The Political Economy of Domestic Violence in a Mumbai Slum: An Ethnographic Analysis

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Abstract

Nationally, more than a third of women report some form of domestic violence in India. This study set in a Mumbai slum shows that structural violence contributes to domestic violence and also systematically disadvantages women by forcing them to drop out of school, reduces labour force participation and prevents women from leaving abusive marriages. We find that birth order, age at marriage and the support of the natal family, all play a critical role in shaping women’s life trajectories. Although natal families and women’s social networks under certain conditions can help mitigate violence, these are limited. Using six case studies, this study proposes a framework that encompasses multiple dimensions and forms of insecurity, categorised into material, physical, sociocultural or sexual constraints. By doing so, it delineates mechanisms by which institutional and normative contexts gender vulnerabilities. Methodologically, this article uses an ethnographic approach and, including two pairs of mothers and daughters as case studies, offers an intergenerational perspective that underscores the transmission of violent life trajectories, highlighting the limited possibilities for mitigation. Thus, programmes that aim to reduce domestic violence need

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to go beyond the family as a site of intervention, to account for the role that systemic violence plays in the production of domestic violence in marginal spaces, such as slums.

**JEL: I12, I3, J16**

**Keywords**
Domestic violence, gender, india, slum, ethnography, structural violence

**Introduction**

Premchand’s *Nirmala*, written in 1928, is a tragic novel that chronicles the life of its protagonist Nirmala, who, although initially engaged to an appropriate suitor at 15, is married to a widowed man 20 years older than her with adult children. This is attributed to her father’s unexpected death, which meant a handsome dowry could not be arranged, terminating the engagement, and ultimately compromising her life-chances. Life after marriage is a series of tragedies, and her husband’s suspicions about her fidelity, stemming from his own insecurities at having married a much younger and beautiful woman, play a significant part in the unfolding of these events.

Nearly 90 years later, the story echoes the life trajectories of many women and girls in India. This study set in a slum community in north-eastern Mumbai uncovers the processes by which the lives of poor women are structured by events, which may not only impoverish them materially, but also deprive them of life-altering choices. In this essay, I will first briefly review factors that heighten the risks of domestic violence; secondly, using a heuristic device that I term domestic insecurity, I will underscore the interactive and iterative exchanges between structural violence and family violence; and finally using six case studies of women including two pairs of mothers and daughters, I will demonstrate the value of employing a life-cycle approach, grounded in ethnographic techniques, to reveal the mechanics of the intergenerational transmission of negative life trajectories.

**Brief Review of the Literature**

A review of the scholarship suggests that while several studies using statistical techniques have identified certain risk factors for domestic
violence in India, such as low education, spousal unemployment, alcohol use, dowry demands, childhood corporal punishment and childhood exposure to family violence (Babu & Kar, 2009; Burton et al., 2000; Flury, Nyberg & Riecher-Rossler, 2010; Jeyaseelan et al., 2007; Kimuna et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2006; Pandey, Dutt & Banerjee, 2009), few have delineated the mechanics of the production of violence grounded in qualitative techniques, that privilege the voices of victims (Agnes, 1988; Bhattacharya, 2004). Yet fewer studies exist that employ a life-cycle approach and ethnographic techniques, explicating the links between the correlates of early marriages and instability in women’s lives, and the nature of gendered disadvantage.\(^1\)

Cross-country surveys of domestic violence indicate that while violence against female partners is prevalent across all groups, women living in poverty disproportionately experience domestic violence (Abramsky et al., 2011; Abrahams & Jewkes, 2005; Burazeri et al., 2005; Ellesberg et al., 1999; Flake, 2005; Kishor & Johnson, 2004; Kyu and Kanai 2005; Okemgbo et al., 2002; Schuler et al., 1996; Xiao et al., 2005). Heise (1999) postulated that poverty probably acts as a marker for a variety of social conditions that combine to increase the risks faced by women. These surveys while useful as a catalogue of risks and protective factors across the Global South that allow for comparisons, are limited by the constraints of quantitative methodologies, and therefore unable to excavate the narratives of women’s lives, delineating pathways that structure vulnerability to violence. In the Indian context, the cleavages of caste, class, religion and gender are critical for contextualizing human suffering in general, and domestic violence in particular (Dalal & Lindqvist, 2012; Krishnan, 2005; Panchanadeswaran et al., 2008; Sinha et al., 2012; Vivian et al., 2003). Also, situating violence within these intersectionalities reveals that capacities for mitigation vary widely and often depend on pre-existing material, emotional or social resources of the individual and the household.

Exploring the interplay between household and individual determinants and the larger political economy is one possible approach to understanding the structural mechanics of the production of marital violence. To this end, the findings from this study suggest that contributing factors to early marriage, such as dropping out of school, rural residence or residence in a poor area, such as a slum, closely resemble: (a) circumstances conducive for domestic violence, and (b) constrains women from leaving abusive marriages. Desai and Andrist (2010) find sexual scripts to be a useful determinant of age at marriage; it is lower in areas/communities that are more concerned with women’s sexuality and have higher levels
of gender segregation. While early marriage is a statistically significant correlate for domestic violence (Erulkar, 2013; Singh & Samara, 1996; Speizer & Pearson, 2011), an interesting question is how do concerns about women’s sexuality interact with individual and contextual factors? Not all families equally restrict their daughters, and communities differ in the degree to which they police norms of segregation and women’s mobility.

**Household Insecurity**

It is possible to answer some of these questions using a heuristic device that I term household insecurity that captures the shocks or life events that specifically disadvantage poor women. Some shocks, such as the death or protracted illness of the primary earner or caregiver or alcoholism of a father, can make households insecure by exposing them to negative outcomes. Household insecurity could be viewed as a continuous state of insecurity or uncertainty due to certain events or constraints that could be one of, or a combination of material, social/cultural, emotional and physical factors. Figure 1 demonstrates this concept, indicating that shocks may individually or together contribute to structure gender disadvantage. Please note that I use the term household instead of families to capture the variety in living arrangements in a slum, including multiple individuals who may not be a part of the nuclear unit, but yet are effective in mitigating violence.

Although not an exhaustive catalogue, Figure 1 outlines multiple constraints/shocks that poor households are disproportionately exposed to, making them insecure. Social or cultural factors act less like shocks and more like constraints, including caste and family norms related to early marriage, dowry practices, specific cultural expectations that differ according to gender and birth order, higher premium on boys’ further education and simultaneous devaluation of girls’ education, stigma associated with women’s work in the informal sector and an emphasis on women’s chastity, all operate to shape gender disadvantage and compromise the well-being of its members, and in particular the life-chances of daughters.

The findings from this study find resonance in the political ecology approach that connects interpersonal and individual factors to power relations and larger social structures (Belsky, 1980; Ellsberg et al., 1999; Farmer, Connors & Simmons, 1996; Garcia-Moreno et al., 2005; Heise, 1998; Michalski, 2004;). These perspectives contend that structural
violence or ‘the social machinery of oppression’ (Farmer, 2004: 307) systematically disadvantages the poor sometimes subtly, but always with tangible impacts on their lives. Thus, domestic violence and structural violence are mutually reinforcing, and domestic violence is embedded in wider relations of power and privilege in society, a conclusion that also emerges from this study.

**Methodology and Description of Site**

This study involved a yearlong fieldwork (2005–06) in a slum located in one of the most deprived wards of north-eastern Mumbai (Ward M). Three practitioners, two trained in AYUSH and one without any formal training provided healthcare for the community. For serious
medical conditions, patients had to visit a Municipal hospital located 6 kilometres away. A single government school offered instructions in Telugu and Marathi just outside the slum. There were 1,400 households split into four co-operative societies with the smallest comprising 200 households and the largest nearly 500 households. Using a snowball sampling technique, I initially visited 80 households across the slum, of which 52 agreed to participate in the study. During in-depth interviews and informal conversations, many women spontaneously raised the issue of marital violence. While I personally did not interview men, a trained male social worker was appointed to conduct interviews with methods similar to those employed for women. Data from the National Family and Health Survey-3 (NFHS-3) have also been used to supplement findings when relevant while primarily six in-depth case studies have been employed to substantiate the arguments.

Prevalence of Domestic Violence

NFHS-3 indicates that nationally nearly 39 per cent of women report physical, sexual and/or emotional abuse at some point in their lives (NFHS-3, 2005–06). Of the 52 women interviewed, 28 reported physical violence and the majority reported some form of emotional abuse. While prevalent across all social groups, poor women are more likely to report experiencing violence than women from advantaged social groups (Dalal & Lindqvist, 2012; Kimuna et al., 2012; Krishnan, 2005). Domestic violence was described using colloquial terms such as bhandan-maar-haan (altercations and beating-harm in Marathi and jhagda maar-peet in Hindi) instead of technical terms such as ‘gharelun hinsa’ or ‘parivarik pratarna’ (family violence in Hindi) and ‘gharguti hinsa’ (in Marathi). The terms ‘tras’ and ‘taqlif’ in Marathi and Hindi respectively were used to convey pain/difficulties/anguish and challenges that punctuated their lives of poverty, such as lack of sanitation, water scarcity, material deprivation and frequent illnesses. Although the majority of women drew clear distinctions between mild physical violence, such as a slap or two and severe physical violence leading to visible injuries or bleeding,3 and justified the former but not the latter, in instances of major infractions of gendered norms, wife beating was generally justified by them.4 Emotional abuse and controlling behaviours, such as restricting mobility, were seen as more violating than physical abuse, as was the act of throwing women out of the house, because it indicated a complete disregard for her honour and suggested that she was fair game for other men in the community.
Marital rape described as *jabardasti* (force) was sometimes viewed as a manifestation of the different levels of sexual desire of a couple, rather than the inherently violent act of rape; some women viewed sex as a chore, an obligation as part of the marital contract, often saying that ‘I do it because I have to’, and sexual violence was more often reported by women when husbands were drunk.

### Description of the Context and Interviewees

Table 1 presents some key socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

As the table indicates, the slum was economically and social diverse; generally Christian and some Muslim households that benefitted from...
family members’ remittances from Middle-eastern countries were better-off. Instead of income figures, I noted visible assets in the households, which suggested that migrant households were more impoverished and all lived as tenants. Some Maratha families that had migrated in the previous decade were also less well off. Vadaris (from Andhra Pradesh) were some of the earliest settlers in the slum (some settling as early as 1965), initially building temporary shelters and later on permanent kholis (rooms), had higher rates of home ownership. The Marathas resented this success and viewed this as a denial of their primordial claims to the land, and in reality some Marathas were as penurious as more recent migrants. Older Maratha families had become poorer because of the closure of textile mills where men had found secure employment in the 1970s and 1980s, and were either presently unemployed or had jobs in small informal enterprises. In these situations, the wives were the breadwinners or the household depended on adult sons, when present. The younger men worked in the service sector, in small factories, in petrol pumps or as couriers. Some women worked as maids or had small home-based tailoring business; a few were tutors for primary school children, while a minority worked in the services industry.

Wings of a Butterfly: The Fragility of the Lives of the Poor

I have selected the life stories of six women (two pairs of mothers–daughters) to map life events that make households vulnerable to uncover processes that constrain women’s agency. In four of the six cases, women had been subjected to domestic violence and were therefore more disadvantaged; thus, while shocks to the household may be inevitable, timely support from kin protects women. Please note that all names used in this study are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of women. Table 2 includes details of women selected for deeper discussions.

Shanti

Shanti was a 20-year-old woman living in one of the most impoverished households with her husband, a two-year-old daughter and a 14-year-old husband’s niece. She traced her roots to rural Bengal, though she was born in Mumbai. Her natal family included three younger sisters and a brother. After being forced to drop out of school in the ninth grade for financial reasons, at 17 she was married to a family acquaintance, 12 years older than her, much against her wishes. Note the following
### Table 2. Details of Participants Chosen for the Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names</th>
<th>Shanti</th>
<th>Sabiha</th>
<th>Asifa</th>
<th>Priti</th>
<th>Sita</th>
<th>Babamma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother/Daughter (M/D)</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (Years)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at marriage</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16,26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband's age</td>
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<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age difference with husband</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of members in the household</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(+ Joint Household with extended kin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Married (3 Years)</td>
<td>Widowed (5 Years )</td>
<td>Widowed (6 Months)</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Separated—husband remarried (16 Years)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband employed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>Deceased</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4 (3 living)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>Hindu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beaten</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of Origin</td>
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<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Rural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own house</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health status</td>
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<td>Hypertension, arthritis, tension/anxiety</td>
<td>Arthritis, non-specific pains, kamzori</td>
<td>None reported</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author's own research.
conversation with her which describes the circumstances under which she was married7.

Shanti: (I got married early)… because we had ‘problems’ at home… My ‘Daddy’ and I used to have a lot of fights… he used to beat my mother and also yell at her. I would tell him to not do that and try to stop it… so he would beat me up too… That is why my mother married me off early.

S: Did your father drink alcohol?

Shanti: Yes (Nods).

S: Does your mother go to work? Who is there in her maika?

Shanti: Yes she goes to the market. She is a bhaji wali (vegetable vendor)… her maika (natal household) is here only. Her mother is there. But her father has died. Her brothers are there, but how long will they take care of her?… I did not want to get married. I did not want to leave my mother and come. And I would not go anywhere or do anything without my mother’s permission. Then my mother thought it was better for me if I married… so that I have a better life than her… I think.

A clustering of factors disadvantaged Shanti including her birth order as the eldest daughter which pressurized Shanti’s mother into this early marriage believing that marriage would provide her daughter a safety net, protect her from her father’s drunken rages, and would ease the financial pressures on a household with three younger daughters who needed to be fed, schooled and married. Such decisions primarily taken by mothers in households where the father’s role is limited because of remarriage or alcoholism or unemployment are not unusual. However, marriage did not offer her a better life, mirroring her mother’s life. Shanti’s husband was chronically unemployed and often beat her (even when not drunk) and threw her out of the house. His control over her was evident through an extreme surveillance of her speech, actions and mobility8.

During the course of the fieldwork I learnt that although her neighbours knew that her husband ‘had AIDS’—information his mother had shared with one of them before she died—her husband had not revealed this to Shanti, exposing her and the child to contracting HIV/AIDS since Shanti was still nursing her daughter and was not using condoms. Her husband attributed his joblessness to his ill health caused by ‘malaria that had affected his bones’. For more than a year, he had been unemployed, having lost his job in a gas agency delivering cylinders, with no indications that he wanted to, or was physically fit to be employed. Periodic contributions from his brother who lived next door and on the rare occasions that he won at teen patti (gambling), comprised the only sources of income for the family. Despite the violence and poverty of her
marital home, the possibilities of returning to her natal family were slim. Shanti’s social network was also fragile; she had few friends in the slum, and suspicions about her HIV status had alienated her from many in the community, including two of her neighbours from eastern India who though initially friendly because of perceived cultural similarities, later had distanced themselves from her. Of all the women in this study, Shanti was the most vulnerable because of the burden of the multiple forms of violence, and the absence of any mitigating mechanisms.

Priti

Priti was a 46-year-old Tamil Christian woman married to a Hindu man with two adult sons. Her childhood was difficult with her mother’s blindness and chronic illnesses and eventual death, and her father’s and alcoholism and subsequent death. When she was in her early teens she migrated to Mumbai with her father, a commercial painter in search of work, dropping out of a Christian school with just four years of schooling. For a few years before her marriage, she worked in a plastic bag manufacturing unit. Her mother’s death forced her younger sister to also migrate to Mumbai. Soon after she turned 16, a maternal aunt arranged Priti’s marriage and took over the care of her sister. However, within the first year, her in-laws threw her out under the (mistaken) assumption that she was infertile. She returned to her father’s house and was re-employed in her earlier job. In the intervening 10 years between her marriages, her father died and her aunt began to pressurize her to remarry since there was no one ‘to take care of her’. She met her second husband at work and following a two year courtship, married him. However, the full extent of his alcohol use and violent behaviour was revealed only later. In the conversation below, she recounts the abuse, offers reasons for not leaving him and also insightfully critiques gendered and inequitable norms.

Priti: He used to fight verbally, hit me, and suspect my fidelity… I was scared of him, so I would go and sit in this lane or that one over there (points outside) and then he got sick because he drank so much. We had to take him to the hospital. After he returned from the hospital he has been better.
S: How many years after your marriage did he begin this?
Priti: After the second child was born, he began to drink a lot more… initially his job was temporary. Then after that he lost his job, just sat at home and was drinking all the time.
S: Did he have friends drinking with him?
Priti: Yes they used to come home, try to talk to me and they would all drink here. I would not even talk to them because my husband was always
suspicious of me. I used to tell him ‘Why do you bring these people to our house? You should not bring such people to our home’. Then he would beat me because of them and throw me out of the house. He would beat me very badly. With belt, with utensils. You see that large brass pot there it has become flat because he beat me with it. I used to have black marks all over my body.

S: (Pause…)

Priti: I could not go anywhere. You know why? Because I do not have any *sahara* (support) no mother, no father, how many years will my *mausi* (maternal aunt) support me? I thought of all this and tolerated it. Everyone tried to explain it to him, his relatives, his aunts, sometimes the neighbours… he would not understand, he just would not understand (that it is not right to beat her). I also could not leave… the children need a father… society would ostracize me. They would tell me that first also this happened (her first marriage) and now again. They would say this woman is bad. No matter what the man does, no matter how much he drinks or how much pain (taqlif) he causes his wife, *samaj* (society) never blames him. Everyone casts aspersions on the woman (*nam badnam karna*). Now the children are all grown up and if he gets too tensed the children also get angry with him (*gussa karten hain*), now he does not say anything, he just sits quietly. My younger son specially yells at him if he shouts at me. There have been no fights recently… in the last 12 years things have been nice and quiet.

The lack of support from Priti’s natal family and its insecurity, factors that contributed to her early first marriage, also constrained her from ending the abusive second marriage. The irony of a father who may be absent financially or otherwise, but is symbolically important, is not lost on Priti; her critique underscores the unequal and gendered nature of norms that allow a man to get away with being a bad husband, but ostracizes a woman if she were to leave an abusive marriage. Her sister despite having a violent marriage was able to leave since her *mausi* agreed to provide shelter and support to her and the two children. For Priti this meant that she could not have left because her aunt already had too many ‘mouths to feed’. Priti’s status as a poor, previously abandoned woman and the absence of material support from her natal family heavily circumscribes her choices. Although her father had owned a kholi, he sold it before his death, leaving both sisters with neither property nor money⁹. In her case, alcohol was one of the key precipitators of violence and is a known determinant of abuse (Nayak et al., 2010).

The abuse abated only when her husband became ill, forcing him to abstain from alcohol, and her sons transitioning into adulthood. Priti’s status as a tenant, despite a decade spent living in the same slum, and her
work as a broker for an agency that supplied maids, socially disadvantaged her. In the slum, home owners often derogatorily termed their tenant neighbours as ‘bhadotris’ to signal their lower social status as well as a lack of entitlements and access to economic and social capital. Since Priti’s work required her to meet clients at ‘odd hours’ (late evenings), it aroused suspicions that she was in fact a pimp. These attitudes towards her work is symbolic of the stigma often associated with the ‘informality’ of women’s work in slums, especially if they involve evening hours, and the enforcement of these norms through negative labelling, often discourages poor women from being employed, even if it means that they would be deprived of certain necessities.10

Asifa and Sabiha

Asifa was a 45-year-old woman married at the age of 12, to a 17-year-old boy from her village in eastern Andhra Pradesh. Both she and her husband had never been to school and were from very impoverished families of landless farmers. Asifa had five grown children, two daughters and three sons. After the birth of her second child and a particularly catastrophic drought, they migrated to Mumbai. Her husband found a job as a plumber, initially earning enough to buy a kholi in the slum. Though he did not drink in the village, he started using alcohol, in the city, often beating Asifa, and his employment became increasingly erratic. Despite the interventions of village elders, he could not be reasoned with. He prohibited Asifa from working, notwithstanding the fact that they frequently starved. When she was approached by a neighbour for the marriage of her eldest daughter, Sabiha, 14 years old at the time, who had attained puberty two years earlier, she readily agreed. She said concerns for her safety in the slum, the lack of schooling in Urdu-medium close by, and the communal riots of 1992–93 in Mumbai, encouraged her to marry off Asifa believing that marriage was the most ‘secure’ option for her daughter.

Of the three, two of her sons had dropped out because of a lack of interest in education and her eldest son was 25 and unemployed. He often drank, had violent outbursts, did not hesitate to push or shove his mother and forcibly took away the little money she had. Despite this, she did not ask him to leave. She said: ‘He is my son I cannot completely sever all ties with him… I feel bad about abandoning him. Who will feed him? He does not come home for days together but after all it is a mother’s heart, will it not pain?’ She appeared very depressed and she lamented that her life was spent first enduring her husband’s violence, and presently her son’s abuse. It is worth noting that Asifa’s situation is
atypical, because sons are rarely abusive towards their mothers; in fact as seen with Priti, the presence of adult sons actually protects women from violence. However, she had the emotional support of her daughter Sabiha who lived nearby and often helped her mother financially when circumstances permitted her to do so. Asifa’s husband had died 10 years ago and two of her children worked in a tailoring shop which allowed the household to stay afloat.

Sabiha, Asifa’s eldest child, was 31-year-old widow with three children. Sabiha said at the time of her marriage, she had serious reservations about the match. Her husband was 10 years older and already engaged to another woman; however, her mother-in-law disapproved of his choice, and wanted Sabiha as her son’s wife. Sabiha’s mother reasoned that since he was in a shoe-making business with his brother, her daughter would be well provided for. Sabiha was persuaded to marry, and she conceived her first child within a year, and three children soon thereafter, of which one died in infancy. Although her husband drank alcohol before marriage, he was not an alcoholic; however, within a few years, he had stopped concentrating on the business and turned into a chronic alcoholic. He would receive his salary at the end of each work week, spend most of it on alcohol, come home drunk, beat her up and often forced himself on her if she protested. Like Shanti’s and Priti’s husbands, he would occasionally throw her out of the house along with the children. In the excerpt below Sabiha reflects on the limited role her natal family played in mitigating the violence.

Sabiha: We would always have fights when he was drunk. I used to latch the door from the outside and go to my mother’s house. Then he would start yelling and wake up the neighbours and complain to them that I had locked him and gone away. If he was drunk then his habit was not to sleep quietly during the day. Then at about 7 in the evening the water used to come and he would yell at me to switch off the light and let him sleep and to not fill water. Then he would talk rubbish because he was drunk… my children would cry and plead with him not to beat me up, they would keep asking him not to beat me. Sometimes he would beat us up and throw us out of the house and tell us to get out.

S: You would be out the whole night?
Sabiha: Yes that has happened and if I went to my mother’s place, she would tell me ‘what is wrong with you people? You are quiet during the day but start making a tamasha (ruckus) at night’. So instead of being shouted at and again I preferred to bear the pain myself. Then I would take my children and sit out. I knew if he fought with me, he would throw us out of the house, so I would grab a rug or a bed sheet beforehand so we could spend the night out.
If I tried complaining to any one they would tell me that you cannot clap with one hand only. So I thought it was better to just handle it myself and try to protect my children than ask people.

This conversation touches on two key areas: support from natal family and neighbours; the latter has important implications for mitigation of family violence and has been discussed elsewhere (Ghosh, 2011). Neighbours often viewed wife-beating as a nuisance that they had to live with, especially when it was caused by drunk husbands. She intermittently had the support of her mother-in-law but this was complicated by the dynamics of their relationship.

Sabiha: When my mother-in-law was there I would try to get her support. I would tell her ‘Look mother, what he is telling me’. Then if she felt that it was appropriate to reprimand him, she would do that and if she felt it was appropriate to scold me she would scold me. Then I would keep quiet… he used to come home drunk also when she was around. And we would fight but my mother-in-law would intervene. After she passed away, then it got worse because he realized there is no one to reprimand him or stop him… sometimes she would save me. But sometimes what would happen is that I would have a fight with my mother-in-law and then my husband would fight with me in the evening. At that time my mother-in-law would think ‘Let her get beaten now. She deserves it.’ (She smiled at the memory.) Sometimes these things would happen and I would take it for granted that on that day I would get no support from her… But mostly she would support me. She liked me so she would protect me… when I would come from work (as a domestic help) she would be very sympathetic to me. She would say ‘Poor thing, she has to work so hard. Give her something to eat’. I would feel very good that she cared for me, worried for me.

Sabiha’s case is instructive because it suggests that while mothers-in-law can, and do intercede, it is complicated. Involving her younger brothers in resolving fights typically led to the fight escalating, and delimited the role of her natal family. Sabiha had continued to work as a domestic help and sometimes struggled to make ends meet; of her three children, two had dropped out—her 15-year-old older daughter was working as a maid, her 12-year-old son had dropped out and was apprenticing with a tailor, and only her 13-year-old daughter continued at school. Sabiha was contemplating the marriage of her older daughter using the logic that younger age would imply fewer dowry demands, and was eager to marry her off into a family that made no dowry demands.
Sita and Babamma

Sita was Babamma’s daughter and was fourth among her five children. They were Vadaris who were from Andhra Pradesh and had migrated to Maharashtra to work as construction labourers. Babamma’s father-in-law had arrived 60 years earlier, claimed a piece of land and built a temporary structure on what was an open field at the time bordering a creek and a small forest. His brothers followed suit, resulting in a joint family like settlement, where they lived in one or two kholis (rooms) next to one another. Subsequently they purchased more kholis and leased them out to tenants. Babamma’s family had a thick network of kin who lived in close proximity and their joint family was better off than many of the other families, including some Maratha families. They had considerable political and social influence in the slum, but simultaneously also attracted resentment from Marathas specially, who viewed them as usurpers of the land. Babamma’s husband left them and remarried when Sita was 10; having no children from the second marriage allowed him to fulfill his financial obligations towards his first wife and children, despite setting up an independent household in another slum.

Sita had an older sister and three brothers. Nine years earlier just after her sixteenth birthday, Sita and her older sister were married to two brothers in a joint marriage ceremony, primarily at the behest of Babamma, using the logic that if both sisters were to remain together so they ‘… could take care of each other and the wedding expenses would be minimized’. Babamma did not involve her father or other relatives in this decision which aggravated her family considerably, and they held her primarily responsible for the tragedy of Sita’s widowhood and her subsequent return to her natal home. Sita had returned to her natal household consisting of five uncles and their families as well as two elder brothers, a younger brother and their wives and children, six months after the birth of her third child. Her first child was conceived within a year of her marriage; her subsequent pregnancies resulted in one stillbirth and a third son. Her husband became progressively ill and she did not want her infant son and 5-year old to be exposed him. Since her husband had been unemployed for the last five years, his brothers financially supported the household. By the time my fieldwork had ended, Sita’s husband had died and she decided to permanently stay on in her natal household. With few employment options and just five years of schooling, she started working as a domestic help while the extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins and their wives took care of her two children in return for her contributions to the household expenses.
The following conversation conducted in the initial phase of the fieldwork highlights why it was possible to mitigate a shock, such as a husband’s prolonged illness and subsequent death:

Sita: I liked staying in a joint family. For me a family is everything. They can look after us and also provide ‘support’. Here also I had a big family there (in-laws’ home) also I had a big family. I did not have any family problems. However whatever I may do that is my sasural (in-laws). Eventually they will blame me for something or the other. I have to think about my future. Even if I do stay there (in-laws), no one cares. In this era everyone only looks after themselves.

S: If something happens to him (your husband), will you feel alone?
Sita: These two kids’ lives are dependent on me. I have to do what my brother says… he is providing me with support. I want to bear the burden of my own responsibility… He also has two children. They will soon become marriageable. He also has a wife. He also has to think for himself… If he keeps thinking about his sister, his wife may tell him tomorrow ‘that you are always thinking about her children, what about me and my own children?’ It is not a good idea that they fight because of me. That is why I need to work at least a little… whether it is a man or a woman each person should carry his or her burden. It is better to be responsible for one-self than have to hear other people’s insults.

Sita was extremely pragmatic in her decisions and was clear that though she was welcomed in her natal household, if she failed to contribute economically, their hospitality would not last. Living with her natal family would also serve her children’s interests because they would be cared for reasoning that ‘… whatever it might be my mother will take care of me and my children. But in my in-laws, no one will take care of my children. People will think “Oh their mother has gone to work. Let the children go to hell, how do we care?”’ While Sita could not expect to receive support indefinitely from her natal family, it was also true that her kin had first absorbed the shock of her father’s abandonment in her childhood, and later on the second shock of her husband’s sickness and death in her adulthood.

Discussion

Three key insights that are worth discussing emerge from these narratives: age at marriage, the interactions between gender and birth order and the mitigating role of natal families.
Age at Marriage

The age at marriage and circumstances under which women were married was one of the most critical factors that foreshadowed future life outcomes. When a household was subjected to a single or multiple shocks, families might be tempted to marry off their daughters not necessarily to the most suitable man, but to the most convenient suitor who happens to be present at that moment. In Shanti’s, Sabiha’s and Priti’s cases, their natal families were both economically precarious and oppressive, and were married off early on the initiative of their mothers to relieve them of the economic and emotional hardships, as well as to reduce the financial pressures on the natal household. Families that were not marked by physical violence or alcohol use, could still hasten marriages of daughters because of their economic fragility that could be exacerbated by certain events; in some instances crop failure and landlessness forced rural farmers to migrate to urban areas; at other times, life events such as a mother’s sickness and subsequent death triggered the early marriage of an older daughter either because the household had no female head or because of the step-mother’s interventions.

It is also important to locate early age at marriage in the normative context of a slum that dictate that girls, especially from economically vulnerable homes are married on attending puberty. The lack of educational and ‘respectable’ employment opportunities for women and the desire to create micro-villages by rural migrants, governed by cultural expectations similar to their villages, appear to be some of the contributing factors that pressurize families into early marriages of daughters. In an urban slum, a girl who was single and several years past her puberty prompted speculations that there was ‘something wrong with her’, thus compromising her in the marriage market. Families often believed that marriage safeguarded their young daughters from sexual predators as well as conferred stability (economic or social) and increased their standing among their jatwalas (caste groups). This belief is not without rationale, since marginal urban environments, such as slums, offer little protection from victimization, particularly sexual violations and limited opportunities for translating education into livelihoods, particularly for women. A diffused sense of physical insecurity permeates these spaces, where an alcoholic father’s friends may try to make advances towards a young daughter or young men realizing that the father is incapable of protecting his daughters may harass her. Sometimes young women eloped to get respite from an abusive family, seeking refuge in a boyfriend, as it happened with the daughters of one of the women who
participated in this study, with seriously adverse consequences for the young woman. Thus, the clustering of economic and social disadvantages and physical insecurity ultimately shaped women’s life trajectories.

**Birth order**

A girl’s birth order is an important predictor of age at marriage and subsequent outcomes. While it could be a co-incidence, it is improbable that all the women with the exception of Asifa, were the eldest daughters in their families, which disadvantaged them in unique ways. The responsibility for care of younger siblings in the absence of a mother (or the presence of an ailing mother) automatically falls on the eldest daughter as she is seen as a ‘mother substitute’, often at the costs of her own welfare such as dropping out of school early. Marriage is still considered the most significant rite of passage for many Indian women, particularly those in poverty. Families try to marry off their daughters as best as they can and sometimes as quickly as they can believing that younger age at marriage is associated with smaller dowries. The criterion for marriage typically seems to be the apparent monetary stability of the marital family and other parameters, such as age and compatibility are acquiesced in the service of presumed material security. The factors which led to the early and convenient marriages of these women are not dissimilar from those that prevented women from obtaining or receiving assistance from their families when they were subjected to violence.

**Role of the Natal Family**

In Sita’s and Babamma’s cases, neither fell into the quagmire of desparation that typically accompanies abandonment or widowhood among the poor. Babamma’s husband left her when both her eldest children were working and though Sita was widowed, their safety nets were their extended kin, notwithstanding the occasional conflict inevitable in a large family. Since Babamma’s husband continued to financially support his first wife and children, the household was stable. Babamma as the wife of the eldest brother commanded certain familial privileges, which also helped consolidate Sita’s position when she returned. The pooled financial and emotional resources and social capital of two productive brothers and three economically productive uncles, aunts and cousins within this joint family ensured a steady and stable supply of assistance.
Conclusion

Through this essay I have attempted to demonstrate the utility of household insecurity as a construct that captures the non-linear and dynamic nature of gender disadvantage. It encapsulates multiple dimensions and forms of insecurity/constraints whether material, physical, socio-cultural or sexual by identifying mechanisms through which the structural and normative contexts gender vulnerabilities. The presence of a single or a combination of constraints has the potential to trigger a chain of events creating trajectories where women are able to exert little agency over themselves or their lives.

The case studies reveal that often women are married young or without much deliberation under the (frequently mistaken) assumption that marriage would secure happiness, safety and economic well-being of daughters. Methodologically using pairs of mothers and daughters gives an intergenerational perspective that reveal the extent of complexities and the limited possibilities for mitigation in the lives of the poor. An ethnographic approach highlights the discursive relationship between structural and family violence and shows that more often than not the life paths and life chances of poor women are determined sometimes even before they are born. Being employed does not necessarily translate to having capacities to leave an abusive marriage because of the informality and poor pay of women’s work in slums and the lack of alternative shelters. Thus, programmes to address domestic violence need to go beyond the family as a site of intervention to account for the role that systemic violence plays in the production of domestic violence and must include measures that empower women to live financially and emotionally independent lives.

Notes

1. I use the terms domestic violence, marital violence, physical abuse and wife-beating interchangeably, in this study, to capture violence that a woman experiences in her marital home which could be perpetrated by husbands (in most examples) or by in-laws and includes within its ambit physical, psychological, economic and/or sexual violence.

2. There were many instances of child marriages with girls being married as young as 12. Women in their 20s had higher ages at marriage, compared to women in their 40s.

3. Moderate levels of drinking were not seen as immoral and was well tolerated by most wives. However, alcohol abuse was a serious problem in some of the households. Physical violence resulting from alcohol was stigmatizing
both for the man directing the violence as well as women who were at the receiving end of such violence, discussed in Ghosh (2011).

4. NFHS-3 indicates that neglecting home and children (39% of women; 30% of husbands) and being disrespectful to in-laws (42% of women; 44% of husbands), are the two most popular justifications of violence.

5. Schensul et al (2006) had similar findings in their study of sexual risk and violence in a Mumbai slum.

6. Kamzori was a catch-all that included feeling unwell, lack of strength, emotional fragility and women who had undergone tubectomy often reported this as a side-effect of the procedure.

7. All conversations are reported verbatim.

8. Talking to Shanti was difficult because of her husband’s extreme surveillance; he would sit with his friends playing cards, under the shade of a large banyan tree, diagonally across the house, at the edge of the slum, with his eyes fixed on her movements.

9. Panda and Agarwal (2005) found that women owning land or property had significantly lower risks of being exposed to marital violence in Kerala that women without property/land.

10. Conversations with unemployed husbands (particularly Marathas) whose wives worked outside suggest that husbands still preferred women to work in home-based enterprises since that is accompanied by a veneer of ‘respectability’, especially because it does not require them to leave home.

11. Sita either did not know her husband’s condition or did not feel comfortable sharing it with me. However, from the clinical symptoms, it appeared as if he had tuberculosis.

References


