



Does Intimate Partner Violence Decline as Women's Empowerment Becomes Normative? Perspectives of Bangladeshi Women



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SUMMARY

Studies addressing the relationship between women's empowerment and intimate partner violence (IPV) have yielded conflicting findings. Some suggest that women's economic and social empowerment is associated with an increased risk of intimate partner violence (IPV), arguably because men use often IPV to enforce their dominance and reassert inegalitarian gender norms when patriarchal norms are challenged; other studies suggest the converse. It is important to understand why these findings are contradictory to create a more sound basis for designing both women's empowerment interventions and anti-violence interventions. The aim of this study is to clarify the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV in a setting where gender roles are rapidly changing and IPV rates are high. We examine some of the ways in which the nature of women's empowerment evolved in six villages in rural Bangladesh during a 12-year period in which surveys have documented a decline of 11 points in the percentage of married women experiencing IPV in the prior year. The paper is based on data from 74 life history narratives elicited from 2011 to 2013 with recently married Bangladeshi women from the six villages, whom other community residents identified as empowered. Our findings suggest that women's empowerment has evolved in several ways that may be contributing to reductions in IPV: in its magnitude (for example, many women are earning more income than they previously did), in women's perceived exit options from abusive marriages, in the propensity of community members to intervene when IPV occurs, and in the normative status of empowerment (it is less likely to be seen as transgressive of gender norms). The finding that community-level perceptions of empowered women can evolve over time may go a long way in explaining the discrepant results in the literature.

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1. Introduction

Although the role of gender inequality in fostering intimate partner violence (IPV) is well documented, studies examining the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV provide mixed evidence as to whether IPV decreases as gender norms become more equitable; many recent studies have documented a positive relationship rather than the negative relationship that one might expect. Most definitions of empowerment involve women's acquisition of resources, agency, and the ability to make strategic life choices in a context of gender inequality (Kabeer, 1998, 1999, 2001; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Schuler & Islam, 2008). There is also broad agreement in the literature that empowerment is a process, involves awareness and sense of self as well as power (the direct exercise of power and the social norms and conventions that support its inequitable distribution), and operates at multiple levels, including the individual level, in interpersonal

relations, and through collective action (Rowlands, 1997; Kesby, 2005).

Quantitative measures of women's empowerment have included women's schooling, mobility, access to and control over economic resources (e.g., micro-credit, earnings, assets), and indices of autonomy or roles in decision-making. In a recent systematic review of studies from 41 sites (Vyas & Watts, 2009) household assets and women's education were generally found to be protective against IPV, but evidence about women's involvement in income generation was mixed. In other studies, a woman's control over resources was found to be protective (Dalal, 2011), but earning an income and contributing more than a nominal amount of income to household expenses appeared to put a woman at greater risk of IPV (Anderson, 1997; Hadi, 2000). In contrast, an analysis of two waves of data from the Indian National Family Health Survey found that both financial autonomy and freedom of movement reduces women's risk of IPV, but not in more

gender-stratified settings of north India (Sabarwal, Santhya, & Jejeebhoy, 2014).

Likewise, studies from Bangladesh have yielded mixed findings regarding the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV, with some evidence that it can vary depending on contextual factors. Female education generally correlates with a lower risk of IPV (Bates, Schuler, Islam, & Islam, 2004; Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain, & Mozumder, 2003; Amin, Khan, Rahman, & Naved, 2013), but several studies suggest that forms of women's empowerment such as earning an income or contributing more than a nominal amount of income to household expenses put a woman at greater risk of IPV (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Amin *et al.*, 2013; Naved & Persson, 2005). Another study found that being engaged in productive activities for fewer than five years was not associated with IPV, while women who were engaged in such activities for more than five years had a significantly lower risk of experiencing IPV (Hadi, 2005). A recent study in 60 villages near Dhaka, Bangladesh also found a correlation between women's work for pay and IPV risk, but only among women who marry earlier or have less education (Heath, 2014). Women involved in microcredit programs experienced higher levels of IPV in several studies (Bates *et al.*, 2004; Bhuiya, Sharmin, & Hanifi, 2003; Naved & Persson, 2005; Rahman, Hoque, & Makinoda, 2011) although one analysis suggests this may be attributable to selection bias (Bajracharya & Amin, 2013). The ambivalent findings on the relationship between women's economic empowerment and IPV may reflect variations in the extent to which women's economic participation is accompanied by opportunities for them to transcend the internalized oppression that restricts their perceived options (Rowlands, 1995).

Indices of a woman's autonomy/mobility, decision-making power, and control of resources were found to be positively associated with past-year physical violence in a region of Bangladesh that is known to be socially conservative in terms of adherence to longstanding gender norms (Koenig *et al.*, 2003), whereas, in another study in rural Bangladesh, women's autonomy was found to be associated with a lower risk of past-year physical violence (Hadi, 2005). A study using data from the 2007 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) found that violence against women increased with their greater involvement in household decision-making (Rahman *et al.*, 2011), as did a recent analysis controlling for endogeneity which used the same data set (Fakir, Anjum, Bushra, & Nawar, 2016), but another analysis also using the same data set found that an autonomy index comprised of 11 items related to decision-making, attitudes about IPV, and freedom of movement (Rahman, Nakamura, Seino, & Kizuki, 2013) was associated with a reduced risk of IPV.

Similar to what Jewkes, *et al.* found in the context of female education in South Africa (Jewkes, 2002; Jewkes, Levin, & Penn-Kekana, 2002), research in Bangladesh suggests that men sometimes use IPV to enforce their dominance and reassert inequalitarian gender roles in marriage when women begin to become empowered through micro-finance or income earning (Goetz & Gupta, 1996; Schuler, Hashemi, & Badal, 1998). Jewkes speculates that as women begin to become empowered they may start to question rigid gender roles but that their empowerment may not be sufficient to protect them from the repercussions of this questioning. This theory may explain the positive associations found between various aspects of women's empowerment and IPV in Bangladesh. However, much of the literature suggesting that women's empowerment increases Bangladeshi women's risk of IPV was conducted more than a decade ago, and most of it is based on cross-sectional studies in which women's empowerment is treated as a static variable. Rapid economic and social changes have been taking place in Bangladesh; for example, progress measured by the United Nations human development indicators (<http://hdr.undp.org>) and the Millennium Development Goals (www.socialwatch.org)

since the early 1990s has been notable particularly with regard to primary schooling, gender parity in education, poverty reduction, and a variety of health indicators. Recent analyses from a nationally representative survey of 3909 recently married women suggest that women's empowerment is now a protective factor against IPV in rural Bangladesh (Bates & Schuler, Unpublished data).

This paper presents recent qualitative findings from six villages where the primary author has been doing research since 1991 (Schuler, Lenzi, Nazneen, & Bates, 2013). The findings document a local perception that IPV in these villages has dropped dramatically in recent years, and a comparison of survey data from the six villages in 2002 ($N = 1212$) and 2014 ($N = 1031$) has confirmed this. During 2002–14, the rate of past-year IPV among all currently married women under age 50 dropped by 11 percentage points, from 36% to 25%; similarly, the percentage of women ever experiencing IPV from the time of their marriage to the time of the survey dropped from 68% to 55%. Additionally, although this could not be demonstrated with time invariant measures of women's empowerment, the six village findings, like the national findings cited above, suggest that women's empowerment has evolved from a risk factor to a factor protecting women from IPV (Field & Schuler, Unpublished data).

Through life history narratives, the women in the present study discuss the processes through which they became empowered, their experiences of IPV from the time of marriage, and the strategies they have used to avoid or respond to IPV. The aims of the study were: (1) to explore the social processes underlying a decline in rates of IPV during 2002–14; (2) to better understand the ambivalent findings in the literature regarding the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV; and (3) to explore changes in the nature of women's empowerment that may explain a recent quantitative finding suggesting that women's empowerment has evolved from a risk factor for IPV to a protective factor. Our theoretical framework is shown in Figure 1, below. We distinguish between “incipient empowerment”, where women's enhanced economic and social roles are viewed as transgressive of gender norms and men justify IPV on these grounds, to “normative” empowerment. The conflicting findings in the literature regarding the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV may reflect contextual differences in the degree to which women's empowerment is seen as transgressive versus normal across settings and time.

2. Methods

(a) Sites

The research sites are six villages in Magura, Faridpur, and Rangpur Districts in the Western and Northern parts of the country. Although not randomly selected, the villages and the districts in which they are located do not stand out within the context of rural Bangladesh (Bates *et al.*, 2004). The villages were poor, but not unusually so for rural Bangladesh. Most families had access to television, either owning one or watching at neighboring homes, and many people, particularly the young, and men, had mobile phones. The villages also were somewhat (but not unusually) socially conservative with regard to gender norms. Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were active in each village, working in areas such as micro-finance, primary health care, education, legal awareness and services, and the promotion of gender equity (Schuler *et al.*, 2013). Sources of employment for women included garment factories near two villages, a jute mill in one, various construction projects, tailoring (training had been provided), poultry raising (training provided), jobs as school teachers

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