

Community Effects and Domestic Violence in South India

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The social or community aspect of domestic violence has been revealed in numerous studies in various developing country settings, including South Asia (Koenig et al. 2003, INCLLEN 2000, Busby 1999, Rao 1997, Kapadia 1995). In many contexts, domestic violence appears to be accepted throughout the community, and social norms have often developed that sanction men's violence against women. Nevertheless, community effects on domestic violence are difficult to identify statistically, and what appears to be a group effect may be essentially explained by unobserved individual-level factors. Research that leads to a better understanding of the root causes of domestic violence, and particularly if community effects exist and how they operate, is needed in order to tailor programs toward effective community responses.

The objectives of this paper are to identify community effects of domestic violence in South India and study how these effects operate to perpetuate violence within a social group. We use an exogenous characteristic – caste – that divides households into groups with distinct broadly defined social structures, low castes and high castes. Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) show that low caste women in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have significantly higher prevalence of domestic violence (51% of rural ever-married women aged 15-49) than high caste women (35%). Why is there such a large caste-gap in domestic violence? The community effects explanation argues that there is something inherently different about the social structure of the low castes that causes higher rates of domestic violence.

A second explanation is that individual-level influences, particularly persistent disparities in socioeconomic conditions, influence violence differently across castes. Lower socioeconomic status has been linked to domestic violence in numerous settings worldwide (Koenig et al., 2003, Hindin & Adair, 2002, Hoffman et al., 1994, Seltzer & Kalmuss, 1988). It is posited that poverty may reduce the ability of men to fulfill norms of successful manhood, especially the expectation to be major providers for the family, and they may respond with violence to demonstrate their manhood in alternate ways (Hoffman et al., 1994). Situations of economic strain may also bring about greater spousal conflict over resources, which may also lead to violence (Jewkes et al., 2002).

Hindu society was historically organized by caste into hereditary occupations, with the lower castes regulated to menial and ritually polluting tasks. The new educational and occupational opportunities that appeared during the British colonial period also favored the high castes. And despite government policies to support the lower castes since Indian independence, such as subsidized schooling and reservation of government jobs, a caste-gap in socioeconomic status

continues to exist throughout India today. Yet a study that attempts to effectively control for socioeconomic differences across castes may not measure all unobserved characteristics and therefore be able to rule out the former community explanation.

We exploit a unique setting to provide support for the community-caste explanation. Our study site is a collection of tea plantations, or estates, in the South India High Range, a mountainous region that lies between the Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The High Range was virgin forest until it was acquired by British planters and converted into tea plantations in the last quarter of the 19th century. Since the plantation land was previously uninhabited, workers were brought to the High Range from the plains of Tamil Nadu. Today, the workers on the tea estates are the third-generation descendants of those migrants, whose population is supplemented by a fresh influx of new workers from the origin communities in Tamil Nadu in each subsequent generation through marriage.

The data used in the analysis are obtained from a single firm, the largest tea manufacturing company in the world, which operates 23 estates in the High Range. Each estate employs approximately 1000 workers. We collected detailed income information from the company's computerized records and surveyed a random sample of 3700 female workers drawn from all 23 estates in 2003. The respondents were interviewed in their homes, and detailed information on the background of each respondent, her husband, and intra-household conflict was collected. In addition, we are collecting qualitative data in the winter 2004-2005, where women and their husbands will be interviewed about household decisionmaking and conflict.

There are several advantages to this study setting: Although low caste and high caste workers come from very different socioeconomic backgrounds in their origin communities in Tamil Nadu, they are engaged in the *same* tasks and earn the *same* income on the tea estates today. Access to health services, education, and other facilities on the tea estates are also identical across castes. In addition, the low castes have *higher* education on average than the high castes on the tea estates, which is opposite to the pattern found in Tamil Nadu.

The tea estates setting allows us to control for socioeconomic differences by caste; nevertheless, we continue to find a significant caste-gap in domestic violence: 59% of married women ages 15-58 among the low castes and 54% of high caste women were ever hit by their husbands. These findings indicate that a community effect by caste exists with respect to domestic violence.

The second objective of the paper is to investigate how this caste effect operates. What is it about the low castes that leads to a higher prevalence of domestic violence? We test two hypotheses. First, we investigate the hypothesis that *income differentials* between spouses affect domestic violence differentially by caste. Marital violence appears to have increased after the introduction of income generation programs that are focused on women, for example, among Grameen Bank participants in Bangladesh (Schuler et al. 1996), or when wives in developed countries earn more than their husbands. It is hypothesized that as women's incomes and their outside options rise, they are more likely to challenge the norm of male decision-making. These challenges threaten masculinity and male power, and men may react with a "backlash" of violence to re-establish their dominant position in the home (Bridges Whaley 2001, Jewkes et al.

2002, McCloskey 1996, Hoffman et al. 1994, Yick 2001, Rao 1997, and Collins et al. 1993). On the tea estates, women are the primary labor force and are employed as tea pluckers; men are employed in supporting tasks such as weeding, pruning, and in the tea factories. The women actually earn 25% *more* than the men on average, which is more than any income-generation program could hope to achieve.

Why would we expect to find cross-caste differences in the female income effect on domestic violence when low and high caste women earn the same incomes on the estates? Due to poverty in the lower castes, low caste women have traditionally worked outside the home and in menial positions. Participation in the labor force has resulted in greater autonomy for low caste women (Kapadia 1995, Geetha 2002, Chakravarti 1993). Therefore, we believe low caste women will assert themselves more when they experience an increase in relative income compared to high caste women, and low caste husbands will therefore be more likely to react with a backlash of violence. Thus, we expect that the female income effect will be greater among the low castes than the high castes.

Our alternative hypothesis explores the notion that a *culture of domestic violence* exists among the low castes in rural Tamil Nadu and continues to persist among the low caste migrants to the tea estates. The lower castes have been historically much poorer than the higher castes, and a culture of poverty associated with high levels of alcohol consumption by men and domestic violence has been observed in low castes across India (Geetha 2002, Rao 1997, Kapadia 1995, Kooiman 1989). Sociological studies of migration have observed that migrant communities maintain particular aspects of their cultural beliefs and social practices even after many generations in the receiving society (Foner 1997; see Grieco 1998 for retainment of caste by Indian migrants to Fiji). Thus, a culture of domestic violence among the low castes in Tamil could have persisted over multiple generations in the tea estates. We will examine this hypothesis using results from our qualitative data analysis. The combined results of our quantitative and qualitative analyses will illuminate caste effects on domestic violence.

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