

Economic Agency and Patriarchal Backlash: Women's Occupation and the Risk of Spousal Violence in India

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Abstract

Women's economic participation is widely regarded as a pathway to empowerment, yet its relationship with intimate partner violence (IPV) remains contested in patriarchal contexts where employment may provoke male backlash rather than confer protection. Using data from India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21), this study examines associations between women's occupational status and spousal violence among 62,381 ever-married women aged 18-49. Occupation was categorised as not employed, daily-wage, and salaried. Binary logistic regression estimated associations with physical, sexual, emotional, and any spousal violence, while interaction models assessed whether asset ownership, internalised misogyny, decision-making autonomy, and the partner pay gap moderated the employment–violence relationship. Overall, 26.8 percent of women reported at least one form of spousal violence in the preceding 12 months. Daily-wage workers were significantly more likely to experience all forms of violence (AOR: 1.17, 95% CI: 1.12-1.23), while salaried employment showed no significant independent association. Asset ownership amplified risk across all employment categories, consistent with patriarchal backlash, whereas decision-making autonomy operated as a meaningful protective factor, particularly among salaried women. Partner controlling behaviour and alcohol consumption were the strongest predictors overall. These findings indicate that women's economic participation does not uniformly reduce spousal violence and may heighten vulnerability when employment is precarious or unaccompanied by genuine domestic agency. Policies promoting women's economic inclusion must be integrated with normative change interventions and intra-household power gains to produce durable reductions in IPV.

Keyword: Spousal violence, Women's employment, NFHS-5, India

I. Background

Violence against women (VAW) persists as one of the most widespread and enduring forms of gender inequality across the world. The United Nations defines it as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Despite wide-ranging policy measures undertaken by governments across the world, VAW remains deeply embedded within historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have produced and sustained systems of domination, discrimination, and subordination across societies.

Among the various forms of violence experienced by women, intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most prevalent globally. IPV refers to behaviour by a current or former husband or intimate partner that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, emotional or psychological abuse, and controlling behaviours (WHO, 2013). It is estimated that 27% of ever-partnered women aged 15-49 have experienced physical or sexual

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violence by an intimate partner at some point in their lives, while 13 per cent report such violence within the preceding year (Sardinha et al., 2022). Notable regional differences exist, with lower rates in the Western Pacific region (around 20%) and higher rates exceeding 33 per cent in African and South-East Asian regions. Low-income countries consistently report higher levels of both lifetime and recent IPV compared to high-income countries. The consequences of IPV extend across physical, mental, and economic dimensions of women's lives, encompassing injury, chronic pain, adverse reproductive health outcomes, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and substantial economic costs through reduced productivity and increased healthcare expenditure. The elimination of violence against women constitutes a key target under Sustainable Development Goal 5.

Intimate partner violence in the Indian context

In India, NFHS-5 (2019-21) indicates that 32 per cent of ever-married women have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence in their lifetime. Among the different forms, physical violence is the most commonly reported at 28 per cent, followed by emotional violence at 14 per cent and sexual violence at 6.1 per cent. National Crime Records Bureau data for 2022 recorded 445,256 cases of crimes against women, translating to nearly 51 complaints every hour, with spousal cruelty accounting for nearly one-third of all recorded crimes against women. Survey-based evidence consistently shows that actual prevalence is substantially higher than what official records capture, and underreporting remains a defining feature of IPV in India.

IPV in India is closely tied to entrenched gender norms and hierarchical family structures, in which male authority is often treated as a given and women may internalise and even justify violence against themselves (Mukherjee & Joshi, 2021). These norms are not sustained by men alone but are frequently reinforced by women themselves, reflecting the depth of their social acceptance (Jejeebhoy et al., 2017). Legal frameworks such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) exist but face persistent enforcement challenges, social stigma, and limited institutional reach, and the gap between legal protection and lived experience remains wide.

Theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence

The relationship between women's economic resources and their experience of IPV has been examined through several competing theoretical frameworks. The resource theory holds that women with fewer resources are more vulnerable to abuse, while men who lack economic or social capital are more likely to resort to violence as an alternative means of asserting authority within the household (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Goode, 1971). Intrahousehold bargaining models, by contrast, predict that improvements in women's economic position enhance their outside options and reduce their tolerance for abusive relationships, thereby lowering the likelihood of violence (Farmer & Tiefenthaler, 1996; Agarwal, 1997). However, more recent scholarship emphasises that when women's gains disrupt established gender hierarchies and generate status inconsistency, men may resort to violence to compensate for perceived loss of status. This is the core claim of the backlash hypothesis, in which IPV functions not merely as a product of deprivation but as a compensatory strategy in the face of normative challenge (Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011). The gender identity framework developed by Akerlof and Kranton (2000) provides theoretical grounding for this mechanism, arguing that when women enter the workforce and gain autonomy in ways that violate normative expectations, partners may respond violently to restore their sense of authority.

Heise's (1998) ecological model conceptualises IPV as the outcome of interacting factors at individual, relational, community, and societal levels. A key strength of this framework lies in its emphasis on the interaction between these levels, explaining why similar changes such as women's entry into paid work can produce very different outcomes depending on context. Women's ownership of assets has been theorised as strengthening their fallback position and reducing economic dependence on abusive partners (Agarwal, 1994; Panda & Agarwal, 2005), yet in strongly patriarchal settings asset ownership may simultaneously challenge entrenched male authority and provoke

backlash (Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011; Peterman et al., 2017). The partner pay gap shapes intra-household dynamics in ways that do not follow a simple linear pattern. While movement towards earnings parity may reduce conflict, situations in which women surpass their partners' earnings are more likely to destabilise normative arrangements and trigger violent responses (Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; Krishnan et al., 2010). Women's participation in household decision-making is similarly contingent on the broader normative environment, as women's assertion of domestic agency may increase rather than reduce the short-term risk of violence in settings where male authority is strongly entrenched (Jewkes, 2002; Schuler et al., 1996).

Women's justification of wife-beating, a widely used indicator of internalised misogyny, is strongly associated with their own risk of experiencing IPV. Women who accept violence as legitimate are more likely to tolerate abusive behaviour, remain in violent relationships, and refrain from seeking help (Heise, 1998; Koenig et al., 2006). Childhood exposure to inter-parental violence shapes both attitudes and behavioural expectations through processes of social learning, with women who witness violence in childhood more likely to internalise norms that normalise abuse and face elevated vulnerability in adulthood (Kalmuss, 1984; Ehrensaft et al., 2003). Together, these attitudinal and experiential factors reveal that the persistence of IPV in India is not reducible to material deprivation alone but is sustained by deeply embedded normative structures that precede and outlast any single economic intervention.

Despite extensive research on women's employment and intimate partner violence (IPV), evidence remains inconsistent, with most studies treating employment as a binary measure and overlooking differences in employment quality and the moderating role of intra-household power dynamics. This study addresses this gap by examining how different occupational categories (not employed, daily-wage, and salaried) are associated with spousal violence among ever-married women in India and whether asset ownership, decision-making autonomy, internalised misogyny, and partner pay gap influence this relationship.

II. Methods

Data source and study design

This study utilised data from NFHS-5, a nationally representative cross-sectional household survey conducted across India during 2019-21, implemented under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with coordination by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai. The survey employed a stratified two-stage sampling design, selecting Primary Sampling Units using the 2011 Census as the sampling frame, and achieved a response rate of approximately 97 percent. Interviews were completed for 724,115 women aged 15-49 across 636,699 households spanning 707 districts. The domestic violence module, administered to a randomly selected subsample in 15 percent of sampled households following internationally recommended ethical and safety protocols, captured detailed information on physical, sexual, and emotional violence perpetrated by current or most recent husbands or partners, alongside data on controlling behaviours, attitudes toward wife-beating, employment, asset ownership, and household decision-making. The analytical sample comprised 62,381 ever-married women aged 18-49. For the partner pay gap moderation analysis, the sample was further restricted to 16,923 women in paid work earning cash income.

Outcome variable

The outcome variable of this study was spousal violence, measured using the domestic violence module of NFHS-5. Three forms of IPV were examined: physical, sexual, and emotional violence. Physical violence included acts such as slapping, pushing, punching, kicking, strangulation, or threats with a weapon. Sexual violence referred to forced sexual intercourse or other unwanted sexual acts, while emotional violence encompassed humiliation, insults, threats, or other forms of psychological abuse by the husband/partner.

Based on women's responses, separate binary indicators were generated for physical, sexual, and emotional violence experienced during the 12 months preceding the survey. In addition, a composite measure of recent IPV was constructed and coded as 1 if a woman reported experiencing at least one form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence in the past 12 months and 0 otherwise. A second composite variable representing lifetime IPV was also created to identify women who had ever experienced any form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence by their husband/partner.

Exposure variable

The primary exposure variable in this study is women's occupational status, derived from information on the respondent's current or most recent occupation collected as part of the NFHS-5 women's questionnaire. For the purpose of this analysis, occupational status was reclassified into three mutually exclusive categories reflecting both employment status and the nature of work. Women who reported not working or were engaged in unpaid domestic labour were categorised as not employed, and this group serves as the reference category in all regression models. Among women engaged in paid work, a further distinction was made based on the regularity and formality of employment. Women working in professional, managerial, clerical, or sales-related occupations, typically associated with stable and regular remuneration, were classified as salaried workers. Women engaged in agricultural work, domestic service, unskilled or semi-skilled manual labour, and other forms of casual work characterised by irregular or daily payment were classified as daily-wage workers. This three-category classification, not employed, daily-wage, and salaried, moves beyond a simple employed/not-employed binary and allows the analysis to examine how the quality and conditions of employment, rather than mere participation in the labour force, shape women's vulnerability to spousal violence. Overall, 64.6 per cent of women belonged to the not working or engaged in unpaid jobs category, 29.9 per cent in the daily wages category, and the remaining 5.5 per cent in the salaried category.

Covariates

The analysis controlled for a range of socio-demographic, relational, and contextual characteristics identified in the literature as important determinants of spousal violence. Individual-level attributes included age, educational attainment, ownership of assets, and exposure to mass media. Personal experience variables captured dimensions of women's socialisation and intra-household agency, including internalised attitudes toward wife-beating, childhood exposure to inter-parental violence, and participation in household decision-making. Partner-level characteristics included the spousal education gap, the partner's controlling behaviour, the partner's alcohol consumption, and the relative earnings gap between spouses. Household-level attributes comprised place of residence (urban or rural), caste group (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Class, and Others), and household wealth quintile, ranging from poorest to richest. A spatial variable grouping states and union territories into six geographic regions, North, West, South, East, Central, and North-East, was also included to account for regional heterogeneity in socio-cultural norms and institutional contexts.

III. Results

Prevalence of the different forms of spousal/intimate partner violence

Table 1 shows the prevalence of physical, sexual, emotional, and any spousal violence across women's socio-demographic, household, and partner-related characteristics. Overall, 23 per cent of women reported physical violence, 5.2 per cent sexual violence, 12.2 per cent emotional violence, and 26.8 per cent any form of spousal violence in the past 12 months. Daily-wage workers reported the highest prevalence of any IPV (33.9%), compared to non-employed (23.8%) and salaried women (22.7%), with this pattern consistent across all violence types; the comparable rates between salaried and non-employed women suggest that employment conditions, rather than employment per se, shape vulnerability to spousal violence. Clear socio-demographic gradients were observed across all

background characteristics: childhood exposure to inter-parental violence produced the sharpest differential, with women who witnessed paternal violence reporting nearly double the prevalence (49.2%) of those without such exposure (21.6%). Partner controlling behaviour (42.8% vs. 13.1%), alcohol consumption (45.3% vs. 21.0%), and acceptance of wife-beating justifications (35.9% vs. 20.1%) were each strongly associated with IPV. An inverse wealth gradient was evident, with prevalence declining from 35.0% in the poorest to 15.9% in the richest households, while Scheduled Caste women reported the highest caste-based prevalence (32.0%). Substantial regional variation was observed, with the South (32.0%) and East (29.8%) reporting the highest prevalence and the North the lowest (12.9%), and rural women reported higher rates (28.7%) than their urban counterparts (22.5%).

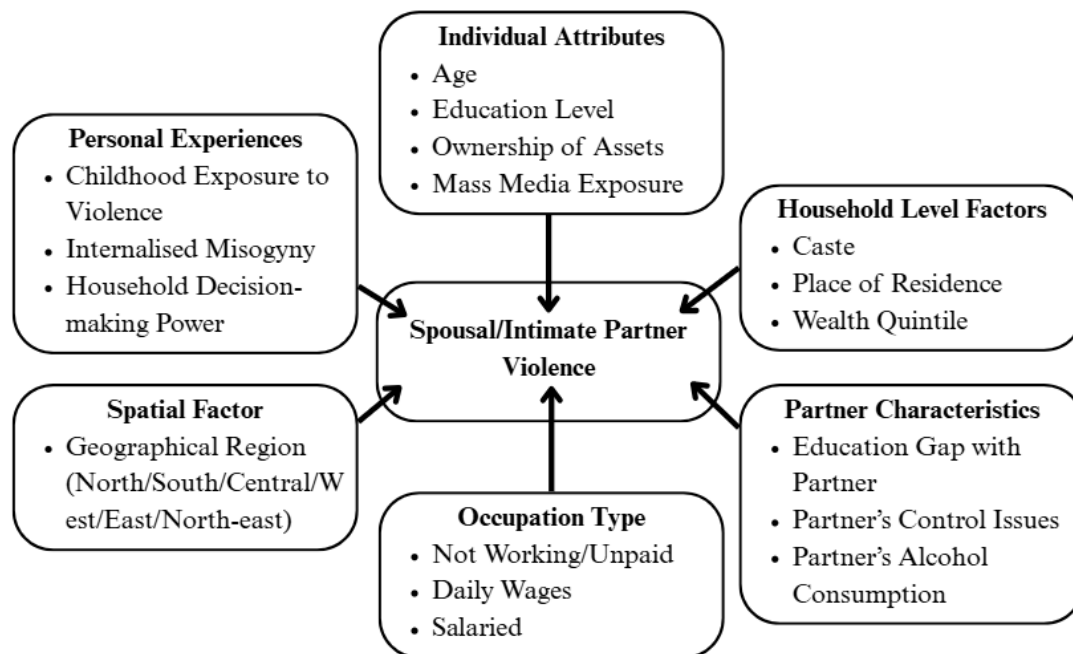


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework

Association between occupation status and IPV

Table 2 presents the unadjusted and adjusted odds ratios for the association between women's occupational status and spousal violence, along with other socio-demographic, household, and partner-related factors. In unadjusted models, daily-wage workers had significantly higher odds of experiencing physical (UOR: 1.58, 95% CI: 1.52-1.64), sexual (UOR: 1.64, 95% CI: 1.53-1.78), emotional (UOR: 1.74, 95% CI: 1.65-1.83), and any spousal violence (UOR: 1.60, 95% CI: 1.54-1.66) compared to non-employed women, while salaried women showed marginally lower unadjusted odds of physical and any spousal violence. After full adjustment, daily-wage workers remained 17% more likely to have experienced spousal violence in the last 12 months (AOR: 1.17, 95% CI: 1.12-1.23) and 28% more likely to report lifetime spousal violence (AOR: 1.28, 95% CI: 1.23-1.34). In contrast, the apparent protective association observed among salaried women became non-significant for recent violence (AOR: 1.04, 95% CI: 0.94-1.15), although salaried women were 10% more likely to report having experienced spousal violence during their lifetime (AOR: 1.10, 95% CI: 1.00-1.21), consistent with the backlash hypothesis whereby disruption of gender hierarchies precedes any stabilising effect of stable employment.

Socio-demographic determinants of spousal/intimate partner violence experienced by women

Education demonstrated a protective effect, with highly educated women are less likely to experience spousal violence in the past 12 months (AOR: 0.58, 95% CI: 0.53-0.65). Asset ownership (AOR: 1.17, 95% CI: 1.12-1.22) and mass media exposure (AOR: 1.09, 95% CI: 1.05-1.14) were associated

Table 1: Prevalence of IPV among women belonging to different demographic and socio-economic categories.

Background characteristics	Prevalence of violence (%)				Number of women
	Physical	Sexual	Emotional	Any IPV	
Women's Age					
18-24	20.2	4.9	10.8	24.6	9,398
25-35	23.7	5.7	12.6	27.3	25,052
36-49	23.3	4.9	12.2	27.0	27,931
Place of residence					
Urban	18.9	4.1	10.3	22.5	19,173
Rural	24.8	5.7	13.0	28.7	43,208
Education level					
No education	30.7	6.8	15.5	34.5	17,812
Primary	25.4	6.4	13.1	29.1	8,699
Secondary	20.4	4.6	11.2	24.4	28,877
Higher	11.1	2.3	6.6	14.2	6,993
Job type					
Not working/Unpaid	20.4	4.3	10.0	23.8	40,265
Daily-wages	29.2	7.3	17.1	33.9	18,666
Salaried	19.0	4.2	10.9	22.7	3,450
Ownership of Assets					
Yes	26.7	5.8	14.3	31.0	28,772
No	19.8	4.7	10.3	23.2	33,609
Mass Media Exposure					
No	21.5	4.9	11.4	25.5	21,883
Exposed	23.8	5.4	12.6	27.5	40,498
Internalised Misogyny					
Yes	31.0	7.4	16.9	35.9	26,438
No	17.1	3.6	8.7	20.1	35,943
Violence in Childhood					
Experienced	43.9	10.2	23.1	49.2	11,814
Did not experience	18.1	4.0	9.6	21.6	50,567
Household Decision-making Autonomy					
No say	27.4	7.5	16.9	32.5	24,963
Has say	20.0	3.7	9.0	23.0	37,418
Education Gap with Partner					
No gap	24.6	5.6	13.5	28.5	18,209
Husband more educated	22.5	4.9	11.1	26.0	27,552
Wife more educated	22.0	5.3	12.5	26.1	16,620
Husband's Alcohol Consumption					
No	17.5	3.3	8.8	21.0	47,500
Yes	40.6	11.4	22.8	45.3	14,881
Partner Control Issues					
Yes	36.4	1.2	22.4	42.8	28,747
No	11.5	9.9	3.4	13.1	33,634
Place of residence					
Urban	18.9	4.1	10.3	22.5	19,173
Rural	24.8	5.7	13.0	28.7	43,208
Caste					
Scheduled caste	27.8	6.2	14.9	32.0	13,147
Scheduled tribe	24.8	5.5	13.1	28.8	5,520
Other Backward Class	24.1	5.1	12.0	27.7	26,168
Others	16.8	4.2	9.8	20.4	17,546
Wealth quintile					
Poorest	30.5	8.6	16.1	35.0	12,113
Poorer	28.1	6.3	13.8	32.0	13,231
Middle	23.7	4.7	12.8	27.8	13,259
Richer	18.5	3.6	10.0	21.9	12,886
Richest	12.7	2.7	7.5	15.9	10,892

Table 1 contnd.....

Background characteristics	Prevalence of violence (%)				Number of women
	Physical	Sexual	Emotional	Any IPV	
Region					
North	9.6	3.0	7.7	12.9	2,617
West	16.3	4.1	9.4	19.8	15,329
South	27.8	4.9	15.4	32.0	15,486
East	25.8	6.8	13.2	29.8	18,611
Central	25.2	5.1	11.1	28.6	6,917
North-east	21.2	5.4	10.1	25.1	3,421
Total	23.0	5.2	12.2	26.8	62,381

with higher odds of recent violence. Childhood exposure to inter-parental violence emerged as one of the strongest predictors, with affected women being 2.75 times more likely to experience recent spousal violence (AOR: 2.75, 95% CI: 2.63-2.89) and 3.22 times more likely to report lifetime violence (AOR: 3.22, 95% CI: 3.08-3.38). Internalised misogyny (AOR: 1.67, 95% CI: 1.60-1.75), lack of decision-making autonomy (AOR: 1.32, 95% CI: 1.27-1.37), and higher education relative to one's husband (AOR: 1.09, 95% CI: 1.02-1.16) were also associated with increased odds of violence. Partner controlling behaviour was the strongest predictor (recent AOR: 3.74, 95% CI: 3.59-3.91; lifetime AOR: 3.45, 95% CI: 3.32-3.59), followed by partner alcohol consumption (recent AOR: 2.19, 95% CI: 2.10-2.29; lifetime AOR: 2.35, 95% CI: 2.26-2.45). An inverse wealth gradient persisted, and women in the Eastern region were 50% more likely to experience spousal violence (AOR: 1.50, 95% CI: 1.37-1.65).

Moderating effect of intra-household power relations

Interaction analyses showed that the association between women's employment and spousal violence varied significantly by asset ownership, internalised misogyny, decision-making autonomy, and relative earnings. Asset ownership was associated with higher odds of violence across all employment categories (Table 3). Compared with non-working women without assets, non-working women with assets were 2.38 times more likely to experience recent spousal violence (AOR: 2.38, 95% CI: 2.27-2.50). The highest odds were observed among daily-wage workers with assets (AOR: 3.44, 95% CI: 3.26-3.62), followed by salaried women with assets (AOR: 2.36, 95% CI: 2.08-2.68). Salaried women without assets were less likely to experience violence (AOR: 0.81, 95% CI: 0.72-0.92).

Internalised misogyny was strongly associated with violence across occupational groups. Salaried women who justified wife-beating were 2.90 times more likely to experience violence (AOR: 2.90, 95% CI: 2.45-3.45), while non-working and daily-wage women who justified wife-beating had even higher odds (AOR: 3.39, 95% CI: 3.00-3.83). Even among women rejecting wife-beating, non-working and daily-wage workers remained more likely to experience violence than salaried women (AOR: 1.42, 95% CI: 1.25-1.60).

Decision-making autonomy exhibited a protective effect. Non-working women with decision-making power were less likely to experience violence (AOR: 0.64, 95% CI: 0.61-0.67), with the strongest protection observed among salaried women with decision-making power (AOR: 0.51, 95% CI: 0.45-0.57). In contrast, daily-wage workers without decision-making power had significantly higher odds of violence (AOR: 1.61, 95% CI: 1.52-1.71).

Among the 16,923 employed women receiving cash earnings, relative earnings showed limited variation among daily-wage workers. However, salaried women experienced consistently lower odds of violence regardless of whether they earned less than (AOR: 0.43, 95% CI: 0.3-0.52), about the same as (AOR: 0.32, 95% CI: 0.25-0.42), or more than their husbands (AOR: 0.46, 95% CI: 0.37-0.59).

Table 2: Adjusted and unadjusted odds ratios of spousal/intimate partner violence experienced by women.

Spousal Violence	Last 12 months'		Ever Experienced	
	UOR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)	UOR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)
Physical Violence				
Job Category				
No®				
Daily Wages	1.58 [1.52, 1.64]***			
Salaried	0.87 [0.79, 0.96]**			
Sexual Violence				
Job Category				
No®				
Daily Wages	1.64 [1.53, 1.78]***			
Salaried	1.06 [0.89, 1.26]			
Emotional Violence				
Job Category				
No®				
Daily Wages	1.74 [1.65, 1.83]***			
Salaried	1.06 [0.94, 1.20]			
Any Violence				
Job Category				
No®				
Daily Wages	1.60 [1.54, 1.66]***	1.17 [1.12, 1.23]***	1.73 [1.66, 1.79]***	1.28 [1.23, 1.34]***
Salaried	0.91 [0.83, 0.99]*	1.04 [0.94, 1.15]	0.95 [0.87, 1.03]	1.10 [1.00, 1.21]*
Age				
18-24®				
25-35		1.18 [1.10, 1.25]***		1.29 [1.22, 1.38]***
36-49		1.08 [1.01, 1.16]*		1.31 [1.22, 1.40]***
Education Level				
No Education®				
Primary		0.90 [0.84, 0.96]**		0.92 [0.86, 0.98]**
Secondary		0.79 [0.74, 0.84]***		0.78 [0.74, 0.83]***
Higher		0.58 [0.53, 0.65]***		0.56 [0.51, 0.62]***
Ownership of Assets				
No®				
Yes		1.17 [1.12, 1.22]***		1.05 [1.01, 1.09]*
Mass Media Exposure				
None®				
Exposed		1.09 [1.05, 1.14]***		1.07 [1.02, 1.11]**
Violence in Childhood				
Did not experience®				
Experienced		2.75 [2.63, 2.89]***		3.22 [3.08, 3.38]***
Internalised Misogyny				
No®				
Yes		1.67 [1.60, 1.75]***		1.72 [1.65, 1.79]***
Controlling Partner				
No®				
Yes		3.74 [3.59, 3.91]***		3.45 [3.32, 3.59]***
Husband's Alcohol Consumption				
No®				
Yes		2.19 [2.10, 2.29]***		2.35 [2.26, 2.45]***
Decision-making Power				
Has Say®				
No Say		1.32 [1.27, 1.37]***		1.38 [1.33, 1.44]***
Education Gap				
No Gap®				
Husband more educated		0.96 [0.91, 1.01]		0.98 [0.94, 1.03]
Wife more educated		1.09 [1.02, 1.16]**		1.11 [1.04, 1.17]**

Table 2 contnd.....

Spousal Violence	Last 12 months'		Ever Experienced	
	UOR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)	UOR (95% CI)	AOR (95% CI)
Wealth Quintile				
Poorest®				
Poorer		0.88 [0.83, 0.94]***		0.91 [0.86, 0.96]**
Middle		0.77 [0.72, 0.82]***		0.80 [0.75, 0.85]***
Richer		0.70 [0.65, 0.76]***		0.73 [0.68, 0.79]***
Richest		0.61 [0.56, 0.67]***		0.65 [0.59, 0.71]***
Caste				
Scheduled Caste®				
Scheduled Tribe		0.71 [0.66, 0.76]***		0.68 [0.63, 0.72]***
Other Backward Caste		0.94 [0.89, 0.99]*		0.96 [0.91, 1.01]
Others		0.89 [0.84, 0.95]**		0.91 [0.85, 0.97]**
Place of Residence				
Urban®				
Rural		0.90 [0.85, 0.95]***		0.89 [0.84, 0.93]***
Region				
North®				
West		1.34 [1.22, 1.47]**		1.41 [1.29, 1.54]***
South		1.41 [1.29, 1.55]***		1.37 [1.26, 1.50]***
East		1.50 [1.37, 1.65]***		1.61 [1.48, 1.75]***
Central		1.49 [1.36, 1.62]***		1.53 [1.41, 1.66]***
North-east		1.30 [1.18, 1.44]***		1.44 [1.31, 1.57]***

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$; CI = Confidence Interval; UOR = Unadjusted Odds Ratios; AOR = Adjusted Odds Ratios.

IV. Discussion

The findings of this study advance the understanding of the relationship between women's occupational status and spousal violence in India by demonstrating that this relationship is neither linear nor uniformly protective, but is instead deeply contingent on the nature and quality of employment, the normative context in which it is embedded, and the degree to which economic participation is accompanied by genuine gains in household agency (Vyas & Watts, 2009; Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011; Kabeer, 1999).

The divergence between daily-wage and salaried employment is among the most theoretically significant findings of the study. Women in casual wage labour consistently face elevated odds of violence across all forms and time frames, even after adjustment, while the association for salaried employment attenuates to non-significance for recent violence and emerges as modestly positive in the lifetime model. This pattern aligns with the distinction between empowering and distress-driven employment: daily-wage work in the Indian context is characterised by informality, economic precarity, and the absence of institutional recognition, and therefore reflects household-level vulnerability rather than autonomous economic participation (Kabeer, 2012; Chin, 2012). The visibility of daily-wage workers as earners, without the social legitimacy and structural protection that formal employment confers, may produce conditions for patriarchal backlash rather than protection (Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; Goode, 1971). For salaried women, the attenuation of the protective association after adjustment indicates that the crude difference is largely compositional, driven by the more advantageous socio-demographic profiles of salaried women rather than any independent protective effect of employment itself. The positive association for salaried women in the lifetime model is theoretically coherent: it captures the earlier period of relational renegotiation that employment can trigger, consistent with the argument that the backlash dynamic is temporally prior to any stabilising effect that stable employment may eventually produce (Macmillan & Gartner, 1999; Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011).

The finding that asset ownership is positively rather than negatively associated with spousal violence, both in regression and interaction models, sits in tension with bargaining theory

Table 3: Interaction Effects of Women's Employment Status and Empowerment Indicators on the Likelihood of Spousal Violence among Ever-Married Women Aged 18-49 Years.

Ever married women aged 18-49 = 62,381		
Characteristics	AOR	95% CI
Job Status x Ownership of Assets (Interaction term)		
<i>Not Working/Unpaid x No Assets</i> [®]		
Not Working/Unpaid x Owns Assets	2.38***	[2.27, 2.50]
Salaried x No Assets	0.81**	[0.72, 0.92]
Salaried x Owns Assets	2.36***	[2.08, 2.68]
Daily Wages x No Assets	1.55***	[1.46, 1.63]
Daily Wages x Owns Assets	3.44***	[3.26, 3.62]
Job Status x Internalised Misogyny (Interaction term)		
<i>Salaried x Does not Justify Wife-beating</i> [®]		
Salaried x Justifies Wife-beating	2.90***	[2.45, 3.45]
Not Working/Unpaid & Daily Wages x Does not Justify Wife-beating	1.42***	[1.25, 1.60]
Not Working/Unpaid & Daily Wages x Justifies Wife-beating	3.39***	[3.00, 3.83]
Job Status x Household Decision-making Autonomy (Interaction term)		
<i>Not Working/Unpaid x No Say</i> [®]		
Not Working/Unpaid x Has Say	0.64***	[0.61, 0.67]
Salaried x No Say	1.05	[0.92, 1.19]
Salaried x Has Say	0.51***	[0.45, 0.57]
Daily Wages x No Say	1.61***	[1.52, 1.71]
Daily Wages x Has Say	0.99	[0.94, 1.05]
Job Status x Partners' Pay Gap (Interaction term)		
<i>Daily Wages x Husband does not earn</i> [®]		
Daily Wages x Less than husband	0.84*	[0.72, 0.99]
Daily Wage x About the same	0.71***	[0.60, 0.85]
Daily Wages x More than husband	0.86	[0.73, 1.02]
Salaried x Does not earn	0.80	[0.54, 1.17]
Salaried x Less than husband	0.43***	[0.35, 0.52]
Salaried x About the same	0.32***	[0.25, 0.42]
Salaried x More than husband	0.46***	[0.37, 0.59]

Note: *** sig. at the 1% level, ** at the 5% level & * at the 10% level; CI = confidence interval; AOR = adjusted odds ratio.

frameworks that conceptualise property as enhancing women's fallback position and reducing vulnerability (Agarwal, 1997; Panda & Agarwal, 2005). In the Indian context, where property ownership is historically concentrated among male household members, women's asset holding carries symbolic significance that exceeds its material value. Asset ownership may represent not merely economic empowerment but a visible disruption of patriarchal norms, provoking retaliatory violence aimed at restoring traditional hierarchies (Peterman et al., 2017; Eswaran & Malhotra, 2011). The sharpest elevation in risk is observed among daily-wage workers who own assets, a combination that may be particularly destabilising within the household's internal economy of recognition: it produces a visible economic claim without the institutional and social scaffolding that might otherwise moderate a partner's response. A complementary explanation is that empowered women are more likely to recognise and report violence, contributing to higher observed prevalence among asset owners (Kabeer, 1999; Jejeebhoy, 1998).

The positive association between mass media exposure and reported IPV similarly admits of multiple interpretations. Women with greater media access may be more likely to recognise and disclose violence. At the same time, media exposure can raise aspirations and introduce expectations of autonomy and equality that are not matched by corresponding changes in male attitudes, generating what has been described as aspirational mismatch, a divergence between women's expectations and the constraints of their domestic reality that may itself intensify household conflict (Jensen & Oster, 2009; Appadurai, 2004; Krishnan et al., 2010).

The normative and experiential variables produce some of the strongest and most consistent associations in the analysis. Women who justify wife-beating are substantially more likely to experience violence across both temporal outcomes, reflecting what Bourdieu (2001) describes as symbolic violence, the process through which women come to perceive their own subordination as natural and legitimate, reducing recognition of and resistance to abuse. The intergenerational transmission of violence is equally striking: childhood exposure to inter-parental violence is among the strongest predictors of adult IPV, with an effect that amplifies in the lifetime model, consistent with theories of social learning and normalisation that embed violence within expectations of marriage over the long term (Kalmuss, 1984; Ehrensaft et al., 2003). The absence of household decision-making autonomy also consistently raises violence risk, reinforcing Kabeer's (1999) foundational argument that empowerment requires not just resources but genuine agency, the capacity to exercise meaningful influence over one's own circumstances.

Partner characteristics are the dominant predictors in both adjusted models, dwarfing the effects of employment status. Controlling behaviour shows the largest effect sizes observed in the analysis, underscoring that IPV is fundamentally a relational phenomenon rooted in power and domination, and that structural interventions which do not attend to these relational dynamics are unlikely to produce durable reductions in violence (Heise, 2011; WHO, 2013). Partner alcohol consumption is similarly strongly associated across both outcomes, functioning as a facilitating condition that lowers inhibitions and amplifies existing tendencies toward coercive control (Leonard & Quigley, 2017; Laslett et al., 2021). The finding that women who are more educated than their husbands face higher violence risk supports relative resource theory, which holds that deviations from traditional gender hierarchies generate status inconsistency and perceived threats to male authority that can provoke violent responses (Goode, 1971; Bhattacharyya et al., 2011).

The moderation analysis reveals that the employment–violence relationship is deeply conditioned by the interplay of economic resources, normative attitudes, and household power dynamics, with no single dimension operating as an unconditional protective factor. Asset ownership amplifies risk across all employment categories, particularly among daily-wage workers, where its co-occurrence with low-status work produces a compound destabilisation of the household's gendered hierarchy. Internalised misogyny moderates risk in ways that persist even within salaried employment, demonstrating that labour market integration does not displace the ideological structures through which violence is legitimated, as employment alters material conditions without necessarily transforming the normative frameworks that shape how violence is perceived and tolerated (Bates et al., 2004; Bourdieu, 2001).

Household decision-making autonomy offers the most consistently protective moderation effect, but its protective potential is contingent on the quality of employment: among daily-wage workers, decision-making power does not produce a significant reduction in violence, as material precarity and economic stress override whatever relational gains autonomy might otherwise confer (Kabeer, 2012; Fawole, 2008). Among salaried women, the combination of formal employment and domestic agency is associated with a substantially lower risk of violence, suggesting that it is the conjunction of structural and relational power, rather than either alone, that produces meaningful protection. The partner pay gap analysis further reinforces the primacy of employment quality over relative earnings: salaried women show reduced odds of violence regardless of their earnings position relative to their husbands, while daily-wage workers show only modest and inconsistent protective effects, indicating that what formal employment provides is not primarily income advantage but institutional recognition, social legitimacy, and temporal stability, conditions that the pay gap alone, without this structural scaffolding, cannot replicate (Morrison & Orlando, 2004; Rocca et al., 2009).

Socioeconomic and structural factors also shape vulnerability in important ways. The clear inverse wealth gradient across both models is consistent with theories of economic stress as a precipitant of household conflict, while also reflecting that material security expands women's exit options and reshapes the normative context within which violence occurs (Gelles, 1974; Vyas & Watts, 2009). Scheduled Tribe women show notably lower odds of IPV compared to Scheduled Caste

women, reflecting greater female autonomy and more egalitarian kinship structures in several tribal communities, though these patterns must be interpreted cautiously given potential reporting differences (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). The counter-intuitive finding that urban women report higher violence than rural women is consistent with previous NFHS-based evidence and may reflect both higher reporting propensity and the structural stresses of urban poverty, weakened community ties, and the renegotiation of gender roles in contexts where traditional expectations and modern aspirations collide (Cardoso et al., 2016). Substantial regional variation further underscores that IPV is not a uniform national phenomenon and that interventions must be sensitive to the specific structural and normative contexts of different geographic settings.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the relationship between women's economic participation and spousal violence is shaped at every point by the interaction of employment quality, normative context, and intra-household power dynamics. Economic empowerment without normative transformation leaves ideological vulnerabilities intact. Employment without domestic agency can produce what amounts to disempowered participation, visible economic contribution without the relational standing that makes it protective. And asset ownership or earnings gains that disrupt patriarchal hierarchies without the institutional scaffolding to sustain that disruption may provoke backlash rather than afford protection. The broader implication is that structural interventions targeting women's economic inclusion must be accompanied by deliberate normative change and genuine gains in household agency if they are to produce durable and meaningful reductions in intimate partner violence in India (Dworkin et al., 2013; Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999).

Limitations of the study

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgement. First, the cross-sectional design of NFHS-5 precludes any causal interpretation of the findings. Employment status and spousal violence are measured at the same point in time, making it impossible to establish the direction of the relationship between them. Women who experience violence may withdraw from employment, while employed women may differ systematically from those who are not in ways the analysis cannot fully account for. Longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs would be necessary to disentangle the temporal sequencing and underlying mechanisms of this relationship (Vyas and Watts, 2009; Krishnan et al., 2010).

Second, reporting bias is a well-recognised concern in survey-based research on intimate partner violence. Women who have internalised or normalised violence may be less likely to disclose their experiences, while those with higher education or media exposure may be more likely to recognise and report it. This differential reporting may partially account for some of the counterintuitive associations observed in this study, and the prevalence figures reported should accordingly be understood as likely underestimates of the true extent of violence (Kishor & Johnson, 2004).

Third, the occupational classification available in NFHS-5 remains highly aggregated and does not correspond to any standardised framework such as India's National Industrial Classification. This limits the precision with which the study can distinguish between occupations by sector, skill level, or working conditions. Compounding this constraint, the major employment-focused surveys in India that do use detailed occupational classifications, most notably the Periodic Labour Force Survey, do not collect data on intimate partner violence, creating a structural disjuncture in the available data landscape that currently prevents any analysis that is simultaneously precise in its occupational measurement and comprehensive in its violence coverage.

Policy implications

The findings carry several important implications for policy. The elevated vulnerability documented among daily-wage workers is not a marginal finding. Given that between 80 and 94 per cent of employed women in India work in informal or unprotected arrangements (ILO; India

Employment Report, 2024), this describes the dominant condition of women's work in this country. Policy must therefore attend not only to whether women work, but to the conditions under which they do. Actively promoting stable, adequately compensated, and regulated employment through enforceable labour protections and wage equity mechanisms is essential. MGNREGA offers a meaningful model in this respect, with its guaranteed work, statutory wage floors, and legal entitlement providing precisely the structural anchoring that casual employment lacks, and expanding its reach and implementation consistency would extend these conditions to a larger share of rural women.

The backlash pattern observed among women who own assets but lack decision-making power points to a critical gap between formal resource access and effective control. Schemes such as PMAY and SHG-linked asset and credit programmes represent real advances, but their protective potential depends on what accompanies them. Stronger property rights enforcement, legal awareness, and accessible grievance redressal mechanisms are necessary to ensure that formal entitlement translates into substantive household standing. The measure of success cannot be the number of asset titles issued in women's names. It must also include whether those women exercise meaningful control over what they nominally own.

The finding that childhood exposure to domestic violence and internalised acceptance of wife-beating are among the strongest predictors of adult IPV underscores that economic interventions alone cannot reach the level at which violence is reproduced across generations. Disrupting this intergenerational transmission requires gender-sensitive school curricula, sustained community mobilisation, and programmes that engage men and boys in examining the acceptability of violence. These are not peripheral to economic empowerment strategies. They address the normative current that, when left unengaged, runs against them.

Finally, India's legislative architecture for addressing domestic violence remains considerably stronger as written than as enforced. Protection Officers are under-resourced, linkages between police, legal aid, and shelter services are inconsistent, and for women without independent income or social support, the formal system can be effectively inaccessible. Strengthening last-mile delivery through investment in Protection Officer capacity, functional One Stop Centres, and the integration of IPV response within primary healthcare is essential. The regional differentials identified in this study further indicate that these efforts must be context-specific, with decentralised planning supported by state-level data and monitoring likely to be more effective than uniform national programmes applied without attention to local structural and normative conditions.

Conclusion

This study shows that women's economic participation in India does not uniformly reduce spousal violence and can in fact heighten vulnerability when employment is casual or unaccompanied by real decision-making power at home. Daily-wage workers faced consistently elevated odds of violence even after full adjustment, while salaried employment offered no significant independent protection for recent violence and showed a modest backlash effect over the lifetime. Asset ownership increased risk across all employment categories, internalised acceptance of wife-beating operated as a strong independent pathway to violence, and the protective value of household decision-making autonomy depended heavily on the quality of a woman's employment. Partner controlling behaviour and alcohol consumption remained the strongest predictors throughout. These findings make clear that policies promoting women's economic inclusion cannot stand alone, they must be paired with sustained efforts to shift gender norms and ensure that economic participation translates into genuine authority within the household, if they are to bring about lasting reductions in intimate partner violence in India.

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