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The state of Indian housewives' participation in domestic decision making and opposition of domestic violence

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Abstract

This paper presents the empirical results of a survey of 127 housewives in West Putra, India in which, quite unlike other surveys conducted by the Indian government, the respondents were specifically asked about their degree of involvement in decision making and opposing domestic violence. It was found that in household decision-making women's involvement was significantly and positively related to their time spent in the household but there was no significant relationships between the women's time spent in the household and their raising voice against violence. It was also found that comparatively women in nuclear families were more able to be concerned about their pride and dignity than their counterparts in joint or extended families.

Keywords: caste system, decision making, domestic violence, housewives participation, Indian society, marginalisation of women

Introduction

Though women are considered the backbone of society their subjection in certain spheres of life is still common in patriarchal societies. In many developing countries (see for eg. Mahabub Hossain, Manik Lal Bose, and Alia Ahmed:2004; Saira Zafar, Zahira Batool and Sumera Bano: 2005), women are subjected to various hurdles such as lower level of education, malnutrition, superstitions, domination by the male members in the family, lack of freedom of expression, lower wage rates and violence.

Since the 1990s, there has been an increasing concern about violence against women in general and domestic violence in particular, in both developed and developing countries. Not only has domestic violence been acknowledged worldwide as a violation of basic human rights, but also an increasing amount of research highlights the health burdens, intergenerational effects, and demo-graphic consequences of such violence (see for examples United Nations, 1997; Heise *et al.*, 1999; Jewkes, 2002; Campbell, 2002; Kishor and Johnson, 2004, 2006). Domestic violence that is any act of physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, or the threat of such abuse, inflicted against a woman by a person intimately connected to her through marriage, family relation, or acquaintanceship is universal and has its roots in the socio-cultural set up of the society. The perpetrators of domestic violence have often been found to be the males and the victims of their sexual partners. Internationally, one in three women have been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused in their lifetime by a member of her own family (Heise *et al.*, 1999).

Domestic violence occurs in all socio-economic and cultural population subgroups; and in many societies, including India, women are socialized to accept, tolerate, and even rationalize domestic violence and to remain silent about such experiences. Violence of any kind has a

detrimental impact on the economy of a country through increased disability, medical costs, and loss of labour hours; however, because women withstand the worst of domestic violence, they disproportionately bear the health and psychological burdens as well.

Domestic violence was recognized as a criminal offence in India in 1983. The offence chargeable under section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code that relates to domestic violence is any act of cruelty by a husband (or his family) towards his wife. However, until recently, there was no separate civil law addressing the specific complexities associated with domestic violence, including the embedded nature of violence within familial networks, the need for protection and maintenance of abused women, and the fact that punishment and imprisonment for the husband may not be the best resolution in every case. Accordingly, after a decade-long process of consultations and revisions, a comprehensive domestic violence law, known as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, took effect in 2006. Key elements of the law include the prohibition of marital rape and the provision of protection and maintenance orders against husbands and partners who are emotionally, physically, or economically abusive.

Given this background this study is an attempt to explore some of the principal socio-cultural factors underlying the state of Indian rural women's participation in decision-making that is ignored by surveys conducted by the Indian government. The objectives of analyzing the basic social problems faced by women of the society, particularly in Tripura are threefold : (1) to establish the socio-economic status of the women; (2) to estimate the extent of participation of housewives in decision making regarding family matters; and (3) to gauge the extent of the women's opposition to domestic violence which is reflective of their participation in domestic decision making.

Data source and methodology

The main source of data for the analysis a questionnaire survey conducted in West Tripura, a district of Tripura state of India where nearly 48% of the total population of Tripura lives. As per census 2001, the population of Tripura stands at 31,99,203 registering a population density of 305 per square kilometer. The estimated midyear population in 2008 is 34,74,000 comprising of 17,79,000 males and 16,95,000 females. After a pilot study, a random sample technique was utilized for data collection and well-structured questionnaires prepared in local language were distributed. To maximize correct responses researchers took help of one local person to explain the questions contained in the questionnaire to respondents who were uneducated or had difficulties comprehending the questions asked. In total 150 questionnaires were distributed and 127 were finally used for the purpose of analysis. Descriptive statistics and non-parametric Chi-square tests were conducted on the sample.

Findings and discussion

The socio-economic condition of the respondents is given in Table 1. The majority of the respondent (58.5%) fell in the age group of 25 to 50 years which reveals that the majority of the respondents were matured enough to participate in the decision making process. Eighty-one percent of respondents belong to the schedule tribe and 96.1% to the Hindu religion. The astonishing fact is that 28.3% never went to school, 29.7% reached up to matriculation, and only 1.6% made it to graduation level. As 59.8% lived in a joint family of which 85.8% had lived in that family for more than 5 years we hypothesize this fact to have significant impact on the housewives' participation in the decision making.

The income and occupation of the respondents' husbands are presented in the Table 2. The majority (i.e., 49.6%) of these husbands' monthly incomes ranged between RS 30001 to 4000, 56.7% were self-employed, and only 18.1% were in government employment.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents according to their age, caste, religion, education level, types of family, and number of years in the family

Age	Frequency	Percentage	Caste	Frequency	Percentage
0-25	23	18.1	GEN*	38	29.9
25-50	74	58.3	ST*	81	63.8
50-75	30	23.6	SC*	2	1.6
75 & above	0	0	Other lower ranks*	6	4.7
Total	127	100	Total	127	100

Religion	Frequency	Percentage	Education Level	Frequency	Percentage
Hindu	122	96.1	Never went to school	36	28.3
Muslim	2	1.6	Up to class 7	42	33.1
Christian	3	2.4	Matriculation	38	29.7
Others	0	0	Higher Secondary	9	7.1
Total	127	100	B.A pass	2	1.6
			Total	127	100

Types of family	Frequency	Percentage	No. of years	Frequency	Percentage
Nuclear	51	40.2	0-1yr	4	3.1
Joint	76	59.8	2--5yr.	14	11
Total	127	100	More than five yr.	109	85.8
			Total	127	100

*GEN: General Category (people who do not deserve any kind of reservation in any government employment)

ST: Scheduled Tribes (two groupings of of historically disadvantaged people that are given express recognition in the constitution of India; also known as the Depressed Classes)

SC: Scheduled Castes (SCs), also known as the Dalits

Other lower ranks : include sudra varna and former untouchables India

Table 2. Distribution of the respondents according to their husbands' monthly income and occupation

Monthly Income (Rp.)	Frequency	Percentage	Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
2000-3000	47	37	Self employed	72	37
3001-4000	63	49.6	Private organization	18	49.6
4001-5000	11	8.7	Government employment	23	8.7
5000&above	6	4.7	Retired	4	4.7
Total	127	100	Part time job	10	100
			Total	127	

Responses of respondents to the different questions asked are presented in Table 3 and 4. From Table 3 it is encouraging to know that a very high percentage i.e., 84.3% of housewives knows about property rights. On the other hand, it is very disappointing to find out that 58.3% never read newspapers or any other magazines and only 18.1% went through the newspapers daily. However, on the contrary 54.3% watch television regularly which may be assumed to have some impact on decision-making and opposing domestic violence.

Further, Table 3 also presents the extent of participation in the decision-making in the family matters by the housewives. It is encouraging to find that 66.9% housewives always participated in deciding about their children education; on the contrary only 33.9% participate in making the decision to visit a health care centre. Some 34.6% respondents stated that they always participated in the decision making about their children’s careers. The very disappointing fact is that only 11.0% always participated in making the decision about financial matters. Similarly, only 9.4% always participated in deciding the purchasing of luxurious items. Some 58.3% respondents decided about purchasing their own requirement sometimes but when it came to purchasing of gold 48% stated that they never made any decision.

Table 3. Frequency distribution of respondents according to their participation in decision making of family matters

No.	Family Matters	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
1	Education of children	85 (66.9)	22 (17.3)	0	20 (15.7)	127(100)
2	Visit to the health centre	43 (33.9)	54 (42.5)	3 (2.4)	27 (21.3)	127 (100)
3	Children's career	44 (34.6)	38 (29.9)	4 (3.1)	41 (32.3)	127 (100)
4	Children's marriage	37 (29.1)	36 (28.3)	22 (17.3)	32 (25.2)	127 (100)
5	Supervision of the household	18(14.2)	66 (52.0)	3 (2.4)	40 (31.5)	127 (100)
6	Daily shopping	19 (15.0)	66 (52.0)	1 (0.8)	41 (32.3)	127 (100)
7	Financial matters	14 (11.0)	58 (45.7)	15 (11.8)	40 (31.5)	127 (100)
8	Purchasing of luxurious item	12 (9.4)	71(55.9)	6(4.7)	38 (29.9)	127 (100)
9	Visiting relatives and friends	10(7.9)	83(65.4)	3(2.4)	31(24.4)	127 (100)
10	Purchasing of personal items	4(3.1)	74 (58.3)	8 (6.3)	41(32.3)	127 (100)
11	Purchasing of gold jewelery	5 (3.9)	46(36.2)	15 (11.8)	61(48.0)	127 (100)

Table 4. Frequency distribution of the respondents according to raising voice against violence committed by husbands and in-laws

No.	Reasons for violence against the wife	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
1	When she goes out without informing	0	43 (33.9)	-0.8	83(65.4)	127 (100)
2	When she neglects the household chores	5 (3.9)	38 (29.9)	2 (1.6)	82 (64.6)	127
3	When she argues with husband	4 (3.1)	33 (26.0)	7 (5.5)	83 (65.4)	127
4	When she refuses to have sex with husband	0	24 (18.9)	11(8.7)	92 (72.4)	127
5	When she argues with in-laws	0	20 (15.7)	6 (4.7)	101(79.5)	127
6	If she is not a good cook	0	22 (17.3)	2 (1.6)	103(81.1)	127

Table 4 presents the distribution of the respondents according to their act of raising voice against domestic violence by husbands and in-laws for some small reason. In this regard we purposely avoided questions regarding dowry related violence, since these were quite outside the ambit of the routine, everyday issues that this study dealt with but which were very important in protecting the self-respect of women in the household . The result was very distressing because not a single woman ever raised their voice against violence committed on them by their husbands or in-laws because of such reasons as their going out without telling, refusing to have sex, arguing back, and not cooking good food.

A number of hypotheses was tested with regard to the decision-making and raising voice against violence by associating these two matters with the women’s age, education, number of years in the family etc. and results of the tested hypothesis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of non-parametric Chi-square test

No.	Null Hypotheses	Chi-square test	df	p-value
1	No association between age and decision making	9.101	6	0.168
2	No association between age and raising voice against violence	12.639(a)	4	0.013
3	No association between no .of years in the family and decision making	11.616(a)	6	0.071
4	No association between no. of years in that family and raising voice against violence	1.772(a)	4	0.778
5	No association between attending school and decision making	5.015(a)	3	0.171
6	No association between attending school and raising voice against violence	7.471(a)	2	0.024
7	No association between reading habits other than newspaper and decision making	5.468(a)	3	0.141
8	No association between reading habits other than newspaper and raising voice against violence	6.213(a)	2	0.045
9	No association between watching T.V and decision making	2.838(a)	3	0.417
10	No association between watching T.V and raising voice against violence	3.411(a)	2	0.182
11	No association between religion and decision making	9.576(a)	6	0.144
12	No association between religion and raising voice against violence	1.091(a)	4	0.896
13	No association between caste and decision making	45.694(a)	9	0.000
14	No association between caste and raising voice against violence	18.601(a)	6	0.005
15	No association between Income of her husband and decision making	22.704(a)	9	0.007
16	No association between Income of her husband and raising voice against violence	6.726(a)	6	0.347
17	No association between family type and decision making	5.194(a)	3	0.158
18	No association between family type and raising voice against violence	6.020(a)	2	0.049
19	No association between knowledge of property rights and decision making	4.263(a)	3	0.234
20	No association between knowledge of property rights and raising voice against violence.	1.193(a)	2	0.551

As indicated in Table 6 the association between age and decision making in family matters is not significant whereas there is a significant relationship between raising voice against domestic violence and the housewife's age . The analysis also shows that the association between number of years spent in the family by the housewife and her participation in the family decision-making is significant. This may be because the woman has become familiar with the family environment as years spent living in the particular house had enable her to participate more in the decision-making.

The same, however, does not apply in the case of her raising voice against domestic violence. The main reason for this is her tendency to get accustomed to things in her daily life such that if they did not raise voice against violence in the first year, then they would also not do it later. In other words, once the woman had accepted the humiliation of violence, they get more and more used to it as the years pass by, hence the absence of relationship between the number of years spent in the house with raising voice against violence.

The relationship between attending school and decision-making is not significant whereas the opposite is true in the association of attending school with raising voice against violence is . The association between reading habits and decision-making is not significant but significant in the

case of the relationship between reading newspaper and magazines and raising voice against violence. The association of decision-making and raising voice against violence with watching television is also not significant.

As expected of Indian societies, there exists a significant relationship between caste and decision-making and caste and raising voice against violence. A possible reason for this is that lower caste women are mostly dominated by their male counterparts in most of the states in India. However, the relationship between religion and decision-making and religion and raising voice against violence is not significant. Interestingly, there exists the association between the husband's income and the wife's participation in the decision making process in the family matters but not in raising voice against violence. It appears that family type is not significantly related to decision-making but is significant to raising voice against violence. This might be due to the fact that in a joint or extended family it is more difficult for the woman to raise voice against any kind of violence as she feels alone against the other members and with the cultural norms not supporting her, whereas in a nuclear family the woman has to deal only with her husband and therefore would find it easier to fight for her pride. The association between knowledge of property rights and decision-making and between knowledge of property rights and raising voice against violence is not significant. In the majority of the families the females are not treated equally in terms of intelligence as invariably they are deemed lacking intelligence and wisdom. As such even their possessing knowledge of property rights does not render them fit to participate in any decision making or opposing violence. The involvement of females in all these matters mostly depends upon the mentality of males and their perception of and attitudes toward the females.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the West Tripura findings confirm the hypotheses that Indian women are marginalised in decision-making and leadership. A variety of processes that begin in infancy interplays to engender such marginalisation. In contrast to boys, girls are encouraged to play passive roles and given little opportunity to make decisions or develop leadership skills outside the family context. Within the family as well, women have very little say in decisions affecting their own lives, even after marriage. For most Indian women, even among educated women of well-off families, marriage itself is not a matter of choice in deciding when and to whom they will get married. Culturally, marriage denotes the end of childhood, but the reality is that millions of Indian women get married when they are still children, both legally and biologically. Given the religious and cultural sanctification of this unequal treatment of gender in the Indian society the prospect for the women of rural West Tripura to break free of the shackle of marginalisation seems far from encouraging.

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