

# **Women's Empowerment and Autonomy: Do They Promote Help Seeking for Spousal Violence in India? *Findings from a National Survey***

## **Introduction**

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined in this study as any physical or sexual violence, is a problem for women in all countries. Research from household surveys in ten countries indicate the lifetime prevalence of physical or sexual partner violence, or both, varied from 15 percent to 71 percent, and the experience of domestic violence was not a rare incident in women's lives, but a persistent and ongoing stressor (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006). The negative consequences of IPV include immediate and long-term physical impairments and psychological distress for the woman, and increased risk for malnutrition, mortality and psychological problems for any children in her household (Campbell et al., 2002). Despite these adverse effects, many women who experience partner violence do not seek help. Though help seeking may not resolve the situation, it can confer benefits that improve the woman's health and psychosocial response to the situation, such as the provision of medical care, social support and coping strategies.

According to the 2005/06 India National Family Health Survey-3 (NFHS-3), about 23 percent of women of married women who have ever experienced physical or sexual violence sought help. In the NFHS-3, unadjusted analyses indicated low rates of help seeking across socio-demographic characteristics. For example, despite vastly different views on women's marital rights and divorce across religions in India, rates of help seeking were low for all religions, from about a low of 18.8 percent among Buddhists / Neo-Buddhists to 41.3 percent among "others" (IIPS and Macro International, NFHS-3). Yet to date, few if any studies have examined the multiple levels of influences on help-seeking behaviors in India, particularly with nationally representative data.

Although researchers have made significant contributions to understanding the risk and protective factors of partner violence, less attention has been given to understanding help seeking. Drawing on the ecological framework and aspects of women's empowerment, we addressed the following research questions: *1) What are the prevalence rates of help seeking for moderate and severe spousal violence among currently married women in India, according to individual, household and state level characteristics? 2) How are individual, marital, and household characteristics of empowerment and autonomy and state level contexts associated with help seeking?*

## **The Conceptualization of the Help-Seeking Process**

There are multiple theoretical frameworks that seek to explain help seeking behaviors, and the concept of help seeking is found across several bodies of literature. One model that may be useful for understanding help seeking is social-ecological model of partner violence (Heise, 1998), which acknowledges the simultaneous influences of individual, interpersonal, community and institutional level factors on domestic violence. Within the social-ecological framework, we seek to test how measures of empowerment and problem recognition at the individual, relationship, and household level influence.

Empowerment can be conceptualized as resources and actions that enable a woman to have greater capacity to engage in society (Kabeer, 1999). Studies have shown that women's educational attainment, social status, and decision-making capacity are associated with care-

seeking behaviors for maternal health services. Few studies have examined the role of empowerment and status in influence care seeking for partner violence.

## **Analysis**

Data for this study came from the 2005-2006 India National Family Health Interview survey, a nationally represented stratified household survey that uses in-person (face-to-face) interviews. Our main outcome was a dichotomous indicator of whether the woman sought help from friends or family to stop the violence (about 98% of woman who sought help sought help from these sources). Only women who had experienced violence were asked about help seeking; thus we examined the actions of women who experienced violence, rather than women's attitudes toward help seeking. Data on help seeking were missing for about 1.5 % of the sample.

Our independent variables included indicators at each level of ecological model and emphasized measures of empowerment, autonomy and problem recognition. At the individual level, we assessed empowerment through measures of her education and employment status (Dalal, 2011; Vyas, 2009). We assessed problem recognition through a dichotomous measure of whether she agreed that a man was justified in beating his wife for any of seven reasons (Abramsky et al., 2011). We also included an indicator of whether she lived with her in-laws, which is known to constrain help seeking for spousal violence. Partner status was measured through educational attainment, and we included a measure of drinking behavior. At the relationship level, empowerment was assessed through a sum of five measures on whether the women makes decisions on specific issues by herself, with her partner, or has no say (her husband decides alone). For autonomy, we used a sum of four measures on her freedom of movement, an indicator of whether she has her own money, and a sum of six measures on her husband's controlling behaviors (Bloom, Wipyj, and Das Gupta, 2001; Panchanadeswaran and Koverola, 2005). We also included an indicator of whether the couple uses modern contraception (Stephenson et al., 2008). We included household status measures of wealth, average educational attainment and an indicator of urban location. To assess macro level influences, we included state-level averages of wealth, education, the prevalence of partner violence and the average number of justifications of wife beating. Other factors were considered but eliminated based on bivariate analyses, such as the wife's years of residency at the household and the state-level gender enrollment ratio.

We analyzed help seeking for two forms of mutually exclusive categories of spousal violence; these categories are based on the probability of experiencing physical injury (Ellsberg et al., 2001) and used by World Health Organization (Garcia-Moreno et al., 2008). Moderate physical violence is defined by whether the spouse ever pushed, shook or threw an object, slapped, and severe violence is defined by punched with a fist, or kicked or dragged, ever tried to strangle, threatened with a knife or gun or ever forced sex.

We report the percent of women who seek help for moderate and severe violence by each of our independent variables. We then examined a multi-level random intercept model, hypothesizing moderate intra-state correlation of responses. However, the intra-state variation was 3 percent, so we proceeded with the more simple logistic regression model. We used bivariate logistic regression to estimate unadjusted associations between each potential independent factor and help seeking for each type of violence. From these unadjusted associations we selected variables for the multivariate regression for substantive and theoretical reasons. We built multivariate logistic regression models, entering variables from each level of the ecological framework in a series and examined the influences and changes in association

with help seeking. Analyses were performed in Stata v.12.0, using survey commands to account for the complex survey design (stratification, clustered sampling and weighting).

## **Results:**

As shown in Table 1, virtually none of the individual socio-demographic or household characteristics were associated with help seeking for women who experienced either form of violence. Witnessing her father beat her mother increased the odds a woman would seek help. Living with in-laws lowered the odds for seeking help. Women whose husband's drank alcohol and exhibited controlling behaviors are more likely to seek help for both forms of violence. Autonomous decision-making (compared to joint decision or the husband decides alone) was associated with higher odds for help seeking. There was no association between joint decision-making (compared to autonomous or husband decides alone) and seeking help. Freedom of movement increased the odds of help seeking for severe violence. At the state level, an increase in the average number of reasons for which women justified wife beating was associated with higher odds of seeking help.

## **Discussion**

That few socio-economic status characteristics were associated with help seeking underscores that women across diverse backgrounds do not seek help, even when experiencing severe violence. Although education, employment and wealth may indicate empowerment maternal and child health care seeking, these assets do little to overcome social barriers to reporting spousal violence. Our findings are consistent with qualitative studies indicating that stigma against reporting of spousal help seeking pervades across class in Indian society. Also consistent with qualitative evidence is that daughter in-law status lowers the probability of seeking help.

Here we found that joint decision-making did not improve help seeking, although some research suggests joint-decision making lowers the odds of experiencing violence. It may be that once violence occurs, the women's capacity to make decisions autonomously is most important in obtaining help. We found evidence that problem recognition is important. Women who saw their father beat their mother were more likely to seek help, but the reasons for this association are not clear. Such women may have seen the adverse effects on their mother but at the same time, witnessing family violence may lead to more tolerant attitudes toward partner violence (Uthman et al., 2011). We also found that women who reported controlling behaviors and experienced severe violence were more likely to seek help. In such cases of psychological and physical abuse, the harm may have reached a point where the woman is in dire consequences, which then prompts seeking help. Qualitative research from India indicates that women often endure years of abuse before seeking help, and only seek help after exhausting other coping behaviors or having suffered injuries (Panchanadeswaran & Koverola, 2005). Finally, we also found that women living in states where women expressed tolerant attitudes toward wife beating were more likely to seek help. We are pursuing further research on this finding to understand if the increased odds in help seeking may be related to local outreach efforts to counter the tolerant attitudes.

While help seeking from friends or family may provide psychosocial support and some in some cases reduce abuse, qualitative work from India shows it often does not stop the violence. Help seeking from informal sources, the focus of this study, usually occurs long before women take any formal recourse to prevent or stop the violence. It is important to recognize the barriers to help seeking that exist at each level of the social structure. In India, individual barriers

include the woman's perceived need to maintain family honor and the perceived consequences of her actions (Mason et al., 2008). Indian researchers have noted the need for domestic violence prevention efforts to target gender and cultural norms of patriarchy which influence relationships between men and women and which justify partner abuse (Mogford, 2011; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Equally important are the institutional factors, such as the non-response legal system, and the limited capacity of health system to assist in the prevention of IPV (Krishnan, 2005).

**Table 1: Odds Ratios for Help-Seeking for Spousal Violence, Among Married Women Age 15 to 49 in India, 2005/2006**

	Moderate violence			Severe violence		
	OR	P-val	SE	OR	P-val	SE
<b>Women's characteristics</b>						
Educational attainment	1.02	0.352	0.02	1.00	0.788	0.02
Age	1.01	0.527	0.02	1.01	0.507	0.01
Religion (ref =Hindu)						
Muslim	1.15	0.48	0.23	1.07	0.606	0.13
Christian	1.41	0.257	0.42	1.19	0.493	0.30
Buddhist	0.44*	0.025	0.16	0.65	0.335	0.29
Other/none	0.92	0.707	0.21	1.94**	0.002	0.41
Total number of children	1.01	0.768	0.04	1.03	0.197	0.02
Working	0.91	0.395	0.11	0.94	0.432	0.07
Justifies wife-beating (any reason)	0.94	0.554	0.10	0.97	0.75	0.08
Saw her father beat her mother	1.01	0.956	0.12	1.242**	0.006	0.10
<b>Partner characteristics</b>						
Educational attainment	0.99	0.647	0.02	1.00	0.93	0.01
Drinks alcohol	1.64***	0	0.19	1.57***	0	0.12
<b>Relationship characteristics</b>						
Number of husband's control issues	1.20***	0	0.05	1.23***	0	0.03
Husband has more education	0.93	0.665	0.15	0.95	0.64	0.11
Marital duration (years)	0.88	0.114	0.07	0.94	0.264	0.05
Uses modern contraception	0.95	0.687	0.11	1.03	0.755	0.08
Num. of decisions made jointly	1.04	0.34	0.04	0.99	0.801	0.03
Num. of decisions made alone by wife	1.35***	0	0.07	1.08*	0.018	0.03
Has her own money	1.09	0.414	0.12	0.97	0.75	0.08
Number of ways she can move freely	0.99	0.789	0.04	1.09**	0.005	0.03
<b>Household Characteristics</b>						
Urban	1.18	0.24	0.16	1.13	0.247	0.12
Wealth (quintile)	1.01	0.867	0.06	1.02	0.712	0.04
In-laws are present	1.02	0.867	0.12	0.83*	0.044	0.08
Average educational attainment	1.01	0.852	0.05	1.04	0.21	0.04
<b>State-level Characteristics</b>						
Average educational attainment	1.04	0.636	0.08	1.04	0.453	0.05
Average number of reasons justified for wife-beating	1.44**	0.001	0.16	1.46***	0	0.13
Wealth (quintile)	0.95	0.794	0.18	0.94	0.652	0.13
Prevalence of IPV	1.02	0.099	0.01	1.01	0.233	0.01

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