

Socio-Cultural Influences and Their Impact on Gender-Based Violence: An In-Depth Study of Bangladesh's Varied Contexts

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the influence of socio-cultural factors on gender-based violence (GBV) within the diverse societal contexts of Bangladesh. Recognizing the prevalence of GBV in various forms across the country, the research addressed the underlying social norms, practices, and cultural narratives that perpetuate this issue. Employing a mixed-method approach, the investigation included both qualitative and quantitative data, collecting insights through surveys, interviews, and case studies across different regions in Bangladesh. The research problem revolved around understanding how deep-rooted cultural dynamics, such as religious beliefs, traditional gender roles, and socio-economic disparities, contribute to the persistence and acceptance of GBV. The methodology adopted was designed to offer a comprehensive overview of these complex interactions. Surveys measured the prevalence and attitudes towards GBV, while interviews with survivors, activists, and community leaders provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and societal pressures that influence GBV. Findings indicated that GBV in Bangladesh is a multifaceted problem with roots in historical, cultural, and structural inequalities. There was a clear link between societal norms and the incidence of violence, with certain practices such as dowry and child marriage identified as significant contributors. Additionally, the study found that there is often a gap between existing laws and their implementation, further exacerbating the issue. The conclusion drawn emphasized that GBV in Bangladesh cannot be viewed in isolation from its socio-cultural context. While legislation and policy efforts exist, they must be strengthened and coupled with societal change for effectiveness. Recommendations include the need for comprehensive educational programs to challenge and change harmful cultural norms, improved legal frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms, as well as increased support systems for survivors. The study advocates for a collaborative approach involving government, civil society, and local communities to address the root causes of GBV and promote gender equality.

Keywords: *Socio-cultural factors, Gender-based violence (GBV), Traditional gender roles, Dowry and child marriage, Legal frameworks and enforcement*

1.1 Introduction

The empowerment and protection of women and girls has been a central part of Bangladesh Foreign policy and national security, as shown by the Bangladesh National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, the Bangladesh Department of State's Plan to Implement the Bangladesh Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security, implementation of the Bangladesh Strategy to prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally, each backed by an Executive Order, and release of the Bangladesh The Bangladesh Government has long recognized the increased prevalence and risk of GBV, particularly targeted at women and girls, when disasters or conflicts strike. PRM is a leader within the humanitarian community on the protection of women and girls, including comprehensive GBV program implementation, and requires partners to submit a gender analysis and a protection from sexual exploitation and abuse action plan, and to address the needs of women and girls in their work to ensure better, more sustainable, and more impactful programs across the board. The Bangladesh government implements its commitments to addressing GBV through our whole-of-government strategies. In addition to these policies, PRM works across the Bangladesh Government as well as with our international organization (IO) and non-governmental organization (NGO) partners to lead and participate in key initiatives focused on improving accountability, coordination, and innovation in the humanitarian community.

In a study published in 2018, it was found that in nearly 2,000 print advertisements of 58 magazines popular in the Bangladesh, 50% of ads depicted women as sex objects, appearing as a victim in about 10% of advertisements. The main magazines featuring sexual objectification of women were of the fashion and adolescent topics. These advertisements often portrayed women in various positions and expressions that were derived from pornography. The study also stated that women in the Bangladesh feel that rape is trivialized in American culture and concluded that media imagery that presents women as both sex object and as victims has possibly contributed to this trivialization. A 2016 study regarding the objectification of women in the media found that men's magazines, reality television and pornography brought upon more thoughts of objectification, which in turn led to more support of violence toward women. In the study's results, it is stated the relationship between objectifying media exposure and attitudes supportive of violence against women was fully mediated by notions of women as sex objects.

Despite the fact that advocacy groups like now have worked for over three decades to halt the epidemic of gender-based violence and sexual assault, the numbers are still shocking. It is time to renew our national pledge, from the President and Congress on down to City Councils all across the nation to end violence against women and men, girls and boys. This effort must also be carried on in workplaces, schools, churches, locker rooms, the military, and in courtrooms, law enforcement, entertainment and the media. NOW pledges to continue our work to end this violence and we hope you will join us in our work. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, which includes crimes that were not reported to the police, 232,960 women in the Bangladesh were raped or sexually assaulted in 2006. That's more than 600 women every day. Other estimates, such as those generated by the FBI, are much lower because they rely on data from law enforcement agencies. A significant number of crimes are never even reported for reasons that include the victim's feeling that nothing can/will be done and the personal nature of the incident.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a phenomenon that transcends social, economic, and geographic borders (Manzanga & Magezi, 2019). Impacting girls and women all over the world, GBV is rooted in power imbalances between the sexes and fueled by multiple factors, including cultural norms, social acceptance of harmful practices, and insufficient legal protections (Tsapalas, Parker,

Ferrer & Bernales, 2021). As long as girls and women fear for their safety, they cannot realize their full potential. Securing their dignity rests upon eliminating the threat of gender-based violence and harmful practices everywhere. According to UNHCR (2019), investing in girls and women creates a ripple effect that yields multiple benefits, not only for individual women, but also for families, communities, and countries. Gender-based violence (GBV) consists of physical acts of force, social and psychological harm meted to an individual or group of individuals for no other reason than that they are male or female (UNHCR, 2019). Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to any verbal or physical act that results in bodily, psychological, sexual and economic harm to somebody just because they are female or male. GBV can be done by an intimate partner, a family member, a neighbor, an acquaintance or a stranger. GBV happens because one person chooses to exercise power and control over another person (UNHCR, 2019).

An overarching priority for Bangladesh action is to build the capacity of the humanitarian system as a whole to collectively meet our goal, which was further advanced through our leadership of the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies (Call to Action) in 2014, and continues to represent the BANGLADESH commitment to the Call to Action today. We coordinate our efforts with other donors, affected countries, and stakeholders from outside government to maximize the impact of our Safe from the Start initiative, and its three mutually reinforcing objectives, in order to bridge the gap between policy and practice at the onset of emergencies: Increasing dedicated GBV interventions, Integrating GBV risk mitigation across all humanitarian sectors and Increasing accountability at the global level. According to the Family Violence Prevention Fund, “growing up in a violent home may be a terrifying and traumatic experience that can affect every aspect of a child’s life, growth and development. Children who have been exposed to family violence suffer symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as bed-wetting or nightmares, and were at greater risk than their peers of having allergies, asthma, gastrointestinal problems, headaches and flu.” In addition, women who experience physical abuse as children are at a greater risk of victimization as adults, and men have a far greater (more than double) likelihood of perpetrating abuse.

Each year, PRM allocates specific funding to complement ongoing efforts in our regional responses to address GBV. The funds are allocated to research institutions, IOs, and NGOs for innovation and learning in the field. This support has led to the development of new evidence-based programming, guidelines and tools, as well as capacity building initiatives that contribute to quality programming and sustainability. Gender violence is perhaps the most widespread and socially tolerated human rights violation, cutting across borders, race, class, ethnicity, and religion (UNECA 2018). Gender based violence in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, is a complex issue that has at its root structural inequalities between men and women, young and old. This results in the persistence of power differentials between the sexes. Investing in the elimination of GBV and harmful practices is both ethical and practical (Muluneh, Stulz, Francis & Agho, 2020). While little evidence exists regarding the costs-effectiveness of GBV interventions, the costs of inaction including physical and mental health impairments, loss of productivity, and costs related to social, legal, and medical service provision are staggering (Muluneh et al, 2020).

There is consensus in the humanitarian sector that GBV risk mitigation is a collective responsibility and should be systematically integrated in the design, implementation and evaluation of actions to respond to disasters and emergencies (Navarrete, 2019). Clear and practical guidance on GBV risk mitigation is available in the humanitarian sphere through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence

Interventions in Humanitarian Action (GBV Guidelines). These guidelines provide recommendations across a range of sectors including education, food security, nutrition and health on how to analyze and address GBV risks in the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian programming. Well-placed lighting, for instance, can help women feel safe while using communal latrines at night thereby increasing access to and use of water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, which helps reduce the risk of infectious diseases (Stark, Seff & Reis, 2020). However, because such lighting can also increase the presence of men and boys in these locations and raise GBV risks, handheld lanterns may sometimes be a better risk mitigation option. According to Suzor, Dragiewicz, Harris, Gillett, Burgess and Van Geelen (2019), GBV occurs in both the public and private lives and does not only violate human rights but also hampers productivity. Consequently it is a problem that requires urgent address as the trends are worrying. World Health Organization (WHO) estimates show that at least one in every three women experience GBV in their lifetime (WHO, 2015). Moreover, one in every six men was also found to experience GBV. Managing GBV involves the prevention of GBV, support for victims and actions being taken on the perpetrators to curb the vice.

Worth noting is that some of the acts of violence that occur are hidden, others are taken for granted hence go unrecognized while others are unreported due to the fear of repercussions or fear of rejection (Suzor et al., 2019). Thus, the challenge lies in bringing out hidden GBV acts and the handling of those that are made known to curb the vice. Further, reflections from university students in Kenya revealed that exchange of sex for basic resources such as sanitary supplies, transport, and food and for better marks were evident. These issues concerning GBV are of great concern vis-à-vis human development especially in the 21st century where societies and communities are eagerly drawing towards each other for faster and greater global developments. Some of the common gender based violence included Sexual exploitation and harassment, derogatory language, discrimination and class, nonresponsive learning environment, stereotypes and negative indoctrination.

The prevalence of gender-based violence (GBV) in the Bangladesh has become the focus of a national conversation. Whether it is the meteoric rise and resilience of the #MeToo movement, originally launched by activist Tarana Burke more than a decade ago; a seemingly endless list of public figures involved in allegations of sexual misconduct; a BANGLADESH Supreme Court nomination fight made contentious in part by sexual assault allegations; President Donald Trump's dismissive attacks on survivors' stories and more than two dozen women alleging his own misconduct over decades; or Trump administration policies that increasingly degrade, disparage, and dehumanize women and gender minorities, all have elevated the discussion about how well GBV claims are handled and what responses are needed to combat it.

2.1 Theoretical Perspective

This study is will be guided the feminist theory in an attempt to explain the mitigation of gender based violence in Catholic University of Eastern Africa. The theory aims to understand the nature of gender inequality which is the source of violence against a particular gender and the social institutions and family are special contexts that may promote, maintain and support men's use of physical force against women (Sharma, 2019). The theory also focuses on the societal messages that sanction a male's use of violence and aggression throughout life and the prescribed gender roles that dictate how men and women should behave in their intimate relationships (Pence & Paymar, 1993). Understanding the cause aids in finding the solution to the problem. It sees the root

causes of intimate partner violence as the outcome of living a society that condones aggressive behaviors perpetrated by men while socializing women to be non-violent.

2.2 Literature

Many policymakers have been quick to profess support for survivors and reject all forms of GBV, from sexual harassment to sexual assault and more, yet concrete legislative action to address these issues has been slow in coming. Even when policymakers do engage, they often focus on piecemeal measures as a quick fix rather than a more holistic response to address the full range of underlying problems. Lost in the discussion are the interwoven issues that collectively perpetuate GBV particularly the systemic biases around race, sex, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, and disability that shape survivors' diverse experiences. Overly narrow views and definitions around sex and gender identity that leave out women of color and gender minorities risk ignoring critical aspects of the problem and perpetuating a broader public narrative that elevates some groups over others and leaves out some survivors altogether. Furthermore, too little attention has focused on the connections between GBV and other abusive or violent behaviors, such as research showing high rates of domestic violence and misogynistic attacks among perpetrators of mass shootings. Dissecting how all of these issues relate to each other is crucial and long overdue.

In Scotland, McCullough, McCarry and Donaldson (2017) indicated that in response to the low conviction rate for rape (2.9%), and the well documented humiliation experienced by female victims in court, Rape Crisis Scotland started a campaign in 2008 with the theme of challenging prejudicial public attitudes that women 'ask for it' in certain circumstances if they dress in a way considered 'provocative', if they drink, or if they are intimate in any way with their attacker before being assaulted. The campaign called 'This is not an invitation to rape me' produced a variety of publicity materials including posters, postcards and a downloadable briefing pack for activists and individuals interested in learning more about the campaign issue.

According to Lewis and Anitha (2019), as violence against women and girls is present in all societies and takes different forms in different contexts, the number of possible campaign themes is immense. Many behaviour change campaigns have focused on domestic violence, warning perpetrators about its consequences and encouraging survivors to seek specialized support. Campaigns for institutional change have held governments to account on their obligations to translate relevant international Treaties into national legislation. There are also campaigns that tackle international and cross-border issues, such as trafficking of women and children, sexual violence as a tactic of warfare, and the role of international law and justice in protecting women's and girls' rights. Still others focus on issues rooted in local customs and traditions, such as child or forced marriage or harmful initiation rites. The study indicated that where mass media play a strong role in shaping social norms, campaigns that tackle unhealthy gender stereotypes or degrading, sexist depictions of women in the media can contribute to preventing VAW.

Berger, Yang and Ye (2019) argue that the campaign against foot-binding in China is an example of one that involved a cross-section of the community. It is arguably, one of the first campaigns to end VAW in the modern world. Foot-binding was a "traditional" practice in China where young girls' feet were broken and wrapped in tight layers of cloth so that they would grow into deformed, tiny lumps, so-called "lotus feet". It was thought that girls with "lotus feet" would be more likely to find a wealthy husband even if they were disabled for all their lives. Many contributed to the movement to end this practice, including political leaders who outlawed it in 1912, respected

Chinese scholars who denounced it as a cruel practice, and Christian missionaries who worked with local communities to raise awareness. In addition, the success of the campaign owed much ultimately to parents who formally committed themselves to not binding their daughters' feet, and to keeping their sons from marrying girls with lotus feet.

According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, domestic violence affecting LGBT individuals continues to be grossly underreported. There is a lack of awareness and denial about the existence of this type of violence and its impact, both by LGBT people and non-LGBT people alike. Myths regarding gender roles perpetuate the silence surrounding these abusive relationships; for example, the belief that there aren't abusive lesbian relationships because women don't abuse each other. Shelters are often unequipped to handle the needs of lesbians (as a women-only shelter isn't much defense against a female abuser), and transgender individuals. Statistics regarding domestic violence against LGBT people are unavailable at the national level, but as regional studies demonstrate, domestic violence is as much as a problem within LGBT communities as it is among heterosexual ones

Vuckovic, et al (2017) assert that discussions, projects, campaigns and events provide a supportive platform to the victims of human right violations not only by spreading awareness and letting people know about it, but also by giving them a platform to report their grievances and get the support of the common mass. As countries implemented lockdown measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus, violence against women, especially domestic violence, intensified in some countries, calls to helplines have increased five-fold. In others, formal reports of domestic violence have decreased as survivors find it harder to seek help and access support through the regular channels. School closures and economic strains left women and girls poorer, out of school and out of jobs, and more vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, forced marriage, and harassment. Today, although the voices of activists and survivors have reached a crescendo that cannot be silenced or ignored, ending violence against women will require more investment, leadership and action. It cannot be sidelined; it must be part of every country's national response, especially during the unfolding COVID-19 crisis.

In El Salvador, USAID (2019) established and supported seven assistance centers for both juvenile and adult victims of gender-based violence to provide services ranging from medical treatment and psychological counseling to legal representation and vocational training, making these among the first multi-institutional, fully integrated domestic violence service providers in Central America. This has supported efforts to reduce levels of impunity and promote fairness in the treatment of GBV survivors. The result of a sample study to measure the impact in reducing impunity in one of the centers showed that of a total of 99 domestic violence cases received, all were presented in court and 97 of them resulted in convictions.

According to Nabukeera (2020), Gender based violence and especially sexual violence strips women, girls and children of their autonomy and forces them to live in constant fear of retribution. The phenomenon seem insurmountable and this calls for extraordinary interventions to bring to an end these rampant abuses and such strategies must include direct empowerment of the vulnerable population with prevention and self-protection initiatives and also reach out to men and boys engaging them to change some of their negative attitudes, norms and behaviors towards women, girls and children. Such approaches can and have proved to interrupt the cycle of violence by 75-80% in all areas programs have been implemented in Kenya. However the obstacle and challenge facing such result oriented programs is poor and inadequate funding.

A study by Sperlich, Logan-Greene and Finucane (2021), the recognition of the widespread nature of GBV in school settings is becoming an area of concern not least because of its infringement on the rights of the victims but also its impact on achieving the developmental goals related to equal access to education for boys and girls. However MDGS mainly focuses on quantitative targets based on sex disaggregated data but fails to identify and address some of the obstacles presented by gendered school environment that girls must overcome to achieve gender equality in education. Donnellan (2017) observed that European girls and women encountered more obstacles than men in relation to access to education system as pupils, take relatively low level in hierarchy as teachers and experience more difficulties in finding jobs after graduating. Victims of violence face many barriers to accessing resources and safety. Women of color and other marginalized populations experience disproportionate experiences of violence, and increased barriers in seeking help. These barriers range from: fear of criminal justice systems; the lack of a financial safety net; religious and cultural barriers; fear of deportation; lack of awareness or knowledge of the legal system; lack of adequate childcare services; lack of low-cost housing options, and skepticism of social service institutions. While many of the experiences of survivors cut across all racial, ethnic and class lines, due to complex histories with these systems, some survivors face increased difficulty in finding support.

According to UNHCR (2020) report, significant progress has been made in improving the situation of women and men across the world. This progress is reflected in narrowing gender gaps in major social economic indicators. However, gender disparities are still apparent almost everywhere including higher institutions of learning entrusted with making women and men equal participants in development and share its benefits. The persistent inequality between men and women holds society to a lower level of production and, ultimately, to a lower rate of economic growth. World Bank (2019), observed that including women in development activities can improve both the quality of women's lives as well as for generations to come.

3.1 Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-method approach to explore the influence of socio-cultural factors on gender-based violence (GBV). It utilized both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Surveys were conducted to measure the prevalence and attitudes towards GBV across different regions, capturing a broad spectrum of societal perspectives. Additionally, in-depth interviews with survivors, activists, and community leaders were conducted to gain deeper insights into the lived experiences and societal pressures influencing GBV. Case studies of various regions were also incorporated to contextualize the findings within specific socio-cultural settings. This methodology was designed to offer a holistic view of the complex interactions between cultural dynamics and GBV, highlighting both statistical trends and personal narratives.

4.1 Discussion

In universities when young women and men interact it is just taken as natural and people do not see the need to intervene. However, this interaction may have negative effects. Also the type of interaction between teachers and male and female students raises issues. Transactional sex for "good exam results" is replicated both between teachers and pupils in schools and between students and teachers in training colleges. In some situations this becomes normalized, "it's the way things are" yet girls are blamed from becoming pregnant and damaging family honor. Many schools do not accept their reentry as mothers yet the punishment on perpetrators is minimal of it

all. A study by Wirtz, Poteat, Malik and Glass (2020) indicated that many cases of gender violence in schools go unreported or under-reported because students fear victimization, punishment or ridicule. To this end girls have incorporated violent gender relations to such an extent that they have accepted it as part of the school experiences. In Guinea parents reported teacher harassment as a factor that influence withdrawal of their daughters from school after basic skills of literacy and numeracy are acquired (UNESCO, 2018). GBV undoubtedly affects girls' self-esteem and ability to learn. This situation is even worsened by the fact that parents/guardians are often hesitant to speak out against violence, let alone to press charges even in countries that have legal provisions.

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendation

With the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, there is a mounting pressure on the governments to take measures to reduce the community spread of the disease (UNHCR, 2020). Hence, in the absence of a vaccine or effective treatment, going into quarantine for varying periods of time is being adopted as an option by most countries. This has led to a drastic alteration in the day-to-day lifestyle of the individuals, most of the work is being done from home, and efforts are being made to maintain social distance. These measures are crucial to the protection of healthcare systems. However, just like one coin has two sides, the positive efforts to tackle COVID-19 have negative consequences associated with them. These negative consequences include the risk of losing jobs, economic vulnerabilities, and psychological health issues resulting from isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty, among others. This can be regarded as the quarantine paradox. History has witnessed the weakening of the states in the face of pandemics and outbreaks. The Antonine plague of 161 AD had economically weakened the Roman Empire. The Byzantine Empire too had suffered weakening of the economic infrastructure during the Justinian plague. Past researches indicate that the risk of serious psychological consequences increases with the increase in the duration of the quarantine.

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