

Institution: University of Portsmouth		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 25: Area Studies		
Title of case study: The Importance of Peer Networks for ending Violence against Women in South Asia: Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof Tamsin Bradley	Professor of International Development Studies	26/09/2011 - date
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Professor Tamsin Bradley's research has made a significant contribution towards the goal of ending violence against women and girls in Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal through a three-stage process of increasing awareness, informing programmes and initiatives, and increasing the resilience of women at community level. According to the World Health Organisation around 30% of all women and girls have experienced some form of violence, and in the countries covered by this research, many women have experienced multiple forms of such violence. Violence against women is now acknowledged by sustainable development goal 5, as a global problem that needs urgent attention. Working directly with affected communities, this research has established the value of peer networks for resilience building and helped to bring such groups into existence, which have become part of the strategies of women's rights organizations, international agencies and local governments.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Over the last two decades, Bradley has developed a world-leading profile of research on some of the most intractable problems facing individuals and communities in the developing world. Her research in South Asia, commencing in 2000, has addressed the sources and structures of violence that hold women back from greater participation in development efforts, and often continue to explicitly victimise them. Her earlier work addressed the need to refine understandings of religious sensibilities and practices in such contexts (R5). It used interdisciplinary perspectives to cast light on the complex balance between community religious beliefs, religious understandings in the practices of development NGOs, and the link between these dimensions of understanding and violence expressed through practices around bridal dowries (R4).</p> <p>Bradley's more recent work (2017 onwards), grant-funded through the UK Department for International Development and the Economic and Social Research Council (G2), has pursued the possibility of strategies for mitigating harm to women in contexts of poverty and displacement. The research has demonstrated empirically how significant the risk of interpersonal violence is to women in such circumstances, and began to develop concrete, community-based approaches to reducing that risk. To do this successfully, Bradley drew on her preceding experience of designing optimal means of researching these highly sensitive issues (G2). Her model of mixed-methods data collection at community level uses local culturally-respected organisations as points of entry, recognising their role as potential gatekeepers, and building positive relations to facilitate the lowering of such barriers. Research on the ground can then be undertaken by selected local researchers, recruited and trained by Bradley to be sensitive to the context, and to deploy a range of open-ended qualitative approaches (R2). In-depth investigative conversation with individuals is used alongside a sensitive approach to gathering wider survey data, to give greater understanding of the extent and complex nature of the problem of violence within communities.</p> <p>The first of two recent projects led by Bradley (2015-2017) was <i>VAWG: Violence Against Women and Girls in South Asia</i> (R2, G1). It explored whether women earning an income results in greater resilience to violence and an ultimate reduction in it. The project sought to understand and document the impact income brought to women's lives across different work contexts: in Pakistan home-based workers, in Nepal construction and sex workers, and in Myanmar garment workers. The findings generated a rich and complex picture of the role income plays in building self-esteem and confidence, especially when women are able to come together in peer-support networks.</p>		

What they also showed was that income alone does not reduce violence, and indeed, that women who out-earn their husbands become more vulnerable to violence from them.

The second and third recent projects, *Narratives of violence: the impact of internal displacement on violence against women in Nepal and Myanmar* (2017-19, G2), *Climate Change and the Environmental Determinants of Violence and Mental Distress in Fragile contexts: Ethiopia, Myanmar and Nepal* (2020-2021, G3), sought to understand the chain of impact from environmental disasters to the displacement of communities, on into widespread violence against women and girls. It also sought to gauge the level of awareness and response to such violence present in organisations delivering humanitarian relief. The project was methodologically innovative in its recruitment of a number of women from within the affected communities to act as “displacement narrators”. Their input enabled the project to get a longitudinal overview of how women cope with the extended aftermath of displacement.

The data gathered clearly showed that violence against women increases sharply following periods of environmental displacement. The quality of data pinpointed the way in which women took or created opportunities to gather and share incidences of violence and explore options. Prior to this research, such spaces were invisible to local development organisations and government officials mandated to improve the lives of women and girls. The research also demonstrated that, despite notional high-level commitments, there was in practice an almost complete lack of humanitarian response to violence against women and girls (R1).

The findings from both projects point to the vital importance of women-only peer support groups in fostering resilience and resistance to violence, and highlight the critical need to ensure these peer networks are linked to specialist women’s organisations and social mobilisers who can offer support and advocacy. In addition, the findings show how essential a committed enabling environment is, consisting of responsive donors, local government and judicial officials. The findings also point to the urgent need for greater mainstreaming of a sensitised lens to violence against women and girls in development in both responses to displacement and economic empowerment programmes (R1-6).

3. References to the research

(R1) **Bradley, T.** (2020). *Global Perspectives on Violence against Women and Girls*. Zed Press, London. An endorsement of this book states that this ‘is a brave and important book that challenges both mainstream and feminist approaches to violence against women and girls’ (Professor Ruth Pearson, University of Leeds).

(R2) **Bradley, T., & Sahariah, S.** (2019). Tales of suffering and strength: Women’s experiences of working in Nepal’s informal entertainment industry. *International Journal of Gender in Developing Societies*, 3(1), 20-36. Doi: [10.1504/IJGSDS.2019.096758](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJGSDS.2019.096758) This is published in a prominent peer-reviewed journal in the field.

(R3) **Bradley, T.** (2016). *Women and Violence in India: oppression and the politics of neoliberalism*. IB Tauris, London. The volume was endorsed by Professor Rajni Parliwala who is a highly respected Professor of Sociology, University of Delhi who noted the important critical contribution it makes to understanding why violence against women and girls continues in India despite the country’s economic growth.

(R4) Longman, C., & **Bradley, T.** (2016). *Interrogating Harmful Cultural Practices: gender culture and coercion*. Ashgate, London. This volume has been extensively cited and as a consequence, the authors have been asked to edit a second volume.

(R5) **Bradley, T.** (2011). *Religion and Gender in the Developing World: Faith-based Organizations and Feminism in India*. IB Taurus, London. The volume received highly positive book reviews in the Indian Press.

(R6) **Bradley, T.** & Gruber, J. (2018). VAWG mainstreaming in access to justice programmes: a framework for action. *Development in Practice*, 28(1), 16-32.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2018.1398716>

This is published in a well-respected peer-reviewed journal that is targeted at academics and practitioners in the field.

Funded research projects

(G1) **Bradley, T** & Carpenter, D. *VAWG: Violence against women and girls in South Asia*. Funded by DFID's South Asia research hub, October 2015 - April 2017 (GBP600,000, GBP257,000 to UoP).

(G2) **Bradley, T.**, Martin, Z., Upreti, B.R. *Narratives of violence: the impact of internal displacement on violence against women in Nepal and Myanmar*. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, December 2017- May 2019 (GBP 240,178).

(G3) **Bradley, T**, Martin, Z. Upreti, B,R, Hutchings, P, Kebebe, A. *Climate Change and the Environmental Determinants of Violence and Mental Distress in Fragile contexts: Ethiopia, Myanmar and Nepal*. Funded by The Economic and Social Research Council, April 2020 - June 2021 (GBP 131,080).

4. Details of the impact

Bradley's funded projects were designed to integrate stakeholder engagement and pathways to impact from the outset. Data-collection tools and overarching research questions were framed and finalised in active consultation with country-level advisory groups made up of both academic and non-academic stakeholders. Through an active process of workshopping these issues, the project team secured interest, trust and engagement with the projects and their outcomes. As the projects developed, the team, supported by a dedicated research-uptake consultant, kept in touch with these groups, passing on and explaining key findings and conclusions.

This active engagement helped secure three dimensions of transformative impact:

Firstly, **increasing awareness**. Through their engagement with Bradley's research, the size and scope of the problem of violence against women and girls in Myanmar, Nepal and Bangladesh has been made clearer to a wide range of groups, including development practitioners, development studies scholars and students, women's rights organizations, and international agencies such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). For example, the Women's Rehabilitation Centre, based in Nepal, found Bradley's research to be essential in providing visibility of the problem of gender-based violence in the region, and thus supporting their advocacy programme. Their Monitoring and Evaluation Officer stated (in 2020) that *"the findings from the research have put forward different critical points highlighting the need of specific services and support to the victims in the post-disaster situation."* The research had made clear, for example, the extent to which responses to such crises need to take account of differences in *"level of vulnerability among women due to castes, poverty, different education levels, etc."* (S6) Another Nepal-based group, Women for Human Rights (WHR), reported (in 2020) that the research and its findings *"have influenced and shaped the thinking of our organisation not least in terms of helping us articulate the importance of what we do better and with more confidence"* (S3).

Beyond supporting awareness, the research findings have also **informed specific programmes and initiatives**. Bradley offered evidence-based recommendations on effective responses and solutions to prevent violence against women and girls. The UNFPA in Myanmar worked with its downstream partner, the Metta Foundation, in Kachin State, to formulate initiatives (2017 to present). A senior gender advisor at the UNFPA communicated the findings to the foundation and they implemented Bradley's recommendations, creating peer networks, organised around a micro-finance programme which benefits women. She noted that Bradley's research *"proved to be exceptionally useful to support evidence based programme design."* (S1) In Nepal, the WHR, with a membership of 100,000 single women, also adopted Bradley's research recommendation of creating peer networks in order to build resilience among women to better resist violence and seek justice (S4).

Through these initiatives, the research findings have achieved their most important impact, by **increasing the resilience of women at community level**. In **Myanmar**, around 50 peer groups were created in 2016 by the Metta Foundation, consisting of approximately 8-10 women in each. The Foundation confirmed in September 2020 that the groups were still operating successfully. They reported that *"as a result of these groups being created the women involved reported feeling more confident and resilient to the challenges they may face and more able to help other women"*

in their community. The help and support given commonly includes responses to domestic violence” (S2).

The Foundation went on to observe that *“The fact that these groups are still in existence and fully utilised by their membership evidences the value of a peer support approach embedded as part of programmes focused on improving women’s economic empowerment and resilience to violence. Building the psychological and collective resilience of women can be seen through these peer groups (as a result of the research findings) and are critical in ending instances of abuse” (S2).*

Given the cascading impact of the resilience generated in these groups it is hard to accurately capture the number of women impacted. However, given the size of the villages and the groups, we can safely estimate that approximately 480-500 women benefitted through the membership of the peer networks. Potentially a further 1000 women have benefitted through cascaded impact. According to the Metta Foundation, Bradley’s peer network approach *“is even more critical given that informal justice (by ethnic leaders, almost all are male) is still strong in the area making it exceptionally challenging for survivors of domestic abuse to achieve an end to it through justice mechanisms.” (S2).*

The potential to work to overcome gender inequalities has been shown in **Nepal**, where the research was able to engage with a recent concerted effort (during 2019) to recruit more women into local government. Many women who previously worked as social mobilisers are now in office. Working in this context, Bradley supported the work of 10 ‘displacement narrators’ in Kathmandu (Middle Hill Area) and the Eastern Terai region. The narrators were recruited, mentored and further supported by the national women’s organisation WHR. A year into the project the narrators felt confident in facilitating peer networks, making them safe for women to share stories of violence. The peer networks consist of around 15 to 20 women per group. On the recommendation of the research findings, they have been linked by WHR to female local government representatives who are then able to follow up on cases of abuse. Up to 200 women have benefitted from membership. The WHR reports that the groups *“are offering ongoing peer support to group members. Members of these peer networks have confirmed that they have helped [the women] to work through their challenges and share instances of violence and/or harassment that they endure” (S4).*

Reflecting on the direct impact of these networks in 2020, the director of WHR stated:

“Resilience among women has been improved through the creation of these groups. Local government and organisational support has followed and channels for recourse to justice when instances of domestic violence occur function better. This level of coordination brings optimism that prevalence rates will and are in decline. The emergence of Covid has made such networks even more important as we are hearing of many more cases of domestic violence as a result of lock down restrictions.” (S4).

One narrator reported the impact she has experienced and witnessed as follows: *“In the time of disaster and other emergencies, women and children are hard hit and all the safety nets that the women have built become fragile and collapse. However, it is really important to acknowledge that the women are the frontline responders ... The opportunity to share the sorrows of VAW, supporting each other as an individual and as networks is important as part of social and mental wellbeing of these women with also institutional support accessibility.” (S4)* Inspired by Bradley’s research, the WHR confirmed in 2020 that they were systematically facilitating peer networks across their programming in Nepal and in particular as part of their Covid response. Given the reach of this national organisation, the impact is now being cascaded to the WHR’s extensive national membership.

Impact in **Bangladesh** is at an earlier stage due to the more recent start of research there (2019). However, the findings have already been used by Foreign Commonwealth Development Office gender advisors and by UNWomen to campaign for greater visibility of violence against women, and also to leverage greater government policy attention and commitment. Displacement narrators are in place in the Char region and continually report on the changing situation. The community stories captured by the narrators have been used by the FCDO in monitoring the impact of Covid (S5).

Underscoring the significance of Bradley's research impact in a range of contexts, a UNFPA Senior Gender Advisor states that as a consequence of the findings, "*women are coming together [through the peer networks] to discuss issues in common as well as laying the foundation for increased participation and leadership*" in order to achieve greater empowerment (S1).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

(S1) Email evidence from a UNFPA Senior Gender Advisor 02/10/2017

(S2) Statement from The Metta Foundation Myanmar via SEGRI. 2020

(S3) Statements from women part of local groups on Nepal collected by displacement narrators via Women Human Rights Organisation, Nepal 24/09/2020

(S4) Statement from Women Human Rights Organisation, Nepal. 2019

(S5) Email evidence from Gender Advisor DFID Bangladesh. 03/09/2019

(S6) Statement from Women's Rehabilitation Centre 26/09/2019