Policy Note

Adolescent boys in Dhaka, Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2019

Adolescent bodily integrity and freedom from violence in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Policy and programming implications from the GAGE baseline findings[1]

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Overview

In Bangladesh, the use of violence is a common method of discipline. Parental physical punishment is sanctioned by culture and values (Banks, 2007). For instance, a study from 2001 found that parents used both physical and psychological means to punish their sons. In most cases boys also reported being physically punished by their parents using their hands or sticks (Sarker, 2001). The use of violence is not only practised at homes but also perpetuated in many educational institutions as well. A UNICEF report found that 91% of male and female children in school in Bangladesh experienced physical punishment at the hands of their teachers (2009). In a 2012 national study, 77.1% of students stated that physical, psychological or financial punishments were inflicted on students in their schools (BLAST, 2012).

However, a majority of Bangladeshi adolescent girls, particularly those who are poor and have fewer social networks, are seen as more visible and can and do face multiple threats to their bodily autonomy and integrity. Physical violence against girls and women is very common in Bangladesh and is closely linked to the low status assigned to them. Adolescent girls face a plethora of other forms of violence such as verbal abuse and harassment, physical violence and sexual violence. For example, public harassment of adolescent girls is on the rise, with some perceiving this as a consequence of the increased mobility of girls, their attendance in secondary schools, and their visibility in the public sphere (Bakker, 2013).

One of the major threats towards adolescent girls is early child marriage; the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh is still very high, with the country having the fourth highest rate in the world (NIPORT et al., 2016). Key factors behind child marriage include gendered social norms that put a high value on family honour, signified by female chastity, social and cultural expectation of male guardianship and female passivity and obedience (Yarrow et al., 2015; Camellia et al., 2012; Seddiky et al., 2015). That said, economic pressures also encourage child marriage, as poorer families do not have the resources to invest in alternative options for girls, such as an education (ICRW, 2014; Kamal et al., 2015; HRW, 2015),[3] and this is seen as a pragmatic decision in the face of endemic poverty.

This brief draws on evidence from Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) – a unique longitudinal mixed-methods research and impact evaluation study that is focusing on what works to support the development of adolescents' capabilities during the second decade of life (10–19 years) (GAGE consortium, 2019 forthcoming). It looks at physical violence experienced by adolescents, including corporal punishment, and sexual and gender-based violence, including child marriage. It then draws out the ways in which gender and disability shape adolescents' experiences, before outlining some implications for policy.

Research methodology

In Dhaka, baseline data collection entailed quantitative survey interviews with 780 adolescent girls and boys that were complemented by in-depth qualitative work and more in-depth qualitative research involving 36 nodal adolescents, their parents and communities to better understand the experience and perspective of young people. According to the GAGE methodology (Jones et al., 2019), we included adolescents who are involved in adolescent-focused programme interventions as well as non-programme participants to better understand the relative contribution of programmes in shaping their well-being and empowerment in the short and longer terms. Participatory research methods were undertaken so as

to better understand young people's experiences, and in particular the role that peer relations play in shaping their identities, priorities and broader well-being. We undertook our primary data collection (in late 2017 and early 2018) with adolescent girls and boys, of younger (10–12 years) and older (15–17 years) age cohorts, in peri-urban and urban contexts and included groups of adolescents who are more at risk of being left behind such as adolescents with disabilities, child brides and adolescent mothers.

Research sites

The three study sites chosen for the GAGE baseline study in Dhaka are two slum areas, referred to here as Community A and Community C (peri-urban), and one low-income settlement, referred to as Community B. These were selected to capture variation in how long the settlements had been established, and heterogeneity of the residents, those who had been there for longer and more transient population. Other important differences included access to health and education services and location, as these have been shown to affect the lives of adolescents.

Key findings: scope and scale of the challenge
Physical violence (including corporal punishment and bullying)

Physical violence was a common fear and had been experienced by most adolescents in all three sites. Adolescents with disability face more teasing in school than their non-disabled peers, although there is no evidence that they are punished more. Younger adolescents experience violence primarily from family members, relatives, neighbours, other adult males and teachers. Older adolescents also experience violence from employers, with many working in the informal economy. Boys were more likely to report experiencing physical violence than girls.

Physical punishment at school

According to the survey, 82% of adolescents experienced corporal punishment at school (65% in Community B). This compares with 83% of children experiencing physical

Table 1: Research sites

Name	Location	Households	Social and physical infrastructure	Access to services
Community A	Dhaka periphery	8,400	Well-developed and stable slum on government-owned land near an industrial area	Excellent access to educational and health institutions, non-governmental organisation (NGO) services
Community B	Central Dhaka	300	Privately owned low-income settlement, high in- and out-migration, many working children, electricity only, poor roads	Poor access to educational and health institutions, NGO services
Community C	Central Dhaka	3,000	Well-developed and stable slum, good road, mostly legal utility connections	Reasonable access to educational and health institutions, NGO services

> ◗◗ Physical punishment used by teachers in schools and *madrasas* creates disinterest among students regarding their education.
>
> (One father from Community B)

punishment in educational institutions nationally (MOWCA, 2013), although earlier studies suggested this figure was declining (Ahmed et al., 2005). Teachers administer punishment if adolescents do not complete their lessons or their homework, or fail to follow the rules. Girls and boys shared how teachers pulled them by their ears, beat them with bamboo sticks and canes and slapped them, a common practice in many schools. This can have a demotivating effect and a fear of continuing to study.

One father from Community B observed that: '*Physical punishment used by teachers in schools and* madrasas *creates disinterest among students regarding their education.*'

Adolescents said that they were punished physically if teachers caught them having a romantic relationship. Although the data from this study and the formative research in urban sites suggests romantic relationships are common, they are often equated with sexual intimacy and punished accordingly.

Physical punishment at home

Parents across all the sites discipline adolescents physically for behaviour such as going out without asking them for permission, skipping school and not studying properly. Among our quantitative sample, 62% of female primary caregivers and 29% of male primary caregivers of 10–12-year-old adolescents reported punishing their son or daughter by shaking, hitting or slapping him or her. This is consistent with analysis by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) of 2012/13 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data, which suggests that 77% of urban parents do this (BBS and UNICEF, 2015). Camellia et al. (2012) also note that it is common for parents in Dhaka slums to discipline adolescents physically.

The use of physical punishment varies by gender. Within our sample, female primary caregivers were 14% less likely and male primary caregivers were 30% less likely to physically punish girls than boys, and this was mainly by shaking them hard, hitting or slapping them.

The overall prevalence in UNICEF's analysis is supported by analysis by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) (2013), in which 77% of mothers and 18% of fathers (82% overall) said they physically punished their children. The difference in prevalence is likely to relate to the more frequent contact of mothers with their children. Mothers in our sample said they would administer everyday

punishments and only involve the father in more severe cases. This suggests that there is a gendered difference in the severity of the punishments, as well as their frequency, although the MOWCA data does not capture this.

Despite this, many parents in our sample and other studies felt that physical punishment was not the best approach. Analyses of data from the same MICS dataset on parental attitudes reported that only one in three adults thought a child needed to be physically punished to be disciplined (this belief was more slightly common among those with lower education levels (35%), and those in the poorest quintile (41%)) (BBS and UNICEF, 2015). Similarly, in our quantitative sample, 46% of female primary caregivers and 49% of male primary caregivers of 10–12-year-old adolescents believe that a child needs to be physically punished to be brought up properly. Female primary caregivers of female adolescents are 28% less likely to believe physical punishment is necessary, and female primary caregivers of adolescents with disabilities are 46% less likely to believe so.

Adolescents said that physical punishment by parents became less frequent as they aged. This is supported by the quantitative survey, where 90% of younger adolescents experienced or witnessed violence in the home versus 82% of older ones. Some parents admitted beating their children occasionally. For example, one mother from Community A said that, if her children did not listen to her or take care of their younger siblings properly, then she beat them. This was seen as the norm for disciplining their children. A father from Community B said of his son: '*I have hit him a lot. I have lost a lot of life force [through the effort I expended in beating them]. I have beaten my children a lot of times.*'

Younger adolescents also said that older siblings frequently beat them, for example if they made mistakes while performing household chores. This violence is not always purposive: one adolescent participant in a focus group in Community A said her older brother beat her for no apparent reason.

Physical punishment in the workplace

National statistics suggest that employers also punish young workers. At least a third of employers said they did so in the MOWCA (2013) study, and the percentage of employees reporting this was far higher. However, only two out of seven working adolescents in our sample talked of experiencing workplace violence. One 11 year old from Community C works as an apprentice at a garage and said that his '*master*' at work often scolded and hit him if he made mistakes, mostly when his father was not around. For girls the fear was even greater of sexual assault or worse. A 16-year-old girl in Community A described being sexually harassed by her line supervisor at the garment factory and

said that she had witnessed a 15-year-old co-worker being raped (the following section discusses sexual harassment and violence in detail). '*When I start working, the person in charge who is the line supervisor, started touching my body while talking, scolded me and pulled my scarf. On my back, on my chest … Yes, I saw one harassment in my own eyes. That time everyone went for lunch. There is a 15-year-old girl. The supervisor called her in a room and raped her. I saw. Also he threatened the girl not to say anything.*'

Physical violence outside the home

Adolescent boys in Communities A and C also said that adult men sometimes punched or slapped them when they saw them on the streets for no reason, and they felt bullied and harassed by these men, who exerted their power and harassed younger males in the locality. Adolescents said they were often bullied and physically assaulted by peers when they were in school and in the community. Two of the nine respondents with disabilities, boys with mobility impairments from Communities B and C, said that people treated them badly and made fun of their impairment. One boy aged 15 from Community C said: '*People call me disabled or lame duck and it makes me feel like not working anymore.*'

Boys are significantly more likely to have experienced peer violence than girls. For example, an 11-year-old boy in Community C said that, when he informed on a peer for stealing, that boy beat him up badly. Members of gangs who have political connections often carry out attacks on the street, and most community members, older and younger, are scared of them. One young adolescent from Community B described being beaten by a younger male adolescent for not calling him bhai ('*brother*', a respectful term for those who are older than you).

Gang culture is present among adolescent boys in Community B, although less evident in the other sites, or most likely not reported for fear or reprisals. Adolescents also reported cases of people using violence with impunity as a result of their political or criminal connections. For example, older adolescent boys in Community B described how a boy with political connections assaulted a girl: '*He started slapping her then afterwards he started punching her. She was most probably bleeding from her nose due to that. He beat her, and then when her parents heard of it and they were coming, he ran away. Then the next day, there were a lot of tensions because of this incident. He wasn't in the area the following two days. We don't know where he was. Then when he came back to school again, the principal decided to expel him. He even started threatening the principal. His brother was once … uh … a bit like a* mastaan *(gang leader) … he was taking advantage of that power.*'

One in four boys and one in six girls had some knowledge of where they could obtain support if they experienced violence, but whether they felt justice would be served if they availed themselves of the networks is not clear. However, younger adolescents were significantly less likely to know where to go to get support (17% vs. 27% of older adolescents). Respondents' perceptions of the police and justice system was not positive, and some gave specific examples of a lack of transparency and accountablity. For example, adult men in Community C stated that people with powerful political connections could get away with teasing and harassing girls and there was no support, because usually these men were well connected to local political leaders and the police.

Sexual and gender-based violence (including child marriage)

Sexual and gender-based violence appears to be common in all three study sites, and adolescent boys and girls as well as adults said that public spaces were unsafe for girls. Accounts of harassment and sexual violence experienced by girls were repeated in most of our interviews. This is supported by secondary analyses that show that violence against women and girls is widespread and closely linked to the low status of women in Bangladeshi society (Stavropoulou et al., 2017). The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) BRAC, Odhikar (Odhikar 2019)and Ain O Salish Kendro (ASK), which monitors media coverage, report high levels of sexual violence against women and girls. Some of this results in the murder or suicide of the victims (ASK, 2017; Fattah and Kabir, 2013).

There was little information about sexual violence targeting adolescent boys, which may reflect actual low numbers and the greater levels of shame associated with reporting this. Adolescent girls described how the perception that they were vulnerable led to restrictions on their mobility and forced them to drop out of school and marry early. In a group interview in Community A, older girls shared that a girl with an intellectual disability was raped in the community, although this was the only incident reported and difficult to verify.

Older boys in a focus group in Community A described an incident where a boy with political connections raped a girl. When the girl's father pressed charges, the perpetrator asked for her hand in marriage to escape prosecution, even though the girl's father refused to marry his daughter off to her rapist. Although all female adolescents described being harassed and telling their parents, and despite the severity of the situation, most parents never ask help from law enforcement, as they do not believe they will be supportive and reaching out to them will not be effective. One male participant in a community norms session in Community C said: '*Although there is the creation of the sexual harassment law [a new law addressing violence*

against women], there is actually no enforcement of the law. Law enforcement as effective support has been shown by government in television, but not in real life.'

Intimate partner violence was also identified as a problem. Respondents in all sites said that women and girls often experienced domestic abuse over dowry payment. In the quantitative survey, married adolescents were asked about their experience with domestic violence. Among the 25 married adolescents in the sample, 68% reported that they had experienced violence from their partner, including physical, psychological and economic violence (there was only one married adolescent in the qualitative sample). This rate is consistent with reports from other sources. In the first national survey of violence against women by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) in 2013, 87% of women reported experiencing partner violence, although by 2015 the rate had declined to 72.6% (BBS, 2013, 2016).

Expected gender roles and behaviour by the community and men, are often used as a justification for violence against female adolescents and women. For example, over a quarter of women felt that domestic violence was acceptable where women were not properly taking care of children, burning food, arguing with their husband or going out without permission (NIPORT et al., 2016). This perception was the same across all age groups.

Younger women, particularly adolescent girls, shared stories that they had heard about rape and sexual harassment and violation of their bodily space. One girl aged 17 from Community C described an experience of inappropriate contact from a traditional healer (*huzur*) and how he managed to avoid further sexual harassment from him: '*I used to go to him for treatment (jharano) but the way he used to touch my body, I did not like that. So, when I realised that I needed to do something about the situation. I did not have the courage to tell my mother then but I stopped going to him. My family used to send me to him but I did not go, I used to wander around in other places and then return home after some time. My family used to ask me, did you go to him, I used to say, 'Yes'.'*

Older boys and younger girls in Community A described how girls often got '*teased*' (the term teasing shared in English by the adolescents, was used to encompass all forms of unwanted verbal and physical contact directed at females from males, regardless of severity. In fact, the term, '*éve-teasing*' is commonly used in the country and dilutes the magnitude of the levels of harassment, but it denotes all kinds of unwanted advances including stalking, assault and threats. Boys threatened and even assaulted female adolescents if they refused their romantic advances. A girl in the community mapping described the following case: '*A few days back while one young girl was playing with her friends, a boy approached her and made some verbal advances to her to be his girlfriend. The girl was not interested and kept denying his propositions and then he took her and tried to rape her in a closed bathroom.*'

According to participants in the community and adolescent boys' focus groups in Communities A and C, female students and garment workers face harassment in the streets. A 16-year-old girl from Community B described how she had experienced anxiety from being harassed on the street by boys and men. In Communities A, B and C, girls are harassed and teased outside their schools, on their way to coaching centres, in front of tea stalls, where usually large groups of men and boys gather, and in alleyways where there are fewer people around. This experience fits with secondary data showing that 42% of women in urban areas reported experiencing violence outside the home (BBS, 2016).

According to older male respondents in these sites, adolescent girls feel helpless on the streets when harassed by boys and older men. This harassment includes name-calling, whistles, sexual suggestions, abuse and threats, throwing stones and having their '*urnah*' scarf pulled. Sometimes, girls have to change their route to school and back, to avoid continuous harassment. One man explained that '*girls avoid protesting for the fear of their safety. They believe this will lead to further sexual violence*', something that other studies have also found (Nahar et al., 2013).

◗◗ Why would I go to jail by marrying her off at an early age? Don't I watch TV?

(A father of an adolescent girl from Community B)

In many cases, girls get support from their parents and family. A 17-year-old girl in Community C explained how, when one of her peers was following her, she told her family about it and one of her elder brothers told the boy to stop harassing her or he would face consequences. This also highlights that in some cases, the presence of older brothers or a strong male guardian is critical for a girl's safety and security. However, parents' anxiety about their girls' safety and violation can lead them to take a pragmatic approach, and discontinue their education and restrict their mobility altogether, as discussed in the brief on voice and agency. According to female respondents in Community A: '*For girls there is a lack of safety and as the girl is growing up, her parents worry that their girl will be going to school and there can be problems ... it's because of boys' disturbing females, that parents always remain anxious about their girls. There are parents who go with their girl to school and bring her back.*'

A mother of an 11-year-old adolescent girl in Community A, who was better off and even employed a poor woman in the slum to assist with household chores, expressed her concern about her daughter's safety: '*Actually, I cannot totally depend on the local woman who comes and helps me. My child stays with my mother and when I send my child to my mother, only then I can be sure that she is safe. As long my child has not reached my mother's house, I keep worrying about her about her safety.*'

Qualitative analyses suggest that older adolescent girls in the two urban sites reported sexual violence more than adolescents in peri-urban Community A. This may relate to the fact that Community A is wealthier and the population is less transient and the community is more cohesive and has better social networks. Therefore, there are fewer opportunities for males from outside the community to come in and assault women and leave. Fewer respondents reported political and drugs-related violence in this site, and community members were reluctant to share the levels of politics by local leaders and drug related violence in their own communities.

Child marriage

While secondary analysis of datasets such as the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) suggests that early marriage is declining, especially in large urban centres such as Dhaka, data from the 2014 BDHS showed that 71% of women are married by the age of 18. In looking at the adult female caregivers of the adolescent quantitative survey respondents, we found that 76% were married before they were 18, a number that aligns with the BDHS. There were differences by socio-economic status, however: women with no education marry on average five years earlier than those who have completed at least secondary education (NIPORT et al., 2016).

When BDHS analyses focus on young women only, it is easier to see change. Between 2011 and 2014, marriage before 18 years declined to 59% from 65% and the median age of first marriage increased to 16.1 years from 14.4 years. This is an important change, as young married adolescents are at risk of pregnancy-related deaths, babies with low birth weights and HIV infection and have less say in decision-making regarding family planning (UNFPA, 2005; BBS and UNICEF, 2015). Forty per cent of women who were married before 18 said they would have preferred to have married later (NIPORT et al., 2016), and because they were younger, many faced greater vulnerability to abuse (CARE, 2016), especially in relation to the payment of a dowry (Das, 2007; Naved and Persson, 20100..

Adolescent respondents in this study confirmed this vulnerability. For example, older boys in Gazipur said that girls faced physical abuse from their husbands and in-laws over dowry. One shared a story about his young neighbour, who was thrown out of her home by her husband over her dowry payment. Older girls in Community C said that girls faced many difficulties in marriage, even though their parents had to pay a lot of money as dowry for them. Younger girls added: '*[Once married] adolescents' (girls') mobility is restricted by her in-laws as they don't allow them to go out and communicate with others. They are often stopped from continuing their education after marriage.*'

The government has attempted to provide services to address the prevalence of early marriage. For example, one of the key informants in Community A said that the government had launched a free emergency helpline to prevent child marriage but the structural and social factors that perpetuate early marriage are a challenge in its preventions. However, it was reported that in all three sites, NGOs and clubs organise activities to encourage awareness and have discussions to delay child marriage. A father of an adolescent girl in Community B said: '*Why would I go to jail by marrying her off at an early age? Don't I watch TV?*'

Nonetheless, respondents across all study sites said that child marriage was still common, as despite the above quote by a parent, the reality was that communities may be aware of the problems of early marriage but took these decisions in the absence of limited options.

The ward commissioner in Community B said: '*It is a big part of our society.*[4] *If parents do not marry off their daughters at the age of 10 or 12 then it is not possible for the parents to protect her honour. We have tried to hold*

protests to stop child marriage but in reality we have come to see that in order for the girl to be protected she has to be married off. Otherwise, this society will attack her like wolves and dogs.'

Key actions to accelerate progress

1. Ban corporal punishment in classrooms.

   The National Education Policy 2010 states that corporal punishment is not allowed in educational institutions, and that disciplinary measures can be taken against teachers for using it. These need to be enforced and monitored by education authorities and school management committees.

   NGO service delivery organisations need to integrate child rights- and legal rights-based organisations to sensitise communities, parents and teachers on the violation of adolescents' rights – physical, mental and emotional health.

   Adolescent-focused service delivery organisations and child rights organisations working should consider introducing additional training for adolescent boys on the importance of health/life skills, managing bullying and coping mechanisms, with empowerment leadership training given on how to speak up and report such violence.

2. Prevent violence against adolescent boys in the workplace.

   Prevention of violence, including how to report such incidents against adolescent boys in the workplace, can be introduced in the school curriculum of government, NGO and informal schools, as well as by peer educators in adolescent and youth clubs in the community and in vocational training institutes.

   Community health workers (CHWs) need to be trained on basic messaging and counselling for adolescent boys who access adolescent family health centres run by the government throughout the country. Boys can be referred to these CHWs by the vocational training institutes.

   Communities, particularly parents, need to be sensitised to the adverse impacts of bullying and workplace harassment on adolescent lives and psycho-social well-being and how to be supportive of adolescent boys when facing such traumatic incidences.

   The 109 and 999 toll-free numbers could be promoted more heavily and labour inspectors could be increasingly vigilant in their inspections of the working conditions of working children in line with the National Children's Policy 2011, the Criminal Procedures Code, and policies against hazardous child labour and labour policies.

3. Use education and media campaigns to promote non-violent forms of discipline.

   The prevalent culture of violence can be challenged through education, media and social media campaigns that promote alternative and positive forms of parenting and child-rearing to communities, families and young people.

   The consequences of long-term mental and emotional health damage to children need to be highlighted in parents' gatherings and through social mobilisation. Many NGOs have community mobilisation meetings to build awareness of social issues.

4. Implementation of laws and specific actions to tackle sexual harassment of girls.

   The National Adolescent Health Strategy has provisions against violence and abuse of children, as does the Domestic Violence (Protection and Prevention) Act 2010, the High Court Guidelines Against Sexual Harassment in the Workplace and in Educational Institutions 2009, the National Action Plan on Violence Against Women (2018) and the Women and Child Repression Prevention Act (Amendment 2003). However, the implementation of such laws remain weak. To protect girls and female adolescents from violence and sexual harassment and abuse in the home, public spaces and educational institutions, the following actions should be prioritised:

   • Educational institutions need to enforce the implementation of their policies to tackle and punish perpetrators. This requires follow up and monitoring by child rights/legal rights organisations, who are working closely with government schools and NGOs in different urban and rural areas.

   • Mass media campaigns, building on those initiated by the NGO BRAC, are needed to sensitise communities about violence and sexual harassment. In particular there should be a focus on what constitutes violence and violations of bodily integrity, including unpacking the notion of 'eve-teasing' being the norm, challenging the stereotypes of what is acceptable romantic behaviour versus stalking, and perceptions of what constitutes relationships, consent and courtship.

   • The government could set up separate transport available only for females to ensure their safety and draw on the model recently set up by a private group – LILY, which has set up a female-only motorbike service for pick up and drop off of females only as required in Dhaka city in 2017.

- Better lighting and wider streets and pavements can make public spaces safer for everyone. The National Building Code provides specifications on requirements for pavements, passages and lighting, etc., which national and local government authorities need to enforce.

5. **Increase action to prevent early marriage, through families, communities and authorities.**

    Increased action is necessary to prevent early marriage, involving families, communities and authorities as follows:

    - Investing in awareness-raising through adolescent female peer leaders who can serve as role models in their communities.
    - Providing adolescent girls with education/skills/vocation education or employment opportunities to help delay the age of marriage, especially in very poor households. Vocational institutes and NGOs focusing on skill development can link in with primary and secondary government schools to identify adolescent girls for further training and job placement.
    - Group activities to build girls' self-confidence should be carried out at school and community level.

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