



Report

# Tackling intimate partner violence in South Asia

Why working with men and boys matters for women

Fiona Samuels, Nicola Jones and Taveeshi Gupta

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**Overseas Development Institute**

203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ

Tel. +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax. +44 (0) 20 7922 0399  
E-mail: [info@odi.org.uk](mailto:info@odi.org.uk)

[www.odi.org](http://www.odi.org)  
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# Introduction

Violence inflicted by intimate partners is a major public health and human rights issue in South Asia. The serious impacts of intimate partner violence (IPV) are felt most keenly by women and adolescent girls, but it has broader social and economic costs for communities and for countries.

There is no global IPV index, but the most recent data from Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for Pakistan reveal that 39% of women aged 15-49 who have ever been married report that they have experienced IPV at some time, while 33% have experienced it in the previous 12 months (National Institute of Population Studies [NIPS] et al., 2013 and ICF International, 2013). In Nepal these rates are 33% and 17% respectively (Ministry of Health Population [Mohp] Nepal et al., 2012, New ERA, Nepal and ICF International, 2012). Bangladesh has no comparable DHS figures, but a national survey on violence against women and girls (VAWG) notes prevalence rates of 49.6% for physical violence, 28.7% for psychological violence and 27.2% for sexual violence (BBS, 2016).

While there is a robust body of evidence on the impact on women of their exposure to IPV, relatively little is known about what determines the attitudes of the men and boys who resort to such violence. A lack of knowledge about why they do what they do – and how this can be addressed – is a constraint to effective programme and policy responses.

This short report summarises findings from a multi-country study on the multi-level influences that shape the perpetration of IPV by men and boys in South Asia, as well as the policy, programming and institutional dynamics that mediate attitudes and behaviours around IPV. Drawing on a mixed-methods primary and secondary data analysis from three countries facing different forms of state fragility – Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan – we explored three key questions.

1. To what extent do social norms drive male perpetration of IPV in South Asia?
2. In what ways do broader political economic dynamics shape attitudes, behaviours and service provision regarding IPV?
3. What are the entry points for policy and programming to tackle male perpetration of IPV?

The short report aims to synthesise the key findings from this study and provide programming and policy recommendations to tackle IPV in South Asia. It stresses the importance of engaging with men and boys in efforts to tackle IPV, particularly given a backlash that appears to be growing as women become more empowered in the region.

## Box 1: What is intimate partner violence?

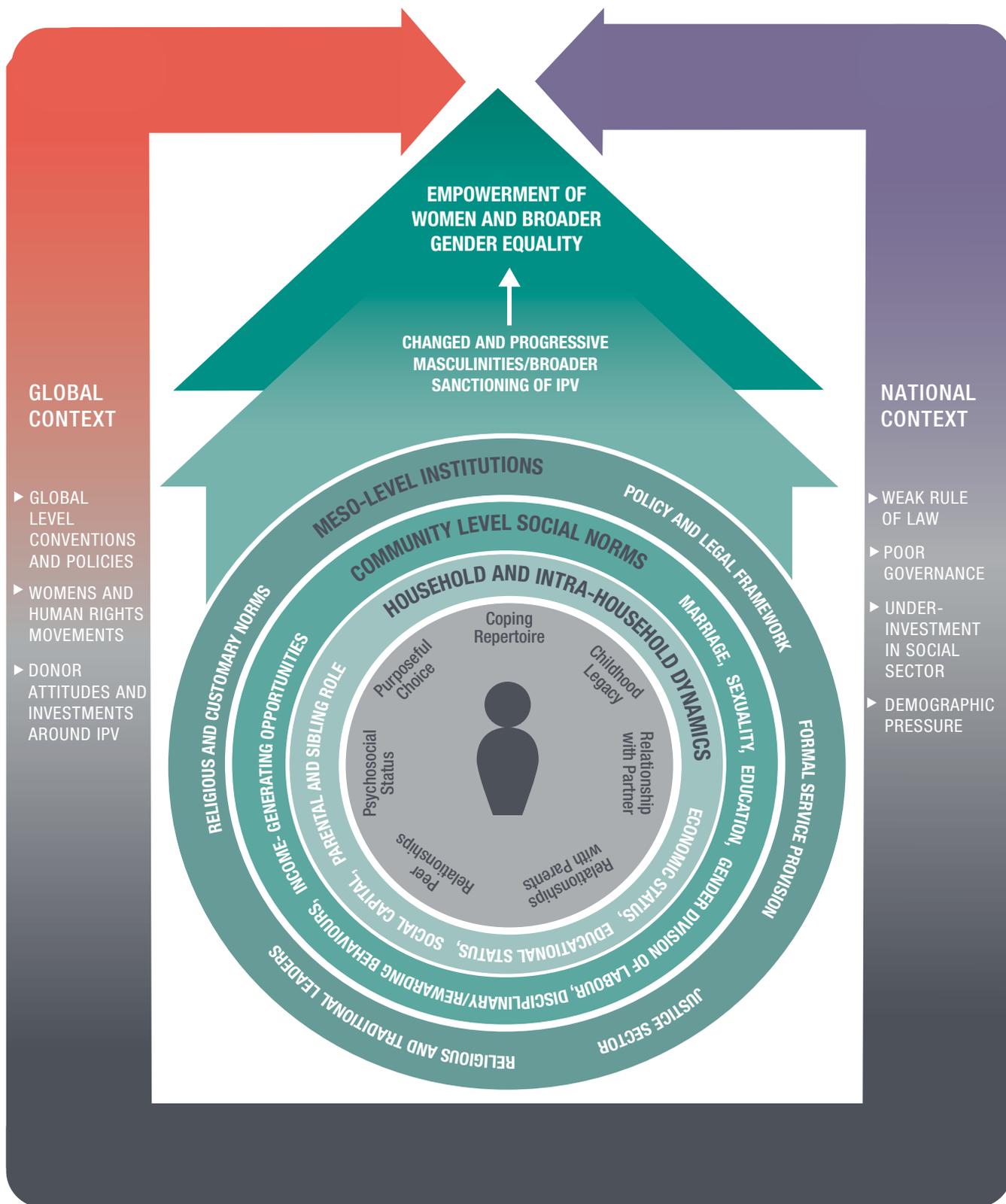
We define intimate partner violence (IPV) as any behaviour within an intimate heterosexual relationship (i.e. with a spouse or romantic partner) that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship. We also include other controlling behaviours, as well as economic violence (Adams et al., 2008; Heise and Garcia-Moreno, 2002; WHO, 2012; Yount et al., 2015). Given our focus on three countries that are characterised by different degrees and forms of fragility,<sup>1</sup> our analysis is also informed by literature on violence in conflict and post-conflict settings. This literature shows, among other things, that men are more likely to perpetrate IPV in such settings, which also see an increase in hyper masculinities and

in impunity (e.g. Fleming et al., 2013; Hossain et al., 2014; Petesch, 2012; Domingo, et al. 2013; Samuels et al., 2015).

Our conceptual framework (see e.g. Heise, 1998, 2011; Fulu and Miedema, 2015) emphasises the interaction of factors at each level of the social ecology – individual, family/relationship, community, society/culture – and the ways in which they contribute to the perpetuation of IPV. These interactions are captured in Figure 1, which highlights the many levels at which interventions are needed to tackle IPV and promote more egalitarian gender norms and behaviours (see Samuels et al., forthcoming, for further details).

1 These might include civil unrest, local tensions, conflict and/or the risk or vulnerability to conflict.

**Figure 1: Conceptual framework: understanding intimate partner violence from an ecological and institutional lens in fragile states**



Source: ODI, 2016

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# 1. Factors influencing IPV: findings from South Asia

At the **individual level**, a range of inter-related factors have often been identified as making boys and men more likely to inflict IPV. While there are variations and mixed results by country, the literature indicates that lower education levels can be related to higher incidences of IPV. Experiencing or witnessing abuse as a child is also one of the strongest drivers of IPV in South Asia. A number of studies have found that witnessing such violence at a young age is linked to a higher likelihood of committing IPV, as is substance abuse (Ackerson et al., 2008; Koenig et al., 2003; Jejeebhoy et al., 2013; Naved et al., 2011).

The literature cites a number of factors at the **household/relationship level** that influence IPV behaviour. These include the level of a woman's economic power within the household (with more economic power often leading to less IPV<sup>2</sup>), household socio-economic status (with higher household status reducing the likelihood of IPV), the quality of the marital relationship (with a better relationship between husband and wife resulting in less IPV), and the number of children in the household (with fewer children usually resulting in reduced levels of IPV).

At the **community level**, discriminatory social norms and beliefs have been widely documented as a serious risk factor for IPV. Similarly, many studies have shown that community tolerance or acceptance of violence against women is a strong predictor of the rates of IPV

in that community. While there has been less research on religious aspects, there is some evidence that conservative interpretations of religious tenets can play a negative role in the risk of IPV (Barker et al., 2011; Das et al., 2008; Jejeebhoy et al., 2013; Naved et al., 2011; Oshiro et al., 2011; Rabbani et al., 2008; Solotaroff and Pande, 2014).

On the consequences of IPV, many studies have found that those experiencing IPV are far more likely to face serious health problems and, in the worst cases, an early death, with IPV a leading cause of morbidity and mortality for women in many contexts. Mental health problems, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and suicidal thoughts have been widely reported among the victims of IPV. Additionally, it is also linked to a whole range of sexual and reproductive health problems, such as unwanted pregnancy and/or abortion, violence during pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS). IPV has far-reaching effects on children, with those from households where IPV is commonplace facing higher health risks as well as challenges related to nutrition and growth, and poor mental health (Fry et al., 2012). Finally, although less studied, particularly in South Asia, IPV has also been shown to have an economic impact at the individual and national level (see e.g. Johnston and Naved 2008; Nanda et al., 2015; Vyas and Watts, 2008; Zakar et al., 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> The relationship between women's economic power and likelihood of IPV is, however, inconclusive since in some cases women who earn a cash income experience more IPV (NIPS and ICF International, 2013), while in other cases, economic empowerment leads to less incidences of IPV (Schuler et al., 2013).

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# 2. Manifestations and multi-level influences

## 2.1. Manifestations of IPV

*‘But now it is different. People will even kill as part of this violence. Killing is not what happened in the past. And now the killing is not just part of honour killing, it’s part of the usual violence as well. Women can be killed because of very petty issues,’*

*(Interview with key informant aged 19, Pakistan).*

*‘When we were young we saw our fathers beat our mothers almost to death if she was at fault. Our mothers did not protest out of fear. [...] They used to stay in the relationship and they are still in that relationship. [...]’*

*‘Now, they may give a slap or two only.’*

*(Focus group discussion, married men, Gazipur, Bangladesh)*

Turning now to our primary data, trends across the three countries show that while physical violence seems to be decreasing, other types of violence (psychological and economic) were thought to be increasing. In Nepal, for example, respondents noted that some forms of IPV, such as wife-beating and polygamy (which was identified as falling within the IPV umbrella concept), are explicit and therefore easier to monitor. Other forms, such as the impact of suspicion affecting women from middle-class families or women in employment outside the home, are more difficult to assess.

## 2.2. Multi-level influences of IPV

Our findings underscored the multi-level and interconnected influences that shape IPV norms and behaviours. More specifically, we distinguish between drivers which are structural in nature and triggers that are more immediate factors spurring IPV behaviours. We use the terms ‘risks’ or ‘influencing factors’ interchangeably to mean those which increase the likelihood of IPV triggers being activated.

### 2.2.1. Individual-level influences

In keeping with the secondary data from the region, our primary research findings in all countries showed that lack of education was seen as a key risk at the individual level and a major influencing factor for IPV. In Pakistan, for example, respondents spoke about lack of ‘intelligence (*aqal*), manners (*tameez*), and awareness (*shaoor*)’ as being root causes for IPV. Unemployment (and, by extension, poverty) was also considered a risk factor in our study contexts, given the ‘stresses’ and ‘feelings of depression’ that so often accompany ‘economic problems at home’, as expressed by various study respondents in the three countries.

Another risk factor that tallied with the literature was that of drug and alcohol abuse, with study respondents noting that this had become more widespread in the study sites. In Bangladesh, for example, peer pressure in adolescence often led to substance abuse. Another risk factor identified by study participants in all countries was that of witnessing violence in the family or in the neighbourhood and as a result, normalising violence against one’s wife. In Pakistan, respondents noted that ‘If their dad beats the mother than the son will also be violent.’

### 2.2.2. Household-level influences

At the household or family level, the triggers pinpointed by male respondents across the three countries for IPV included a long list of behaviours by wives that are seen as culturally unacceptable:

- not taking care of the house, children and/or in-laws
- wearing clothing considered inappropriate, including not covering their heads
- not having food ready when husbands get home from work
- not having the bed ready when husbands want to sleep
- talking back to husbands
- going outside the home without permission and being suspected of talking to other men
- non-observance of *purdah* (in Bangladesh and Pakistan)
- refusing sex with their husbands.

Tensions in relationships between spouses and in-laws were also seen as important drivers of IPV, as these testimonies from Bangladesh and Nepal demonstrate (see also Box 2 on a case study from Pakistan):

*‘Elder brother-in-law, younger brother-in-law, father-in-law, they all beat the woman. Sister-in-law, even the mother-in-law beats.’*

*(Focus Group Discussion, married women, Mymensingh, Bangladesh)*

*‘A wife whose husband treats her right cannot be abused by her mother-in-law or sister-in-law. That is it. And if the husband gets incited by his mother’s words and starts beating his wife the moment he comes home from work without listening to what happened, then it would be abuse. That would be abusing a wife because of mother-in-law.’*

*(Focus Group Discussion, married women, Mymensingh, Bangladesh)*

*‘A married son is like the middle finger. There is an index finger, his mother on one side and the ring finger, his wife on the other side. There is a constant conflict*

### **Box 2: Role of in-laws in exacerbating IPV**

Tasneem<sup>3</sup>, who was widowed three years ago while eight months pregnant, often endured violence while she was living with her husband and her in-laws. Back with her own parents since her husband’s death, she explained that it was her in-laws who instigated the violence.

*‘They were jealous of my relationship with my husband and used to fight with me for no reason. They used to curse me and say bad things to me. They used to advise my husband to leave me to marry another woman. They used my illness as a reason to convince him. My husband never said anything to them. Instead he used to target me and blame me for not participating in household chores, which was not true, because I used to work all day and I left nothing for my mother-in-law to do. He even hit me twice. He hit me with his hands and never apologised for it. When he hit me, I used to cry and they would send me to my mother’s house.’*

*(Interview with a survivor, Pakistan)*

*between the index finger and the ring finger to have the man listen to them. If the middle finger leans towards the index finger, i.e. if he listens to the mother, he will perpetuate IPV on the wife. If the middle finger leans towards the ring finger, i.e. if he listens to the wife, he will perpetuate violence on the mother.’*

*(Interview with key informant, Kapilvastu, Nepal)*

In Bangladesh, some respondents also cited demands around dowries as a strong driver of IPV. As noted by married women respondents:

*‘Everything happens for dowry. Beating, throwing her out of the house and sending her to the parent’s house, in some cases they throw acid on her face. There are big examples of incidents for dowry.’*

*(Focus Group 10 for married women in Mymensingh, Bangladesh).*

In Nepal and Pakistan, polygamy and in Bangladesh, extra-marital affairs were also seen as drivers of IPV. In Nepal, however, women would rather their husbands were in polygamous relationships than having extramarital affairs, which often lead to additional economic violence, with the man spending all his money outside the household, leaving his wife and children penniless.

### **2.2.3. Community and wider-level influences**

Findings in all three countries suggested that deep-rooted patriarchal norms around femininity and masculinity and expectations that a wife will behave in a particular way are critical drivers of IPV. In Bangladesh, for example, there is a sense that a man is supposed to be angry, tough and aggressive and hold power and control over his wife. A woman, on the other hand, is viewed as a commodity, to be transferred from her parents’ home to her husband’s home without any voice or agency.

*‘He (a husband) beats when he gets angry. Men are hot-tempered. It is only natural that they’d beat when angry.’*

*(Focus Group Discussion, married women, Gazipur, Bangladesh)*

3 All names have been changed to respect the privacy of respondents.

*'I am a man. I have the right to order her. I ordered her not to do something, not to talk to someone, but she did not obey me. ... This was actually 'overtaking' me in my own house. As you understand, I am a man. So, I got angry (raag, jid) and decided if she doesn't obey me I'll divorce her. If I am overpowered by her I'll be treated as less than a man.'*

*(Focus Group Discussion, married men, Gazipur, Bangladesh)*

In Nepal, study respondents from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds alike felt that the way in which women and girls are viewed, coupled with the behaviour expected of them, centred on the role of the men in their lives – whether husbands, fathers and brothers – as the guardians of women at every stage of their lives. While the law may promote equality between men and women, social norms around guardianship often contradict this, with men seen as protectors and women as the protected.

Restrictions on women's freedoms were seen as some of the most rigid norms that place girls and women at risk of IPV in all three countries, both in the present and the future. In Pakistan, it was noted that even if a woman has a good relationship with her husband, she is not 'allowed' to have a job, 'go outside anywhere, meet anyone', and is expected to 'stay at home' as soon as they reach puberty. Similarly, in Nepal, very strong controls were noted over the mobility of girls and women and a key factor in IPV.

*'There are husbands who do not let their wives go out of the house and the wife has to listen to whatever he says. So the wife tells to her husband, "can we go out to the market" to which the husband then replies saying he does not want to go. After hearing this reply the wife then gets angry and goes out alone or without asking and when she returns in the evening, her husband beats her.'*

*(In-depth interview with beneficiary women, Kapilvastu, Nepal)*

Adolescent boys were found to control their girlfriends, including taking control of their mobility. They were also reported to impose their desires on their girlfriends, force the girls to meet them, and monitor their social interactions by, for example, checking their phones.

Child and arranged marriages continue in all three countries and put girls and women at risk of IPV. According to respondents in Pakistan, in arranged marriages, 'the boy and girl haven't seen each other before marriage, they start fighting within 8-15 days of their marriage because they haven't met, talked, or understood each other' (interview with key informant 5). Similarly in Bangladesh, several key informants noted that child marriage is still prevalent and an underlying cause for IPV, given that young girls do not have enough understanding or knowledge and are most vulnerable to violence. They also noted that 'women lose their beauty if they are married off at an early age and men get easily attracted to other women. Then they have conflict over several issues' (interview with key informant 15). In Nepal, and particularly among the Tharu communities, early and arranged marriages can lead to incompatibility between spouses, which can often lead to the husband beating the wife and/or having extramarital affairs (see Box 3).

Our primary research found that both men and women in all three countries accept and justify gender-based violence (GBV) and IPV, which are usually seen as necessary forms of corrective action towards women – a finding that also tallies with our review of the secondary literature. In Pakistan, both young men and older men justify violence as a necessary tool to teach women to 'obey' and 'behave'.

*'When I ask her for prayers, she won't offer prayers. When we ask her to cover her body, she doesn't obey. When Nikah<sup>4</sup> is done then husband has rights over her. So, she shall obey. I think that the husband should not beat her on small matters but when it is legitimate, he is justified and then he can beat. We learn this from sermons delivered on TV.'*

*(Interview with 16-year-old boy, Deh Chohar, Pakistan)*

### **Box 3: Marriage customs drive IPV**

'Gauna' marriages are common in Nepal's Tharu community. Such marriages take place when children are quite young: between the ages of eight and fourteen. While girls are not sent to live with their in-laws until middle- to late-adolescence, they tend to be removed from school soon after their marriage to learn the skills they will need as wives and mothers. Boys, however, usually stay in school, where many meet girls who become more important to them than wives they have not seen since their childhood wedding ceremonies. Because boys and their families are fined up to NRS 200,000 (about \$200) if they do not 'complete' their gauna marriages and accept their wives into the household, young wives often find themselves living with husbands who can barely tolerate their presence and who berate and beat them for interfering with their relationships with their girlfriends.

In Nepal, our findings reveal an acceptance, and an expectation, that wives are inferior to husbands and should be controlled by them. A wife is expected to be submissive to the husband and his family and a woman who speaks out is regarded as a wife who is out of her husband's control. This gives leeway for violence as a means of control or corrective action ('it is for her own good'). Although views were mixed, some adolescent boys did say they had beaten their girlfriends when those girlfriends did not obey them. Similarly, in Bangladesh, it is believed to be a husband's responsibility and prerogative to *shashon* (discipline) a woman who breaks social or religious norms, with IPV being the primary tool for correcting a wife and considered a necessity, rather than violence.

*'People say, "You cannot retort back just because your husband has hit you or scolded you. A husband can always scold you, but it doesn't allow you to talk back.'"*

*(Focus group discussion, married women, Mymensingh, Bangladesh)*

Women were seen to justify and accept IPV – a reflection of the strength of patriarchal norms. In particular, older women from Madheshi, Tharu and Muslim communities in Nepal found it acceptable for husbands to beat their wives if the wives have made any kind of mistake:

*'Yes, if the wife does something wrong, for example if she has extramarital affairs with another man, a husband can beat his wife.'*

*(Case study with survivor, Kapilvastu, Nepal)*

Similarly, in Bangladesh, some women believe that beating a woman is justified if she goes out without her husband's permission (in-depth interview with survivor), does not take care of the children (in-depth interview with



The bumper sticker on this Nepali van reads: 'Good wife is someone whom the husband likes'. © NISER Nepal 2016

#### Box 4: Committed to marriage, despite years of torture

Joya is a 19-year-old Bangladeshi woman who has endured torture – from her husband’s family. Despite her suffering, she is committed to hang on to her marriage, even if it costs her life, because she grew up in a divorced household and feels that divorce is too hard on children.

Joya was married about four years ago, soon after leaving sixth grade, to Jasim, a well-off young man who had completed secondary school and is only three years older than she is. She went to live with him, his brother and his wife, and her mother-in-law, who is separated from her husband and controls the household. Only two months after they were married, Jasim began to beat Joya, goaded by his mother’s allegations that Joya has been unfaithful. He hit her with a broom and wooden spatula, breaking her arm. Accusing her of stealing a ring (which was actually stolen by his brother), he attacked her with a knife, cutting her badly.

Joya’s mother-in-law kept up a relentless campaign to ensure that Joya was subservient in the family. She demanded that Joya’s parents pay her for accepting their daughter and encouraged Jasim to beat his wife when their demands for more money were not met. Eventually, Jasim abandoned Joya at her parents’ house

and fled, insisting that she should divorce him so that he could avoid paying the bride price and alimony. Joya, committed to married life, refused and her mother filed a court case to compel Jasim to accept his wife back into his household.

Joya’s life soon became worse, with Jasim beating her constantly. In one attack, he undressed her, bound her hands and feet, and left her in the water tank for two days. His brother began to make sexual advances towards Joya whenever they were alone in the house. When she refused these advances, he beat her, locked her in a closet and even held her fingers in boiling oil, threatening to throw the oil into her face if she made a sound.

When Joya became pregnant, Jasim convinced himself that the baby was not his. He and his brother made her swallow tablets and beat her belly with a bamboo pole, hoping to induce a miscarriage. While Joya was severely injured, she did not lose the baby until, a few days later, her brother-in-law kicked her in the abdomen. The next day he tried to kill her, hanging her from the roof by her neck and was only stopped at the last minute by his own father.

When we interviewed Joya she was living with her mother. She was, however, trying to patch up her marriage.

Source: Fieldwork, 2016.

survivor), or if a woman has an affair, with some also suggesting that forced sex during marriage is acceptable.

*‘This (sex) is happening between a husband and his wife. You cannot call it violence. Yes, if it happened before her marriage, you could call it violence. But after marriage, even if it hurt an awful lot, we cannot talk about it.’*

*(Focus Group Discussion, married women, Gazipur, Bangladesh).*

Some women, however, feel that almost anything is preferable to the scandal and humiliation of divorce, and stay in an abusive relationship, despite the risks, as seen in the story of Joya, from Bangladesh (see Box 4).

While there were some mixed messages about the role of religion in perpetuating violence, particularly from respondents in Bangladesh and Pakistan, there was a sense that while religion itself does not instigate violence, its interpretation could, arguably, provide men with a justification for perpetrating violence against women, as

highlighted in the following excerpts from a focus group discussion in Bangladesh:

*‘A woman’s heaven lies underneath her husband’s feet.’*

*‘Parts of the body hit by the husband will go to heaven.’*

*‘A woman who disobeys a husband or does not appreciate him will have a place even in Jahannam [hell].’*

*(Focus group discussion, married women, Mymensingh, Bangladesh).*

There was a sense in all countries that norms are changing, but unevenly. On the one hand, as pointed out by older women in Nepal, girls have much more freedom than they once had: they can marry later, have more choice in their spouses, and they can finish their education and even aspire to having a degree.

*‘Nowadays they (girls) can wear short clothes, gossip on their mobile phones, send messages and talk whatever*

4 *Nikah* literally means conjunction or uniting. In the Islamic legal system, it implies a marriage contract in the presence of a minimum of two males. Ref: Introduction to the Holy Qur’an By Abd Al-Rahman Doi page 167

*they like, they will make plans on mobiles, girls from over there come here and sit below that tree behind my home and then gossip with boys freely, the time has changed, at our time there was only fear.*

*(Inter-generational trio with grandmother, Rupandehi, Nepal).*

On the other hand, there was also a sense that new freedoms have created other vulnerabilities for girls and that there is evidence of a backlash, with many men viewing these new freedoms as a threat. This backlash can be seen in men turning even more to rigid patriarchal and religious prescriptions for the control of women and this, in turn, fuels IPV. Similarly, on the one hand, there is a slow acceptance in all three countries of the relatively new phenomenon of boyfriends and girlfriends amongst certain circles. On the other hand, while this phenomenon may signal increasing tolerance and perhaps a loosening of more conservative and stringent gender norms, boyfriends continue to control their girlfriends and may also subject them to IPV. This violence often goes unreported because, despite the changes in society, dating relationships are not yet fully accepted. In Bangladesh, for example, key informants noted that while university students are open about having girlfriends and boyfriends (seen as a sign of their modernity), the boys are still in charge, often restricting the movements of their girlfriends and their interactions with other boys, and sometimes using physical violence to reinforce their control.

In all three countries, social media plays a mixed role in shaping attitudes and practices around IPV. While social media was seen as an important way to raise awareness around gender equality, it was also seen as a danger to women's morality and a challenge to traditional gender norms (see Box 5).

### **Box 5: Online spaces provide new avenues for IPV and gender backlash**

Study respondents reported that one new space facilitated by modern urban life is the virtual world, where the risks for girls and young women are all too real. According to a senior researcher from BRAC in Bangladesh, *'the use of technology such as mobiles has increased violence by increasing interactions between girls and boys.'* These interactions are dangerous, s/he added because *'most boys and girls have not learnt yet how to behave with one another and technology has come too fast.'* In some cases girls pose for what they believe to be private pictures and videos, only to discover that they have been shared online. *'There is a lack of law for guaranteeing consent'*, explained one key informant from the Community Lead Service (CLS) [key informant interview 38]. Girls consent to photos, *'but not necessarily to share them on the public domain.'* In other cases, the contact facilitated by mobile phones leads to *'rape cases by boyfriends.'*

In Pakistan, key informants and respondent women suggested that access to technology was giving young boys easy access to pornography, leading to *'sexual frustration.'* Boys agreed, with young respondents from Lyari admitting to watching porn on their phones and saying that doing so encouraged dating relationships.

Recognising this new and growing threat, in early 2016 Bangladesh hosted its first expert consultation on cyber-violence against women and girls (VAWG). This involved practitioners from the fields of law, media, technology and women's rights (BLAST, 2016). Participants highlighted issues around social stigma for victims of online violence (e.g. how women are called 'bad women'), but also how 'consent' is understood by technology users.

Key informants noted that while new technologies are opening virtual spaces for VAWG, they can also prevent and respond to it. In Bangladesh, for example, many adolescents use their mobiles to listen to the radio, including programming from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

There is also some evidence that technology is helping to address VAWG in Nepal and Pakistan. A key informant from Nepal explained: *'the media nowadays with its ever broadening coverage is the major source of information [about VAWG] and has helped generate awareness even in our village.'* Male respondents in Pakistan grudgingly added that Indian soap operas were empowering women and teaching them to 'free'. One younger man said: *'In the beginning, men used to order their wife. But now, a woman orders her husband. Our women have seen those Indian dramas and...they see their dresses and shoes and wish to wear them so in this way our women are getting free now'* (Interview with 21-year-old from Deh Chohar, Nepal).



A man uses his phone in Dhaka, Bangladesh. © Abir Abdullah/ADB (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

# 3. Policy, programming and informal responses

## 3.1. Policy and legal frameworks

Policy and legal frameworks related to GBV vary considerably across our three study countries, but IPV is poorly reflected in every case. Bangladesh and Nepal have, however, enacted a number of conventions and laws and policies on violence against women. The policy and legal landscape related to IPV is more patchy in Pakistan, with some states adopting more forward-looking approaches than others. Existing legislation in all three countries often provides cursory remedies, at best, and suffers from gaps that result in poor implementation. In particular, legislative frameworks pay inadequate attention to the underlying social norms and values that drive GBV and IPV. Key informants also noted that violence happens everywhere,

and should, therefore be addressed in policies across a whole range of sectors.

## 3.2. Programming and services

### 3.2.1. Survivor services

The provision of medical, legal and psychosocial services is at the forefront of the response to GBV and IPV in all three countries to meet the needs of women and girls who have been victimised, with NGOs and governments heavily involved in such services. In Bangladesh, one key initiative is the Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women (see Box 6), which aims to strengthen

#### **Box 6: The Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women in Bangladesh: a promising approach**

The Multi-Sectoral Programme (MSP) on Violence Against Women (VAW) is implemented jointly by the Governments of Bangladesh and Denmark and aims to develop a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach to gender-based violence (GBV). Launched in 2000 and led by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), the programme focuses on the following:

- Improving and consolidating integrated services related to VAW
- Increasing public and institutional awareness of VAW and related public services
- Developing the institutional capacities of the MoWCA and key government agencies to improve inter-ministerial coordination and action in relation to VAW
- Achieving targeted legal and procedural reform to enhance the prevention and redress of VAW cases
- Working to tackle trafficking, which is common in border areas, with flows towards India, Nepal and China through Myanmar
- Preventing child marriage.

The MSP is staffed by more than 700 people and includes helplines, 20 regional trauma centres, 30 One

Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs) and Violence Prevention Committees.

The helplines are staffed by personnel trained to university level, most of whom are women. Their aims is to help women who are experiencing violence contact local police and women's representatives. There were 90,000 calls in 2016 alone. The helplines have been invaluable, explained one key informant, helping women to understand their rights and access the support and services they need.

The One Stop Crisis Centres (OCC) were established in 2009, and have supported a total of 8,653 women and children to date ([www.mowca.gov.bd/](http://www.mowca.gov.bd/)). Given their success, there are plans to establish OCCs in 40 districts and 20 Upazilas. All OCC employees are authorised to report cases to the local police station, which is then required to designate an officer in charge immediately. That office is responsible for ensuring that medical evidence is collected within 24 hours of an assault. OCC employees then help survivors gather the required paperwork and keep the process moving in a timely fashion. In more rural communities, this role is often filled by BRAC workers who help survivors report and prosecute their attackers by accompanying them to file reports and providing them with stipends to cover the costs of transportation.

the integration of GBV prevention and response services, though further evaluation of these kinds of programmes are necessary given their unclear impacts in other countries (personal communication). In all three countries, shelter homes and counselling telephone hotlines (especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan) are run by both government and NGOs and are an important part of the response.

### 3.2.2. Protection services

Informal support networks often provide vital protection for women, especially networks of her own family and her neighbours. Our findings suggested, however, that family reactions could be mixed. A range of justice-system responses also exist and include informal processes of arbitration at the village level (such as *shalish* in Bangladesh and *jammats*<sup>5</sup> in Pakistan<sup>6</sup>). However, going to these informal courts may not be a viable option as such courts may rule that the woman should remain with an abusive husband – in the name of protecting his family’s social status. The steps taken after such informal responses varied markedly in each country.

Under-reporting of IPV to the police and formal justice system is a major challenge in all three countries as a result of entrenched beliefs that IPV is a ‘private’ matter. As a result, the overwhelming consensus across these countries was that formal services are not accessed until women’s lives are at risk. An equally challenging barrier in the formal response system was a perceived dearth of accountability and transparency, with rampant corruption and police officers all too often refusing to open a case unless they are paid to do so. While governments should, in principle, bear the cost of all legal expenses in cases of VAWG, financial barriers prevent some women, especially the poorest in rural areas, from accessing formal justice. Another major impediment to accessing services in all countries was seen as lack of awareness of the services available, with the onus on survivors to find and reach out to services. Poor treatment received by women at the police stations was also cited as a reason for women hesitating to seek formal justice (see also Box 7 for a survivor’s story).

*‘There is a lack of sensitivity in the police service, medical-legal staff, and the staff working at the shelter. A lot of women have told us that the women in the police service are the most verbally abusive. The in-charge of the shelter home has said to a woman that you have had a second marriage, so now we can’t do anything for you except tell you to do a third marriage or die in the current marriage.’*

*(Interview with key informant, aged 14, in Pakistan)*

### Box 7: A survivor’s story from Nepal

Sabin, who comes from a poor family, was married to a wealthy man from Kapilvastu, Western Nepal. He met her at a cousin’s wedding and pursued her relentlessly until she agreed to marry him. His parents, however, were very unhappy with the marriage and began to taunt Sabin for her poor background as soon as she moved into her husband’s home. At first, he supported her, but once she gave birth to their first child, he abandoned her at her parents’ house and began chasing other women. Religious leaders intervened and forced him to take her back, which made him very angry. He began denying her food, beating her and raping her. When she became pregnant again, he abandoned her at her parents’ house for a second time. Sabin went back to him yet again, and the abuse continued. After eight years, the village religious committee agreed that she had tolerated the abuse long enough and allowed her to file for divorce. Her husband, however, refused to hand over the paperwork she needed to finalise the divorce (her citizenship and marriage certificates and her children’s birth certificates), leading the Chief District Officer to imprison him to force his hand. In the end, Sabin’s divorce went through and her husband is now engaged to be married to another woman.

*Source: Fieldwork, 2016*

*‘Sometimes the officials have a bias attitude towards women who are filing complaints against their husbands. They themselves have issues related to IPV in their personal lives or are not very satisfied with the present laws or practices on gender equitable justice. In such case when decisions are to be made by them based on their personal judgement, hearing of the cases gets affected negatively.’*

*(Interview with key informant, male government official, Rupandehi, Nepal)*

### 3.2.3. Prevention services

A lack of capacity to address VAWG was noted in all three countries, with agencies and departments under-staffed, with poorly trained staff, and facing poor coordination and limited leadership. The invisibility of women in debates and dialogues was also highlighted. Given limited government capacities around prevention, donor organisations, including UN agencies and NGOs, are heavily engaged in raising awareness about VAWG, aiming to ensure not only that the public understands what VAWG

5 ‘Group of people’ in Urdu

6 Informal adjudication of petty disputes (both civil and criminal) by local leaders.



Women's ward of the hospital in Gazipur, Bangladesh © Fiona Samuels/ODI 2016

entails, but also to help women and girls understand their rights and how to claim them. In Bangladesh, efforts were strong and relatively widespread, but in Pakistan the scope of such programmes was limited and large-scale change was hindered by the small number of people reached by existing programmes.

One key way in which organisations raise awareness about VAWG is facilitating dialogue at the household and community levels. Using techniques such as television

and radio programmes, street theatre and community discussions, NGOs work with a wide range of stakeholders to make sure that girls and women realise that they do not have to tolerate abuse and that boys and men come to understand what type of behaviour constitutes abuse. Efforts are also underway to improve the capacity of local police departments, providing gender-awareness training to officers and supporting the recruitment of more female officers (see Box 8 for a story from a male perspective).

### **Box 8: You do not have to be loud and strong to be a man**

Rohan is a well-educated, 27-year-old married father of two living in Hyderabad, Pakistan. Born in a conservative village, his own attitudes towards rights, masculinity and violence were conservative until he joined a youth group seven years ago. Now he is a vocal opponent of forced marriage and intervenes to stop violence in his community.

Rohan grew up in a large family that never had quite enough money to go around, even though his father was a police officer. There were some years when Rohan did not have enough money for a school uniform, and was beaten by his teachers for coming to school in street clothes. By the time he was 10 he was helping to support his family by selling samosas after school. Despite his family's poverty, however, Rohan remembers his childhood fondly because *'the environment at our home was good.'* His father may have been emotionally distant, and a strict disciplinarian, but: *'he would scold, not hit.'*

Rohan's first awareness of gender justice came in mid-adolescence, when he watched his father forcibly marry off his older sister – a sister he looked up to as his role model during childhood. His sister did not agree to the marriage, *'even my mother didn't agree,'* he explained. *'So I argued with my father to not let her get married to him. Her life would change for the worse.'* In the end, however, his sister married because: *'my father and uncle had taken the decision.'*

Rohan's entire family left their village and moved to Hyderabad around the time Rohan finished secondary school. Soon after, he was invited by a friend to join

a NGO that *'works for the betterment of the people'*. During training he was introduced to the idea of rights and shown videos about violence against women.

Participating in the youth group, Rohan explained, *'has affected me immensely'*. He no longer berates his wife when her cooking is bad, as *'everyone has to eat it, including her'*. He stops men who are speaking disrespectfully to women, explaining – when they ask him why he is interfering – *'I am an active citizen here and this woman is like my sister'*. Recognising that *'we normally adapt and adopt what we see around us'*, Rohan takes his wife and his mother when he goes shopping, so that his neighbours will see that times are changing and women no longer have to stay inside the home.

Rohan's conception of what it means to be a man has also changed. While he has never believed that men must exert power and demonstrate strength through violence against women, he was shaken when his group carried out research last year and discovered that women believed: *'until our husbands hit us, we don't even know whether they are our rightful husbands'*. Now he is a vocal opponent of the idea that a man must be *'loud and strong to be manly'*.

Rohan's youngest sister was just engaged to be married. This time Rohan won the argument with his father. *'If my sister disagrees, then we will cancel it. It is her right and I gave it to her.'*

*Source: In-depth interview with male community activist, Hyderabad, Pakistan.*

# 4. Conclusions and recommendations

Our findings show that the multi-dimensional definition of IPV set out by the World Health Organization (WHO) resonates with the patterning of IPV in these three contexts, with economic violence an addition of critical importance. Not surprisingly, verbal and psychological forms of violence are rarely discussed or reported but our primary research findings suggest that they form a fundamental part of the IPV experienced by women.

Our findings also show, however, the need to include definitions of IPV that are culturally resonant and context-specific in any umbrella conceptualisation of IPV in the region. For example, dowry-related violence, acid throwing, *fatwa* violence and polygamy-related violence are all significant dimensions of IPV experiences in our study countries.

From the perspective of many men and boys in our sample, some form of violence in relationships with intimate partners – wives and girlfriends – is acceptable and can be justified by the need to control girls and women and correct their behaviour to ensure compliance with conservative gender norms. This is not to say that attitudes of men and boys are not changing, but the pace and degree of change is uneven, with men often claiming that they have ‘modern’ and ‘egalitarian’ attitudes but, when questioned more closely revealing perceptions of ideal women, wives and girlfriends as docile and submissive. The study also revealed mixed findings around the interplay between age and attitudes towards IPV, with adolescent and recently married young men exhibiting deeply conservative norms while middle-aged men were more accepting of women as potentially equal partners. There was also a view, however, that it is difficult to change entrenched gender norms when men are ‘*too old*’.

In terms of the multi-level influences that shape IPV, the key message from our cross-country findings was that the different levels are highly inter-related. At the individual level, the key influences included education (or lack thereof), substance abuse, and being exposed to violence within the household or community in some form either as a child or adult. At the household level, stresses in relationships with in-laws are key triggers of IPV, as is the low economic status of a household. Finally, the key drivers of IPV at the community level include a range of gender norms related to child, early and arranged marriages, the

acceptance of violence by both men and women, dowry practices and mobility restrictions. While there is some evidence of positive change resulting from access to new technologies, there is also evidence of a backlash, especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan, where conservative religious forces, among others, are championing entrenched patriarchal and often violent social norms.

Institutions at all levels – macro, meso and micro – and whether formal and informal – play a vital role in both promoting and stalling progress on eradicating IPV. At the micro-level, these institutions include extended family and tribal groupings, informal courts and arbitration systems as well as the women’s GBV monitoring groups, community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs that are often the first port of call for survivors. The interface with religious leaders at community level is also important, although our findings suggest that they often serve as a conservative force and that women may not turn to them. This is the case especially in the context of a growing backlash against women and girls’ empowerment.

Meso-level institutions also emerged as key mediators of IPV responses. These include schools, health clinics, police stations, formal legal structures (including legal aid), and sub-national representatives of political parties. At the macro-level, given the range of fragilities faced in these contexts, we see considerable diversity in the patterning of institutional responses to IPV and support for broader women’s rights agendas.

The programming infrastructure to respond to IPV is more robust in Bangladesh and Nepal than in Pakistan where responses are highly fragmented, but engagement with men and boys by existing programmes is limited in all three countries. Programme coverage is also very limited; programmes tend to be of limited duration and they are neither integrated nor sufficiently intense to make a significant difference to the lives of women and girls.

Informed by these overarching findings, Table 1 identifies key recommendations and opportunities for changes in policy and practice to address IPV. Recognising that IPV, far from being ‘private’, is everybody’s business, the table sets out responsibilities that span all levels in the ecological framework, from regional bodies to national governments, and from ministries to communities.

**Table 1: Key recommendations and opportunities to address IPV through policy and practice**

Recommendation	Operationalisation	Who	Opportunities	Challenges
<b>Promote definitions of IPV that have cultural resonance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Build on standardised measurements for IPV and identify agreed indicators that have cultural resonance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Academics, educationalists</li> <li>Regional bodies – South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), WHO Regional Office, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Securing a place at the table at regional meetings</li> <li>Promoting opportunities for dialogue between academics, civil society and educationalists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring that the definition adequately captures variations within countries on IPV attitudes and behaviours</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure programming responds to regional patterning of IPV</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in awareness-raising not only on IPV but also on the relevant laws and policies that exist on GBV, inheritance, dowry, divorce etc., and the services available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government, media, NGOs/ CBOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use interactive approaches, such as community theatre, working through schools, community dialogues, safe spaces for women and girls to discuss these issues, and work with male role models</li> <li>Use media/social media to reinforce this messaging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risk of fragmented messaging that fails to build on or complement different messages from different sectors and levels</li> </ul>
<b>Engage with men and boys to better tailor programme interventions, while maintaining a strong gender and rights focus that is inclusive of women and girls</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify entry points where different groups of men and boys are most likely to be receptive to messaging, including religious institutions (e.g. mosques and churches), schools, youth groups, cafes, sports events and locations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All actors, including communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Given that social norms become more rigidly enforced and personally salient in adolescence, it is critical to reach boys as early as possible, ideally when they are pre-adolescent or very young adolescents, and inside the family</li> <li>Work through educational establishments and youth clubs to reach adolescent boys and young men, including through influencing curricula development</li> <li>Work with role models of positive and progressive masculinities, including celebrities or progressive religious leaders</li> <li>Invest in pilots to test different approaches</li> <li>Promote cost-cutting learning on promising models of engaging men and boys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risk of backlash by boys and men, especially if such measures are not carried out in a way that is culturally resonant</li> </ul>
<b>Ensure that programming approaches respond to the multi-level influences of IPV</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure the promotion of an inter-sectoral and multi-level approach through a national coordinating agency or inter-agency working group</li> <li>Pay attention not only to programming that addresses IPV specifically, but also to opportunities to mainstream IPV prevention through programming related to e.g. women's health, livelihoods/ economic empowerment, food security, infrastructure and transport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministry of Women or Justice as possible champions</li> <li>Support from donors and (I)NGOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Given the diverse programming entry-points, there are opportunities to work with the following target groups: men and women as couples, in-laws, community and religious leaders, media leaders (given that the media often reinforce discriminatory attitudes), police and the health sector at different levels, and employers</li> <li>Programming entry points can also include programmes to build women's skills, credit and savings schemes, programmes on substance abuse and employment opportunities for men and women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Risk of backlash, especially from religious leaders and conservative political parties</li> <li>Limited and short-term funding cycles</li> <li>Weak institutional enforcement mechanisms</li> </ul>
<b>Map and engage strategically with key institutions at different levels, especially in an effort to counter backlash against women and girls' empowerment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve the availability of information and the skills and knowledge of service providers to prevent, screen for and respond including making referrals re. IPV within and across the justice, legal, protection, health and education sectors).</li> <li>Promote legal reforms to criminalise IPV behaviours (e.g. marital rape), and for the prosecution and sentencing of IPV perpetrators.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government, NGOs and donors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Harness existing local structures, including formal and informal justice systems</li> <li>Develop cross-country learning around promising practices through, for example, SAARC, with support from donors as needed</li> <li>Enhance reporting of IPV to test and strengthen justice and police systems</li> <li>Enhance referral systems across sectors on IPV</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited resourcing and lack of gender budget monitoring</li> <li>Lack of incentives, given limited funding and institutional prestige related to GBV/IPV issues</li> <li>Lack of demand, given the often hidden nature of IPV and the limited awareness of existing services</li> <li>Problem of legal loopholes and elite capture, which undermine reporting, prosecution and transparency /accountability</li> </ul>
<b>Invest in, strengthen and improve programming, including monitoring, evaluation and lesson-learning related to programming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure greater investment in primary and secondary prevention initiatives.</li> <li>Provide greater investment for prevention and treatment services to ensure adequate intensity and duration of programming.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government</li> <li>NGOs</li> <li>Donors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invest in monitoring and evaluation of existing programming to inform new and scalable programming approaches</li> <li>Rigorous monitoring will also improve the quality of services as well as transparency and accountability</li> <li>It is critical to monitor and evaluate implementation of the law at a national and sub-national level</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender- and social-norm change are often slow and non-linear processes and funding cycles are too short to allow for the necessary continuity</li> </ul>
<b>Strengthen data collection and analysis that involves both men and women, boys and girls from diverse geographical, ethnic etc. groups with regard to IPV practices</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As part of this work, invest in strengthening culturally appropriate tools and scales to measure forms of economic and emotional violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Researchers in the region</li> <li>Donors that support research</li> <li>UN agencies that are responsible for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in relation to GBV reduction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Growing global and regional attention to issues of IPV and recognition of lack of data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited research funding</li> </ul>

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**Overseas Development Institute**  
203 Blackfriars Road  
London SE1 8NJ  
Tel +44 (0) 20 7922 0300  
Fax +44 (0) 20 7922 0399

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