



Research Article

Regional Delineation of Violence Exposure Among Women and Children in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Bangladesh ranks fourth in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and records higher rates of child marriage and teenage pregnancy compared to other South Asian countries. Many researchers have examined violence against women. However, only a limited number have systematically analyzed its regional distribution and underlying contextual factors. This study aims to analyze the regional distribution of exposure to violence among women and children across 64 districts of Bangladesh. A Composite Weighted Index was developed using five key indicators: experience of physical assault in childhood, child labor rates, prevalence of polygyny, women's perception of safety, and attitudes toward domestic violence. Data were sourced primarily from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Report of 2019 and other national databases. The indicators were normalized, weighted utilizing the Composite Weighted Index Method. Data were then analyzed in SPSS and the GIS tools to show the spatial vulnerability patterns. The findings showed noticeable regional variations. The greatest risk of violence is observed in the southwestern coastal districts like Barguna, Bagerhat, and Khulna. In these communities, many women face physical abuse, do not feel safe in their surroundings, and domestic violence is socially tolerated. This risk is compounded by poverty, early marriage, disaster vulnerability, and patriarchal social structures. While major cities like Dhaka, Chattogram, and Rangpur showed moderate vulnerability with different socio-economic factors, these cities still face major challenges in reducing violence. This study emphasizes the need for geographically targeted policies and distribution of resources to address the versatile nature of violence, as the exposure varies from region to region based on unique local socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

Keywords

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), Composite Weighted Index, Regional Delineation, Social Inequality.

1. Introduction

Violence against women and children remains a priority international issue, with significant social, economic, and health impacts. The international cost of violence against women is approximately 3.7% of gross domestic product (GDP), which is more than the cost of education in most countries (World Bank, 2023). Global statistics show that one out of three women suffers physical or sexual violence during their lifetime (World Health Organization, 2021). UNICEF recognizes that about one in eight girls and women has been sexually abused before the age of 18, noting the prevalence of gender-based violence (UNICEF, 2025). In Bangladesh, violence against women and children reflects this worldwide issue, which is further complicated by socio-cultural forces that often make it challenging for victims to access help. Perpetrators are usually known to victims, such as people they trust at home and in schools, which prevents them from

seeking justice (UNICEF, 2025). Although violence is widespread in Bangladesh, it is largely underreported. In about 72.7% of cases, victims never speak out about their ordeal; only 1.1% report the incidents to the police, and 2.1% to the local leaders (BBS, 2015).

Reasons for non-reporting include beliefs that reporting is unnecessary (39.3%), protecting family honor 15.6%, and fear of the perpetrator 12.0%. Also, while 41.7% of women were injured while experiencing physical or sexual violence, only 28.5% got medical attention, suggesting gaps in healthcare access and support systems for victims (BBS, 2015). National-level surveys reveal that 72.6% of all married women in Bangladesh have experienced at least one form of violence, physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or controlling behavior by their husbands at some point in their lives (USAID, 2020). While the above data are significant at the national level, they shape notable regional variations that may exist within the country's diverse geographical and socio-economic landscape.

Understanding regional variation in exposure to violence is essential to planning effective and efficient, context-specific interventions and policies. However, a lot of the research depends on aggregate national data, with minimal attention paid to spatial variation or regional differences in exposure to violence. Such gaps disrupt policymakers' and practitioners' ability to target resources and respond to localized risks effectively.

This study addresses the gap by examining the spatial pattern of exposure to violence for children and women in Bangladesh. Employing spatial analysis and statistical techniques, the research aims to identify areas with high concentrations of violence, explore regional variations, and identify socio-economic determinants of the differentials. The findings are designed to inform targeted strategies for reducing violence and strengthening support services for vulnerable populations in parts of Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

Violence against women and children is described as the intentional application of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another, or others, or against a group or community that either causes or is likely to cause injury, death, psychological harm, poor development, or deprivation (WHO, 2014). Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence directed toward individuals due to their gender or sex, often with unequal power relationships being the motivation (Collins, 2014). Violence includes forms beyond Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), such as trafficking, child marriage, humiliating punishment, and risky migration (Save the Children, 2015).

Numerous theoretical models have been constructed to account for the causes and consequences. Ecological models are most frequently applied to describe violence as the result of interactions between individual, relational, community, and societal levels (HEISE, 1998). At the community and societal levels, gender inequality, poverty, and cultural norms play significant roles in shaping the likelihood of violence. The study's findings align with this model, particularly in the Khulna and Barisal divisions, where gender inequality remains pervasive. UN Women's work in these areas highlights how gender norms continue to limit the potential of women and girls, exacerbating their vulnerability to violence. Progress has been made, but these deeply rooted norms still hold back women's empowerment and contribute to violence. Women in these regions face restricted access to education, economic opportunities, and decision-making power, which increases their vulnerability to gender-based violence (GBV) and child marriage (Dhaka tribune, 2023).

Feminist theory focuses on the role of patriarchal social structures and gender inequality as causes of violence. Feminist theory posits that violence, especially against women, comes from gender inequalities and male dominance. It explains that society often sees men as more powerful, which makes it easier for them to control or hurt women (Besemer, 2017). In regions with higher violence, particularly in the south-west, traditional ideas of male authority and female submission are deeply rooted, which increases violence both in the home and in society. This is evident in childhood abuse, where violence is learned early, and in child labor, which exacerbates economic pressures on women and children. Polygyny reflects male dominance, and women's perception of safety is often low due to a lack of respect and protection. Lastly, attitudes toward domestic violence in these areas often show cultural approval of male control, further perpetuating the cycle of violence.

Social learning theory explains how children exposed to violence in the family may adopt similar violent behaviors as adults (Besemer, 2017). Psychodynamic theories advocate personality traits like impulsiveness and aggression as the causes of violence. To capture the spirit of violence, particularly in diverse socio-political environments such as Bangladesh, contemporary holistic approaches that integrate socio-cultural, economic, and spatial factors have been advocated

(Rahman, 2019). To capture the spirit of violence, particularly in diverse socio-political environments such as Bangladesh, contemporary holistic approaches that integrate socio-cultural, economic, and spatial factors have been advocated (Rahman, 2019). By embedding these contextual factors into the CWI, the index measures not only the prevalence of violence but also the societal, cultural, and economic conditions contributing to regional vulnerabilities.

National surveys record frighteningly high levels of intimate partner violence (IPV), with about 50% of married women having encountered physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (BBS, 2015). Emotional, economic, and controlling behaviors also form prevalent types of IPV. Victims of IPV and childhood abuse often endure lasting psychological impacts, including conditions like depression, anxiety, and trauma-related disorders, which can drive the cycle of family violence. Research has established many risk factors at the individual, household, and community levels (Goldberg, 2023).

Both lower education for women and men is associated with a higher risk of IPV, though working women can also face more violence due to perceived threats to male authority (Bhalotra et al., 2020). Drug addiction, especially substance abuse, increases violent behavior and attitudes in men (Rahman, 2019). Family poverty and marital conflict were found to be important drivers, often linked to dowry-related issues and increased family dynamics, such as in-law interference (Ahmed & Kashem, 2015). At the community level, gender-inequitable social norms that condone male authority and violence as disciplining tools facilitate IPV. Many community members, including adolescent boys, hold gender-inequitable attitudes that legitimize wife-beating for misbehavior or perceived disobedience (Nishan et al., 2025). These social norms are upheld by religious and cultural ideologies that valorize male superiority and female inferiority.

Despite extensive documentation of the prevalence and risk factors of IPV, gaps still exist in the spatial representation of exposure to violence across different regions of Bangladesh. Most national-level data hide local variations, which reduces the ability to implement context-specific interventions (Rahman, 2019). In addition, children's exposure to violence and its developmental effects receives little attention in mainstream research, often because of parents' involvement (Washington, 2002). Underreporting is an overall issue. Cultural stigma, fear of revenge, and respect for the family honor discourage victims from seeking help (Naved et al., 2017). Evidence shows that the majority of survivors fail to report violence, and few use the formal support system (Sultana et al., 2024). All these reasons create gaps in statistics and disrupt useful policy-making. Reporting and access to protection services are still hampered by stigma, threats of reprisals, and family pressure. The response of the justice system to most cases is inadequate, resulting in survivors failing to obtain legal remedies and protection (Naved et al., 2017). Although Bangladesh has enacted numerous laws and policies against domestic violence, their effectiveness is diminishing due to weak enforcement and societal resistance (Rahman, 2019).

While national surveys provide essential information, exposure to violence is not spread evenly. Poverty, education, and access to services vary regionally and influence exposure to violence. However, there is limited systematic regional analysis available. Very few geospatial analyses are used to map violence or analyze regional clusters, making targeted interventions challenging.

Table 1: Summary of Research Gaps in Literature Review

Research Gap	Description	Sources
Lack of Regional Analysis	Most studies report national violence rates, but few examine regional differences or hotspots.	(BBS, 2015; Save the Children, 2015)
Underreporting and Non-Disclosure Issues	High stigma, fear, and social pressure result in many cases going unreported, leading to an underestimated prevalence	(Naved et al., 2017; Sultana et al., 2024)
Limited Exploration of Socioeconomic and Cultural Factors	Existing studies often examine economic and socio-cultural determinants separately, overlooking how their interaction shapes violence risk and survivor experiences.	(Naved et al., 2017)
Limited focus on violence against children	Research primarily focuses on women; children's exposure, especially outside the household, is under examined.	(BBS, 2015; Save the Children, 2015)
Scarcity of Data on Healthcare and Support Access	Evidence shows survivors' uneven access to medical and psychosocial support, especially in rural and marginalized communities.	(Save the Children, 2015)

(Source: Author's Preparation, 2025)

3. Methodology

The research formulates a Composite Weighted Index to measure the exposure of Bangladesh's 64 districts to violence against women and children. In consideration of the multidimensionality of exposure to violence, five factors were selected based on relevance and data availability. The factors capture the socio-economic, infrastructural, and demographic factors influencing the risk and prevalence of violence.

3.1. Factor Selection

Five factors are selected to capture the nature of violence exposure, based on their relevance and availability in national datasets.

1. *Experience Physical Punishment*: Percentage of children between 1-14 years who have faced any physical punishment and/or psychological aggression by caretakers. The indicator captures the prevalence of violence during early life, and it is further needed to know because overall vulnerability to violence in a district depends on it (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2019).
2. *Child Labour*: Percentage of children aged 5–17 years who participated in formal or informal employment. Child labour is an indicator of economic poverty and lack of access to schooling, both of which are correlates of higher exposure to exploitation and abuse (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2019).
3. *Polygyny*: Percentage of women aged 15-49 years residing in a polygynous union. Polygyny has also been attributed to gender inequality and greater levels of domestic power imbalances, factors that increase the likelihood of violence against women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2019).
4. *Women's Perception of Safety*: Percentage of women aged between 15-49 years who say they feel safe walking alone at night in their neighborhood. This measure detects the personal perception of security by women in public spaces, the perceived safety in communities, and the occurrence of gender-based violence (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2019).
5. *Attitude Towards Domestic Violence*: Percentage of women aged between 15–49 years who believe that a husband can beat or hit his wife if she goes out without telling him, does not look after children, disagrees with him, does not want sex with him, burns food, etc. It measures social acceptance towards domestic violence and cultural norms of its perpetration (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics & UNICEF, 2019).

3.2. Data Collection

Factor data for 64 districts were obtained from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) Report, 2019. Besides secondary sources, government reports, national surveys other relevant organizations were used. The latest and most reliable datasets available were utilized in the research to maintain the accuracy.

3.3. Weight Calculation and Composite Index Construction

To effectively measure the relative weights of each factor, the research employs a Composite Weighted Index technique. The measurement data of each factor were first logarithmically transformed to normalize differences in measurement scales and distributions. The weight for each factor (W_n) was calculated as the ratio of the mean to the standard deviation of the log-transformed data for that factor.

$$W_n = \frac{\text{Mean of } \log_{10} X_n}{\text{Standard Deviation of } \log_{10} X_n} \dots\dots\dots (i)$$

Here,

$n = 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.$

$X_n = X_n$ = Individual Factor Data

W_n = Weight of Individual Factor

Table 2. presents the calculated weights for each selected factor based on the normalized log-transformed data, highlighting their relative contribution to the composite vulnerability index.

Table 2: Composite Weight Calculation for Selected Factors

Factor	Experience Physical Assault	Child Labor	Polygyny	Women's Percep- tion of Safety	Attitudes To- wards Domestic Violence
W_n	W_1	W_2	W_3	W_4	W_5
Value	68.69697074	3.523477408	1.832253569	4.156811737	5.365895646

(Source: Author's Preparation, 2025)

The composite weighted index for each district was then computed by aggregating the weighted log-transformed factors (Glasson, 1984).

$$\text{Composite Weight, } W = \frac{\sum_{n=1}^5 W * \text{Log}_{10} X_n}{\sum_{n=1}^5 W_n} \dots\dots\dots (2)$$

3.4. Selection of Class Interval

Three different methods were employed to calculate the class interval, assuming a preference for five classes.

i. Equal Interval Method

In the equal class interval method, the class interval has been determined by following (3)

$$\text{Class interval} = \frac{\text{Highest value} - \text{Lowest value}}{\text{Class Number}} \dots\dots\dots (3) \quad (\text{Gupta, 2020})$$

From the equation;

Highest value = 2.043059773

Lowest value = 1.859601605

Preferred class number = 5

Class interval = 0.037

ii. Mean Standard Deviation Method

The mean and standard deviation of the composite score is determined utilizing the mean standard deviation method. The principle of this method is to calculate,

Mean ± 1 Standard Deviation

Mean ± 2 Standard Deviation

Mean ± 3 Standard Deviation

iii. Arithmetic Method

This method is performed using the following equation (4)

$$A + X + 2X + \dots\dots\dots + NX = B \dots\dots\dots (4) \quad (\text{Gupta, 2020})$$

Here,

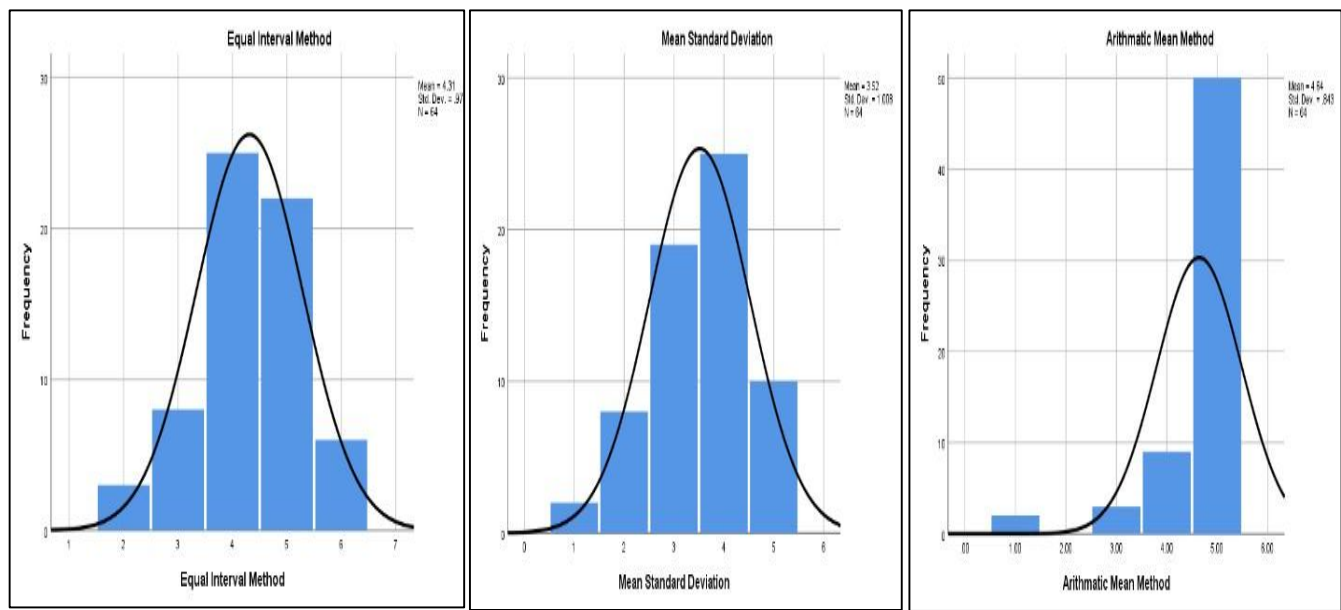
A= Lowest Value

B= Highest Value

N= Number of Class= 5

$$X = \frac{B - A}{15} = 0.01223$$

Figure 1: Histograms of Equal Class Interval, Standard Deviation Method, and Arithmetic Method



(Source: Author’s Preparation, 2025)

The principle is to calculate the lowest cut points of each class. The cut points are then included in SPSS software to generate frequency, mean, median, mode, skewness, kurtosis, and finally a histogram. Figure 1 shows histograms of Normal Distribution in Equal Class Interval Method, Arithmetic Method, and Mean Standard Deviation Method, respectively. The selection of the equal class interval method was guided by the skewness value, with preference given to values close to zero.

Table 3: Comparison of Class Interval Methods Based on Skewness and Kurtosis

Method	Equal Class Inter- val	Mean Standard Deviation	Arithmetic
Skewness	-0.354	-0.428	-3.007
Kurtosis	0.022	-0.210	9.852

(Source: Author’s Preparation, 2025)

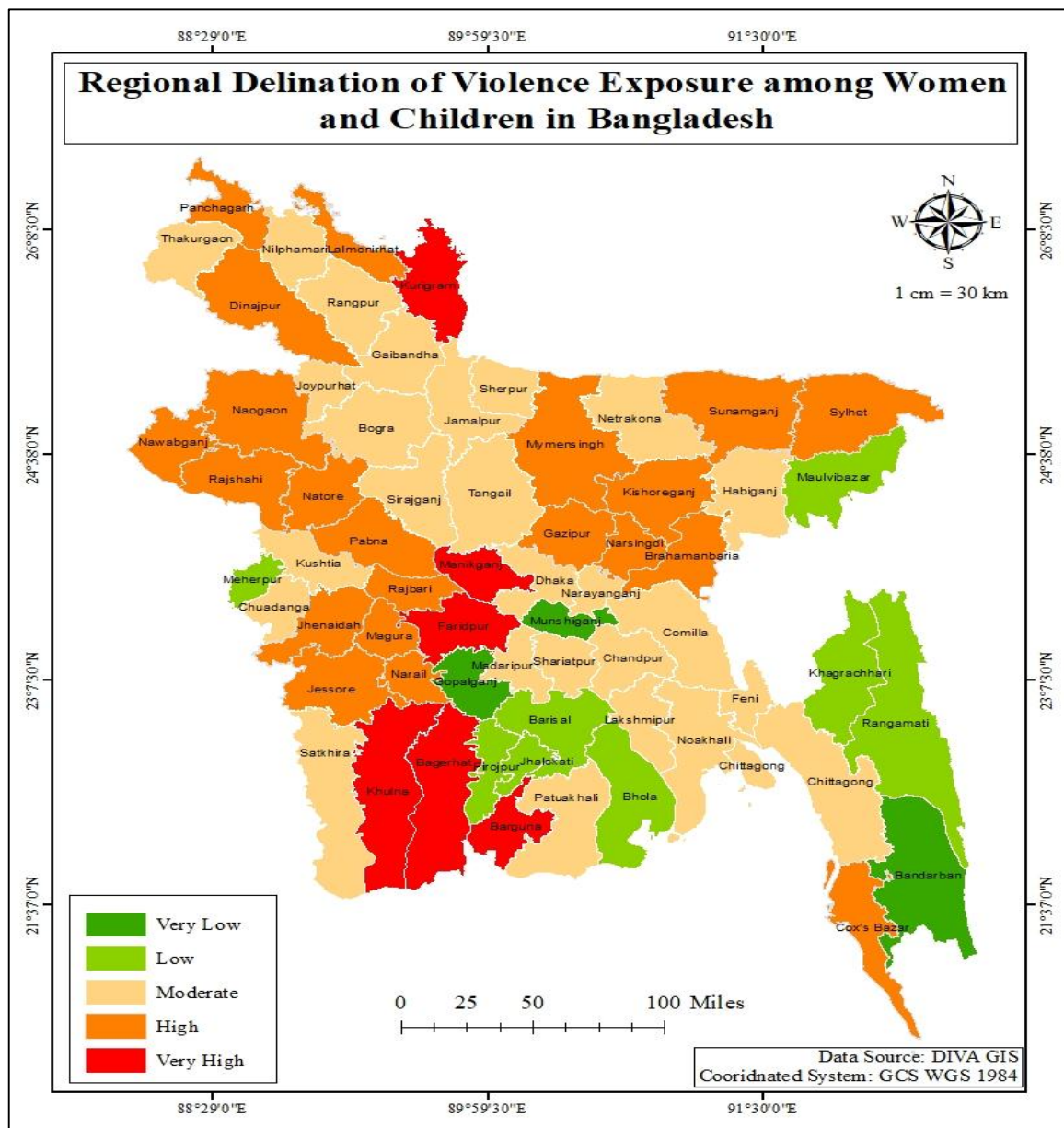
A near-zero skewness value indicates that the data are normally distributed. Among the three methods that were experimented with, the equal class interval method had a skewness of -0.354, which was closest to zero. Therefore, this approach is ideal for generating choropleth maps.

4. Results & Discussions

4.1. Regional Delineation of Violence Exposure

The spatial distribution of violence exposure among women and children across districts is illustrated in the choropleth map below. The map categorizes districts into vulnerability levels very low, low, moderate, high, and very high, based on a composite weighted index derived from five key indicators: physical punishment, polygyny rate, feelings of safety, and attitudes towards violence.

As depicted in the map, distinct regional clusters emerge, particularly highlighting southwestern districts with notably high levels of vulnerability. Conversely, eastern and southeastern districts mostly fall into the lower vulnerability categories.

Figure 2: Regional Delineation of Violence Exposure Among Women and Children in Bangladesh

(Source: Author's Preparation, 2025)

4.2. Summary of Classification from the Map

Districts such as Bagerhat, Barguna, Khulna, Manikganj, and Faridpur fall into the very high violence exposure category based on the composite weighted index. The analysis revealed that the five factors of exposure to violence for women and children among districts show substantial variation in vulnerability levels, which were taken for factor analysis to constitute the composite index. Among the five factors, the insight of four factors reveals that physical punishment remains high in most districts, with rates above 90% in Bagerhat, the physical punishment rate is 94%, in Barguna, it's 91%, and in Khulna, it's 96%. Polygyny levels are variable but tend to be low; however, some districts, such as Faridpur and Bagerhat, have slightly higher rates of around 8.5%. The level and perception of safety are also different to a large extent, with districts such as Manikganj (45.4%) and Barguna (42.6%) reporting high percentages of women who do not feel safe walking alone late at night in their local area. This includes adolescent girls, adult women, and elderly females. Supportive attitudes toward violence against women remain widespread in these districts, with 48.5% of women in Bagerhat and 41.6% of women in Barguna agreeing that a husband may be justified in physically disciplining his wife under certain circumstances.

Table 4: Formal Regionalization with Best-Class Interval

Class Range	Catego-ries	Count	Per-cent	Districts
1.85960 - 1.89960	Very low	3	4.7%	Gopalganj, Bandarban, Munshiganj
1.89961 - 1.93960	Low	8	12.5%	Moulvibazar, Rangamati, Meherpur, Pirojpur, Jhala-kathi, Barishal, Bhola
1.93961 - 1.97960	Moder-ate	25	39.1%	Madaripur, Habiganj, Thakurgaon, Kushtia, Dhaka, Chuadanga, Feni, Noakhali, Joypurhat, Nilphamari, Chandpur, Shariatpur, Chattogram, Sirajganj, Bogura, Lakshmipur, Sherpur, Gaibandha, Netrokona, Jamal-pur, Rangpur, Cumilla, Tangail, Satkhira, Narayanganj
1.97961 - 2.01960	High	22	34.4%	Sylhet, Lalmonirhat, Narail, Kishoreganj, Patuakhali, Coxsbazar, Jashore, Naogaon, Magura, Natore, Suna-mganj, Mymensingh, Brahmanbaria, Dinajpur, Rajbari, Narsingdi, Chapainawabganj, Gazipur, Jhenaidah, Rajshahi, Panchagarh, Pabna
>=2.01961	Very High	6	9.4%	Kurigram, Manikganj, Khulna, Faridpur, Bagerhat, Barguna

(Source: Author’s Preparation, 2025)

These regions exhibit consistently high scores across multiple indicators, especially in attitude justifying violence and low perceived safety. Most affected districts categorized as Very High Vulnerability Exposure, about 9.4%, are Barguna, Bagerhat, Khulna, and others.

4.3. Key Indicators for Very High Vulnerability Districts

Districts such as Bagerhat, Barguna, Khulna, Manikganj, and Faridpur fall into the very high violence exposure category based on the composite weighted index. The analysis explained that the five factors of exposure to violence for women and children among districts reveal substantial variation in vulnerability levels, which were taken for factor analysis to constitute the composite index. Among the five factors, the insight of four factors reveals that physical punishment remains high in most districts, with rates above 90% in Bagerhat (94%), Barguna (91%), and Khulna (96%). Polygyny levels are variable but tend to be low; however, some districts, such as Faridpur and Bagerhat, have slightly higher rates of around 8.5%. The level and perception of safety are also different to a large extent, with districts such as Manikganj (45.4%) and Barguna (42.6%) reporting high percentages of women who do not feel safe walking alone late at night in their local area. This includes adolescent girls, adult women, and elderly females. Supportive attitudes toward violence against women remain widespread in these districts, with 48.5% of women in Bagerhat and 41.6% of women in Barguna agreeing that a husband may be justified in physically disciplining his wife under certain circumstances.

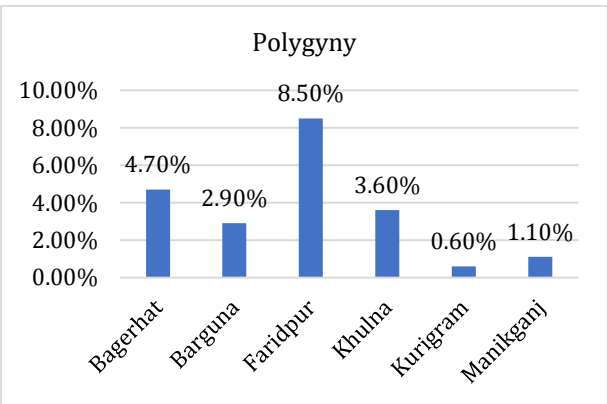


Figure 3: Polygyny Rate Across Districts Catego-rized as Very High Vulnerability (Source: Author’s Preparation, 2025)

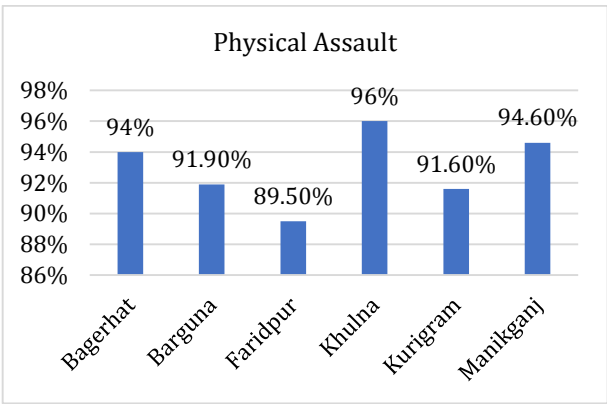


Figure 4: Women Experiencing Physical Punish-ment During Childhood in Very High Vulnerability Districts (Source: Author’s Preparation, 2025)

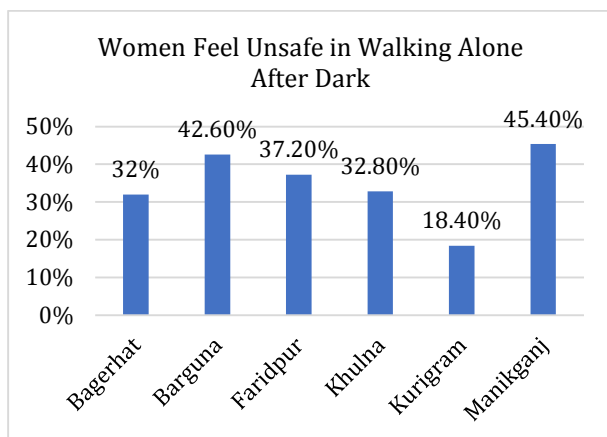


Figure 5: Women's Perception of Safety in Very High Vulnerability Districts
(Source: Author's Preparation, 2025)

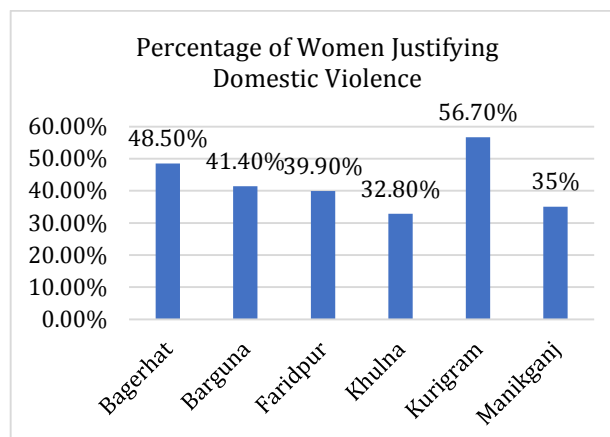


Figure 6: Acceptance of Domestic Violence in Very High Vulnerability Districts
(Source: Author's Preparation, 2025)

4.4. Composite Ranking of Highly Vulnerable Districts

To further analyze the extent of vulnerability in the very high grouped districts, a weighted composite ranking was developed. Barguna and Bagerhat are the top two districts with the highest exposure to violence for females and children. Although Faridpur ranked third based on composite weight, Khulna holds particular significance due to its status as a divisional urban center with remarkably high exposure. Its high level of violence and strategic location make it an important area for policy attention and further analysis.

Table 5: Ranking Among the Very High Violence Exposure Regions

District	Barguna	Bagerhat	Faridpur	Khulna	Manikganj	Kurigram
Composite weight	2.04306	2.04264	2.02424	2.023	2.02081	2.01996
Ranking	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	4 th	5 th	6 th

(Source: Author's Preparation, 2025)

4.5. In-depth District Insights

4.5.1. Barguna

Barguna district is the most vulnerable district in Bangladesh to children and women based on the composite weighted index developed in this research. It depicts an interdisciplinary combination of socio-economic and environmental factors that significantly endanger the safety and well-being of women. The strongly rooted patriarchal values and economic inequalities in Bangladesh grant men surpluses of power over women, and gender-based violence is thus openly tolerated. Nationally, over half of ever-married women have experienced intimate partner violence, while early marriage remains prevalent, with more than half of women aged 20–40 marrying before 18 (Xinyu Zheng, 2023).

The seaside geography of Barguna also increases this vulnerability. Severe weather conditions, such as cyclones and floods, often destroy the social and physical infrastructure of the district, disrupting livelihoods and social order. Studies reveal that violence against women rose before, during, and after such disasters, driven by heightened insecurity, displacement, and economic hardships. For instance, during 2016 Cyclone Roanu, women in Barguna reported greater harassment and abuse in overcrowded shelters, as well as the post-disaster surge in domestic violence because of lost income and increased family tension (Bernard et al., 2022).

This acute vulnerability is shown in the prevalence and multifaceted nature of violence in the coastal sub-districts, particularly Patharghata Upazila. Police reports between 2010 and 2015 in Patharghata identify rape as the most frequently filed cases of violence, taking over 80% of filed cases, followed by dowry violence at 60%, kidnapping at 55%, sexual harassment at 43%, and eve-teasing at 35%. Interestingly, NGO intervention areas recorded higher rates of reporting, indicating increased awareness and support systems, with 74 rape cases registered in NGO areas as opposed to 61 in non-NGO areas during the same period (Jahan Meem, 2018).

Public perception attributes these levels of violence to factors such as the coastal terrain, early physical maturation, alcohol abuse, and lack of literacy. Approximately 69% of the participants in the area believe the unique coastal terrain and lifestyle are among the key causes of early physical maturation and heightened sexual urge among youth, which increases sexual violence risk. The other 65% found alcohol abuse, 63% lack of literacy, and 57% dissemination of pornography as key culprits for increased rape cases. A local doctor emphasized that children from coastal areas develop physically sooner due to dietary conditions, which leaves them more vulnerable to sexual violence, and a local journalist pointed to the lack of recreational activities and drug abuse as other aggravators (Jahan Meem, 2018).

Dowry is deeply entrenched as a cultural practice and serves as a primary cause of physical and sexual violence. and 75% of the community members attribute its root cause to illiteracy, and 70% to poverty. Perpetrators employ coercive tactics such as marital separation and home-based torture to demand dowry money, a trend promoted by factors such as Indian television serials. Some of the reasons also involve patriarchal thought, not educating the female population, lack of decision-making power in families, and economic dependence upon husbands (Jahan Meem, 2018).

Abduction, a severe act of violence, is prevalent because of the geographical position of the district, featuring waterways that facilitate trafficking and exploitative labor migration easily. The community's response with low awareness of such threats in combined with poverty and illiteracy, leaves out many, particularly children who are put to work in vulnerable situations (Jahan Meem, 2018).

4.5.2. Bagerhat

In Bagerhat, women are subjected to repeated victimization of violence, highly determined by educational and socioeconomic factors. Education significantly determines women's exposure, as rural women in Bagerhat have an average of about 6.23 years of schooling, while nearly 50% remain illiterate (Mahmuda et al., 2024). Only 19% of ever-married women aged 15–49 in Khulna Division attained secondary education (NIRPOT & ICF, 2019). This knowledge deficit is reflected in variations in exposure to violence; for example, 78% of illiterate women have suffered physical violence, compared with 28% of literate women. Psychological violence, verbal abuse, threats, and emotional disregard affects 64% of illiterate and 58% of literate women, while economic violence impacts 86% of illiterate compared with 54% of literate women (Mahmuda et al., 2024).

Child marriage continues to be a major concern in the district, with a recent survey indicating that 26% of women in Bagerhat were married as children, and an alarming 84.4% of them were sexually harassed in one way or another (SM Shamsur Rahman, 2023). COVID-19 contributed to this crisis; between March 2020 and September 2021, over 3,000 girls, including some of them being schoolgirls, were married off chiefly due to economic hardships that compelled families to decrease expenses. Early marriages often abbreviate education and expose young girls to domestic violence and negative health consequences, leading to cycles of poverty and vulnerability (Prothom Alo, 2021).

Husbands are identified as the primary abusers of violence, at 64% of cases, with 16% sister-in-law and 13% mothers-in-law trailing behind. The trend reflects the deeply entrenched patriarchal social structures in Bagerhat, where poverty, marital conflicts, inadequate law enforcement, widespread media violence, and women's economic dependency on their husbands all add up to the high rate of domestic violence (Mahmuda et al., 2024).

4.5.3. Khulna

Khulna, a divisional town located in south-western Bangladesh, is commonly known as a relatively developed town. However, being one of the top six most gender-vulnerable districts poses a contrast to this perception. As Khulna ranked 4th in the composite weighted vulnerability ranking, Khulna reports significantly high absolute numbers of gender-based violence (GBV) cases, especially in urban and peri-urban areas. A report presented at the September 2014 session of the Khulna District Law and Order Committee revealed a shocking surge in crimes against women and children, with 415 reported cases alone from January to August 2014 for rape (54), trafficking (20), and abduction (8) (Dhaka Tribune, 2014).

Annual trends show consistently high incidences since 2009 and recurring failure of the justice system due to strong interference, prolonged trial proceedings, and lack of victim protection measures. Local human rights organizations, including Manabadhikar Bastobayon Sangstha, identify that the figures likely underrepresent the true scale, as social shame, fear of retaliation, and police distrust from the community dissuade many from reporting (Dhaka Tribune, 2014).

It worsened further following Cyclone Remal in late May 2024 in Khulna and neighboring districts along the coast. Rapid assessments by humanitarian agencies reported widespread damage to housing infrastructure and breakdown of essential services that disproportionately affected women and girls. In Khulna and Barishal, where 57% of women were already in high-risk areas for partner violence, post-cyclone insecurity increased GBV risks further. 42% of affected households were worried about women's and girls' safety, and 87% were worried about the future, including the danger of child marriage. Before the cyclone, 62% of girls and women felt safe walking alone outside at night in Khulna, a number that is now probably considerably lower. Lack of safe shelters and gender-responsive evacuation planning worsened the crisis for women, girls, and gender-diverse communities (Biswas et al., 2024). A survey conducted recently reveals that the highest rate of domestic violence occurrences in Bangladesh is in Khulna Division, where approximately 29% of the women reported physical violence, which is significantly above the national average (Hossain et al., 2025).

Aside from adult gender violence, Khulna has significant issues regarding child labor and violence against street children, which represent higher social and economic vulnerabilities. Poverty is the underlying cause of educational impediment, and all street children mention financial issues for school truancy. The requirement of work affects 62.3% of school-aged children who do not attend school, and 56% have an issue with school fees, and over half face hunger, especially girls (61.1%). Educational levels are significantly low, only 6.1% of street children have completed class nine or the SSC level. Abuse is remarkably frequent; among school children, 20% face abuse, rising to 73.3% parental and 60% police violence among non-school children's friends (Sarker & Islam, 2024). In families where intimate partner violence is common, children are not only exposed to abuse but also often forced into labor due to economic hardship or the absence of protection. The psychosocial trauma that children face in these violent environments can lead to intergenerational cycles of violence, where the children who witness or experience violence in the home may grow up to either become perpetrators or victims of IPV themselves (Islam, 2014). Street children, especially in high-violence areas like Khulna, face additional risks of sexual violence, child labor, and abuse, and their exposure to violence becomes normalized, contributing to the broader culture of violence in the community (Bromfield et al., 2023).

Khulna's count of incidents is higher due to its larger population size and higher urban density. However, in the consideration of population-adjusted and geographic-adjusted measures are considered, its combined risk rating is slightly lower than that of lesser coastal districts like Barguna and Bagerhat. This means that while Khulna has acute GBV issues in sheer numbers, the per capita and spatial intensity of vulnerability is more concentrated in far-flung and underserved coastal areas.

5. Recommendations

The findings of this study reflect the need for region-specific approaches for addressing violence against women and children in Bangladesh. Since the nature of vulnerabilities varies across different areas, targeted actions are necessary. For that, a set of practical recommendations is provided to support the policymakers and grassroots organizations. These suggestions show not only the data from this research but also the real-world experiences from successful initiatives in other countries, which offer ideas that can be thoughtfully adapted to our local context.

5.1. Regional Resource Allocation and Capacity Building

In areas like Khulna, Bagerhat, and Barguna, where violence against women and children is particularly high, they need extra care and particular action. These communities require specific support. Things required to do, like awareness programs in communities, proper training for local police on gender issues, and more support services like safe shelters, healthcare, and legal aid, can help a lot. Setting up local task forces in these districts might also help, as they can focus only on the issues happening in those areas and act faster. can be learnt from Brazil's Maria da Penha Law. It brought real change by training law enforcement officers to deal with domestic violence more effectively, which made a big difference in how victims were supported (Macaulay, 2022).

5.2. Community-Based Violence Prevention Programs

Community-driven programs play a crucial role in engaging local leaders, youth groups, and women's organizations in changing harmful social norms. These programs raise awareness about gender equality and build a culture of nonviolence, focusing on challenging gender-discriminatory norms. By conducting educational campaigns through local leaders and organizing workshops for boys and men on gender equality and healthy relationships, these programs can transform

individuals' attitudes towards respect and equality. One of these successes is South Africa's Men as Partners (MAP) program, which teaches men to challenge negative stereotypes, practice positive fatherhood, and promote women's rights. Through peer education and community mobilization, MAP has been successful in reducing domestic violence through transforming understandings of masculinity (Peacock & Levack, 2004).

5.3. Targeted Economic Empowerment Programs for Women

Economic empowerment initiatives are needed to increase women's economic autonomy and reduce their dependency on abusive partners. These initiatives need to include vocational training, microfinance, and entrepreneurship. By increasing microfinance initiatives and providing grants to small businesses, women in high-risk areas can build economic stability, while vocational training in tailoring and technical fields can enable greater mobility and income growth. A successful example is the Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) in Bangladesh, which provide access to small loans and savings for women. Such programs have succeeded in reducing domestic violence by enabling women to have better control over their finances, empowering them to make independent choices (Zaman, 2021).

5.4. Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Support Systems

To support survivors of violence, the legal framework should be strengthened by establishing fast-track courts for domestic violence and child abuse cases, ensuring timely justice. Additionally, increasing the availability of free legal aid, especially in rural areas, and introducing legal literacy programs for women would empower victims to access justice more effectively. A relevant example of such an initiative is the Thuthuzela Care Centres in South Africa, which offer comprehensive support to survivors of sexual violence. These centres provide medical, psychological, and legal services, ensuring that survivors have access to justice and care in a coordinated and holistic manner (Dlamini, 2024).

5.5. Improving Access to Education and Awareness

Increasing education access for girls, along with awareness programs about gender equality and the consequences of violence, is key to breaking the cycle of violence. Enhancing scholarships for girls in high-risk zones can prevent early marriage and promote long-term empowerment. Gender sensitization campaigns in schools for both students and teachers can foster more inclusive attitudes and healthier relationships. A successful example is Rwanda's Girls Education Initiative, which has reduced early marriage and violence by ensuring girls stay in school longer, providing opportunities for personal development and social mobility (UNICEF Rwanda, 2023).

6. Conclusions

This study highlights significant regional disparities in the exposure of violence against women and children across 64 districts of Bangladesh, using the Composite Weighted Index Method. The outcomes determine that the three southern coastal districts of Khulna, Bagerhat, and Barguna have the highest exposure due to a combination of poverty, low rates of women's literacy, child marriage, and patriarchal norms, with the impact of natural disasters. On the other hand, major cities like Dhaka and Chattogram experience moderate vulnerability levels that are informed by specific socio-economic and cultural conditions. These differences in regional trends emphasize the need for site-specific interventions, area-specific policies, and resource allocation that take cognizance of each region's peculiar challenges. The study emphasizes the importance of knowing local environments in developing effective interventions to mitigate violence and protect vulnerable groups.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to theories on violence, gender, and child protection by providing a regional analysis of exposure to violence in Bangladesh. It aligns with the ecological model of violence that emphasizes interaction between individual, relational, community, and societal factors in shaping violence. Regional differences in violence are influenced by factors such as poverty, education, and cultural expectations, highlighting the multidimensional nature of violence. The findings also support feminist theory, which has a connection between violence to patriarchal social order and gender inequality. In regions with high violence exposure, entrenched male dominance and societal acceptance of violence reflect the core principles of feminist theory. This research validates social learning theory, as children exposed to violence are more likely to adopt violent behaviors, thereby perpetuating the cycle of violence across generations. The study also enhances

gender and child protection frameworks as it is the way socio-economic and cultural situations increase the vulnerability of children to violence, particularly where there is widespread child labor and early marriage. The research extends these theoretical frameworks by emphasizing the importance of regional context in understanding and addressing violence.

6.2. Practical Implications

This research provides valuable insights for policymakers, social workers, and NGOs to reduce violence against women and children in Bangladesh. Policymakers can use the findings to effectively allocate resources, prioritizing vulnerable zones such as Khulna, Bagerhat, and Barguna. Social workers and NGOs can tailor interventions to the unique socio-economic and cultural conditions of specific regions, addressing issues of gender inequality, child labor, and violence in the family. Community awareness programs implemented in high-risk environments can reduce cultural attitudes while increasing gender equality. Vocational training and educational programs have the potential to empower women, reduce dependence on abusers, and improve socio-economic status. Local organizations and NGOs can partner to create integrated support systems that fulfill the specific needs of vulnerable groups. Strengthening legal aid and access to justice will give survivors a pathway to seek protection and remedies.

6.3. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be addressed. It is secondary source-based, such as the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), which may not capture the most recent change in exposure to violence or emerging trends. The Composite Weighted Index used to measure exposure to violence, though comprehensive, does not capture all possible factors, such as informal social networks or recent policy changes. Underreporting of violence, in many instances perpetrated by cultural stigma and fear of revenge, may have caused the underestimation of the real incidence of violence in some regions.

6.4. Future Research

Future research could expand on this study by exploring changes in violence exposure over time and evaluating the impact of different interventions. Analyzing the effectiveness of NGO and government sustainability efforts at the district level will provide valuable insights into the success of ongoing strategies and will enhance future intervention targeting. Expanding the study to other regions of South Asia or similar socio-cultural contexts would offer a comparative perspective on regional variations in violence exposure and inform broader policy recommendations. Alternative methods, such as primary data collection through surveys, interviews, or ethnographic studies, could offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of victims and provide more nuanced understandings of violence. Incorporating qualitative data to explore the role of informal social networks, community interventions, and local cultural practices could also enhance the comprehensiveness of future research.

Declarations

Author Contributions

Md. Kawsar Jahan Khan conceptualized the study design and supervised the data analysis. Sanzida Sumaiya Suchana conducted the statistical and spatial analysis and drafted the manuscript. Both authors contributed to the interpretation of results and final revisions of the manuscript.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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