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Violence against Women in India: Evidence from Rural Gujarat

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Introduction

The nature of domestic violence, its causes, and its prevalence must be fully understood in order to plan effective prevention and intervention strategies. Research should examine not only the determinants and consequences of violence but also relevant economic, social, and cultural factors. Most of the current Indian literature focuses primarily on the linkages between the socialization of women into subordinate positions, male patriarchy, and domestic violence (Krishnaraj 1991; Heise et al. 1994; Miller 1992). However, these explanations do not provide an understanding of how violence seeps into certain relationships or why husbands abuse their wives. As determinants of violence, proximate factors like economic stress, alcohol consumption, and allocation of time, need to be explored empirically and theoretically. This community-based study presents a picture of domestic violence as reported by married women in rural Gujarat. Through both quantitative and qualitative methods, the project explores the magnitude, onset, and forms of violence. In addition, it studies reasons given for abuse, correlates of violence, and women's options for support.

Genesis of the Study

The study emerges from a larger project funded by the Ford Foundation in New Delhi that is examining the relationship between women's education and health seeking behavior. The data was collected through repeated visits to five villages in Kheda district of central Gujarat between May 1993 and January 1997. As part of the study, a baseline survey of the entire population was conducted to assess the socio-economic and health situation of the region. From this census, a statistically random sample of 450 currently married women with at least one child less than three years of age at the time was selected. The majority of these women were contacted twelve times in the span of three and a half years. The data instruments from the large study investigated the relationship between:

Women's education and their autonomy;

Their health seeking behavior and management of illnesses suffered by their children; and

Their treatment seeking behavior regarding their own gynecological problems.

While exploring these issues, many of the women in the survey suggested that violence was an important indicator of women's autonomy and power within the household. This feedback led to a few exploratory focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. These were held to understand the broad parameters that could be explored in a community-based quantitative survey on violence. The insights gained were valuable in designing the survey, which was conducted between December 1996 and January 1997 in all five villages.

Study Design and Survey Instruments

From the original sample of 450 women, 346 were contacted for the violence study. The attrition of nearly 100 women is due primarily to permanent out-migration and temporary leaves of absence from the village. Only four women declined to participate. The questionnaire addressed both current and past episodes of violence. Supplementing the initial five focus group discussions and the survey, 36 in-depth interviews were conducted to facilitate open-ended dialogue with the participants. The interviewers selected survey respondents who may have had family members present at the time of questioning and needed more privacy to speak freely, those who made inconsistent or deliberately misleading statements, and those who were particularly open in discussing the violence they experienced in their marriage. Interviews were recorded with permission.

Location of the Study

The participants in the study come from a relatively prosperous area approximately 15 kilometers from Anand, location of the successful Amul dairy co-operative. [1] Nearly 55 percent of the households in the study own a milch animal; 86 percent have access to piped water; and 60 percent have electricity available for domestic use. In addition, almost 10 percent of the husbands of the respondent women were reported to be salaried employees. Men and women exhibit different levels of education. Half of the women have no formal schooling and 30 percent have eight or more years of schooling. The level of literacy was much higher for men, with only 17 percent without formal schooling and 48 percent with eight or more years of schooling.

Magnitude of Violence

Two-thirds of the women surveyed reported some form of psychological, physical, or sexual abuse. Of the total sample, 42 percent experience physical beatings or sexual assault. An additional 23 percent suffer abusive language, belittlement, and threats. This large proportion resonates with high levels of violence recorded in other parts of India. About 36-38 percent of women in a Tamil Nadu study and 42-48 percent of women in an Uttar Pradesh study reported violence (Jejeebhoy 1998). In one village in Punjab, 75 percent of the women from scheduled caste households reported regular beatings (Mahajan 1990).

Onset of Violence

When I was pregnant with the first child – a girl – the altercations between us had started and have since continued. He is like a strong pepper, hot, so that even with a slight provocation or fault, he loses his head and fights. He tolerates nothing.[2]

During the in-depth interviews, some women commented that once the initial inhibition was broken, it was not difficult for men to beat their wives. Most women remembered the first argument with their husbands. In most cases, the problems started within the first year of marriage and before the birth of any children. Women reported that after having children, the violence did not decrease but their husbands became accustomed to abusing them. Many also felt that if they listened quietly, their husband's abuse might die down. If instead a woman defended herself or responded angrily, the confrontation usually worsened and could escalate to physical violence. A woman often retaliated when her husband insulted or blamed her parents for her perceived shortcomings.

Correlates of Violence

He started enjoying drinking and would come home drunk and start beating me. Now I am married for 15 or 16 years and have two boys of school going age. And I get beaten up.

The women in the study were divided into those who experienced both psychological and physical abuse, those who experienced psychological abuse, and those who did not report any abuse. The results show that each form of abuse cuts across all age, caste, and education lines (see table 1). Identifying trends of the different forms of abuse, common precipitating factors thought to trigger the violence, and magnitude of violence across these correlates can establish the widespread prevalence of violence across categories and contribute

to the design of more specific prevention and intervention strategies. In addition, the social and economic conditions that may foster different types of violence can be examined through such an analysis.

Despite slightly higher numbers of young brides reporting abuse, the relationship between age, duration of marriage, and violence is weak. The most widespread violence was reported among women from the Thakore and Baraiya castes (80 percent), other low castes (75 percent), and scheduled castes (74 percent). Though relatively less, large numbers of Muslim women (56 percent) and high caste women (45 percent) also indicated abuse from their husbands. Differences in the rates of physical abuse account for most of the variation between caste groups. While all women reported similar rates of psychological abuse (23-28 percent), a smaller proportion of high caste women (17 percent) additionally indicated physical abuse compared to low caste women (57 percent).

Table - 1: Magnitude of Violence in Entire Sample (N-346)*

	Psychological Abuse	Psychological and Physical Abuse	No Reported Abuse	Percentage Distribution of Sample
All Caste	42%	23%	35%	100%
Scheduled	23%	48%	29%	15%
Lower	20%	57%	23%	47%
High	28%	17%	55%	26%
Muslim	23%	33%	44%	12%
Age of Women				
15-24	26%	52%	22%	24%
25-34	23%	38%	39%	66%
35 +	17%	47%	36%	10%
Women's Education				
No Formal Schooling	16%	60%	24%	49%
Lower Primary	35%	41%	24%	10%
Upper Primary	24%	41%	35%	16%
Secondary +	32%	10%	58%	26%
Husband's Education				
No Formal Schooling	14%	68%	19%	17%
Lower Primary	15%	62%	23%	14%
Upper Primary	26%	47%	27%	21%
Secondary +	28%	25%	47%	48%
Living Arrangement				
Nuclear	23%	50%	27%	60%
Joint	23%	30%	47%	40%

Years of Marriage				
1-5	40%	35%	25%	6%
6-10	24%	40%	36%	57%
11-14	18%	51%	31%	25%
15 +	21%	40%	39%	12%

* Because of rounding, not all rows all up to 100% exactly.

Reported violence declined with the increasing education of both men and women. Though incidence did not fall below forty percent for any group, abusive relationships were reported more frequently among illiterate women (76 percent) and illiterate men (81 percent) than women and men with secondary schooling or more (42 percent and 53 percent respectively). Violence also varied with living arrangements - 53 percent of women in joint families reported abuse compared to 73 percent of women in nuclear families. It is important to note that the rate of psychological violence among both groups is the same, the 20 percent differential is due to higher numbers of women in nuclear families reporting physical abuse.

When grouped by age and duration of marriage, all categories of women reported either psychological or physical abuse at incidence levels ranging from 60 percent to 75 percent. An interesting finding is that differences in overall violence by these groupings are statistically insignificant. Contrary to some expectations that violence might subside with age, adult children, and adjustments, women who suffer abuse early on continue to experience it throughout their marriage. As one respondent who had been married for several years remarked, "The frequency or intensity of beating or quarrels have not really decreased. It should have with the passage of time, but nothing of that sort has happened." The data suggest that as women age and have been married longer, forms of violence actually shift towards more physical violence. For example, while women who had been married 1-5 years reported similar levels of physical and psychological violence (35 percent and 40 percent, respectively), the responses of women who had been married 11-15 years demonstrated a shift towards more physical violence. About 51 percent of these women reported physical abuse and 18 percent reported psychological abuse.

Precipitating Factors of Abuse

If the food is not according to his taste, and if the quantum of salt in the vegetable is too much, or it is very pungent or not fully cooked, he loses his temper. If he thinks that I have not kept the house tidy and clean, he loses his temper. He does give me money to manage the house, but if the money is all spent and I ask for more, he loses his temper and

picks a quarrel. When he picks a quarrel, he blames my parents and uses very foul language for them. I cannot tolerate that and so we fight.

A central question in understanding and addressing abuse is how underlying patterns of gender subordination and the use of violence for conflict resolution manifest themselves daily. Women in the study frequently attributed an outburst of violence against them to proximate causes or precipitating triggers such as “mistakes” in running the household. The catalysts cited most often include: not preparing meals on time (66 percent), not cooking meals properly (51 percent), not caring for the children properly (48 percent), and economic stress (48 percent). Though marital violence in India is often equated with dowry violence, just one percent stated that inadequate dowry precipitated the abuse. During the in-depth interviews, women stated that while these incidents described above are often the initial catalysts for violence, their husband’s anger was aggravated further when the women resisted verbal abuse by defending themselves or using harsh language.

Though reports of precipitating incidents such as preparing a meal late or not disciplining a child may seem trivial, they are indicative of the many demands on women’s time. In addition to work and responsibilities outside of the home, most women in the study are also expected to be responsible for maintaining the household, caring for the children, and preparing meals. Such gender-specific responsibilities like collecting fuel and water are time-consuming and labor-intensive. The pressure of completing all of these tasks “properly” may reinforce these dynamics of gender subordination and become an excuse for violence.

Other existing literature has gone further in examining the possible underlying factors. One study in Karnataka found that alcohol use and dowry were primary and important determinants of abuse (Rao 1997). Others argue that hierarchical gender relations, perpetuated through gender socialization and socio-economic inequities, are the root cause of violence against women (Heise et al. 1994). In addition to economic inequality between men and women, David Levinson (1989) outlines three other factors that together help predict violence against women: a pattern of using physical violence for conflict resolution, male authority in the home, and a divorce restriction for women. In the current study in Gujarat, only three women reported dowry-related violence. This low number may be due to higher prevalence of dowry harassment in urban, higher caste families not represented in a rural sample. The Gujarat findings support Levinson’s predictors of violence. The lack of women’s power within the home as well as constraining social and economic factors which provide few options outside of marriage were indeed associated with high levels of abuse.

Forms of Violence

Besides using abusive language, my husband hits me with whatever he can lay his hands on. When he is really mad, he flings a stick or whatever is in his hand freely towards me. He does not kick or pull my hair or bang against the wall. But hitting me in the back or slapping is what he does most of the times. In a fit of rage, he even asks me to leave home and go to my parents' house. But how can I go? I have children and this is my home.

In this study, reported violence takes many forms. The most frequently reported types of violence against a woman include abusive language (80 percent), beatings (63 percent), forcing her back to her parental home (52 percent), and threats to throw her out (51 percent). Other types of abuse include refusing to give money to manage the household, protracted criticism, and getting angry with the children. Two thirds of the women who were abused reported physical violence. Of the women who reported physical violence, the most frequent forms are slaps (100 percent), having objects thrown at them (63 percent), and beatings with a stick (58 percent). Approximately ten percent of the women who were physically abused indicated they required medical attention after getting beaten, yet only 38 percent of these sought treatment. Despite the fact that there were few inquiries specifically on the subject of sexual abuse, 20 percent of women reporting physical violence described violence of a sexual nature.

Women in the survey who reported violence experienced an average of three different forms of abuse. In addition, 45 percent of the women reported that their husbands used abusive language in the presence of their children, and 63 percent said that this occurred in front of their parents as well. Many women grew to tolerate abusive language in the presence of their in-laws, but felt physical beatings in their presence were demeaning and corrosive of their self-worth.

Precipitating Factors for Domestic Violence

Looking at the data as a whole helps to understand the overall contours of domestic violence, but it is essential to examine the survey responses more closely in light of its complex nature. Table 2 provides more detailed information on the linkages among the precipitating factors for abuse. Furthermore, the analysis suggests potential inhibiting factors for domestic violence against women.

With a sensitive and socially charged topic like domestic violence, questions about under-reporting arise. Differences in reported violence by group, for example by caste or levels of education, are difficult to analyze because of concerns that some women may face stronger social pressure to keep violence private and hidden, and therefore may not be reporting violence to interviewers.

The consistent interaction between researchers and participants in this study over a long period of time hopefully minimized this possibility. Furthermore, many women in all categories did report violence. An analysis of these reports can provide important data regarding possible differences in experiences of violence and in trends by caste, age, and education. The knowledge of such distinctions can in turn guide the design of appropriate intervention strategies.

The forms of violence reported vary across caste. Women from the scheduled and lower castes reported much higher incidence of physical abuse than other survey respondents (see table 1). They were also more likely to report that their husbands threatened to force them out of the home or back to their parents' house. For example, 35 percent of high caste women in abusive relationships mentioned that their husbands threatened to expel them from the house compared to 62 percent of lower caste women. Precipitating factors also varied: while all women mentioned complaints about meal preparation and child care, 68 percent of scheduled caste and 55 percent of lower caste women who had reported some type of violence listed economic stress as a precipitating factor for abuse. Another difference among castes was that a greater proportion of high caste women (20 percent) reported feeling that others instigated the violence in their homes compared to Muslim women (12 percent) or lower caste women (10 percent). Reported forms and factors seen to be prompting violence among scheduled caste and lower caste women are oriented around economic constraints and being thrown out of the house. These women have few options outside the marital home. Higher caste women may be more concerned about social stigma and they may be less likely to report physical abuse.

Table- 2 : Correlates Forms and Reasons Given for Abuse Among Women Experiencing Violence (N=228)* (Reason of Abuse) (Reasons Given for Abuse)

	Abuse Language	Physical Assault	Threats to force out of home	Meals not ready on time	Economic constraints	Children not cared for
Castes						
Scheduled	78%	68%	60%	65%	68%	43%
Lower	91%	74%	62%	72%	55%	47%
Muslim	79%	58%	38%	58%	33%	67%
Age of Women						
15-24	80%	66%	51%	58%	45%	51%
25-34	79%	62%	56%	66%	51%	49%
35 +	87%	74%	56%	83%	44%	39%
Women's Education						
No formal Schooling	91%	79%	64%	76%	59%	44%
Lower	88%	54%	50%	73%	35%	38%

Primary						
Upper Primary	80%	63%	46%	46%	54%	57%
Secondary +	38%	24%	22%	43%	16%	60%
Husband's Education						
No Formal Schooling	96%	83%	67%	75%	65%	44%
Lowre Primary	86%	81%	62%	81%	65%	40%
Upper Primary	89%	64%	53%	74%	47%	38%
Secondary +	73%	53%	50%	61%	40%	58%
Living Arrangement						
Nulcear	82%	68%	57%	70%	51%	49%
Joint	77%	57%	43%	57%	425	47%
Years of Marriage						
1-5	53%	47%	33%	47%	27%	47%
6-10	79%	62%	51%	59%	46%	50%
11-14	87%	73%	57%	73%	60%	55%
15 +	85%	65%	65%	88%	46%	3%

* Because women gave multiple answers to questions about forms and reasons for abuse, the rows are not meant to add up to 100%.

Two important results of the survey contradict the popular perception of the young bride in a joint family being the most vulnerable to violence. In this study, women living in nuclear families reported more violence, and this violence continued as women aged. Likewise, economic constraints were consistently offered as a precipitating factor by approximately half of the women, regardless of their age. However, problems with meals not being prepared on time were cited more frequently by older women: 83 percent of women aged 35 or older listed it as a factor prompting abuse compared to 58 percent of women aged 15-24.

Similarly, higher percentages of women married for longer periods of time mentioned some form of physical violence as compared to newly married women. Women who had been married fifteen or more years commonly reported having objects thrown at them (54 percent) and beatings with a stick (42 percent). Reports of abusive language also increased with length of marriage: 53 percent of newlyweds reported verbal abuse as compared to 85 percent of women married for more than 15 years. Lastly, women who had been married for several years were threatened with eviction from the house more frequently – 65 percent as compared to 33 percent of women married for one to five years.

Large differences did not exist in the magnitude of violence experienced by women who had been married for a short time as compared to those who had been married for a long time. However, the number of different precipitating factors and the forms of violence both increased with the length of the marital relationship. These findings could indicate that, with time, abuse intensifies to the point where everything becomes an excuse or trigger for violence.

Many of the greatest differences in incidence, forms, and precipitating factors occurred by level of education. While rates of reported psychological abuse in the entire sample were similar across different groupings, reported physical violence dropped from 60 percent among women with no formal schooling to 10 percent among women with secondary schooling. However, as mentioned previously, even among women with more than secondary school education, two out of five reported some form of violence. Of these women, the most frequently reported forms and factors triggering violence differed from the rest of the sample. Among these abused women, smaller percentages of educated women reported abusive language or threats of being forced out of the home. The factors that women with greater education cited for precipitating violence also differed from the rest of the sample: 43 percent of educated women reported issues with meal preparation compared to three-fourths of women by other groupings. These women were more likely than women with no schooling to cite child care (60 compared to 44 percent) and the instigation of outsiders (19 compared to 11 percent) as factors precipitating the violence.

The magnitude, precipitating factors, and forms of violence also declined with husband's education, but to a smaller degree. For example, 91 percent of women with no schooling reported abusive language compared to a much lower 38 percent of women with secondary schooling. While 96 percent of men with no schooling abused their wives verbally, the violence declined less substantially to 73 percent among men with secondary schooling.

Communication with Others about Violence

I do not have relatives living nearby, but there are neighbors. It is not that the neighbors play any role in the quarrels or instigate my husband against me. In fact, they sometimes take my side and tell my husband that since you do not earn regularly, how do you expect your wife to run the house.

A woman's access to support or alternatives may effect her situation with domestic violence. In this study, three out of five women confronting violence were able to confide in others, usually neighbors or female in-laws residing in the household. However, family members and neighbors are reluctant to

intervene because violence is seen as a private, family affair. In other cases, they sometimes feel helpless to stop the abusive husband.

Of women who maintain silence, 75 percent emphasized concern for the honor of their husband and family as the primary reason for staying quiet. The isolation of women in violent households deepens when social and economic constraints preclude visits to their natal home. After women have children, visits to their parents' home decline. Other reasons women cannot go home include a social acceptance that women endure hardship with their in-laws, the unwillingness to depend on married brothers at their natal home, and the apprehension that a subsequent return would be humiliating if their husband did not come to fetch them back. Even for women who are able to go to their natal home after a confrontation, 30 percent reported that they do not tell their family the reason for their visit.

Perceived Options

One does often feel like running away from it all. But where does one go? There should be a place where women can go. The only place is parents' house but they will always try to send you back. Also, when there are children, where can one go? Sometimes I do feel quite suffocated, but when I think of the children, I cannot take any steps in haste. My children would not eat food prepared by anyone else. So I have to live for them.

Especially when they were unable to access their parental home for support, abused women felt they had few alternatives. Although many reported that they had thought about running away or committing suicide, they felt these options were not feasible because of their young children and the lack of places to go.

Barbara Miller (1992) listed some options that may seem viable for women who are considering escape from an abusive situation, including: support from the natal home, divorce/separation, bearing sons, age, and committing suicide. As a result of the concerns discussed above, women cannot always go to their natal home, and divorce carries a great deal of social stigma for higher caste women. Lower caste women, who have poor access to and control over economic resources, may have no place to go. Survey results did not show that abuse lessened with the birth of sons or with increasing age. Even suicide is not an option because many women do not want to abandon their children.

Public support institutions such as shelter homes are an option but are still not easily or widely accessible to most women. Measures such as approaching the police or women's groups for legal actions must be examined carefully as other ways by which women can address violence. These solutions may have little value until women have more economic options outside of marriage. In the

private sphere, one important source of support is the natal family. At present the natal family is often constrained by social norms, the status vis-à-vis the conjugal family, and economic resources. Natal families should be strengthened to act as mediators. In searching for the most effective strategies, the voices and perspectives of women survivors are crucial.

Conclusion

The research suggests that in the present Indian rural setting, solutions to much of domestic violence must be found within the family setting and within the community setting. Strategies that should be explored further are education of women and girls; gender-sensitive education directed at males; the formation of women's groups to minimize isolation and increase power; and the use of mass media to promote more balanced, healthy perceptions of male-female relationships.

The results of this study, though limited by lack of multivariate analysis to establish significance of factors, present a glimpse into both the severity and endemic nature of marital violence. The research also helps to increase the understanding of the social and economic pressures that limit the power and options of women in violent relationships. Understanding both immediate precipitating factors and underlying causes for abuse as well as the structures that women feel comfortable tapping for support provides a starting place for designing initiatives to counter violence. The ways in which correlates such as age, caste, education, and duration of marriage, are associated with different forms and factors is an important finding that can aid in informing context-specific efforts in domestic violence prevention and intervention.

Notes

1. The Amul dairy (Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation - GCMMF) is comprised of 10,183 village milk producers' cooperatives in Gujarat. This cooperative has 1.95 million members, produces 6 million liters of milk per day, and sold 455 million dollars worth of products in 1997-98. The sale of milk fetches cash income for the households.

2. These quotes are taken directly from field interviews. In order to protect the privacy of these individuals, no identifying information has been given.

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