



## Do changes in spousal employment status lead to domestic violence? Insights from a prospective study in Bangalore, India<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The prevalence of physical domestic violence – violence against women perpetrated by husbands – is staggeringly high across the Indian subcontinent. Although gender-based power dynamics are thought to underlie women's vulnerability, relatively little is known about risk and protective factors. This prospective study in southern India examined the association between key economic aspects of gender-based power, namely spousal employment status, and physical domestic violence. In 2005–2006, 744 married women, aged 16–25, residing in low-income communities in Bangalore, India were enrolled in the study. Data were collected at enrollment, 12 and 24 months. Multivariable logistic regression models were used to examine the prospective association between women's employment status, their perceptions of their husband's employment stability, and domestic violence. Women who were unemployed at one visit and began employment by the next visit had an 80% higher odds of violence, as compared to women who maintained their unemployed status. Similarly, women whose husbands had stable employment at one visit and newly had difficulty with employment had 1.7 times the odds of violence, as compared to women whose husbands maintained their stable employment. To our knowledge, this study is the first from a developing country to confirm that changes in spousal employment status are associated with subsequent changes in violence risk. It points to the complex challenges of violence prevention, including the need for interventions among men and gender-transformative approaches to promote gender-equitable attitudes, practices and norms among men and women.

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### Introduction

The prevalence of physical domestic violence – violence against women perpetrated by husbands – is staggeringly high across the Indian subcontinent. In a recent national survey, 35% of Indian women of reproductive age reported having experienced physical domestic violence at some point in their married lives (NFHS, 2007). Moreover, considerable evidence suggests that domestic violence is also associated with an array of adverse women's health outcomes, such as pregnancy loss, psychosocial conditions, unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS (Dunkle et al., 2004; Jejeebhoy, 1998; Patel, Kirkwood, & Pednekar, 2006; Sidibe, Campbell, & Becker, 2005; Silverman, Decker, Saggurti, Balaiah, & Raj, 2008; Stephenson, Koenig, & Ahmed, 2006; Vizcarra, Hassan, Hunter, Munoz, Ramiro, & De Paula, 2004). Yet relatively little is known about risk and

protective factors. Although gender-based power dynamics in marital relationships are thought to underlie women's vulnerability to domestic violence, few studies have focused on identifying the specific aspects of these inequities that may either pose a risk for or protect against domestic violence and that are amenable to change through programs and policies (Panda & Agarwal, 2005; Rocca, Rathod, Falle, Pande, & Krishnan, 2009). In this article, we examine the association between key economic aspects of gender-based power, namely the employment status of women and their husbands, and reported experience of physical domestic violence in a cohort of married women in urban south India. To our knowledge, this is the first study to prospectively examine these relationships in a developing country context.

While some attention has been devoted to the study of women's employment as a means of empowerment, relatively little attention has been paid to the potential for backlash as a consequence of changes in women's roles. On the one hand, women's increased access to economic resources has been associated with a number of positive outcomes such as increased utilization of health care services, reduced fertility and improved children's education and nutrition (Vyas & Watts, 2008). Further, it has been hypothesized that employment may reduce women's dependence on their husbands and enhance their power within households and relationships, and thus reduce their vulnerability to domestic violence (Vyas & Watts, 2008). On the other hand, employed women may be at higher risk of experiencing violence because they may be more likely to challenge their husbands' authority or because their husbands perceive a threat to their authority (Kimmel, 1996; Koenig, Ahmed, Hossain, & Mozumder, 2003; Rocca et al., 2009; Schuler, Hashemi, Riley, & Akhter, 1996; Vyas & Watts, 2008).

The empirical evidence, both in India and elsewhere, is mixed. Research in rural and urban settings in India have found that women's participation in employment or related activities – both before and after marriage – is associated with greater reporting of domestic violence (Kishor & Johnson, 2004; Krishnan, 2005; Rocca et al., 2009; Verma & Collumbien, 2003). In cross-sectional analyses of baseline data from our study in urban Bangalore, women who participated in vocational training after marriage were more likely to experience violence (adjusted OR = 3.1, 95% CI: 1.7–5.8) (Rocca et al., 2009). In contrast, research in the southern state of Kerala found that women with regular employment were less likely to report ever having experienced physical domestic violence than unemployed women (Panda & Agarwal, 2005).

Power dynamics within marital relationships and the risk of domestic violence are likely to be shaped not only by women's employment but also by their husbands' employment status (Benson, Fox, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2003; Fox, Benson, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2002; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999). In India, a husband's ability to provide economically for the family is intimately linked to notions of masculinity as well as personal and family honor. A study of married men and women in a working class community in suburban Mumbai found that men's failure to provide economically for the family did not go unnoticed and often led to criticism by neighbors (George, 2006). Research has also highlighted the challenges that men in urban poor communities face in meeting their role as economic providers, including difficulties in securing steady employment and alcohol dependency, which can lead to frustration, stress, marital discord and domestic violence (George, 2006; Krishnan et al., 2005; Sivaram, Latkin, Solomon, & Celentano, 2006). In a cross-sectional survey of urban and rural women in Kerala, women whose husbands were employed were significantly less likely to report physical domestic violence when compared to women with unemployed husbands in adjusted analyses (OR = 0.2, 95% CI: 0.1–0.3 for both regular and irregular employment) (Panda & Agarwal, 2005).

Inconsistencies in women's and husbands' employment status have also been hypothesized to affect domestic violence risk (Benson et al., 2003; Fox et al., 2002; Macmillan & Gartner, 1999). In multivariable analyses of cross-sectional data from seven rural and urban sites across India, the odds of reported violence were two times greater among employed women whose husbands were unemployed in comparison to unemployed women whose husbands worked (OR = 2.2, 95% CI: 1.3–3.4); a slightly elevated odds of violence (OR = 1.2, 95% CI: 1.0–1.4) was also observed when both women and their husbands were employed (Jeyaseelan et al., 2007). Similar findings have been reported in a survey of urban and rural communities in Kerala (Panda & Agarwal, 2005).

Taken together, research to date suggests that the employment status of both women and their husbands are associated with women's risk of domestic violence. However, existing research is entirely based on cross-sectional surveys, which cannot establish a temporal relationship. Thus, it is unclear whether, for example, experiencing domestic violence leads women to seek out employment or whether women's employment leads to marital discord and violence. Our research improves upon existing studies of domestic violence by *prospectively* examining the relationships between spousal employment status and domestic violence in the context of a 24-month longitudinal study (the Samata Health Study) of the association between gender-based power and susceptibility to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among young, married women in the southern Indian metropolis, Bangalore.

### Theoretical approach and hypotheses

Our analysis draws upon Kabee's model of women's empowerment and other theoretical frameworks that have guided domestic violence research, specifically, theories of family stress and resources and the concept of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dutton, 1988; Goode, 1971; Greenfield et al., 1998; Hornung, McCullough, & Sugimoto, 1981; Kabee, 1999). These theoretical approaches frame the relationship between spousal employment status and domestic violence in different ways and shaped the hypotheses that we examined in this study.

In Kabee's model of women's empowerment, a key component of women's power is their access to and control over economic, political, and social resources, including employment (Kabee, 1997). The model emphasizes the fact that the meaning and implications of specific kinds of resources are shaped by local circumstances and prevailing values. When women's access to and control over resources go against prevailing norms and values, as may be the case with women's employment in the Indian setting, there may be substantial social costs, including heightened domestic violence.

In contrast, family stress theory emphasizes the material or structural dimensions of employment and suggests that domestic violence results from the stress associated with unemployment and lack of economic resources (Dutton, 1988; Greenfield et al., 1998). On the other hand, resource theory and the concept of hegemonic masculinity – a pattern of roles, expectations and practices (including violence) that facilitate male dominance over women – emphasize the symbolic significance of spousal employment status. These theories posit that increases in women's economic resources and/or reductions in men's relative contributions to household economic resources can challenge masculine identities and provoke violence (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Goode, 1971; Hornung et al., 1981).

Guided by these theoretical frameworks, we hypothesized that women's employment would increase their risk of domestic

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