

# GENERAL SECTION

# 13

## Domestic abuses against housewives in *haor* areas of Bangladesh: understanding the impact of Concern's intervention in reducing abuses

by DIPANKAR DATTA and NELI SEN GUPTA

### Introduction

The *haor* basin takes up the greater part of the northeast region of Bangladesh. The area remains flooded for about six months of the year and looks like an enormous lake in which villages resemble islands dotted through the landscape. The flooding erodes the edges of these 'island villages' and the villagers have to construct various forms of erosion barriers to preserve their village land from the floodwaters. Travel is by boat for six months of the year. In the dry season, the area is a vast plain of rice fields. National NGOs and Government services are rarely visible in this area. However, this area has been targeted by a few international NGOs, such as CARE and Concern Worldwide.

Concern Worldwide in Bangladesh has been implementing integrated rural development projects in three remote sub-districts – Khaliajuri, Itna, and Gowainghat – of the *haor* area for the last ten years. Key project activities include the formation of community-based groups with the poor for raising awareness, human development training, skill training, non-formal education, savings and credit schemes, and rural infrastructure development. At present, about 96% of the group members are female. These activities aim to contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of poor women, an inherent part of which is raising awareness of their own rights, as many women suffer from

abuse in their households and communities.

To understand the effectiveness of Concern's programme towards empowering poor women in *haor* areas, research was undertaken early in 2003. The key research questions were:

- what are the socio-economic factors contributing to abuses against housewives in the family?
- what are the most common types of abuse? What are the health consequences?
- as a result of Concern's interventions, what has been the extent of the reduction of physical and mental abuse of housewives?

### Research methodology

The study was conducted in 12 *haor* villages (Table1) over a period of three days in each village.

To begin with, poor and non-poor households were identified in every village by using a social map. In the control villages, 20 women from poor households were invited to participate in PRA sessions. In the Concern villages, the poor households were further categorised as Concern and non-Concern households, from which 15 and 10 women were invited to participate in PRA sessions respectively. Participants were invited considering their availability.

Table 1: Distribution of selected villages

Name of sub-district	Concern village (Concern working areas)	Control village (where Concern and other NGOs have not worked)	Total
Khaliajuri	2	2	4
Itna	2	2	4
Gowainghat	2	2	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>

Next, two groups were formed, a housewives group and a mothers-in-law group. This division was to facilitate open discussions within peer groups.

With the mothers-in-law group, a Focus Group Discussion was held, focusing on major changes that the mothers-in-law noted between their being housewives and the housewives of the present generation. This was followed by a discussion on the issues of dowry, polygamy, divorce, the abuse of women, and the impact of Concern's intervention in empowering housewives.

With the housewives group, a Family Relationship diagram was used to analyse their relationship with other family members (Chart 1). Next, a Venn diagram (Chart 2) was used to facilitate discussions to ascertain the causes of poor or abusive family relationships. Discussions were also held on the nature of abuse, the related health consequences (Chart 3), and defence strategies at times of severe abuse. This was followed by a discussion about women's feeling about power. In Concern villages, an Impact-Flow diagram was used to understand the overall impact of Concern's intervention (Charts 4 and 5).

Towards end of the exercise in each village, findings were presented to other housewives living in that village for triangulation.

### Household relationships analysis

#### The fabric of inter-household relationships

The housewives considered and evaluated different perceived virtues like obedience, honour, dignity, duty, affection, subordination, etc. in describing their relationship with other family members.

In all cases, the son is considered to be the closest in the relationship network, followed by the daughter, and then the husband. Housewives generally have a better position

A triangulation session in Mehendipur village of Khaliajuri



Photo: Dipankar Datta

if other family members are in some way dependent on her or her husband.

Both the *sosur* (father-in-law) and the *sasuri* (mother-in-law) play a vital and subtle role in the family. The *sasuri's* role is like a catalyst, particularly in family decision-making related to housewives and in exerting influence over her son. The *sosur* is more like a father, an ultimate decision maker, and one who can rebuke or even physically assault a housewife.

The *vasur* (husband's elder brother) is more like a *sosur*. However, it is a social norm for a housewife to wear a long veil before a *vasur* and not to touch him for any reason. It could be extremely embarrassing if a *vasur* abused her, either verbally or physically. The *vaz* (*vasur's* wife) often commands adoration and respect, the depth of which depends on many interrelated factors, such her husband's economic status and her relationship with the *sosur/sasuri*. Usually, housewives share their emotions and feelings and discuss personal issues with the *vaz*, as she is also a family housewife.

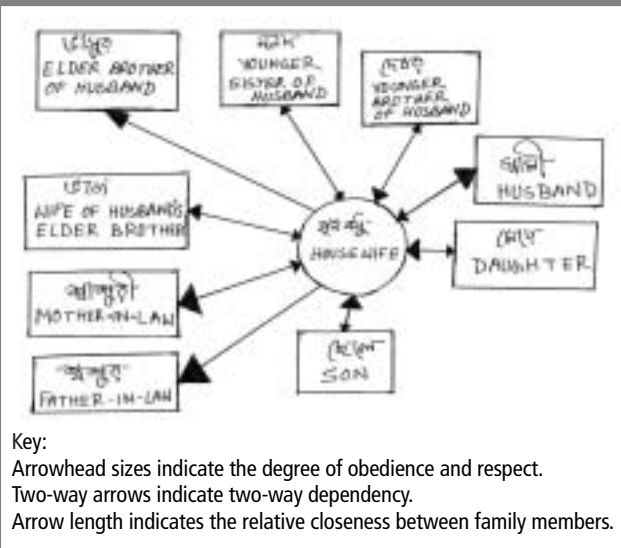
Housewives normally have a more friendly relationship with *debors* (husband's younger brothers) than with *nanads* (husband's sisters). *Nanads* usually have unrestricted access to the housewives' cosmetics and clothes, which can be a source of annoyance to them.

#### Analysis of abuse in family relationships

Factors contributing to poor or abusive relationships within families and which often result in mental and physical abuse are most commonly related to financial problems within the household, neglecting household chores, or socio-religious discrimination. The health consequences of physical torture have been summarised in Chart 3.

Dowries were a repeated theme. In Muslim-dominated villages, a dowry is considered to be an investment to

**Chart 1: Relationships between housewives and other family members in Nuralipur village, Khaliajuri**

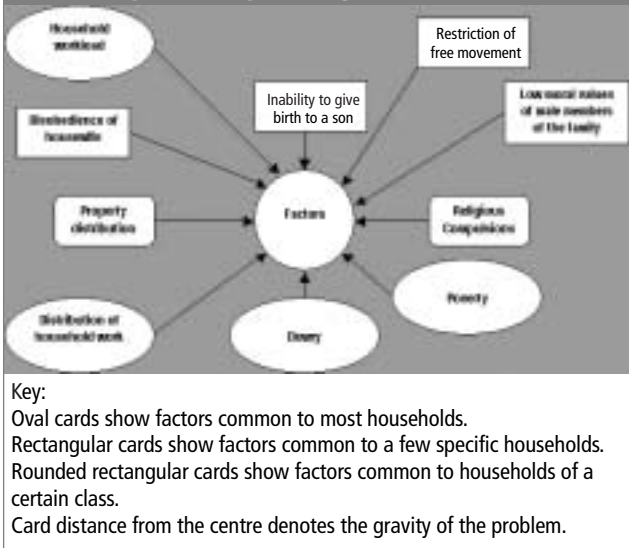


strengthen the husband's livelihood. Like Muslim women, Hindu women get no share of their paternal properties after marriage. A bride's parents' inability to pay a dowry means that her parents risk being stigmatised and the bride herself risks being violated. The most common dowry-related abuses include physical torture, forced eviction from the marital home, a second marriage or the threat thereof, and being denied adequate food.

Causes of poverty like seasonal unemployment or working family members being unable to work due to long-term illness directly affect the household income flow, putting intense psychological pressure on male family members. The most common poverty-related abuses were beatings and verbal abuse. These abuses were also common if housewives failed to do household chores on time or take care of male family members. In contrast, in recent years, housewives have not only been involved in household activities but also in most cases directly involved in income-generating activities. Even this is not without problems: some Concern members also work on project-related activities in addition to their household work. However, because of heavy workloads, they can sometimes become bad-tempered with their husbands or other family members, often resulting in domestic violence.

In Muslim-dominated villages, socio-religious discrimination can occur because of a housewife's free movement in the community. Formal complaints by religious or village leaders made to male family members can result in physi-

**Chart 2: Factors responsible for poor or abusive relationships in Dhanpur village, Itna**



cal abuse and/or the restriction of a housewife's freedom of movement. Infertile wives and those who fail to give birth to a son also encounter socio-religious discrimination, usually facing neglect by their husbands, opposition from in-laws, and denial of access to their husbands' property.

Other significant factors in abusive family relationships include the unjust distribution of property and goods/services among family members, issues relating to children's upbringing, a husband's unwillingness to repay loans which his wife has taken from groups, a housewife's inability to satisfy her husband's physical needs<sup>1</sup>, or a husband's involvement in antisocial activities.

### Defence strategies

From the study it became evident that many housewives resort to silence as a self-protecting strategy when having few socio-economic options available to them. According to the participants, most husbands who married a second wife initially hid this fact from them. Once discovered, they had no choice but to accept it. Participants noted that most

<sup>1</sup> This study did not focus on sexual abuse. However, sometimes this issue arose in the discussions. About 90% of marriages take place before a woman's first menstrual period. The average housewife marries at the age of 12 and the average inter-spouse age difference is 15 years. Discussions revealed that most of the newly married housewives were not physically mature enough for sexual intercourse and as a result they became ill. Failure to satisfy their husband's physical needs sometimes resulted in torture or divorce. In addition, husbands ignored these factors during their menstrual period and after giving birth. Painful situations occurred when they were forced to fulfil the physical needs of their husbands at those times.

**Chart 3: The health consequences of domestic abuse against housewives**



second wives were divorced or widowed women, choosing to marry again for their livelihood security, knowing that their new husband already had a first wife.

However if, after their second marriage, their husbands misbehaved or tried to divorce them, the first wives generally appealed to the *salish* (village court) to try to reclaim their dowry or filed suits against their husbands in a judicial court, though usually with limited success.

Over time however, a lot of Concern women members have begun to resist physical abuse through various concerted actions, including:

- discussing issues with others group members;
- arranging shelter for the victims (abused women) in other houses; and
- women's group members intervening to help resolve the crisis.

Participants acknowledged their husbands' moral support in arranging shelter for these victims. The actions of women members and their husbands' behavioural change have not only reduced the incidents of physical abuse but have also provided strong moral support, helping them to resist abuse and protest against the oppression of women socially.

**Analysing the effectiveness of the Concern Project**

**Housewives' feelings about power**

Housewives felt that one form of power was that of their husband attaching importance to their opinion. They also felt that having sons earning a wage<sup>2</sup>, an education, intelligence and commonsense, the ability to speak with others, some money, their own assets, respect for their opinion from family members, being able to participate in settling

<sup>2</sup> Women perceive that sons will take care of them in their old age. Besides, only sons have the right to perform the last religious rites.

**Chart 4: Impact of group formation in the family in Lengura village, Gowainghat**



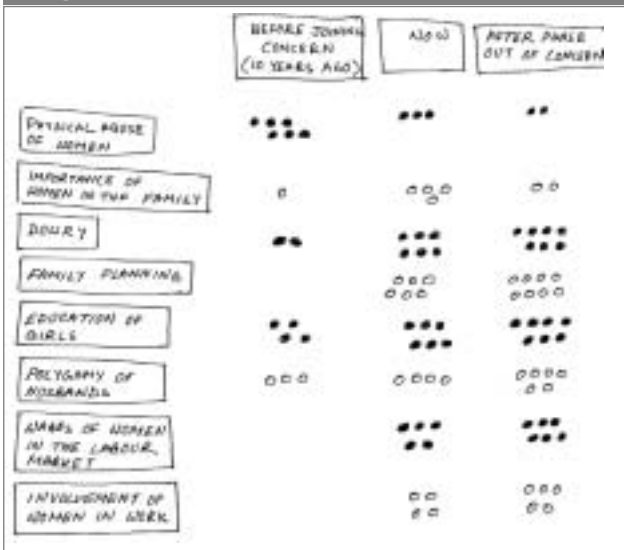
family disputes, and the ability to buy necessities were forms of power. In addition, some participants thought that a housewife was powerful when she could make decisions in the absence of her husband.

**Achieving power: not an elusive goal**

In the control villages, the incidence of abuse has not reduced over the last decade. Instead, the rate of divorce, polygamy, and the demand for dowries and related abuses has increased over the last ten years. The mobility of housewives is restricted. Usually they are not allowed to vote at elections according to their choice. Housewives referred to abuse against them as an accepted behavioural norm. With increased economic hardship and rising male unemployment, housewives in poor families are working outside the home (but within the village) in larger numbers than ever to supplement, sometimes very substantially, household budgets. Housewives' rising economic responsibilities, however, do not automatically give them greater power and security in their households. Housewives working outside the home violate social norms – a source of tension and shame for their menfolk, especially if the primary reason is her husband's unemployment. These sweeping changes place an enormous stress on households.

In contrast, as a result of Concern's interventions, the decreasing number of incidents of abuse experienced by Concern housewives since joining the programme revealed many gradual and positive changes, towards a more elevated social status for women. The reduction of physical abuse was particularly noted.

**Chart 5: Impact of Concern's activities in Purbo-Gram village, Itna**



Previously, women's mobility, especially in Muslim-dominated villages, had been very restricted. More recently, women are not only working outside of the village but also visiting the Concern office and bank for various purposes. They have been able to create a situation within their families where they are able to share their opinions. Now, if a husband physically abuses his wife publicly, other women in the village protest against this. Both divorce and polygamy are still prevalent but women have intensified their protests against these incidents. Despite many efforts to raise awareness, the intensity of dowry-related problems has increased over the past decade, but incidents of related physical abuse have reduced significantly. There have been cases where Concern members have mobilised villagers to raise the money for a dowry where a poorer family has been unable to pay in full, and thus settle a marriage.

A number of positive factors were found to have contributed to the levels of influence and control over family-related issues gained by the Concern women members.

- Concern's human and skill development training has empowered women by increasing their ability to generate income and by raising awareness of their own rights.
- Concern's credit programme has proved to be an effective tool for empowerment, enabling women to achieve economic freedom and to fulfil basic family needs through self-employment, increasing their transactions with other members of society, enabling them to provide credit to their husbands, and by reducing fear and uncertainty.

**Analysing the impact of Concern's activities in Rustampur village, Gowainghat**



Photo: Dipankar Datta

- Increased organisational strength, increased mobility, and free interaction with outsiders has contributed significantly to the empowerment process.

**Key lessons**

There are multiple dimensions to domestic abuse. The combinations of abuses are specific to individual housewives, households, and villages. In the control villages, the increase in domestic abuse is linked to an increasing demand for dowries, an increase in male unemployment, the violation of traditional norms, and the threat to men's sense of masculine identity, etc. The restricted socio-economic mobility of housewives limits their choices and increases their vulnerability within their households as well as in the village.

In the Concern villages (with the exception of dowry-related cases) the decrease in the incidence and severity of domestic abuse has been linked to the greater organisational strength of both the female and male groups and housewives' income-earning ability. The highest reduction of abuse has been observed in the incidence of physical torture compared to the incidence of verbal abuse or the deprivation of basic needs.

Although dowries are regarded as a harmful practice, participants were not sure how these problems could be resolved. Despite there being a law against them, discussion groups did not see it as an effective tool able to address this problem. Discussion groups in some villages suggested broadcasting radio and television programmes to raise awareness of the problems associated with dowries.

The findings about linkages between decreased abuses, housewives' increased economic roles, and the benefits of supportive actions to reduce abuses give hope. Building on this, participants emphasised the need for more direct involvement of male family members in micro-credit activ-



ities. According to the Concern group members, 96% of whom are women, the women who had access to micro-credit were solely liable for this fund, though in reality most women hand over this money to their husbands and still depend on their husbands' willingness to repay the loan. They suggested making their husbands jointly (and legally) liable for any financial credit. This approach would encourage their husbands to work more closely with them, e.g. discussing business opportunities, repayment procedures etc. It would also improve the wife's position both socially and within the household, and remove the humiliation of husbands only having access to credit through their wives. The immediate outcome of putting this recommendation into practice is promising. Women now find that their husbands take more interest in understanding the functionality of groups, help in group-related activities, and share the responsibility of repaying loans on time.

Local institutions did not serve the needs and interests of poor women. Neither village institutions (like the *salish*) nor legal institutions (police, judicial court) supported housewives contesting incidents of polygamy and divorce. To improve access to village institutions, discussion groups suggested promoting and expanding the number of male groups, to help build organisational strengths and create opportunities for male family members to participate in

human development training, such as the social and legal rights of women.

Concern has already taken steps to put the above-mentioned learning into practice.

- Instead of just the housewife, the whole family will be considered to be Concern's beneficiary. This will enable other family members to participate directly in many group-related activities.
- Both husband and wife will be equally liable for loan money.
- The number of male groups will be increased. Women's group leaders will facilitate the formation of new male groups in association with Concern project staff.
- A popular theatre will be formed with interested group members. This theatre will perform shows about dowries and other social issues in every village.
- Concern has increased the number of training sessions on legal and women's social rights issues for the groups. Husbands and other male family members will be encouraged to participate in this training.

These studies show that processes of change in gender relations and attitudes are ongoing and take time and that it is equally important to work with both woman and men to change attitudes. Though it is a good start, Concern will need to be in for the long haul.

#### CONTACT DETAILS

Dipankar Datta, Partnership and Capacity Building Adviser, Policy Development and Evaluation Directorate, Concern Worldwide, 52–55 Lower Camden Street, Dublin 2, Republic of Ireland. Email: dipankar2kbd@yahoo.com

Neli Sen Gupta, Field Monitor, North East Regional Programme, Concern, House 58, 1st Lane Kalabagan, Dhaka 1205, Bangladesh. Email: concern@bdonline.com