Author's response to reviews

Title: Household Exposure to Violence and Human Rights Violations in Western Bangladesh (I): Prevalence, Risk Factors and Consequences

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Author's response to reviews: see over
**Title:** Household Exposure to Violence and Human Rights Violations in western Bangladesh (I): Prevalence, Risk Factors and Consequences

**Reviewer:** Edward Mills

**Minor Essential Revisions**

1. Abstract would benefit from estimates of the prevalence or rates of the prevalence of the main outcomes.  
2. Final sentence of abstract. It isn’t a startling finding that OPV is driven by economic and political gains. I’d be amazed if it weren’t. Throughout, don’t start sentences with number.  
3. Small grammatical errors throughout that a proofread would identify. No need to state that torture is brutal.

4. Page 3. “Torture and violent attacks against women have been widespread as well [4, 5]. It is reported that from 1 January 2001 to 28 February 2007, a total of 1,884 women were victims of dowry-related violence: 1,241 were killed, 479 were brutally tortured, 61 suffered acid burns, and 95 committed suicide [6] I don’t see why dowry-crimes are related to OPV. Can you explain?

5. Don’t refer to this as conflict-affected population. It isn’t technically a conflict, but it is violence-affected.

6. I’m afraid that Human Rights Watch reports are not considered a particularly credible source of evidence. Is there a local NGO that you can reference?

7. Stick to proper headings, intro, methods, results, etc.

8. This isn’t “This is a multi-site case study of conflict epidemiology” There is no such thing as conflict epidemiology. There is only epidemiology used in conflict settings.

9. How was the first house in each cluster chosen and was it each nth house? How many houses were empty and what did you do if an empty house was your nth house?

10. A greater description of the multivariable model is required. Was this a step-wise evaluation, for example?

11. How did you assess mortality, how did you confirm?

12. Table 2, do you think that Iraq data for violent mortality is an adequate control? I would have thought simply comparing it to some place like India would be appropriate.

13. Table 4 and text, why use exact p-values most of the time and then threshold p-values (eg. <0.05) at other times?

**Reviewer:** Neil J Mitchell

**Theory and hypotheses (DISCRETIONARY REVISION)**

14. Instrumental use of violence

15. Hindus

16. Principal-agent problem

17. The levels of political violence are high. I was concerned that the voucher might be an incentive for respondents to inflate violence levels. But the researchers appear to
have addressed that issue (p. 22). COMPULSORY: Was it possible that word of incentives spread from those who had taken the survey to those about to take it?

18. To provide corroboration and to show the findings are not out of line with other assessments of human rights in Bangladesh it might be worth putting the findings in context of other assessments of human rights violations in Bangladesh.

19. Is it possible to say anything more about the types of violence and in particular the incidence of sexual violence – this was in the survey and women were the respondents but relatively low incidence is reported. Perhaps this finding should be discussed in the ‘limitations’ section and whether there is an under-reporting problem here.

20. It might be worth providing a brief description of the political system and assessment of degree of democracy in Bangladesh.

21. I didn’t find much discussion of figure 1 in the text nor much on the source for these data.

22. p. 5 use ‘members’ instead of ‘cadres’

23. p. 4 clarify Operation Clean Heart and Spider Web – government operations? (which party controlled government?)
Response to the concerns of reviewers and editors

Editors:
The authors declare that they have no competing interests. We have now revised the manuscript according to the suggestions of the reviewers and inputs of the editors. We have also re-enforced the section of Background and Discussion. A proof-reader did the grammar check throughout the manuscript. References have been updated too.

Reviewers:
1, 3, 7 and 22) We have revised the abstract. A minor edit was done throughout the manuscript by a proof-reader.
2) We have revised the abstract and rephrased the following sentences in the section of Discussion as:

(Page 23) OPV in Meherpur district is incited by a mixture of various motivations: political goals of leaders and private interests of the perpetrators (that is, reward or enjoyment of the agent), which support the theory of a principal-agent problem {Butler, 2007 #106; Mitchell, 2004 #105; Bohara, 2008 #107}. In summary, when the politics of organised crime and the organised crime of politics are mingled in Bangladesh, the victims are both economically and politically deprived.

4) We deleted the following paragraph because it is not important and relevant:

(Page 4) “Torture and violent attacks against women have been widespread as well [4, 5]. It is reported that from 1 January 2001 to 28 February 2007, a total of 1,884 women were victims of dowry-related violence: 1,241 were killed, 479 were brutally tortured, 61 suffered acid burns, and 95 committed suicide [6].

5 and 14) We have made the corrections based on the suggestions of the reviewers and added the following sentences in the last paragraph in the section of Discussion.

(Pages 20-21) State-organised violence is by nature instrumental in achieving specific goals; the nature of state-organised violence must always be considered while studying violence-related injury and trauma in complex settings and post-conflict settings. In the absence of an effective international monitoring mechanism and preventive measures in complex settings and post-conflict settings, OPV and human rights violations are likely to be widespread. A similar situation has been also reported for Kashmir, India {Petersen, 1994 #113; de Jong, 2008 #115; de Jong, 2008 #114} and Karachi, Pakistan {Chotani, 2002 #71; Jamali, 2000 #183; Mian, 2002 #33; Haider, 1995 #19}

6) We also included some of most recent data of other sources.

(Page 3) They have also systematically used torture and ill-treatment as a means to suppress opposition parties and criminals {Human Rights Watch, 2006 #38; Amnesty International, 2006 #101; Sreeradha, 2005 #81}. Torture and violent attacks against
women have been widespread as well (Begum, 2004 #37; Islam, 2003 #18; Monsoor, 2007 #35; Nasiruddin, 2007 #39).

We addressed the issues concerning the reliability of case reporting of human rights violations in the first paragraph of Discussion:

(Page 18) Case reports of OPV and human rights violations have been focused on individual experiences. Often, these are high profile cases and political bias and stance may influence case reporting, particularly in a society with high political tensions (Horton, 2007 #58). The problem of under-reporting is substantial.

8) The first line of “Objectives” was rephrased as:

(Page 6) This is a multisite epidemiological study whose initial focus is to assess OPV and human rights violations at the population level and to study their causes and consequences at the individual and family level.

9) Empty houses were very rare. To provide detailed information on study implementation, we added the following sentences in the second paragraph:

(Page 9) Each interviewer was responsible for two clusters of their own. ...............The first house was the n-th house on the street in the selected direction. If the selected house was empty, the next household was visited. Because of security concerns, sometimes the interviewers avoided the areas near police stations and military camps or crime-affected neighbourhoods.

10) A description of multivariate model is provided in the last paragraph:

(Pages 15-16) A multivariate model was built up and tested in a stepwise manner, taking parameters of univariate associations into account. Household serves as the unit of analysis and weighting of family size was adjusted. The risk for a family member to be arrested or detained was higher if the income level of the household was higher (Table 4). Adjusted to the household income level and random cluster effect of village, the likelihood for a family member to be arrested or detained was significantly higher if a member of this family: 1) was involved in party politics; 2) had ever participated in a demonstration, a strike or a human rights rally; 3) had a personal or financial conflict with other families (Table 4).

11) There is birth registration in Bangladesh but it does not function properly. Usually people in rural areas register neither birth nor death cases. We added the following information in the first paragraph of page 10:

(Page 10) The death within 12 months was reported by the household members. There is no official document for confirmation.
12) We were unable to find the data of violence-attributed mortality rate in 2000s for India and Pakistan in the literature (including reports of WHO and UNICEF). However, the literature showed that crude mortality rates in conflict zones in Karen, Karenni and Mon states in eastern Burma in 2002-2003 was 21-25 per 1000 people and violence-attributable mortality was around 1.2 per 1,000 per year. We have updated the “remarks” in Table 2 and rephrased the following sentences:

(Page 19) The CMR in Meherpur district (17.9 per 1,000) remained close to the rate observed during the liberation war in 1971 (18.9 per 1,000) and the rate was also the same as the CMR in Zimbabwe, ranking 12th highest in the world in 2006. The violence-related mortality rate in Meherpur district was similar to the rate in a conflict zone in eastern Burma (Table 2) [Lee, 2006 #108]. In addition, a majority of the study population suffered from pain. High mortality rate, injury rate and pain complaints of a population in the violence-prone areas should be taken as a warning sign of deteriorating public health.

13) We found that some articles published by the International Health and Human Rights presented the exact p-value when there is no association and used the threshold p-value when the association is significant, for example http://www.biomedcentral.com/1472-698X/9/1

15) Religious affiliation is not a risk factor for violent attacks, shown in another study in Pakistan. The following sentence and reference was added in the second paragraph:

(Page 21) A study also noted that no case of violence on religious differences was reported in Karachi, Pakistan [Jamali, 2000 #73].

16) To address the “principle-agent problem” and the corruption in Bangladesh, the following paragraph and references were added:

(Page 22) The leaders rely on the members of law enforcement agencies to wipe out the challengers to their power, and to crush those who have different political views and ideology or the criminals. The members of law enforcement agencies, however, have their own goals, independent from the leaders, and they could easily exploit the information and power advantage for their private interests. Pervasive corruption in the public sector in Bangladesh allows the members of law enforcement agencies to conceal their unlawful actions. The correlation of the level of human rights violations and sexual violence with the level of democracy and corruption has been examined and a similar pattern has been observed in India [Butler, 2007 #106].

17) It is unlikely that word of incentives spread from those who had taken the survey to those about to take it. The interviewers explained to the participants that was no compensation for participation in the survey. The vouchers were distributed afterward. The following sentences were added in the last paragraph of pages 10 and the beginning of the page 11, to clarify how the survey team prevented the spreading of word of incentives among the study population:
(Page 10) During the household survey, the interviewers were not informed about who would eventually be invited to the mobile clinic. In addition, the survey participants were not informed about the possibility of free examination and treatment in the mobile clinic. (Page 11) When the household survey was finished, the list of families to be invited to the mobile clinic was prepared based on the survey results. The interviewers were told to return to the villages for which they were responsible and distribute the vouchers to the victims’ families who reported incidents of: 1) torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; 2) sexual harassment, molestation, rape or insertion of a blunt object into a genital organ and/or rectum; 3) arrest or detention; 4) extrajudicial execution of family member, perpetrated by members of law enforcement agency.

18 and 20) We have updated the references in the sections of Background and Discussion to show that our results were in line with other assessments of human rights situation in Bangladesh. In the section of Discussion, we also provided a brief description of the degree of democracy, development of multiparty politics and human rights violations in Bangladesh.

(Pages 20-21) Violence has remained inseparable from Bangladeshi politics and society. Bangladesh has gone through numerous political crises including two presidential assassinations, four coups, and at least 18 failed coup attempts since 1971 independence. The ongoing conflict between the leaders of the Awami League and the BNP is a prolongation of the three-decade hostility between these two families. The party elites instigated hatred of rival groups for political and economic gain; the struggle for power and resources between the two major parties has been blamed for the political polarisation [Andersen, 2006 #12; Sreeradha, 2005 #81]. In the last decade, multiparty democracy has been restored in Bangladesh. Although State Fragility Index and Polity scores have improved [Marshall, 2009 #102], the democracy is far from consolidated. A 5-level Political Terror Scale [Gibney, 2009 #103] and the Cingranelli-Richards Human Rights Dataset [Cingranelli, 2009 #104] coded the practice of human rights of 190 countries in a particular year based on the yearly reports of the “US State Department Report” and Amnesty International. Both showed that violations of civil and political rights in Bangladesh have been systematically increasing from the 1990s and have become a routine practice of the security forces since 2001. This has jeopardised the multiparty democracy in Bangladesh.

The largest Islamic political party Jamaat-e-Islami Party was founded in pre-partition India in 1941. It has been against the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan. One of the leaders of the Jamaat-e-Islami Party organised a militia in the Khulna division during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 to assist the army of Pakistan. Until today, Khulna division, including Meherpur district, is still under the threat of Islamic extremists linked to Pakistan. The Jamaat-e-Islami Party has been in an alliance with the BNP and participated in a four-party coalition government during 2001-2006. Political polarisation is often blamed for attacks against Hindus because the main opposition party in 2001-2008, Awami League, has traditionally been the principal beneficiary of Hindu votes [The Redress Trust, 2004 #15].
19) We explained why the reporting of sexual violence was low in our survey by adding the following sentences in the “Limitations and strengths”:

(Page 24) The household members were asked to remain to confirm the information provided. On the other hand, it made it embarrassing for the victims of sexual violence to reveal such an attack in front of their family members. Previous experience showed us that the victims of forced sexual contact or sexual torture were often in denial of tragedy or not ready to speak about it openly at the first or second approach by the social workers. They were likely to reach out for help afterwards. The brochures of the BRCT and Manab Unnayan Kendra were provided for their reference as resources that offer assistance or legal consultation for such types of victims. We believed that the numbers of victims of sexual violence in our survey were under-reported because of social stigma.

21) We provided the information on data resource and discussed the trend of case reporting shown in Figure 1 by revising the following paragraph:

(Pages 4-5) The BNP won the election in October 2001 and launched Operation Clean Heart in October 2002 as a drive against growing crime: a rise in murder, rape, and acid throwing. In March 2004, the anti-crime and anti-terrorism elite force ‘Rapid Action Battalions’ was founded. Up to December, 2007, Rapid Action Battalions had seized a total of 23,632 people including two senior terrorists and recovered 3,592 illegal weapons based on official data from their website [Rapid Action Battalion, 2009 #111]. Their lack of accountability has been questioned, however, by the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International [Human Rights Watch, 2006 #38; Amnesty International, 2006 #101]. Daily violent attacks on the press by political militants, criminal gangs and security services were also reported by Reporters Without Borders [Reporters Without Borders, 2008 #100]. A local non-governmental organisation (NGO), Odhikar, documented human rights abuses by gathering information through a nationwide network of trained human rights workers and from media reports: 65,057 injuries and 2,339 killings due to political clashes were identified during the period January 2002-June 2009 (Figure 1). The number of reported incidents peaked 2 months before the general election in October 2006 at 3,096 injured and 77 killed. The Awami League alleged electoral bias in favour of its rival, the BNP, and boycotted the elections. The president of the caretaker government announced a state of emergency and curfews in January 2007, due to weeks of riots and protests over erroneous voter lists, and postponed the general election until December 2008. Pre- and post-election violence was observed at the end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009.

23) We provided more information concerning Operation Spider Web and we also rephrased the following paragraph:

(Pages 5-6) Khulna division, which borders India, is the province most affected by violence in Bangladesh. Operation Spider Web was launched in 2004 by the BNP-led government in the south-western districts of Bangladesh after Operation Clean Heart failed to restore public order. Its primary target was the left-wing extremists along the Indian border. Substantial numbers of extrajudicial killings in Khulna division have been
reported since 2004 {Human Rights Watch, 2006 #38; Lacos, 2008 #84; Asian Legal Resource Center and Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2006 #109}. The Bangladesh Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma Victims (BRCT) also reported 1,102 torture cases and 414 torture-related deaths in Khulna division in 2004 {Bangladesh Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma Victims, 2004 #6}.

Others:

● The following sentence was rephrased as:

(Please note the page number for the original sentence)

"Torture is frequently practiced in the context of OPV and human rights violations."

● We changed the subtitles in the section of Methods as:

Household survey
   Sample selection and case definition
   Study implementation
OPV screening at the mobile clinic
Quality assurance
Statistical analysis
Ethical evaluation

● (Page 13) The first sentence in the section of Result “In total, 1,101 households were surveyed” was deleted because it has been mentioned in the section of Method in page 9.

● The following sentences in “Consequences for family health” were rephrased:

(Please note the page number for the original sentences)

"Compared with families exposed to less than four categories of OPV or human rights violations, the family exposed to at least four categories of OPV or human rights violations yielded higher regression coefficients for the proportion of household members reporting injury within 12 months: 14.10, (95% CI: 4.23-23.97, P<0.005). The regression coefficients were also higher for the proportion of household members reporting lifetime experience of violence-related injury: 22.36, (95% CI: 12.48-32.24, P<0.001) and pain complaints within 2 weeks: 6.65, (95% CI: 0.51-12.80, P<0.05)."

● At the end of section of Discussion, we added a paragraph to address the application of research findings in community practices.

(Please note the page number for the original paragraph)

"A community-based rehabilitation project was implemented by BRCT in selected villages in nine districts of Khulna division from 2005 to 2008. It had a specific focus on human rights education, community health and community development. We have established a population baseline in Meherpur district, reshaped the model of above community-based intervention and developed implementation strategies based on the knowledge generated from this study."