Baseline Report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights and Violence Against Women and Girls in Dhaka Slums

VIOLENCE AGAINST UNMARRIED ADOLESCENT GIRLS

2012

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While spousal violence against women is well documented in Bangladesh, little is known about violence against unmarried adolescent girls. High levels of within marriage physical and sexual violence against women (VAWG) have been reported; about 60% of the ever-married women reported being physically and/or sexually abused by a husband (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, & Macro International, 2009). A large scale survey representing urban slum and non-slum population shows that VAWG is significantly higher in slum areas compared to non-slum areas (Sambisa, Angeles, Lance, Naved, & Curtis, 2010). While 66% women in slum areas reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence, 45% women in non-slum areas reported so (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), MEASURE Evaluation, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh and Associates for Community and Population Research, 2008).

The existing literature on violence against unmarried adolescent girls focuses mainly on sexual harassment in the public sphere. One study reported that 43% of the rural unmarried adolescent girls experienced sexual harassment on their way to school, college or social visits (Alam, Roy, & Ahmed, 2009). Such harassment seems to deter the prospects of girls’ education in rural Bangladesh. Approximately, 45% of the girls aged 12 to 16 years and 73% of their parents reported that they considered stopping education due to such harassment on the way to school (Karim, 2007). In the urban area the girls have greater mobility for work compared to their rural counterparts and widespread sexual harassment and intimidation on the way to work was reported by the young female garment workers in a qualitative study conducted in Dhaka city (Siddiqi, 2003).

To date there is no attempt at understanding exposure of the unmarried adolescent girls to domestic violence, violence perpetrated by the immediate community or violence in intimate
relationship, all of which are relatively common in urban slums (Rashid, 2006). This paper is an attempt to bridge these gaps in the existing literature by exploring experience of violence of the unmarried adolescent girls from Dhaka slums in different tiers of the society and in different relationships.

METHODS

The study has been conducted as part of a larger action research project Growing up Safe and Healthy: Addressing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and Violence against Women and Girls in Urban Bangladesh (SAFE). This study uses data from key informant interviews (KIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs) conducted in three slums from Dhaka between June 2011 and Nov 2011.

The research team contacted the local influential people before data collection and briefed them about the general objectives of the study. The team spent a week to build primary rapport with the community by engaging in informal conversation with the slum dwellers at the tea stalls or on the streets. icddr,b had been implementing another project in the studied slums for the last two years, which enhanced acceptability of this research team to the slum dwellers.

Sampling, selection of participants, settings, limitations
Data were collected from four categories of participants: 15-19 years old never married adolescent girls; 15-29 years old ever married women; 18-35 years old men; and key informants. All participants were selected purposively. A total of 12 key informant interviews (7 female and 5 male) were conducted (See Appendix, Table 1). The key informants were: (1) Female and male NGO workers from the study site; and (2) The women and men from the slums with first-hand knowledge regarding the study population and extensive knowledge about issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights and VAWG in the area. Three FGDs were conducted with the unmarried adolescent girls, three with the unmarried men and three with community leaders. In-depth interviews were carried out with 15 never married adolescent girls and seven unmarried males. Three girls had no education, four had primary and seven had secondary education. Only one of them had education beyond tenth grade. The majority of the girls (9) were employed (See Appendix, Table 2). The FGD participants and the informants for IDIs were mainly selected with the help of the key informants.

Data collection
Three male and two female data collectors with Masters degrees in Social Science collected data from informants of same gender. Data collection started with KIs that were designed to understand perceptions, attitudes and practices regarding safety and security situation in the community, gender roles and norms, gender relationships, and violence against women. Then IDIs were carried out to explore individuals’ subjective experience of VAWG in the area. Concurrently the study team conducted FGDs with all four categories of participants. An additional FGD was conducted with community leaders for gathering information on the history of the slum, its infrastructure and the power structure for helping contextualise the data on violence. Each IDI, KII and FGD took 1.5-2 hours to complete.
Data analysis
Preliminary analysis began soon after the data collection had started. Based on thorough reading and discussion of 20% of the transcripts, a preliminary code list for categorising the qualitative data was developed following each wave of data collection. Data were coded using the software Atlas/ti. The code list was upgraded when dictated by the emerging themes. Data retrieved by codes were analysed by systematically comparing and contrasting codes and cases.

Ethical issues
The WHO recommendations (2001) were followed to ensure no harm to the participants, confidentiality and safety of the data and the participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to all interviews or discussions and guardian’s consent was sought in order to interview minors (aged below 18). Data was recorded using tape recorders upon participant’s agreement and tapes were kept in a locked file, and erased following transcription.

The interview and FGD guides were designed carefully and sensitively to introduce and enquire about women’s experience of violence. Each interview or discussion session started with general questions such as societal gender norms, safety and security issues and then the data collectors gradually introduced questions on women’s experiences of violence. IDIs ended on a positive note to reinforce the informants’ coping strategies. We provided IDI participants with contact information on services available for violence survivors. icddr,b's Ethical Review Committee approved the study.

FINDINGS
For enhancing and deepening the understanding of violence that the unmarried adolescent girls in urban slums experience at multiple levels the findings of this study have been organised under three subsections: Violence at home; Violence in prem (romantic relationship); and Violence in the community.

Violence at home
The data indicated that violence is a common way for parents and elders to discipline children and adolescents in the slums. As pointed out by our key informants soon after a girl reaches her puberty, she is expected to start following certain rules until she gets married. The girls are advised not to talk or play with boys, to begin wearing a piece of cloth to cover their chest (orna), to learn cooking and other household work, and take religious lessons at home. The most common form of restriction the adolescent girls experience is related to their movement outside the home.

Data from the KII s and FGDs offered explanations for changes in the parents’ behaviour towards their unmarried daughters. The informants believed that the inherent insecurity and extreme poverty in a slum increases the vulnerability of the young girls to sexual abuse and violence. They reported that the girls here are not safe on the streets or not even in their homes as parents and elders in the family are at work each day earning their income. According to KII and FGD
participants social insecurity, combined with cultural pressure for protecting virginity and chastity of an unmarried girl and upholding family honor (maan-shonman) result in restricting the girls’ mobility. This often creates immense pressure on the girls for marriage too.

“Girls are not safe in this area. There are so many mastaan (gangsters), bokhate (spoiled/derailed) boys out there. They harass the girls. Sometimes girls cannot go to school because of such harassment. Parents therefore want to get their daughters married off before anything bad happens to them.”

KII_Female__Living in the slum 40 years__Private Tutor

Many of the adolescent girls reported that they were not allowed to go outside alone, especially in the evening. One girl told the interviewer what her parents usually say when she wants to go out:

“...Take your older sister with you if you need to go out...you’re grown up now...you shouldn’t go out alone.”

IDI_Kochi_Unmarried_Age 15_Education class 5_Garment worker

Key informants and FGD participants reported that once a girl reaches puberty the form of discipline and control changes and parents usually stop hitting or beating her. A daughter’s attainment of puberty reminds parents that their little daughter has grown; she will be married off soon and will go to marital home. Possibly in response to this, only a few girls reported currently being physically abused. As it is presented below physical violence may still be perpetrated against some unmarried adolescent girls in certain circumstances.

Girls’ most common experience at home included emotional abuse by their parents and elders. Controlling a girl’s mobility, and her interactions with males in order to ultimately control her sexuality, was a repetitive and overriding theme emerging from the data. Emotional and even physical violence in some cases was perpetrated for maintaining this control.

Data from in-depth interviews with the girls indicate that there is a constant surveillance of their interaction with the men and with other girls in the community by family members. Girls were forbidden to talk to other men, or to girls who were known to be in relationship with men. Such interactions were feared to lead to a bad reputation in the neighborhood. A girl gave an example of what parents usually tell the adolescent girls:

“That girl talks and hangs around with men so don’t make friends with her. This girl doesn’t do that and is a ‘good girl’...so you can spend time with her”

IDI_Koli_Unmarried_Age 17_Education class 9_Unemployed

According to data from FGDs with the unmarried adolescent girls, and confirmed in IDIs, parents frequently suspected that their daughter was going out with men. This often led to emotional and even to physical violence. The following was stated by an unmarried adolescent girl:
“Last year I went out with my female friends in the morning to celebrate the Bangla New Year...when I came back home in the evening everyone was angry...I was beaten by my elder sister's husband. My mother yelled at me, “Liar! Why don't you say that you were with a guy the whole day!”

IDI_Ankhi_Unmarried_Age 16_Education class 5_Unemployed

This suspicion as well as actual discovery of a relationship often leads to an attempt to hurriedly marry off the girl somewhere else. If a girl resists marriage suggested by her parents an affair is assumed and the girl is labeled as a 'bad girl'. One girl reported that when her mother found out that she was in a relationship she started looking for a groom. When she found one this girl refused to marry the man and her mother shouted at her:

“You have become ‘noshto’ (spoiled/ polluted, having relationship with men after coming to this city). You don't listen to me anymore...I'll take you back to the village and everything will be alright then.”

IDI_Ankhi_Unmarried_Age 16_Education class 5_Unemployed

According to FGD and IDI data, migrants to slums grappling with the reality of living in their present environment often idealised the ways of life in the village. Thus, in order to deal with the seemingly contagious love marriages some families try to fix arranged marriage for their daughters and sometimes even succeed in marrying off the girls ignoring their choice and disregarding their lack of consent. The parents may have also resorted to physical violence in order to make this happen. As described by an unmarried adolescent girl in an FGD:

“People say bad things to parents if a young girl remains unmarried here...Then parents get worried and start seeking grooms for their daughters...a girl's opinion has no value to them...they force their daughters for marriage...sometimes even beat them...”

FGD with unmarried girls

Overriding concerns of the family regarding the daughter's sexuality, chastity, safety, security and family honor made the parents tense and often made them mistrust the girls and even to inappropriately make them responsible. This happens when the girls complain about being sexually harassed by the local men. For example, in response to daughter's complaint against the local men for harassing her, her mother told her,

“Why do you need to go out so frequently then? If they find you walking around on the streets it's very normal that they'll tease you!”

IDI_Ankhi_Unmarried_Age 16_Education class 5_Unemployed

Such emotional abuse at home deprives the girls from the opportunity to share their problems or to seek remedy. This allows sexual harassment in the community to go unchallenged, which contributes to sustaining the girls' vulnerability to this violence.

A number of girls reported conflict with their parents or elders over control of their own income. The working girls usually hand over their entire salary to their parent/s keeping a very small
amount for themselves (usually not more than BDT 500 or USD 6 per month). There is pressure for giving up all their earnings to their families and conflict was common if they wanted to hold on to some of it.

“Once I kept some money from my salary and handed over the rest to my mother. Mother charged me, “Where is the rest?” I replied “Why are you asking? This is my money. I can do anything with it.” My mother got very angry and I had to give her back the money I had kept for myself. Since then I cannot keep a penny for myself.”

IDI_Mita_Unmarried_Age 15_Education 0_Garment Worker

Violence in Prem

The data demonstrate that despite restrictions the unmarried adolescent girls often had romantic relationship with men and such relationship played significant roles in their lives. Living in close proximity to other households in the crowded setting of urban slums and working alongside men at places of employment present the adolescent girls with multiple opportunities for interacting with the opposite sex, leading sometimes to romantic relationships.

Our conversation with the adolescent girls and men during in-depth interviews and FGDs reveal that romantic relationships often start with coercion forcing the girls to enter such relationship. The girls reported that they are particularly vulnerable to romantic advances from the young men, which made them feel harassed. These advances were often accompanied by threats of abduction, rape, badnam (ill-reputing the girl), acid throwing etc., if they refused to have the relationship.

“A young man from here always waits on the street for me… I am scared to go out from my home.. he proposed marriage to me couple of weeks before and I said ‘no’… Few days ago, he threatened me by saying, “too much pride is not good… your beauty won’t last long!… I’ll see for how long your aunts are going to protect you from me….”

IDI_Champa_Unmarried_Age 20_Education HSC_Private Tutor

Sometimes the men even go to the extent of putting pressure by threatening the girl not directly with harming her, but with suicide. The girls often had to give in under such threats.

Data suggest that a man’s and a girl’s expectations from romantic relationship differ and sometimes contradict each other. The girls have more at stake in entering such a relationship and expect marriage as the ultimate outcome of prem. They are careful in choosing their premik (boyfriend). As reported by the girls in in-depth interviews and FGDs, they preferred to refuse the men who were known to be in other relationship; do not work; or are maastans (goon) or whom they thought their parents would not approve of. The men, on the contrary, were interested in physical beauty of a girl as the key purpose of prem was ‘to enjoy’, by which they meant sexual pleasure. According to the men, such relationships were temporary and only lasted as long as there was pleasure. Marriage, on the other hand, was viewed by them as a long term relationship having some concrete material gains attached. Ideally they would prefer to marry a girl whose family would be able to pay dowry or provide financial support when needed. Such contradictory expectations from prem may result in conflict and violence against the girls. The men often deceive girls into
having sex giving false hopes of marriage. The girls who reported having a premik, said that they were under constant pressure from their premik for sex.

“Whenever I see him, he asks for physical closeness...like a leech. I don’t like it...it makes me feel uncomfortable. He keeps asking me to hug him, to do this and that. I get suspicious...does he really love me? Or does he just want to have sex?”

IDI_Ankhi_Unmarried_Age 16_Education class 5_Unemployed

Only a few girls reported agreeing to have sex after their premik promised them to marry and after having sex the men left them:

“I did not want to ...but he used to keep asking for it...he used to say “I’ll never leave you. If I really wanted to do so why would I disclose our relationship to my parents? They know everything. I’ll marry you...trust me””

IDI_Parul_Unmarried_Age 18_Education class 5_Unemployed

Such reports from the girls were crosschecked with data from in-depth interviews with the men. Most of them reported that in order to obtain sex they deliberately gave false hope of marriage to the girls. They often resorted to physical, emotional and sexual violence if the girls resisted sex. So, sex under threat and physically forced sex was not uncommon in such relationships. During the interviews the men tried as well to justify such acts:

“Her body and mind is mine...why wouldn’t she give it to me?. I used to tell her that I’ll leave her if she doesn’t give in...A man can’t control his urges. When he gets aroused, it’s not possible for him to consider if his partner is sick or getting hurt.”

IDI_Porag_Unmarried_Age 24_Education 0_Rickshaw puller

As a result, of unprotected sex this girl mentioned by Porag became pregnant twice. Both the times the man used physical violence to compel her to undergo abortion.

“I had to beat her...otherwise she wouldn’t agree to abort the child...I told her that I would leave if she keeps the child.”

Both our male and female informants reported that in a slum it was very easy for a man to have multiple relationships and abandon a girl whenever they choose as they go unpunished for such things. As a result such abandonment of the girls by premik is quite common.

“I have four premika (girl friend) at the moment (smiling)...will finally marry one of them...will ditch the other three. They can do nothing about it. They will just have to let this go. If they are really good girls and care about their ijjat (virginity) they will just keep their mouth shut and not tell anyone...ijjat is the most precious thing for a girl...losing it implies losing everything a girl has in her life”

IDI_Munna_Unmarried_Age 18_Education class 3_Bus Helper
A girl’s refusal to accept such abandonment further escalates abuse which may tarnish a girl’s and her family’s reputation.

“After I came to know that he had married another girl I went to his workplace to see him and complained to the people there…he got so angry that he started hitting me…later his aunt threatened me on the phone by saying “you whore! You call again and we’ll tear you to pieces”…I went to his house with my mother and his mother said, “you shameless slut! You slept with my son, got pregnant and now you tell us that you are innocent!” Even though I was not pregnant people think I was!”

IDI_Parul_Unmarried_Age 18_Education class 5_Unemployed

The girls reported that even though it is the men who usually maintain multiple relationships they often suspect the girls of having relationships with other men, and often watch her interactions with other men. Sometimes this urge to control would be so extreme that the girl would want to break off the relationship. This, however, usually met with threats from their premik:

“My premik always used to suspect that I am having affair with other men…I used to teach some students at my home and he told me awful things even if he found me talking with my male students. If I wore make-up he would ask, for whom did I go for the make up?…sometimes he even made his friends to call me to see if I enjoy talking with other men!…So I decided to leave him and told him so. He got furious and said, “Now I am sure that I was right about you! Tell me who is the guy, who you are leaving me for?…I will see how you are going to live in this area! I’ll give what you deserve from me!…I was so scared that I could not go out alone for one year…”

IDI_Lipi_Unmarried_Age 19_Education class 9_Unemployed

Violence in the Community

Our key informant interviews and FGDs indicate that slum residents in general were vulnerable to various forms of violence from political leaders and their gangs who maintained their authority and control over the area through force. Lack of government institutions and structures allowed these local informal political systems to thrive relatively independently. In the context of state neglect the local political leaders perpetrating violence against women easily get away with it by maintaining connections with politically powerful people in the city and with the representatives of law enforcing agencies working in the area.

Our conversations with the unmarried adolescent girls reveal that they were particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of violence perpetrated at the community level due to their young age and marital status. Those who were born in the slum or had connections with local powerful people were less vulnerable than rural migrants, those who live away from family, or those who did not have strong links with local powerful people.

“Local mastaan and bokhate young men chase the girls who are new to the area…., who just came from the village…They propose them for a romantic relationship.”

KII_Male_Living in the slum for 10 years_Unemployed
“Girls who live here alone, not with her parents or with her family...have to tolerate all the sexual comments or advances made by the local men...they cannot protest nor do anything... When a girl is repeatedly harassed or threatened she goes to the community leader for support...and if she is poor, (instead of providing any support) the leaders would say, “Why would he/she do this to you? You must have provoked this.”

KII_Female_Living in the slum 22 years_Unemployed

The girls repeatedly identified local mastaan and bokhate youngsters, community leaders and their followers as the main perpetrators of violence in the community. Common forms of violence perpetrated by them included sexual harassment, using informal arbitration process for abusing a girl, and extortion.

Sexual harassment
The men use girls’ mobility as an opportunity to abuse the girls. Many girls work outside home and are more vulnerable to sexual harassment. Most common experience of sexual harassment as reported in in-depth interviews and FGDs were: name-calling, spreading rumors damaging one’s reputation, making sexual comments, staring in unacceptable ways, making lewd sexual gestures, and touching the girls sexually.

Sexual harassment often leads to limiting opportunities for girls in the community. For example, their mobility gets restricted and sometimes they stop going to school or work. These restrictions are often imposed by the family mainly for two underlying reasons. First of all the families get concerned about security of the girls and try to protect them against any undesired events. Second, the commonly held perception that sexual harassment is invited by the girls themselves puts the blame on girls stripping them off support from the family or the community and often making families to put restrictions on their mobility. This was well reflected in a group discussion with community leaders:

“Men do not tease good girls...now a days girls wear revealing clothes...short kameez, jeans...that provoke men by their gestures and postures”

FGD with Community Leaders

Key informant interviews revealed that the cultural emphasis on the young women’s chastity and her family’s honor, the social consequences of having a romantic relationship before marriage are much more serious and damaging for the unmarried girls than the men. Cultural disapproval and social consequences discourage unmarried girls from entering sexual relationships with the men before marriage.

“Here ‘badnam’(bad name of the girl) spreads so quickly!...if someone labels a girl as a ‘kharap meye’ no one would marry her. Rich people can afford paying money and shut people’s mouth...but for poor people like us, maanshonman is the only thing that we have...and we can’t afford losing it.”

KII_Female_Living in the slum 40 years_Private Tutor
Our conversation with the key informants and unmarried girls also revealed that rape was not very uncommon in the community.

“Couple of months ago… a girl was coming back home from work at around 8 or 9 pm… a guy used to harass her every day on her way to work… that night he stopped her… then using force took her to Madhubag… After that her life was completely ruined.”

FGD with unmarried girls

As already mentioned above, key perpetrators for sexual violence against unmarried adolescent girls were local mastaan and bokhate young men, and community leaders. However, such violence is perpetrated as well by some older men. This is a routine experience for the girls in the community. Some girls maintain strong links and even enter into romantic relationship with the local powerful elites as a strategy for reducing the burden of such sexual harassment.

“There are girls here who maintain romantic relationship with the men holding some power in the area to protect themselves from harassment from other men. If she is seen with a powerful guy in the community, no one would say anything to her.”

KII_Male _Living in the slum 30 years_Microbus Driver

Extortion, forced payment, local informal arbitration

A different level of harassment and control comes from the community policing girls' behaviour. Like family, community maintains strict surveillance of the unmarried girls while they are outside home. The young men maintaining good relationship with powerful people in the community extort money from the unmarried girls and boys if they are found hanging out together. If the couple refuses or are unable to pay the money they are brought under arbitration, beaten publicly, and are charged fines by community leaders or their followers. Sometimes young men threaten girls hanging out with boys that they would report to the community that they were found engaged in sex. They also threaten them with rape and sometimes they actually rape them.

“It is very normal that girls will like boys and they’ll hang out together. But gangsters here don’t even allow them to talk and would catch them if unmarried girls are seen with a man. They beat the man and demand money from them. If they fail to pay, they are brought to community leaders.”

KII_Female (House owner)_Living in the slum 26 years_Unemployed

Findings from KII, and FGDs suggest that residents are dependent on the leadership structure for mediation and arbitrations during times of conflict. Community leaders can accuse people, declare a punishment and carry it out. Many of our informants said leaders always looked for opportunities to arrange arbitration for financial gain. A common target for such arbitration is young people having pre-marital relationship. Unmarried couples especially those who are poor and marginalised are brought under community trials and are beaten or charged fine, or are forced into marriage.
DISCUSSION

This paper sought to explore violence against unmarried adolescent girls within home, in the community and in romantic relationships, taking into account the factors that help to sustain such violence. We have described how the unmarried adolescent girls experience multiple forms of violence at home, in romantic relationship and in the community. However, the form of violence differs: at home, the girls were most commonly exposed to emotional violence and controlling behaviour. In the community sexual harassment, extortion and unfair arbitration were the major types of violence against unmarried adolescent girls. In relationships, girls were emotionally abused, forced or coerced into sex, and were abandoned.

Although conventional concerns regarding chastity of the girl, family honor, and the girl’s future underlie parents’ control over their movement outside home the urban slum context compounds the concerns and poses greater challenges in achieving the goal. High crime level in the slum is accompanied by sexual harassment and assault of the girls. Most of the girls in the slums either go to school or work exposing them to the outside world. The girls from slums also make friends and go for different kinds of entertainment. This heightens suspicion of the parents that they are engaged in romantic relationship making them to strengthen surveillance of the girls; impose greater restrictions over their mobility. They also resort to emotional and even physical violence for maintaining control over them.

Similar to the parents the community upholds conventional notions of patriarchy. The community’s role in enforcing the restrictions over the girls, siding with the men and abusing its power for further victimising the girls was very clear from this study.

Despite the control, girls’ agency has enabled them to have relationship. Traditional gender norms of ‘good girl’ and sanctions on prem, on one hand discourage the girls to disclose their relationship even if it is violent and they need support. On the other hand, this allows the men to continue abuse and to get away with it. Similarly, blaming of girls for invoking sexual harassment precludes help seeking by the girls and perpetuates such behaviour.

The study findings suggest that compared to rural areas life circumstances have radically changed in the slums through changes in the gender roles. The girls who were traditionally financial burden of parents have become important contributors to family income. They have become more mobile and independent. They get involved in relationship. But the changing role and its outcomes challenge the patriarchal ideology, which lag behind the advances in life. The contradiction between the two (traditional and modern) gives rise to many tensions and conflicts exposing the unmarried adolescent girls to a range of different forms of violence within home, in the community and in romantic relationship. Exercising agency the girls try to address such violence. However, violence condoning attitude of the slum dwellers; heightened desire for maintaining the conventional order of things through increased imposition of restrictions and perpetration of violence; lack of recourse mechanisms do not often allow them to overcome the violence.
REFERENCES


## APPENDIX

### Table 1: Number of In-depth Interviews, Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

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### Table 2: Background characteristics of unmarried male & female informants interviewed in-depth

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