

Women and Girls in Bangladesh

Girls are fed last, and less than their brothers. They are more vulnerable to trafficking, sexual abuse, rape, acid throwing and other forms of exploitation, including child labour and child prostitution. Many are married by age 15 and their families must pay hefty dowries. Dowry violence, such as murder and induced suicide, still poses real threats to girls.

Girls are less likely to go to university and if they do go, their dowry increases. Many are mothers by the time they are 19. Their youth doubles the risk of fatal complications in pregnancy. About 11,000 women die in child birth every year. Almost half of all mothers are malnourished. Women are likely to die before their husbands.



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There were 266 acid attacks reported recently over a one year period, affecting 322 people¹. Of these, 183 were women, 76 were children under 18, and 63 were men. Marital, family and land disputes, dowry, refusing sex and marriage were the main reasons for the attacks. Special, speedier courts have been introduced to deal with acid attacks, which now carry the death penalty.

Dowry and dowry-related violence, such as acid attacks and murder, are still prevalent. A recent report² stated that 165 women were killed in one year, 77 had acid thrown on them, one was divorced and 11 committed suicide over dowry demands. Dowry is officially prohibited by law.

Girls aged 14 to 17 are more likely to commit suicide, and attempt suicide than boys. The Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey reported more than 2200 children committed suicide in one year – or about six per day. Of those six, four were female. Suicide is the biggest killer among this age group³.

There are substantially more “undetermined” causes for female deaths by injury than for male deaths. Boys are more likely to be victims of non-fatal violence⁴.

More than half of married men (55 per cent) feel justified in hitting or beating their wives. In a health survey, nearly one in two said if their wife went out without telling them, it would justify violence⁵.

¹ UNICEF ‘Support to the Acid Survivors Foundation and the *Kishori Abhijan* Project in Bangladesh,’ June 2005.

² Written statement of the Asian Legal Resource Centre on ‘Dowry related violence against women in Bangladesh,’ distributed at the 61st session of the UNHCR in Geneva, April 5, 2005.

³ Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey Report on Children, UNICEF and Government of Bangladesh, 2005.

⁴ Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey Report on Children, UNICEF and Government of Bangladesh, 2005.

⁵ Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, 2004, National Institute of Population Research and Training, 2005.



About 55 per cent of married women lack the freedom to go alone to a hospital or health centre, or outside their village, town or city⁶.

Domestic violence remains a huge threat to the security of adolescent girls. A UNICEF report found that extreme physical abuse at home that led to death accounted for more than 70 per cent of the reported domestic violence cases involving young housewives and girls aged 13-18⁷.

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world. More than two-thirds of adolescent girls are married (of those aged 10-19)⁸. Nearly two in five girls aged 15-17 are married, despite 18 being the legal age for marriage⁹.

More than half the adolescent girls (55 per cent) become mothers by the time they are 19, and half of these mothers are acutely malnourished. The maternal mortality rate among adolescent mothers is double the national rate¹⁰.

The national maternal mortality rate is one of the worst in South Asia, at 320 deaths per 100,000 births¹¹. This means about 11,000 women die giving birth every year. Most deliveries take place at home away from emergency obstetric care and without a skilled attendant.

Almost one in every seven maternal deaths is caused by violence¹².

Nearly half of all mothers are malnourished (45 per cent)¹³. Anaemia is a severe public health problem for pregnant women, which has been estimated at around 46 per cent. Almost one third of adolescent girls also suffer from anaemia¹⁴.

Girls are typically fed less and last. Nationally, 4.8 per cent of girls aged 12-59 months were malnourished compared with 3.6 per cent of boys¹⁵.

Almost one in every two husbands decides their wife's health care (48 per cent). They often solely determine their children's health care (32 per cent)¹⁶.



⁶ Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, 2004, National Institute of Population Research and Training, 2005.

⁷ UNICEF Bangladesh website: www.unicef.org/bangladesh

⁸ The State of World Population 2005, UNFPA.

⁹ UNICEF Bangladesh Country Programme document, 2005.

¹⁰ The State of World Population 2005, UNFPA.

¹¹ SVRS 2002, BBS, according to BMMS 2001 by NIORT, MMR is in the range of 320-400 per 100,000 live births in UNICEF and BBS Progotir Pathey 2003.

¹² Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

¹³ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

¹⁴ Anaemia Prevalence Survey of Urban Bangladesh and Rural Chittagong Hill Tracts 2003, UNICEF.

¹⁵ UNICEF and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Progotir Pathey 2003.

Although the life expectancy gap between men and women has narrowed over the last decade, Bangladesh continues to be one of the very few countries in the world where women's life expectancy is lower than that of men: with men at 68.6 years and women 68.0 years¹⁷.

Women are put at risk of HIV/AIDS by their partners' sexual behaviours, despite the fact Bangladesh's overall prevalence rate is believed to be less than one per cent. Most married men who have unprotected sex with sex workers continue to have sex with their wives. Consistent condom use among sex workers in Bangladesh brothels is four per cent. For street-based sex workers it is two per cent. Brothel workers have an average of 19 clients a week, one of the highest turnover rates in Asia¹⁸.

Only 57 per cent of girls aged 10-19 years have heard of HIV/AIDS¹⁹.

The tertiary education ratio for female to males is 36:64, below the MDG target of 50:50²⁰. Early marriage is one of the main causes of poor enrolment and high female drop-out rates at the higher education levels. Increasing tertiary opportunities for girls is expected to boost the mean age of marriage.

Literacy rates in females aged 20 to 24 years compared to their male peers is 55:71 (up from 42:65). This is still well short of the MDG target of 100:100. In 2000, it was estimated only 43 per cent of women were literate²¹.

Net primary school enrolment rates have achieved gender parity, at 81 per cent for boys and 84 per cent for girls²².

Almost one in five paid agricultural labourers is female (19 per cent). However, they only earn 70 per cent of their male counterparts' wages. In other sectors, women make up 22 per cent of paid employment. Their wages are less than half the male wage. (Public servants have equal wages)²³



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For one in eight women who earn a wage, someone else decides how that wage will be spent. More than two in five decide with someone else, such as their husband²⁴.

¹⁶ Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, 2004, National Institute of Population Research and Training 2005.

¹⁷ UNICEF BCO PowerPoint 2007.

¹⁸ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

¹⁹ UNICEF and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics Progotir Pathey 2003.

²⁰ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

²¹ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

²² UNICEF Bangladesh Country Programme document, 2005.

²³ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

²⁴ Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, 2004, National Institute of Population Research and Training 2005.

Female-headed households face serious poverty. Nearly one in every two female-headed households falls below the poverty line, compared to less than two in five patriarchal households.²⁵

There were only six women in the previous 300-seat National Parliament of Bangladesh – or two per cent of the representation²⁶. Both leaders of the main political parties are women: the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Begum Khaleda Zia, widow of former president Ziaur Rahman; and the Awami League (AL) leader Sheikh Hasina, daughter of former president and Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

In local government, about 25 per cent of the elected members are women²⁷.



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²⁵ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

²⁶ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.

²⁷ Government of Bangladesh and UN 'Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh Progress Report,' 2005.