

Understanding Trends in Spousal Violence in India

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Spousal violence is often seen as individual and isolated and considered a private matter not worthy of public condemnation.¹ It is, however, an expression of larger systemic and structural issues. Following neoliberal economic reforms in India, a narrative has been promoted that such reforms would lead to women's empowerment by relaxing the hold of cultural norms and creating economic opportunities that include women in the global workforce, which would then free them from violence (Krishnan 2018). However, global economic conditions can contribute to violence against women through the intertwining of private life with public spaces such as the workplace, and of patriarchy with the material conditions of daily life (Weissman 2007).

In this paper, we relate spousal violence in India to such intertwining post-neoliberal reforms. Earlier studies have associated domestic violence in India with engagement in paid employment and women's property ownership (Panda and Agarwal 2005, Bhattacharyya, Bedi and Chhachhi 2011, H. Bhattacharya 2015). We assess trends in the incidence of spousal physical violence against women using data spanning the period between 2005 and 2021.

Data: Sources and Under-Reporting

Legal protection of women experiencing domestic violence was limited until the passage of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code in 1983, which criminalises physical or mental 'cruelty' inflicted on a woman by the husband or a relative of the husband. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) was passed in 2005 and protects the rights of women subjected to domestic violence. The PWDVA defines domestic violence as physical, sexual, verbal and emotional, or economic abuse perpetrated on a woman by her partner or resident family members. Throughout this paper, we only consider physical violence, and not other forms of domestic violence. As Oduro, Deere, and Catanzarite (2015) note, the correlates of different forms of violence may be different even within countries, and it is useful to analyse each form of violence separately.

Another reason to not consider overall domestic violence is related to the collection and availability of data. We use the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) 3 and 5, conducted in 2005–06 and 2019–21, respectively. One question relating to reported sexual violence in NFHS 3 appears to have

disaggregated into two questions in NFHS 5 but it is not clear whether the information was similarly captured in both rounds, particularly for such a sensitive topic.² The comparability of the incidence of reported sexual violence and overall domestic violence between the two rounds is therefore not clear.

Although NFHS 2 also collected some information on domestic physical violence, this information is not comparable to that collected in later rounds, and the NFHS 2 dataset is not used. The trend does not show a marked difference with the inclusion of the NFHS 4 round conducted in 2015–16, and we only use data from the NFHS 3 and 5 surveys to understand the overall trend between 2005 and 2021.

The reference period used is the 12 months preceding the survey, and only currently married women aged 18–49 years and living with their spouses were included in the study. Physical violence refers to the reported incidence of any of the following by the spouse in the 12 months preceding the survey: pushed, shook, or threw something at her; twisted her arm or pulled her hair; slapped; punched; kicked, dragged, or beat her up; tried to choke or burn her on purpose; and/ or threatened or attacked her with a weapon.

A concern with the collection of such sensitive information is the under-reporting of domestic violence. Estimates of such under-reporting find that only around two percent of the physical violence incidents and one percent of the sexual violence incidents perpetrated by husbands were reported to the police in 2005 (Gupta 2014).³ In considering trends, we assume that the extent of under-reporting of intimate partner violence remained roughly the same across survey rounds. The extent of under-reporting may also vary by socio-economic group (Deshpande 2002, Panda and Agarwal 2005), and this bias may hamper the comparability of reported violence between different social or economic groups. Keeping in mind the need for an intersectional analysis, we do show the trends in reported violence across different groups but cautiously interpret trends in light of these limitations.

Spousal Violence

For more than 20 percent of currently married and cohabiting women, their spouse inflicted physical violence on them during the 12 months preceding the survey in both years (Table 1). The overall incidence remained roughly the same, with a marginal rise mainly in urban areas. The reported incidence continued to be relatively higher in rural areas. These estimates reflect reported violence, and the actual incidence of domestic violence is likely to be higher.

Spousal Violence and Intersecting Identities

Women's experience of domestic violence is often shaped by other dimensions of their identity, such as race or class, as patterns of subordination intersect (Crenshaw 1991). In the same spirit, we consider intersectional identities to understand spousal violence against women in India. The reporting

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of incidence of spousal violence may vary over time as well as by socio-economic group, and we therefore cautiously assess cross-sectional patterns and time trends.

The striking aspect of the reported spousal physical violence disaggregated by social group is the higher incidence among historically marginalised social groups, as compared to the residual ‘others’ group comprising those who do not belong to the Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC) (Table 2). The trends between 2005 and 2021 show either marginal changes or broadly the same levels apart from a decline in incidence against ST women in rural areas. Around 27 percent of SC women, 25 percent of ST women, and 23 percent of OBC women reported being physically mistreated by their spouse in 2019–21, as compared to 16 percent of women of the forward castes communities (‘others’).

Table 1 Reported spousal physical violence (%)

Region	2005-06	2019-21
Urban	16.8	18.0
Rural	23.5	24.1
All-India	21.3	22.2

Note: All tables in this paper refer to reported incidents of physical violence perpetrated against currently married and cohabiting women (18-49 years) in the 12 months preceding the survey. Source: Computed using NFHS 3 and 5.

Table 2 Reported spousal physical violence by social group and wealth quintile (%)

Wealth quintile	SC	ST	OBC	Others
2005-06				
Bottom 20 percent	29.9	33.1	29.1	31.3
Next 20 percent	32.2	28.1	27.4	26.4
Middle 20 percent	26.5	25.0	23.7	22.4
Next 20 percent	21.7	18.6	17.6	15.7
Top 20 percent	14.8	13.1	9.9	6.7
All	26.6	28.6	21.5	15.9
2019-21				
Bottom 20 percent	32.3	26.6	32.8	28.3
Next 20 percent	28.2	23.0	29.5	26.9
Middle 20 percent	26.9	25.9	23.8	19.3
Next 20 percent	23.0	23.9	20.2	12.8
Top 20 percent	16.0	15.3	14.3	8.6
All	26.7	24.6	23.4	16.2

Source: Computed using NFHS 3 and.

Across all social groups and in both years, lower proportions of women in the top wealth quintile⁴ reported physical mistreatment by their spouse. Women reporting spousal violence tend to be from households with lower economic resources, which in turn affects their ability to exit the marital relation. They may also be additionally burdened by unpaid subsistence activities to support the household. Caste, class and gender intersect such that women of different caste and class identities may face different obstacles in freeing themselves from violence.

Spousal Violence and Work Patterns of Women

The incidence of spousal physical violence is higher among those women who reported being employed at the time of the survey (Table 3). In a cross-sectional analysis of the 2015–16 data in NFHS 4, we found that employed women tended to face a greater risk of spousal violence and hypothesised the pattern to be due to the double burden of paid and unpaid labour on such women, resulting in a male backlash when gendered expectations are not met (Biswas and Thampi 2021). Here, the trends over time reveal that the higher risk of spousal violence among women who reported being employed was true in other years as well.

At the same time, women who do not report ‘working’ also experienced an equivalent increase in the incidence of spousal physical violence between 2005 and 2021. The sources that create the conditions of gendered violence may be different for women who report being employed and those who do not. In the case of women who do not report being employed, the spouse may retaliate through violence to the absence of contribution to household earnings by the wife. In addition, the gendered expectations around unpaid domestic labour within the household may have changed following economic reforms.

In this regard, we consider whether the need to undertake a heavy share of unpaid domestic labour relates to the incidence of spousal violence. For this, a proxy measure of ‘intensive’ unpaid domestic labour is used, i.e., whether the source of water for the household is more than 10 minutes away from the premises of the dwelling. This indicator is adjusted for the presence of another female member aged above 15 years in the household who may be able to share the burden of the reproductive labour in the household. The presence of a female member is used given the much higher share of women in undertaking domestic and subsistence activities within the household. As per the NSS Time Use Survey 2019, more than 80 percent of women engaged in unpaid domestic services for the household. On average, women spent one-fifth of the time in their day on unpaid domestic and caregiving services for members, which was eight times more than the time that men spent (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation 2020).

Physical mistreatment by the spouse is, on average, much higher among women who bear a heavy share of unpaid reproductive labour, as

Table 3 Reported spousal physical violence by reported work status of woman (%)

Reported work status	Urban		Rural		Total	
	2005-06	2019-21	2005-06	2019-21	2005-06	2019-21
No	15.3	16.3	20.6	21.6	18.4	19.8
Yes	20.7	22.1	26.4	28.3	25.2	26.7

Source: Computed using NFHS 3 and 5.

Table 4 Reported spousal violence by time taken to collect water (%)

Region	Within or near premises	More than 10 minutes
2005-06		
Urban	15.9	28.3
Rural	22.7	28.8
All-India	20.4	28.7
2019-21		
Urban	17.9	25.0
Rural	23.8	31.0
All-India	21.9	29.9

Note: Time taken to collect water in households without other female members aged above 15 years is used as an indicator of unpaid reproductive labour of the woman.

Source: Computed using NFHS 3 and 5.

proxied by water collection responsibilities that may not be shared by other household members (Table 4). In both years, the proportion of such women was higher by eight percentage points. Among women who face ‘intensive’ reproductive labour and those who do not, the reported incidence of spousal physical violence was higher among SC, ST, and OBC women than among forward castes women (Table 5). Women of marginalised communities who face an intense burden of reproductive labour appear to also face a higher risk of spousal violence. The experience of spousal violence interacts with pre-existing vulnerabilities and existing structures of domination.

In 2019–21, 24 percent of forward castes women who bore a heavy share of unpaid reproductive labour reported spousal physical violence. This was in fact lower than the proportion of Dalit women who did not need to spend much time in water collection and still reported battering by the spouse (26 percent). This reflects structural intersectionality, by which the experiences of domestic violence of women of different intersectional identities are qualitatively different (Crenshaw 1991).

Discussion

Since the introduction of neoliberal economic reforms, ‘a market-led version of women’s empowerment’ (Wilson, Loh and Purewal 2018, 1) has

Table 5 *Reported spousal physical violence by time taken to collect water for women of different social groups (%)*

<i>Water collection time</i>	<i>SC</i>	<i>ST</i>	<i>OBC</i>	<i>Others</i>
2005-06				
Within or near premises	26.0	26.9	20.8	15.2
More than 10 minutes	30.7	34.1	26.8	25.2
2019-21				
	SC	ST	OBC	Others
Within or near premises	26.4	24.1	23.0	15.9
More than 10 minutes	32.3	30.2	33.4	24.3

Note: Time taken to collect water in households without other female members aged above 15 years is used as an indicator of unpaid reproductive labour of the woman.

Source: Computed using NFHS 3 and 5.

been promoted. Government policy and the corporate world have promoted the narrative that globalisation would lead to women's empowerment by relaxing the hold of cultural norms and creating economic opportunities that include women in the global workforce, which was then expected to free them from violence and oppression (Krishnan 2018).

Since at least 2005, the incidence of reported spousal physical violence has remained roughly the same or shown a minor increase, assuming that under-reporting bias in the NFHS surveys has also remained roughly the same over time and across socio-economic communities. If, as the narrative goes, economic reforms would free women from violence, why has there not been a decrease, and potentially the reverse?

We consider the sources of continued spousal violence within the larger structural context of multiple crises compounding each other and contributing to the continued need for male control over women, interlinking patriarchy with the neoliberal regime. The Indian experience of neoliberalism has been one of multiple interlinked crises – agrarian and employment crises as well as a crisis of social reproduction (Rao and Vakulabharanam 2019).

The agricultural sector in the Indian economy has been in serious crisis with low growth rates, rising input costs and inadequate state support. In spite of periods of rapid economic growth, there has been inadequate generation of remunerative non-agricultural jobs. Even the employment that has been generated has been informal in nature with low wages, poor working conditions, and inadequate or no social security provisions. Such insecure structural economic conditions amplify the conditions for domestic violence. For instance, in a case study in South Africa, a country with a long history of oppression and serious poverty and unemployment, the male partner admitted to resorting to violence against his wife in the absence of control over other spheres of life, such as his unemployed status (Boonzaier 2008).

In this context of the livelihoods crisis, a relevant trend is the declining female labour force participation rate in India in spite of high economic growth rates, decline in fertility rates and rise in female educational attainment. Instead of being included in the workforce, women have withdrawn from it since the late 1980s. In 2019–20, only 29 percent of women aged above 15 years were in the labour force as against 73 percent of men, as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey data. In addition, in spite of the presumption that the market does not discriminate, women and marginalised social groups have continued to face discrimination in the access to employment opportunities and economic resources. In any case, participation in paid employment need not mean empowerment on its own (Elson 1999, Ilkkaracan 2012). Indeed, women who report being employed face a higher risk of spousal violence and this may be due to the double burden of unpaid reproductive work and paid work on them, which can result in a backlash effect from their spouse when gendered expectations within the home are not met (Biswas and Thampi 2021).

At the same time, women who do not report ‘working’ also experienced an equivalent increase in the incidence of spousal physical violence during the period between 2005 and 2021. The sources that create the conditions of gendered violence may be different for women who report being employed and those who do not. In a situation of livelihoods crisis, not contributing to household earnings may disadvantage women’s position within the household and reinforce the possibility of violence against them by their spouse.

This in turn reflects the lack of recognition of unpaid domestic labour as ‘work’ and relates to the crisis of social reproduction in the economy. The decline in female labour force participation has been matched by a corresponding rise in the proportion of women primarily engaged in unpaid domestic and subsistence activities. That such activities are not officially counted in the definition of labour force participation is a reflection of the lack of social and statistical recognition of women’s economic activity (Hirway 2015, Ghosh 2018). In such a context of precarious and informal employment, inadequate social security provisioning, increasing acquisition of land and common property resources, inadequate public investment in providing essentials such as water and fuel, the unpaid domestic labour of women becomes all the more relevant in supporting the subsistence of the working members in the household. Thus, gendered expectations around unpaid domestic labour may have increased following neoliberal reforms, intensifying the conditions for domestic violence if those expectations are not met.

In our data analyses, we use the time spent on collecting water for the household as an indicator of ‘intensive’ unpaid reproductive labour. Women are usually entrusted with carrying and using water at home as well as with many of the activities for which water is used, such as cooking, cleaning, and care work. Water continues to be under-provisioned in various parts

of the country, particularly during the summer months. The time spent collecting water by travelling long distances or waiting in queues at public taps or water lorries leaves women with less time for other activities (Paul 2017). Such responsibilities also vary by caste, harking back to historic caste divisions in the access to water. Predominantly Dalit neighbourhoods may have less access to water or fuel, assigning collection of such resources to the women of these households. For Dalit women in the Kumaon region, Joshi (2011) notes a sharp gendering of responsibilities around water which starts at adolescence. With marriage, the gendered division of water responsibilities get cemented and continue even after women's bodies are bent with age and physical exertion (Joshi 2011). Our findings indicate that the reported incidence of spousal physical violence tends to be higher in households where women bear a heavier burden of reproductive labour.

With increased rural-urban migration in the search for non-agricultural jobs, there has been a proliferation of informal settlements in cities. Such settlements are marked by under-provisioning of essentials such as water and poor housing facilities (Anand and Thampi 2021). For one-third of the population in the country, the drinking water source is located outside the premises of their dwelling, as per the NSS Socio-economic Survey 2018. Rise in housing costs and poor conditions of housing for migrant workers in cities also intensify the reliance on the unpaid work done largely by women. To the extent that rural-urban migration and female unpaid domestic labour are necessitated by the neoliberal labour regime, patriarchal arrangements and the neoliberal regime support each other (Sangari 2015).

The transition to neoliberalism included shifting the responsibility of care work from the state to the family, usually the female members, or handing it over to the market (T. Bhattacharya 2013, Davidson 2013). The increase in material needs in the changing economic context along with the expectation that women would provide for those needs amplified the conditions for gendered violence within the home (T. Bhattacharya 2013). The low priority assigned to 'life-making' activities such as health and education is also evident from social sector spending cuts and non-recognition of the work done by ASHA and anganwadi workers. Such budget cuts have contributed to an intensification of the burden of domestic care and subsistence work on the female members of households. For instance, stagnation in the proportion of health expenditure (at around one percent of GDP since 2000) along with increased privatisation of healthcare facilities result in women shouldering a heavier burden when family members fall sick and cannot afford to be treated in institutional facilities. Indeed, the public health system only treats less than a third of the population in India, as per the NSS Health survey 2017–18.

We also assess trends in spousal violence through the lens of intersectional identities. The absence of control over the economic situation could be stronger among marginalised communities, leading to

a higher incidence of domestic violence. Men in socially and economically disadvantaged communities are more prone to violence against their wife to assert control in the domestic sphere (Anandhi 2017, Still 2017). These patterns can be linked to the persistence of caste-based inequalities in the access to economic resources and employment (Thorat and Attewell 2010, Zacharias and Vakulabharanam 2011). Caste, class and gender intersect such that women of different caste and class identities may face different obstacles in freeing themselves from violence. This reflects structural intersectionality, by which the experiences of domestic violence of women of different intersectional identities are qualitatively different (Crenshaw 1991). Seeking rights against violence is also more difficult for socio-economically marginalised women to whom law enforcement personnel are often openly hostile (Roychowdhury 2021).

As noted by Crenshaw (1991), there is a concern that statistics that show greater prevalence of violence among minority communities may reinforce stereotypes of these communities being more violent. However, the structural factors that create the conditions for persistent deprivation of marginalised communities, and therefore persistent domestic violence, need to be highlighted. These patterns are to be seen as a reflection of the continuing disadvantages that historically deprived communities continue to face in spite of the promise of neoliberal economic reforms that the market would not discriminate by identity. Identifying such differences can also be a source of social empowerment (Crenshaw 1991).

The gendered expectations within the home are therefore reasserted in different ways in the situation of crises in the Indian economy following neoliberal economic reforms. Far from being free from violence and oppression, women are expected to continue to meet the material needs to provide human labour. Thus, the sources that create the conditions for intimate partner violence against women may have changed with neoliberal economic reforms, but the incidence of such violence continues through the intertwining of patriarchy with the material conditions of daily life.

Notes

- 1 Dietrich (1983) narrates how prosecution for prisoners in Madurai Central Jail convicted of wife killing was very difficult as the offence was considered 'a private affair' (Dietrich 1983, 60).
- 2 The question in NFHS 3 was '(Does/did) your husband... Force you to perform any sexual acts you did not want to?' In NFHS 5, this appears to have been captured as two questions relating to physical coercion and coercion through threats or any other way. It is not clear whether the information was similarly captured in both rounds, particularly for this sensitive topic. This is one of the reasons why we consider only physical violence, and not sexual violence or overall domestic violence, in our analysis.
- 3 Even for the cases that were registered, only around 16 percent of cases tried under Section 498A resulted in a conviction, and less than half of the cases tried under PWDVA led to a court order by 2018 (Roychowdhury 2021).

- 4 The NFHS unit-level data includes a variable on the wealth quintile of each sampled household, and this is used as an indicator of the relative wealth position of the household. A score was computed for each household using the reported information on assets ownership, dwelling characteristics, and access to various goods and services, and wealth quintiles were constructed on the basis of this score.

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