

Home and the world: Revisiting violence

While there is no simple answer to why men abuse their wives, balance of property could prove a deterrent. An analysis.

Bina Agarwal & Pradeep Panda

Spousal violence is symptomatic of a deep social malaise. It ruptures the myth of the home as a protective space and exposes it as a chamber of terror for many. It not only devastates the women who suffer it but also scars the children who witness it, and dehumanises the men who perpetrate it. It has enormous human, social and economic cost. And it captures perhaps more than any other indicator the gendered and grossly unequal exercise of power in society. Not surprisingly then, few issues have so concerned the women's movements in India and elsewhere as that of domestic violence, and few have so unified women's groups across regions and political affiliations.

The estimated incidence of spousal violence in India ranges between 20-50 per cent. These too are underestimates since many women do not report it for fear of social stigma. While there is no simple answer to why men abuse their wives, and why more in some societies than others, many studies have sought to identify the factors which can affect women's risk of spousal abuse. None, however, have examined the impact of women's property status. Those analysing the effect of women's economic situation on spousal violence have focused basically on employment, with mixed results — some find a lower risk among employed women, others a higher risk, or no difference.

Why property is important

Its uncertain impact apart, there are several reasons why, in examining the links between women's economic situation and violence, we need to go beyond employment and probe the effect of women's property status, in particular their owning land or a house.

The security of property, unlike employment, is invariable to the vagaries of the labour market. A house or land visibly signals the strength of a woman's fall-back position and her tangible exit option, and can thus act as a deterrent to spousal violence. And should she face violence, owning (or otherwise having access to) a house or land gives her an immediate escape option. A house can be especially helpful in this respect, but even with land a shelter could be built or micro-enterprise established.

Employment does not give the same protection: many women are unpaid workers on family farms, or have insufficient earnings to rent a place. Rented accommodation is also often unavailable readily, and there are social barriers — Indian landlords are often suspicious of single women tenants. A woman owning a home or land would not face such difficulties. Also land access enhances women's livelihood options and sense of empowerment (See eg, Bina Agarwal's *A Field of One's Own*). These would reduce her risk of violence by increasing her economic security and reducing her tolerance to violence. The important point though is not whether a woman actually uses the exit option that immovable property provides, but that the very existence of that option could deter violence. And if violence does take place, she can better escape further abuse, without having to make a cruel choice between homelessness and injury.

In the 1970s, many women's groups in Europe in fact strongly lobbied for housing legislation to enable battered women to set up home separately from violent spouses. Women's shelters can only provide temporary relief. For all these reasons it is critical to test how women's property status affects spousal violence. Here we present the broad findings of our ongoing joint study which takes this factor into account, hoping this early presentation will be useful to the dedicated women's groups who have long been combating spousal violence. Given that few Indian women own or control property we needed a research location with a sufficient sample of property-owning

women. Pradeep Panda's survey of 502 ever-married rural and urban women in the 15-49 age group in Trivandrum district (Kerala) provided an excellent chance to analyse this. Kerala has several traditionally matrilineal communities that recognise women's property claims. Also 1991 survey of rural widows by Martha Chen found that 24 per cent of the women sampled for Kerala who had land-owning fathers inherited land as daughters, compared to only 13 per cent for all India.

We examined both physical and psychological violence, and both long-term (that which occurred at least once during the woman's married life) and current violence (that which occurred in the last year) — together constituting four categories for analysis. We looked at various forms of physical violence (slapping, hitting, kicking, beating) and psychological abuse (insults, belittlement, threats, etc.). The surveyed households covered all income categories. The women respondents' average age was 33 years, the average marriage duration was 12 years, and marriages were arranged in 78 per cent of the cases but two-thirds were with the women's consent. About 43 per cent households belonged to traditionally matrilineal castes. Reflecting Kerala's low fertility and high literacy, 83 per cent of the couples had two children or less, and 96 per cent of both sexes were literate. But only a third of the women were employed (mostly in irregular or seasonal work) compared with 93 per cent of the men (mostly in regular jobs). Overall 34 per cent of the sampled women owned either land or house or both. Some 6 per cent owned only land, 14 per cent had only house titles, and 15 per cent had titles to both. While the majority of propertied women belonged to the traditionally matrilineal castes, 35 per cent of the matrilineal caste women were propertyless.

The findings

Despite Kerala's favourable human development indicators, we found a high incidence of both physical and psychological violence. On a long-term profile, 36 per cent women (41 per cent rural and 27 per cent urban) reported at least one incident of physical violence after marriage. And most experienced multiple forms: 61 per cent of the 179 women who reported being hit, kicked, slapped, or beaten by husbands experienced all four forms, and 90 per cent experienced at least three. Also most faced three or more incidents. Psychological abuse was even higher: 65 per cent reported some form of such abuse and 68 per cent reported three or more incidents. Insults and being demeaned were especially common. Similarly, current violence was high: 29 per cent of women were physically abused and 49 per cent psychologically abused in the previous year. Of particular concern is violence during pregnancy: 38 per cent reported being slapped, kicked, hit or beaten during pregnancy. This can lead to miscarriages, low birth weight infants, and even fetal and maternal deaths. Clearly violence against women here is pervasive, frequent and takes multiple forms.

And even simple things can trigger abuse. Women reported being abused if the husband felt she had not looked after the children or in-laws properly, or had not cooked properly, or had been talking with neighbours or other men. Suspicion about her being unfaithful, dissatisfaction with dowry, etc. also served as triggers.

But is the incidence of violence less if women own immovable property? Indeed it is. Ownership of property by women is associated with a dramatically lower incidence of both physical and psychological violence and both long-term and current. For example, as many as 49 per cent of the women who owned neither land nor house had suffered long-term physical violence, compared with 18 per cent and 10 per cent respectively of those who owned either land or a house, and 7 per cent of those who owned both. The effect of property ownership on psychological violence is even more dramatic: while 84 per cent of the propertyless women had suffered such abuse, the figure was 16 per cent for women owning both land and a house. In other words, women's ownership of immovable property clearly serves as a protection against all forms of spousal violence.

Equally, it provides an escape: of the 179 women experiencing long-term physical violence, 43 left home. The percentage leaving home was much greater among the propertied (71 per cent), than among the propertyless (19 per cent). Moreover, of those who left home, although 24 returned, 88 per cent of the returning women were propertyless. Few of the propertied women returned. In other words, not only are propertied women less likely to face marital violence, they are also more able to escape further violence. Hence property ownership can serve both as a deterrent and as an exit option. Belonging to a matrilineal caste group does not make a difference, over

and above property ownership.

Interestingly also, while a fair proportion of women (propertied and propertyless) faced dowry demands, only 3 per cent of the propertied women faced dowry-related beatings by in-laws and husband, compared with 44 per cent of the propertyless. This suggests another form in which owning personal property can protect women.

Importantly, the protective impact of owning a home or land in reducing women's risk of violence emerged as significant even after controlling for factors such as the household's economic status, the woman's age, duration of marriage, childlessness, hers and her husband's educational and employment level, spousal gaps in education or employment, the husband's alcohol consumption and childhood exposure to violence, and social support from parents and neighbours. In contrast to women's property status, there was no clear relationship between a woman's risk of violence and being employed herself, except if she had a regular job, and the latter reduced the risk only of long-term physical violence.

Apart from a woman's property status, her social support, the household's economic status, and the husband's employment status — were all linked with a lower risk of both long-term and current violence, and both physical and psychological violence. Other factors which we found mattered, but only for some categories of violence, are the husband witnessing marital violence in childhood and his alcohol consumption, both of which increased the likelihood of wife abuse, and the woman being more educated than her husband, having children compared with none, and being younger by nine years or more — all of which lowered the risk of certain categories of violence.

The conclusion

In sum, women's access to immovable property such as housing and land is important not only for the well-recognised reasons of enhancing women's livelihood options and overall empowerment, but also for notably reducing their risk of marital violence. India has laws that make domestic violence a criminal offence. And there are All-Women Police Stations, family counseling cells, and short-stay homes meant to help women. Several women's organisations also provide shelters and support — but are handicapped in the extent of help they can provide when battered women have no independent economic means.

Overall the existing legal and other measures are insufficient. Also they deal with violence after the fact. Our analysis indicates that women's property status could play a crucial preventive role. Clearly this factor cannot be ignored in any effective strategy for dealing with spousal violence and making families more women-friendly.

(Bina Agarwal is professor of economics, Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi; Pradeep Panda is associate fellow, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum)