



Expected & Normalised:

Emerging Evidence of the Links Between
Women, Violence & Displacement on the
Jamuna Chars, Bangladesh



UNIVERSITY OF
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In May 2019, the University of Portsmouth (UoP) led a mixed methods study focused on displacement effected Jamuna riverine char communities, gathering local voices, evidence and experiences of violence¹ following the 2018 floods. Focused on women, although community men were also interviewed, the results were stark.

Like the flooding itself, violence at a household level is expected and normalised by both the men and women of the chars, with violence increasing post-flooding when already extreme poor households are under significant further stress. Although the emerging evidence points to a community network that supports each other in times of community crisis, such as flooding and the related erosion, with little apparent NGO or government support, violence continues and increases for these women post-displacement. Evidence would also indicate an ebb and flow of violence levels over the year and across a char women's life.

Funded by the UoP, this study builds on a similar multi-country ESRC DFID funded *Women, Violence & Displacement* study in Myanmar and Nepal (2018-2019). Professor Tamsin Bradley from UoP led the study, supported by Kate Conroy and Rafique Islam. Local data collection was undertaken by Grameen Bikash Foundation (GBF), Bangladesh.

Methods

Undertaken during May – June 2019, prior to the 2019 floods and *monga* season in Bogra and Sirajganj, this study was mixed methods, with 433 household level interviews (356 female / 77 male) and 26 in-depth interviews covering 13 villages. While this main data collection phase has been completed, the study will continue to track a number of char women (*Displacement Narrators*) over the coming year through regular qualitative interviews. All enumerators were fully trained prior to data collection², with mixed male / female enumeration teams.³

The questionnaire was piloted and refined by the team within char communities and was purposively designed to allow for potential underreporting of violence at the household level. Specific questions were asked to women to reflect on levels of violence within her family, her neighbours, as well as herself. All quotes below are reported verbatim from interviewees, although have been anonymised.

The chars & char households

Considered one of the poorest regions of Bangladesh, the chars (island sand bars) are formed of annual riverine and deltaic deposits during the monsoon season (June – September) from the Brahmaputra, Ganges and Meghna rivers. The chars are highly dynamic – created and washed away overnight by annual flooding that is both a blessing and curse for the households that live there.

¹ By violence we mean all forms of violence from psychological, physical, mental, verbal and sexual etc.

² All enumerators received training on how to conduct interviews safely, and to reduce chances of re-traumatisation by interviewees.

³ It should be noted that for safety mixed enumeration teams were fielded.

While the chars are habitable, the flooding inundates the whole char region making char dwellers lives highly prone to environmental instability, and subject to significant asset, income and consumption fluctuations, damaging coping strategy usage, and seasonal migration for work. Typically, the most vulnerable within the char communities live often at the very edges of the islands themselves: the areas at the most immediate risk of floods, erosion and further displacement. Meaning that the poorest of the extreme poor in Bangladesh often experience the greatest deprivations during the floods.

While the predominantly subsistence farmers or workers give thanks to the rich nutrients the annual flooding provides for their crops, with multiple crops per season being possible, char people have often experienced multiple environmental displacements over their life. These displacements can be as dramatic as the floods themselves, with homes, fields and whole chars washed away overnight, with many char folk songs telling stories of how a rich man can become a poor man overnight through the loss of fields, cattle and crops. The floods not only erode land away but also livelihoods, meaning a dramatic reduction in household income and seasonal employment opportunities. In parallel increases in morbidity rates are seen, as with the flooding so comes waterborne diseases, such as dysentery and diarrhoea, made all the worse by a lack of basic services on the chars. Following the monsoon floods comes *monga* (the hunger season), which can be prolonged and intensified by the severity of the earlier floods. During this period, between the planting and the harvesting of the *aman* (rice) crop from September to November employment opportunities are seriously depressed, affecting households severely.

While the flooding and the later *monga* is predictable to a degree no-one knows if, and perhaps more importantly the depth of how, their household will be affected one year to the next. At the community level, all these factors have a compounding effect for households and their abilities to respond, with many falling into using highly damaging coping strategies (such as reducing the quality and quantity of food consumed, selling off assets etc.) to survive. This is the baseline situation for most char dwellers, a constant precarious balance of shocks and survival.

Household & Displacement Overview

Based 30 minutes by boat from Sariakandi ghat, households interviewed have broadly typical char dwellers characteristics. Overwhelmingly men and women interviewed were either farmers (38% and 33%) or had wage employment (57% and 53%) as their main sources of income. 43% of men and 54% of women interviewed had never attended school and all respondents had lived somewhere else beyond their current homestead, with 60% having come from another char. Many households had been displaced multiple times, with 60% of households having been displaced between one to five times in their lifetimes, with a small number having been displaced over 10 times.

Perceptions of Violence

Perceptions of violence can vary from context to context, person to person. To understand this on the chars, we asked a range of questions, covering personal perceptions of violence against women from psychological, physical, to sexual to all 433 interviewees: men and women alike.

The results were startling, across 22 forms of violence against women, ranging from intimidating women, to kicking, beating or dragging women to marital rape, over 90% of male self-reported responses across most categories did not acknowledge that any those forms of violence constituted violence against women. The only form of violence against women, as perceived by men, with 100% in agreeance was ‘rape by a stranger’.

		Male %	Female %
Inter-marital rape?	Yes	2.7	94.6
	No	97.3	5.4
Rape by a stranger?	Yes	100	100
	No	0	0
Sexual harassment?	Yes	2.7	100
	No	97.3	0

Table 1: Is this a form of violence against women?

Conversely 90%+ of women interviewed across categories agreed that these all were many forms of violence against women.

Male violence for char women is normalised, routine and often anticipated. Revealing the factors underlying and constructing male dominance was not the focus of this research but other work clearly links patriarchy to wider cultural and religious values (Bradley and Kirmani 2017).

Key findings:

- Women have a high level of awareness over what constitutes violence and its many forms.
- Men however only recognise certain behaviours as instances of violence.
- Marital rape, in particular, is overwhelming not seen by men as an act of violence.

Violence and Displacement

Both the quantitative and qualitative data was unequivocal, overwhelmingly women reported significant tension and stress since the 2018 floods. Confirmed by the qualitative data, over three quarters of the women interviewed through the household survey reported this. When asked who suffered the most, 63% of interviewed women suggested that it was adult women, versus 13% suggesting children, with the results inversed when the men were asked the same question, with 13% of men suggested adult women and 61% suggesting children.

While there may be significant underreporting against forms of violence at a personal level, patterns of reporting by women from the evidence follow a fairly similar trend. Across most forms of violence, there would be significant levels of women (between 65% - 90%) stating that their neighbour had experienced a specific type of violence, often reducing slightly when discussing whether this had happened to any of her family, and about halving when talking about herself. For those that had reported forms of violence being perpetrated against them, about a half to two thirds said this had happened in the last year. And between 10-20% of this group across most forms of violence had experienced this since the displacement. Some key, and worrying, figures reported by char women include:

“My husband is usually a good person, but after coming from field work or when there is no money in his pocket then his temper remains hot and shows anger even at little things. Then, I am afraid to talk much with him.”

“During the last river erosion, his mood was too bad, there was no money in his hands, and so he had faced severe financial crises to bear the cost due to the river erosion.”

- 80% of women confirmed that at one point they had experienced slapping or having an object thrown at them, with 50% of this group saying it had happened in the last year.
- 73% of women stated that they had experienced marital rape at one time, with 60% of women stating this had happened in the last year.
- 31% of women had been kicked, dragged or beaten.
- 21% of women stated that a neighbour had been raped by a stranger.

How common is violence, who are the perpetrators and what are the triggers for violence?

Ninety-nine percent of men reported that violence was ‘neither common nor uncommon’, ‘uncommon’ or ‘very uncommon,’ and yet over 50% of men report that up to 25% of village women suffer violence, with 54% aware that women within their families are suffering violence. Yet, over 89% of women stated that up to 50% of women in their communities had ever suffered violence, and 71% in their families.

Most char women interviewed (nearly 90%) state that their husbands are the most typical perpetrators of violence (intimate partner violence (IPV)), with 57% of men also confirming this. Interestingly, while 43% of interviewed men stated that ‘other family members’ were the most typical perpetrators of violence, only 7% of women reported this. This could point to how men view their households and violence – perceiving their own mother’s as key perpetrators of some forms of violence and reducing their own culpability.

But what triggers this violence? Extreme poverty, perhaps itself triggered by displacement or lack of

“There is no way to return to my father’s home, so I have to adapt with this family. I will keep sorrows in my heart and behave well with smiling face”

work or other factors, is the constant and key trigger for violence, mentioned over and over by the char women in both qualitative and quantitative data sets. They also overwhelmingly reported this as being by their husband. Char women worry post displacement about the lack of jobs and income for their husbands, increased prices for basic commodities, the debt cycle, and repeatedly talk about how they try not to challenge their husbands at times of stress, to avoid being hit, beaten or verbally abused.

There is an enduring sense of insecurity by all at the time of the floods. The security of women and girls outside the home during the floods is seen as a repeated issue by many. With many stating that if they suffer from a ‘river break’ it is safer for them to move as groups of households, rather than individually to stop potential attacks.

Non-displacement related violence included cases of violence related being able to have a son, gambling, dowry (either lack of or lack of full payment), and to some degree harassment from mother-in-laws.

‘Ages’ of violence

The experiences of violence that char women described in this study often reflected key stages in their lives. Marriage and entry into another household being a key stage or possible flashpoint where violence may increase or not, until the household is perhaps put under stress due to displacement or other shock later on. Most, if not all, women surveyed in-depth reported flaring violence due to these shocks, and as children were born and grew up, sometimes the children themselves offered protections against their father’s physical violence. As the household aged, and

husband's bodies would grow weary with back breaking work, sometimes the power dynamics shifted with the once violent husband now dependent on the wife for support.

Perhaps significantly, early marriage is seen as a significant household coping strategy, with marriage being the key point in any char woman's life. Marry rich or marry poor and your life trajectory is broadly set. Many of the women interviewed in-depth married between the age of 10 to 14, with children often coming soon after. In addition to other considerations, early marriage is also seen as a means of keeping girls safe, as there is a perceived risk if unmarried and they are left alone as they age, they are vulnerable to stranger attack.

Key findings:

- Violence against women increases during and post displacement, mainly triggered by deeper poverty.
- Wives adapt their behaviour at home to minimise the risk of being beaten etc.
- Violence is more acute in nuclear (single) families than in joint households.
- There are ages of violence for women, during which she may be more likely to be a victim of violence.
- Marriage is a critical juncture for women.

Responses to violence & displacement

Across both the qualitative and quantitative interviews, most people spoke of the current lack of services across the chars, either tailored to supporting women or more broadly supporting emergency or development interventions.

Many char women spoke of the power of community to respond to the displacement crisis, packing up homes, travelling and relocating together. Often citing safety as an important issue of doing this together.

While a limited number of women spoke of some forms of limited NGOs support to alleviate the flood impact (grants of two to three thousand taka), not one reported any local support (government or NGO) to responding to violence. Meaning that whether they think it effective or not, women often look internally within their families for support should violence occur, then escalating to local community or religious leaders if needed. With a few exceptions, many char women acknowledged a lack of parental support in crisis, due to their parents own poverty.

“During the movement there was more trouble and loss. We call people besides us to carry the tin roof on the boat and we gathered valuable things quickly. Neighbours helped us otherwise we could not have saved ourselves and the river would have flushed away all our household things. We helped others in the same way. This is a common thing in the Chars area”

All interviewed were asked a series of questions relating to the effectiveness of a suggested response to tackling violence. Tellingly, 80% of women and 42% of men believed that *‘doing what the person wants’* was effective at reducing violence, with 45% of men and 35% of women thought not talking to anyone in the hope that the situation may get better was an ‘effective’ or ‘very effective’ response. Similarly, 61% of men and 50% of women thought not socialising outside of the homestead was an effective response.

Corresponding with the sense of community around displacement over 90% of women and men thought speaking to either a community or religious leader was also 'effective' or 'very effective'. Interestingly, both men and women on the chars felt that while NGO and other support services were broadly absent on the chars that they would be effective in reducing violence against women. Three quarters of women thought that a female peer network was urgent and important to minimise violence.

Despite the high levels of reported violence above, and perceived roots of support, only 7% of women had sought support, which only in part can be explained by the lack of support services, and might also possibly indicate the stigma around talking about violence with others/

Key findings:

- Whilst women acknowledge that violence increases post displacement they suffer largely in silence.
- Families help each other pack and unpack possessions and resettle however there is little evidence that networks exist to support survivors of violence.
- None of the respondents reported an organisation working in the area on violence against women.
- There is little evidence of strategy or challenge to violence beyond submission and silence, yet, women are very acutely aware of the high levels of violence they endure.
- Very little support is available from NGOs or government. The support that is given focuses on distributing food and shelter around displacement issues, or perhaps an old age safety net, violence against women is not responded or acknowledged.

What happened during the 2019 floods?

Qualitative interviews from our Displacement Narrators (in August 2019), showed the devastation of the floods this year across our village sites. Following the floods, approximately 500 households across four of our sample villages (Nayapara, Koromjapara, Dhanerpara, Shimulbari, and Chalk Rothinath) had to move to completely different villages (Sherpur and Sujatpur). Nearly all the households in Rajbari and Khas Rajbari villages also had to move within their own char.

Narrators also reported that the loss land and crops by flood has created a scarcity of food, which is causing severe tension. As flood flowed over homesteads, there has been no opportunity to earn income, produce crops, and raise livestock, with households worrying how they will manage to pay for food, and with no savings for seed, fertiliser or feed. Many have had to sell their livestock and are faced both with low prices and a limited number of buyers. During this time, morbidity rates have also increased, with people suffering from dysentery and diarrhoea and not able to afford treatment.

Over the period, women have suffered physical and mental abuse by their husbands, parents-in-law and, in some cases, by other members of the family. As yet, they have not faced any sexual harassment by the community or by the family members. Significantly while there are no NGOs (etc.) supporting households through this crisis, some families have sent their young and teenage girls to their relatives' houses for perceived safely reasons and to avoid '*unexpected harassment*'.

What have we learnt through this study?

We believe that the results speak, quite literally, for themselves.

We have learnt that women are extremely vulnerable to increased levels of IPV post displacement. We learnt that they are exposed without any external support or resource and with no means to build resilience to it. Women have no choice but to endure violence until the situation settles and things become more secure and their husbands feel able to support their families again. We learnt that age has a significant impact on a women's vulnerability to different forms of violence. We have learnt of the high levels of all forms of violence experienced by women throughout her life.

Whilst our study is still a work in progress, with rich data sets that can be mined further, our key learnings are striking and certainly evidences the urgent need to address violence against women on the chars: not only during displacement but throughout the yearly challenges a char women faces.

Programming implications

The chars themselves have been a major focus of the international community, with hundreds of millions of pounds poured in by DFID, USAID and other donors over the last 20 years. These interventions have attempted to tackle the high levels of extreme poverty, inter-generational poverty transmission and improve the resilience of households to support themselves through the floods and related *monga* season. Yet still extreme poverty is experienced, still poverty is transmitted from generation to generation, still numerous households 'just survive' the floods, and still women ensure levels of violence that are both as expected and normalised through their lives as the floods themselves.

The emerging evidence from this study shows that there is strong evidence base for practitioners to assume violence against women will increase with environmental displacement, and that she will face differing forms and depths of violence frequently throughout her life. The evidence base also points to IPV as the main source of violence.

What do these emerging findings mean for policy and programming in Bangladesh and beyond?

Key questions emerge around how violence against women can be reduced in existing and future programming, and more broadly at the policy level. These include:

1. How can women and girls be accounted for and become more 'visible' in programming?
2. Can key points in both a project/programme lifecycle and a women's own life be identified as specific flash points for tension and violence?
3. What measures can be undertaken to respond to these flashpoints (etc.) that go beyond a tick-box approach? I.e. design approaches go beyond a basic targeting of household women for programme inputs.
4. How can useful and usable evidence related to this be captured ethically and rapidly to support programming adaptations?

Mainstreaming Violence Against Women Girls Approaches in Programming

These questions point to the need to mainstream violence against women and girls (VAWG) approaches within all programmes, and not just within explicitly gender focused programming. How can this be done?

Policy makers and practitioners need to reflect on *if, how and in what ways* a programme will positively or negatively impact on VAWG. This does not mean a cursory reflection but a deep embedded and systematic approach, which is reflected on throughout a programme.

As a starting point a series of critical and reflective questions can be asked through each programmatic phase that considers if and how interventions may positively or negatively impact on levels of VAWG. This needs to be undertaken with a political economy analysis of the contextual people, systems and structures that the programme may operate within.

Below we show some of the evidence generated by this study that can be reflected on and used when mainstreaming VAWG approaches on a chars focused programme. They could also be useful for similar settings.

Design Phase Questions

Evidence Point: Our findings overwhelming link increased poverty to violence, with displacement increasing further VAWG.

- Is the response sufficiently focused on alleviating or minimising deeper extreme poverty?
- Is it possible to work specifically with male income earners to try and respond to and resolve their anxiety (which triggers violence)?
- Can potential violence flashpoints at a project level be acknowledged and mapped? Can related mitigation or responses to these be built into the programme?
- Can the right channels to support violence reduction be identified and used? For example, in the case of the chars, this would be initially working through community structures.
- Is the projected budget for the programme gendered? But having resources and enough resources explicitly set aside for these activities?
- How might women be encouraged safely to speak out about violence and where might they realistically go to for support? Can sustainable support structures outside the community be developed? Will they be successful (i.e. could a pilot be written into programming)?

Implementation questions

Evidence Point: Our findings clearly reveal a lack of external support and an urgent need for a more intense response package to include VAWG as a central focus.

- What sustainable livelihood solutions targeting, in the immediate term, men can be identified and tested?
- What parallel resources for women can be identified, not only to respond to the immediate disaster (for example, providing feminine hygiene products with any food or disaster response packages) but also to support them in the longer term against violence?
- What evidence needs to be tracked and mapped to reveal violence levels and identify flashpoints? For example, the on-going mapping and identification of most at risk groups; young mothers, and male breadwinners whose livelihood and homes have been destroyed?
- What role might community leaders play in supporting women to challenge violent behaviours?

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Considerations

Evidence Point: There is a lack of data that demonstrates what works to support an end to VAWG in such extreme and remote contexts. Understanding what has (and has not) worked in the chars would make a considerable contribution to more effective programming both in Bangladesh but also in similarly contexts of displacement.

Given the sensitivity of the issue an ethically sensitive real time M&E approach is needed to monitor the direct or indirect impact of these programme activities and interventions on actual instances of violence. Even if women are not the focus of a response intervention (for example, an employment opportunity), data needs to be collected on both the impact of the disaster and any outside response to the disaster for women (of all intersections).

How might the activities extend in terms of supporting different groups of women and men also needs capturing? Have the interventions caused any unintended tensions? What examples of things working can be identified? (e.g. community leaders stepping in to support women and stronger peer networks)



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