

Bengali Women's Experiences during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 was the result of a mass uprising against the Pakistani military regime, and a wide range of individuals and groups participated in the war. Students, laborers, and members of the East Pakistani army, police, and border guards made up the majority of the opposition force. In addition to them, millions of common people helped combatants with supplies, food, housing, support, and knowledge; the women's efforts are particularly noteworthy. The goal of the study was to investigate those experiences that women had during the liberation war. The article is a review-based investigation using secondary data. There has been a review of recent and previous studies related to the war of liberation in Bangladesh against West Pakistan. These reviewed studies were gathered using keywords such as "Liberation war," "female experience," and "Bangladesh", "1971" to search resources from different databases, including ScienceDirect, ERIC, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, peer-reviewed publications, and university websites. From a feminist research perspective, the study discovered that women were more likely to endure both physical violence and sexual assault. The study reveals how women's bodies were used as battlegrounds by the Pakistani army and their local allies.

Keywords: Liberation war, women's experience, Bangladesh, 1971, gender perspectives

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of human history, war has been a feature of human civilization. People from different countries, particularly those in the military services, fight each other for a variety of causes, including political philosophy, religious beliefs, and dynastic objectives (Dasgupta, 1978). British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent ended in 1947, and two independent nations, India and Pakistan, emerged based on religious beliefs. Pakistan consisted of two parts: East Pakistan and West Pakistan have distinct cultures, ways of religious practice,

and language. East and West Pakistan's distinct socioeconomic and cultural circumstances directly led to the 1971 War for the Liberation of Bangladesh (Lipi, 2024). Researchers believe that Bangladesh was subjected to discrimination by West Pakistani officials, and a bloody conflict between East and West Pakistan resulted from a revolutionary movement for self-determination (Ibrahim, 1998; Imam, 1986; Kabir, 1999). Millions of individuals were ruthlessly murdered, randomly attacked, and tortured throughout the nine months of the conflict, which ran from March 26, 1971, to December 16, 1971, because of their political, religious, or cultural beliefs (Hussain, 2007). When people discuss the Liberation War of Bangladesh, they frequently discuss the sacrifices made by the great leaders and how they established a parliament or declared independence (Firdousi, 1996). However, we sometimes overlook the fact that women, children, and civilians suffered the greatest casualties because they were the ones who fought the war both directly and indirectly (Begum, 2001). The Bengalis fought back against the Pakistani soldiers when they attacked the unarmed people of East Pakistan. Among the resistant forces, women contributed both directly and indirectly to the battle (Akhtar et al., 2001). Their anguish and struggle were very different from those of men (Ulfat, 2022). In fact, more than 5 lakh women were sexually assaulted during the 1971 freedom fight (Islam, 1981). The accomplishments of these women must be acknowledged. Women have been abandoned throughout patriarchal history (Mamdani, 2001). They received no justice at all. When the Independence War of Bangladesh originally started, women took part in it in many different ways (Jahan, 2004). Women of many religious backgrounds, including Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, participated in the struggle for freedom. Along with Bengalis, indigenous women also participated in the battle for freedom (Liberation War Museum, 1987). However, the Bangladeshi government did not provide female parliamentarians with administrative authority throughout the fight, nor did it train women in combat or equip them for guerrilla warfare (Khan, 1998). Women's desire to work was unwavering. They expressed a strong desire to take part in the conflict (Ibrahim, 1998; Imam, 1986; Kabir, 1999). For instance, around 300 young women were prepared for the Liberation War in Kolkata under the leadership of politician Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury (Liberation War Museum, 1994). The Gobra camp provided weapons instruction (Liberation War Museum, 1987). At that period, women were also encouraged to participate in the war like men; they were often disguised as young men to actively fight against Pak army (Liberation War Museum, 1994). Hence, it is equally important to acknowledge the sacrifice of the female freedom fighters in this context. Women also contributed to the war of liberation by giving assistance and care to war-wounded freedom fighters, handing over weapons, hiding freedom fighters at home, gathering supplies, food, and clothing for them (Ibrahim, 1998; Imam, 1986; Kabir, 1999). In the midst of the conflict, many of them played a crucial role as nurses in the Bangladesh Field Hospital, providing medical assistance (Jahan, 2004). For the most part, this is how women have performed a steadfast part in the fight for the liberation of Bangladesh. During the war of liberation, women's participation was multifaceted, and hence this study seeks to investigate their experience during this period.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The general objective of this study is to analyze, through a systematic review of secondary sources, the diverse roles and experiences of Bengali women in the 1971 Liberation War, including direct and indirect support to freedom fighters as well as experiences of sexual abuse, and to interpret these findings through a gender lens that recognizes women simultaneously as historical actors and as targets of gendered violence.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

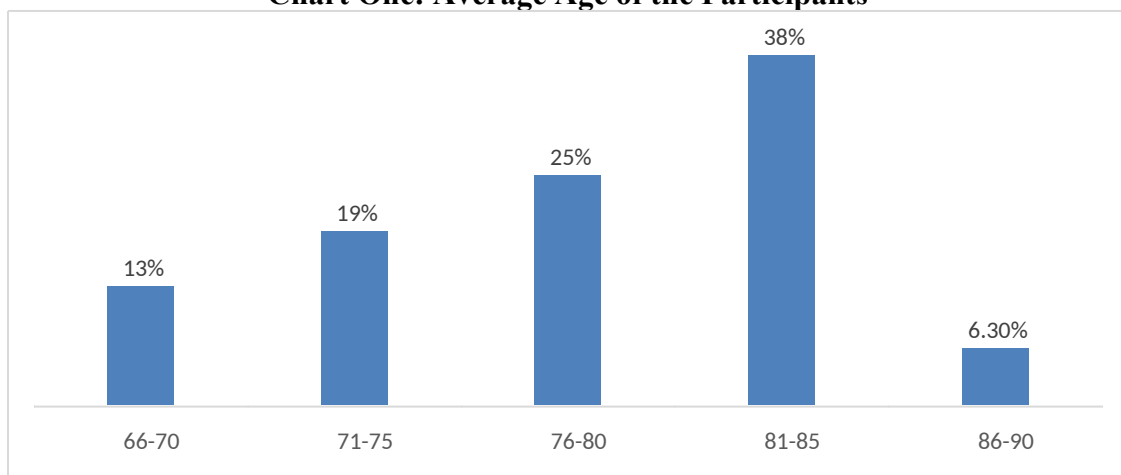
This study employed a qualitative-dominant systematic literature review with quantitative synthesis of select secondary data. The design is thematic and gender-sensitive, aimed at

identifying, categorizing, and critically interpreting documented experiences of Bengali women during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. Given the sensitive nature of gendered wartime violence and the absence of a single primary dataset covering all regions of Bangladesh, a review-based approach allowed for triangulation across multiple small-scale studies, memoirs, NGO reports, and historical archives. A systematic search was conducted across five electronic databases and two academic platforms. The databases were ScienceDirect, ERIC, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and PubMed (for trauma/health-related studies). On the other hand, the repositories were Peer-reviewed journals such as Journal of Genocide Research, Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, university websites such as University of Dhaka, Jahangirnagar University, University of Chittagong, and select international universities with South Asian studies programs, and digital archives such as Liberation War Museum, Dhaka; Genocide Archive, Bangladesh. Boolean operators were used to combine search terms such as "Liberation war," "1971 war," or "Bangladesh war of independence," "female experience," "women's role," or "gender perspective," "Bangladesh" or "East Pakistan," "sexual violence," "war crimes," or "women fighters." Additional snowball searching was performed by reviewing the reference lists of key retrieved articles. A thematic analysis of narrative data was conducted following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework to analyze the data. After the analysis of the data, results have been prepared both quantitatively and qualitatively based on the themes and categories. Limitations of the study include geographic bias, underreporting of sexual violence, and category non-standardization across primary studies.

IV. FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

In order to comprehend women's experiences during Bangladesh's 1971 War of Liberation, the research examined a number of publications, books, and articles. Following the qualitative examination of the data, the researchers used themes and categories identified by the thematic analysis to present the findings both numerically and qualitatively. The researchers have cited and cross-referenced their findings with those of other researchers when presenting the results. The current study's findings are shown below:

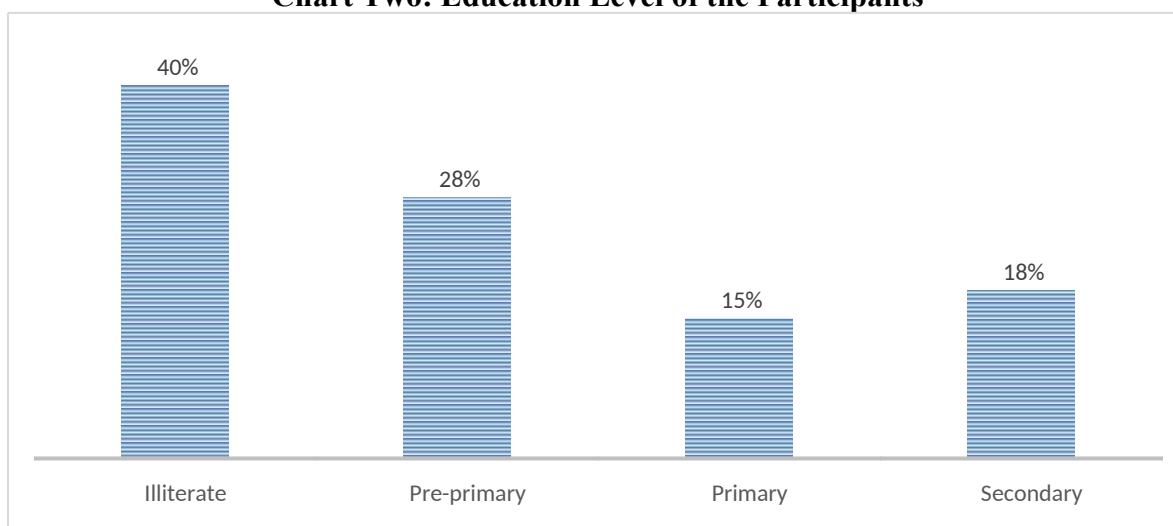
Chart One: Average Age of the Participants



This chart presents the age distribution of the women who shared their experiences across different studies; it is not a finding about war experiences but rather a methodological and demographic lens through which all previous data can be reinterpreted. Over six in ten participants (63%) were between 76 and 85 years old at the time of data collection, as determined through secondary sources. Women aged 76-85 in the survey year would have been approximately 20-35 years old during the Liberation War. This is the typical age range for young wives, new mothers, and reproductively active women. Historically, this is precisely the

demographic most vulnerable to wartime sexual violence, abduction, and displacement (Akhtar et al., 2001). Besides, Women in their late 70s to mid-80s can recall traumatic events from 50+ years ago, but memory may be fragmented, shaped by decades of retelling or suppression, and influenced by subsequent life events (Firdousi, 1996). Most of the women would have been married with young children, making them primary targets for the Pakistani army's systematic rape campaigns aimed at "impurifying" the Bengali gene pool and breaking family structures (Begum, 2001). At this age, they would have been managing households, caring for children and elderly in-laws, and potentially participating in resistance activities (hiding fighters, supplying food, nursing wounded) (Lipi, 2024). Moreover, in rural Bangladesh, women in their 20s and 30s without male protection, whose husbands had been arrested, fighting, or killed, were most exposed to violence (Mamoon, 2000). The age data reveal that the participants are predominantly women who were in their reproductive prime (20–35 years old) during the 1971 war. This is the correct target population for studying gendered wartime violence.

Chart Two: Education Level of the Participants



This chart presents the educational background of the women. From a gender perspective, education level is not merely a demographic variable but a critical determinant of wartime vulnerability, post-war recovery, and the very ability to narrate one's suffering in a research context. In the 1971 context, in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971, female literacy was extremely low, which was estimated at around 12-15% nationally, and much lower in rural areas. A 40% illiteracy rate among surviving elderly women is actually lower than the wartime population average, suggesting some selection bias toward somewhat more educated women. It likely refers to no formal schooling but some exposure to maktab (religious school learning Quranic recitation) or very early years of primary school before being withdrawn. In many cases, "pre-primary" may be a euphemism for minimal literacy, perhaps able to recognize letters or sign one's name but not read a sentence. The findings show that these women received just enough "education" to fulfill religious obligations but not enough for functional literacy. This reflects a deliberate patriarchal strategy: teach girls just enough to be "good Muslims" but not enough to seek employment, manage property, or challenge male authority (Jahan, 2004). This education level might have an impact on wartime experience. Firstly, illiterate women could not read military notices, news bulletins, or escape route information, and so they were likely to experience more violence during wartime (Jahan, 2004). Besides, they could not keep written records of lost family members, property deeds, or war crimes to pursue post-war justice (Jahan, 2004). They relied entirely on male relatives or neighbors for information, making them vulnerable to misinformation or abandonment.

Chart Three: Contribution to the War of Liberation

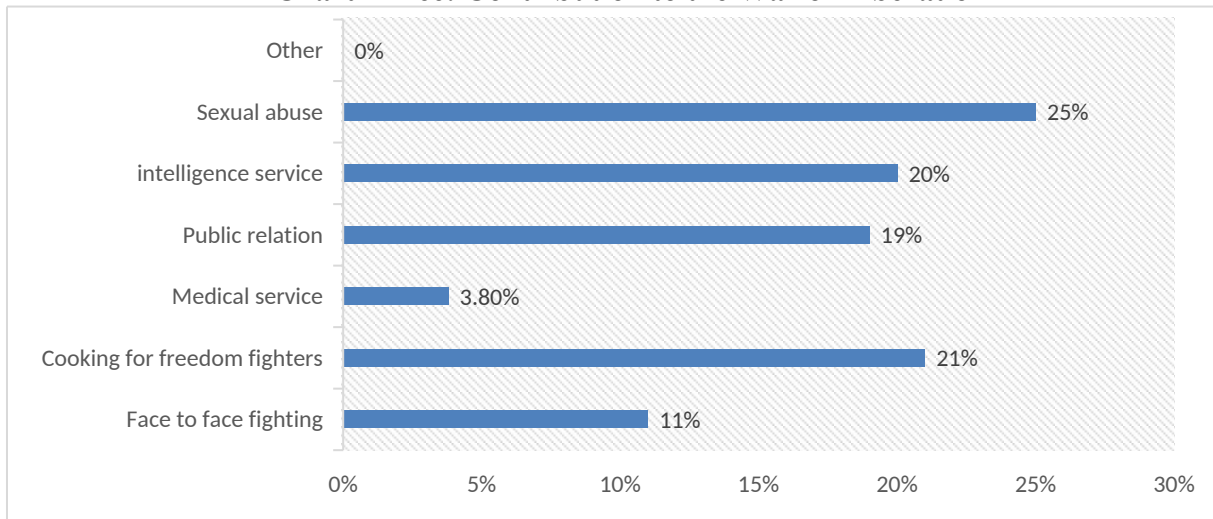
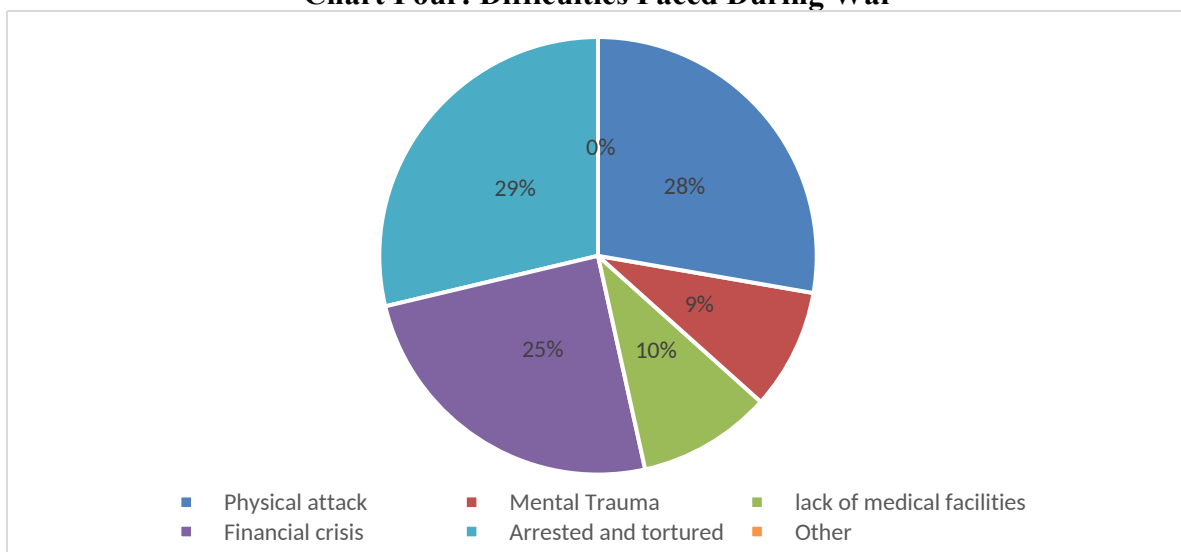


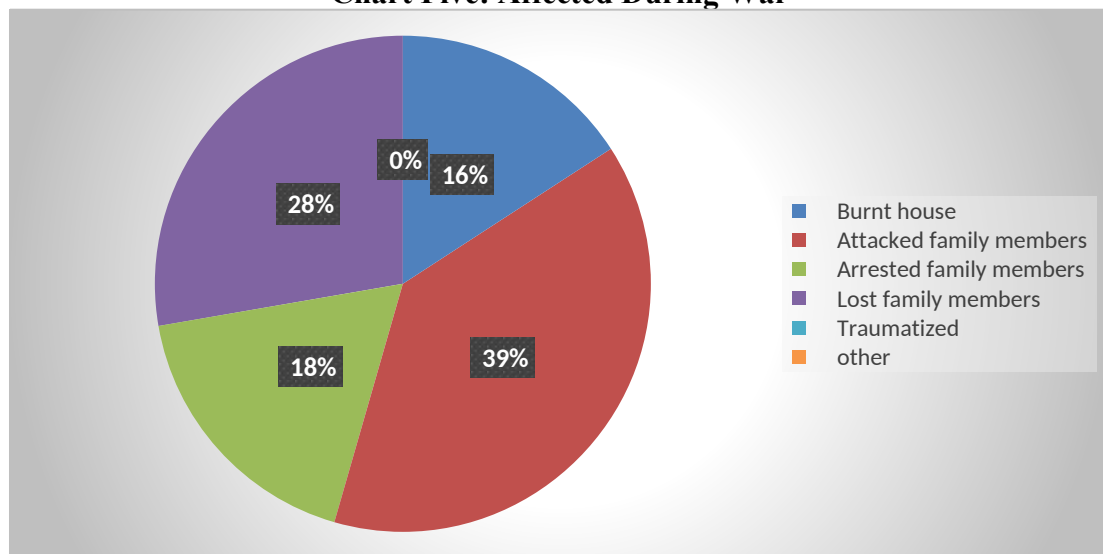
Chart three reveals that while 74.8% of women made direct or indirect contributions to the liberation struggle, most commonly through cooking (21%), intelligence work (20%), and public relations (19%). The single most frequently reported experience was sexual abuse, at 25%. This category represents the paper's primary gender-specific insight because it is the largest single experience. It involves forced pregnancies, sexual torture, and rape committed by the Pakistani military and their local allies (Ibrahim, 1998). Importantly, the evidence demonstrates that sexual violence did not prevent women from actively participating in their jobs, such as cooks, spies, or fighters who were also subjected to or threatened with sexual assault (Islam, 1981). However, care must be used because 25% probably underestimates the true incidence because of shame, stigma, and social exclusion following the conflict. The fact that it continues to be the highest category highlights how sexual fear is routinely employed as a weapon of war. Furthermore, 11% of women engaged in face-to-face combat, challenging assumptions of female passivity. The data collectively demonstrate that Bengali women occupied a dual position during the war, as indispensable non-combatant and combatant agents of liberation, and as primary targets of genocidal sexual violence (Islam, 1981). A gender perspective thus reframes the 1971 war not only as a national struggle but as a gendered battlefield where women's bodies were territories contested and violated even as they fought back.

Chart Four: Difficulties Faced During War



The analysis reveals that the most frequently cited difficulty faced by Bengali women during the 1971 Liberation War was arrest and torture (29%, closely followed by physical attack (28%) and financial crisis (25%). The combined majority (57%) of women reported direct physical violence, either through arrest/torture or physical attack. This strongly supports the article's gender perspective, as it aligns with historical evidence that the Pakistani military and its local collaborators systematically targeted Bengali women for sexual violence, mass rape, abduction, and brutal torture (Ulfat, 2022). Arrest and torture (29%) being the single highest category suggests that women were not merely caught in crossfire but were deliberately singled out by occupying forces as a strategy of terror and ethnic humiliation. Financial crisis accounts for 25% of reported difficulties. From a gender lens, this reflects how war exacerbated pre-existing patriarchal economic structures: women lost male breadwinners, became heads of households overnight, and faced extreme poverty due to the destruction of homes, looting of assets, and displacement to refugee camps in India (Lipi, 2024). It also points to the long-term struggle of widows and single mothers after the war. Mental trauma, being only 9%, is striking and likely underreported rather than absent. From a gender perspective, this low figure may be a sign that women were reluctant to disclose psychological suffering, especially related to sexual violence, due to shame and social ostracism. Besides, in post-war Bangladesh, physical and economic survival took precedence over mental health, which remains culturally underacknowledged.

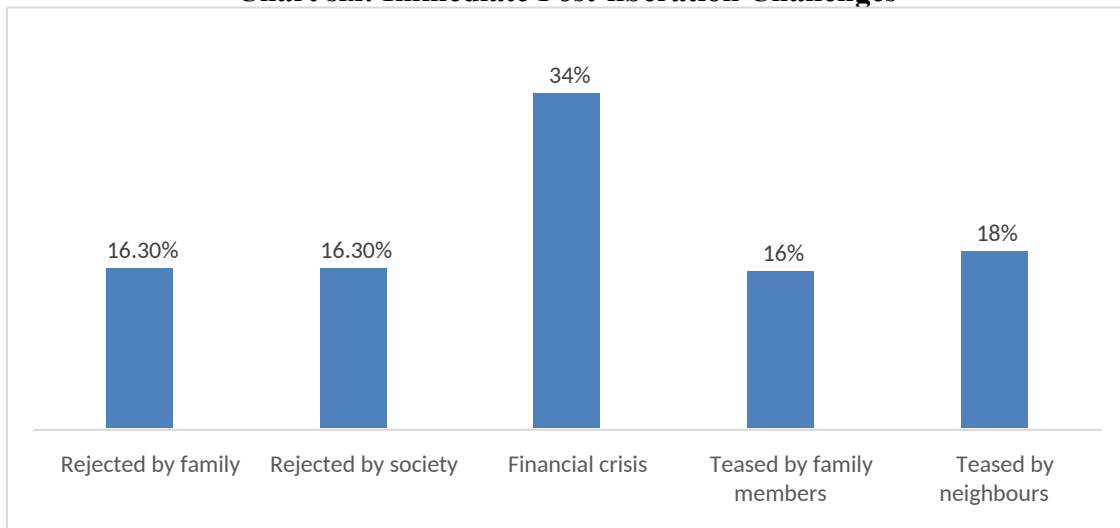
Chart Five: Affected During War



This table captures not what was done to women directly, but how women were affected through their family and household, a distinctly gendered lens, as women's wartime suffering has historically been mediated through their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. The highest reported category is attacked family members (39%). From a gender perspective, this is critical because even if not physically attacked themselves, women bore the trauma of watching fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons beaten, shot, or abducted (Lipi, 2024). After an attack, women were expected to nurse the injured, bury the dead, and manage household survival, often without medical or social support (Akhtar et al., 2001). Seeing family members attacked was itself a form of psychological warfare, intended to break women's morale and community cohesion (Begum, 2001). The second highest category (28%) reflects bereavement and widowhood. For Bengali women in 1971, the loss of a husband meant immediate loss of social identity, economic security, and protection from further violence (Akhtar et al., 2001). Many widows were later ostracized or forced into destitution (Lipi, 2024). Besides, the loss of a son or father removed potential breadwinners and defenders, leaving women solely responsible for surviving children

and elderly parents (Begum, 2001). The lowest among the listed categories (16%) still represents significant material loss, but its lower ranking suggests that women prioritized reporting harm to people over property. The gendered focus on family survival may have made house burning seem less urgent in self-reports.

Chart six: Immediate Post-liberation Challenges



This table is arguably the most revealing from a gender perspective, as it captures the betrayal women faced after the war ended, not from the enemy, but from their own families and communities. The highest reported post-liberation challenge is financial crisis (34%). From a gender perspective, this reflects that their husbands, fathers, and sons were killed, disappeared, or permanently disabled (Firdousi, 1996). Women who had never worked outside the home were suddenly sole providers (Ibrahim, 1998). Besides, Homes, livestock, crops, and small businesses were looted or burned during the war (Jahan, 2004). However, post-war rehabilitation was minimal. Moreover, unlike combatants, civilian women received no war pensions, land grants, or vocational training (Ulfat, 2022). Many fell into poverty, begging, or sex work for survival (Jahan, 2004). Women had to earn income and continue unpaid domestic labor like childcare, cooking, and fetching water without support. Combined, rejected by family (16.3%) and rejected by society (16.3%) constitute the second-largest category (32.6%). This is the hallmark of gendered post-war victimization. Women who were raped, abducted, or forced into "marriage" by Pakistani soldiers or collaborators were considered polluted or dishonored (Ibrahim, 1998). Families often expelled them to protect the family's "honor" (izzat). An estimated 25,000–30,000 women became pregnant due to wartime rape (Ibrahim, 1998). They faced near-total abandonment; some were forced into illegal and unsafe abortions, others bore children who were stigmatized as "enemy babies." The presence of "teasing" like mocking, taunting, verbal harassment, teased by neighbours (18%) and teased by family members (16%), as a distinct category, is uniquely gendered and culturally specific. Neighbors and even family members reduced horrific experiences (rape, torture, abduction) to shameful gossip, calling women names like "Pakistani's woman" or "enemy's bride". The post-liberation data reveal a devastating irony: Women who endured rape, torture, and loss to help create an independent Bangladesh were re-victimized by the very nation they helped liberate.

V. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The data empirically confirms that arrest, torture, and physical attack were the most acute and prevalent horrors for Bengali women in 1971, while the financial crisis was the most

pervasive long-term hardship. The very low reporting of mental trauma (9%) and “other” (0%) suggests either a narrow coding scheme or deep cultural silencing of certain experiences, such as forced pregnancy, family abandonment, and social rejection post-assault. From a gender perspective, the findings demand recognition that women’s war experiences are not merely a subset of general suffering; they are defined by gendered violence, such as sexual torture, arrest as domestic targets, and gendered economic collapse, like loss of protection and livelihood. The data also reveal that Bengali women experienced the 1971 war primarily through harm to their families rather than as isolated individuals. The near-universal absence of self-reported trauma should not be misinterpreted as resilience; rather, it demands a critical feminist methodological discussion about how trauma is measured, named, and culturally expressed. The article should argue that women’s wartime suffering is relational, which is embedded in the destruction of family networks, and that standard survey categories may systematically undercount psychological harm when applied in non-Western, war-affected, and honor-bound societies. Qualitative narratives from raped, widowed, and displaced women are essential to fill the silence behind the zero. Moreover, the data conclusively shows that immediate post-liberation challenges were not secondary to wartime suffering, but an extension of it, only the perpetrator changed from the Pakistani military to Bengali families and neighbors.

VI. CONCLUSION

This review confirms that any complete historiography of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War must center women's experiences, not only as victims of gendered violence but also as active agents who cooked, spied, fought, and mobilized. The central conclusion is that women were more likely to endure both physical violence and sexual assault than their male counterparts. Critically, the study reveals how women's bodies were used as battlegrounds by the Pakistani army and their local allies. However, the data also shows substantial rates of active contribution (cooking, intelligence, public relations, and even face-to-face fighting), rejecting any simple victim narrative. A gender perspective thus remains essential for a complete and just understanding of the 1971 war. A gender perspective does not diminish the national narrative; rather, it deepens and complicates it, revealing how the war was fought both on the battlefield and on women's bodies.

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