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**Women's Acceptance of Intimate Partner Violence within Marriage:
Qualitative Perspectives from Rural Bangladesh**

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Summary

While violence against women by husbands and male partners occurs throughout the world, the proportions of women who report experiencing such violence, and the proportions of men and women who say it is sometimes justified, vary substantially among societies and subpopulations—or, more precisely, the proportions who say so in surveys vary. This paper uses qualitative data from 110 in-depth interviews and 16 small group discussions to explore the psycho-social underpinnings of a 2002 survey finding that an extremely high proportion of women believe it is acceptable for husbands to use violence against their wives. Consistent with the survey results, some women suggested that husbands' violence against their wives was often the victim's fault. When the topic was explored in more depth, however, it appeared that although most of the abused women in the study had resigned themselves to accepting a certain level of violence they did not truly condone it. Many abused women expressed extreme anger and bitterness regarding their subjection to violence. The authors conclude by raising questions regarding the meaning of responses to commonly used questions intended to measure women's attitudes regarding intimate partner violence, and discuss policy implications.

Introduction

A growing body of research documents the prevalence, determinants and consequences of men's violence against their wives and female partners in less-developed countries. This type of violence has been variously referred to as "intimate partner violence", "domestic violence", "spouse/wife abuse", or "gender-based violence"—the latter to call attention to the links between such violence and gender inequality (Bott et al. 2005; Heise et al. 1999; United Nations 1993). A review of population-based surveys from around the world found that between 10% and 69% of women in various settings had been physically assaulted at least once by an intimate male partner (Heise et al. 1999).¹ Here we use the term "intimate partner violence" (IPV) to refer specifically to men's violence against their wives. In Bangladeshi society, people rarely admit publicly to having sex outside of marriage, and marriage is virtually universal.

Recent data suggest that the prevalence of IPV in Bangladesh is in the medium-high range (Heise et al. 1999). In six rural surveys, in which research designs varied, the proportion of married women reporting physical violence in their marital relationships ranged from 32% to 72% (Steele et al. 1998; Koenig et al. 2003; Khan et al. 2001; Schuler et al. 1996; Bates et al. 2004; BIDS 2004). Reported IPV rates within the most recent one-year period ranged from 16% to 54%: (Naved and Persson 2005; Schuler et al. 1996; Bates et al. 2004; BIDS 2004).²

Previous analyses based on survey data have identified a number of individual risk factors for IPV in Bangladesh. For example, studies have found the risk of experiencing

violence to be significantly higher among younger women (Islam et al. 2004; Koenig et al. 2003; Naved and Persson 2005—but in the latter case only in urban areas; Schuler et al. 1996),³ less educated women (BIDS 2004; Islam et al. 2004; Koenig et al. 2003; Schuler et al. 1996),⁴ women with more educated husbands, women living in households of lower socio-economic status (Bates et al. 2004; BIDS 2004; Koenig et al. 2003), women who earn independent incomes or contribute income to the family (Bates et al. 2004; Hadi 2000 - on sexual violence; Naved and Persson 2005), women with dowry agreements or demands from the husband's side of the family (Bates et al. 2004; Naved and Persson 2005) and women with a history of family abuse (of husband's mother by his father) (Naved and Persson 2005).

Surveys from various countries suggest that in many societies IPV is condoned, substantial percentages of female (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005; Heise et al. 1999; Kishor and Johnson 2004). A recent review of findings from the multi-country WHO Study on Women's Health and Domestic Violence found that in about half of the sites 50 to 90% of women agreed that it was acceptable under at least one of several circumstances (Garcia-Moreno et al. 2005). In Bangladesh, male (NIPORT et al. 2005; BRAC 2003) respondents say it is justified under various circumstances (also see Islam 2001; Mannan 2004; Naved et al. 2006). This paper uses qualitative data to examine the psycho-social underpinnings of survey results indicating that an extremely high proportion of women in rural Bangladesh view IPV as acceptable.

Methods

Our analysis is based on data from structured surveys (Bates et al. 2004), and in-depth interviews and group discussions in villages where the research team has been working since 1991. The data on IPV were collected as part of a larger project on gender inequality, women's empowerment and health (Schuler et al. 2006).

Research sites

The six villages are located in three districts of Bangladesh (Rangpur, Faridpur, and Magura (qualitative research was done in two villages of Rangpur and one in the Magura District). Although not randomly selected, the villages as a group have no unusual characteristics (Bates et al. 2004). They are poor, somewhat conservative but not unusually so and, like most of the country, have a relatively homogenous ethnic and religious composition, with approximately 96% identifying themselves as Muslim. Each village has both government and religious schools (*madrassa*) either nearby or within the village. At least one NGO is active in each village, addressing issues such primary health care, microcredit, education, legal awareness and gender equity. Women from several villages work in rice processing centers or road maintenance projects, and some have migrated to the capital to work in garment factories or as domestic servants. Some men have migrated to Dhaka or to Middle Eastern countries for employment. Although this paper deals mainly with women's attitudes, we include data from a survey with men for comparison.

Survey data

Surveys were conducted in six villages with 1,212 married women, most under age 50,⁵ and 320 married sons of the female respondents. The women's survey covered a range of topics related to women's social, economic, and physical wellbeing, including IPV and attitudes regarding its acceptability. The men's survey was shorter and focused on gender attitudes, including attitudes towards the acceptability of IPV. Violence measures were based on the WHO multi-country survey and ethical protocol (World Health Organization 2001).⁶ Same-sex interviewers administered the surveys.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data collected between 2001 and 2004 in three of the villages includes 110 in-depth interviews, almost all with married women (three with men and 107 with women), and 16 small group discussions (13 with married women, one with school girls, one with both women and men, and one with men). The interviews explore the social and economic processes underlying early marriage, gender inequality, and IPV. All interviews included sections on IPV, and a subset of eight interviews with individual women and seven group discussions: six with women and one with a mixed group of men and women; two in each of two study villages, and three in the third, focused primarily on violence and rights issues. We therefore use this latter set of interviews more extensively in the paper. The eight individual women had previously talked about their husband's violence against them in the context of interviews on other topics, or their neighbors had mentioned it. Participants in the group discussions were convenience samples (such groups are generally difficult to organize because of the lack of privacy

and constraints on women's time); we intentionally included younger women in all groups, as well as a few who were older and, in one case, decided to experiment with a mixed group of men and women. Although not asked directly, almost all women in the group discussions gave the impression that they were victims of IPV.

The Bangladeshi field researchers (three women, one man) had in-depth training and experience in ethnographic research methods. Following each field visit, they prepared written transcripts in Bengali from their taped interviews and field notes, which were translated into English. The US-based researchers coded the transcripts thematically using a software program to organize the material.⁷ The field researchers were given opportunities to review preliminary analyses, challenge interpretations and provide supportive or discrepant evidence.

Ethical precautions

Informed consent was obtained from all study participants. Measures were taken to ensure privacy during the interviews and the field researchers were instructed to suspend interviews when sensitive topics such as IPV were being addressed if interruptions by other household members or neighbors could not be avoided. The husband was never interviewed on IPV if the wife was, in order to minimize the possibility that he would suspect his wife of revealing this information. For the same reason, we did not include questions about actual IPV in the surveys with men, only hypothetical questions intended to measure men's attitudes towards it. The field researchers were trained to deal with

reactions to questions on IPV in accordance with WHO guidelines for research on domestic violence (World Health Organization 2001).⁸

Results

Specific situations in which IPV is socially condoned

The survey results suggest a relatively high level of agreement between women and men regarding when husbands are justified in using physical violence against their wives (Table 1). Wasting money, talking back, going out without permission, and disobedience were most frequently cited by women, as justifications for IPV; wasting money and disobedience were most frequently cited by men. 84% of women and 90% of men said IPV was acceptable in at least one scenario, and most named multiple scenarios (data not shown).

Similar sets of questions were asked of men (but not of women) in the 2004 Bangladesh DHS, but used fewer and different scenarios. The most similar scenario was “goes out without telling him,” in response to which 49% of the men interviewed in the DHS said a man would be justified in beating his wife, and “goes out without permission” (38% of men in our survey said a man would be justified in beating his wife). 55% of men interviewed in the most recent Bangladesh DHS agreed that at least one of the scenarios mentioned would provide grounds for IPV.⁹

Variation among villages

The proportions of men and women who said husbands were justified in using violence against their wives varied among villages (Figure 1). The qualitative data presented

below are from villages 1, 2 and 5. In all three, the percentages of women appearing to condone IPV is 75% or higher.

Similarly, the proportions of women that reported experiencing IPV varied by village (Figure 2), with percentages that ever experienced IPV ranging between 46% and 79%. Percentages that experienced IPV within the past year ranged between 15% and 46%.

In summary, the vast majority of women and men in our survey seemed to condone IPV, and the level to which it is condoned, as well as the actual incidence, varies considerably among communities. The qualitative data presented below illustrate some of the ways that women interpret and explain IPV. The contrast between these data and the survey findings raises questions regarding the meaning of responses to survey questions intended to measure attitudes towards IPV.

Who is to blame when men beat their wives?

Some women who spoke about IPV made statements consistent with the idea that such violence is widely condoned in this society, even by the victims themselves. An 18-year-old married woman, for example, told the interviewer, “It is alright for a husband to beat his wife if she does something wrong.” A woman in a group discussion said “I was beaten due to my own faulty behavior. It is not acceptable to do the same things in my husband's house that I had been doing in my parent's house.”

In many interviews and group discussions where the topic was explored in detail, however, women expressed deep anger and bitterness; most had resigned themselves to accept IPV but they nonetheless felt it was wrong. Rather than a husband's prerogative or an appropriate punishment for their own misdeeds, women often described their subjection to IPV as a circumstance over which they had little or no control; they said that it was the lot of women to suffer, or that it was their bad luck or fate to be abused or to have been married to a man with a violent disposition. A few women blamed their situations on parents who had married them off at too young an age, made compromises in the marriage negotiations, or failed to provide them with an adequate dowry. Many also attributed men's violence to poverty and lack of education, saying, in essence, that deprivation breeds violence. Many implied that if husbands had the right to beat their wives, it was not a natural or moral right, but rather a de facto right stemming from women's economic dependence on their husbands; for example: "It is inevitable that we will be beaten by our husbands as long as we live on our husbands' income."

In most cases, it appeared that women stayed with violent husbands because they saw no other viable options and not because they felt deep down that their husbands were justified in beating them. A young mother, for example, who had suffered severe violence while pregnant told us:

“If I went back to my father's house my family would marry me off again....I couldn't be sure how my second husband would behave--he might be worse than the man I have now. Anyway what is life for a woman?”

Women's visions of justice

Abused women's suggestions as to what might be done to alleviate the problem of IPV often revealed intense bitterness and a desperate wish for outside intervention. In all seven of the group discussions on rights and IPV (including that in which men were also present), women said that husbands should be punished for using violence against their wives; none of the participants expressed disagreement. The following is an excerpt from one group. Its tone suggests a blend of irony-- grimly serious fantasizing, and pragmatism

Woman 1: If the government enacted a tough law prohibiting dowry, the situation would be different.

Woman 2: But there is no law to pay dowry. Government has asked everybody *not* to pay dowry.

Woman 3: Nobody follows the government's rules....

Woman 1: If a husband beats his wife he should be hanged....If anybody beats his wife for nothing, provisions should be made so that he is hanged immediately....

Woman 4: If all the men are hanged then what would women do? Nobody would have her *sangsar* (conjugal household).

Woman 2: If the husbands are imprisoned for five years then all this beating will stop.

Woman 1: There are no proper laws in our country. If there were proper laws, husbands would be punished when they beat their wives without mercy. Where is

the punishment? We do not see anybody getting any punishment for beating their wives....

Woman 4: It is inevitable that we get beaten by our husbands as long as we live on our husbands' income.

Woman 3: If the punishment were tougher, a husband would remember that for a long time and never dare to beat his wife again. Others too would learn the consequences of wife beating.

Woman 4: Provision should be made so that wives can beat her husbands when their husbands beat them.

Woman 1: If the husbands are given 14 years of imprisonment or if they are compelled to do hard work in the prison they might learn a lesson.

Woman 2: 14 years of imprisonment is too much. It is better to keep them in jail for 3-5 years with tough punishment. And there should be the rule that he could not divorce his wife but have to live with her....

Woman 1: Some of the husbands may say they are ready to suffer imprisonment not only once but seven times, and even then we will beat our wives, so, if the government can hang at least one such husband then the men will understand that if they beat their wives and their wives bring them to court then they might be hanged. Out of fear they would not beat their wives anymore.

In the other groups as well, some women suggested extreme measures. In two groups, hanging was suggested (in one instance by a man), in another, life imprisonment, and in several, jail sentences of shorter duration. A few suggestions reflected grisly flights of

imagination, for example, having members of the army “catch them and trample them so their entrails would come out of their bodies”. One woman said, “I wish I could cut off his head and eat it!” A middle-aged woman in the group that included several men said bitterly, “[Someone] ought to catch hold of the husband and members of the father-in-law’s household and crush them under a grinding wheel—then we would see if their oppression is reduced.” The men in the group kept silent at that point. Another woman, later in the discussion, added, “If the government enacted a law providing that anyone who takes dowry would be hanged, then no one would take dowry and oppression [of women] would diminish.”

Implied in the group discussions and in many individual interviews was a sense that outside intervention was needed to stop IPV. When asked directly what could be done besides punishing abusers, women made a variety of suggestions, all involving interventions by the government or NGOs (Schuler et al 2006b).

Discussion

One of the most troubling features of IPV is that it is so often socially condoned. In surveys conducted in a wide variety of settings worldwide, both men and women openly say that it is justified under various circumstances (Heise et al. 1999; Kishor and Johnson 2004). In our survey 76% of women experienced IPV and 84% named one or more scenarios in which they said it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife. In contrast, in the context of in-depth interviews and group discussions about IPV, many women strongly articulated the idea that IPV is wrong and should be stopped.

The wording of the survey questions implies an intention to elicit individual attitudes regarding the legitimacy of GBV. In light of the qualitative findings, however, we suspect that in the survey women may often have expressed their perceptions of prevailing norms rather than articulating their own attitudes – our pre-testing of the questions notwithstanding. Several researchers who have applied these or similar questions in large-scale surveys in a variety of settings have developed similar perspectives (Kishor, personal communication; Ellsberg and Heise, personal communication).¹⁰ In all likelihood such questions tend to pick up a mix of own attitudes and community norms.

Both research and clinical experience suggest that under-reporting of marital or intimate partner violence in surveys may be common (Ellsberg et al. 2001; Heise 1994; Watts 2002); it is probably rare in surveys for women to over-report partner violence against them. Hence, rates of IPV based on population-based surveys may be assumed to represent minimum prevalence levels. The reasons women may under-report their husbands' violence against them includes shame and a tendency not to recognize certain types of behavior as violence in settings where physical punishment is considered a husband's prerogative (Heise 1994). In contrast, our findings suggest that in some contexts, survey responses regarding the acceptability of men's violence against their wives may over-represent the extent to which it is condoned.

Mental health practitioners dealing with IPV in developed countries have noted a tendency for female victims to feel ashamed and to blame themselves for violence against

them, particularly when the inegalitarian gender system in which they are embedded is invisible to them in the sense that it is experienced as the natural order of things. Laing (2001), for example, writing about IPV in Australia, refers to the “isolation and self blame that [abused] women experience when they do not link their experiences within the wider context of gender relations.” Arguably, the phenomenon of self-blame could explain the statements of the vast majority of women in our survey who indicated that men were justified in beating their wives in at least one of several circumstances mentioned. Yet, we found little in our qualitative data to support this interpretation. Abused women in our study often spoke at great length about their emotional as well as physical suffering, but they rarely expressed shame at being abused. Thus, ironically, the ubiquity of IPV in this society may have a positive side--in that an abused woman may be less inclined to experience her situation as an aberration for which she herself is responsible.

Another small base for optimism amidst these discouraging findings was women’s articulateness about their situations and their strong sense that their human rights were being violated. The extreme punishments that some women suggested when asked what might be done to prevent men’s violence against their wives illustrate the depth of their frustration, their sense that they are not strong enough to resist such violence on their own, and their desperation for some sort of intervention. Their felt need for outside help of course does not mean that women in rural Bangladesh will never be strong enough to resist IPV individually or by banding together with their neighbors but, at least in the

villages where this study took place, they plainly do not feel they are strong enough to do so under the present circumstances.

Heise, Ellsberg and Gottemoeller (1999) note that societies often develop distinctions between reasons for violence against women, defining some violence as just, or acceptable, and other violence as unjust or unacceptable. We saw this very clearly in our study. For example, study participants often discussed dowry-related violence but not a single participant expressed approval of it. In contrast, some justified violence against wives who were seen as rude and disrespectful to their husbands and in-laws. Participants in our study also drew distinctions as to what level of violence was acceptable and under what circumstances, condemning extreme violence and violence they viewed as disproportionate to the woman's "offense". Village-level fluctuations revealed in our survey, both in the prevalence of IPV and in the extent to which it was condoned (regardless of whether the survey responses reflected respondents' attitudes, their perceptions of community norms, or a mix of the two), suggests that social norms may evolve over time, such that the threshold level of accepted violence gradually changes within a community. Koenig et al. (2003) also report substantial variation in the prevalence of domestic violence, both between the two regions in their study, one of which was more and the other less conservative, and among villages within each region. Studies (e.g., Kishor's 2004) also show wide variations among countries, both in prevalence and level of acceptance.

Conclusions

Two limitations of this study are that our qualitative interviews were not specifically designed to test the validity of the survey questions regarding women's attitudes toward IPV, and that a relatively small number of interviews were extensively used to illustrate attitudes that women may rarely articulate. As the interviews did not directly explore what women meant in the survey, part of the apparent discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative findings may reflect differences in women's (unstated) frames of reference when talking about IPV in the contexts of two different types of interviews. For example, in saying that it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife when she disobeyed him, it is conceivable that women often were thinking of repeated, overt disobedience and comparatively mild hitting, whereas when they expressed extreme outrage in the context of a group discussion, they may have been thinking of what they considered to be unprovoked or extreme violence.

Nonetheless, the overall tone of the women's remarks when they strongly condemned IPV and suggested extreme measures to stop it implies that they saw IPV as a very widespread problem in their society. This study does not provide clear evidence as to why survey respondents might misrepresent their attitudes regarding IPV (whether, for example, they were articulating collective norms as they perceived them rather than their own attitudes, as intended) but our findings do suggest that further qualitative studies may be needed to interpret the results of surveys on attitudes regarding IPV.

The high percentage of women in our survey who reported being subjected to IPV, women's openness to engage in group discussions about it, their strong belief that such violence is wrong, and their conviction that perpetrators should be punished, suggests that anti-violence interventions would be well-received in these communities. Given women's general lack of reticence to disclose violence against them if, for example, screening, counseling and referral for legal and other services were built into primary health care services, one might expect large numbers of women to take advantage of them (provided the system was well-designed and implemented with sensitivity). Solidarity groups (either newly formed or existing NGO membership groups) also might provide a viable mechanism for providing emotional support and emergency shelter for IPV victims. Eventually such groups may find ways to intervene collectively to pressure male perpetrators to modify their behavior, possibly with support from nonviolent men (in this study there were some). Community-based interventions by local NGOs such as alternative dispute resolution (*shalish*) reform initiatives have shown some promise in organizing women to resist violence (Siddiqi 2003). The deep roots of IPV in this society do not justify inaction.

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¹ Some of the apparent variation among countries in the prevalence of IPV probably reflects methodological differences in measurement, however. (WHO 2002 #5042)

² The highest rate, 54%, was reported for ages 15-24. No overall figure was given.

³ Each of the studies from Bangladesh mentioned here included a different set of variables. In the interests of space, this discussion of findings is limited to key findings that can be easily compared. Null results are not mentioned.

⁴ The BIDS study reports only bivariate findings, while the findings from other survey analyses mentioned here are from multivariate regression models.

⁵ The survey with women also included some older women, as it was administered to three categories of respondents: a) women who were interviewed as part of a survey conducted in 1994 by Schuler and colleagues of all married women of reproductive age in the 6 study villages; b) all other married women below age 50. A separate questionnaire was used for married sons of female respondents.

⁶ Consistent with these guidelines, women were asked six questions about specific acts of violence of increasing severity committed against them by their husbands ever and in the past 12 months. Potential bias due to subjective perceptions of “abuse” was minimized in that all of these questions referred to actual behaviors. The men’s questionnaire was much shorter and consisted mainly of questions intended to elicit gender-related attitudes, including attitudes towards IPV.

⁷ SPData, developed by Michael D. Nossaman.

⁸ Unfortunately, no programs or services for victims of IPV were available in the local areas, so we were unable to provide referrals for those who disclosed violence.

⁹ In the 2004 DHS women were not asked whether they had experienced IPV. Men were asked about actual abuse of their wives but the results were not included in the 2004 DHS report. Unfortunately, we do not have data that would enable us to investigate why the men in our survey appeared to condone IPV to a much greater extent than those in the DHS sample. However the average age of men in our sample was lower (because the male sample consisted of married sons of women in the survey). In our study, younger women were found to be at greater risk of abuse (Bates et al 2004) and younger women, on average, have younger husbands. Thus it is possible that younger men were more likely to say IPV was acceptable in order to rationalize their own behavior.

¹⁰ Investigators in the WHO cross-national study in fact wanted to elicit community-level norms. After considering various options they concluded that in a survey of this nature the most effective method for doing so would be by aggregating at a cluster level responses to questions regarding respondents’ own attitudes (Ellsberg and Heise, personal communication). Their interpretations of correlations between attitudes toward and experience of IPV reflect this perspective (Garcia-Moreno et al 2005: 38-40).

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Figure 1: Percentages of married women experiencing violence in past year by age group, 2002 (N=1186)

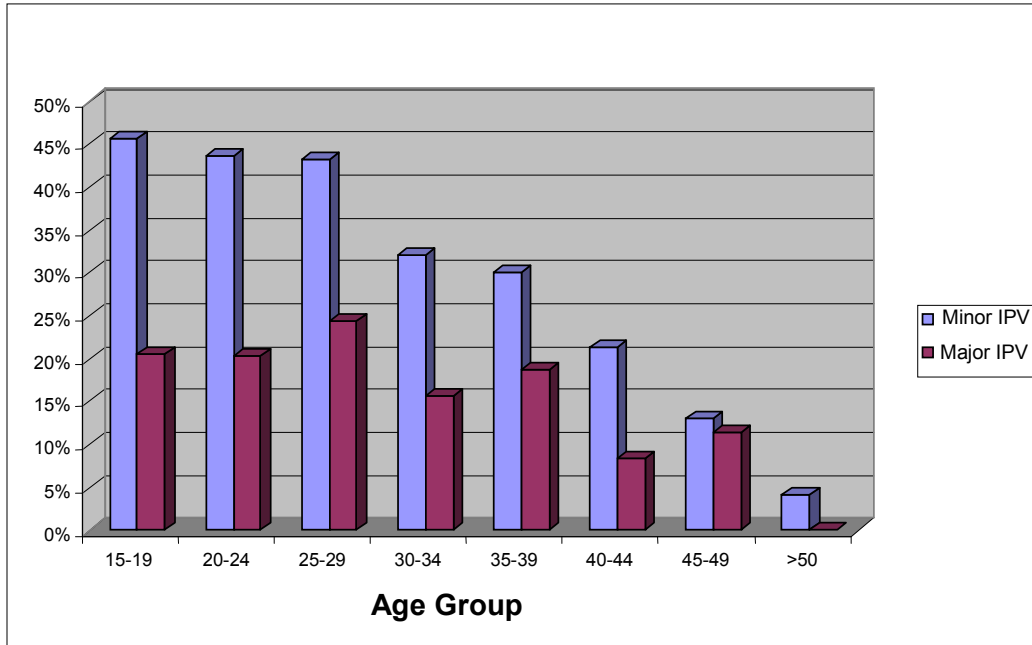


Table 1: When it is considered acceptable for a man to beat his wife

Acceptable to beat wife if:	% Female Respondents (N=1,186)	% Male Respondents (N=320)
She disobeys	52	52
She talks back	59	47
She goes out without permission	60	38
She wastes money	60	55
She refuses sex	33	37
you suspect wife is unfaithful	NA	38

Figure 2: Percentages condoning IPV by village, 2002 survey

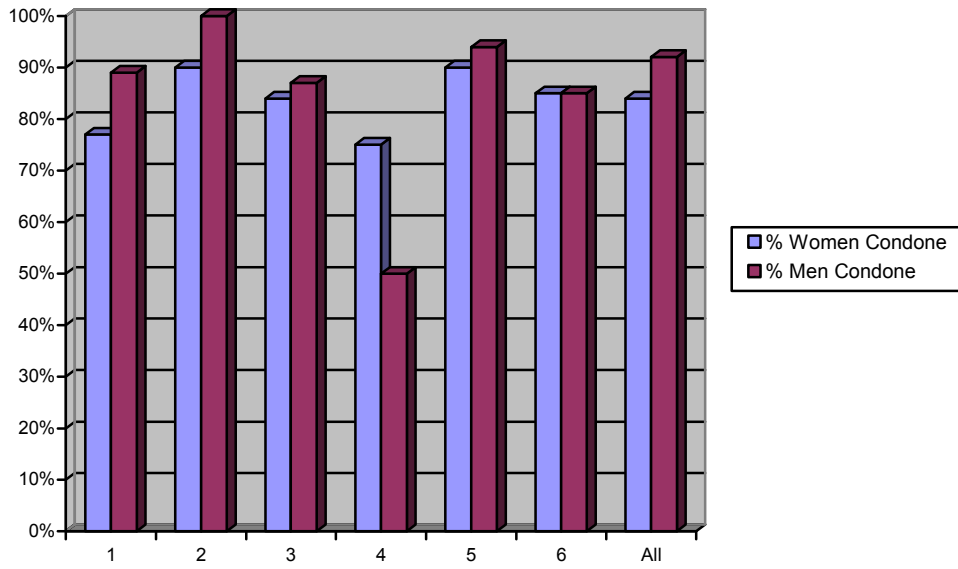


Figure 3: Percentages of married women beaten by husbands, ever and in past year, by village, 2002 (N=1186)

