Reducing spousal violence against women and girls in Dhaka slums: Evidence from SAFE

Background
Spousal violence against women and girls (SVAWG) in Bangladesh is among the highest in the world. Approximately 27% of ever-married women report physical and/or sexual SVAWG, 24% report emotional violence and 7% report economic violence during the last 12 months. Prevalence of physical IPV during the last 12 months in urban slums is the highest (35%) compared to other urban (20%) and rural areas (22%), suggesting greater vulnerability of slum-dwelling females. The adolescent girls are more vulnerable to SVAWG than older women. Despite wide recognition of SVAWG as an important public health, development and human rights issue, evidence for SVAWG prevention is still inadequate, particularly in low and middle income countries. Some interventions show promise in reducing this violence against programme participants, but existing literature does not, however, provide clear guidance on how to reduce SVAWG at the community level. In order to address this gap in knowledge, SAFE, a 20-month intervention was designed, implemented and evaluated during November 2010 to December 2014. SAFE aimed to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and reduce VAWG in Dhaka slums. The study sites included 19 slums from Mohakhali, Mohammadpur and Jatrabari areas in Dhaka city. The SAFE consortium was led by icddr,b and included Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Nari Maitree and We Can Campaign, Marie Stopes Clinic and Population Council.

This policy brief presents the main findings regarding SAFE’s impact on SVAWG and the pathways of change with specific recommendations for stakeholders.

Target population
1. Married and unmarried females aged 10–29
2. Married and unmarried males aged 18–35
3. Community members

Core components of SAFE intervention
1) 13 interactive 2-hour group sessions for awareness raising, skill building and promotion of activism
2) Community mobilization campaigns
3) Health and legal service provision

Themes covered in interactive group sessions
1) Gender and rights
2) Sexual and reproductive health and rights
3) Violence against women and girls
4) Related laws and legal provisions
5) Interpersonal communication, negotiation and conflict resolution
6) Activism

SAFE Quantitative Evaluation
A three-arm cluster randomized controlled trial (RCT) was used to evaluate effect of single-sex female and male group sessions versus female only group sessions on SVAWG and other outcomes of interest in SAFE.

Arm A included gender segregated sessions with females and males.
Arm B included group sessions with females.
Arm C Comparison.

All arms received health and legal services and community campaigns.

The female surveys included 4458 females aged 15–29 at baseline and 4581 at endline. The sample for the male surveys included 1616 men aged 18–35 at baseline and 1620 at endline.

SAFE Qualitative Study
Qualitative data were collected as part of the evaluation. Analysis of pathways of change in SVAWG was conducted using data from in-depth interviews with 22 married female and 15 married male SAFE group members.
Key findings:
SAFE’s Impact on Spousal Violence against Women and Girls

Effect of interactive group sessions on gender, rights, violence, laws, communication and negotiation, and activism
- No effect when only females were targeted
- Risk of spousal physical violence reduced by 21% among adolescent girls in the community when both females and males received single-sex group sessions

Impact of SAFE on group members
Qualitative data suggest that most SAFE group members, who attended 5 or more sessions, reported that one or more forms of spousal violence reduced or stopped in their personal life.

“Earlier I could not understand how to deal with thrashing by [my] husband. I used to think there is nothing I can do. Now, if he beats me or insults me in public I get back to him later on and try to make him understand that he should not mistreat me, particularly in public, which is humiliating. I learned this from the group sessions. This strategy has reduced violence in my life.”

Sumona, 25 years, homemaker

“SAFE discussed these issues [regarding violence] in different ways and so men have become more aware. …Even those, who do not understand everything clearly, had the notion that it is not right. I think some men actually got this even if only partially.”

Kholil, 30 years, street food vender
Knowledge and reflection on gender, rights, SVAWG, and related laws and services made female group members gender aware. Interactive group sessions reduced their isolation, increased their confidence, enabling them to speak out more to claim their rights and created a critical mass for addressing violence. SAFE encouraged them to address violence not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of other women.

“We gained courage and strength participating in the group sessions. Ordinary group members also underwent changes. If anything goes wrong, they now come to us for help.” Naima, 26 years, homemaker

The female group members applied communication, negotiation and conflict management skills gained from group sessions to: improve spousal communication and mutual understanding; reduce conflict; and create space for negotiating more egalitarian couple relationships. As a result, SVAWG reduced in some cases. When these strategies failed, the members sought help from fellow group members or SAFE staff. Their cooperation often led to SVAWG reduction.

Activism of the female group members in the neighbourhood and among relatives helped reduce SVAWG among non-SAFE members. Activism included sharing knowledge gained from SAFE, advising survivors on ways of addressing SVAWG, initiatives to persuade the perpetrators not to engage in violence.

“He used to beat his wife every night and force her to have sex. ... I gave her [SAFE] booklets and said, 'Show this to your husband and convince him [to stop violence]'...I also requested my husband to convince him. He did so. Now, the frequency of violence has reduced.” Piya, 19 years, homemaker

The pathway of change among the male group members was similar to that of the female group members. However, the magnitude of positive change in gender attitudes seemed to be much smaller than the females. Also, men’s participation in activism was much lower compared to the female group members. A combination of group sessions and activism contributed to reduction in SVAWG in the community.

Pathways of Spousal Violence Reduction in SAFE

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<tr>
<th>Outcomes of group sessions on female members</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactive group sessions decreased isolation</td>
<td>Increased awareness regarding gender/ rights / VAWG/ laws / services</td>
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<td>Decreased gender inequitable attitudes</td>
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<td>Communication, negotiation and conflict resolution skills improved spousal communication and reduced conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased confidence and voice</td>
<td>Increased help seeking for addressing SVAWG</td>
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<td>Activism</td>
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Reduced spousal violence against women and girls
Recommendations

Recommendations for policy and programme

- Female and male interactive group sessions in combination with activism need to be implemented for reducing physical spousal violence against adolescent girls in the community
- Group sessions must be interactive in nature
- It is not adequate only to raise awareness, but also to equip females with skills for addressing violence
- Promotion of activism is critical for reducing SVAWG among non-members

References


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