

Power, work struggles in Bangladesh households linked to domestic violence

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A village woman of Bangladesh. Credit: Balaram Mahalder

(Medical Xpress)—In Bangladesh as elsewhere, women are empowered by working outside the home. But new research from the University of Washington shows such work can also increase the threat of domestic violence for some Bangladeshi wives.

The study brings to light how the South Asian nation is seeing a change in relations within the household, with both positive and [negative](#)

[consequences](#) for [women](#).

The findings come from a [research paper](#) by Rachel Heath, UW assistant professor of economics, released by the World Bank Development Research Group and presented in November at the Northeast Universities Development Consortium at Dartmouth College.

Heath and [collaborator](#) Mushfiq Mobarak at Yale University oversaw a door-to-door survey of 1,400 [households](#) in 60 villages outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2009.

The survey asked wives their age and level of education at marriage and first employment, and if they needed their husband's permission for household purchases. It also asked if they had ever been beaten by their husband, or felt it was acceptable for a husband to beat a wife.

The study revealed that 26.9 percent responded that their husband had beaten them "more than once," while 8.8 percent responded they'd been beaten once and .08 percent responded "regularly."

Heath found that the amount of power a wife brings to her marriage—and how that increases when she gets work—is related to the her risk of [domestic violence](#) from her husband.

For instance, if she marries young or with little education or no job, she has little leverage with their husband and "low risk of domestic violence, because the husband gets to implement his preferences anyway," Heath said.

An outside job increases her power and thus her leverage in the marriage—but Heath's research shows there is a dangerous downside.

Among women who have five or fewer years of education, the survey

showed 39 percent have suffered domestic violence. Among women with five years of education who work, the rate jumps to 45 percent. "More highly-educated women face less domestic violence overall, and the figure does not depend on whether they work," Heath said.

"If from a very low level her bargaining power improves, that could create conflict—she's now bargaining with him, and he could try to use violence to win that conflict."

Heath added that over the long term, education levels are going up and women are marrying later" in Bangladesh. "Once women get to the point where they can survive on their own and they don't have to stay in really bad marriages, then there isn't the same risk of increased domestic violence after labor force participation," she said.

Heath said the Bangladeshi social service infrastructure has few programs supporting women, but the findings could be a message to Bangladeshi policy makers to provide [education](#) and counseling for young women new to the workforce.

"What this paper is saying is that we also have to be careful to look for things within the household that might negatively be impacted" by the wife's increase in status through work, Heath said.

More information: www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/...ered/PDF/WPS6149.pdf

Provided by University of Washington

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