

The uneasy relationship of domestic violence with women's empowerment in India

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BACKGROUND

This paper explores how domestic violence fits into the multidimensional picture of gender inequality and women's empowerment. Domestic violence is thought of as a crucial part of gender inequality and as one of its most extreme manifestations. According to conventional wisdom and a large body of scholarship, there is a strong negative correlation between domestic violence and multiple dimensions of women's empowerment, especially female education and employment (Ahmed, 2005; Mathur and Slavov, 2013; Yodanis, 2004). It makes logical sense.

However these associations don't seem to be the case universally. Empirical evidence from Nordic countries (Gracia and Merlo, 2016) and South Asia (Koenig et al, 2003; Schuler et al, 1998; Rahman, 1999; Panda and Agarwal, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2015; Bhattacharya, Bedi, and Chhachhi, 2011; Weitzman, 2014; Agarwal and Panda, 2007; Vyas and Watts, 2009; Dalal, 2011; Jejeebhoy, 1998) suggests that this relationship may be more problematic than one might expect. Nordic countries are the most gender equal countries in the world on many dimensions, but they also have disproportionately high prevalence rates of intimate partner violence against women. This perplexing trend is referred to as the 'Nordic paradox' (Gracia and Merlo, 2016).

How general are these exceptions to the domestic violence–gender inequality association? And which dimensions of gender inequality are more often aligned with domestic violence, and where do the exceptions occur? Though domestic violence is usually framed as an important aspect of gender inequality, there doesn't seem to be any systematic look across different dimensions of gender inequality to see where domestic violence fits.

India is an interesting case for such an analysis because there is already substantial literature that has found a paradox with women's employment: women in the labor force are at more, and not less, risk of domestic violence (Panda and Agarwal, 2005; Bhattacharya, 2015; Bhattacharya, Bedi, and Chhachhi, 2011; Weitzman, 2014; Agarwal and Panda, 2007; Vyas and Watts, 2009; Dalal, 2011; Jejeebhoy, 1998; Reddy & Vanneman, 2018). This seemingly non-intuitive relationship has been explained by the *backlash theory of abuse*: as women become more resourceful, men may resort to violence for instrumental reasons, both to counteract the increased power gained by women in order to reinstate their dominance, and because there are more resources to "extract" from female hands (Cools & Kotsadam, 2017).

In our earlier work (Reddy & Vanneman, 2018), presented at PAA 2018, we studied the relationship between domestic violence and women's labor force participation in India at *both* the individual and community levels, and found an interesting contrast between the macro and micro level relationships. Consistent with earlier literature in India, we found that a woman's own (individual-level) employment increased her risk of domestic violence. However, our community level analysis revealed that high rates of women's employment in the community protected her from violence, holding constant her own employment.

While that paper examined how domestic violence related to one dimension of women's empowerment, labor force participation, we aim to expand that work here to many other dimensions of women's empowerment and gender equality. We have picked some of the most commonly studied indicators of gender inequality to test their relationships with domestic violence. These indicators include:

- child sex ratio (as a measure of son preference),
- women's and men's literacy rates,
- women's and men's age at first marriage,
- women's employment,
- women's access to money,
- women's freedom of movement, and
- women's household decision making power.

Gender equality and women's empowerment are two sides of the same coin: progress toward gender equality requires women's empowerment, and women's empowerment requires increases in gender equality (Kishor & Gupta, 2009). Indicators of gender equality/inequality are designed to compare the status of women and men on particular characteristics of interest; whereas, indicators of empowerment/disempowerment tend not to be relative. Instead, indicators of women's empowerment are designed to measure roles, attitudes, and rights of women. In this paper we have combined indicators of gender inequality and women's empowerment and sometimes use these terms interchangeably.

DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

We use data from India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS), which provides the most comprehensive, nationally representative data on domestic violence and other dimensions of women's empowerment and gender inequality. The NFHS has both a broad spectrum of gender equality and women's empowerment indicators, and good measures of three kinds of domestic violence: physical, sexual, and emotional. An initiative of the Indian government in partnership with the Demographic and Health Surveys, the NFHS was first launched in 1992-93. While the focus of the survey has been on family welfare, maternal and child health, and nutrition, recent rounds of the survey have included a module on domestic violence.

For this paper we use data from the survey's fourth and most recent round (NFHS-4) conducted in 2015-16. NFHS-4 covered all 29 States and 7 Union Territories in India. A total of 601,509 households, including 699,686 women and 112,122 men aged 15-49 were interviewed in this round. We supplement the NFHS-4 data with data from the Indian Census (2011) for three of our indicators: child sex ratio, female literacy rates, and male literacy rates.

Our initial plan is to study the associations of domestic violence with gender equality and women's empowerment at the contextual level of districts. Indian districts are basic administrative units of approximately two million residents and reflect somewhat homogenous cultural contexts that may be central for understanding domestic violence variations. Our results with women's labor force participation show that the individual and contextual relationships can be quite different, so we intend to begin by mapping out the contextual, district-level patterns. To the extent that domestic violence is an outcome influenced more by cultural norms rather than by individual level characteristics (Heise, 1998; O'Campo et al, 1995; Cunradi et al, 2000; Koenig et al, 2003; McQuestion, 2003), we believe these macro-level associations are the appropriate place to begin.

Measures

The domestic violence measure used in this initial analysis is the percentage of ever married women who have experienced either physical or sexual violence committed by their husband. We plan to later disaggregate this domestic violence measure to investigate whether different types of domestic violence have different relationships with gender equality and empowerment. This will show whether physical, sexual, and emotional violence relate any differently to the different gender indicators.

The child sex ratio is the number of girls for every 1000 boys in the age group of 0-6, according to the 2011 Census of India. Age at marriage measures are the percentage of women first married after age 18, and men after age 21. Women's employment rates are the percentage of women employed either outside the home or in family enterprises in the 12 months preceding the interview. The measure of women's access to money is the percentage of women who have money that they can decide how to use. Women's freedom of movement is measured by the percentage of women who are allowed to go alone to the market, health facility and places outside the village or community. Women's household decision making power is the percentage of men who say that a wife should have a final say alone or jointly with her husband in five household decisions: decisions about major household purchases, purchases for daily household needs, visits to wife's family or relatives, what to do with the money wife earns, and how many children to have.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

As a first pass at mapping out where domestic violence fits among the selected nine dimensions of gender inequality, we have calculated the Pearson's correlation coefficients between domestic violence and the gender indicators across the 36 states and union territories (see Table 1).

Several of these relationships show the expected negative relationship. We found strong negative correlations of domestic violence with later ages of marriage for women (-0.553) and men (-0.477), and with literacy rates for women (-0.492) and men (-0.487). There are also somewhat weaker negative correlations of domestic violence with three indicators of women's empowerment: women's access to money (-0.334), women's freedom of movement (-0.317) and household decision making power (-0.331), again confirming the general wisdom.

However, we also found a strong counter-intuitive positive correlation between domestic violence and women's labor force

Table 1. Statewise correlation of domestic violence¹ with nine indicators of gender equality and female empowerment.

Gender indicator	Correlation coefficient
1. Child sex ratio ²	0.134
2. Female literacy ³	-0.492
3. Male literacy ⁴	-0.487
4. Female age at marriage ⁵	-0.553
5. Male age at marriage ⁶	-0.477
6. Women's employment ⁷	0.405
7. Women's access to money ⁸	-0.334
8. Women's freedom of movement ⁹	-0.317
9. Women's decision making ¹⁰	-0.331

¹ Percentage of ever married women who have experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their husband, NFHS 2015-16; ² Number of girls for every 1000 boys in the age group of 0-6, census 2011; ³ Female literacy rate, census 2011; ⁴ Male literacy rate, census 2011; ⁵ Percentage of women first married after age 18, NFHS 2015-16; ⁶ Percentage of men first married after age 21, NFHS 2015-16; ⁷ Percentage of women employed either outside the home or in family enterprises in the 12 months preceding the interview, NFHS 2015-16; ⁸ Percentage of women who have money that they can decide how to use, NFHS 2015-16; ⁹ Percentage of women who are allowed to go alone to the market, health facility and places outside the village or community, NFHS 2015-16; ¹⁰ Percentage of men who say that a wife should have a final say alone or jointly with her husband in 5 household decisions: Decisions about major household purchases, purchases for daily household needs, visits to wife's family or relatives, what to do with the money wife earns, and how many children to have, NFHS 2015-16.

participation rates (0.405), confirming the results of earlier work. States where *more* women are in the labor force are states with *higher* rates of domestic violence. We also found an unexpected positive correlation between domestic violence and the childhood sex ratio (.134) although the relationship is not very strong. Nevertheless, it appears that states with less son preference as revealed by the childhood sex ratio have somewhat more, not less, domestic violence.

An analysis of the rankings of the different states on each of the indicators shows some interesting counter-intuitive correlations (see Table 2 in appendix). The state of Manipur is a good example. It has the highest female labor force participation rate, at 54%, and also the highest prevalence of domestic violence in the country. About 53% of ever-married women in Manipur reported experiencing spousal physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Similarly the state of Jammu & Kashmir has relatively low levels of domestic violence, ranked 33 with a prevalence rate of only 9.3%, and also the lowest rate of female labor force participation in the country (ranked 36 at 15.9%). The state also has among the lowest child sex ratios in the country (862 girls for every 1000 boys), an indicator of very high son preference, along with very low levels of female literacy (58% compared to the national average of 65.5%).

Our mixed findings at the state level justify the closer look at the district level. By doing so, we hope to develop a more accurate picture of exactly which dimensions of women's empowerment and gender inequality are most related, least related, or counterintuitively related to domestic violence in India.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper examines the extent to which domestic violence in India correlates with other dimensions of gender inequality and women's disempowerment. Domestic violence is usually considered just another dimension of gender inequality, and is often included in the calculation of gender inequality indices. It is seen as one of the main contributors to the persistence of gender inequality, and as hindering the empowerment of women. More importantly, it is often assumed that domestic violence and women's empowerment are negatively correlated. Such assumptions lead to policies that encourage women's empowerment, mostly economic empowerment, as a means to reduce gender inequality of which domestic violence is one of the most extreme manifestations.

While we acknowledge that violence against women at home reflects the low status of women in society, our findings suggest that the mechanism involved in domestic violence may not be similar for all indicators of gender inequality or women's disempowerment. A closer examination of the mechanisms surrounding domestic violence is necessary, which can then inform strategies to effectively alleviate it.

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Appendix

Table 2: Ranking and rates of domestic violence and nine dimensions of gender equality/women's empowerment across states and union territories in India

STATE	Domestic violence ¹		Child sex ratio ²		Female literacy ³		Male literacy ⁴		Female age at marriage ⁵		Male age at marriage ⁶		Women's labor force participation ⁷		Women's access to money ⁸		Women's freedom of movement ⁹		Women's household decision making ¹⁰	
	Rank	%	Rank	Ratio	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Manipur	1	52.6	21	930	17	73.2	17	86.5	7	87.7	18	87.1	1	54.4	28	32.4	30	31.3	12	66.4
Andhra Pradesh	2	43.0	18	939	29	59.7	33	75.6	33	63.8	21	83.9	6	45.7	34	24.5	16	45.3	30	51.0
Telangana	3	42.9	20	932	33	58.0	34	75.0	27	68.2	19	86.6	2	49.5	35	23.8	17	44.2	34	42.9
Bihar	4	42.7	19	935	36	53.3	36	73.4	35	58.1	34	86.6	30	20.6	27	33.4	25	33.8	33	46.9
Tamil Nadu	5	40.5	15	943	16	73.9	16	86.8	15	82.3	8	92.8	14	33.5	23	39.7	9	53.7	31	69.9
Chhattisgarh	6	36.7	8	960	27	60.6	25	81.5	22	75.8	27	80.0	4	48.2	15	43.7	26	33.8	8	69.9
Uttar Pradesh	7	36.4	27	902	31	59.3	28	79.2	20	77.5	29	78.1	25	23.4	14	43.8	28	32.2	24	54.7
Odisha	8	34.9	17	941	26	64.4	23	82.4	21	77.2	15	89.3	20	26.3	30	31.1	34	20.3	27	52.1
Puducherry	9	34.6	5	967	8	81.2	6	23.8	5	85.3	5	95.0	23	23.8	25	36.4	12	49.7	23	55.7
Jharkhand	10	34.0	12	948	34	56.2	30	78.5	32	60.8	33	73.0	16	32.3	21	40.2	21	41.0	11	68.2
Madhya Pradesh	11	32.8	23	918	28	60.0	26	80.5	32	67.0	36	72.3	7	41.8	26	35.1	27	33.0	25	54.3
West Bengal	12	32.6	11	956	19	71.2	22	82.7	36	56.4	25	81.7	26	23.4	4	58.1	8	55.6	16	64.3
Haryana	13	31.9	36	834	24	66.8	19	78.1	28	79.6	28	79.6	29	21.4	16	42.8	22	38.1	21	59.7
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	14	31.3	22	926	25	65.9	18	86.5	28	68.5	31	73.9	19	28.1	31	30.0	33	26.6	13	66.3
Arunchal Pradesh	15	30.8	1	972	30	59.6	35	73.7	26	70.5	30	75.8	10	36.6	20	41.4	21	38.3	10	68.9
Meghalaya	16	27.9	2	970	16	73.8	32	77.2	17	81.4	22	83.5	5	46.4	11	48.1	11	31.3	7	70.5
Tripura	17	27.7	10	957	4	83.2	5	92.2	31	67.1	24	82.2	15	33.1	5	54.9	19	41.6	29	51.4
Delhi	18	26.8	33	871	9	80.9	8	91.0	14	82.8	26	81.3	32	19.6	12	47.6	13	47.5	3	76.1
Daman and Diu	19	26.6	26	904	10	79.6	7	91.5	18	78.3	20	84.1	24	23.5	3	61.5	6	60.2	36	27.6
Rajasthan	20	24.8	31	888	36	52.7	27	80.5	30	67.1	35	72.5	16	30.8	13	46.0	23	36.6	19	63.0
Assam	21	24.4	7	962	23	67.3	29	78.8	29	67.4	23	82.4	35	16.7	33	25.2	24	34.9	17	63.6
Chandigarh	22	22.5	32	880	7	81.4	10	90.5	8	87.3	3	95.6	12	35.8	1	63.4	4	64.0	14	64.3
Karnataka	23	21.6	13	948	22	68.1	21	82.9	24	75.0	9	92.4	8	37.6	32	29.9	29	31.3	32	49.3
Maharashtra	24	21.2	28	894	14	75.5	12	88.8	25	74.0	12	90.9	9	37.2	6	52.9	10	52.3	9	68.6
Punjab	25	20.1	35	846	18	71.3	24	81.5	5	90.2	10	90.2	33	18.1	17	42.8	11	50.2	18	63.2
Gujarat	26	20.0	29	890	20	70.7	15	87.2	23	75.5	32	73.9	11	36.0	7	52.1	7	42.3	4	73.7
Andaman & Nicobar islands	27	17.9	4	968	5	81.8	11	90.1	16	81.6	7	93.0	34	17.8	24	39.5	14	47.4	26	54.0
Mizoram	28	15.2	3	970	2	88.4	3	93.7	6	88.3	16	87.8	3	49.1	36	22.9	2	84.6	35	41.9
Kerala	29	14.0	6	964	1	92.0	2	96.0	3	90.7	2	97.6	28	21.9	22	40.1	35	11.9	15	64.3
Nagaland	30	12.8	14	943	11	76.9	20	83.3	9	86.4	13	90.6	13	35.8	29	31.8	32	27.7	20	62.9
Uttarakhand	31	12.6	30	890	21	70.7	13	88.3	13	83.6	17	87.7	31	20.3	8	50.0	5	63.2	6	71.0
Goa	32	12.3	16	942	6	81.8	4	92.8	10	86.1	4	95.0	22	23.9	2	61.7	7	57.9	1	82.5
Jammu & Kashmir	33	9.3	34	862	32	59.0	31	78.3	2	90.8	14	90.5	36	15.9	18	41.7	15	46.7	28	51.6
Lakshadweep	34	8.9	24	911	3	88.3	1	96.1	1	95.5	1	100.0	21	24.2	19	41.5	36	7.8	22	58.7
Himachal Pradesh	35	5.5	25	909	12	76.6	9	90.8	4	90.5	6	93.9	17	31.9	9	49.8	3	71.8	5	73.4
Sikkim	36	2.2	9	957	13	76.4	14	87.3	12	83.6	11	91.0	27	22.1	10	48.1	1	85.1	2	81.5
Correlation coefficient with domestic violence				0.134		-0.492		-0.487		-0.553		-0.477		0.405		-0.334		-0.317		-0.331

¹Percentage of ever married women who have experienced physical or sexual violence committed by their husband, NFHS 2015-16; ²Number of girls for every 1000 boys in the age group of 0-6, census 2011; ³Female literacy rate, census 2011; ⁴Male literacy rate, census 2011; ⁵Percentage of women first married after age 16, NFHS 2015-16; ⁶Percentage of men first married after age 21, NFHS 2015-16; ⁷Percentage of women employed either outside the home or in family enterprises in the 12 months preceding the interview, NFHS 2015-16; ⁸Percentage of women who have money that they can decide how to use, NFHS 2015-16; ⁹Percentage of women who are allowed to go alone to the market, health facility and places outside the village or community, NFHS 2015-16; ¹⁰Percentage of men who say that a wife should have a final say alone or jointly with her husband in 5 household decisions: Decisions about major household purchases, purchases for daily household needs, visits to wife's family or relatives, what to do with the money wife earns, and how many children to have, NFHS 2015-16.