

The Effects of Husband's Alcohol Consumption and Women's Empowerment on Intimate
Partner Violence in India

Abstract

Background: The influence of husband's alcohol consumption and that of women's empowerment has been largely studied separately in relation to the intimate partner violence (IPV) faced by women, which has hindered a nuanced understanding of gender-based violence in India. **Aim:** To understand how husbands' alcohol consumption shapes the relationship between women's empowerment and violence among Indian couples. **Method:** Data from the 2015-16 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) was used. A composite women's empowerment index was constructed and its association with husbands' drunkenness and odds of facing emotional, physical, severe, and sexual violence was examined. **Results:** Compared to women whose husbands were *never drunk*, those whose husbands were *sometimes* or *often* drunk had significantly higher odds of experiencing physical, emotional and sexual violence. For all the types of intimate partner violence (IPV), an increase in the empowerment index was associated with a significant reduction in the odds of experiencing violence. However, increasing frequency of husband's drunkenness in combination with increasing scores on the empowerment index, was associated with a significant increase in the odds of IPV, except sexual violence. **Conclusion:** Our findings highlight the nuances of IPV, situating the experiences of women in the social, cultural, and economic realities of Indian society.

Keywords: alcohol abuse; domestic violence; female empowerment; National Family Health Survey; NFHS-IV

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence against women has been acknowledged as a violation of basic human rights (Heise et al., 2002). Females are at a higher risk of experiencing interpersonal violence in contrast to males and one in three women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence (García-Moreno et al., 2013). Intimate partner violence (IPV), interchangeably called domestic or spousal violence, has emerged as one of the most common forms of gender-based violence around the world (Abramsky et al., 2011), and particularly in India. As of 2017, nearly 18% of all women reported having experienced some form of violence from their partners in India (Ritchie et al., 2018). This is substantially higher than other similarly developing countries such as China, Brazil, and South Africa, and nearly nine times the rate that a woman in the United States experienced violence by a partner. Indeed, recently released national data (National Crime Records Bureau, 2020) suggests that approximately 30% of all documented crimes against women in India are attributable to 'cruelty by the husband or his relatives.' Furthermore, the National Family Health Survey–3 (NFHS–3) documents the gravity of domestic violence against women in India; overall, 39% of currently married women report having ever experienced physical and/or sexual violence, the odds of which are two or three times higher if the husband drinks alcohol and gets drunk often (Kishor & Gupta, 2009).

The relationship between alcohol use and aggressive behavior is well documented. Results from studies across multiple disciplines have consistently found associations between alcohol use and aggression in general, and alcohol use and IPV in particular (Foran & O'Leary, 2008; Klostermann & Fals-Stewart, 2006; Peralta et al., 2010). Gender-based violence such as IPV, however, is unique from other forms of aggression in that it is deeply rooted in socialization practices and structural factors that discriminate against women. Jewkes (2002, p. 1426) found that IPV is strongly associated with the "status of women in a society and the normative use of violence as part of the exercise of power." Hence, any understanding of violence faced by women is

incomplete without an understanding of the normative gendered position of women in society. Recently, there have been several studies highlighting the impact of interpersonal power dynamics to domestic violence, with evidence being collected from around the globe (Flake, 2005; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Jejeebhoy, 1998a; Norman et al., 2010; Pulerwitz et al., 2000).

Gendered power is often studied through the concept of women's empowerment or autonomy. Critical to the definition of women's empowerment is that it is seen as the process by which the powerless gain greater control over their lives (Kishor & Gupta, 2004, p. 694). This renegotiation of power threatens established gender roles in marriage. There have been several studies highlighting the impact of gendered power dynamics on domestic violence, with evidence being collected from around the globe and South Asia in particular, presumably under conditions of pronounced gender inequality (Flake, 2005; Gage & Hutchinson, 2006; Jejeebhoy, 1998a; Jewkes et al., 2010). A community-based survey found that 41% of women in two Indian states reported having ever been beaten by their husbands (Jejeebhoy & Cook, 1997). In a survey of 6,700 men in Uttar Pradesh, 30% of respondents acknowledged that they had beaten their wives and 22% reported having forced their wives to engage in non-consensual sexual relations (Martin et al., 1999). The concepts of choice, control, and power, central to women's empowerment, are often points of contention in relationships with gender-stereotype imbalances, such as those in which husbands often consume alcohol.

Beyond the obvious potential for intoxication that alcohol provides, drinking and violence are social activities that have implications for expressing masculinity and normative heterosexuality (Peralta et al., 2010) and have shown to be demonstrative of power (Bennett & Williams, 2003; Kantor & Straus, 1987). Similarly, masculine gender role stress leading to IPV is moderated by heavy episodic drinking, and intoxicated men are likely to process gender-relevant threats faster than suppressing cues (Lisco et al., 2015). Through the proximal effects of alcohol on lowering inhibition and distorting perception of cues, alcohol-related violence perpetuated by

men helps establish and maintain gendered-identity. Similarly in discordant relationships, such as those with gender-stereotype imbalances, alcohol may play an indirect role in IPV by exacerbating the frustrations felt by men who may use violence as an alternative form of resource to control their partner, exert their masculinity, and maintain normative gender roles (Goode, 1971; Miedema & Fulu, 2018). Given that drinking and fighting are demonstrative of masculine power, women who threaten gendered norms in relationships to a greater extent, i.e. those who are more empowered, may be at higher risk of facing violence from their partners who drink alcohol in an attempt to restore hegemonic masculinity (e.g., Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The influence of women's empowerment on experience of IPV varies with social contexts and outcomes of interest. For instance, women in professional employment had lower odds of experiencing IPV compared to those who were unemployed in Uganda (Kwagala et al., 2013). Similarly, in the Indian state of Kerala, women with regular employment were less likely to experience domestic violence than unemployed women (Panda & Agarwal, 2005). In contrast, other research in India has found that increasing women's participation in employment is associated with greater domestic violence (Ackerson & Subramanian, 2008). Thus, overall there is mixed evidence on the protective function of women's empowerment variables such as educational attainment, asset ownership, access to microcredit and cash transfers (Ahmad et al., 2019; Baird et al., 2011; Grabe, 2010; Koenig et al., 2003).

Such inconsistent findings might be due to the binary definition of "empowerment" using individual factors representative of empowerment, leading to a fragmented understanding of the concept (Msuya et al., 2014; Sethuraman et al., 2006). Thus, parsing empowerment into its components yields an incohesive understanding that is a cumulative sum of multiple individual and social-level concepts. We aim to bridge this gap in the literature by assessing the influence of husbands' alcohol consumption and a composite metric of women's empowerment on IPV among currently married women in India. Our hypotheses are as follows:

H1: Women with husbands who frequently consume alcohol experience greater IPV than women whose husbands consume alcohol less frequently.

H1b: The frequency of husband's alcohol consumption linearly affects the frequency of violence faced by wives.

H2: Women who are more empowered, face increased violence than women lower on the empowerment index.

H2b: Women whose husbands consume alcohol more frequently and score higher on the indicators of empowerment experience more violence than women who are empowered similarly, but whose husbands consume alcohol less frequently.

2. Method

2.1 Data. We used data from India's fourth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) 2015-2016 (*National Family and Health Survey (NFHS-4)*, 2017).¹ The NFHS collected data from a nationally representative, stratified random sample between 20 January 2015 and 4 December 2016. Detailed descriptions of the sampling and other survey procedures can be found in the NFHS report (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF, 2017, pp. 1--8). We used data from the Woman's Questionnaire administered to female participants (age 15-49 years) in the NFHS-4, and the Men's Questionnaire administered to men in the age group of 15-54. For this analysis, the sample is restricted to currently married women who completed the interview ($n = 62,716$; Figure 1).

For the purposes of our analyses, we used the following data:

¹ Datasets from the DHS (including the data used in this manuscript) cannot be passed on to other researchers without the written consent of The DHS Program. To request dataset access, you must first be a registered user of the DHS website. Code used by the authors to reproduce the results reported in the manuscript are available on request.

2.1.1. Sociodemographic variables: These variables were chosen based on findings from previous studies (Dalal, 2011; Kimuna et al., 2013; Koenig et al., 2006; Msuya et al., 2014; Tuladhar et al., 2013; Weitzman, 2014; Wekwete et al., 2014).

- a. Respondent's and husband's educational achievement,
- b. Husband's employment status,
- c. Respondent's and husband's age, and
- d. Household Wealth Index. The method of measurement of the index of household wealth can be found in the India NFHS report (International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) & ICF, 2017, p. 16).

2.1.2. IPV

- e. Emotional violence included items such as "*ever been humiliated,*" "*ever been threatened with harm,*" and "*ever been insulted or made to feel bad*" by the husband;
- f. Sexual violence included the following items: "*ever been physically forced into unwanted sex,*" "*ever been forced into other unwanted sexual acts,*" and "*ever been physically forced to perform sexual acts respondent didn't want to.*";
- g. Physical violence was categorized into "less severe" and "severe." Less severe physical violence included "*ever been pushed, shook, or had something thrown by husband/partner,*" "*ever been slapped,*" "*ever been punched with fist or hit by something harmful,*" and "*ever had arm twisted or hair pulled*" by the husband. Severe physical violence included "*ever been kicked or dragged,*" "*ever been strangled or burnt,*" and "*ever been threatened with knife/gun or other weapon*" by the husband.

Items pertaining to the three different type of violence were collapsed and aggregated into binary codes. The final items used in the analysis included: "*experienced any emotional violence,*"

“experienced any less severe physical violence,” “experienced any severe physical violence,” and “experienced any sexual violence.”

2.1.3 Women's Empowerment

To develop a cohesive metric of women's empowerment, we employed variables reflecting dimensions of women's autonomy based on past literature (Kabeer, 1999), as well as those that were categorized to be a part of the women's empowerment module by the NFHS. By broadening the operationalization of women's empowerment, the index is able to capture economic (e.g. currently working), social (e.g. freedom of movement) and cultural (e.g. attitudes towards domestic violence) capital of women's lives. To avoid multicollinearity among the variables, a correlation analysis was run (Table A.2, Appendix), following which eight variables were identified, providing the most explanatory power to a composite measure of women's empowerment. Each of the original variables included different levels and measurement scales. Binary variables were included in the composite index as is, whereas ordinal variables were recoded into binary variables. Description of the final variables and their re-coded values are found in Table A.1 in the Appendix. Of these eight components, we retained six as one component (earns more than husband) applied only to the smaller sub-sample of women who earned any income² ($n = 20,151$), and another component (ownership of assets) had a negative item-rest correlation ($r = -0.0173$). Thus, the final score a respondent could receive on the Women's Empowerment Index ranged from 0 to 6, with a higher score indicating a higher level of overall empowerment.³ Although the internal consistency of the index as measured by Cronbach's alpha was .42 and by McDonald's omega was .58, the item-total correlations were significant and

² When we included the variable of whether a woman earned more than husband (set to zero for non-working women) the women's empowerment index had marginally lower statistical reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.39$). The results including this are presented in online supplementary material (Tables A.4 and A.5) as these are similar to the results using the current formulation of the women's empowerment index.

³ We did not include women's education level within the WEI as it is a continuous variable, whereas all other components of the index are binary. Further, it may not be informative or indicative of women's empowerment to convert education into a binary variable. It is therefore retained as a socio-demographic control variable that can explain odds of facing violence.

positive (Appendix, table A.2), suggesting that the computed items were measuring the underlying construct of women's empowerment, albeit weakly.⁴

2.1.4 Husband's Alcohol Consumption

- i) Frequency of *perceived* drunkenness: The Woman's Questionnaire included the following question on husband's alcohol consumption: "How often (does/did) he get drunk: often, only sometimes, or never?" This variable assessed the *perceived* frequency of drunkenness, responses ranged from never (0), sometimes (1), and often (2).
- ii) Frequency of alcohol consumption: The Men's Questionnaire included questions about the frequency of alcohol consumption: "How often do you drink alcohol: almost every day, about once a week or less than once a week?"

2.2 Analyses. Data analyses were run in Stata version 16.0. The women's empowerment index was generated and assessed for statistical reliability (using Cronbach's α) as described above. Data from husband's self-report alcohol consumption from the men's recode data was combined with the women's individual recode dataset. Pearson's correlation analysis was run to avoid collinearity between the highly related sociodemographic variables. The final analysis used the Wealth Index, woman's educational attainment, and husband's educational attainment as the confounding variables (these are reported in the full Table A.3 available in the online appendix)⁵. Odds Ratios

⁴ A Confirmatory Factor Analysis using DWLS (diagonally weighted least squares), suitable for binary data, was also computed to assess the latent factor structure of the Women's Empowerment Index with the following fit indices: Comparative Fit Index = .93; Tucker-Lewis Index = .89; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = .05; Standardized Root Mean Square Residual = .05, indicating good absolute and relative fit (Hair et al., 2010).

⁵ We also estimated a model that interacted the husband's level of education with the wealth index to see if there were any heterogeneous effects. None of the interactions, except for a small negative effect in wealth groups four and five were associated with lower odds of facing severe violence were statistically significant. These results are qualitatively similar to the main results and can be found in the online appendix (Table A.6).

were calculated using logistic regression models with weights provided in the NFHS, and standard errors were clustered at the level of the household.

3. Results

The prevalence of violence amongst currently married women ranged from 6.2% for *sexual violence* to 27% for *less severe physical violence*. Table 1 describes the socio-demographic profile of the entire sample and segregated by type of violence.

Compared to women whose husbands were *never drunk*, those whose husbands were *sometimes* or *often* drunk had significantly higher odds of experiencing physical, emotional and sexual violence (Table 2; H1). For all types of violence, the results showed a strong linear progression in the odds of facing violence associated with an increase in the perceived frequency of husband's drunkenness (Table 2; H1b). Similarly, when the husband reported drinking alcohol once a week or almost every day, it was associated with an increase in the odds of women facing all types of violence. The association was highest for sexual violence, with women whose husbands who drank almost every day facing more than twice the odds as compared to women whose husbands only reported drinking once a week.

For all the types of IPV, an increase in the empowerment index was associated with a reduction in the odds of experiencing violence (Table 2; H2). Although the differences between the odds of experiencing violence were not as large in the interaction model as compared to the model assessing only husband's alcohol consumption (drunkenness), the results indicated that there was greater risk of violence as empowerment, frequency of drunkenness, and husband's alcohol consumption increased. The interaction models showed that increasing frequency of husband's drunkenness in combination with increasing scores on the empowerment index was associated with an increase in the odds of respondents experiencing violence, except in the case of sexual violence (Table 3; H2b). The interaction effect of the husband drinking almost every day

with the women's empowerment measure had no statistically significant association with the odds of facing violence, except an increase in the case of facing severe violence.

4. Discussion

Studies have separately highlighted the influences of partner alcohol consumption (Abramsky et al., 2011; Adhikari & Tamang, 2010; Babu & Kar, 2010; Begum et al., 2015; Berg et al., 2010; Hayati et al., 2011; Nayak et al., 2010) and the empowered status of women (Dalal, 2011; Moonzwe Davis et al., 2014; Wayack Pambè et al., 2013; Wekwete et al., 2014) on IPV faced by women from across the globe. This study sought to understand the intersection of these two variables on IPV in the Indian context. Husband's frequency of alcohol consumption and women's empowerment were shown to have significant effects on the experiences of IPV. The cumulative metric of women's empowerment assessing social, cultural, and economic aspects of women's lives was found to be a protective factor, as women who were more empowered experienced lesser violence. Husband's frequency of alcohol consumption displayed a linear relationship with IPV, as women who reported higher frequency of their husbands getting drunk also reported greater experiences of domestic violence. While examining the interplay between empowerment and husband's frequency of alcohol consumption, the study found that women higher on the index of empowerment and whose husbands consume alcohol dangerously are at a higher risk of facing IPV. However, when assessed by the husband's self-reported measure of alcohol consumption, we find no significant association of drinking almost every day interacted with the empowerment index on all types of violence. A notable exception is the increase associated with the odds of facing severe violence, when empowerment is high and the husband drinks alcohol every day.

Consistent with findings of previous literature, this study demonstrated that husband's frequency of alcohol consumption was significantly associated with IPV in all its forms. However,

the nature of survey data used make it difficult to establish temporality. Despite this, the overall response that frequent alcohol consumption is a significant precipitating factor for physical, emotional, and sexual violence is consistent with many other studies on domestic violence (Abramsky et al., 2011; Devries et al., 2010; Jejeebhoy, 1998a, 1998b; Kimuna & Djamba, 2008; Koenig et al., 2003, 2006; Rao, 1997; Saffitz, 2011). Additionally, the indirect role of alcohol in heightening marital conflict has been demonstrated previously as longer periods of sobriety are found to be associated with less conflict and fewer struggles for control between partners (Roberts et al., 1985).

The results of the effects of women's empowerment on IPV found that women who are more empowered are less likely to face domestic violence. Previous literature showed mixed findings with regards to the protective nature of women's empowerment. Better incomes as a result of employment and therefore, access and control over economic resources do not necessarily protect women from IPV (Bhattacharyya et al., 2011; Castro et al., 2008; Chin, 2012; Perez et al., 2012). However, multiple studies have also demonstrated that economic empowerment in the form of women's occupation results in decreased odds of experiencing IPV (Panda & Agarwal, 2005; Rao, 1997). Similar mixed findings are evident for participation in microcredit programs (Angelucci, 2008; Bajracharya & Amin, 2013) and in household decision-making (Wayack Pambè et al., 2013). However, most of these studies assessed theories of empowerment and violence using singular and specific variables of women's empowerment, which is one explanation for the ambiguity in the findings across studies.

Empowerment is a multidimensional process, operating at different levels (Alsop et al., 2006). Thus, assessing aggregated variables allowed for a holistic understanding of the milieu in which an empowered woman might face violence. Similar findings were seen in Tuladhar et al.'s (2013) analysis of the 2011 Demographic and Health Survey of Nepal. Empowerment was treated as a composite of five variables, and women with low and moderate scores on the Women's

Empowerment Index were 74 and 38 percent more likely to experience physical and sexual violence, respectively, than those who had high scores on the index. Afifi (2009) found a similar relationship between scores on women's empowerment index and practice of FGC in Egypt; those on the higher levels of empowerment were 8 times more likely to not perpetuate FGC for their daughters. These results demonstrate that empowerment can work through multiple pathways in improving outcomes for women. Women who are empowered are not only likely to be economically independent, but are also more likely to socialize, build relationships, and exchange information with people outside of the household--factors that contribute to their ability to recognize and bargain for a better household environment (Jejeebhoy, 1997).

The relationships between the variables of empowerment and violence, however, get more complicated with added alcohol use. Results found that empowered women who report that their husbands get drunk *sometimes* or *often* have higher odds of facing all forms of IPV than those empowered women who reported their husbands never getting drunk. Similarly, the odds of facing violence for empowered women whose husbands reported drinking once a week (or less) are lower than their counterparts whose husbands reported drinking almost every day. Thus, higher empowerment may be risky for women whose husbands are frequently drunk. The feminist approach to domestic violence "holds that almost all male-on-female abuse is based on the patriarchal values of our society and that these values are sanctioned by a culture in which male domination of women is both covertly and overtly reinforced" (Lawson, 2003, p. 20). In India, where patriarchal gender norms around employment prevail, employed and earning women are seen as deviating from convention; violence may thus occur as a response to a threat to loss of control and to exert power over an independent spouse. Frequent alcohol consumption exacerbates the situation by weakening brain mechanisms that normally restrain impulsive behaviors, including inappropriate aggression (Gustafson, 1994). Factors that reflect women's independence from their husband may be perceived by the husband as challenging their masculinity.

Additionally, frequent and hazardous consumption of alcohol has been associated with lower employment probabilities (Johansson et al., 2007), further challenging gender-stereotypical notions of masculinity. In his review of Mexico's flagship poverty alleviation program, *Oportunidades*, Angelucci (2008) found that while a combination of cash transfers to women and human capital investments were able to decrease husbands' alcohol abuse by 15%, changes in aggressive behaviors were dependent on transfer size, among other variables. While small transfers decreased violence by 37% for all households, large transfers increased the husband's aggressive behaviors, presumably because their wife's entitlement to large transfers threatened their gender role identity. It should be noted, though, that the odds of facing violence are much less when assessing husband's alcohol consumption and empowerment as opposed solely the former, indicating that empowerment does play a protective role to an extent, even in alcohol-complicated relationships.

4.1.1 Strengths and Limitations. A primary strength of this study was the use of nationally representative datasets to address and understand IPV within the Indian social context. The present work develops an aggregated index of women's empowerment that is both valid and reliable, and offers a more holistic perspective on its association with IPV and husband's alcohol use. However, this study was not without limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevented establishing a cause-and-effect relationship as well as further explorations of determinants of violence such as broader crime levels or the intergenerational transmission of violence. Second, the NFHS did not provide a clear definition of the duration and frequency of the husband's alcohol consumption, making it difficult to rigorously define alcohol abuse for the purposes of this study and establish temporal causality between the variables. Third, the study excluded men as a research focus. While this study included husband's characteristics in the regression analysis, responses from the Men's Questionnaire of the NFHS pertaining to domestic abuse could be used as a potential point of focus for future work. This would expand the obvious (yet overlooked) centrality of the role of men in

understanding domestic violence. Fourth, our composite measure of the women's empowerment index was not strong by conventional statistical standards (low reliability, but strong construct validity). A better measure would require either fewer components at the risk of discounting certain factors, or more observational data. Finally, the implications of the results are also limited as type of data available only allowed for analysis of heterosexual relationships. However, it should be noted that monogamous heterosexual relationships in India are the norm, implying a broader reach in terms of generalizability.

4.1.2 Research, Clinical, and Policy Implications. As the greater risk of facing IPV is associated with a higher frequency of drunkenness, policy efforts to examine alcoholism among married couples in India is critical. Efforts at the local level by civil society organizations and government to identify and mitigate risks to spouses of alcoholic men can therefore go a long way in preventing IPV, especially among more empowered women. The implications of this research, however, are not solely limited to the Indian subcontinent. The South Asian diaspora is estimated to be around 2% of the South Asian population, with Indians comprising the majority (Rangaswamy, 2005). While not extensively researched, IPV has been found to affect 21-40% of South Asian women in the United States alone (Soglin et al., 2020). Individuals carry their gender, class, and ethnic beliefs that are grounded in their culture with them as they migrate (Bacon, 1997); hence the nuances of alcohol consumption, empowerment, and IPV highlighted in this study bare as much relevance to South Asians around the world as they do to those in the Indian subcontinent. In order to reduce domestic violence in India and, by extension of the diaspora around the world, policies need to address the concordant role that frequent alcohol consumption plays. This study elucidates the multidimensionality of empowerment as a product of not only economic, but also social and cultural capital. Future work could focus on assessing the impact of integrating interventions to reduce alcohol consumption within community-based programs that offer medical, legal, and

financial aid to women who seek assistance for domestic violence, addressing not only women but also men to establish lasting social change.

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