Women’s empowerment as a protective factor against intimate partner violence in Bangladesh: a qualitative exploration of the process and limitations of its influence

Abstract

Literature on the relationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) against women and women’s empowerment is generally contradictory, and findings from a recent survey in rural Bangladesh suggest that empowerment is becoming protective even though IPV rates remain high. In this paper we construct qualitative case studies exploring factors and social processes underlying relationships between empowerment and IPV in four villages. The findings suggest that, while empowerment may be protective against IPV in the aggregate, this relationship may be subverted at the micro-level. Interventions are needed to reinforce the potential of empowerment to reduce IPV and counteract factors like geographic isolation and limited employment opportunities that inhibit women’s empowerment.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The body of literature on the relationship between intimate partner violence (IPV) against women and women’s empowerment suggests that the relationship is complex, may not always operate in the same way across contexts, and may vary depending on the specific dimensions of empowerment considered. In Bangladesh, evidence suggests that women are becoming more empowered both economically and socially, but the prevalence of intimate partner violence remains high, and the association between empowerment of women (EOW) and IPV appears complicated. Probable catalysts in the trend toward greater EOW in Bangladesh include rapid increases in women’s and girls’ schooling levels (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Schuler, 2007; World Bank, 2003) which can lead to dramatic changes in women’s roles and aspirations (Schuler, 2007); the garment industry (Amin, Diamond, Naved, & Newby, 1998; Kabeer, 2001); and women’s increased engagement in agriculture in conjunction with its intensification and diversification (Jaim & Mahabub, 2011). NGOs that create economic and social opportunities, drawing women by providing microcredit, training, employment and legal education and services are also believed to be contributing to EOW (Jahan, 2012; World Bank, 2006).

Findings from a recent, nationally representative sample of married women suggest that women’s empowerment is becoming a protective factor against IPV in this setting even though rates of IPV remain high (Bates, Osypuk, Naved, Yount, & Schuler, 2015). EOW was found to be protective both at the individual and the village levels, but it did not hold in every community included in the study sample. Building on conceptual frameworks posed by Heise (Heise, 1998), Koenig and colleagues (2003), and Naved & Persson (2005), this paper uses qualitative data to examine some of the ways in which EOW can interact with various contextual factors to discourage IPV in some settings and support its persistence in others. These models posit that
IPV is a function of the interrelated effects of contextual and community-level factors, household and individual-level characteristics, and women’s status/autonomy factors; the authors further theorize that an individual woman’s empowerment changes from a risk factor to a protective factor against IPV as gender norms become more egalitarian, but that this change occurs more or less rapidly depending on contextual factors that vary at the local level.

Methods

Site selection

We collected qualitative data from four communities selected purposively from a nationally representative sample of 78 communities where surveys were conducted in 2013 and 2014 as part of a larger, mixed method, multilevel study on relationships between EOW and IPV. To maximize variation in the relationships of interest, we used the 2013 survey data to identify four communities with high or low levels of IPV and EOW by categorizing them into four cells and choosing a village from each cell that was far from the mean on both variables (Table 1). Our index of EOW for categorizing the villages included eight dichotomous indicators of empowerment described in a previous study of rural credit programs in Bangladesh (Hashemi, Schuler, & Riley, 1996), each tapping a potentially separate dimension of empowerment (e.g. mobility, involvement in family decisions, economic security, etc.).

Table. 1 Village-level mean past-year physical IPV prevalence and empowerment scores among married women in sampled villages, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past year IPV %</th>
<th>Empowerment score</th>
<th>Past year IPV %</th>
<th>Empowerment score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Village B: 51% / .28</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Village A: 65% / -.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Village C: 15% / .42</td>
<td></td>
<td>Village D: 21% / -.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data

We conducted a total of 16 focus group discussions (FGD)—seven with men (36 participants, aged 27-62), nine with women (45 participants, aged 16-65); 10 in-depth interviews (IDI) with men (aged 35-65); and 16 life history narrative (LHN) interviews with women (aged 18-30), with approximately equal numbers from each community.

We developed interview guides for each type of interview to ensure that key topics would be covered, but the interviewers were encouraged to be spontaneous and add follow-up questions based on each study participant’s remarks. The women had to be at least somewhat empowered based on their incomes, education and role in managing family resources, lower-middle or lower class (based on the interviewers’ assessment), and married fewer than 12 years (a criterion intended to best capture experiences of women thought to be at highest risk for IPV). They were
identified by means of key informants and informal screening interviews. The LHNs focused for the most part on the women’s own experiences, while the FGDs and IDIs primarily addressed trends in the communities. In each village we also did a mapping exercise to identify infrastructural and other important features, and compiled field notes based on observations and casual conversations. The interviews were conducted in Bangla, transcribed, and translated into English. The interviewers were two Bangladeshi women and one man with long experience conducting qualitative interviews. They received specific training for this study, and they contributed to the design of the interview guides.

Analysis

In the initial analysis, the first author read and reread the transcripts as individual and group narratives, aggregating them by village to identify themes and evidence regarding the relationships between EOW and IPV. She then discussed the themes with the field research team in light of their village maps and field notes and invited them to offer explanations for the commonalities and differences observed among the villages with respect to EOW, IPV, and relationships between the two. We subsequently used NVivo 10 to code the transcripts thematically and systematically reviewed and summarized the evidence and counter-evidence pertaining to each theme.

The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards of FHI 360 and BRAC University.

Findings & Discussion

The paper will present village-by-village case studies where we identify village-specific factors that appear to influence women’s empowerment, IPV, and the relationship between the two. The authors will discuss the findings in the context of prior research in Bangladesh on community-, interpersonal-, and individual-level correlates of empowerment and IPV, and analyze their implications for interventions to counteract IPV and promote women’s empowerment.
References


