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The Effect of Violence on Women's Electoral and Political Participation in Bangladesh



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The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) supports citizens' right to participate in free and fair elections. Our independent expertise strengthens electoral systems and builds local capacity to deliver sustainable solutions.

As the global leader in democracy promotion, we advance good governance and democratic rights by:

- Providing technical assistance to election officials
- Empowering the under-represented to participate in the political process
- Applying field-based research to improve the electoral cycle

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Executive Summary

Women in Bangladesh are uniquely impacted by pervasive violence in the country's electoral process, as voters, candidates, political party supporters and activists. To explore the effect of electoral violence on women's meaningful participation, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) convened seven focus groups of Bangladeshi women in 2013 and 2015¹ to discuss electoral violence they have experienced both in the home and in the public sphere.

Through these focus groups, IFES found that:

- Bangladesh's pervasive violent political culture hampers women's political participation. Women are afraid of becoming victims of political attacks and clashes. Women also fear their families limiting their participation in political activity.
- Much of the electoral violence experienced by women is psychological in nature (i.e. intimidation and harassment). Many women are also victims of electoral violence, primarily psychological violence, within the home.
- Sexual violence (as a form of electoral violence) has been experienced through harassment and assault of women candidates, political activists and voters.
- Some women are perpetrators of electoral violence. Within the home, they are using intimidation to limit voter choice. In the public sphere, they are slandering other candidates. This phenomenon may increase as women's political participation increases; perpetrators of such violence may see engagement in such tactics as necessary to ensure a "seat at the table."
- Withholding access to financial resources in general and specifically to participate in politics is used to deter women's political participation.

Focus group participants identified 1) patriarchal cultural norms and interpretation of religion, 2) Bangladesh's violent political culture, and 3) weak implementation of laws, as systemic sources of electoral violence, and urged a multi-faceted approach to reducing electoral violence and its impact on women's electoral participation. In addition to ensuring the enforcement of laws, participants recommended:

- Awareness campaigns, targeting both men and women, that 1) support women's rights, 2) address the problem of political and electoral violence, and 3) highlight the issue of violence against women.
- Punishment of those who are caught perpetrating acts of electoral violence, according to due process, and publicizing these cases to counter the culture of impunity.
- Gender-sensitive anti-violence training for local government officials, election officials, law enforcement and electoral stakeholders.
- Strong and public stances by political leaders against electoral violence and the importance of inclusive elections.
- Expanding police presence during the electoral period, particularly with female police cells.

¹ The 2013 focus groups were conducted as part of a global program funded by USAID/Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance/Conflict Mitigation and Management project. The 2015 focus groups were conducted under the Bangladesh Election Support Activity (BESA) program, funded by USAID and DFID.

- Addressing the uncontrolled use of money in politics and the use of “muscle” power.
- Ensuring the proper functioning of village courts and their resolution of cases of domestic violence.
- Collecting and assessing information on electoral violence, including incidents affecting women.
- Anti-violence and pro-peace messages from community leaders.

Participants in the focus groups urged the Government of Bangladesh, the Election Commission of Bangladesh, political leaders, civil society and the media to work collaboratively on these and other initiatives. A full list of recommendations is included in this report.

The complexity of gendered electoral violence in Bangladesh – which includes psychological, economic, sexual and physical violence – requires continued and inclusive assessment to develop successful strategies to ensure its mitigation and the fostering of women’s positive engagement in Bangladesh’s democratic development. IFES uses the following definition of violence against women in elections:²

Any harm or threat of harm committed against women with the intent and/or impact of interfering with their free and equal participation in the electoral process during the electoral period. It includes harassment, intimidation, physical harm or coercion, threats, and financial pressures, and it may be committed in the home or other private spaces, or in public spaces. These acts may be directed at women in any of their roles as electoral stakeholders (e.g., voters, media, political actors, state actors, community leaders, or electoral officials).

Further, the understanding of women’s involvement in electoral violence needs to be comprehensive, ensuring that women are not solely seen as victims, but also as perpetrators or silent partners, to ensure the design of appropriate and successful mitigation strategies.

Issues for further examination include:

- The relationship between domestic violence and electoral violence
- The extent to which women’s electoral and political participation is impacted by the broader culture of political violence
- “Invisible” forms of electoral violence – data collection on psychological, sexual and economic forms of electoral violence
- Public, sexist rhetoric and harassment, and its prevalence in campaign/political speech
- The role of women in perpetrating electoral and political violence
- Role of male allies and strategies to develop male allies for gender-equity in leadership

Data on gendered electoral violence could be gathered in surveys and other studies on domestic violence – including any follow-ons to the national 2011 Violence Against Women Survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Additionally, information could be collected through monitoring of political statements, including during the electoral period. Further focus group discussion and community-level interventions are also vehicles to gain a more in-depth understanding of this issue and address the sources and propagation of electoral violence.

² Huber, Jessica; Kammerud, Lisa (2016). *Violence Against Women in Elections: An Excerpt from IFES’ Framework*, pg. 2. IFES.

Introduction

Those who incite electoral violence against candidates and political activists of both genders have the same objective: to delay, intimidate, prevent or eliminate political opponents and/or electoral processes. Yet, in the case of female candidates and activists, these destructive objectives extend deeper into the social fabric, shaping women's relations to the power structures that govern them and undermining the human rights framework in their countries.

-Gabrielle Bardall,

*Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence (IFES, 2011)*³

Under the “Bangladesh Election Support Activities” (BESA) Program,⁴ IFES has worked through two key channels to engage interested stakeholders in preventing electoral violence, sharing information on the causes of conflict and promoting peaceful political processes:

- The **Women Against Violence in Elections (WAVE) Advisory Group**, which has worked to identify ways to mitigate electoral and political violence against women as well as ways to engage their networks and utilize their expertise to promote peaceful, violence-free elections and encourage women's participation and leadership.
- The **Electoral Conflict and Security Working Group**, which serves as a platform to discuss successes of and lessons learned from grassroots initiatives that address electoral violence and improve electoral security, and strategies for new interventions in this area.

Additionally, under IFES' global “Bridging the Gaps: A New Framework for Gender and Electoral Violence” program,⁵ IFES is working to identify and address the unique issues related to gender-based election violence. Bangladesh was identified as one of several target countries to conduct research that would help 1) inform the development of a robust framework for assessment and documentation of women's experiences with electoral violence, and 2) enhance IFES programming that addresses the impacts of electoral violence on women through sharing the framework and recommendations to improve program design.

IFES conducted a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) with Bangladeshi women in 2013 and 2015 in order to better understand women's unique and often undocumented experiences with electoral violence. IFES drew from its institutional knowledge, both from prior electoral violence research as well as experience with country-based initiatives to monitor, report on and mitigate electoral violence⁶ in determining questions to ask during the FGDs. In addition, starting with the 2013 FGDs that were conducted under IFES' global program, the BESA project utilized the subject matter expertise within the WAVE Advisory Group and the Electoral Conflict and Security Group to identify additional FGD participants to support a holistic view of this issue within the Bangladesh context.

³ Page 11.

⁴ This program is funded by USAID and DFID.

⁵ This program is funded by USAID Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance/Conflict Mitigation and Management.

⁶ This includes incidents in Bangladesh during the 2008 and 2014 elections.

The specific objectives of the focus groups⁷ were to:

1. Assess general opinions about electoral violence in Bangladesh;
2. Identify the specific kinds of electoral violence women experience in their private roles as citizens and in their public role as activists and candidates;
3. Identify perceived obstacles to women as voters, candidates, and political actors; and
4. Understand how a violent political culture affects women's electoral and political participation.

The findings seek to contribute to a more holistic and human-centered approach to electoral security, as opposed to an event-, location- or material-centered approach, that covers all phases and activities of the electoral process and that adheres to the spirit of international standards and norms governing elections,⁸ as experienced by women in the political sphere.

Background

Violence impacts the electoral participation of both men and women. However, most existing studies of electoral violence, as well as the frameworks and interventions based upon these studies, focus on electoral violence that occurs in the form of observable acts in the public sphere, the data for which is more readily available.⁹ Election-related violence involving women, much of which is difficult to quantify and analyze because it occurs in the private sphere or in the form of psychological threats or social restrictions, is often overlooked. Additionally, many people – women and men alike – do not perceive the subtler forms of private-sphere violence as electoral or political violence. This reality is echoed in media reports of political and electoral violence in Bangladesh, which overwhelmingly capture incidences of violence perpetrated by men and against men, and do little to highlight the unique violence women face as actors in the democratic process.¹⁰

From an institutional perspective, Bangladesh has made significant efforts to address the marginalization of women through a legal framework that addresses both violence against women and women's political representation. Bangladesh ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, although it did so with reservations, stating that certain articles conflict with Sharia law.¹¹ Bangladesh also acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political

⁷ Focus groups are a qualitative research tool in which a group of people from similar backgrounds or experiences discuss a specific topic of interest. See Overseas Development Institute for more information on the methodology: <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/194.pdf>.

⁸ See Mohan, Vasu (2014). *A Rights-Based Approach to Electoral Security*. <http://www.ifes.org/news/rights-based-approach-electoral-security>. IFES.

⁹ Kammerud, Lisa (2012). *An Integrated Approach to Elections and Conflict*. IFES

¹⁰ As part of the BESA program, IFES systematically collects quantitative data based on media reports of political and electoral violence in Bangladesh. Of the reports collected since 2014, most acts of physical, political, and electoral violence are perpetrated by men against other men.

¹¹ Bangladesh maintains reservations against Articles 2 and 16.1(c) of the CEDAW, which oblige state parties to eliminate discrimination against women in all legislation public institutions and existing laws or practices, on the grounds that these articles conflict with Sharia law. Article 2(a) pertains to achieving equality of men and women in national constitutions or other appropriate legislation and in practical realization. Article 16.1(c) ensures the same rights and responsibilities for men and women during its marriage and at its dissolution. Available at: https://treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4&lang=en#EndDec.

Rights (ICCPR) in 2000, and is party to other key international human rights treaties. The constitution of 1972 guarantees non-discrimination and equal protection under law for all citizens, and full participation in public life, and Bangladesh has enacted numerous legislative instruments in recent years to protect women's rights. Such legislation includes the Prevention of Cruelty Against Women and Children Act (2000), which prohibits rape, acid throwing¹² and dowry-related crimes, and made sexual assault and sexual harassment punishable offenses;¹³ and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection Act) (2010), which criminalizes domestic violence, and defines domestic violence as physical, emotional or sexual abuse, as well as financial damage, inflicted on a woman or child by any member of the family (Art. 3). In 2010, the High Court provided guidelines to employers and educational institutions to form policies to address sexual harassment in work places, educational institutions and other public places, and also directed the Government to enact legislation to address sexual harassment in public places.¹⁴ The Government of Bangladesh has also adopted the Women Development Policy (2011) and the recent National Plan of Action to Prevent Violence Against Women and Children (2013-2025), which was developed jointly with civil society. Measures such as the establishment of One Stop Crisis Cells, which provide health care, police and legal assistance, and other services, and of special units of female police officers, among others, have been taken to address and prevent violence against women.

With regard to electoral and political participation, Bangladesh has instituted temporary special measures (TSMs) that reserve a certain number of seats for women at the four levels of national and sub-national government.¹⁵ Bangladesh first introduced a quota for women in parliament in the 1972 constitution for a period of 10 years, and has subsequently expanded the number of seats using constitutional amendments for TSMs. There is currently a quota of 50 seats for women in the 350-seat parliament. Similarly, there are legal provisions for reserved seats in local government. The current prime minister, leader of the opposition, speaker of the National Assembly, and chairperson of the second-largest party are all women. Women also vote in numbers almost equal to those of men, although exact figures are difficult to confirm as results and turnout are not disaggregated by gender.

While institutionally, positive legislative and other measures have been taken to address gender-based violence and increase women's representation, Bangladesh still suffers from fundamental and deeply-ingrained cultural and societal beliefs and practices, which contribute to continued violation of women's rights. In 2011, a national survey on violence against women carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)¹⁶ found that 87 percent of married women had experienced domestic violence, with psychological violence being the most common form of violence (80 percent of respondents). One-third of respondents were victims of violence perpetrated by a non-partner; those within the family – parents,

¹² United Nations. (24 March 2010). Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Consideration of Reports Submitted by Parties Under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Report of States Parties: Bangladesh. (CEDAW/C/BGD.6-7). Available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/288/51/PDF/N1028851.pdf?OpenElement>.

¹³ Hossen, Md. Alamgir. (September 2014). *Measuring Gender-Based Violence: Results of Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey in Bangladesh*. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. 1. Available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/Mexico_Nov2014/Session%203%20Bangladesh%20paper.pdf.

¹⁴ Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW): Eighth Periodic Report, Submitted Under Article 18*, 11. Available at: http://mowca.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mowca.portal.gov.bd/page/762c7e6e_69ce_4979_817c_f7dbc2b561ed/8th%20Periodic%20Report-%20CEDAW-2015.pdf.

¹⁵ For more information, see Paasilinna, Silja (2016). *Women's Reserved Seats in Bangladesh: A Systemic Analysis of Meaningful Representation*. IFES.

¹⁶ Hossen, Md. Alamgir, Ibid.

step-parents and parents-in-law – were frequently cited as perpetrators.

Focus Group Methodology

IFES defines electoral violence as: “any harm or threat of harm to any person or property involved in the election process, to gain an electoral advantage, or to the election process itself, during the election period.” This definition is meant to encompass physical as well as psychological violence. Incidents, or particular acts of violence, could range from harassment of voters, to throwing stones at an election office to candidate assassination. Electoral violence can happen at any point of the election period – from voter registration to polling day to after results are announced.

In October 2013, IFES facilitated four FGDs in three districts as part of a global IFES study on political and electoral violence against women under the “Bridging the Gaps: A New Framework for Gender and Electoral Violence” program. To augment the data collected in 2013 and to test findings, IFES conducted three additional FGDs of participants from four districts in June 2015 under the BESA program. A total of 67 women participated in the seven focus groups. The breakdown of the 2013 and 2015 focus groups is represented in the table below.

Figure 1: FGD Breakdown by District

2013 Focus Groups			2015 Focus Groups		
No.	District	# Participants	No.	District	# Participants
1.	Barishal	10	5.	Satkhira	7
2.	Chittagong	10	6.	Kushtia and Satkhira	10
3.	Chittagong	9	7.	Kushtia and Jessore	11
4.	Cox’s Bazaar	10	Total # of Participants		67

In 2013, focus groups locations and participants were selected in discussions with Stratdev, a Bangladeshi consulting firm. The goal was to have both rural and urban locations for the focus group with “grassroots activists” as participants. In 2015, the locations and participants were selected based on input from two IFES-facilitated groups – the Electoral Conflict and Security Working Group and the WAVE Advisory Group – coinciding with other IFES activities in the area to minimize costs.¹⁷ Focus group participants included current and former *Upazila Parishad* (Sub-district Council) vice-chairwomen, *Union Parishad* councilwomen, political party activists, polling staff, journalists,¹⁸ senior teachers, lawyers, and community and civil society leaders. The focus groups consisted exclusively of women; IFES and members of the working groups believed that women would be more candid and forthcoming in their opinions if men were not present during these discussions. Also of note, participants of the focus groups were primarily Muslim and Bengali, reflecting the majority of Bangladeshi citizens, with representation from religious minority groups. However, there were no ethnic minorities or indigenous representation in the focus groups due to the locations in which the FGDs were held.¹⁹

¹⁷ Both are technical working groups of non-governmental leaders, academics and activists.

¹⁸ Female journalists attended the focus groups as participants; all participants agreed that comments made in the focus groups were confidential and not for attribution.

¹⁹ According to the last census conducted in 2011, which was a survey-based census, the ethnic minority population (including indigenous people) was approximately 1.1 percent of the population. However, this figure is disputed by indigenous peoples rights advocates.

All FGDs were conducted in Bangla and facilitated by a female Bangladeshi consultant or employee of IFES. Facilitators explained that the purpose of the FGD was to gather the participants' opinions on women's experiences in different phases of the election cycle, and, more specifically, to discuss the various obstacles that women may face during the election period.

IFES decided to shorten the length of the focus groups in 2015 to two and a half hours to ensure a productive and lively discussion, and sustained interest on the part of the participants. Therefore, fewer questions were asked in the 2015 FGDs than the 2013 FGDs. See Annex 1 for the Focus Group Discussion Guide, developed under the "Bridging the Gaps: A New Framework for Gender and Electoral Violence" program, as well as how questions were tailored for the 2015 FGDs.

Questions asked in 2013 but not in 2015 sought to elicit participants' opinions of the previous elections, their perception of violence against women and of the role of various stakeholders in reducing violence. Despite the differences in the questionnaires used, common themes emerged from both focus group series with regard to the nature of electoral violence, and the specific experiences of women, within the home and in the public sphere, as voters, political activists and candidates. Also, participants in both groups offered ideas as to how various state- and non-state actors could work to further reduce electoral violence, even though the questions on this topic in the 2015 groups were less specific.

Key Findings of Focus Group Discussions

The FGDs with Bangladeshi women in 2013 and 2015 found that women experience unique forms of electoral violence, both within the home and in their public lives, as a result of 1) patriarchal cultural norms and religious attitudes toward women, 2) a general violent political culture, and 3) weak implementation of laws.

Media and other reports on electoral violence have historically focused on physical violence occurring in the public sphere, with known perpetrators and victims who are – overwhelmingly – men. However, the FGDs suggest that for women, electoral violence is predominantly psychological in nature, experienced in the home and in public, and negatively impacts electoral behavior and political participation.

Psychological, sexual and physical violence in the home are hidden types of electoral violence. These incidents are not normally reported and/or not understood as violence. These incidents are also difficult to prevent using traditional means to address electoral security, such as law and order measures. It is difficult for women to file legal complaints against perpetrators of sexual, and psychological violence or for law enforcement to intervene, due to the lack of physical evidence and cultural attitudes related to women's rights in the home and in society. The same is true for economic threats.²⁰

While FGD participants noted that women are primarily victims of electoral violence, sometimes women are also perpetrators of electoral violence when engaging in politics. This is primarily of a psychological nature, but also manifests as physical violence. Senior women in the home were also identified as perpetrators of electoral violence.

Psychological Violence: Psychological violence experienced in the home impacts a woman's ability to vote according to her choice, while in the public sphere it hampers a woman's ability to participate in the political process. Women who are victims of psychological violence in public tend to be political activists, candidates and voters who experience slander and character

"Women expressing political opinions are often challenged because, being women, they are not supposed to know or understand politics."

Focus Group Participant

²⁰ Huber and Kammerud, *supra*.

assassination – some of which could also be characterized as sexual violence. FGD participants said that female candidates engage in slander of other female candidates, and that within the home, more senior women are perpetrators of psychological violence. Other perpetrators, both in the public and private spheres, were predominantly men.

That Bangladeshi women are frequently victims of psychological forms of electoral violence was consistent with IFES' global data on electoral violence.²¹ According to IFES' Electoral Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) data, psychological violence – intimidation and verbal harassment – accounts for 42 percent of all incidents of violence against women,²² and women are three times more likely to be victims of intimidation than men.²³ EVER found that psychological intimidation accounted for nearly 90 percent of incidents of violence against female party leaders, party/candidate supporters or candidates, and political party candidates/supporters made up the largest proportion – 48 percent – of female victims of electoral violence (female voters were the next largest group at 22 percent).²⁴

Sexual Violence: While FGD participants did not identify sexual violence as a form of electoral violence experienced in the home, they did note that female candidates, activists and voters are all subject to sexual violence (verbal and physical) outside the home. Women political activists are often physically assaulted during rallies and marches, and FGD participants felt that women voters, activists and candidates are sometimes subject to sexual harassment and intimidation by men. Public sexist rhetoric and harassment (a form of sexual violence), such as labeling women activists as prostitutes, was reported by FGD participants.

Physical Violence: Global EVER data has shown that male victims of electoral violence are much more likely to experience physical harm (almost 35 percent) than female victims of electoral violence (10 percent).²⁵ In Bangladesh, FGD participants said that electoral violence against women does not often take the form of physical violence either within or outside the home; however, participants describe instances of physical violence as quite severe when they do occur. The violent nature of Bangladesh's political culture, since it tends to restrict women's political participation and likely results in smaller numbers of women in politics, may explain why women are less likely to be victims of physical violence. One FGD participant admitted that she has been a perpetrator of political/electoral violence; if women's participation in politics were to increase amid a violent political culture, their involvement as perpetrators could also increase.

Financial Manipulation and Intimidation: Within the home, the threat of *Talaq* (divorce) and withholding access to finances were described as "financial manipulation" by FGD participants. This manipulation is used by family members, especially husbands, to pressure women to vote a certain way and prevent women from being politically active as political party members, supporters, and candidates. In the public sphere, FGD participants noted that financial constraints hamper women's ability to compete equally with men; participants also brought up a lack of access to illegal sources of funding.

²¹ Through its Electoral Violence Education and Resolution (EVER) project, IFES collected data from seven projects in six countries (including Bangladesh) from 2006 to 2010. This project found that psychological violence is one of the most prevalent forms of election-related violence experienced by women.

²² Bardall, Gabrielle. (2011). *Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence*. IFES. 1.

²³ Bardall, 13

²⁴ Bardall, 14

²⁵ Bardall, 13. Conversely, female victims of electoral violence are much more likely to experience psychological harm or intimidation than male victims.

Intersectionality and Electoral Violence Against Women: Women belonging to minority communities and indigenous communities (especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts) face the same violent political culture and intimidation faced by all women and, in addition to that, they are victims of discrimination and violence as minorities. In separate focus groups conducted by IFES with female indigenous village leaders (*karbari*) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, participants described violence and intimidation in the Hill Tract area that affected men and women, including refugees who were settling in that area. This had an effect on their sense of safety and ability to participate in political activity. Similarly, Hindu women who participated in FGDs spoke of electoral violence targeting minorities as an additional impediment to their safe participation in elections and politics. Scholars have argued that socially excluded/marginalized minorities including indigenous people face additional disadvantages such as being concentrated in urban slums, ghettos, or ancestral lands being sought for development and these “spatial inequalities” contribute to exclusion from political processes and governance structures.²⁶

I. Electoral Violence within the Family

Participants described a woman's role as largely within the private home sphere, with a widely-held expectation that “women have to stay in the house and be trained in being a loyal wife and dedicated mother.” The way that this has manifested in Bangladesh has had a negative effect on families' level of support for women's political engagement – not only does this expectation of women's role limit their ability to participate in electoral politics as a candidate or activist, but the lack of respect for women's political opinions often constrains their ability to cast a vote of their choice, as they are subject to familial pressure and other intimidation to vote according to the direction of their spouse or other senior family member(s).

FGD participants report that electoral violence within the family takes the form of psychological, economic and physical violence.

Psychological Violence

Familial pressure is a specific form of intimidation – control or forced disenfranchisement – and “may include spousal or parental pressure on who to support, refusal of permission to leave the house to vote, refusal of relatives to watch children for women to vote; this disproportionately affects women.”²⁷

Psychological intimidation is “a widespread tool of political manipulation, and (is) often associated with situations of power imbalances and control in household settings.”²⁸

In Bangladesh, familial pressure and psychological intimidation are used to restrict women's political engagement, and are pervasive types of psychological electoral violence against women. According to FGD participants, this most commonly impacts a woman's right to vote according to her preference.

Family Pressure to Vote a Certain Way: The right to cast a vote of one's choice is pivotal to democracy; however, in Bangladesh, too often this right is violated by forces within the family that pressure women to vote for a candidate they do not support. FGD participants cite family voting, which occurs when a family member – usually the male head of household – decided on behalf of the entire

“A woman rarely gets the opportunity to cast her vote as per her will.”

Focus Group Participant

²⁶ Kabeer, Naila. (2010) *Can the MDGs provide a pathway to social justice? The challenge of intersecting inequalities*. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

²⁷ Bardall, Gabrielle. (2011). *Breaking the Mold: Understanding Gender and Electoral Violence*. IFES.

²⁸ Bardall, Ibid.

family on how to vote, or when one member of the family pressures other members to vote for a certain candidate,²⁹ as a common manifestation of familial pressure. The lack of voting autonomy starts before Election Day; FGD participants recall instances where male family members began pressuring women at the outset of the electoral period to cast their votes according to the men's choice.

Psychological intimidation is not only perpetrated by men in the household. According to FGD participants, older women were also perpetrators of psychological intimidation. One FGD participant notes that older women within the house "compel them to cast a vote according to their choice."

Societal Display of Women as Unequal to Men: Additionally, FGD participants note a general societal lack of confidence in women's ability to exercise her right to choose, which extends into family life. One participant recalls the common belief that "women are not capable of making decisions." Another notes that, despite her contributions to the family's health and well-being, a woman's views and opinions seem to carry little weight within the family.

Threat of Divorce: FGD participants identified threat of *Talaq* (divorce under Sharia law) as both a type of psychological violence (psychological intimidation) and economic violence, used by husbands to ensure that wives vote as directed.

Physical Violence

According to FGD participants, physical electoral violence against women does not often take place within the home, although there are some occurrences. Participants note that physical violence is directed toward women if they want to do something solely for themselves instead of on behalf of their families, including running for election or even just wanting "to stand on their own feet." One *Upazila Parishad* vice-chairwoman describes an extreme example of direct physical violence saying that her sister was murdered by her parents-in-law after voting against their wishes.

Financial Manipulation and Intimidation

Compounding psychological and physical violence is the overall economic status of women in Bangladesh. Many women lack the ability to fund a campaign in Bangladesh, and a lack of access to economic resources inhibits a woman's ability to engage in politics. Although many women now participate in economic activities in Bangladesh, lower wages combined with deeply entrenched gender roles mean that "women cannot be self-reliant" and are subject to "financial manipulation" by their family members. Women's limited control over financial resources and/or lower wages can impact their ability to participate in elections and broader politics if family members withhold resources to keep women from going to the polls or running for office. FGD participants also cite "time poverty" as another factor limiting electoral participation of women in Bangladesh. Prescribed gender roles, such as women's propensity to assume larger responsibility for childcare and domestic work, affects time available to participate in political activities, including travel to polling stations. Additionally, FGD participants note that permission is required from their spouses and in-laws to be economically active outside the house, but is often not granted. One participant noted, "I want to have a job but my husband does not allow this. I aspire to set up a business, such as home-based embroidery, but he does not even permit that. Is it not violence, *Apa* (Sister)?" This economic control is too often replicated in the electoral and political fields. As noted earlier, the threat of *Talaq* was also seen as a significant form of economic coercion (in addition to psychological intimidation), given the control husbands have of financial resources as well as the financial (and other)

²⁹ iKnow Politics (International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics). (2009). *Prevention of Family Voting*. 4. Available at: <http://iknowpolitics.org/en/knowledge-library/expert-responses/consolidated-response-prevention-family-voting>.

difficulties that are faced by divorced women in Bangladesh. Participants highlight that women who are divorced, separated, abandoned or widowed are among the most vulnerable to economic, social and cultural challenges. Participants also cite the threat of denying access to financial resources – typically by the husband – as a method of coercing women's electoral decisions and participation both as voters and as candidates and activists.

II. Electoral Violence within the Public Sphere

Social, religious and cultural expectations regarding women's electoral participation can result in social-psychological, sexual, economic and physical forms of electoral violence directed against women in the public sphere. FGD participants report that women activists and candidates, in particular, face considerable psychological and sexual forms of electoral violence in addition to economic and physical violence. Female voters and election officials are most commonly victims of intimidation, threats and sexual violence.

Amid the prevalence of electoral violence in Bangladesh, FGD participants note that women are also perpetrators of such violence, particularly psychological violence through the slandering other female candidates.

Psychological Violence

Participants repeatedly note that women who take part in the political process or a political movement are negatively perceived to be challenging the status quo, deemed “crazy, ambitious, shameless (and) lacking in character,” and face psychological abuse. Participants also note that this treatment persists across villages, towns and cities, as well as religion, class and caste boundaries. Different forms of verbal, written and other psychological abuse are used, including: labeling women political party members as prostitutes; accusing women of using “feminine wiles” if they gain electoral advantage or support; and other forms of slander and character assassination that can isolate women from their family members or support networks and discourage their electoral participation.

Character Assassinations: FGD participants discussed “character assassination” and slander aimed at women who are either running as candidates or who are politically active as the primary form of psychological violence. They do not view male candidates and activists as subject to the same level of psychological harassment or intimidation as women, and men are not restricted by family or community pressure the same was as women in their electoral participation.

Participant responses indicate that women from higher class families are particularly discouraged from political participation: “If a woman from an established family is economically and/or politically active, she is subjected to verbal abuse and character assassinations especially using her family name.”

There are pervasive character assassinations made by political party members and candidates; respondents cite several examples of male candidates pressuring female candidates to withdraw their political nomination by carrying out conscientious campaigns to slander the women. Female candidates are also known to be perpetrators, spreading defamatory messages against female opposition. Reflecting the deep-seated cultural stereotypes entrenched in the respondents themselves, one FGD participant notes that the “vindictive mentality” among women creates a difficult situation as they try to “belittle one another.”

Election Day Violence: In a violent political culture such as in Bangladesh, political tensions around Election Day can heighten opportunities for election-based violence against women. FGD participants note that if a woman becomes a polling agent or election-related government official, she and her family frequently experience threats and harassment. Such behavior contributes to the general concern by women and their families about the risks of women's engagement in the electoral process.

Sexual Violence

The public sexist rhetoric and harassment experienced by politically active women are types of sexual violence as well as social-psychological violence. Sexual electoral violence “includes politically motivated rape as a tool of terror and intimidation, marital rape as a tool of repression, and sexual harassment, assault and abuse with the objective of controlling, intimidating, humiliating and disenfranchising women.”³⁰

Sexual violence was cited as a common form of electoral violence experienced by women outside the home, particularly physical assault and psychological intimidation and harassment. FGD participants note that sexual violence affects women voters, activists and candidates of all ethnicities, groups and classes. When leaving their homes, women in Bangladesh feel they are constantly at risk of psychological and physical sexual violence. If a woman goes outside, “she may be humiliated at any time” or “labeled characterless,” bringing shame not only to herself but to her family.

Physical Assault: This form of sexual violence, in particular, is experienced by both candidates and political activists. It was noted that at political party rallies and processions “some pervert activists are always ready to touch sensitive places of women.” Women are disgraced by political leaders, party men and supporters, “and they are even raped.” Sexual violence toward female election officials was cited as well; as one FGD participant said, “Sometimes colleagues try to take advantage of an innocent gesture.”

Intimidation and Harassment: Intimidation and harassment of a sexual nature is experienced by women activists/candidates and voters – participants said that “indecent words, vulgar comments, and gestures toward women are very common.” Intimidation tactics by party cadres outside the polling stations included “passing comments and harassing” female voters. One participant also said that men may “flash/expose themselves to young women who are walking ‘even in groups’ to the polling stations.”

Physical Violence

Women as Victims of Physical Violence: FGD participants spoke about female candidates and political activists being subject, in general, to threats of, and in some cases, acts of, physical violence. One participant gave an example of a woman who had allegedly been beaten and arrested for her political participation, threatened with divorce by her husband while in prison, and then divorced once she was released.

Women as Perpetrators of Physical Violence: One FGD participant advocated violence as a response to violence against women. She said, “I myself have hurled bombs and attacked five policemen. Later, I was arrested ... Women must learn to commit violence to avoid becoming victims of violence.”

Destruction of Property: One FGD participant gave an example of economic punishment against a female political activist from Chittagong in which a woman was subject to economic violence following her joining of an opposition party, including: being charged with a financial penalty of BDT 300,000 (approximately USD 3,700) from local service institutions for utilities; a local elected official's supporters barred customers

³⁰ Bardall, 6.

and clients from coming to her shops and salon; and having her gas line cut. Fear prevented her from filing a report with the police.

As noted in the previous section, for FGD participants, the lack of financial resources was discussed as a key cross-cutting obstacle faced by women in running for office. Women are often doubly disadvantaged as political parties tend to provide less funding to female candidates, and women lack their own resources to make up the gap. Interestingly, one FGD participant discussed that this financial gap included not only legal but illegal sources of funding, used not only for participation but for bribing election officials. She noted that “election officials can be bought with drug money and black money; men have access to both.”

III. Systemic Sources of Electoral Violence

Bangladeshi culture and religion, a violent political culture and a weak implementation of laws are often cited by FGD participants as sources of electoral violence experienced by women, both within the family and in the public sphere.

Patriarchal Cultural Norms and Interpretations of Religion

Religious and cultural factors impact the electoral participation of women.

Religion: Some particularly patriarchal interpretations of Islam, where women's proper role is separate from the public realm, have resulted in issuance of *fatwas* (Islamic religious ruling) by *mullahs* (clerics) against women when they participate in political activities. Additionally, cultural stereotypes, such as the belief that “women cannot perform at high levels as they always talk about children's sickness and offer other excuses,” contribute to an environment that undermines women's integral role in political processes.

Culture: In Bangladesh, participants note a particular and prominent paradigm of gender relations that views political participation as outside of the realm of chastity and purity that Bangladeshi women are expected to embody, whether constrained by *pardah*³¹ or not. Further, women who participate in the political process are perceived to be seen as challenging the masculine status quo.

Unmarried women engaged in politics face particular challenges. Several FGD participants state that “people think if they select an unmarried candidate, she may not contribute to society.” Others note that if a woman is involved in politics, she is seen as spoiled “and nobody will agree to marry her.”

Violent Political Culture

A persistent violent undertone permeates politics and elections in Bangladesh. This pervasive culture of intimidation negatively impacts women's participation as voters and candidates, and threatens the legitimacy of Bangladesh's electoral process.

High Levels of Political and Electoral Violence: Respondents can cite examples of concerted violence, including harassment of women and girls in public transport as a consequence of ongoing political rivalry; intimidation, harassment and threats issued against those who supported an oppositional party; direct and overt pressure from political party members to switch party loyalties; and attacks on homes. As one respondent notes, “the entire election campaign becomes such a war zone that it really becomes

³¹ *Purdah* is the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home.

tough for women to deal with it.” Fearing for the safety of their wives, sisters and mothers, risk of violence against women can cause families to restrict women’s political participation in this dangerous space.

Access to “Muscle”: Women lack the resources to engage in “muscle” politics on par with men, which results in fear for their personal safety as well as the safety of their families in such a violent environment. The reliance on “muscle,” hired by political parties, contributes to a systemic culture of violence by party members and supporters against voters. Respondents highlighted the presence of “muscle men” who either threaten individuals and communities who are seen as sympathetic to an opposition party or to gather votes from specific communities such as “gang controlled slums.” Because the ability to rally “muscle” is often perceived as critical to advance in a political party and gain party backing for candidacy, this lack of access is seen to undermine women’s propensity to enter politics. As respondents note, party leaders tend to prioritize candidates with money, “muscle power ... and controlling capability.” As one FGD participant notes, “in our context, it is really tough to find these qualities in a woman candidate and usually, women fall back in the race for nominations, resulting in a loss of skilled and eligible women candidates. This contributes to the general perception among party leaders that women will not be able to contest effectively against men, and that ultimately the party will suffer if they nominate a woman candidate.”

Weak Implementation of Laws

A lack of enforcement of the law impacts the violence that women experience within the family, some of which is the result of women seeking to exercise their electoral rights. FGD participants note that female electoral participants were not equally protected by the law when they sought to be politically active, and that weak legal enforcement contributes to domestic violence. Bangladeshi law provides some protection against violence that could affect women’s electoral participation. Bangladesh’s Domestic Violence (Protection and Prevention) Act, for example, criminalizes domestic violence as defined by physical, emotional or sexual abuse, as well as financial damage. However, despite the existence of these laws, a lack of comprehensive protection for all forms of violence, combined with weak enforcement, results in a system that fails to provide adequate recourse against deeply-entrenched practices of gender-based electoral violence.

Social Acceptance of Violence: In some cases, violence against women is overlooked and unreported due to social perceptions of women’s role in society. Participants note, for example, that some particular patriarchal interpretations of Islam result in a systematic undermining of women’s rights in marriage. Given the prevalence of psychological and family-based abuse against women as a primary source of electoral violence, failure to protect women’s rights within the home has direct impacts on women’s unique experiences with gender-based electoral violence.

This failure to protect women from psychological abuse was noted throughout the FGDs as respondents highlighted that the impact of psychological pressure from family members is not taken seriously enough in Bangladesh. Respondents reported that existing anti-violence legislation is rarely enforced. Respondents also note that despite the fact that open violence, threats, insults and slander against women are considered violence in the society, the culprits are rarely brought to justice and women are blamed by their families “for the evil deeds of men.” Others note that, particularly in rural areas, “if a husband does not beat a woman too severely, it is acceptable, and verbal abuse is okay.”

Inequitable Access to Justice: In other cases, systemic failure to protect women’s rights contributes to inequitable access to justice, especially during elections. One FGD participant, a vice chairwoman of a Sub-district Council, alleges that during a recent election, the ruling party brought false allegations against her, claiming that she had created obstacles for law enforcement to carry out its work. Following these supposedly false allegations, the respondent was put in jail for 47 days. Less egregious examples

were echoed by other respondents who note that during election campaigns, false claims are frequently filed against the women candidates and go unchallenged. Despite the clear legal violations that such intimidation and violence presents, fear and lack of trust in public institutions to enforce rights-based laws often prevent victims from filing cases with the police.

Recommendations of Focus Group Participants

At the conclusion of the FGDs, participants were asked about the roles played by key Bangladeshi actors – the Election Commission, security personnel, community leaders, media, the public, political parties and civil society organizations – in reducing violence toward women during the electoral process, and what specific strategies could be taken to mitigate such violence, as well as electoral violence in general. IFES hopes to be able to use these responses within the WAVE Advisory Group and Electoral Conflict and Security Working Group to develop stronger advocacy strategies on this issue.

While recognizing that there is greater awareness about and prevention of violence against women, participants express the need for new and expanded initiatives and a strong commitment by key stakeholders to address electoral violence, particularly its impact on the full realization of women's political and electoral rights. They recommend the development of greater awareness of women's rights; that high-level political as well as community leaders publicly denounce electoral violence; an expanded security presence during the electoral period; improved enforcement to prevent and address electoral, as well as domestic, violence; and collaboration among key stakeholders to mitigate electoral violence. Participants also highlighted a need to address the role of money in politics and its impact on electoral violence, and urge civil society organizations to become more engaged in developing strategies to reduce electoral violence.

The following recommendations of FGD participants have been tailored to each stakeholder/actor:

To the Government of Bangladesh:

- Ensure implementation of laws to equally protect the rights of women and men
- Ensure full enforcement of legislation to prevent violence and protect human rights
- Conduct public education campaigns addressing the role and rights of women and girls within the family
- Conduct public awareness campaigns against political and electoral violence, women's political rights, and violence against women – targeting men and women, using a variety of media to ensure that all sectors of society are reached
- Conduct gender sensitization training of police deployed during the electoral period
- Establish Mobile Courts (*Druto Bichar Adalat*) for the quick disposal of cases related to electoral violence to show that acts of violence will not go unpunished
- Ensure proper functioning of the Village Courts to resolve cases relating to domestic violence and family disputes
- Ensure that those engaging in electoral violence are charged and punished, under due process
- Publicize cases of those involved in perpetrating electoral violence to counter the culture of impunity

- Conduct gender sensitization training of police/ward commissioners and union and sub-district chairpersons and officials
- Ensure the implementation of an effective reporting system of incidents of violence, especially of violence against women, at the deputy commissioner level

To the Election Commission of Bangladesh:

- Conduct gender-sensitive training for election officials at all levels on a continuing basis on the role of women in society and for polling staff and other temporary election staff prior to and during the election period
- Enforce laws and regulations to ensure proper behavior of polling agents
- Create laws, rules and regulations to limit the use of money in politics and the use of “muscle power” during the electoral process
- Convene electoral stakeholders, the media, community leaders, security personnel and others prior to the start of the electoral period to develop strategies to prevent and mitigate electoral violence, including violence against women
- Conduct training and education campaigns for political contestants and activists, polling agents, domestic observers, media, and voters on elections and democracy, women’s political rights, and violence against women
- Deploy female police in larger numbers during the electoral period, to ensure security and protect the dignity of female voters, political activists, and polling agents

To Political Leaders:

- Take a strong public stance against the use of electoral and political violence, both against and by women
- Identify male allies for gender-equity in leadership and political participation
- Limit the use of money in politics and the use of “muscle power”
- Improve the status of women within political parties

To the Media:

- Conduct public education campaigns addressing the role and rights of women and girls within the family
- Conduct public awareness campaigns against political and electoral violence, women’s political rights and violence against women – targeting men and women, using a variety of media and ensuring that all sectors of society are reached
- Work with other actors to ensure full access to information on violence against women, including during the electoral period
- Ensure gender-sensitive reporting on the electoral and political processes, particularly with regard to female candidates and politicians, including avoiding the use of language denigrating women

To Civil Society:

- Conduct public education campaigns addressing the role and rights of women and girls within the family
- Conduct public awareness campaigns against political and electoral violence, women's political rights and violence against women, targeting men and women, using a variety of media and ensuring that all sectors of society are reached
- Raise awareness about and address the impact of violence on women's participation in the electoral and political processes
- Provide legal aid to women at the district level to enable them to seek protection against violence

To Community Leaders:

- Unite against electoral and political violence as “social guardians”
- Speak out more in support of free and fair elections and against violence and persecution
- Ensure regular discussion about dowries, early marriage, violence against women and other gender-focused issues at *Uthan Baithak* (courtyard meeting)

Annex 1:

Electoral Violence against Women in Bangladesh: Focus Group Discussion Guide

The questions below were used to guide the Focus Group Discussions convened by IFES in Bangladesh in 2013 and 2015. Questions in italics were asked only in the 2013 Focus Groups.

Opinions about Election Processes and Experiences

- *How would you generally characterize the election processes in Bangladesh?*
- *How would you characterize the election processes in parliamentary elections between 1990 and 2013 (better, worse, the same) in terms of issues of participation of people from all backgrounds, of women, and of matters of security? Why?*
- *In your opinion, how, and to what extent does violence in Bangladesh impact political participation for (a) voters; (b) political party candidates; (c) cadres?*
- *If you had to list two aspects of the election process that should be the focus of improvement, what would they be and why?*

Women's Roles in Society

- *Thinking about women's roles in society, how do Bangladeshis in general view women's primary roles? Has this view changed? Why do you think there has been a change?*
- In society, do you think that women face different obstacles than men? How so? What kinds of obstacles?
- What kind of challenges and barriers do women face when making the decision to be in public spaces as professionals?

Women in Elections and Political Processes

- How do you think Bangladeshis in general and in your community (at work, in area of residence) think and feel about women politically participating in demonstrations, social movements and other forms of political activities?
- In your line of work and in the communities and professional settings you work in, what are the opinions about women being involved in formal political processes such as elections?
- In your opinion, what kind of challenges and barriers do women face in making the decision to be involved in politics as political party candidates, polling agents, political party activists and voters?

Understanding Violence

- How would you define violence?
- *In your professional line of work and in your informed opinion, what forms of violence against women do Bangladeshis consider to be unacceptable? What types of violence against women are more accepted and/or remain underreported? What types of acts are not considered as "violence" in society? Do men and women have different levels of violence that they accept?*

Electoral Violence and Women

- In your opinion, what are the specific obstacles to women who wish to participate in the formal election process?
- In your opinion, what are the specific obstacles to women who wish to participate as voters in the elections?
- When do the specific types of violence that target women emerge – prior to the elections, Election Day, or after the elections are conducted?
- In your work with communities, do women experience violence in their homes and private/ social lives (as single women, wives, daughters, mothers, neighbors, etc.) during election cycles if they express interest in, or decide to participate in elections as voters, agents, political party candidates? What specific types of violence are manifest in their homes?
- In your professional experience, do you think that there are ways in which women participate in violence during election cycles?
- *In your professional opinion, do women's experiences in their various roles (voters, activists, candidates, non-voting civilians) during election cycles generate state/NGO attention? If not, why do you think that is so?*
- To your knowledge, is mobilizing “muscle” or “party men” required by the political parties to get party support as a candidate in an election? If so, is this more difficult for women than men?

Responding to Electoral Violence Targeting Women

- *What is the role of various actors – the role that they play now – in reducing violence toward women during electoral processes? (a) election management body; (b) security personnel; c) community leaders; d) media; (e) public; (f) political parties?*
- *What is missing from these roles or actions?*
- What specific strategies can the state or political parties adopt to reduce electoral violence against women voters and non-voters?
- What specific strategies can the state or political parties adopt to reduce electoral violence against women who officially participate in elections (as candidates, active political party supporters/activists)?
- *In your knowledge and based on the specific kinds of violence that women experience in the election period, what specific actions have been taken in (a) the past elections and (b) in the run-up to this election by the government, political parties, NGOs, etc. to counter election violence against women? Which of them have been effective? How?*
- In your professional opinion, and based on the specific kinds of violence that women experience in the election period, what specific forms of recommendations would you make for conflict reduction strategies that can be implemented by local communities and grass-roots organizations?
- *Do you think women political leaders/activists can play a vibrant role in mitigating election-related violence against women? How?*

- Do you think election laws and codes of conduct for political parties and candidates are effective and useful to reduce electoral violence affecting women in particular? Why and why not? Provide examples.
- *Does media have a role to play in addressing issues of electoral violence that target women? How?*



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