to 40% among eligible non-participants (16). The risk of sexual abuse was found to be less among women who participate in credit programmes and financially contribute to their families (17). Others contest this effect of micro-credit on reduction of domestic violence. In a village study in Bangladesh, it was found that economic advancement did not always ensure reduction in violence (18). Findings revealed the existence of mental abuse (e.g., threat of divorce or second marriage whenever there is a problem, insulting the woman's parents, not allowing to visit natal home, preventing from interaction with other males, etc.) in better-off households. The authors argued that getting involved in credit programme and bringing cash at home may rather create tension within the household and precipitate domestic violence. Similarly, Schuler et al. (19) suggest that expanding women's access to economic opportunities and resources does not always make them less vulnerable to domestic violence, at least not right away. Rather, in some cases, credit creates a new arena of hostility and conflict resulting from newly adopted non-traditional roles by women. When women challenge gender norms, they sometimes provoke violence from their husbands. Again, by breaking the barriers of traditional norms and behaviours ascribed to women by patriarchal society, micro-credit may generate anxiety and tension among its participants, thereby interfering with their emotional well-being (20). In a recent review of the causes and prevention of intimate partner violence, the author concluded that women who were more empowered educationally, economically, and socially are most protected, but below this high level the relation between empowerment and risk of violence is non-linear (21).

This paper explores the effect of a credit-based development interventions on violence against women (excluding sexual violence) perpetrated by husband and its determinants, from a set of cross-sectional data collected in 1999 at Matlab, Bangladesh. This is expected to contribute to the current debate on the interrelationship between micro-credit and domestic violence and help policy planners in designing violence-sensitive programme interventions.

## Materials and Methods

### *The BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project*

The project, a joint research initiative of BRAC and ICDDR,B (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh) was established in Matlab in 1992, to examine prospectively the relationship between women focused development interventions, and the health and well-being of the rural poor (22). BRAC is an indigenous NGO involved in poverty alleviation (23) while ICDDR,B is an international Centre for Health and Population Research (24). BRAC's Development Programme (BDP) targets poorer households in the community with special emphasis on improving their health and socioeconomic condition through group formation, non-formal education, skill development training and collateral free loan for income generating activities. The eligibility criteria for participation is that the household possesses less than 0.5 acres of land including homestead, and that the household sells manual labor for at least 100 days a year for survival. ICDDR, B has been operating a Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) in Matlab since the early 1960s. The project began when BRAC moved into Matlab with its development interventions.

### *Data collection*

The data for this study originated from a cross-sectional survey undertaken by the above project during the third quarter of 1999 in 60 BRAC-ICDDR,B study villages in Matlab DSS area (18). Data were collected using two pre-tested structured questionnaires. The first, which contains demographic and socioeconomic information, was administered to the household head and/or spouse or any knowledgeable adult member of the household present at the time of survey. The second, which contains information on different aspects of women's lives including domestic violence, was administered to the respondent. This questionnaire on violence elicited information on both physical violence (e.g., physical assault of various degree like slapping, beating etc.) and mental violence (e.g., money and/or ornaments/land/livestock etc. taken away against will, not allowing visit to natal home, verbal abuse directed against women and/or her natal home and, threat of divorce). The women were asked whether any of the above incidents happened between herself and her husband in the preceding four months, and if so, recorded accordingly.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were analysed in two stages: first, bi-variate analysis was done to characterise group-level differences in the occurrence of 'any type of violence' (physical or mental) among the study women. Variables were selected on the basis of their relevance to domestic violence informed by empirical literature. Next, a logistic regression was run to explore the influence of different variables with respect to the occurrence of 'any type of violence' (coded 'any violence'=1, 'no violence'=0) in two closely

related models. Ten sociodemographic variables were entered simultaneously in both the models: age, years of schooling of the respondent, whether have children currently, contribution to household income; age, years of schooling, and occupation of household head; household's landholdings, economic solvency and family type. Besides, for predicting the effects of BRAC's development inputs on 'any violence', household's BRAC membership status was included in Model I and membership type in Model II. Membership status was categorised into BRAC-eligible non-members and BRAC members. Membership type was categorized into eligible non-members; members with only savings; members with savings and credit; and, members with savings, credit, and training.

## Results

Around 14.5% of the women reported having suffered any type of violence from their husbands in the preceding four months (Table 1). The prevalence of reported violence was greater among women from BRAC households compared to those from non-member households. The association between occurrence of violence and household's BRAC membership status was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

To explore the sociodemographic correlates of reported violence, a bi-variate analysis was performed (Table 2). Women from poor non-member households who were  $< 30$  years of age ( $p < 0.01$ ), and had no schooling ( $p < 0.001$ ) were significantly more likely to report violence compared to those from BRAC households. Currently alive children, exclusive engagement in household chores and contribution to household income was found not to be associated with reported violence, whether or not the women were from BRAC households.

We examined the household characteristics of the study women that might have an association with the reported occurrence of violence (Table 3). Women were found to be significantly more likely to suffer violence if they belonged to BRAC households headed by a person aged  $< 35$  years, or when the non-BRAC household's head earned livelihood through wage-labour. The other variables failed to show any association with reported violence.

In logistic regression, two models were tested (Table 4). In model I, the predictors of any type of violence were those identified significant in the bi-variate analysis, with the exception of household's perceived solvency which was added because of its importance as a self-rated poverty indicator. In addition, BRAC membership status of the households was added as a predictor in the model. In model II, this variable was replaced by 'type of membership'. This latter variable can be taken as a proxy for the quality of membership as well as duration of membership because with the ageing of membership, inputs like skill-training are gradually added to the intervention package. The results of logistic regression identified age (probability less as the age increases), years of schooling (probability less if the woman had some schooling), household head's occupation (probability more when the household head earns living from

wage labour) and household's perceived solvency (probability more if the woman hailed from a deficit household) as important predictors of domestic violence against women in both the models. Thus, the typical profile of the woman suffering from domestic violence looked like this: woman at her 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> decade of life who didn't have had any schooling and hailed from a deficit household where the household head lived by wage labour. In Model I, involvement in BRAC was found to be a risk factor for domestic violence. However, in the second Model, prevalence of violence rather lessened with the improvement of the depth of membership such as receiving skill-training for various income-earning activities in addition to involvement in savings and credit activities. This also indicates that the level of violence decreases with the duration of membership as capacity building training is usually given after a year or more of membership.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In Bangladesh, gender-based violence against women, especially within marriage, is not new. Extreme poverty, patriarchy, systematic discrimination since birth, illiteracy, early marriage, and unequal power relations make them vulnerable to such occurrences. Moreover, patrilocal marriage system, where young bride moves to the in-law's household away from her natal home, makes the situation worse. The health implications of domestic violence on woman's physical, emotional and reproductive well-being has drawn the attention of policy makers worldwide and warrant urgent attention. One way of prevention can be empowerment of the women through education and increasing income-earning opportunities in the context of a women-friendly social environment. In Bangladesh, micro-credit organizations are addressing these needs of the poor women for improving their status in the society and thereby empower them to achieve a better quality of life (25, 26, 27). This paper studied the effect of such an indigenous organization BRAC, on domestic violence against women and explored the underlying factors mediating such effect.

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

Multivariate analysis identified younger age as a risk factor for violence as found in other studies (28, 29) This is plausible in a culture like that in Bangladesh where early marriage is the norm. When a woman at her early teens enters into marital household leaving the security of natal home, she is thrown into an



unknown social realm and is in a vulnerable situation. The expectations of in-laws, especially mother-in-law, and husband regarding gender and social norms are still unknown and errors in failure to comply with results in violence. Also, the role of women's education in lessening violence found in the study is consistent with current knowledge (30, 31, 32). Education empowers women through social networking, increased self-confidence and capacity to use information and resources available in the society, besides being translated into income-earning. The study findings on the strong relationship between violence and poverty as reflected in reporting of greater violence among women from deficit households and labour-selling households, corroborate findings in the literature (28, 29, 30, 33, 34).

This study illuminates us about the dynamics of BRAC membership on the occurrence of violence within households. BRAC membership was associated with higher probability of domestic violence in the first model while in the second model, the probability of violence decreased with the depth of participation such as being involved in credit based income-generating activities, and capacity building of women through skill-training over time. Quite a few explanations may be put forward to address this observation. Membership in a credit group opens many windows of opportunities for women. It raises their level of awareness through group meetings, various educational interventions, and interactions in the public arena over time. The access to knowledge and information through membership also help women gain power and autonomy. Training for skill development accelerates this process. It places women in a position where they are better able to negotiate conflict and avoid violent situations with greater confidence, knowledge and information. Alternatively, it may be that the husbands become habituated to the economic role of women and initial resentment gives way to acceptance and even appreciation (?). The greater visibility of women in public domain related to participation in BRAC activities, and changing familial and societal attitude vis-à-vis their activities may make it less possible for the husbands to get away with violence without incurring social scorn. Hussain, et al. found that after being involved with BRAC for 4 years, women became independent and they could move freely; household violence reduced, and husbands did not dare to be too violent (25).

The current study contributed to the on-going debate on the relationship between micro-credit and domestic violence by reiterating the importance of the breadth (duration) and depth (quality) of membership in microcredit institutions for reducing violence against women perpetrated by the husband. It raised further possibilities for in-depth investigation on the dynamics and management of credit entering into the poor household, role of skill training on incidence of violence and how these interact in the context of micro-credit to affect the prevalence of domestic violence against women.



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Table 1: Reported prevalence of any type of violence\* among women (four months recall) by BRAC Membership status of households, Matlab 1999 (%)

	% women from		
	BRAC member households	Poor non-member households	All
Any violence	17.5	13.7	14.5
No violence	82.5	86.3	85.5
n	422	1622	2044
$\chi^2$ significance	$p=0.05$		

\* physical assault, verbal abuse, money/jewelry taken against will, prevented from going to natal home/ wage-earning work outside home, threat of divorce/second marriage etc.

Table 2: Sociodemographic characteristics of study women by reported occurrence of violence (four months recall) and BRAC Membership status of households, Matlab 1999 (%)

	% women from			
	BRAC member households		Poor non-member households	
	Any violence	Total (n)	Any violence	Total (n)
<u>Age (years)</u>				
≤ 30	21.2	137	17.1	684
30+	15.8	285	11.2	938
$\chi^2$ significance	ns		p<0.01	
<u>Years of schooling</u>				
None	18.7	262	15.1	1084
Some	15.6	160	10.8	538
$\chi^2$ significance	ns		p<0.05	
<u>Occupation</u>				
Household chores	17.6	404	13.8	1573
Others	16.7	18	10.2	49
$\chi^2$ significance	ns		ns	
<u>Currently alive children</u>				
No children	7.1	28	11.8	144
Have children	18.3	394	13.9	1478
$\chi^2$ significance	ns		ns	
<u>Contribution to household income</u>				
Yes	15.8	19	19.6	51
No	17.6	403	13.5	1571
$\chi^2$ significance	ns		ns	

Table 3: Household characteristics of study women by reported occurrence of violence (four months recall) and BRAC Membership status of households, Matlab 1999 (%)

	% women from			
	BRAC member households		Poor non-member households	
	Any violence	Total (n)	Any violence	Total (n)
<u>Household head's age (years)</u>				
≤ 35	31.3	80	15.8	399
35+	14.3	342	13.0	1223
$\chi^2$ significance	<i>p</i> <0.01		<i>ns</i>	
<u>Household head's years of schooling</u>				
None	18.8	256	14.2	1095
Some	15.7	166	12.5	527
$\chi^2$ significance	<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>	
<u>Household head's occupation</u>				
Wage labour	20.9	158	16.5	593
Others	15.5	264	12.1	1029
$\chi^2$ significance	<i>ns</i>		<i>p</i> <.005	
<u>Household's landholdings (decimals)</u>				
≤ 50	17.6	375	13.9	1514
50+	17.0	47	10.2	108
$\chi^2$ significance	<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>	
<u>Perceived economic solvency</u>				
Deficit households	22.2	180	15.3	770
Non-deficit households	14.0	242	12.2	852
$\chi^2$ significance	<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>	
<u>Family type</u>				
Nuclear	17.5	268	14.8	961
Other	17.5	154	12.1	661
$\chi^2$ significance	<i>ns</i>		<i>ns</i>	



Table 4: Odds ratios of factors predicting occurrence of any type of violence against women perpetrated by husbands, Matlab 1999.

	Model I (n= 2044 )	Model II (n= 1837)
<u>Age (years)</u>		
≤ 30	1.00	1.00
30+	0.55***	0.51***
<u>Years of schooling</u>		
None	1.00	1.00
Some	0.67**	0.63**
<u>Currently alive children</u>		
No children	1.00	1.00
Have children	1.46	1.32
<u>Household head's age (years)</u>		
≤ 35	1.00	1.00
35+	0.83	0.94
<u>Household head's occupation</u>		
Others	1.00	1.00
Wage labour	1.34*	1.33*
<u>Household's perceived solvency</u>		
Non-deficit household	1.00	1.00
Deficit household	1.36*	1.32(p=0.05)
<u>BRAC membership status</u>		
Eligible non-member	1.00	
BRAC member	1.48**	
<u>BRAC Membership type</u>		
Eligible non-member		1.00
Passive member (savings only)		1.29
Active member (savings+credit)		1.50
Skilled member (savings+credit+training)		0.66
<i>-2 log likelihood</i>	<i>1644.05</i>	<i>1413.76</i>
<i>Model Improvement</i>	<i>46.77***</i>	<i>36.64***</i>
<i>Overall predicted</i>	<i>85.5%</i>	<i>86.6%</i>

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$