Domestic Violence and Women's Empowerment in Nepal

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Introduction

Domestic violence

Domestic violence or intimate partner violence (IPV) is prevalent, especially in less-developed countries. IPV is defined here as male-to-female partner violence, which includes physical violence and sexual coercion; this narrower definition is necessary because data on psychological and other forms of violence were not collected in this dataset. In Nepal, over 20% of women in the surveyed sample reported experiencing physical violence, and over 90% of that physical violence was committed by a current or former husband.[1] About 15% of physical violence experienced by women in the past twelve months resulted in deep wounds, broken bones, broken teeth, or other serious injuries.[1] Pregnant women in Nepal who experience violence are less likely to seek reproductive health services, such as antenatal care, which puts them at risk of perinatal and neonatal mortality. Research shows that women's empowerment is a crucial factor in reducing domestic violence; women's empowerment, especially on a household level, is hypothesized by Sarkar to be a predictor of domestic violence, independent of other social and economic factors.[2] Additionally, social factors are hypothesized to be correlated with domestic violence independent of demographic variables.

Although incidents of domestic violence are rarely perpetrated outside of private settings, even the most private affairs in one's life are social. Behaviors of husbands and wives alike are influenced by social ties and family dynamics. One study showed that social ties can act as a buffer against IPV, as women who visit their families are less likely to experience domestic violence.[3] In this same study, violence was seen as a last resort in husbands' attempt to control their wives' deviation from established social roles in many societies. One of the driving forces of this deviation is women's empowerment. Family or individual level variables, like education level, age at first cohabitation, and income are only a part of the variables affecting domestic violence according to Carlson's 1984 paper on the ecology of domestic violence.[4] They affect the odds of domestic violence along with social-structural factors that include larger cultural framework and power dynamic outside of the family unit.[4]

Empowerment

The definition and measurement of women's empowerment has been evolving over time; recent studies suggest that women's ability to make decisions which affect themselves and their families is an adequate way of measuring this concept.[5] This definition of empowerment focuses on a shift of power from the powerful to the relatively powerless. Therefore, empowerment should not be measured by health and development outcomes, as they do not necessarily indicate a change in power structure within a family. Studies show that education and participation in paid labor do not significantly alter the power structure within the family.[6] Malhotra and colleagues propose that instead of broad-based questions on education, employment, and health decisions, studies should focus on the power dynamic within the family structure, namely on who makes decisions in a household.[5] Therefore, in the current study, empowerment is measured with specific decision-making variables which indicate how often women make decisions in the household collected through survey methods.

Women's empowerment is associated with many positive outcomes.[7] Empowering women helps to reduce inequalities between men and women in many developing countries. Several countries, including Nepal, have initiated programs promoting women's empowerment. Empowerment programs in Bangladesh have reduced verbal and physical abuse and violence towards women.[8] A similar study in 2003 found that female empowerment within the community often functions independently of socio-economic conditions or women's empowerment on individual levels.[9] Research in Bangladesh shows that increased status of women at the individual level can elevate the risk of domestic violence, while community-level female status significantly lowers the risk of violence.[9]

Social factors in Nepal

Nepal is located in the foothills of the Himalayas and consists of three ecological zones: mountain, hill, and terai (or plains). Each region has a drastically different landscape, ethnic composition, religion and language. The majority of the population is Hindu, and most of them belong to a certain caste. Although ethnic and caste affiliations are discouraged and outright discriminations are banned, ethnic boundaries are still significant.[10] Differences in caste positions affect the life experience of individuals and families. About ten percent of the population in Nepal practice a minority religion: studies show non-Muslim minority religions in Bangladesh, where ninety percent of the population are Muslim, are aligned with lower rates of domestic violence.[11] Urban or rural residence also plays a role in shaping community, especially in Nepal where rural communities tend to be isolated villages in rugged mountain terrain.

Community variables used in the current study include ecological region, urban or rural residence, caste position, and religion, as these are the variables available in the survey on which this paper is based. Although this collection of variables is lacking in anthropological nuance, it can paint a brief picture of the lives of these individuals, and can measure—to a reasonable extent—the community and cultural context in which one lives. In the specific context of Nepal, these factors can reasonably describe one's cultural setting.

Other demographic and social economic factors are included and controlled for in statistical analysis. Many of these are considered risk factors by previous studies: a study in Cambodia found a negative association between household standard of living and physical domestic violence. The same research also showed that women with large numbers of children and 8-13 fewer years of education than their husbands are more likely to experience domestic violence. Yount hypothesized that children are stressors who elevate the risk of domestic violence.[3] In a study in India, education, age of the women, and urban residence were all associated with domestic violence. The study hypothesized that young women's behavior needed to be "checked" as they learned to behave according to the social or family norms.[12] Other factors have a more ambiguous effect: one study showed that the effect of wealth in the forms of dowry and a woman's income was complicated and often contradictory in rural Bangladesh, but education and an older age at marriage reduced the risk of domestic violence.[11]

Women's employment was also ambiguous in its effect, because even though it increased family income, female participation in labor force might hinder their fulfillment of traditional family roles.

Based on this review of the literature, women's empowerment is modeled at the individual level to see if it is associated with domestic violence. In addition, the effects of ecological region, religion, caste position, and urban residence on odds of domestic violence are examined independently. Then, interactions between factors that impact odds of domestic violence and women's autonomy were examined. Other factors that affect the occurrence and reporting of domestic violence are: wealth, level of education, employment, women's age, age at first marriage, and number of children. It is expected that the more a culture empowers women, the less likely those women are to experience IPV; Likewise, women in regions or cultures which do not empower women might have increased odds of experiencing domestic violence.

Method

Participants

The data for this study come from the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in Nepal in 2011. The sample design uses a multistage cluster sample based upon an updated version of the 2001 census. The sample was designed to provide estimates of most key variables for the 13 eco-development regions. The sample includes 12,918 women between ages 15-49, who each had an individual interview. Interviews were completed for 12,674 women, resulting in a response rate of 98 percent.[1] One in three women surveyed were given the domestic violence module, yielding a sample size of 3,343. In terms of residence, 17% of the respondents live in the mountain region, 40% in the hill region, and 43% in terai. Only 26% of the residents reside in urban areas. The majority (86%) of the respondents are Hindu. The second largest religious group is Buddhist (8%). The two religions consist of the majority of Nepalese religion, sharing many practices and theologies. Muslim and Christian, (2% respectively), are major minority religions on the relative fringe of society. Most of the respondents report being part of the higher caste. The average age of women surveyed is 31, and they have 3.5 years of formal education, on average. Their average age at first cohabitation is 17. Most of the woman report they are currently working (67%), and they have, on average, 2.38 living children.

Research design

Women were interviewed in their local language with a translator present to mediate. The women were asked if they had ever experienced minor physical violence, severe physical violence, or sexual violence from their partner. These results were aggregated into a single variable where woman experiencing none of these kinds of violence are coded 0 while women experiencing any of those are coded 1.

Women's empowerment was measured by decision-making power in the household. Women were asked who makes decisions in four aspects of household decision making: (1) health care, (2) household purchases, (3) visiting relatives or friends, and (4) the husband's earnings. Each of these measures was recoded into a binary variable where women who reported having no power in making a particular type of decision were coded 0 and women who had power were coded 1. These were then summed up into a four-point scale ranging from 0 (no say in any of these matters) to 4 (have a say in all four matters).

Environmental or community factors include region, religion, ethnicity, and residency. Region is the ecological region in which the respondents live, and was measured by dummy variables in the following categories: 'mountain', 'hill', and 'terai', 'hill' being the reference category. Religion was measured in dummy variables in the following categories: 'Hindu', 'Buddhist', 'Kirat', 'Muslim', and 'Christian', 'Christian' being the reference category. Ethnicity was recorded into a dichotomous variable where privileged castes were coded 1 and middle and lower castes were coded 0. Residency was measured in a dichotomous variable where urban residency was coded 1 and rural 0.

Other control variables included education, wealth, work status, age, age at first cohabitation, and number of children. Education, age, and age at first cohabitation were measured in years. Number of children was measured with a continuous variable. Work status was coded into a dichotomous variable where currently working was coded 1 and 0 otherwise. Wealth was measured with wealth index score that gave households scores based upon their wealth compared to others in the nation. National average was coded 0, and above or below average were coded as positive or negative numbers ranging from -0.15 to 2.5.

Estimation procedure

Prior to presenting multivariate results, descriptive statistics and bivariate analyses were presented, which found significant relationships between the dependent and main independent variables. Because the dependent variable—which was experiencing physical or sexual violence from a partner— was measured as a dichotomous variable, logistic regression was used to estimate the models. The results are indicated with odds ratios, which represent the increase or decrease in the odds of women experiencing domestic violence associated with a unit change in each category of the independent variables when holding all other variables constant. The first model shows the effect of women's empowerment on domestic violence. Next, community variables are included to determine if they influence the likelihood of domestic violence. Last, demographic factors are controlled for. After the logistic regression analysis, interactions were run between the empowerment index and ethnicity, the empowerment index and urban residency, and the empowerment index and region. This was done to test if the effect of empowerment varies across these groups, and to see if individual empowerment and community level empowerment have different effects on the odds of domestic violence.

Results

Descriptive statistics for domestic violence, empowerment, community, demographic, and control variables are presented in Table 1. On average, 28% of women in Nepal reported ever experiencing domestic violence. In terms of decision-making in the household, women reported having a say in two to three decisions of the four options on average.

The multivariate results are presented in Table 2. This model provides the odds of ever experiencing domestic violence associated with household decision-making and attitudes towards wife beating. As predicted, women being empowered, measured in decision-making power within the household, correlates with significantly lower odds of experiencing IPV. For every household decision in which a woman has a say, the odds of ever experiencing IPV are reduced by 10%. This result is statistically significant.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, factors influencing domestic violence among women in Nepal, 2011

Variables	M or %	SD	Range
Dependent Variable			
Experienced IPV	0.28	(0.45)	0=did not,1=did
Independent Variables			
Decision-making			
Say in own health care	0.67	(0.46)	0=no say,1=have a say
Say in household purchases	0.59	(0.49)	0=no say,1=have a say
Say in visiting relatives or friends	0.64	(0.64)	0=no say,1=have a say
Say in husband's earnings	0.67	(0.46)	0=no say,1=have a say
Say in how many of these situations	2.55	(1.51)	0 to 4
Control Variables			
Urban residence	26%		1=urban,0=rural
Education in years	3.59	(4.10)	0 to 11
Wealth index score	-0.01	(0.98)	-1.5 to 2.5
Currently Working	67%		1=working,0=not working
Woman's age	31.35	(8.35)	15 to 49
Age at first cohabitation	17.40	(3.29)	10 to 36
Number of living children	2.38	(1.54)	0 to 8
Religion			
Hindu	86%		
Buddhist	8%		
Muslim	2%		
Kirat	2%		
Christian	2%		
Ethnicity			
Higher Castes	54%		
Lower Castes	46%		
Region			
Mountain	17%		
Hill	40%		
Terai	43%		
N=3349			

Source: Demographic Health Survey, Nepal, 2011

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Being a member of the higher caste or living in urban areas are associated with increased odds of IPV when social economic factors are controlled for (Model 3). Region wise, the terai region shows significantly higher odds of domestic violence than the hill or mountain regions. The odds of Christians and Muslims ever experiencing domestic violence are about 80% higher than for other religions. The result is only significant when social economic factors are controlled for (Model 3). Among social and economic factors, the number of living children did not have a significant impact on the odds of ever experiencing domestic violence.
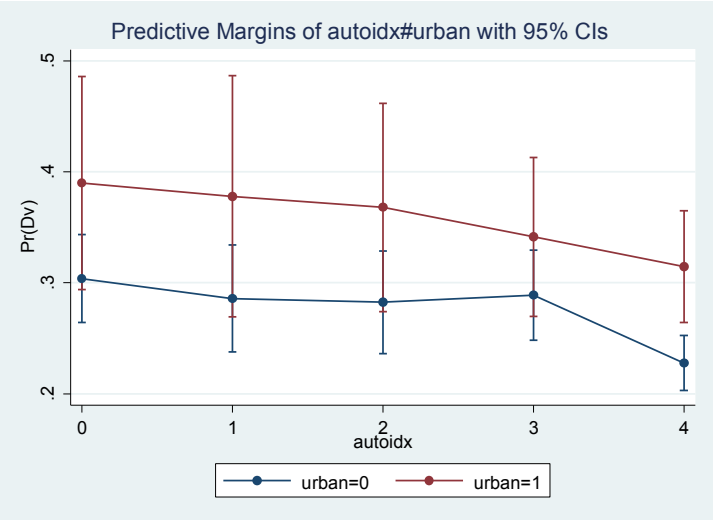
Table 2

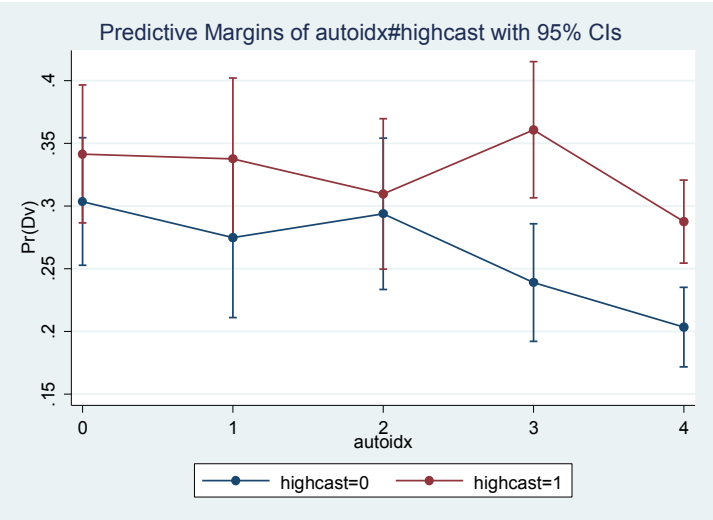*Odds ratio of factors predictive of domestic violence, Nepal, 2011*

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Primary Variable			
Women's autonomy (additive index)	0.90***	0.91***	0.89***
Community Variables			
Urban residence		0.91	1.64***
High caste		1.88***	1.45***
Ecological region			
Mountain region		1.23	1.03
Hill region		1.00	1.00
Terai region		1.56***	2.02***
Religion			
Hindu		1.00	1.00
Buddhist		0.61**	0.81
Kirat		1.19	1.27
Muslim		1.37	1.83*
Christian		1.70*	1.82*
Control Variables			
Socio-Economic (wealth index)			0.57***
Women's age			1.02***
Age at first cohabitation			0.94***
Number of living children			1.06
Currently working			1.26*
Education in years			0.89***
Log likelihood	-1985.89	-1927.06	-1838.90
[N]	[3,343]	[3,343]	[3,343]

*p <. 05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Graph 1

Predictive Margins of autoidx#urban with 95% CIs

Graph 2

Predictive Margins of autoidx#highcast with 95% CIs

Graph 3

Predictive Margins of autoidx#v101_3 with 95% CIs

Graph 4

Predictive Margins of autoidx#v130_4#v130_5 with 95% CIs
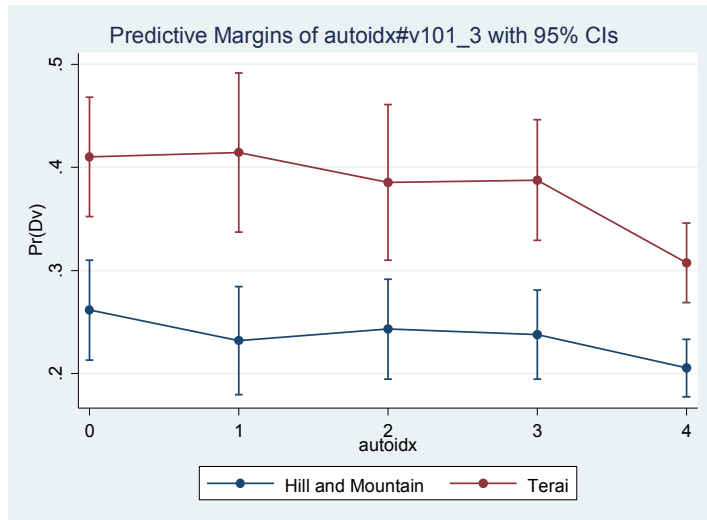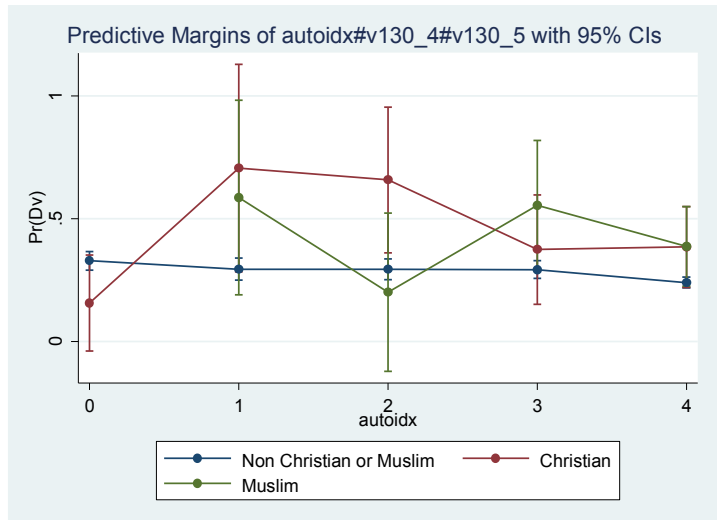
Empowerment is associated with reduced odds of domestic violence, regardless of interactions between community variables and empowerment.

Discussion

There are some important limitations to this study. Apart from the lack of longitudinal data to establish causality, the categories of this study are limited, and the sample size was not sufficient enough to capture the nuances of castes and religions in Nepal. For example, the survey did not distinguish between Tibetan Buddhism and Teradata Buddhism. Geographic locators in this study did not go beyond ecological region level. Characteristics of the community, such as a village leader's attitude towards domestic violence, its governing structure, or the type of prevailing economic activity were not measured. Ethnographic research, if possible, should be conducted to examine the inclusion of these variables. The survey also did not include forms of domestic violence other than physical or sexual violence. Reports of domestic violence and attitude towards wife beating had too few cases for a reasonable regression model. We also cannot rule out the differences in reporting domestic violence. Women of a higher caste or education level may be better able to identify, and be more willing to, report domestic violence. Further qualitative studies should be conducted in the field.

These limitations withstanding, this study made some important contributions to the literature. It was found that lower wealth, lack of education, younger age at first cohabitation, and having a job were associated with increased odds of domestic violence. These variables are evidence that

an individual's characteristics, especially those that induce strain on the family, are correlated with higher odds of domestic violence. However, other stressors do not have a significant relationship with domestic violence. The number of living children does not significantly impact the odds of women experiencing domestic violence when other socio-economic factors are controlled . Increase in women's age is correlated with increased odds of domestic violence, but older women are less likely to be educated and have more stress-inducing responsibilities. These findings suggest that other theories might be needed to explain the odds of domestic violence.

Bourdieusian social theory might help explain some of these findings.[13] In Bourdieusian tradition, the relatively powerless—in this case women—would challenge the powerful social roles which are embodied in the husband and other relatives. Any challenger to the established habitus must face pressure from all other actors, and those actors, generally relatives and community members, are less likely to resort to violence as they employ different kinds of control, such as social exclusion and gossip.

Many of this study's significant findings concur with this perspective of domestic violence. Being a member of higher caste increased the odds of domestic violence. Being a member of the higher caste means more rigid social expectations upheld by traditional family roles. Members of higher caste might have held a less fluid conception of social norms and felt more threatened when the norms were challenged. Therefore, it is more likely for women in a higher caste to transgress against the norm, prompting violence. Weaker social ties also contribute

to increased odds of domestic violence. As families sever social ties that kept behavior in check, women may lose buffers to domestic violence. Women in higher castes, free from the need to unite against stigmas, may form weaker social ties than women in lower castes. Weaker social ties might also explain why urban residences significantly increase the odds of domestic violence when wealth is being controlled. In an urban community with weaker social ties, men may lack other social means to control their wives' behavior, so they resort to violence.

Increases in domestic violence are seen as well among religious groups that have weaker social ties. Religion plays a large role in Nepalese social interactions, and religious minorities are often excluded from the social structures revolving around Hindu or Buddhist practices. Christian and Muslim religions are correlated with increased odds of domestic violence. These groups are often more recent immigrants from India and other South Asian countries with weaker communities and fewer social connections in Nepal. Those who live in more isolated communities have higher odds of experiencing domestic violence, as do members of the dominant social group whose social order is being challenged.

This theory requires further research that produces qualitative insight into family and community structures. Ethnographic work on the dynamics of family life in South Asian or other developing countries can answer what a quantitative survey cannot.

There is research suggesting that empowerment might increase domestic violence in culturally conservative areas.[9] However, the current study found that even in terai regions, where odds of domestic violence are higher than all other regions, higher level of female autonomy is associated with

lowered odds of domestic violence. In urban areas where the odds of domestic violence are higher, autonomy is still significant. These results suggest that women's empowerment has a real impact on domestic violence. This can also be attributed to a shift in power within the family. When more decision-making responsibilities are delegated to their wives, husbands might feel less inclined to perform acts of domestic violence. There is also an observed change in women when they go through empowerment programs, as they learn to stand up for themselves.[8] Previous studies theorized that on the family level, shifts in power induce conflict because husbands feel their power is being stripped away.[4] Empowering women might cause husbands to feel insecure and consequently increase rates of domestic violence. However, it is only when the shift in power is nascent that husbands feel threatened; therefore, the negative effect of empowering women is likely transitional. As new habitus are formed, domestic violence is no longer considered acceptable, and empowering women is the only way to changing the power dynamic in the field to form new habitus.

Out of the three groups of variables that influence domestic violence, women's empowerment was the one with the most significant policy implications. Individual and societal level changes lack clear policy solutions, but empowering women has been implemented across the globe for decades. Giving women more resources might lead to short term negative consequences, but giving women more say in household and social matters will lead to a change in the norm that benefits all. Policies and developmental projects should be designed to give women more say in political, economic, and social matters. Grass roots movements working towards empowering women might be especially effective, as one can expect less resistance to normative changes in gender roles. Strengthening communities around women in urban areas can foster a social norm against domestic violence. Empowering women has a pivotal role to play in the fight against domestic violence.

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