

# The Scenario of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) & Increased Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

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DOI: 10.47760/cognizance.2024.v04i10.003

**Abstract**— *Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) remains a significant issue in Bangladesh, despite the recent strides in women's empowerment. This study investigates whether the empowerment of women plays a role in reducing IPV, while also examining the influence of a patriarchal social structure on this dynamic. Utilizing qualitative research methods, this analysis draws primarily on secondary data sources, including journal articles, prior studies, news reports, and editorials. Process tracing, a storytelling-based analytical tool, is employed to explore the patterns and relationships involved. The findings suggest that while women's empowerment serves as a mitigating factor in reducing IPV, the entrenched patriarchal nature of male dominance initially triggers resistance to both empowerment and IPV reduction efforts. Nonetheless, the study argues that this resistance can be overcome through concerted efforts, involving government and NGO initiatives that focus on effective law enforcement, supportive policies, and the creation of a safe and respectful environment for women. These collaborative approaches offer promising pathways for addressing IPV in Bangladesh.*

**Keywords**— *Women Empowerment, Domestic Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Patriarchy, Gender Justice, Bangladesh*

## Introduction

### **Background of the Study**

Bangladesh has made notable progress in fostering a gender-equitable society where women actively participate across various sectors. Since the 1990s, the country's advancements in gender equality and women's empowerment have become highly visible, with women now occupying roles as garment workers, educators, entrepreneurs, journalists, models, peacekeepers, migrant workers, defense personnel, and even political leaders, including prime ministers [1]. This development is further evidenced by increased school enrolment rates for girls and women's growing presence in paid employment, export-oriented industries, and self-employment[2]. Such signs of progress are significant given that Bangladesh began from a position of deeply entrenched gender inequality, which Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) described as being part of the "classic patriarchy" system, a substantial barrier to gender equality [3].

However, despite these advancements, the issue of violence against women, particularly domestic violence, remains largely unchanged. Gender-based violence continues to be a major concern, with 82% of married women experiencing some form of violence, which hampers their ability to fully realize their potential [4]. In an earlier study, it was found that over 94% of Bangladeshi women had faced physical, sexual, or psychological abuse during marriage or from an intimate partner [5]. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between women's empowerment and intimate partner violence (IPV), a common form of domestic violence, with a particular focus on violence perpetrated by husbands within the marital relationship.

### **Research Question and Purpose**

This study aims to address the relationship between women's empowerment and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Bangladesh by answering a primary research question and two sub-questions. The core research question is: "Does women's empowerment contribute to reducing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Bangladesh?" The study also examines two sub-questions, which explore the limitations of women's empowerment and identify strategies to overcome these barriers.

#### **Sub-Questions:**

1. What role does the patriarchal nature of male dominance play in relation to women's empowerment and IPV?
2. What are the most effective ways to address IPV in the context of Bangladesh?

As women become more empowered, they are expected to gain autonomy not only in economic activities but also in decision-making and establishing their own voice, which may protect them from domestic violence, particularly IPV. The study seeks to understand whether this empowerment can contribute to a reduction in IPV, especially in a context where Bangladeshi women are increasingly participating in the workforce and acquiring skills as part of their empowerment journey. At the same time, IPV remains a pervasive issue, necessitating an exploration of whether empowerment has tangible benefits in reducing violence against women.

In Bangladesh's patriarchal society, where men traditionally control family decisions, the first sub-question investigates the specific role of male dominance in shaping women's empowerment and its effect on IPV. It explores whether men's resistance to women's empowerment contributes to continued violence. The second sub-question seeks potential solutions, recognizing that all forms of domestic violence are harmful and must be addressed.

The primary goal of this research is to analyze the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV in Bangladesh. As women increasingly participate in various sectors, they are expected to gain empowerment not only financially but also in ways that protect them from IPV, which is deeply rooted in the patriarchal social structure. Through qualitative data analysis, this study examines whether the expectations of empowerment align with reality and what existing literature and empirical case studies reveal about this relationship. Another objective is to explore how male authority responds to women's empowerment and to propose solutions for reducing IPV.

This research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV by answering the posed research question and sub-questions. The findings will not only contribute to academic literature but also serve as a guide for Bangladeshi women facing IPV, offering insights into the challenges they encounter in a patriarchal society and how empowerment can help them navigate these challenges.

By analyzing previous scholarly works, utilizing case studies, and employing process tracing as a data analysis tool, this study identifies significant changes in how women's empowerment is perceived in relation to IPV. It argues that women's empowerment plays a role in reducing IPV in Bangladesh, identifying four key characteristics of empowerment that contribute to this reduction: divorce cases, access to resources through non-governmental organizations, women as active agents in addressing violence, and shifts in gender norms that support women's independence. Naila Kabeer's concept of empowerment provides a framework for understanding how women gain the agency, resources, and achievements needed to challenge IPV.

In response to the first sub-question, the study argues that male-dominated patriarchal structures initially resist women's empowerment, which in turn delays the reduction of IPV. The case of Rumana Manzur, a prominent Bangladeshi academic, illustrates this backlash, which is analyzed using Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy. However, the study further asserts that women can overcome this resistance through a true sense of empowerment, as outlined in Kabeer's framework. This resistance is ultimately an initial obstacle that women can surpass as they challenge structural inequality.

To address the second sub-question, the study reviews existing scholarly recommendations and case studies, such as the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), which highlight the collaborative role of government and non-governmental organizations in resolving domestic violence. The study concludes that while women's empowerment contributes to reducing IPV, this process requires additional support through legal aid, proper law enforcement, and educational initiatives for both men and women.

In summary, this research challenges the earlier narrative that women's empowerment exacerbates IPV, demonstrating instead that conditions for women in Bangladesh have improved as empowerment processes have taken hold. The study also shows how empowered women can confront and overcome structural inequalities, despite initial challenges, through resilience and self-belief. Finally, the research offers practical solutions to

further reduce IPV and highlights the strength of empowered women in confronting domestic violence in patriarchal contexts.

## Definitions

### Women Empowerment

Keller and Mbwewe define women's empowerment as "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination [6]." This subordination is described as the domination imposed by men. Batliwala (1994) similarly asserts that the primary goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideologies and transform the structures and institutions that perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality [7]. Thus, women's empowerment is a process that enables women to resist patriarchal oppression and address gendered structural inequalities.

### Domestic Violence

The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act of 2010 broadly defines domestic violence as "physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse or economic abuse against a woman...by any other person of that family with whom the victim is or has been in a family relation" [8]. This broad definition encompasses not only physical abuse but also psychological and economic abuse, which, though they may not leave visible scars, can cause significant harm to women.

### Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) refers to abuse perpetrated by a current or former spouse or partner within an intimate relationship [9]. In Bangladesh, this typically occurs within the context of marriage or conjugal relationships. IPV can take the form of physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and controlling behaviors by an intimate partner. While IPV can occur in various types of relationships, women are the most frequent victims, and male intimate partners or ex-partners are the common perpetrators [10]. Accordingly, this study focuses on IPV against women by their male partners or husbands.

## Literature Review

### IPV as an Intergenerational Transmission of Violence in Bangladesh

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is not only a form of domestic abuse but also a violation of human rights, with a higher prevalence in low- and middle-income countries [10]. While IPV is a global issue, its severity is particularly pronounced in less developed countries like Bangladesh. Research indicates that over 94% of women in Bangladesh have experienced some form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence during marriage or an intimate relationship [5]. A hospital-based survey further revealed that 43% of women reported experiencing physical IPV, 35.5% had faced sexual IPV, and 32.5% experienced both forms during their lifetime [11].

Bakchi *et al.* (2018) identify key risk factors for IPV in Bangladesh, including the younger age of women, low levels of education in both spouses, poor socioeconomic conditions, and family conflicts [12]. A significant finding is that men who witnessed violence between their parents are more likely to perpetuate violence against their own wives, contributing to the intergenerational transmission of violence [13]. This finding is supported data from the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (2007) and found a positive correlation between witnessing inter-parental physical violence (IPPV) and the perpetration of IPV. Women who witnessed IPPV were more likely to experience IPV compared to those who had not.

A related risk factor is the social norm of accepting violence and the tendency to remain in abusive relationships without reporting the abuse [14]. Many women lack the self-confidence to seek help, doubt the system's ability to bring positive change, and fear being blamed by society for their victimization.

### Women Empowerment that Challenges Male Authority Increases IPV, but IPV Reduces when Empowerment Becomes Normative

The relationship between women's empowerment and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is complex and nuanced, with studies offering contradictory perspectives. While some research argues that women's empowerment can serve as a protective factor against IPV, reducing the risk of violence, others suggest that empowerment may, in some cases, escalate IPV. This section will explore these contrasting viewpoints by reviewing key scholarly contributions.

Women's empowerment, particularly through the accumulation of household assets and education, has been shown to protect against IPV. A review of data from 41 different contexts suggests that empowerment through

asset ownership and education reduces the likelihood of IPV [15]. This increase in IPV risk may be linked to the challenge women's empowerment poses to patriarchal norms, which can trigger male dominance and resistance [16].

Data from the 2007 Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS) to examine the experiences of 11,178 women aged 15–49 [17]. Their findings align with this contradictory evidence, showing that women who are empowered in decision-making and autonomy are more likely to experience IPV. In contrast, unemployed women were less likely to face IPV, as they conform to patriarchal expectations and do not challenge male authority [18]. Additionally, some women may avoid reporting IPV, further complicating the relationship between empowerment and violence.

On the other hand, more recent studies highlight how normative changes in women's empowerment can help reduce IPV. Schuler and Nazneen (2018), using data from a 2014 survey, identified four key characteristics of women's empowerment that contribute to a reduction in IPV: (a) women's income reached a level where men became financially dependent on them, (b) women's skills and earnings provided an "exit point" from abusive relationships, (c) changes in social norms made empowerment normative rather than transgressive, and (d) women increasingly acted as intervening agents, raising their voices against domestic violence such as IPV [19].

Further support for these findings comes from Schuler who demonstrated that women's increased participation in economic activities not only reduced family conflicts but also contributed to a reduction in IPV [19]. Their findings challenge earlier studies from the 2000s, which suggested that women's income could increase the risk of IPV. More recent research suggests that factors such as increased gender equality, a decrease in women's dependence on marriage, and improved access to both informal (mediation) and formal (legal) resources contribute to the reduction of IPV. These changes reflect a broader societal shift where women's empowerment, particularly through economic activity, has become more widely accepted and normative in Bangladesh. As a result, women have gained self-sufficiency, confidence, and the ability to leave abusive marriages, leading to a significant reduction in IPV in recent years.

### **Patriarchal Nature and Male Domination as Barriers to Women's Empowerment**

The previous section highlights that strong patriarchal attitudes and male authority present significant obstacles to women's empowerment, particularly in reducing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). This section examines how patriarchal dominance in both public and private spheres obstructs women's empowerment and fosters domestic violence.

Walby (1996) defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" [20]. She distinguishes between public patriarchy, which includes societal norms, laws, and institutional forces that disadvantage women, and private patriarchy, which refers to male control over intimate female partners. Akhter conducted an ethnographic study of 19 economically empowered women and found that, despite their economic advancements, they continued to experience IPV [21]. This indicates that public patriarchy—manifested in social stigmas surrounding divorce and a lack of legal protections for women—reinforces private patriarchy, thereby perpetuating intimate violence.

True discusses the concept of "breadwinner masculinity," wherein men's fear of losing control over income, resources, and their wives increases IPV [22]. When women enter the workforce and challenge traditional gender roles, this perceived shift in gender dynamics threatens male authority. As a result, men often respond with violence to reassert their dominance, a phenomenon observed when gender equality undermines previously entrenched male privilege [22].

It is also further explore how patriarchal norms in Bangladesh compel women to remain in abusive relationships [21]. Social stigma and a lack of legal support for women seeking divorce or separation (public patriarchy) reinforce male dominance within the household (private patriarchy). This interplay increases IPV, even for economically empowered women. Al-Amin and Mathbor (2019) provide an example of this dynamic through an analysis of microcredit programs [23]. They found that male control over financial decisions within families significantly undermines women's empowerment. Their study shows that 85% of loans obtained by women are controlled by their husbands, and 69% of loan applications are initiated by men. This reveals that women are often passive participants in these programs, with minimal control over their financial resources, which limits their empowerment and social status.

Murshid (2018), however, offers a contrasting view, arguing that women involved in microfinance programs can gain control over their resources, develop financial literacy, and pursue entrepreneurship. By applying

Sherraden's Asset Theory and excluding patriarchal influences, Murshid (2018) concludes that microfinance can enhance women's empowerment by increasing their autonomy [24]. Nevertheless, Al-Amin and Mathbor (2019) contend that male domination in family decisions, the labor market, and economic ventures remains a critical barrier to women's progress [23]. Despite the growth of microcredit programs aimed at empowering women in Bangladesh, male control over household and economic resources often prevents women from fully benefiting from these initiatives. Consequently, patriarchal structures in both public and private domains continue to impede women's ability to achieve their full potential [25].

### **The Concept of the "She-cession" and The Rise of the "Shadow Pandemic"**

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, women and girls faced an increased risk of discrimination, abuse, and domestic violence due to restricted mobility, financial instability, food shortages, rising household tensions, and individual vulnerabilities. The United Nations (UN) termed this alarming surge in violence against women as a "shadow pandemic" [26]. A tele-survey by the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) revealed that 11,025 women in Bangladesh experienced various forms of domestic violence during the lockdown. Of these, 3,589 women reported economic abuse. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) referred to the economic crisis that disproportionately affected women as a "she-cession" due to the severe economic consequences faced by women during this period.

MJF's survey reported a 31% overall increase in violence against women and children, with 97.4% of women experiencing some form of domestic abuse. Specifically, 2,085 women were physically abused, 4,947 endured psychological torment, and 404 were sexually assaulted in their homes. Furthermore, 4,249 women and 456 children suffered domestic violence, with 3,009 women facing financial restrictions imposed by their husbands. Additionally, 1,839 women were physically beaten, and 4,622 were subjected to mental abuse [26]. These statistics highlight the connection between women's economic disempowerment and the resurgence of patriarchal patterns of abuse, particularly by intimate partners who perceive women as weak and vulnerable.

Prior to the pandemic, Bangladesh had already ranked among the highest globally in terms of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) against women. A World Health Organization (WHO) report indicated that 50% of women in Bangladesh aged 15 to 49 had experienced either physical or sexual abuse by their partners at some point in their lives. This data was drawn from 61 countries and regions, covering the period from 2000 to 2018 [27].

During the lockdown, many women who sought help from the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) hotline reported being unable to escape abusive situations due to travel restrictions, which prevented them from reaching friends or family members [26]. A report by the non-governmental organization Light House revealed that, up until October 2022, 2,675 people had been assaulted, and 155 had been killed in dowry-related incidents [28]. Many families in Bangladesh continue to experience various forms of violence, including dowry-related abuse, child marriage, marital rape, physical torture, verbal abuse, and public humiliation. Due to the deep-rooted social acceptance of violence against women, many survivors do not perceive their experiences as warranting serious attention.

These findings underscore the critical role of women's empowerment in addressing and mitigating domestic violence. When women are economically marginalized and denied empowerment opportunities, patriarchal structures often reassert dominance, leading to increased domestic violence.

### **Addressing Domestic Violence Against Women in Bangladesh**

Afrin (2017) offers an overview of Bangladesh's constitutional provisions and legal frameworks for combating domestic violence, particularly against women. Key legislation, such as the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, acknowledges dowry as a significant factor contributing to domestic violence, including intimate partner violence (IPV). Domestic violence is criminalized in Bangladesh, with the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 providing legal recourse to victims. This law enables victims to access medical care, legal aid, and remedies such as divorce, interim protection orders, and restraining orders against abusive spouses. However, Afrin highlights certain limitations, particularly the absence of specialized training for police officers, who are often the first responders to such incidents. While she considers the Act a crucial step in acknowledging domestic violence, Afrin stresses the need for improved monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. She recommends fostering a democratic, secular society with educated citizens who view violence as a societal issue, modernizing outdated laws like the Penal Code of 1860, and promoting community engagement to ensure victims receive appropriate legal support.

Hossain (2016) similarly underscores that most domestic violence in Bangladesh is perpetrated by husbands, in-laws, and other family members. He attributes this violence to a range of social factors and provides several recommendations to combat it. These include increasing economic opportunities for women, offering skills

training to enhance their self-esteem and status within the household, and framing domestic violence as a human rights violation. Hossain emphasizes the need for community and family-level awareness and advocates for gender-sensitization training for judicial and law enforcement personnel to foster attitudinal change and ensure gender justice. While Hossain focuses on education, human rights, and training, Afrin (2017) examines the legal landscape, both agreeing that the state has a fundamental responsibility to address violence against women. Hossain (2016) further suggests that the government adopt a “zero tolerance” policy towards perpetrators. Although their discussions broadly cover domestic violence, their recommendations are equally relevant to IPV, a subset of domestic violence.

Sarker and Yesmin (2013) offer more targeted strategies for eliminating domestic violence, outlining short-term, medium-term, and long-term policy measures [29]. They position the government as the primary actor, supported by civil society, businesses, and the media. Their short-term recommendations include swift legal proceedings and community-based rehabilitation and protection for victims. Medium-term policies emphasize reforming and effectively implementing existing laws, as Afrin (2017) has also suggested. For the long term, they advocate for public awareness campaigns, integrating gender rights into education, providing trauma treatment through regular psychological counseling, and empowering women economically and socially.

These combined perspectives highlight the multifaceted approach needed to address domestic violence and IPV in Bangladesh, emphasizing legal reforms, community engagement, and empowerment through education and economic opportunity.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

The concept of ‘empowerment,’ as articulated by Naila Kabeer, is examined in this study with respect to women’s empowerment. Additionally, Sylvia Walby’s ‘Patriarchal Theory’ is applied to address issues related to male domination rooted in patriarchal systems.

In Parvez’s (2011) MPhil thesis on women-initiated divorce in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Kabeer’s ‘empowerment concept’ is utilized [29]. Parvez (2011) argues that the rising rates of divorce initiated by women in Bangladesh can be linked to their enhanced access to resources, which facilitates their empowerment [29]. This access empowers women to exercise greater control over their lives, presenting the option of terminating relationships as an alternative choice. According to Parvez (2011), this choice is influenced by three dimensions of empowerment identified by Kabeer: resources, agency, and achievements [29]. These dimensions illustrate how women use available resources to exercise agency in decision-making, leading to desired outcomes.

Kabeer (2012) defines empowerment as a process of change through which individuals previously deprived of the ability to exercise choice gain this capacity [30]. Central to Kabeer’s definition is the concept of ‘choice’. Kabeer (2012) further elaborates on ‘choice’ by outlining three key aspects: (1) the conditions under which choices are made, including whether alternatives are available or choices merely conform to existing norms; (2) the strategic nature of choices, which affects the quality and direction of one’s life; and (3) the implications of choices for broader structural inequalities, which challenge prevailing gendered and social norms [31].

On the other hand, literature suggests that IPV may increase when women’s empowerment is perceived as transgressive. Akhter *et al.* (2020) discuss Walby’s ‘Patriarchal Theory,’ noting that cultural norms resistant to women’s empowerment may perpetuate domestic violence despite economic advancements through education and employment. Walby’s theory, particularly its focus on cultural and violent structures, helps explain the persistence of IPV. Thompson describes ‘public patriarchy’ as a gendered social culture that allows men to degrade women, which manifests as ‘private patriarchy’ through acts of sexual violence. This theoretical framework is employed to explore the connection between social culture and violence, as examined through various case studies and analyses in this study [32].

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to guide the research design, data analysis, and the formulation of findings in response to the research question and sub-questions. According to Nkwi, Nyamongo, and Ryan qualitative research is characterized by its use of data that are non-ordinal in nature, meaning it focuses on textual rather than numerical data [33]. While qualitative research can encompass various forms of data including images and sounds, this study will concentrate specifically on textual data derived from literature, publications, and reports.

Qualitative research techniques include small group discussions, semi-structured interviews, and the analysis of texts and documents such as reports, media articles, and diaries [34]. Additionally, empirical materials such as

case studies, personal experiences, life stories, interviews, observations, historical records, and visual texts may be utilized [35]. Unlike quantitative research, which often seeks mathematical or statistical validation of hypotheses, qualitative research aims to provide comprehensive evidence to draw reasonable conclusions.

The choice of qualitative methodology in this study is intended to investigate whether women's empowerment serves as a factor in reducing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). The concept of women's empowerment will be assessed through literature analysis, societal experiences, norms, situational contexts, and observational data, integrating these elements with a theoretical framework of empowerment to analyze IPV trends. Due to limitations in resources, data availability, and time constraints, rigorous statistical analyses, such as year-to-year percentage changes in IPV, will not be feasible. Instead, in-depth qualitative methods, including case studies, narrative analysis, discussions, and report evaluations, will be employed to address the research sub-questions. The case study approach, as described by Crowe; is used to provide a detailed and multi-dimensional understanding of complex issues within their real-life contexts [36]. Creswell (2002) further emphasizes that case studies reveal insights into specific activities, events, or processes within bounded systems [37]. In this study, the case study method will facilitate an exploration of how women's empowerment has influenced Bangladeshi women's responses to domestic violence (IPV). By examining real-life instances and events, this approach will help elucidate the relationship between women's empowerment and IPV, providing nuanced insights into these variables.

### Data Collection and Analysis

The research predominantly relies on secondary data sources, with limited use of primary data due to various research constraints. Despite these limitations, the study's aim to gather and analyze evidence relevant to the research questions remains intact. Secondary data sources include journal articles, newspaper articles, compilations of news reports, editorials, and opinion pieces. Additionally, interviews and focus group discussions with Bangladeshi men, collected by other researchers and cited as secondary sources, illustrate the shifts in societal norms and the impact of women's empowerment. Primary data is mainly drawn from the BRAC website, with supplementary data obtained from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and NGO Advisor. The inclusion of peer-reviewed journal articles is essential for rigorous research analysis. Complementary sources such as news articles and editorials are also utilized to provide context on issues like divorce and patriarchal backlash in Bangladesh. To maintain credibility and minimize research bias, careful selection of newspaper sources was undertaken. Furthermore, data from NGO and government websites is incorporated to strengthen the research findings.

Data analysis will employ qualitative methods, specifically the 'story-telling' approach. Within this framework, 'process-tracing' will be the primary analytical tool. Process-tracing, as described by Mahoney (2012) and cited in Beach (2016), involves analyzing causal mechanisms through a sequence of events or narratives leading to outcomes [38], [39]. Collier underscores process-tracing as a fundamental method for within-case analysis in qualitative research, involving procedures to formulate and test explanations through case studies [40]. Mahoney (2015) further highlights the importance of 'careful description' in process-tracing, which serves as an analytic tool for deriving descriptive and causal inferences from a sequence of events or phenomena [39].

Given that this study uses a case study design to explore within-case dynamics and link causes—such as women's empowerment or patriarchal dominance—to outcomes like variations in intimate partner violence (IPV), process-tracing has been selected to provide a detailed analytical description and infer outcomes.

### Case Study Analysis on Women's Empowerment and its Impact on Reducing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

- 1. Increased Divorce Rates in Bangladesh: Divorce as an 'Exit Option' for Women from Abusive Marriages**  
Divorce is legally defined as "the formal ending of a marriage" (Cobuild Advanced English Dictionary, n.d.). Historically, divorce in Bangladeshi society has been stigmatized, which has forced many women to endure abusive marriages, thereby increasing their risk of intimate partner violence (IPV). However, recent trends suggest that this stigma is diminishing, particularly in urban areas such as Dhaka. This shift has empowered women to resist enduring abuse. In Chittagong City Corporation, 4,970 divorces were filed in 2017, and an additional 2,532 cases were recorded from January to July 2018 [41]. In Dhaka, the situation is even more severe, with an average of one divorce reported per hour and approximately 50,000 cases between 2012 and 2017, the majority of which were initiated by women [41]. A survey conducted in Dhaka North and South City Corporations revealed that 70% of divorce applicants were women [41].

Recent data from a report covering June to October 2020 indicates an even higher frequency of divorces in capital cities like Dhaka, Chattogram, and Sylhet, with a divorce occurring approximately every 37 minutes [42]. It identifies a strong connection between these divorce rates and domestic violence, noting that most divorce petitions come from women who seek to end their relationships with oppressive and abusive partners. A study by Akter and Begum (2012) found that 90.9% of women filed for divorce due to physical and verbal abuse by their husbands [43].

The rise in women's education and income levels has led to increased awareness of domestic violence and greater economic independence, enabling women to choose divorce as a strategic option to escape abusive relationships [41]. This trend reflects a form of empowerment, which Kabeer (2012) defines as "a process of change to gain the capacity of choice exercise which was denied before". The enhancement of women's financial freedom and educational attainment has significantly increased their confidence to pursue divorce, demonstrating a positive shift towards greater autonomy and protection from violence.

## 2. Intervening Actors

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local bodies in empowering women through resources, training, and legal support is crucial in reducing intimate partner violence (IPV). This section will first examine BRAC and its approach to strengthening women's capabilities as a case study, and then discuss examples of successful interventions by women in reducing IPV.

BRAC, a prominent non-governmental development organization based in Bangladesh, operates across 11 countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas [44]. The organization focuses on improving gender justice and diversity, recognizing that approximately 70% of Bangladeshi women have experienced IPV at some point in their married lives [45]. BRAC employs an "integrated gender transformative approach" to amplify women's voices, choices, and spaces to combat gender discrimination. This approach involves challenging socio-cultural gender norms and advocating for gender equality and justice [45].

In 2018, BRAC reached 1.845 million individuals across seven districts with awareness campaigns about violence against women [45]. A key component of their strategy is the integration of both men and women in changing gender norms through gender-responsive learning materials and a focus on women's leadership. BRAC's "community empowerment" project further empowers women, resulting in the prevention of 280,000 acts of violence, including domestic violence [45]. This initiative aims to create a protective environment for women.

A study that covering the years 2011-2014 explored ten Bangladeshi villages through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions [19]. The study found a decrease in IPV linked to changed gender norms and increased women's empowerment. For instance, a 61-year-old male participant from one of the study villages expressed, "Together with my wife, we run our family. She won't live with me if I beat her" [19]. This statement reflects the recognition of women's income and the consequent reduction in IPV as men became more dependent on their partners.

Focus group discussions also highlighted the fear of men as women became active interveners. A 40-year-old man noted, "If a woman complains to the police against her husband, they will come and arrest him and put him in jail... they (women) know everything, from the courthouse to anything you may mention" [46]. Another discussion from Village 5 emphasized BRAC's support, stating, "Many NGOs inform women about laws and recourse mechanisms... they also help women file cases against their husbands"[46]. As women gained awareness and overcame societal stigmas, IPV rates decreased, aligning with national data showing a reduction in IPV from 57.8% to 54.2% between 2011 and 2015, and a decrease in annual IPV reports from 37.0% to 26.9% [47].

## 3. Rumana Manzur Case Reflects Backlash in Women's Empowerment Due to Patriarchal Oppression

This section examines the case of Rumana Manzur, a Fulbright scholar and assistant professor at the University of Dhaka, who was also a graduate student at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in 2011. During a visit to Bangladesh, Manzur was brutally attacked by her husband, resulting in severe injuries, including blindness from eye gouging and facial disfigurement. Saif Islam, representing Bangladeshi students at UBC, reported that her husband, who was unemployed at the time, targeted Manzur to obstruct her educational pursuits [48].

Manzur's husband, a graduate from a Bangladeshi university, was reportedly envious of Manzur's success and had been abusive towards her, as Manzur claimed that her husband "had been torturing [her] for a while" [49]. Despite enduring this abuse silently for the sake of her young daughter and fearing the impact of separation on



the child, Manzur's decision to seek a divorce during her visit to Bangladesh led to a violent attack with the intent to kill. The attack left her with permanent eye damage and blindness [50].

This egregious act of violence occurred against a highly educated and ambitious woman who was actively pursuing her career and education. Despite her empowerment as a university teacher, she faced severe partner violence due to prevailing social stigma and patriarchal oppression. The attack highlights the persistent structural inequalities within a male-dominated society. The incident was prominently covered by Global News in Canada, where Manzur was recognized as a UBC graduate student during the attack [48]. It was also reported by Indian media, including The Telegraph, during her subsequent eye treatment in India [49].

Additional secondary sources include Manzur's TEDx Talk and her interview with HuffPost Canada, where she vividly recounted her experiences and the severity of IPV [50]. These sources underscore the backlash against women's empowerment and the ongoing struggle for change. Manzur's perseverance in raising awareness and advocating for victims of domestic violence highlights the potential for change despite systemic barriers. Following the incident, her husband was arrested and brought to justice [51]. Manzur successfully completed her master's degree at UBC and refocused her career towards law, joining law school to become a human rights lawyer to support other women in need [52].

#### 4. Cases with Examples Exploring Solution

Intimate partner violence (IPV), as a form of domestic violence, is a significant issue not only in Bangladesh but also globally [53]. This section presents cases and examples that have effectively addressed IPV in Bangladesh. Previously, the role of BRAC in enhancing women's awareness and empowerment was noted as successful. However, increasing awareness alone does not always suffice; legal actions are essential to address critical cases. The Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) is one organization that provides free legal aid to disadvantaged women, aiming to protect their human rights and ensure justice through mediation, litigation, training, and investigation [54]. Among their notable success stories is the case study of Farah (pseudonym) and Ahmed from Khulna. They married in 2008, and shortly thereafter, Ahmed began physically abusing Farah and demanded dowry, which she could not fulfill. Farah sought refuge at her parent's home and reported the abuse to BLAST's Khulna Unit Office. BLAST facilitated two mediation sessions with Ahmed, leading to successful negotiations where he committed to ceasing the violence and dowry demands [54]. Subsequently, Ahmed's actions aligned with his promises, resulting in a peaceful marital relationship.

Additionally, the government of Bangladesh has launched effective support initiatives through the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, including the 'Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Cell' (Women Violence Repressive Cell), which addresses violence against women at the national level. The National Council for Women's Development (NCWD) is another national body focused on women's development, with violence prevention as a key intervention area. The NCWD oversees law formation, legal rights, development, and violence prevention, complemented by district and Thana-level committees aimed at preventing violence against women [13].

While these initiatives demonstrate progress, it is evident that IPV in Bangladesh can be addressed only partially or fully through a combination of legal support, advice for women, effective intervention by government and non-governmental actors, and the enforcement of existing laws.

### Findings & Discussion

#### Women Empowerment Acts as a Contributing Factor in Reducing IPV

This section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding and argumentative response to the research questions of this study, based on literature, theoretical frameworks, and case studies as part of the research design.

The literature review indicates a significant shift over time regarding the impact of women's empowerment on intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh. Studies from the early 2000s suggested that forms of women's empowerment, such as household decision-making and financial contributions, did not benefit women and instead increased their vulnerability to violence by intimate partners. This narrative was supported by data from the 2007 Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS) [55]. However, a shift is observed in the 2014 survey, as Schuler and Nazneen (2018) identified four key aspects of women's empowerment that contribute to reducing IPV: (a) increased women's income leading to men's dependency on it; (b) women's skills and earnings providing an 'exit point' from abusive relationships; (c) normalization of gender-equal norms; and (d) women acting as 'intervening actors' and voicing opposition against IPV.

The first point contradicts the earlier narrative that earning an income increased the risk of IPV [56]. Instead, Schuler and Nazneen (2018) found that when women's income reached a level where men became dependent, IPV decreased.

The second point discusses the 'exit option' provided by increased financial autonomy, which allows women to leave abusive relationships. This is evidenced by the rising rates of women-initiated divorces in Bangladesh. With financial freedom and changing societal norms around divorce, women are no longer compelled to remain in abusive marriages. This aligns with Kabeer's (2012) definition of empowerment as a 'process of change' and gaining 'capacity' previously denied, reflecting women's ability to initiate divorce due to reduced social stigma and increased personal autonomy. Kabeer's (2012) condition of choice requires 'alternatives' to make choices meaningful, such as access to resources, economic independence, and self-confidence. These 'strategic choices' allow women to decide whether to continue or terminate their marital relationships, contributing significantly to IPV reduction.

The final characteristic of women's empowerment involves women's capacity to act as intervening actors and raise their voices against IPV. This is illustrated by BRAC's efforts, which enable women to realize their potential as community leaders and intervene in situations of violence. BRAC, along with other NGOs, supports women, particularly those with lower educational attainment in rural areas, by increasing their access to resources and legal support. The support from organizations like BRAC and BLAST empowers women to speak out against domestic abuse, facilitating access to justice and embodying Kabeer's (2012) concept of 'agency'. This empowerment has led to a significant reduction in IPV, as reflected in data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [55].

In summary, the analysis of literary arguments and empirical findings suggests that women's empowerment, characterized by increased income and economic contributions, no longer exacerbates family conflicts but rather strengthens family ties and reduces IPV in Bangladesh. Increased access to resources has not only provided financial freedom but also fostered internal empowerment, leading to substantial positive outcomes and contributing to the reduction of intimate partner violence (IPV) in Bangladesh.

#### **Patriarchal Male Dominance Creates an Initial Backlash**

The previous section highlighted that women's empowerment is a key factor in reducing IPV. However, this empowerment process is not without its challenges, particularly in a patriarchal society where entrenched structural inequalities create unequal power dynamics between men and women. In Bangladesh, as in many other contexts, patriarchal norms continue to impact the process of women's empowerment, as discussed in this section.

Walby (1996) defines patriarchy as "a system of social structure and practice in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women". This systemic oppression poses significant barriers to women's empowerment, leading to what is described as a 'backlash.' The term 'backlash' is defined as "a strong, negative reaction to something, especially to change" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In this context, the 'change' refers to women's empowerment and their efforts to challenge male dominance and traditional gender roles.

The case of Rumana Manzur exemplifies this backlash. Despite being highly educated and successful, Manzur faced severe violence from her husband, who attacked her due to feelings of inferiority and loss of control. This brutal act illustrates how even accomplished women can experience significant obstacles and backlash in a patriarchal society that maintains male dominance and control.

Theoretical support for this understanding comes from Walby's (1996) 'Patriarchal Theory,' which posits that cultural and structural violence against women creates barriers to their empowerment and the reduction of IPV. While cultural norms that oppose women (public patriarchy) have started to change in Bangladesh, private patriarchy—particularly within households—persists, as evidenced by Manzur's experience. This ongoing male dominance hinders women from fully achieving empowerment and development.

Kabeer's (2017) concept of empowerment emphasizes the importance of choice and its implications for addressing structural inequalities. Kabeer argues that true empowerment involves challenging existing cultural and structural inequalities. In the case of Rumana Manzur, despite the severe backlash she faced, she demonstrated significant agency by reporting the attack, garnering media attention, and ultimately achieving personal success [50]. This illustrates Kabeer's concept of 'agency,' where women, despite facing severe obstacles, can leverage their empowerment to overcome structural challenges.

Thus, while patriarchal male dominance represents an initial backlash against women's empowerment, it also plays a role in obstructing the IPV reduction process. However, this initial backlash can be mitigated through empowerment that originates from within, supported by access to resources and a strong resistance to societal

and structural challenges. Overcoming this backlash requires mental resilience and continued courage, which can ultimately lead to positive outcomes and significant achievements for women [31].

### **Suggested Ways to Resolve Domestic Violence in Bangladesh**

While 'women empowerment' significantly contributes to reducing domestic violence, including IPV, it is not sufficient on its own to eradicate this deeply rooted, intergenerational issue. This section explores the measures that researchers have suggested to address IPV effectively in Bangladesh.

According to Hossain (2016), women's economic opportunities and skills training are essential for empowering women and enhancing their self-belief. Hossain also emphasizes the need for incorporating a 'gender sensitization module' in training for law enforcement personnel, a component currently lacking in the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act of 2010 [57]. Additionally, Hossain advocates for attitudinal changes to promote gender justice, a goal that aligns with BRAC's approach of integrating gender-norm change through its learning programs. Afrin (2017) supports treating domestic violence as a societal problem and encourages raising awareness among citizens to combat discrimination against women.

Sarker and Yesmin (2013) echo Afrin's recommendations by suggesting reforms to outdated laws, such as the Penal Code of 1860, and emphasizing community engagement and law enforcement for victims. Organizations like BLAST are already involved in monitoring and implementing such reforms in Bangladesh [53]. These authors call for a 'zero tolerance policy' from the state against perpetrators and highlight the necessity for law enforcement agencies, including police and judicial officers, to receive specialized training to handle IPV sensitively.

A combined effort from both government and non-governmental organizations is crucial to tackling IPV effectively. Empirical evidence shows that government initiatives, alongside the efforts of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), play a significant role in addressing violence against women. However, challenges remain, such as the male-dominated control of microcredit systems, which undermines women's economic gains [58].

The incorporation of gender-sensitive training for law enforcement is vital, though it is a time-consuming process involving curriculum development and implementation. Reforming the Penal Code of 1860 requires a robust civil society movement and strong government commitment [58]. BRAC's 'five-step approach to fighting gender-based violence' demonstrates an effective model by fostering partnerships between NGOs and government agencies to ensure justice and create deterrence for perpetrators [59]. This approach includes monitoring violent acts to enable prompt interventions.

While BRAC's efforts in prevention, awareness, legal protection, and victim rehabilitation are commendable, a broader societal shift is necessary. This study has shown that women empowerment is crucial in reducing IPV but achieving the best outcomes requires government policymakers to act responsibly and address the culture of impunity [58]. Change must start at the grassroots level, fostering an environment of equality and respect for women. NGOs and civil organizations are making strides toward ending domestic violence, but their efforts must be supported by widespread citizen engagement to ensure a fundamental change in societal attitudes and practices.

### **Conclusion**

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a pervasive global issue, with women often bearing the brunt of such violence. This research focused on the context of Bangladesh, a country that has made notable strides in gender equality and women's empowerment in recent years. Despite these advancements, violence against women within households and IPV remain significant concerns.

The study demonstrates that while women empowerment is a critical factor in reducing IPV in Bangladesh, it does not occur in a vacuum. Qualitative data analysis and recent case studies support the hypothesis that women's empowerment contributes positively to IPV reduction [19]. However, this progress is tempered by the persistent patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society, which can obstruct women's advancement through initial backlashes from both public and private patriarchy [20].

Initial backlash often manifests as resistance from a male-dominated culture and the fear of losing control over women, reflecting a broader societal struggle with patriarchal norms [20]. This study highlights that such resistance, while significant, can be mitigated through women's resilience, self-belief, and effective empowerment strategies. The term 'initial backlash' is used to describe these obstacles, which can be overcome with continued courage and commitment to challenging structural inequalities [31].

Addressing IPV requires more than just empowering women; it necessitates comprehensive support from both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Effective interventions include enforcing gender justice, implementing laws, providing skills training for relevant individuals, ending impunity for perpetrators, and fostering a respectful environment for women.

The findings of this study are significant for three primary reasons. First, they highlight the positive developments in women's empowerment in Bangladesh, countering earlier beliefs that women's economic participation increased IPV risk. Recent changes in societal norms have shown acceptance of women's income and autonomy as beneficial [19]. Second, the study offers hope and encouragement to women, demonstrating that empowerment and perseverance can lead to positive outcomes despite the challenges of IPV and male dominance. Third, the research identifies effective strategies for addressing IPV, which are crucial for both women and academic discourse on gender and violence [53]. These implications provide valuable insights not only for women but also for the broader field of gender studies and domestic violence research, paving the way for more informed and effective interventions.

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