

Economic and social resources and domestic violence among young women in urban South India

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Aim and Justification

The aim of this analysis is to examine whether young, married Indian women who have economic and social resources, both prior to and after marriage, are less likely to experience physical domestic violence. We assess this question first using baseline data from a cohort study of gender-based power and STI/HIV risk among 16-25 year-old married women in urban slums of Bangalore, India. Results from this preliminary baseline analysis will be explored in greater depth using longitudinal data from, which will be available February 2008.

Our analysis contributes to the literature on domestic violence in India in several ways. First, it is one of the few to focus on this issue in an urban Indian setting. Over the past two decades, India in general, and Bangalore in particular, have experienced rapid urbanization and development. Consequent changes in social expectations and norms related to gender, as well as in women's employment opportunities and economic security, are likely to have an impact (arguably, a beneficial one) on marital relationships and women's experiences of domestic violence. Our study focuses on urban, slum communities that were established approximately two decades ago, providing an opportunity to explore these issues in a unique setting.

Second, the combination of qualitative and quantitative data we use in this analysis allows us to examine women's resources in a novel way. Our approach has been guided by a well-established conceptual framework that draws upon Kabeer's conceptualization of gender-based power and women's empowerment. Based on this framework, we conducted formative qualitative research with members of the target population and developed a comprehensive set of measures of women's power in marital relationships. These measures include economic and social resources that women brought into the marriage (such as social support prior to marriage) as well as factors which gave them power within the marital relationship (such as employment after marriage). Measures derived from the qualitative work were administered to a cohort of young married women who are being followed for two years. In the current analysis of the baseline data from the quantitative study, we are able to examine the independent association between each resource and domestic violence, as well as tease apart the importance of resources that women bring into their marriage as compared to those which they have during marriage. Finally, unlike most published studies which have examined risk factors for domestic violence

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cross-sectionally, the longitudinal nature of our data will allow us to examine the temporal relationships of having social and economic resources and domestic violence in the cohort.

Background

Domestic violence encompasses an array of physical, sexual and/or psychological acts inflicted by intimate male partners on women (L. G.-M. Heise, C., 2002). It is considered to be both a manifestation of deeply entrenched gender-power inequities, as well as a mechanism by which such inequities are enforced. Globally, domestic violence is one of the most common forms of violence against women, with 15% to 71% of women reporting physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in a recent ten country study. It is associated with a wide range of adverse women's health outcomes including unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections/HIV, and suicide (L. L. Heise, 1994). Over a decade and a half ago, the United Nations General Assembly called for increased research on the "causes, nature, seriousness and consequences" of violence against women (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). Although considerable research has now documented the prevalence of domestic violence, relatively little is known about specific factors that put women at risk of domestic violence or that serve to protect them against domestic violence.

Studies across India have demonstrated the widespread prevalence of domestic violence. In community surveys conducted since the early 1990s, between 22% and 65% of married Indian women reported physical violence by their spouse (Krishnan, 2005). In the state of Karnataka, where the current study is being conducted, 27% of women reported having been beaten by their husbands, and 34% of women's husbands reported that they had beaten their wives (Krishnan, 2005). While domestic violence is reported by women and men in nearly all communities that have been studied, there are wide variations in the extent to which it occurs across India (Heise, 2002; Koenig, 2003). For example, a survey of men in five districts of the northern Indian State of Uttar Pradesh revealed considerable district variations in reported physical violence against wives: reports of wife beating ranged from 18% in one district to 45% in another (Martin, 1999).

Similarly, there is great variability in the associations between a range of proximate risk and protective factors and women's reports of domestic violence. While socio-demographic characteristics, such as higher household socioeconomic status, women's higher education and older age at marriage have been found to be associated with lower reported physical violence (Jejeebhoy & Cook, 1997; Jeyaseelan, 2007; Koenig, Stephenson, Ahmed, Jejeebhoy, & Campbell, 2006), there are exceptions to these patterns (Schuler, 1996; Srinivasan, 2007). Furthermore, consensus is elusive in the case of other key proximate factors: women's status and autonomy. These factors have been measured in a number of ways, including the number of sons a woman has borne, whether and how big a dowry she brings to the marital household, her employment status, and her level of control over household income (Jejeebhoy & Cook, 1997; Jeyaseelan, 2007; Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain, & Mozumder, 2003; Koenig et al., 2006; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996). The variability in the association between women's status and risk of domestic violence may be attributed, at least in part, to differences in prevailing socio-cultural conditions (Koenig et al., 2003). This observation highlights the need for research that combines a careful specification of prevailing socio-cultural conditions to identify and examine potentially relevant risk or protective factors associated with domestic violence.

Program strategies and policy recommendations often assume that empowering women by increasing female education, and vocational training and employment opportunities, will provide women with resources that will in turn decrease their risk of adverse reproductive health outcomes. However, there is a growing recognition that these strategies may conflict with prevailing social norms and expectations, which are relatively slow to change, and may result in increased violence against women (Koenig et al., 2003; Schuler et al., 1996; Swaminathan, 2004). In particular, women's autonomy in settings that are highly conservative may pose a greater threat to male authority and position, and therefore, may be associated with higher risk of domestic violence (Koenig, 2003).

Our study is located in relatively long established low income communities in a rapidly growing metropolis in South India, where gender norms have historically been understood as less restrictive than in North India. Drawing upon Kabeer's conceptual framework of gender-based power and women's empowerment, we explore whether young women's economic and social resources are associated with lower reported domestic violence.

Methods

This paper builds on formative, qualitative research on gender-based power and adverse reproductive health outcomes conducted between 2002 and 2004 in urban slums of Bangalore, southern India. This component included focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with married, adult women and men (ages 18-49 years). These data were coded and analyzed using Atlas-ti. Based on insights gained in this phase, we developed a series of measures of social and economic factors that women could use as resources to potentially put them at lower risk domestic violence. These measures were then administered three times over two years to a longitudinal cohort of young married women. This analysis examines the cross-sectional associations between these potential protective resources and domestic violence at baseline.

Sampling

A convenience sample of young married women was recruited from two Bangalore slum communities and their local government health centers between August 2005 and February 2006. Eligibility criteria were: being a married female between 16-25 years of age; speaking Tamil or Kannada fluently; and anticipating residence in the community for the duration of the 2-year study. Women below 18 years of age were asked to provide guardian consent. The protocol was approved by the human subjects protection agencies of the University of California, San Francisco and the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore.

Data Collection

Trained interviewers verbally administered face-to-face surveys and recorded participant responses in survey booklets. The survey collected information on socio-demographics; domestic/household characteristics; economic activity and assets; and sources of and responses to marital conflict. Interviews were conducted in private rooms in two government health clinics and were accompanied by sexual health education and optional clinical examination and lab testing. Participants are being followed for two years and are completing surveys each year. Data collection will be complete in January 2008.

Measures and Analysis

The outcome was defined as having been “hit, kicked or beat” by one’s husband (yes/no) for any reason in the 6 months prior to study enrollment. Independent variables were selected a priori on the basis of being factors with the potential to serve as economic and social resources for women. Socio-demographic variables, including an asset score based on household possessions and facilities, were also examined in analyses.

The relationship of each predictor variable with the outcome was assessed using separate logistic regression models. A full multivariable logistic regression model was then run to examine the association of each variable, adjusting for the others in the model, with domestic violence. Because the full model is intended to be explanatory and we do not attempt to draw inference from this analysis, standard errors are not highlighted. Instead, p-values were used to generally assess the strength of each association. All analyses were conducted using STATA 9.2 (College Station, TX).

Preliminary Results

Sample characteristics are summarized in Table 1 (see Appendix). The average age of participants at baseline was 22 years. Over half of participants were Hindu (54%), while 35% were Christian and 11% were Muslim. Education levels were low, with 18% reporting no formal education and the mean reporting a primary level of education. Over half (56%) of participants reported having *ever* experienced physical domestic violence; over a quarter (27%) reported physical domestic violence in the last six months. In addition, 35% reported having ever had sex with their husband when they did not want to.

Table 2 summarizes the results of regression analyses of baseline data. Several factors were independently associated with recent domestic violence, including younger age at marriage, lower socio-economic status and being in a “love” marriage. When considering the other factors in the model, women in “love” marriages still had higher odds (OR=1.71, $p<0.01$) of recent domestic violence than women whose marriages were arranged.

Social and economic resources that women had prior to marriage did not appear to significantly increase or decrease risk of violence in marriage. The one exception to this was that working prior to marriage was associated with a 60% increased odds of experiencing domestic violence in an unadjusted model; the significance of this relationship disappeared after considering other factors.

Numerous resources after marriage, on the other hand, were associated with increased risk of violence. In terms of social support, women who participated in a social group after marriage had higher odds of recent domestic violence in the full model (OR=1.61). Women whose families were not asked to pay additional dowry after marriage, and women whose husbands served as their primary source of social support, had lower levels of violence (OR=0.45 and OR=0.64, respectively). In terms of economic resources, women who worked before marriage, worked after marriage, and participated in vocational training after marriage were more likely to report domestic violence, based on individual unadjusted models. The only economic resource

that remained significant in the adjusted model was vocational training participation after marriage; women who received training had three times the odds of reporting recent domestic violence (OR=3.05, $p<0.01$).

Discussion

While preliminary, our results highlight the complexity of the meanings of and relationships between economic and social resources and women's experience of domestic violence. Similar to a number of other studies of domestic violence in India, we found that socio-demographic factors such as younger age at marriage and lower household socioeconomic status were associated with reported violence, although the former was not statistically significant in the adjusted model.

Interestingly, women who had chosen their spouse (were in a "love" marriage) were significantly more likely to also report recent physical violence than women whose marriages were arranged. Our qualitative research suggested that women and men who defy social norms by choosing their spouse often lose important social and economic support from their natal families, including the provision of dowry by the woman's family. Interviews with adolescent married girls revealed that these conditions often precipitated marital conflict (including post-marriage dowry harassment) and led to domestic violence. Even after controlling for post-marriage dowry requests by the husband or his family and the receipt of natal family financial support after marriage, "love" marriage was still associated with higher odds of domestic violence. Further exploration of the characteristics of "love" marriages will be needed to explain this association.

Another finding of note is the increased odds of reported violence among women who participated in a social group after marriage, as well as the elevated yet statistically insignificant odds ratio associated with social group participation prior to marriage. Twenty two percent of participants reported being part of a group, and the most common types of groups were self-help, savings/chit fund, or women's groups. While the women's health implications of social group participation has not been examined in India, studies in Bangladesh have documented both elevated as well as lowered odds of reported violence amongst women participating in micro-credit programs (Koenig et al., 2003; Schuler et al., 1996). These studies have highlighted the importance of taking the broader community context into account: in conservative settings, Koenig *et al.* have argued, women's participation in social groups may be "viewed as provocative because they undertake actions that challenge prevailing norms governing women's propriety and modesty." Our qualitative data indicate that there are numerous women's social groups in Bangalore's slum communities and participation is not necessarily a contentious issue. At the same time, women and men in our qualitative study emphasized the importance of women's adherence to social expectations of a "good" wife and mother, and indicated that mobility within the community is one of the triggers of marital conflict. Thus, young, married women who participate in social groups may face greater risk of conflict and violence than older women.

Consistent with findings from our qualitative research that dowry demands do not cease at the time of marriage was the result that post-marriage requests for dowry by the husband and/or his family were associated with increased odds of reported violence (Bloch & Rao, 2002; Jejeebhoy

& Cook, 1997; Srinivasan & Bedi, 2007). A related but separate result is the reduced (yet statistically insignificant) odds of reported violence amongst women who were given some form of dowry at the time of marriage. Several Indian studies have documented similar associations between dowry and domestic violence (Bloch; Jejeebhoy, 1997; Srinivasan, 2007). Srinivasan and Bedi have argued that larger dowries enhance men's (and their families') social status and that dowry comprises assets that women may exert greater control over, thus reducing their risk of experiencing violence. In our sample, dowry primarily consisted of items such as *saris* (clothes) and pots and pans, articles that most often were used by the woman herself and of relatively less economic value. The continued social value and importance of dowry that these results suggest is disturbing given the relatively long history of public and private activism around this issue. Greater emphasis on promoting equal inheritance and property rights for women may be warranted.

Recent studies have highlighted the inconsistent relationships between access to economic resources, particularly through employment, and domestic violence (Kantor, 2003; Swaminathan, 2004). The elevated odds of reported violence among women who had greater economic resources (particularly those who had obtained vocational training after marriage) underscores the importance of examining this relationship using longitudinal data. It is unclear whether women who are in marital relationships marred by conflict seek employment and training as a response strategy or whether women who seek employment and training are more likely to invite violence.

Clearly, there are several limitations to this analysis. Because we use cross-sectional data, we are unable to establish causal relationships between the studied factors and domestic violence. We will examine whether the relationships between the hypothesized risk and protective factors and domestic violence remain in longitudinal analyses from this study. Another limitation is that all data are self-reported by participants, and therefore subject to both recall and social desirability bias, particularly those which relate to stigmatizing conditions, such as experiencing domestic violence. However, we recruited female interviewers from local communities, engaged in extensive research methods and ethics training, and engaged in formative qualitative research over a two year period to develop rapport with participants and local community members. This is likely to have reduced the hesitancy to report violence as well as misclassification on other variables.

In conclusion, our analysis highlights the importance of context-specific studies in identifying specific resources that protect women against the risk of domestic violence. In settings where gender inequities are deeply entrenched, enhancing women's social and/or economic resources may result in increased domestic violence. Perhaps this is a temporary phenomenon, which disappears over time. Nonetheless, our findings when combined with existing evidence points to the urgent need to engage with and co-opt men, families and communities on gender justice and equity.

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Appendix

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics
(n=747)**

		Mean (years)	SD (years)
Age		22.4	2.3
Age at marriage		18.0	2.4
Duration of marriage		4.3	2.9
Age of husband		27.6	3.7
Education		5.9	3.6
		N	%
Household Family Structure	Extended with only husband's family	289	38.7
	Nuclear	352	47.1
	Extended with any natal members	106	14.2
Religion	Hindu	403	53.9
	Muslim	82	11.0
	Christian	261	34.9
Nulliparous		131	17.5
Interview language	Kannada	220	29.5
	Tamil	527	70.5
Ever experienced spousal violence		420	56.2
Experienced spousal violence last 6 mo		200	26.8

Table 2: Unadjusted and Adjusted Logistic Regression Analyses for Experience of Domestic Violence in the Past Six Months, at Enrollment

	Odds Ratio	
	unadjusted	adjusted
Sociodemographic Factors		
Age at enrollment (years)	1.01	1.05
Age at marriage (years)	0.93*	0.93
Religion (ref = Hindu)	1.00	1.00
Muslim	0.79	0.73
Christian	0.96	0.87
Education (years)	0.97	1.00
Asset score	0.76**	0.76**
Love marriage	1.98**	1.71**
Social Resources		
Household composition (ref = Extended with only husband's family members)	1.00	1.00
Nuclear	1.14	0.85
Extended with any natal family	1.43	1.36
Dowry given at marriage	0.60**	0.29
Free from being asked for dowry after marriage	0.38**	0.45**
Social group participation before marriage	1.88	2.08
Social group participation after marriage	1.24*	1.61*
Husband is main source of social support	0.62	0.64*
Economic Resources		
Worked before marriage	1.61**	1.49
Worked after marriage	1.59**	1.16
Vocational training before marriage	1.27	1.41
Vocational training after marriage	2.67**	3.05**
Natal family provides any financial support	1.06	0.94