Does Women’s Empowerment Promote Help-Seeking for Spousal Violence in India? *Findings from a National Survey*

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**Objectives**

- The majority of women who experience spousal violence do not seek help.
- Research suggests that aspects of empowerment have a positive influence on a women’s well-being and healthcare-seeking behaviors. But little is known about the influence of empowerment on help-seeking for spousal violence.
- Spousal violence and empowerment are shaped by local norms and customs. Examining the role of empowerment is particularly relevant in societies with strong patriarchal traditions and where spousal violence may be culturally sanctioned (Davison, 2010; Goel, 1996).
- Guided by an empowerment framework and influenced by the social ecological model, we examined the role and interaction of individual and contextual empowerment for help-seeking from partner violence among married women in India.

**Data and Measures**

- **Data:** National Family Health Survey, 2005/2006 (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ORC Macro, 2007) and the Gender-Empowerment Index and the Gender Development Index (GDI) (India Ministry of Women & Child Development, 2009).
- **Measures:** Help-seeking: two mutually exclusive sources: from family/friends or as a woman, respondents were asked about their help-seeking for spousal violence.
- **Violence:** Pushed, shook or had an object thrown at them; severely slapped; hit with a fist or something harmful; kicked or dragged; pushed, shook or had an object thrown at; severe violence.
- **Covariates:** Demographic variables included individual and household characteristics: age, total number of children, urban residence, average household educational attainment, religion, employment status, daughter-in-law status, and whether she saw her father before her mother.

**Empowerment Framework**

**Individual empowerment:** a measure of years of education and a measure of wealth quintile.

**Relationships:** Any participation in decision-making: a binary measure from six questions on whether the woman participates in decision-making for household spending, deciding to obtain health care for herself and visiting her family.

**Attitude towards wife beating:** a binary measure from seven questions on whether a man is ever justified in beating his wife.

**Freedom of movement:** a continuous measure from four questions on whether she was allowed to go to four places.

**Husband’s controlling behaviors:** a continuous measure from six questions on the husband restrictions and threatened.

**Evaluative difference:** whether her husband has more years of education than herself.

**Severity of violence:** whether the woman experienced severe violence or an injury from the violence.

**Level of empowerment:** Proportion of women who experience violence, proportion of women who justify wife-beating for a reason; proportion of women with a loan; the Gender-empowerment Index and the Gender Development Index (GDI) (Ministry of Women & Child Development, 2009).

**Factor analysis** was to verify construct validity of empowerment measures. We estimated odds ratios for each of help-seeking: 1) individual, 2) household characteristics, 3) individual & state-level empowerment measures; 3) interaction of empowerment measures.

**Implications**

- Findings point to the pervasive reluctance and obstinate social barriers women face in response to violence, despite advances in women’s education, autonomy and wealth.
- Institutional recourse for abuse is rare. Reforms in the last 10 years, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005, and local and international non-governmental organizations, have increased institutional and domestic violence. However, a review of the effects of the 2005 law indicated positive changes but many challenges (Bhatia, 2012).
- Governments must allocate resources and pursue reforms in traditional and legal systems to alter social norms around wife-beating.

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*Summary*

- The strongest indicators that a woman would seek help were the severity of violence, the husband’s controlling behaviors and the state-level norms around gender empowerment.
- Individual measures of empowerment are not related to seeking help. Among relationship measures of empowerment, freedom of movement and husband’s behaviors were predictive of help-seeking.
- Few women seek help from institutions. Whether the woman justified wife-beating was unrelated to whether she sought help.
- Further research is needed to understand how social network influences, rather than social status measures, may improve help-seeking.

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*Table 1: Percent of Currently Married Women Age 15-49 Who Sought, and Did Not Sought Help for Spousal Violence, Among Currently Married Women Age 15 to 49 in India, 2005/2006*