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Friends, Families, and Foes: Social Support and Women

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Isolated from the public world, a large section of Indian women remain closely entangled in the private world of family and kinship. An engagement with external networks would encourage their workforce participation, which, in turn, could enlarge their social sphere.

A girl who was in an interfaith live-in relationship in Delhi was brutally murdered by her partner in October, drawing attention to domestic violence in India and awakening an Islamophobia latent in a large part of the country's population. It also revealed the lack of social support women in the country receive not only in cases of domestic abuse but also in other aspects of their lives.

Modern Choices?

The murder reinforced the popular belief that educated girls in India are choosing their partners themselves, only to get involved in intercaste or interfaith relationships that ultimately lead to violence. However, the macro picture does not indicate that women in the country, across education levels, enjoy any such “independence”. Only 5% of married women (between the ages of 15 and 49) have chosen their husbands themselves. Even in the most highly educated group (those who have been to college and beyond), the husbands of 60% of them were chosen by family members and 24% of them had no say in the matter. Only 5% of women have married outside their caste, and more than 80% of women are married to men from their own caste. The distribution remains the same across all education levels and all forms of marriage.

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Irrespective of who chooses the partner (parents or themselves), domestic violence is common in all the communities to which these married women go. More than 83% of women across all forms of marriage said that beating wives was common in their community if a husband suspected infidelity; if a dowry was not provided; if a husband thought domestic duties were not performed “satisfactorily”; or if a wife went out without asking for permission (India Human Development Survey 2011-12). This indicates domestic violence is a problem born out of society's patriarchal structure. It is not merely the fallout of an individual man's traits or of “modern” life choices.

Value of External Networks

Various studies and reports of the World Bank highlight the strong bonds that exist among members of families and how community association (identified as social capital) works as a social safety net across multiple life crises (Coleman 1988). However, the benefits of such bonds may not be the same for all family members. The mobilisation of such associations, especially community and kinship networks, is disproportionately dependent on women's unpaid work (Molyneux 2002). Yet, women themselves do not always receive the benefits of such associations—the bonds may even be highly restrictive to them.

Isolated from the public world, a considerable section of women in India remains closely entangled in the private world of kinship. Economist Naila Kabeer (2011) argues that if women expand their social space through certain chosen networks instead of only being part of obligatory family relationship and kinship networks, there would be a possibility of altering their sense of personhood, which otherwise naturalises their subordinate status. An engagement with these “communities of practice” could help women by enabling them to see the alternative choices available, prompting them to contest the injustice within families and kinships. Their participation in the workforce and engagement with external organisations— such as mahila mandals, self-help groups, credit groups, youth groups, and trade unions— may pave a path for them to form associations of their choice, to a certain extent. However, only a few nationally representative data sets, such as the Indian Human Development Survey (IHDS) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS), try to capture information on such associations of women.

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The Indian Human Development Survey of 2011-2012 shows that only 20% of married women between the ages of 15 and 49 are engaged with at least one of the groups such as mahila mandals, self-help or credit groups, and trade unions or political organisations. Associations with such organisations could encourage the workforce participation of women, which in turn could be crucial for the enlargement of their social sphere.

Interestingly, the same data shows that 55% of the women associated with any such organisation have worked for a wage. In contrast, among women with no such association, only 39% have ever worked. This may indicate the enabling power of external association. However, the picture is not quite so rosy when we look into the bonds shared by households. In households associated with caste, religious, or social groups, women have much lower workforce participation (35%).

Similarly, families knowing influential people within and outside their caste do not lead to a positive impact on women's workforce participation. In the absence of macro data, several micro studies have highlighted the benefits and limitations of the workplace and the organisational bonds that women share. From finding better work opportunities and shelter during migrations to forming solidarity networks in a hostile work environment and achieving financial independence through saving among friends are examples of the benefits of such networks.

However, these networks can be very fragile and trust is often broken. More importantly, these associations may not directly confront patriarchy but try to bypass it. So women might expand their public world through these ties while still remaining closely associated with their traditional kinship ties. Thus these associations may not always ensure a collective resistance to “sensitive issues” such as domestic violence.

Limits to Intervention

In the recent murder case in Delhi, friends of the victim said that they were aware of her being involved in an abusive relationship, and her father had approached the police as there had been no contact with her for several days. Micro studies show the ambivalent roles of neighbours, friends, and family in providing support to survivors of domestic violence. A study in a slum area of Delhi showed that the availability of parental refuge in the face of domestic violence depended on whether women were in an “arranged marriage set up” or one where they had chosen their partners (Grover 2009). Women in an arranged marriage had a stronger support system than women who chose their own partners. In the latter case, such support was temporary and families demanded that the battered daughters reciprocate by being more involved in domestic chores.

Initiatives to build solidarity should ideally be localised so that women can bond on the basis of their shared identities in workplaces, their neighbourhoods, and in local organisations.

While all social relationships demand reciprocity, kin and neighbourhood relations demand “bounded solidarity”, and larger community norms primarily limit support. For example, another micro study in Delhi shows neighbours' help in case of domestic violence was mainly dependent on their perception of women's morality (Snell-Rood 2015). Women in a second marriage or those who had left an abusive relationship were stigmatised in neighbourhoods, further isolating them. While organisational associations could provide support to such women, they were often controlled by powerful external actors from different classes and castes (Batiwala 2007). Survivors could therefore be viewed as mere recipients of support, which often shifted the agency from the survivors themselves into the hands of professional non-governmental organisation members and activists.

While we need detailed data at the macro level to identify the extent of women's social associations and their limitations, micro studies are crucial to understanding the complexities of such relationships. Initiatives to build solidarity should ideally be localised so that women can bond on the basis of their shared identities in workplaces, their neighbourhoods, and in local organisations. They should not be the mere beneficiaries of large organisations during a crisis.

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