

Attitude Towards Wife-Beating Among Adult Males in India: Does Past Shape the Present?

Dr. Paramita Barman Sen^{1*}

^{1*} Assistant Professor in Economics, Faculty of Commerce and Management, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata.

Abstract

Background: Violence afflicted on women stands as both a major public health issue and violation of human rights. Globally, around 30 per cent of women fall victims to physical and/or sexual violence during their lifetime by their intimate partners or non-partners. Attitude towards domestic violence assumes as much importance as the issue itself, when it comes to efforts at termination of this menace. The current study seeks to explore the role of past experience in shaping attitude towards domestic violence against women, among adult males in India.

Data and Method: The study uses data from NFHS-5 (2019-21) on adult Indian males aged 15-54 years. Apart from simple descriptive statistics, logistic regression analysis has been employed as the main econometric method.

Results: A substantial 41.52 per cent of adult Indian males feel that wife beating is justified. Past experience of the father beating the mother turns out to be a significant determinant of justification of wife-beating among adult Indian males.

Conclusion: In sync with SDG Target 5.2.1 calling for elimination of violence against women and girls, policies involving both awareness drives and strong punitive measures as deterrents of domestic violence are the need of the hour.

Keywords: Domestic violence, justification, attitude, adult males

1. Introduction

Violence against women within the household in India has for long remained a manifestation of patriarchal highhandedness and unequal power dynamics between the man and the woman in a marriage. Wife beating, a form of intimate partner violence, is an offshoot of the philosophy of patriarchy that views men's *control* over their wives as legitimate. As procreation and maintenance of the family line were considered the primary functions of women, control exercised by men over women served as a tool for upholding patriarchal norms and male supremacy in the household. Anything perceived as potential threat to male dominance is expected to trigger instances of domestic violence (Engels, 1884). 84 per cent of ever married women in India experiencing domestic violence reported that their current husbands were the perpetrators (Pandit, 2022). A study on the risk factors for domestic violence in India reveals that 39 per cent of Indian women experienced abuse. Women with lower household income, illiteracy, lower caste, and having a partner who is alcoholic and gambles, are found to be at significantly higher risk of domestic violence (Mahapatro *et al.*, 2012). Evidence suggests that spousal violence jeopardises women's health, both physical and mental. Target 5.2.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals calls to "*Eliminate violence against women and girls: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation*".

Attitude towards domestic violence assumes as much importance as the issue itself, since any intervention to eliminate this menace is expected to be effective through altering the existing mindset that legitimizes it. Domestic violence needs to be prevented even before it is cured. Study based on nationally representative data in India indicates strong positive link between women's attitude regarding violence and incidence of the same (Dasgupta, 2019). Another study reviewing factors associated with attitude regarding intimate partner violence concluded that education might be most crucial among all factors (Wang, 2016). Uthman *et al.* (2009), in a study on 17 sub-Saharan countries, finds that women were more likely to justify intimate partner violence than men. Higher wealth status, higher education, media access, joint decision making and urban residence reduced the odds of justifying the same. Although studies earlier have looked into the correlates of attitude towards domestic violence, none has explored whether past experience of incidence of domestic violence within the household has any role to play in shaping attitude towards the same. The current study attempts to address this gap in the context of adult males in India.

2. Data and Methods

The study is based on nationally representative data from NFHS-5 (2019-21) on adult Indian males aged 15-54 years. The **outcome variable** is *attitude towards domestic violence among adult Indian males*, specifically, *whether they justify wife-beating*. It is interpreted as a dichotomous variable with values 0 (wife beating is not justified) and 1 (wife-beating is justified). The survey asks adult males whether wife beating is justified for the following reasons:

- (i) *Wife goes out without telling husband*
- (ii) *Wife neglects the children*
- (iii) *Wife argues with husband*
- (iv) *Wife refuses to have sex with husband*

(v) *Wife burns food*

If respondent justifies wife-beating following at least one of these above reasons, the response is coded as 1, else 0, i.e. respondent does not justify wife-beating for any of the above reasons.

The **main predictor variable** is *history of domestic violence in the household*. The specific question posed in this regard is whether respondent's father ever beat mother, coded as 0 (no) and 1 (yes). Additional predictors considered are respondent level characteristics: age, education, marital status, employment status and alcoholism; household level characteristics: residence, religion, social group, income class, sex of head of household and age of household head; predictors related to attitude towards wife's sexual autonomy: whether respondent believes that wife is justified in refusing sex and husband has the right to react adversely if wife refuses to have sex. Logistic regression has been used as the econometric model for the analysis. Results are checked for robustness by adding control variables at the levels of respondent, household and opinion about wife's sexual autonomy, one by one, to the main logistic regression model. Model was tested for goodness of fit. Stata 14 software was used for data analysis.

3. Results

Out of a total of 1,01,839 adult males in India, 41.52 per cent justified wife beating (**Table 1**).

Table 1: Distribution of adult Indian males by attitude towards wife beating (numbers and percentage shares)

Attitude towards wife beating	n (% share)
Wife beating <i>not justified</i>	59,552 (58.48)
Wife beating <i>justified</i>	42,287 (41.52)
Total	1,01,839 (100)

Source: NFHS-5, unit level data

Table 2: Distribution of socioeconomic characteristics and attitude towards wife's sexual autonomy among adult Indian males

Socioeconomic variables	n (%)
Residence Urban	26,420 (25.94)
Rural	75,419 (74.06)
Religion Hindu	77,211 (75.82)
Non-Hindu	24,628 (24.18)
Reservation Unreserved	23,919 (23.49)
SC/ST	38,594 (37.90)
OBC	39,326 (38.62)
Income class Poor	42,395 (41.63)
Middle income	21,715 (21.32)
Rich	37,729 (37.05)
Sex of household head Male	90,560 (88.92)
Female	11,279 (11.08)
Marital status Single	38,462 (37.77)
Married	63,377 (62.23)
Education level Uneducated	12,269 (12.05)
Primary	11,710 (11.50)
Secondary and higher	77,860 (76.45)
Alcoholic No	75,391 (74.03)
Yes	26,448 (25.97)
Occupation Unemployed	19,241 (18.89)
Employed	82,598 (81.11)
Attitude towards wife's sexual autonomy	
Wife is justified in refusing sex: No	10,547 (10.36)
Yes	91,292 (89.64)
Husband has right to react adversely if wife refuses sex: No	72,191 (70.89)
Yes	29,648 (29.11)
Total	1,01,839 (100)

Source: NFHS-5, unit level data

From **Table 2** it can be seen that majority of adult Indian males are rural residents, Hindu, belong to reserved categories, poor, secondary and higher educated, employed, non-alcoholic and married. Mean age of men in the sample is 32 years. Only 11 per cent belong to female headed households. Mean age of household head is 48 years.

Close to 90 per cent of men in the sample believe that the wife is justified in refusing sex (on grounds: wife knows husband has sexually transmitted disease, husband has sex with other women and wife is tired or not in mood). Little less than one-third of the men believe that the husband has right to react (get angry, refuse financial support, use force for sex, have sex with other women) if the wife refuses to have sex.

Table 3: Summary of result on robustness of effect of the main predictor on outcome variable

Main predictor variable	Model 1 ¹	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Father ever beat mother No Ref				
Yes	2.72***	2.62***	2.62***	2.57***
Individual predictors	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Household predictors	No	No	Yes	Yes
Predictors on attitude towards wife's sexual autonomy	No	No	No	Yes
Sample size	101,839	101,839	101,839	101,839
LR chi2	3783.91	4599.91	5221.13	10719.29
Prob > chi2	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R2	0.0274	0.0333	0.0378	0.0775
Log likelihood	-67226.882	-66818.88	-66508.27	-63759.19

Source: Analysis of NFHS-5 unit level data; *** significant at 1 per cent, **significant at 5 per cent

Table 3 shows the results of logistic regression analysis, run to identify the predictors of attitude towards wife beating among adult males in India. With respect to the *main predictor variable*, results suggest that **history of domestic violence in the family with the father ever having beaten the mother, increases the likelihood of justification of wife-beating significantly (p=0.000) among adult men.**

With regards to other predictors like attitude towards wife's sexual autonomy, men who think that the wife is justified in refusing sex anytime she refuses, are significantly less likely to justify wife beating (p=0.000). However, men who believe that the husband has right to react on the wife's refusal to have sex, have significantly higher likelihood of justifying wife-beating (p=0.000) (**Table 4**).

At individual level, education, employment status, age, marital status and alcoholic habit affect attitude towards wife-beating. There is higher likelihood of justification of domestic violence among the employed (p=0.000) and the alcoholic (p=0.000). It falls with educational attainment (primary: p=0.010; secondary and higher: p=0.000), age (p=0.000) and marriage (p=0.000). At the level of the household, justification of domestic violence is significantly more likely among rural residents (p=0.000), non-Hindus (p=0.000), reserved category (SC/ST: p=0.002; OBC: P=0.000), female household head (p=0.023) and higher age of the household head (p=0.031). Men from rich income class are less likely to justify wife beating (p=0.000).

Table 4: Determinants of attitude towards domestic violence among adult Indian males (final logistic regression model with all control variables)

Variables	OR	CI
Main predictor		
Father ever beat mother No Ref		
Yes	2.57***	2.4872 - 2.6608
Predictors at respondent level		
Education Illiterate Ref		
Primary	0.93**	0.8823 - 0.9827
Secondary & higher	0.84***	0.8012 - 0.8739
Employment status Unemployed Ref		
Employed	1.18***	1.1307 - 1.2260

¹ Model 1 shows effect of the main predictor on the outcome variable in the absence of other control variables. Model 2 adds respondent level controls to Model 1. Model 3 adds household level controls to Model 2 and Model 4 adds controls related to respondent's opinion of wife's sexual autonomy, to Model 3.

Age	0.99***	0.9929 - 0.9964
Marital status Single <i>Ref</i>		
Married	0.80***	0.7697 - 0.8341
Alcoholic No <i>Ref</i>		
Yes	1.20***	1.1658 - 1.2413
Predictors at household level		
Residence Urban <i>Ref</i>		
Rural	1.09***	1.0571 - 1.1309
Religion Hindu <i>Ref</i>		
Non-Hindu	1.23***	1.1961 - 1.2732
Reservation Unreserved <i>Ref</i>		
SC/ST	1.06**	1.0226 - 1.1001
OBC	1.24***	1.1982 - 1.2864
Income class Poor <i>Ref</i>		
Middle income	1.01	0.9761 - 1.0487
Rich	0.84***	0.8141 - 0.8743
Head of household Male <i>Ref</i>		
Female	1.05**	1.0070 - 1.0969
Age of household head	1.00**	1.0001 - 1.0023
Predictors on respondent's attitude towards wife's sexual autonomy		
Wife justified in refusing sex No <i>Ref</i>		
Yes	0.85***	0.8145 - 0.8877
Husband has right to react if wife refuses sex No <i>Ref</i>		
Yes	2.89***	2.8130 - 2.9793
Sample size	101,839	
LR chi2(17)	10719.29	
Prob > chi2	0.0000	
Pseudo R2	0.0775	
Log likelihood	-63759.19	

Source: Analysis of NFHS-5 unit level data; *** significant at 1 per cent, **significant at 5 per cent

4. Discussion

The novel contribution of the current study is investigation of the role of history of domestic violence in the family, on men's attitude towards wife beating. Result reveals that prior incidence(s) of the father hitting the mother emerges as a strongly significant factor in shaping attitude towards wife beating among adult males. Research presents findings in sync with this result. Exposure to violence at home is associated with behavioural disorders from very early ages and are important triggers of actual violence meted out towards partners in early adult life (Hall and Lynch, 1998). Experience of domestic violence has consequences on children's mental, physical and family relations (Khemthong and Chutipongdech, 2021). Thus, finding from the current study indicates that there are *intergenerational implications* of incidences of domestic violence within the family (between parents) in shaping men's attitude towards justification of wife-beating. This hints towards the possibility that justification of violence inflicted on the wife by an adult male from the present generation finds validation through previous such act(s) of violence inflicted by the earlier generation, i.e. the father on the mother. Female headed households being more prone to having men who justify wife-beating, is an intriguing finding. In sync with this result, a study on Nigeria by Ahmed *et al.* (2017) has shown that incidences of domestic violence are generally more in households headed by women, contradicting the usual notion that there is less domestic violence in female headed households. As Alam (1985) puts forth, "In a hierarchy which defines men as full members and women as half, a woman head-of-household is half of half." Although female heads are expected to execute all economic and social responsibilities of their male counterparts, they have peripheral social status. The current study finds that men with higher level of education are less likely to justify wife-beating and this finding is in line with findings from other researches by Wang (2016) and Dalal *et al.* (2014). The finding that men from rich income class are significantly less likely to justify wife-beating, resonates with a study in eastern India by Roy *et al.* (2024) where poor or low-income household has been found to be a significant contributor to domestic violence against women. Though it does not imply that economically sound households do not experience domestic violence, the likelihood is much lower.

5. Conclusion

The present study brings to light the immense significance of history of domestic violence against women within the family in shaping the attitude of adult Indian men towards wife-beating. It thus underscores the responsibility that lies

with any generation of parent, particularly the father, under a typical structure of patriarchy, towards fostering a mindset in the following generation, i.e. the son that is respectable towards women, particularly the wife. The finding that higher educational attainments are associated with lower likelihood of justification of wife-beating among men provides some optimism with respect to efforts at preventing this social menace. Awareness campaigns thrusting upon the aspects of human rights violation of the victims of such acts as well as potential legal consequences facing the perpetrators are called for, along with more stringency in addressal of reported cases of domestic violence against women.

References:

1. Engels, F. (1884). The origin of the family, private property and the state. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>
2. Pandit, A. (2022). 77% of women stay mum about domestic violence. Available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/77-of-women-stay-mum-about-domestic-violence/articleshow/91408159.cms>
3. Mahapatro et al. (2012). The risk factor of domestic violence in India. *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, 37(3):153-7. Available at <https://doi.org/10.4103/0970-0218.99912>
4. Dasgupta, S. (2019). Attitudes About Wife-Beating and Incidence of Domestic Violence in India: An Instrumental Variables Analysis. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 40: 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-019-09630-6>.
5. Wang, L. (2016). Factors influencing attitude toward intimate partner violence, Aggression and Violent Behavior, 29: 72-78. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2016.06.005>.
6. Uthman et al. (2009). Factors associated with attitudes towards intimate partner violence against women: a comparative analysis of 17 sub-Saharan countries. *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, 9:14. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-698X-9-14>
7. Hall, D. and Lynch, M. A. (1998). Violence begins at home. Domestic strife has lifelong effects on children. *BMJ*. 316(7144):1551. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.316.7144.1551>
8. Khemthong, O. and Chutipongdech, T. (2021). Domestic Violence and Its Impacts on Children: A Concise Review of Past Literature.
9. Ahmed et al. (2017). Domestic Violence in Relation to Women Empowerment and Women Household Headship: A Case in Nigeria. *Nile Journal of Business and Economics*, 3: 15. <https://doi.org/10.20321/nilejbe.v3i7.118>
10. Alam, S. (1985). Women and poverty in Bangladesh. *Women's Studies International Forum* [online], 8(4): 361–371.
11. Dalal et al. (2014). Intimate partner violence against women in Nepal: an analysis through individual, empowerment, family and societal level factors. *Journal of Research in Health Sciences*, 14(4):251-7.
12. Roy et al. (2024). The Impact of Socio-Economic Status on Domestic Violence against Women in Eastern India. *Archives of Current Research International*. 24: 14-26. <https://doi.org/10.9734/acri/2024/v24i3639>