

Indigenous Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Study on Gender-Based Violence

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ABSTRACT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh occupies a geopolitically significant position due to its borders with India and Myanmar, its natural resources, and its complex historical and political contexts. For decades, Indigenous Peoples of the CHT have struggled for self-determination, land rights, and survival, but successive state policies—marked by militarisation, Bengali settler transmigration, and systemic discrimination—have produced widespread violence, displacement, and marginalization. The 1997 CHT Peace Accord formally ended over two decades of armed conflict, yet key provisions, including demilitarisation, land dispute resolution, and rehabilitation of displaced peoples, remain largely unimplemented. Women and girls, excluded from peace negotiations, continue to face gendered impacts of conflict, including sexual violence, abduction, and impunity for perpetrators. The failure of the state to address communal violence and ensure justice has eroded trust in formal legal systems. As a result, many Indigenous communities, despite support from NGOs, continue to rely on traditional justice mechanisms, which are perceived as more accessible and culturally familiar, though increasingly contested by Indigenous women's rights activists. Drawing on primary data collected through field observations, structured surveys of 100 respondents, three focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with ten experts, alongside secondary sources, the research highlights both the persistence of impunity in formal legal systems and the contested reliance on traditional justice mechanisms. Findings reveal the resilience of indigenous women and communities, while underscoring the urgent need for state accountability, implementation of peace accord provisions, and gender-sensitive policies. The study contributes to broader debates on indigenous rights, peacebuilding, and gender justice.

Keyword: Gender based Violence (GVB), Traditional justice, Indigenous women, gender justice

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Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), located in southeastern Bangladesh, is a region of unique geopolitical, ecological, and cultural significance. Bordered by India and Myanmar, and endowed with natural resources, the CHT has long been a contested space where questions of sovereignty, identity, and rights intersect. For Indigenous Peoples, the CHT represents not only a homeland but also the center of protracted struggles for land rights, cultural survival, and political self-determination. However, the history of militarisation, demographic engineering through state-sponsored transmigration of Bengali settlers, and systemic discrimination has shaped a legacy of violence and displacement that continues to define the region. The 1997 CHT Peace Accord was heralded as a turning point, formally ending decades of armed insurgency and

promising autonomy, demilitarisation, and rehabilitation of displaced Indigenous peoples. Yet, more than two decades later, the Accord remains only partially implemented. Contentious issues such as land disputes, demilitarisation, and the recognition of Indigenous rights remain unresolved, perpetuating insecurity and distrust. Within this context, Indigenous women and girls have been disproportionately affected. Despite their exclusion from peace negotiations, they continue to bear the brunt of violence in both public and private spheres, ranging from sexual violence and abduction to structural barriers in accessing justice, health, and education. A critical concern emerging from this situation is the erosion of Indigenous women's trust in formal legal institutions. Survivors often encounter bureaucratic hurdles, high costs, linguistic barriers, and widespread impunity, which discourage them from

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seeking redress through state systems. Consequently, traditional justice mechanisms—headed by Karbaris, Headmen, and Circle Chiefs—remain central to community dispute resolution. These forums are culturally embedded, affordable, and accessible, yet their capacity to deliver justice in cases of gender-based violence (GBV) is contested. While many families prefer these mechanisms for their familiarity and legitimacy, Indigenous women's rights activists highlight that such forums frequently reproduce patriarchal norms, prioritising community harmony over survivor safety and accountability.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how Indigenous women in the CHT experience gender-based violence and navigate the plural justice landscape. It examines the role of traditional justice systems in addressing GBV, their strengths and limitations, and the extent to which they interact with formal state institutions and NGO interventions. By centering Indigenous women's perspectives and drawing on feminist legal and intersectional frameworks, this research seeks to illuminate pathways toward a more inclusive and rights-respecting justice system for the CHT.

Research Objectives

- ✓ To investigate how often, what kind, and what trends of gender-based violence (GBV) Indigenous women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts face, with a focus on domestic/community and conflict-related situations.
- ✓ To analyze the role of traditional justice systems (e.g., Karbaris, Headmen, Circle Chiefs) in addressing GBV cases, including their procedures, sanctions, and outcomes.
- ✓ To develop context-specific recommendations for harmonizing customary justice systems with formal legal frameworks and NGO initiatives, ensuring greater protection of Indigenous women's rights and survivor-centered approaches.

Methodology:

This study utilizes a combination of primary and secondary data collected from various sources. Primary data have been gathered through field observations, questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, photographs, and maps. People's perceptions were recorded through field surveys using structured questionnaires. A pre-

designed open-ended questionnaire was developed for in-depth interviews, which were conducted with ten renowned experts and resource persons. Their insights and opinions were documented through face-to-face interviews to enhance the study's findings.

A total of 100 samples were selected from different groups of residents within each study area. Three focus group discussion was also conducted. Additionally, recommendations from relevant authorities were considered in the study area. Secondary information on violence was sourced from books, theses, reports, journal articles, and publications by various organizations and various NGOs and research institutions.

Theoretical framework:

Feminist theory argues that GBV is rooted in patriarchal structures, gender inequality, and the normalization of male dominance (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). This perspective views violence as a mechanism used to maintain male power and control in society. In the CHT, Indigenous women often experience patriarchal norms both within their communities and in broader state structures, making feminist theory essential for understanding the gendered nature of violence.

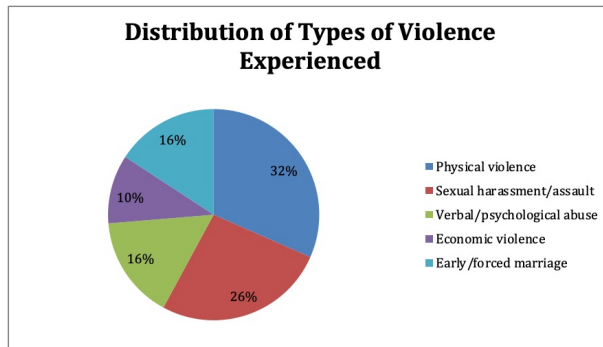
Galtung (1969) describes structural violence as social, political, and economic systems that harm individuals by restricting their rights, opportunities, and security. In the CHT, long-term conflict, militarization, and institutional neglect contribute to conditions where Indigenous women face heightened vulnerability to GBV. Limited access to legal aid, healthcare, and protection services reflects systemic inequalities embedded in state structures.

The UNPFII recognizes Indigenous women as among the most marginalized groups globally, experiencing compounded discrimination due to their ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. They play a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting traditional knowledge, yet face significant challenges to the full enjoyment of their human rights. (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII). "Gender-based violence refers to any violence that is directed at an individual based on their biological sex, gender identity or perceived gender, and includes physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, whether occurring in public or private life." World Health Organization. (2012).

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"Customary or traditional justice systems constitute the legal pluralism present in many societies, functioning alongside formal state courts. They derive legitimacy from historical practice, community consensus, and social recognition rather than statutory authority. (Ubink, J. M., & Quan, J. (2008)

Findings and discussion:

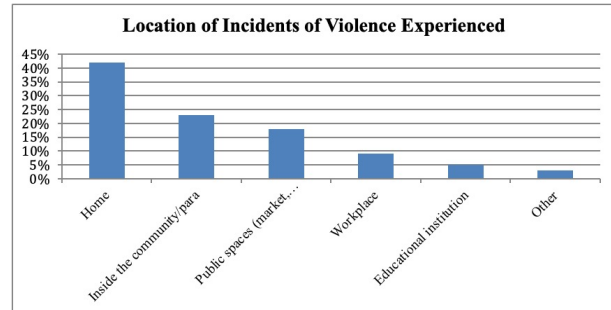


This pie chart visualizes the distribution of the different types of violence reported by respondents of three districts in the survey.

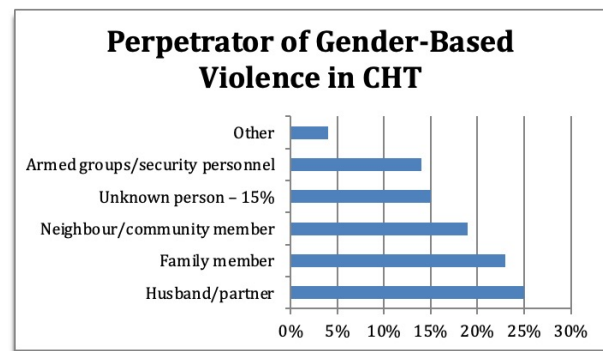
The pie chart illustrates the distribution of different forms of violence experienced by respondents. Physical violence (32%) emerges as the most commonly reported type, indicating its continued prevalence and the high level of personal insecurity faced by many individuals. **Sexual** harassment/assault (26%) is the second most frequent, highlighting widespread exposure to gendered sexual violence.

Both verbal/psychological abuse and early/forced marriage (16% each) represent significant non-physical forms of violence, suggesting that emotional coercion and harmful socio-cultural practices remain persistent issues. Economic violence (10%), though the least reported, still reflects notable financial control and resource restrictions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that gender-based violence is multifaceted, with both physical and non-physical abuses contributing to the vulnerabilities of the affected population.



The findings show that most GBV incidents occur at home (42%), indicating that domestic spaces are the primary site of violence. Community/para areas account for 23%, reflecting harassment or conflict within local social networks. Public spaces (18%) show risks during daily movement, while workplaces (9%) and educational institutions (5%) represent smaller but notable areas of vulnerability. The remaining 3% occur in other locations such as forests, jhum fields, or security zones.



The chart shows who perpetrated gender-based violence (GBV) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) based on respondents' reports.

Husband/partner (25%) is the most common perpetrator, indicating that GBV is largely happening within intimate relationships. Family members (23%) are the second-highest group, showing that a significant portion of violence occurs inside the household. Neighbour/community members (19%) also contribute notably, reflecting community-level risks. Unknown persons (15%) represent incidents involving strangers, often in public spaces. Armed groups/security personnel (14%) indicate a conflict-linked or authority-linked dimension of violence in the region. Other (4%) includes teachers, employers, local leaders, or others not listed. Overall, the chart highlights that most GBV incidents in CHT are perpetrated by people known to the victim, especially intimate partners and family members.

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The study demonstrated that the indigenous women of CHT were subjected to a range of GBV, including physical and sexual abuse, financial hardship and psychological distress. They experienced it in the transit system, at work, at home, and in public areas. The offenders were also diverse, including family members, members of their own group, and others who were predominantly Bengali. The reasons for this were equally varied and numerous.

These case studies include 16 incidents of sexual assault and rape in Rangamati, 14 in Khagrachari and 13 in Bandarban. 97% of these cases involved women and girls in extreme poverty. Case studies of 2025 include 19 incidents of rape and gang-rape, five of attempt to rape, six of murder, eight of assault and sexual harassment, including four school children by their teacher, and five of abduction.

The fact that the CHT has no officially recorded cases of domestic violence is notable. Despite its obligations to prevent systematic abuse of indigenous women and girls in the house or within the family, the state continues to pay little attention to these issues. Human rights abuses. Indigenous people aim to preserve customary law and the traditional justice system, and headmen and karbaries were traditionally employed to resolve domestic abuse cases. Families usually didn't want to look into these matters outside of the established authorities in their communities.

However, indigenous women's rights advocates contend that the traditional justice system urgently needs to be reformed because headmen and karbaries have varying capacities, are gender sensitive and lack sufficient and efficient accountability mechanisms.

Thirty-one of these cases include girls between the ages of four and eighteen, indicating that the security and safety of minors and young adults is a critical concern. One respondent specifically emphasizes anguish and embarrassment after experiencing sexual harassment, while another reports excruciating stomach ache following violent sexual assault and rape. Girls' general and reproductive health are severely impacted by rape and sexual assault. Due to inadequate healthcare, they have high rates of maternal and child mortality, severe harm to their reproductive systems, and an elevated risk of HIV/AIDS and STDs.

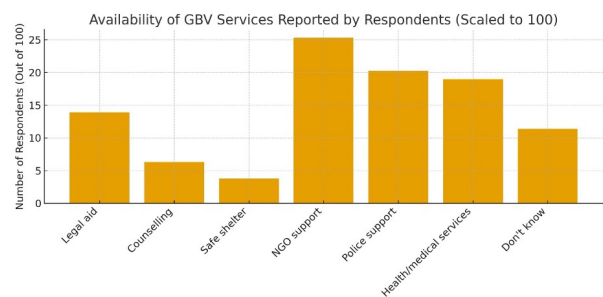
The case studies also demonstrate how sexual assault, including harassment, often takes place in settings like schools that are thought to be safe. Teachers and peers are among the perpetrators. For example, as the case studies indicate, three teachers were allegedly involved in rape and sexual harassment cases and in another incident a 16-year-old Bengali boy was allegedly involved in a sexual assault of a girl class mate. Over 14 girls were sexually attacked by a male school teacher in one documented event over the course of a year.

Indigenous women and girls are heavily involved in the production of food, especially in agriculture, which includes wet rice farming, horticulture, and shifting (jum) cultivation. Nevertheless, they are not safe or protected at work. In rural and isolated areas, women and girls are particularly more susceptible. Due to SGBV during regular activities, women in rural regions are quickly losing their freedom of movement.

Six cases specifically mentioned attacks on girls and violent murders of women during political violence. These show that two primary causes of violence against women and girls are land conflicts and intercommunal animosity, which are often stoked by national political parties.

Threats and intimidation were mentioned by every respondent as strategies used to stop them from pursuing justice.

The safety of women and girls with disabilities is another issue; three rape and violence cases involving parents or victims with impairments were reported in the case studies. In every case, the local community mediation procedures enabled financial settlements, and none of these incidents led to cases being filed with the court. Focusing on monetary compensation or rushing any settlement runs the risk of undermining the fundamental goal, which is a guarantee to act in the victim's "best interest."



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The distribution of responses regarding the availability of GBV-related services reveals notable disparities in service provision across the study area. When scaled to 100 respondents, the findings show that NGO support services are the most widely reported (approximately 25.4%), indicating that non-governmental organizations play a central role in delivering GBV interventions. Police support (20.2%) and health/medical services (18.9%) also appear relatively accessible, reflecting the presence of basic institutional mechanisms for responding to GBV cases.

In contrast, the availability of legal aid is lower (13.9%), suggesting limitations in formal legal support or barriers in accessing justice mechanisms. More critically, counselling services (6.3%) and safe shelter facilities (3.8%) are reported at markedly low levels. These services are essential for providing psychosocial support and immediate protection for survivors, and their limited presence highlights significant service gaps in the region. Additionally, approximately 11.4% of respondents reported being unaware of any available services (“Don’t know”). This lack of awareness indicates not only potential gaps in service outreach and communication but also reflects the broader challenges survivors may face in navigating existing support systems.

Overall, the data suggests that while some institutional and NGO-led services are relatively visible, the availability of comprehensive survivor-centered services—particularly safe shelter and counselling—remains limited. This underscores the need for strengthened service delivery, improved coordination among service providers, and enhanced community-level awareness to ensure effective and holistic GBV response mechanisms.

While some women and girls choose to remain silent, our FGDs show that this is not the only reason why they have limited or no access to justice. The state's active cooperation in giving offenders impunity—sometimes under the pretense of protective laws, sometimes under the pretense of national integrity and security—is essential to maintaining the silence. The conditions of impunity therefore go mostly uncontested, supported by culture, reinforced by the government, and frequently with the active cooperation of non-state actors.

Recommendations

Promote Economic Empowerment and Education

Introduce livelihood programs and vocational training targeted at Indigenous women survivors of violence. Provide scholarships and educational support for Indigenous girls to reduce vulnerability associated with early marriage and poverty. Support income-generating initiatives that enhance financial autonomy, reducing women’s dependency on abusive partners.

Enhance Local Governance and Indigenous Participation

Ensuring Indigenous women’s active involvement in local governance, including traditional councils and development committees. Providing capacity-building and leadership training for Indigenous women to facilitate their representation in decision-making. We should also adopt community-driven approaches that respect Indigenous cultural norms and autonomy.

Address Structural and Contextual Barriers

Child protection strategies

Children are frequently the victims of violence. It is nearly usually the case that a child who has been raped has been abandoned or unprotected. Because gathering water or bringing in food from Jhum land requires traveling long distances, women in the Hills sometimes go to work just as often as men. Child protection measures should be used by organizations working in this field, and they should ensure that remote locations are covered.

Legal empowerment strategies

Lastly, women in the highlands lack legal knowledge. Even if there are organizations working in this field, efforts should be made to broaden their offerings and look for more creative ways to make these lessons applicable to people's everyday lives.

Provide necessary Information

It is important to provide information about educational and employment prospects for women so that they are not readily taken advantage of by parties and entrenched interest groups. This can be accomplished through community radio, various schools, and institutions.

Neighborhood or hill watch committees

Because of the remote locations of the CHT where violence against women frequently occurs, communities must pool their resources and create groups like Hill Watch Committees that will periodically monitor the

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situation. Additionally, the government should consider extending mobile coverage in the CHT, and social services should consider utilizing the community radio system and creating an efficient method of reporting crimes.

Domestic violence

Even though domestic abuse instances are currently underreported, appropriate mechanisms must be established so that women feel secure enough to seek assistance. The system of counseling services needs to be improved, because both victims and offenders frequently require treatment. The Karbari-Headman system in the CHT has a long history of informal justice, thus efforts must be taken to make it more gender-sensitive and perhaps include a female volunteer force.

Improving transportation and communication networks to enhance access to services for remote Indigenous villages is also necessary. Beside this, reducing militarization in everyday community life and ensure accountability for abuses by security actors. Addressing structural inequalities through policies promoting land rights, political representation, and socio-economic inclusion of Indigenous women.

These recommendations aim to address GBV among Indigenous women through legal reform, improved services, community engagement, structural change, and culturally sensitive approaches. Implementing these measures can contribute significantly to creating a safer, more equitable environment for Indigenous women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Conclusion

The multifaceted form of gender-based violence (GBV) that Indigenous women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) face is highlighted in this study. The results show how gender inequality, ethnic marginalization, militarism, and structural disadvantage interact to shape GBV in the area. The vulnerability of Indigenous women is further increased by their limited access to secure shelters, psychosocial counseling, legal aid, and culturally relevant services. The theoretical framework demonstrates that GBV in the CHT is not just a personal or family issue but also has deep roots in larger social, political, and institutional contexts. It does this by drawing on feminist, intersectionality, structural

violence, and ecological perspectives. The study emphasizes how critical it is to address GBV in a comprehensive and culturally aware manner. To ensure survivors' safety and dignity, it is crucial to empower Indigenous women, strengthen institutional mechanisms, improve access to justice, and raise community awareness. Sustainable change requires addressing systemic injustices and encouraging meaningful Indigenous women's participation in development and governance. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on GBV in marginalized communities and calls for coordinated action across government, civil society, and Indigenous institutions to effectively combat violence against Indigenous women in the CHT.

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