Building Empowerment, Resisting Patriarchy: Understanding intervention against domestic violence among grassroots women in Gujarat, India¹

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how empowerment programs impact gender based violence and the social structures that lead to such violence in the first place. Drawing from interviews with former participants in empowerment programs that focus on building community leaders, the study examines how grassroots women lead interventions and the resulting effects on leaders' and survivors' lives. Findings suggest that although most survivors had displayed some agency in independently resisting violence, their efforts are effective when coupled with a support network and access to resources. With the intervention of leaders, the survivors were able to better negotiate for justice with a renewed sense of agency. For the leaders, participation in programs gave them an identity independent from their status within the family. They promoted change by developing independent innovative intervention strategies that worked despite the tight structural constraints of gendered norms.

KEY WORDS

Agency; Domestic Violence; Empowerment; Gender

My husband beat me every day. I was extremely scared of him. I sat in the corner and took the beatings. I was so scared that I could not raise my voice against him. He used to beat... my children. He beat me with chains, metal rods, wooden planks and whatever he could lay his hands on. I was scared to go outside the house. (Prabha, 42, Hindu, survivor)

The above excerpt of an interview with a domestic violence survivor exemplifies the nature of abuse that many women in India and other parts of the world experience (Kandiyoti 1988; WHO 2013). Typically such violence maintains gender inequalities in marital relationships and enforces an extreme form of patriarchal privilege (Chaudhuri, Morash and Yingling 2014; Stark 2010). In such situations, women may feel enormous pressure to adjust and tolerate abuse in silence. They are faced with extreme alienation and increased vulnerabilities because they lack supportive family and community networks and they find themselves in a culture that legitimizes the violence as it perpetuates structural inequalities. Given such extremely oppressive conditions, one wonders how a survivor is able to develop resistance, create support networks beyond her family and kin, and carve out livable (i.e., bearable) conditions for herself and her children. The pertinent question among researchers is how women can empower themselves against gendered violence when deviation from culturally prescribed gender roles comes with huge social costs (that may involve ostracism from the family and kin, difficulty in finding partners for children, and denial of employment or rental space).

To answer the above question, we study a group of grassroots women leaders in Gujarat, India, who are former participants in two different empowerment programs, and we examine how they lead interventions against domestic violence. A goal of these empowerment programs is to build leadership skills for a variety of purposes, including intervention against domestic

violence, encouraging participation in trade unions, and developing semi-skilled workers' collective bargaining skills. Our rationale for focusing on local leaders rather than on the more commonly studied victims and survivors is based on the following logic. First, previous research has demonstrated the importance of feminist mobilizations and the presence of a vibrant civil society as an impetus for activism and policy change related to violence against women (Htun and Weldon 2012). Our study provides a unique opportunity to observe feminist mobilization from the ground by showing how a group of empowered women leaders, some of whom are not trained to intervene against domestic violence, act with agency to help survivors, who are then able develop a support network and strengthen their own agency in the process. Second, our study allows consideration of women as more than just victims who lack the necessary social capital to initiate intervention and produce social change (Duvvury and Nayak 2003; Jejeebhoy 1998; Kumar 1994). Our approach responds to Subramaniam's (2006; also see Purkayastha and Subramaniam 2004; Ray and Korteweg 1999) criticism of the scholars' tendency to view Indian women solely as victims, thereby ignoring their capacities and potential as agents of change. For example, there is a plethora of interdisciplinary studies on domestic violence in India (e.g., Bush 1992; Desai 2005; Gangoli and Rew 2011). However, the bulk of these studies has focused on understanding the problem from an individual victim's perspective that often unintentionally portrays women as lacking agency and social capital and thereby unable to participate in social change. Thus a core focus on intervention led by grassroots women is missing. The change/intervention addressed in the literature is predominantly conceptualized as a "top down" approach in which mainly higher social class lawmakers and activists become responsible for improving the lives of domestic violence victims. An alternative focus on women-initiated intervention in grassroots communities is central to the present research. This approach is

modeled on previous research (for example by Boonzaier and Van Schalkwyk, 2011 and Gerami and Lehnerer, 2001) that moved beyond collecting victimization narratives and added to the growing literature showing that even in grassroots traditional situations, individuals' choices are not pre-determined but can operate within a feminist discourse of taking action with agency.

Finally, our research also contributes to the domestic violence literature by showing how agency and desired outcomes of interventions are shaped by survivors' context and related possibilities for creating a tolerable living situation for themselves and their children.

Researchers in the West have increasingly recognized that empowerment of marginalized women and communities takes different forms depending on local priorities and values (Brotsky and Cattaneo 2013; Thomas, Goodman, and Putnins 2015).

The goal of our research is to understand how social change, here enacted through women's empowerment programs, is possible within the context of a setting with extremely patriarchal and intractable institutions of marriage and family. Towards this end, we first briefly describe how women respond to abuse before intervention. Then we address the following questions: How do programs with different goals empower grassroots leaders through training? How do grassroots leaders with differing training and experience vary in their strategies to help survivors break out of oppressive conditions, strengthen agency, and work against the perpetuation of structural gender inequalities? What is the nature of the leaders' and survivors' agency in a highly patriarchal context, and how does empowerment help in strengthening agency so that social change is possible?

To answer the above questions, we are guided by Sanyal's (2014) conceptualization of women's agency as a feature that emerges when women push against normative boundaries with the goal of achieving greater livability (42). In a highly patriarchal context, the survivors with the

support of the empowered leaders often resist widely accepted gendered norms with the aim of making their lives in the community better. Although these efforts may not end the abuse, as our analysis reveals, they may lead to greater livability by making life bearable and providing some justice for women. Using this conceptualization of agency, we examine the intentions and actions of local leaders who share an awareness of the constraints imposed by extreme patriarchal norms of conduct, as they intervene against domestic violence using varying strategies. We focus on how, with the support of leaders, survivors gain power in households and communities, and ultimately on the implications of empowerment for addressing domestic violence in extremely patriarchal settings.

Theoretically, our research contributes to understanding how *structural change* (here structure represented through societal norms dictated by culture and/or religion) is possible through demonstration of what we call *empowered agency* (as seen in women's decisions to make life livable by resisting norms). Agency refers to a choice and having agency does not imply empowerment (Kabeer 2010). Women in patriarchal societies often make decisions in an effort to create tolerable conditions for themselves by managing abuse. For example, women we studied often silently tolerated abuse to protect their loved ones. However these demonstrations of agency do not resist the patriarchal structure; rather they are an example of what Kandiyoti (1988) describes as bargaining with patriarchy, which maintains men's privileged status (Kabeer 2010). Empowered agency takes place when women make conscious decisions to resist the structure by taking actions that push the normative boundaries in the institutions of family and marriage. Such actions have the potential to increase gender equality in the long run.

POLITICAL NATURE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERED AGENCY

A conversation on how empowerment programs influence interventions that aim to reduce domestic violence should begin with a focus on the nature of violence and how it maintains and extends gender inequalities in marital relationships (Jakobsen 2014:539). Emphasizing a need to go beyond studies that focus on the direction of violence (who directs the violence against whom) and drawing from interactionist gender theories, Jakobsen presents a renewed theoretical interest in understanding why domestic violence (specifically male-to-female partner violence) is deeply gendered and political. Through her qualitative study of wife beating in Tanzania, she shows that domestic violence demonstrates unequal hierarchical relationships over woman and legitimizes the men's authority in households. It both *enforces gender* (through maintaining unequal relationships) and demonstrates *doing gender* (men's performing the role of a person who is in authority and women submitting to men's authority). The purpose of reinforcing these unequal, often violent relationships is for the husband to always benefit and have access to concrete material resources as manifested through food, gifts, and finances. Irrespective of who does the work or earns money, it is the husband who always profits from the relationship, and violence becomes a necessary means to maintain this structure (Jakobsen 2014:547-553; 554-556).

Jakobsen's findings are supported by similar research on India that suggests that domestic violence is often socially and culturally legitimized to ensure structural inequality of women. For example, Bina Agarwal (1995) traces connections between rigidly defined gender hierarchies, roles within households, and domestic violence. As a young woman enters her husband's home for the first time (typically a patrilocal joint family often located in a different village, town or city from that of her natal family), she is placed at the lowest level within this hierarchy, where failure to meet expected role performance can have serious consequences in the form of threats

or real physical violence against the bride. Further, the married woman's virtues lie within the patriarchal family values and traditions, as a "grip" that upholds qualities such as devotion and subjugation to the husband and family, and silent toleration of insults and abuse (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004:95). Marital abuse is a common form of patriarchal domination against Indian women, and the violence is perpetuated not only by the husband but also by other males and females in the family (Gangoli and Rew 2011).

Further, due to preference for male children, female feticide and infanticide rates are high in the country, along with poor health care for girls and women even in their natal families (Banu 2016; Dehai et al. 2016; Jaitley 2018). This context creates a double bind situation for women, as they are often unsupported by the natal family, are structurally at a disadvantage given their lower social status, and become fully dependent on the husband's family upon marriage. The above examples are some of the many structural barriers to women's increase in social status that create further challenges for Indian women, namely in asymmetrical gender expectation (Ahmed-Ghosh 2004) and that increase women's vulnerability to domestic violence. To understand how women in this situation can initiate social change, we examine local leaders in empowerment programs that aim to challenge existing social structure and strengthen agency.

The sociological debate around agency is tied to discussions on structure, and the two are often seen as inconsistent with each other. The conceptualization of agency has been left ambiguous, thereby leaving researchers to come up with their own interpretations of the term. Although such open interpretation may make it possible to adapt the concept to specific cases, such ambiguity has also created much confusion. This confusion is problematic given the policy potential and implications that agency has for women's empowerment. Drawing from sociology, philosophy, and economics, Sanyal (2014) connects agency with gender, thereby presenting a

much needed clarification reflecting the relationship of agency to women's empowerment. Arguing that agency emerges out of the interplay between the self, performances of the norm, and constraints that norms place on women, she argues: "It is in these interstices between prescriptions and practice that one can find agency...it pushes against normative boundaries and strives to achieve greater "livability"... " (42). Reminding researchers that context is crucial, Sanyal further argues that it is important to develop an appositional or cross cultural approach to analyze women's agency, so that one can grasp the full range of goals and aspirations that constitute the reality of women's lives under various structural prohibitions and possibilities. Only then will social scientists be able to fully understand women's potential and capabilities (45-46). This definition of agency is crucial for developing an analysis of (1) what it means to be empowered for grassroots women living under strong patriarchal norms of conduct, (2) how women develop the power to enforce their entitlements both within the households and in the community, and (3) ultimately the implications of women's empowerment for successful interventions against domestic violence, both for themselves and for others in the community.

Discourses around the term *women's empowerment* have a wide range. From recognizing social power, rights, respect, and autonomy, to strategic life choices that overcome unequal power relations at the level of self, collective, and society, empowerment involves the transformation of patriarchal structures that are often the cause for women's disempowerment in the first place (Batliwala 1994; Bisnath and Elson 1999; Kabeer 2001; Sharma 2008). For example, Subramaniam (2006; 2012) argues that empowerment is achieved when women recognize and acknowledge power difference, leading them to take actions that challenge the fundamental imbalances of power in the domains of family and community. Action to challenge

the existing power balance is tied to decision making, and participation in decision making is crucial for empowerment.

The women's empowerment literature identifies two models broadly categorized as social and economic, but which both aim to increase grassroots women's decision-making capacity and opportunity (Kabeer 2001; Subramaniam 2012). Some empowerment programs mix the approaches, but most make one approach more prominent than the other (Mukherjee, 2015). The *intended beneficial consequences* of the social approach are to raise consciousness about women's vulnerable status within communities and to transform social and cultural norms that support gender inequality. Subramaniam (2012) explains how in small women's groups, *facilitative consciousness raising*, an important component of the social model, provides a space for women to articulate their experiences, listen to others, and consider individual and collective challenges to injustices (73). In this process, especially disadvantaged women who had come to accept being silenced and repressed were empowered through developing an identity – distinct from their identity within the family – as valued group members. Group participation stimulated women to see themselves as worthy individuals, which translated to action that challenged cultural norms that kept them subordinate (Subramaniam 2006, 2012).

Compared to social models, in many parts of the developing world, economic empowerment models are more popular, in part due to more availability of funding sources (Duvendack et al. 2011). Such models focus on lower income households in which women's gaining the skills and the right to work safely and regularly leads to steady income, control of household finance, and freedom to make decisions. Popular examples are microcredit groups. The microcredit literature provides examples of how small collateral-free loans to women not only combat poverty but can also have *unintended beneficial consequences* in women's lives,

including successful collective mobilization against gendered violence (Chaudhuri, Morash and Yingling 2014; Kabeer 2001; Sanyal 2009). Despite their popularity, economic models are also among the most criticized empowerment programs due to findings that they fail to affect gender inequality in meaningful ways (Duvendack et al. 2011; Mukherjee 2015; Poster and Salime 2002).

Although they have different approaches, both women's empowerment models challenge social structure by developing community-based leadership, which is crucial for feminist mobilization (Rose 1992; Subramaniam 2006). This transformation to leaders includes further consciousness-raising, which is particularly relevant for grassroots women with limited public speaking and decision-making experience in the home and community. Thus, training grassroots women as leaders becomes a political practice directed at challenging the ideological hegemony of male supremacy (Ferree and Hess 1985; Subramaniam 2006).

CHOICE OF THE STUDY SETTING

In India, domestic violence encompasses a wide range in types of violence against women that include not only physical and emotional assaults by husbands, but also by the in-laws. In addition, women are often forced to abort female fetuses, partake in killing female infants, and are often themselves victims of "bride burnings" and other forms of homicide, due to dissatisfaction with dowry, behavior, or failure to bear sons. The above forms of violence contribute to a highly skewed sex ratio favoring men in the country, such that a recent government report concluded that 63 million women were "missing" in the nation due to these practices (Jaitley 2018). Prior to 1983, there were no specific provisions in the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to deal with marital abuse and violence, and as a result very few cases were officially

reported. Due to extensive campaigning by women's groups, the first domestic violence law criminalizing physical and mental cruelty within marriage (498A, IPC) was passed in 1983 (Gandhi and Shah 1991; Kannabiran and Menon 2007). The 2005 Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) extended the legal definition of domestic violence to include economic and verbal abuse, recognized sexual abuse and marital rape as illegal, and covered violence between unmarried domestic partners (UNHCR 2010).

Today, despite the passage of PWDVA, the problem of low reporting remains. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS 2005-6), 39% of women in India between ages 15-49 have experienced some sort of domestic violence during their lives (UNFPA 2009). However only 4% file a police report (NFHS 2005-6). This low rate of reporting is related to general attitudes towards domestic violence among family members (including the victim's natal family), police personnel (who are the victims' first contacts in the legal system) who in most cases refuse to register complaints when they consider the violence not serious enough, and among lawyers, judges, and other legal personnel (Lawyers Collective 2013; Mahapatro, Gupta and Gupta 2014). As a result, court conviction is rare because the institutional intent is to keep the family together at all costs (Basu 2011; 2012).

The state of Gujarat, India, makes for an interesting case study as it has a long history of women's activism and movements. In addition, Gujarat's statistics on ever experiencing domestic violence (34% of ever married women) are close to national statistics (39% of ever married women) (NFHS 2005-6). Further, the roots of the violence against women in Gujarat lie in the feudal patriarchal culture (particularly the preference for male children over females) among both Hindus and Muslims (Kumar 1994; Mazumdar 1994).

Following a period of a more secular Gujarat state government, starting in the 1990s there were dramatic shifts back to fundamentalist Hindu ideology, albeit manifested in the political philosophy and actions of elected state government officials, that has supported both ethnic violence against Muslims and related violence against women (Spodek 2011: 13; Varshney 2002). Today, despite public assurances from the state that it will address abuse, there is decreased government financial support for programs to combat violence against women. Despite this rather grim picture, Gujarat is also a symbol of hope for women's rights in India. Currently, a thriving group of women-focused organizations in Gujarat continue to work on women's rights, education, awareness, employment and other conditions to improve on their "disempowerment" (a term used by Carr, Chen and Jhabvala 1996). These diametrically opposite features of Gujarat –a vibrant women-focused civil society and deeply culturally entrenched practices that maintain the gender inequality – create a setting where unique dynamics of abuse and responses to it can be studied.

METHODS

Before the start of data collection, the two authors visited Gujarat, interviewed staff in three organizations that ran women's empowerment programs, and selected two (one an economic and the other a social model) for sampling of participants² and as the focus of a comparative case study. The social model, designated as model 1 in the study, had the objective

² The authors went through a list of organizations that worked on women's empowerment in Gujarat. The list was generated with the help of experts who worked in the area and through online searches of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the region. After initial correspondence with some of the NGOs over email, the authors narrowed down the list to three organizations that featured stopping violence against women as one of its goals. The final two NGOs selected for the study had two different approaches to promote women's agency and reduce violence.

of addressing domestic violence, and thus offered an opportunity to study the *intended beneficial consequences* of empowerment, specifically the training of leaders to intervene in domestic violence, the actions of the leaders, and the effects of the training on both survivors and leaders. This program serves poor Hindu and Muslim women in both rural and urban locations. The other program (economic or model 2) offered the opportunity to study the *unintended beneficial consequences* of empowerment, specifically how a program with the aim of self-reliance through work engaged in domestic violence responses and the resulting outcomes. This second program is a union for poor, self-employed women who work in various trades such as rag pickers, agricultural workers, garment workers, kite/incense/cigarette makers, and vegetable vendors. Leaders are elected for three-year terms to assist other union members in settling disputes related to work or personal problems. Although not all women in model 2 are domestic violence survivors, the leaders often intervene in domestic violence disputes involving members.

To develop rapport with potential study participants, the first author made multiple visits over five years to various rural and urban locations where the two programs operated (e.g., shelters, NGO offices), and to the neighborhoods and villages where staff, leaders, and survivors lived and worked. She collected data based on interviews with leaders, survivors who approached them for help (19 abuse survivors and 10 leaders from model 1, and 10 survivors and 12 leaders from model 2); interviewed four key staff members of these programs; and conducted two focus group meetings involving 25 leaders. Supplementary data involved review of program materials used for workshops and leadership training, and participant observation of empowerment and leadership training programs and group meetings. Together the different types of data included information on the strategies the leaders employed to help survivors, the challenges they faced, and the kinds of success they were able to achieve.

Participants for the 51 interviews were recruited from Ahmedabad (an urban area), and Rapar, Kutchch (a rural area). Although the participants are not representative of the population, they are diverse in religious, caste, and urban/rural demographics.

Given the sensitive nature of the research, the entire data collection was planned to minimize harm to participants. Necessary training in research ethics was given to individuals involved during the recruitment stage of the project. In addition the first author, who conducted all interviews, is an expert on conducting interviews on a sensitive topic and with vulnerable populations. Interviews were always conducted at a private office, rented especially for the purpose, or in locations chosen by the participant. Pseudonyms are used in place of real names of participants for identity protection. In addition, two counselors (one for each organization) were hired to provide support to the participants if needed (Ellsberg and Heise 2002).

The interviews included both open and closed ended questions to elicit demographic information, narratives describing the history of violence, independent efforts by survivors, intervention by leaders, participation in empowerment and leadership programs, and the changes women underwent after participation in empowerment programs and workshops. Questions probed for information on survivor's goals in life, such as remaining in the relationship, being involved in decision making at home, and achieving financial independence. Interviews lasting from one to three hours were taped and a skilled bilingual research assistant prepared the transcripts in English. The data were then uploaded into qualitative software and subjected to multiple rounds of coding. Following grounded theory logic for coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990), open coding was used to identify multiple patterns and themes in the data (e.g., intervention efforts, patterns of violence). The emergent themes were further coded and analyzed to answer specific research questions (e.g., questions about intervention strategies; effect of

empowerment on the lives of leaders and survivors; structural factors affecting intervention efforts). To establish coding reliability, a detailed codebook was maintained throughout the coding process. After the first author completed the initial round of coding, a research assistant independently coded a randomly selected set of data to test for intercoder reliability (Campbell, Quincy, Osseman and Pedersen 2013). Discrepancies that arose between the two separately coded segments were negotiated between the coders until a high level (95 percent) of inter-coder agreement was established for a subset of responses, after which the first author completed the final round of coding.

FINDINGS

First we describe how survivors depicted their responses to violence before local leaders intervened. Most survivors said they engaged in behaviors expected from good wives, who maintained family honor and prevented escalation of violence by never complaining or answering back. This expected behavior was reinforced by relatives who often urged the woman to adjust to the situation and ignore the abuse. For the few women in the study who did speak out against their abuse, this response did not stop the violence. Without a support network and resources, the women found themselves increasingly alienated, so they eventually adjusted to living with abuse. The above description of survivors' attempts at stopping the violence through either tactics of silence or by being vocal about their abuse is not unique to our study. Others have noted how women who live in extreme patriarchy often make choices that help them navigate the violence. Kandiyoti's (1988) seminal argument on patriarchal bargains, defined as a complicated compromise between women's attempt to maximize life's options by acting with unrestrained agency and accommodating the constraints of agency imposed via rules governing gender expectations (p. 286), is a starting point to understand why victims of domestic violence

and their female relatives often do not confront the patriarchal arrangements. As most women in these settings are financially dependent on male family members, they are reluctant to challenge male dominance or the institution of marriage. As Bellows et al. (2015), Hartmann and Boyce (1983), and Kabeer (1999) note, this risk in speaking out against abuse in a highly patriarchal structure forces many women to stay with their abusive partners rather than face social isolation and poverty. One should not mistake the women's compliance or their silence as passive acts. Instead they can be viewed as a survival tactic that Meyers (2011) describes as burdened agency and Lentz (2018) views as burdened choice. Both concepts are relevant for explaining our study's description of survivors' tactics as a way to move beyond the narrow binary of active versus passive choices to a nuanced understanding of how women are able to navigate violent situations within the boundaries of their available agency. However, burdened agency is not a solution to domestic violence. This brings us to our next set of findings about how the two programs recruited and empowered local leaders.

Building Leaders: Organizations and Empowerment Training

In both organizations, local leaders come from a large pool of women who voluntarily took part in empowerment programs. In the social model (model 1), with the help of the organization's staff, current leaders travel to rural and urban locations to recruit local women for initial meetings and empowerment programs that last up to three days. Consistent with core organizational goals, this model offers social awareness-raising workshops (*jagruti sibir*) relevant to women's rights and domestic violence issues. Taking a different approach, the leaders from the economic model (model 2), a trade union, initially invite local women vendors to attend introductory meetings on the organization and its goals. At these meetings the women are encouraged to join the organization as members and attend follow-up meetings on topics such as

bargaining for self-employed workers' rights, reaffirming their collective identity as workers, and the importance of banking.

For the model 1 participants, empowerment programs are based on interactive modules during which women are encouraged to play games (structured group activities), share life stories (focus group meetings), and spend time away from home. A staff member from model 1 describes how these awareness campaigns push women to think beyond their usual boundaries and share stories about their experiences with violence:

We take them out of their familiar places... So for example these women they are from Kutchch. They have never traveled outside their villages. And we brought them all the way to Ahmedabad... Rather than us lecturing, it helps if these women from various villages get together... exchange ideas... stay, eat and interact together. The first two days of the workshop is mostly games and then by the third day the women start sharing their stories. Then we talk about ways to deal with issues... with examples and stories from events in women's lives... experiences of domestic violence... so these examples tell women that if someone else can get out of a similar situation, then why can't she?

Only a few women from the model 1 awareness campaigns are chosen for leadership training. Selection criteria are often intuitive, to some extent arbitrary, and depend on social workers' perception of the participant's leadership capabilities. The organization's staff members emphasize that the women must be "smart" in order to figure out how they can get their work done, an important skill for working in communities with rigid gender roles. The selected women then go through an extensive five-day leadership training that focuses on structured intervention strategies, risk taking, and safety precautions.

Model 2 leaders are elected from registered members of the trade union. Leaders can serve multiple terms over the years, and there are various levels for leaders; at the base are specific trade leaders (e.g., incense workers, domestic workers), at the mid-level are group leaders in charge of a number of trades, and higher yet are the leaders above the group leaders. A model 2 staff member explains that the ability to relate to other women vendors is an important skill for a leader: “The leaders conduct classes on workers’ education for minimum wage and here they give examples from their lives... look this is what happened in my trade, and this is how I was able to bargain....” Model 2 does not have a training program for their trade leaders, so the women learn “on the job” how to deal with police harassment of street vendors, stand up against authority, and collectively bargain for rights in the process. Mid-level leaders are trained with specific programs that provide classes on public speaking, management, bargaining, and image building. Due to the organizational focus on economic empowerment, these leaders do not actively seek out domestic violence victims for intervention efforts; learning to deal with domestic violence also occurs on the job, with tactics for negotiating with police and government bureaucrats borrowed from trade union strategies. As shown by the analysis presented in the next two sections, the organizational focus and related training influence the leaders in the two organizations to use different strategies to address women’s domestic violence.

Strategies of Intervention: Intended Consequences in the Social Model

Leaders in model 1 pursued what we term *conscious facilitation* of an intervention for domestic violence victims. Participants in the study recall how from their very first meeting with the survivors, leaders start “preparing” (*taiyari*) the survivor by explaining how the legal system can aid her. For most survivors, this is usually the first time in their lives that they realize that there is help for addressing domestic violence. In the narrative below, Kumvar (Hindu, survivor)

describes how her life took on a different meaning after she met Sugra (Muslim, leader).

Kumvar, who had only known a lifetime of extreme physical abuse at the hands of her brother and husband, found a friend, a confidante and an ally in the leader from the very first day they met.

I used to collect firewood from the forests. I had four daughters and I had to support all of us...Someone in the area told Sugra about me. At the very first meeting she sat with me for almost two hours listening to my problems. She was struck by the hard work involved in collecting firewood... Sugra wanted to know why I was doing this work, and whether there was anyone else in my life to support me. I told her that after having four daughters, my husband did not want to keep me as I was unable to deliver a son. So I was kicked out of the house with my daughters. He did not care whether we lived or died... I did not realize that I could share [my misery] with others. He used to hit me so much that I started to think that it happens to every woman. I did not know this was wrong. I used to think this was how life is... For the first time in my life someone listened to my story. I cried a lot that day. My tears would not stop. She told me that she would accompany me to all the places I would need to go to seek help. She helped me.

Accompanying the survivor to the NGO office, lawyer's clinic, and police station are important functions of the leader. Often leaders have these contacts saved on fast dial on their cell phones. Bhuri (Hindu, leader) recalls how with her help the police came after midnight to their village to rescue a woman: "Parma came to me at 11 o'clock in the night. She told me that her family was beating her. She wanted to contact the police for help. I had the number saved on my cell phone. The police came that very night..." Noting that the police do not always show up or register a complaint, Bhuri often has to use threat tactics against them: "I call up the police

station and tell them to register the complaint. And they do! I threaten them that if they do not do as I say, then I would call up the NGO...So then they do as I say.”

The above two examples highlight two important points. First, leaders, who were themselves survivors, use examples of abuse in their own life and explain how they overcame abuse. This creates a bond between the survivor and leader, and the survivor starts to rely on this bond as she develops strategies against the abuse. Second, the leaders in model 1 know exactly where and how to obtain help for the survivors; they are equipped with police phone numbers, and shelter and legal contacts. These are important resources that the leaders provide as a result of specific training in domestic violence intervention.

The ways in which leaders intervene in domestic violence cases is context specific. For example, for the urban Muslim women (particularly for younger leaders), mobility outside the home is restricted. Women’s behavior, including dress, mobility, and interactions with people outside their families is dictated by the community *jammāt*’s (local religious body) ideas about purity. Jetun (an older Muslim leader) has to wait for an opportunity (e.g., when the men in her family go off to work) to make contact with a potential case. “I try to talk to the women at a time when there is no one at home...either at mine or hers.” Urban Muslim leaders often provide survivors with access to the NGO or a shelter because they cannot themselves travel to police stations or courts. However, some Muslim leaders in rural areas act outside normative restrictions, in part because these restrictions were relaxed when they left their husbands’ villages. By being a divorced woman living in her natal village, Sugra had already resisted the pressure to conform to gendered expectations. Similarly, Savita (Hindu, rural leader), who is also divorced and living in her natal village, describes how she does not wear *ghunghat*, a head covering for Hindu women. For Sugra and Savita, conscious facilitation is observed at its fullest

with ongoing relationships established over years and repeated direct contacts with local police, courts, counselors, and NGO staff. Sugra directly intervenes on behalf of the survivor at local *panchayat* (governmental council) bodies, and she accompanies her to police stations and courts to the extent that she is developing a reputation as a “marriage breaker” in her village. She is always the first one to show up at a potential survivor’s home, and she begins the intervention process with a clear plan of contacts and strategies. The success of conscious facilitation is possible when the leaders have direct access to a network of supportive agencies and resources, including police, courts, hospitals, and shelters.

Perhaps the most important skill for a leader to be an effective conscious facilitator is to develop innovative strategies for helping women escape from their abusive homes. For example, often leaders cannot directly approach a woman due to the presence of in-laws who control her every movement. The leaders then have to come up with ways to establish contact and create a safe location for communication. For many women, trips to the toilet are the only time and place available for communication. Savita explains: “...everyone has to go outside the village for toilet. So then I send her a message through her well-wishers that she can slip out of the house saying that she needs to go to the toilet and then I will meet her. I take the *lota* (ablution mug) with me to meet her so that no one will be suspicious. This can take place early in the morning or very late at night. If I give her a message today, then she will come tomorrow or the day after. But she will come.” Similarly, internal village politics prevent some leaders from getting involved in a case directly. For example, Bhuri recounts a case where she could not intervene directly due to her own status as a daughter-in-law in the village, as it would imply going against her own kin.

Manu came to me for help. But this village was our *sasural* [in-laws' home]. So her in-laws were my kin as well. I had to think of a way I could help without going against them. So I advised Manu to ask her father to accompany her to the bus stop. I too went to the bus stop behind them... We boarded the bus separately, took her to the NGO's office, and got her help through them. Her case continued for 5-6 years, and it got resolved this year. To date people do not know about my involvement in the case.

Summarizing the importance of innovation in strategies for each case, Bhuri explains that while the organization provides a basic guideline, it is often up to the leader to think of intervention ideas on the spur of the moment: "In the leadership training they taught us that we had to help others, but not in a way that would harm us or cause problems in our own relationships. But they [the organization] did not tell us how to do it. This is what I had to come up with. And for every case, I have to come up with a different strategy."

Strategies of Intervention: Unintended Consequences in the Economic Model

In response to the 2002 Hindu-Muslim riots in Ahmedabad, organizers in model 2 set up seven centers (Kendra offices) in the most affected neighborhoods to promote religious unity and offer programs to help local women develop economic independence. Currently, each center is run by a local leader, and other women from the organization help out with various classes, training, and bookkeeping. An unintended positive result of establishing these centers has been to provide women from the NGO and local women a space to talk, offer support, and develop strategies of intervention against domestic violence. The atmosphere in the NGO's central offices are formal, and personal family affairs often take a back seat. In contrast, leaders initiate intervention against domestic violence at the neighborhood Kendra offices, where local women and their children gather.

To respond to domestic violence, model 2 leaders have been especially pressed to improvise and develop innovative strategies, as the NGO provides neither training to address abuse nor access to the anti-domestic violence support network. Leaders from model 2 seemed to be reluctant to intervene in a way that challenges traditional family structure. Champa (Hindu, leader) explains: “We talk to the husband... The *sanksar* (culture) that the NGO has taught us that we are not here to break homes ...without man, woman is incomplete and without woman, man is incomplete...so it is important to preserve that.” Champa’s narrative summarizes a *bargained-negotiation approach* that leaders follow during intervention efforts, a strategy borrowed from the union tactics they use to deal with representatives of state authority. The goal is to come up with solutions without initiating or aggravating conflicts. This approach is different from the model 1’s aggressive *conscious facilitative intervention*, as the aim in model 2 is to reach a peaceful solution to end the violence without disrupting the family, while protecting the economic interests of the survivor and developing a support network for her in the process. The leaders often use a two-pronged approach to bargained-negotiation: *samjhota* and *samadhan* (working with the couple towards compromise), and if that fails *power shakti* (use of threats). Madhu, a Hindu leader in charge of a Kendra, explains how the two- pronged approach works during negotiations to stop domestic violence: “I approach all cases peacefully ...but if need be I raise my voice, show my teeth. Show...not use. I tell them that if you do not solve this amongst yourselves then you are going to spend the money on others...police, courts,...so it is better to listen to me and spend the money on your kids. I tell them to take a dip in the Ganges...then to start over.”

Madhu’s attitude towards dealing with domestic violence is typical of the leaders in this model. Rather than engaging in an argument against domestic violence as a gender rights issue,

the leaders emphasize the importance of economic costs to the family if the case goes to court. The economic argument is one that the leaders feel most comfortable with, given that they have both the training and the resources to help the woman in the economic sphere. Leaders use this logic successfully to persuade survivors to step outside their homes, and start thinking of ways to strengthen their agency at home. Kamala, a Hindu survivor describes how Sarita (Hindu, leader) encouraged her to start earning so that she could support her children financially and become less dependent on her husband. Kamala's abusive husband, though initially resistant to the idea of her earning, began to tacitly approve as the household finances increased.

Kamala's abuse however did not stop. Sarita would often visit Kamala to check up on her, calm her down after fights with her husband and in-laws, and provide medicines for her injuries. The narrative of "calming down" the survivor when she is upset came up frequently during the interviews. However one should not equate "calming" with pressuring the survivor to adjust to the abuse. Instead, this strategy of leaders is similar to the concepts of the burdened decision (Lentz 2018) or burdened agency (Meyers 2011) that characterized many survivors in our study. Like the survivors, the leaders make a compromise between acting with unrestrained agency and complying with patriarchal expectations in marriage and family, to come up with an intervention strategy that is practical given the patriarchal nature of the family and community. Note that Sarita provides the survivor with medical help privately. Other leaders reached out to shelters outside their union organizing network to find resources for counselling and legal help, but this was not the typical strategy.

For survivors who are reluctant to go outside familiar networks for help, over the years the Kendra offices have become a space where women find support discretely. Because of the economic benefits of learning a trade, families accept women's visits to the Kendra office.

Kokila describes her visit to the office when the beatings at home become too much to bear:

“After the Kendra office was set up, women in the community started to gather there. My in-laws did not say much when I started to come here as all the younger women from the neighborhood were coming here. I come here for solace... *shanti*...even if it is for ten minutes.” Kokila understands the pressure to remain married to an abusive husband in a community that shuns divorced women and her children. Frequently depressed and suicidal, she explains how the leaders have helped her by building a strong network of support: “I got a lot of strength from Manjula ... now if he [husband] tells me to get out I stay put. I have children...I have to stay put because of them... Look at how much of misery my children are in, and I am alive. Tomorrow if I die, their misery will increase even more.”

Kokila’s narrative of how the leaders intervene by calming the survivor, before letting her go back to the life of abuse rather than confronting the abuser, is typical of participants in model 2. The strategy of continuing to live with their abusers may not seem to be empowering and may seem to create high risk for the survivors. However, in grassroots communities divorce comes with enormous social and economic costs (Kabeer 1999; Kandiyoti 1988), as indicated by Kokila’s concerns for her children. The leaders have thus developed what they perceive to be a practical solution to abuse: one that best utilizes the resources that the leaders can provide. They initiate negotiations with the abusers, reasoning (*samjhota*) that if they stop abusing the woman and support her towards economic independence, it will make family life better. A better family life is heavily dependent on financial stability, and here is where the organization’s deep networks in trade union training and banking become important. The leader strikes a bargain with the husband: stop beating the wife, support her towards earning and saving, and the family’s economic situation will improve. Given the reputation of the organization’s success in economic

empowerment of women, this seems to be a feasible solution. This is another way one can understand how livability is achieved.

In most cases, model 2 survivors in our study report that physical abuse becomes less frequent after the leader starts taking an interest in her case. For those whose abuse worsens after the leader intervenes, model 2 leaders demonstrate a diametrically opposite stance to the “practical” approach” against domestic violence: “*power shakti*.”

The *power shakti* intervention is aggressive and involves the threat of violence against abusers. During this intervention the leaders often step outside their own comfort zone of operation. For example, Sarita, who had in the past always stressed a peaceful reconciliation between Kamala and her husband, changed her strategy to an aggressive and assertive stance after a pregnant Kamala was kicked in the stomach by her husband. Sarita insisted that Kamala file a complaint against her husband and accompanied her to the police station to register her case. The officer was reluctant to register the complaint, dismissing it as a private matter. Kamala then describes Sarita’s personality transformation into “*dar`avni*” (scary) when Sarita reminded the policeman of his duties. Later that night, Sarita accompanied the police van to Kamala’s house and oversaw the husband’s arrest.

Manjula, another leader, describes how abusers become intimidated by the sheer number of women in the organization who show up at their doorstep when abuse continues:

There was this man who would drink every day and beat his wife... One time he pulled out a stick and started hitting his wife in front of everyone. I grabbed the stick from his hand and started to hit him back. I got a cut in my hand. He asked me “Who are you to stop this?” I replied, “I am a woman and so I will stop you... I will not call the police, but I will call all

the women from the organization and they will come and hit you very hard...so he got jittery and started fussing over my hand...

Sarita's personal exercise of power and Manjula's threat to mobilize a crowd of angry women are examples of the "*power shakti*" approach against violence, which involves some form of intimidation or threat when previous attempts to stop the violence failed. Despite being quite different from the practical approach, the second strategy does display much of the training employed in model 2. The power of collective mobilization (threat of crowd mobilization to shame an abuser) and the ability to confront authority (reminding the reluctant police officer of his duty) are both crucial skills that model 2 leaders possess. These skills are especially important for confronting police harassment of street vendors and workers.

From Empowered Intervention to Empowered Agency

Here we address our final research question, about the nature of leaders' and survivors' agency in the highly patriarchal context. Empowered intervention efforts are accompanied by the survivor's increased awareness of her rights, access to available resources against domestic violence (mostly model 1), along with a growing support network developed with the help of the leader (model 1 and 2). For model 2, much of the support network is an unintended consequence of the Kendra houses. As a result of intervention in both models, the choices that survivors make after their interaction with the leader, challenge gender inequality in their daily lives instead of reproducing it (Kabeer 2010). This signifies a shift in the survivors from burdened agency to empowered agency. Exercising agency, as demonstrated in the choices survivors make in their daily lives to manage the violence, may not be inherently empowering, as Kabeer notes. Rather this is a demonstration of burdened agency where the women accommodate patriarchal privilege, to make their lives of abuse bearable. Empowered agency, on the other hand encompasses

awareness of their rights, the injustices against them, and a plan of action on how to reduce the inequality.

For example, some survivors in both models felt empowered to speak against their abuse and to demand justice. For many women, this was the first time that they were able to directly confront their abusers publicly, an important step in a culture where women are under pressure to maintain family honor. Parveen, who had always performed the role of a “good wife” recalls an interaction with her mother-in-law (the main abuser) with the support of the organization and with the knowledge of legal resources she can call upon if the abuse continued: “When they (model 1 staff) asked me about my grievances towards my in-laws, I did speak up. *Saas* [mother-in-law] started to complain but I shut her up. I do not want to move out of the house even if they hit me again, not with my kids. I feel scared, but I can manage.”

Women leaders also felt the effect of participation in empowerment programs in their own lives. The new identity as a leader brought about noticeable changes in the lives of women, who were otherwise “ordinary wives.” From taking pride in their choice of clothing (“Previously I would not notice what I wore but now I pin up the sari...It looks neat.”), to being treated respectfully by family members and people in the community (“they now address me as *ben*” signifying respect), these women discovered their public speaking skills before the police and magistrates. For example, in both models the women were taken on field trips to police stations and courts, institutions that they previously saw as intimidating. For the women, it was the first time that they had spoken to a police officer or been inside a police station or court. Further many leaders, who were themselves survivors, became aware of their own rights in the family. For instance Sugra, whose lawyer had worked out a deal with her husband for maintenance money, never received the money due to her husband bribing the local police station. With the

help of the NGO, Sugra was able to re-file for maintenance and was successful in receiving compensation:

All this created an impression on me. Now...I am not afraid to go to the police station, to go before the magistrate in the court. If I have to speak up in front of them, I am not afraid. A magistrate asked me: "How long did you study in school?" I replied I have never attended school. He did not believe me. He thought I was lying...

An empowered intervention is successful when it leads to empowered agency where the survivor, who is now aware of her rights, has the ability to make independent decisions regarding her recourse for obtaining justice, and creates livable conditions for herself and her children. For many such women, who may still choose to live with their abusers, some sense of justice is attained when they are able to speak against the violence publicly, register complaints, control finances, get access to legal aid, and ensure child support. In addition, having a support system outside the natal and marital family becomes very important, because these networks help the survivors to strengthen their agency by pushing the boundaries of their communities' gendered expectations strategically with a goal in mind (controlling the abuse, become financially independent) and create "livable" spaces. For instance our study finds that even though many survivors had worked outside their homes (daily wage laborers) or assisted in the family business (tailoring, laundry services), almost all reported lack of control over their wages or were unpaid workers. With the help of the support network of the leaders, the survivors in both models learned to separate finances and open bank accounts, and became accountable for their expenses. In the long run, control of finances gave these women strength to make independent decisions in the family about matters that include education for children, refusal to marry off underage daughters, and self-advocacy to obtain an inheritance.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In both the model 1 social and the model 2 economic approaches, leaders encounter many serious domestic violence cases, but the intervention strategy varies depending on whether addressing domestic violence is an intended or an unintended aim of empowerment training. In an intended challenge to existing patriarchal structure, model 1 leaders consciously use facilitative intervention to promote women's rights, though they carefully adapt their strategies to minimize risks to themselves and to survivors in the highly patriarchal context where they mount this challenge. Comparatively, the model 2 strategy is largely an adaptation of union tactics, and the emphasis is on financial benefit of reduced violence to the husband and his family rather than challenging the oppression of women within the family. For both approaches, with the help of leadership intervention, women are able to see some change in controlling the violence, and they are able to strengthen their agency.

Second, both models aimed at a structural change, and each model was successful in achieving empowerment in the area of its expertise: social for model 1 and economic for model 2. There were unintended beneficial consequences in both models, but these impacts were less powerful than intended impacts. For example, although women in both models were conscious of the unequal structural reasons behind domestic violence, women in model 1 were more successful in not only stopping the abuse but also finding ways to strengthen survivor's agency. This was demonstrated in the data that documented the process of confronting the abusers, registering police cases, fighting for compensation, and working with the woman's own desire for reconciliation with the husband. In contrast, despite taking steps to stop or reduce the violence, the women in model 2 were not as adept in empowering survivors. Without an anti-

domestic violence support network, their efforts had limited results. The neighborhood centers did provide a much needed support group for the survivors and created some degree of livability. However, the reluctance of most leaders to initiate an aggressive intervention against the violence and their tendency to focus on the practical logic of maintaining a peaceful household to enhance financial stability resulted in limited intervention for some victims who encountered extreme abuse.

Our findings have implications for funding sources that are crucial for the existence of women's empowerment programs. Funding sources should support networking across different types of empowerment programs, which might meet women's immediate needs and at the same time promotes increased attention to changing patriarchal structures. Given that many poor women in the communities we studied had numerous difficulties (domestic violence, unsafe and unstable working conditions, lack of nutritious food and to water, limited education), NGOs with different purposes might profit from developing networks with each other to facilitate their participants' and their local leaders' access to multiple resources to address different problems. To fully empower women, which we believe is the key to facilitating structural change, funding agencies need to stop prioritizing one empowerment model over another. Instead the aim should be to end gender inequality through empowerment in all spheres of life.

The comparative case study that we conducted is not without limitations. As with any case study, although we tried to select settings and programs that were not highly atypical, the results are most clearly generalizable to the particular sites of our research. Also, we did not assess whether the training provided to leaders usually led to the intended intervention, certain leader characteristics shaped the interventions, unintended consequences of interventions, comparison of the intervention strategies relative to the intensity of violence, and the long-term

effects of interventions on survivors, their families, and their communities. These are all important areas for further research that, in some cases, should be longitudinal or would require a larger sample.

Despite these shortcomings, this article contributes to the understanding of the interplay of structure and agency. In addition the research also demonstrates how empowerment works in the lives of ordinary women. This is evident through leaders' development of an independent identity, increased physical mobility, confidence in holding leadership positions, and direct confrontations with authorities. The effects on the leaders are especially highlighted in their innovative, self-directed intervention strategies and the unique status that many of them held in their communities.

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