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### How Survivors of Domestic Violence Seek Legal and Social Support Against Their Abusers in Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra State in India: An Exploratory Study

Jonathan Israel  
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**How Survivors of Domestic Violence Seek Legal and Social Support Against Their  
Abusers in Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra State in India:  
An Exploratory Study**

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India: Public Health, Gender, and Community Action  
Fall 2022

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**Abstract**

This exploratory study sought to gather detailed information about women's experiences surviving and rehabilitating from domestic violence. This information was used to identify factors that encourage survivors to stay in their relationships and factors that enable them to seek legal and social support against their abusive partners. Qualitative data was gathered through a series of in-depth interviews and panel discussions with survivors of domestic violence in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra (India). This data was analyzed with guidance from Indian feminist theory, local professionals, and contributing research mentors. Further examination of national survey data, past research on domestic violence in Indian contexts, and broader social critique from native academics and activists were used to determine the social, cultural, and religious forces that have contributed to normalizing and perpetuating domestic violence in India. This study was conducted in conjunction with Snehalaya, a non-government organization based in Ahmednagar primarily assisting underprivileged women, children and LGBT communities suffering from poverty and the commercial sex industry.

**Introduction**

Violence against women is a severe public health problem and is recognized as such globally by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2016). In India, many women face gender-based violence before birth, with selective abortions being a significant issue due to the cultural preference for sons (Choudhury, 2019). Further preferential treatment towards sons creates unequal dynamics between brothers and sisters, leading to neglect of girls' nutritional needs and far fewer educational opportunities. These factors lead to a disparity in childhood mortality rates between male and female children and a larger number of men than women nationally (UN, 2022). This unequal norm, instilled at a very young age, is present

throughout women's lives and is impactful in many dimensions. At its pinnacle, this inequality enters the institution of marriage, often leading to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse from a husband towards his wife<sup>1</sup>. Situations of domestic violence are highly common in India with 32% of married women reporting experiencing at least one form of abuse from their husband (NFHS-5 2021). Although extremely prevalent, cases of spousal sexual or physical violence, only 23.7% have sought any form help and 1% have sought help from formal institutions (Leonardsson, San Sebastian, 2017).<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this research is to investigate the social, cultural, and religious factors that keep survivors of domestic violence from seeking help and how the people of do, are able to so.

To begin this investigation, the paper provides important contextual and historical understandings of religious institutions and cultures that perpetuate gender-based violence. Specifically, a discussion of the caste system illustrates how intersections of gender and caste, perpetuate violence against women in a range of forms. Further discussion ties together how gender inequality in an Indian context relates to the normalization of domestic violence. Throughout, the paper relies heavily on the work of Indian authors, political leaders, and activists, whose work has shaped Indian culture and popular psyche.

### **Key Findings**

1. Participant's husbands were not always the main sources of physical or emotional abuse.
2. Alcoholism may be less accepted in Indian culture than wife beating.
  - a. Marital families were more likely to shun sons for alcoholism than for beating their wife.

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<sup>1</sup> Although both men and women are survivors of domestic violence in India, due to the lack of male survivors available to the researcher and most cases being perpetrated by men onto women, this project will only discuss cases of domestic violence with female survivors.

<sup>2</sup> Data from this Cross-sectional study of 19,125 women in India who had experienced spousal physical or sexual violence was obtained from the NFHS-3, data from 2005-2006.

3. Living in a joint home with in-laws may decrease the chance of receiving verbal or physical abuse from the husband.
  - a. Increases the chance of verbal or physical abuse from the husband.
4. Biological families are also responsible for abusive behaviour.
  - a. Abuse ranged significantly from mild neglect to severe cases of kidnapping and death threats.
5. High economic status did not greatly increase women's access to freedom and independence.
  - a. Greater economic comfortability often led to women having less financial responsibility and therefore being more reliant on their fathers and husbands.
6. Separation triggering incidents were caused by many accumulating factors rather than isolated events.
7. Positive feelings towards abusive husbands decreased over time spent away from them.
8. Equal treatment from parents during childhood correlated with greater support during experiences of domestic violence in adulthood.

## **Historical and Cultural Contexts**

### ***The Caste System***

A proper examination of the patriarchal forces responsible for domestic violence in India requires a discussion of multiple intersecting oppressive systems, including the caste system. India has an intensely hierarchical society which is apparent economically with an overall increase in wealth disparity (Choudhary, 2022). Although rising inequality exists globally, India has historically justified this through the caste system, a religiously based institution which stratifies society by occupation, economic status, and purity. The Hindu practice divides the population into four castes: *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, *Shudras*, and *Dalits* (formerly untouchables). Within each caste is many sub-castes known as *Jatis* and are correlated with specific occupations. Adherence to this hierarchical system is reinforced

among Hindus, through the belief in reincarnation; that one's actions in this life impact the position and status of the next. Therefore, the strict observation of one's caste occupation is an essential religious practice that is believed to have legitimate implications on future lives.

Central to the system's persistence is the practice of endogamy or marrying within the caste. Dr. Ambedkar Nagar, a social reformer, political leader during the decades pre- and post-Indian independence, and architect of the Indian Constitution, wrote prolifically on this topic. Ambedkar points to *Brahmin* castes as the originators of the endogamous system when he famously argues, "some closed doors – others found them closed" (Ambedkar, 1917). In his paper, "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development," the quote identifies the power and privileges held by the Brahmin caste and how subsequent castes imitate this behavior. This is to say; endogamy is created and maintained by those "closing the door" but perpetuated and practiced by those "finding them closed." This system which upholds caste boundaries is important because it explains how its ancient roots are both responsible for its inception and not responsible for its perseverance.

Further on the impact of the endogamous system is the control that it imposes on the lives, bodies, and sexuality of women. Indian feminist scholar and historian Uma Chakravarti coined the term *Brahmanical Patriarchy* to describe the religiously sanctioned restriction on the control of money, land, and marriage. The term is first used in her 1993 article, "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class, and State," in which she examines the brahmin social order and its organization of caste and gender hierarchies. In this article, she writes,

The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movement of women or even through female seclusion. Women are regarded as gateways—literally points of entrance into the caste system. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented

from having sexual access to women of the higher castes so women must be carefully guarded (Chakravarti, 1993).

Chakravarti begins by explaining how the Brahmanical system is kept up through the control of women's sexuality and general autonomy. To maintain caste purity, the system requires the strict seclusion of reproduction. She further explains that the upper caste woman is to be guarded in addition to the lower caste male being restricted. She therefore concludes that Brahmanical patriarchy views the upper caste woman's identity as, in need of protection. The lower caste status of the man restricts his access, while the gender status of the woman denies her freedom. This finding, extrapolated on men in women from different castes, indicates that women of lower castes are subjected two-fold— being denied access based on caste and freedom based on gender. It is this duality that exemplifies Chakravarti's understanding of Brahmanical patriarchy as an oppressive system by both caste and gender.

Caste is still a part of Indian society today. Although no longer legally supported<sup>3</sup>, caste's endogamous nature has remained resilient. As of 2011 census data, only 5.82% of marriages in India are inter-caste (Ray, Chaudhuri, Sahai, 2017). This finding is further understood by a nation-wide survey study which found a strong majority of Indians say it is at least "somewhat" important to stop men (79%) and women (80%) from marrying into another caste. The same study found that about one-quarter (24%) of Indians say all their close friends belong to their caste, and 46% say most of their friends are from their caste (Corichi, Evans, Sahgal, Salazar, Starr, 2021). Although attitudes towards caste have progressed in the past several decades, caste-based discrimination is still prevalent through microaggressions, honor killings, and centuries-old systemic mechanisms. More visible

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<sup>3</sup> The 1950 Constitution of India legally abolished the practice of untouchability and provided measures for affirmative action in both educational institutions and public services.



segregation of Dalit castes<sup>4</sup> can be found in rural areas of the country where they can be denied access to land, well-paying jobs, and may be abused, harassed, or killed, at the hands of the police and upper-caste groups(Corichi, et.al, 2021).

### ***The Patriarchy and Gender Inequality***

As discussed, the creation of the Caste system and its implementation was as much to do with caste oppression as it was to do with gender oppression. Therefore, a closer look into how caste and Hindu history has contributed to gender-based violence is required. To better understand this is an excerpt from the Manusmriti, a collection of Sanskrit verses on *Dharma* or life's purpose. Chapter two, verse 213 (translated to English from Sanskrit) reads, "It is the very nature of women to corrupt men. It is for this reason that the wise are never unguarded regarding women" (Manusmriti, 2016). Ancient texts such as this are important to Hindu tradition and provide relevant context to the historical subjugation of women. To be "unguarded" towards women would require men to approach woman with constant skepticism, suspicion, and distrust. This practice would logically lead men to believe women less, avoid interacting with them, and silence their opinions. Equally as relevant, this excerpt teaches women that their presence around men is unwanted and detrimental. Patriarchal oppressive structures are clearly built within this religious framework.

Following the Vedic-period and the writing of many religious texts came a substantial decline in the status of woman. Upon marriage a wife effectively became part of her husband's property and caste law created rigid structure for marriage and reproduction. The reality of female status in society at this time can be explained by Dr. Ambedkar and his example of male and female surplus in a community. Surplus in this context refers to men

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<sup>4</sup> Making up approximately one-sixth of the population (160 million), Dalit castes are referred to in plural form because of the subdivisions within all castes and the wide variety of geographic location and occupation.

and women who have lost their partner or are divorced, causing an unequal gender distribution and a dilemma for how these individuals should be treated in society. Dr. Ambedkar points to the traditional practices of *Sati*- the burning of a widow on her husband's pyre, as an example of the severe treatment women receive in this situation compared to men in the same circumstances. Although *Sati* has been banned for nearly 200 years,<sup>5</sup> the marginalization of divorced and widowed women is mainstream in many Indian cultures. Men face far less difficulties returning to normal social life in this circumstance. This differential treatment is an example of the patriarchal forces of the caste system and the extent to which this inequality controls the lives of women.

The priority treatment of men and boys is present today as the strong preference for sons is a social norm and is the driving force behind female feticide, the practice of sex selective abortions.<sup>6</sup> As discussed, the belief in reincarnation is central to Hinduism creating an emphasis on death rituals known as *Antyeṣṭi*. Often exclusively the role of the son, this responsibility creates a religious distinction that justifies gender preferences. The same concept is seen across many social and economic spheres described by Manu law. Chapter IX of the Manuscript text says about women, "Her father protects in childhood, her husband protects in youth, and her sons protect in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Manusmriti, 2016). The notion that women lack the ability to live independently greatly impacts how they are treated growing up, how they are treated by their peers and how society views them in adulthood if they do live independently. This factor plays a large role in why women experiencing domestic violence decide to remain with their abuser. The Manu Law excerpt is also tightly intertwined with dowry practice, the economic exchange from the wife's natal parents to her marital parents during marriage. Dowry is a large cause for son

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<sup>5</sup> Sati was banned on December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1829, by the Bengal Sati Regulation under the jurisdiction of British India. Although extremely uncommon today, the last incident took place in Madhya Pradesh in 2002.

<sup>6</sup> In 1994 the Indian Parliament passed the first national law banning sex-selective abortion, the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Regulation and Prevention of Misuse Act (IPC, 1994).

preference in many poor communities because the financial strain of marrying a daughter. Property ownership and inheritance is another perpetuating factor of son preference because it has historically been restricted to male heirs. Until 1956,<sup>7</sup> women did not have full ownership over her property and possessions without the consent of her husband or father. This factor legally encouraged fathers to transfer ownership to their sons in order to retain family wealth. These legal, religious, and cultural practices contribute to the systemic restriction of women's financial and social freedom.

The gender-sex binary is another important topic as it holds incredible strength in Indian culture. These two concepts, which differ greatly, are often incorrectly used interchangeably. Sex refers the biological distinction between female and male reproductive organs, whereas gender is the socially constructed roles designated to each sex. Deeply intertwined in many cultures around the world, gender dictates how men and women perform in nearly every facet of their lives. Patriarchal forces encourage biological men to adhere to masculine traits and biological women to feminine traits. These gender roles have had systemic implications through religious institutions, governmental bodies, and economic spheres; in all of which men have historically, and currently, hold overwhelming amounts of power. In cooperation with this institutionalized system is its manifestation within interpersonal dynamics. The hegemonic and narrow heteronormative roles define masculine traits as physical dominance, lack of emotionality, and the tendency to resort to violence, and are complimented by, a similarly narrow imagination of the feminine role, defined as passive, submissive, and with an eagerness to accommodate. These rigid constructions of gender in a context of compulsory heterosexual marriage, create circumstances that greatly increase the opportunity for violent problem-solving and abusive behavior. In this way, the gender-sex binary, built from

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<sup>7</sup> The 1956 Act provided women full rights to property and possession management.

patriarchal structures, reinforces the beliefs of male superiority, and is deeply intertwined with gender-based violence and domestic violence.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The study sample included 13 participants living in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra and included both in-depth interviews conducted with female beneficiaries at Snehalaya (n=4) and a group discussion-based interview with women from the Laltaki Slum<sup>8</sup> (n=9). Many additional meetings with professionals working at both government organizations and non-government organizations completed the bulk of the primary research.

As beneficiaries of Snehalaya, the four primary participants of this study are a part of the minority help seeking population.<sup>9</sup> According to the most recent National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), only 14% of women who have experienced any form of physical or sexual violence have sought help (NFHS, 2021). These four women were chosen for this study because of their willingness to participate, their experience as survivors of domestic violence, and their unique perspective as a part of the help seeking population. From this point forward, this group is referred to as the primary sample.

The second sample comprised of nine female residents of the Laltaki Slum in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. Mainly growing up in neighbouring districts and villages, their experiences were far more similar with one another than the experiences of the primary sample. However, due to language barriers and difficulties translating, there are many vital flaws in this data and will not be used as a primary source of analysis. This sample does however, represent the majority of cases explained above as only one of the nine respondents

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<sup>8</sup> Laltaki Slum is located in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra

<sup>9</sup> Help seeking population refers to survivors of domestic violence who have sought help for their abuse.

had reported their violence to legal authorities or sought help. Although this group is not directly connected with Snehalaya, these women were selected through their connection to the Balbhavan after-school program, a Snehalaya led project for children in the Laltaki slum. From this point forward, this group is referred to as the Laltaki sample and will not be addressed throughout the data analysis.

Among the primary sample, ages ranged between 34 and 36 (mean=35). Three of the respondents were current beneficiaries of Snehalaya; receiving food, shelter and employment from the NGO, while one respondent was a former beneficiary and only receiving legal assistance. The three current beneficiaries were tasked with responsibilities in the kitchen and at the on-campus English medium school<sup>10</sup>. All three participants were educated through 8<sup>th</sup> standard. All three participants had at least two children (age of children range between 4 and 14). Only one participant lived with all her children. One had neither of her children with her, and one participant had only one (of three) living with her. The former beneficiary was employed at a local bank, lived in an apartment in Ahmednagar, and was completing a law degree at a local institution. Her economic and educational background provided more options accessible to her. Half of the participants reported their husbands' regularly drank alcohol and that their aggression was related to their alcohol consumption. Only one of the four women reported a formal dowry being presented to her husband's family by her parents. Only one participant reported their marriage being fully arranged by their parents. All four women reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse by their husbands including: beating, slapping, throwing, electricity shocking, hot liquids, violating sexually, and more. Frequently co-occurring with physical and sexual violence, participants also experienced psychological and emotional violence (Logan, Swanberg, 2005).

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<sup>10</sup>English Medium Schools are taught with a predominantly English curriculum, historically reserved for more affluent communities.

*Additional individual background information regarding the primary sample can be found in*

**Table 1** below.

**Table 1:** Participant's Introductory and Background Information

Participant name (pseudonym)	Asmita	Chandani	Brihati	Nitya
From (rural/urban)	Urban (Mumbai)	Rural	Rural	Rural
Age	35	35	34	36
Children	Four children: eldest 14yrs	Two children: eldest 10yrs	No children	Three children: eldest 9yrs
Marriage (year: age)	2007 : 20	2005 : 18	2014 : 26	2007 : 21
Arranged Marriage or Love marriage	Love marriage	Arranged	Love marriage	Arranged-love marriage hybrid
Dowry (Y/N)	No	Yes	Not formally	No
Husband alcoholic (Y/N)	No	No	Yes	Yes
Husband's Occupation	Electrician	Barber	IT Company	Painter
Education	8 <sup>th</sup> Standard	8 <sup>th</sup> Standard	- Law (pending) - Teachers Diploma	8 <sup>th</sup> standard
Current occupation	Snehalaya: school cleaning	Snehalaya: kitchen	Bank worker	Snehalaya: school cleaning
Caste	Maratha	Navhi	Maratha	Maratha
Amount of time after marriage before violence began	1-2 years	6 months	3-4 months	1 year
Joint home (Y/N)	Yes, but not at the beginning (after 1-2 year)	Yes	No	No, but briefly lived with mother in-law (first year)
Bank Account (Y/N)	No	No	Yes	No

### *Participant Introductions*

Asmita held herself extremely honourably and with immense pride. Her four children live with her at Snehalaya and it is evident how much she cares for them. When speaking about her daughter's academic success, Asmita was joyfully teary-eyed. After leaving her husband, she and her children briefly lived in Pune where she worked at a factory. Following their time in Pune, Asmita and her children found Snehalaya, she has been employed by the organization since. Her youngest two children are twins, one suffers from cerebral palsy. Although her situation today is far better than it has been in years the past, she worries about her son's future and his ability to stand on his own feet.

Of the study's participants, Chandani came to Snehalaya most recently, arriving this past summer. She is here alone, her two children stay with their father and her marital family. Although she misses them greatly, she was certain that their safety was not a concern, "their father loves them," she said on multiple occasions. Chandani's biological mother past away nearly ten years ago and her father has been paralyzed for many years. Her brother has been supportive during her experience of domestic violence but he has become less able to provide for her recently. It was evident that despite the circumstances, she still loves her husband and is very eager to return home to be with her children. However, Chandani was confident in her decision to be at Snehalaya, and she was prepared to face the consequences of living independently if she felt she must.

Brihati was incredibly well-spoken, insightful, and driven. It was clear that at no point in her life did she submit to the social pressure working against her. The only of the four participants no longer living at Snehalaya, Brihati had an apartment to herself, was financially stable, and well-educated. She worked at a bank where she had friends who thought similarly to her about the issues of domestic violence, widowhood, and the

mistreatment of women in their society. She is currently finishing law school and plans to start a program to help women in need of legal assistance, an issue she talked about extensively. Although still struggling to find peace and finalized her divorce, Brihati has hope for herself and for women like her to escape the patriarchal forces that have created their circumstances. More than anything, Brihati was strong, brave, and empowered, she will make an inspirational and effective legal advisor.

Nitya is an extremely talented woman and a fast learner. She was proud of her ability to pick up new skills and use them to earn money and provide for her children. She talked about her experience making clothing, working at a hotel kitchen, and the difficulties of single motherhood. Nitya has three children, two stay with her parents and her youngest is with her at Snehalaya. Although previously a contentious relationship because of her husband's abuse, Nitya's parents have become supportive of her and her children. Nitya was very honest and reflective, often bringing up her previous self's low self-esteem as an explanation for many of her regrettable decisions. This thoughtfulness made Nitya a stronger and more empowered person as she continues to search for stability and safety. Only her son was at Snehalaya, but his presence and smile were contagious.

### ***Ethical Measures and Confidentiality***

To begin all interaction for this study, full transparency was implemented between the interviewer and interviewee. This included a brief explanation of the study and its purpose, a personal introduction of the researcher, and a personal introduction to the translator. They were also informed their participation in this study is completely voluntary, not obligatory and will not include payment.

Prior to starting all interviews, interviewees were reminded of their rights to confidentiality and privacy. To insure participants' anonymity, all names used throughout this



paper are pseudonyms. Participants were made aware this would be the case. They were also assured they can stop the interview at any time and for any reason. Interviewees were made aware of the interviewer's audio recording device and asked to provide verbal consent to the recording.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic the researcher took many measures to avoid participants feeling forced, coerced, or pressured into reliving traumatic events in their past. Interview questions were asked and worded in a way that surrounded the participant's experience with domestic violence rather than asking about the abuse directly. For example, instead of asking, "In what ways did your husband beat you?" the researcher might have asked, "Could you tell me more about life with your husband during your marriage?" This practice allowed participants to choose how much detail they wanted to share about their experience.

Additionally, the interviewer was cautious not to ask question that might be perceived as accusatory such as, "Why did you wait so long to leave your husband?" Instead, questions were consciously worded to avoid potentially making participants feel regret or shame regarding how they dealt with their circumstances.

### ***Methodological Challenges and Limitations***

Prior to an in-depth investigation of these factors, it is important to acknowledge the massive diversity within Indian culture. Due to the wide variety of previous governing forces, geographic conditions, and religious practices, society in the Indian sub-continent is divided into thousands of subcultures. Lacking the time, resources, and familiarity to discuss each of the many unique cultures, this project will discuss the issue of domestic violence within a generalized Indian context.

Furthermore, there is an inherent lack of understanding of many cultural norms and practices due to the researcher's American upbringing. In efforts to combat these biases, the project relies heavily on the work of many famous Indian scholars and activists who have written on the topics of gender inequality, Brahmanical patriarchy, and the issue of domestic violence itself. Additionally, throughout the research process there was constant discussion of these themes with native teachers, advisors, and professionals who were able to provide important context to cultural nuances otherwise undetectable from a foreign perspective.

Lastly, due to the highly sensitive nature of the research topic, the sample for this study was limited to four primary participants. Many factors caused this issue, among them were, a 28-day time constraint, limited financial resources, and the researcher's identity as a foreign white male. It is understandable that potential participants may have been unwilling to share their experience on this matter with a stranger, regardless of identity, let alone from a background as unfamiliar as this one.

Although the extremely small sample restricted the ability to reach any conclusive findings about Indian culture or society, it provided the opportunity to comprehensively compare, contrast, and identify patterns within individual experiences of the sample. Due to the small sample size, this research took an exploratory approach, aiming to provide a variety of in-depth narratives that expand the readers understanding of the research topic and greater Indian culture.

### ***Terminology***

Throughout this paper, members of the primary sample are referred to by their pseudonym, as participants, as respondents, and as *survivors*. This paper does not refer to the women of this sample, or anyone who has experienced domestic or gender-based violence, as *victims*. This decision was made to preserve the dignity and agency of the survivors written

about, not to diminish the severity of their suffering. The term *survivor* connotes strength, perseverance, and empowerment whereas the term *victim*, connotes weakness, helplessness, and possibly responsibility or blame for their suffering. In a context in which women are strictly bound to heterosexual marriage with few viable alternatives, these women have resisted their bondage. The term *survivor* embodies their struggle and pays homage to the dynamic nature of their circumstances whereas *victim* brackets them into a static state of passivity. In an effort to approach this topic with kindness, empathy, and respect towards the women who participated, the decision was made to refer to them as *survivors* not *victims*.

### ***Procedure***

As stated, recruitment for this study was conducted in correspondence with Snehalaya administration and staff. Specifically, caretakers from Snehadar were selected as liaisons to potential research participants. Snehadar is a Snehalaya sub-project which works to rehabilitate and assist survivors of domestic violence, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. With their help, the first course of action was a general meet and greet with Snehadar beneficiaries and their children. Given the traumatic and highly personal nature of the research topic, it was important for potential participants to be aware of the project's intentions and become comfortable with the researcher's personality.

The activity included several ice breakers, distribution of small candies, and an enjoyable exchange of Hindi, Marathi, and English words. Following this session, the Snehadar beneficiaries were asked to stay back without their children to receive more detailed information about the purpose and goals of the project. They were asked if they would feel comfortable sharing their experience with domestic violence in an interview setting. They were assured their confidentiality would be secured within the context of the interview and their name would not be used in the research report.

This preliminary session required the help of a translator to relay most of the instructions and information. The translator was selected from a group of masters students from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences<sup>11</sup> in Mumbai who were volunteering with Snehalaya during the research period.

Following the meet and greet session, three women elected to participate in the interview process. Each participant was spoken to individually on separate days and at a time of their choosing. Prior to beginning the interview, the participant was reminded that their name would not be used or connected to their stories in anyway. To add comfortability and privacy, the interview was conducted in a private room with water and tissues available. Additionally, the project's advisor, Nick Cox, remained in the room for each interview to provide the participant with emotional and moral support. Nick is a long-term trustee at Snehalaya and is very familiar with all beneficiaries and their families.

Nick also assisted in facilitating an interview with the fourth participant, a former beneficiary of Snehalaya living and working in Ahmednagar. After meeting at the participants workplace, the interview took place in a nearby restaurant for the participants comfortability. Two of the participant's co-workers/friends were present for our introduction and a brief discussion, but returned to work after ensuring the situation was comfortable and safe. No translator was required.

### ***Data Analysis***

As explained, this exploratory study examined the factors that keep survivors of domestic violence from leaving their partners and what circumstances contravened those factors. Therefore, the study required individual narratives of women who experienced both

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<sup>11</sup> Tata Institute of Social Sciences is a public research university in Mumbai, India. Founded in 1936, it is Asia's oldest institute for professional social work education.

circumstances. The study was conducted in cooperation with Snehalaya, Ahmednagar, an NGO with various projects related to woman and child empowerment, safety, and rehabilitation. Due to the sensitive and highly personal nature of this research topic, only four women were comfortable participating. Although this small sample size raised many difficulties, it also provided the opportunity for a more in-depth analysis of each narrative.

The first step in this process was to transcribe each of the interviews verbatim. The second step was a categorical coding of these transcripts by theme and context to the research question. As text received code, codes were identified and defined. Subsequent text was assigned the proper coding according to these definitions. In cooperation with the research mentor, the coded transcriptions were revisited, and an analytical framework was constructed to determine the meaning of these interviews. Specifically, this framework was divided into three main periods: after marriage but before separation, the precise moment of separation, and post-separation. Within each of the three periods, data was further sorted into concepts and categories for more precise interpretation.

**Table 2:** Domestic Violence Stages: Corresponding Experiences and Emerging Themes

Post-Marriage, Pre-Separation	Moment of Separation	Post-Separation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Instances of Abuse               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Abuse from Husband</li> <li>b. Abuse from Marital Family</li> <li>c. Abuse from Natal Family</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Reasons for Staying in Relationship               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Personal</li> <li>b. Social</li> <li>c. Economic</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Separation Triggering Incident               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Brihati</li> <li>b. Asmita</li> <li>c. Nitya</li> <li>d. Chandani</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Current Motivation               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Children's Well-Being</li> <li>b. Personal Endeavours</li> </ol> </li> <li>2. Current Feelings for Husband               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Positive</li> <li>b. Negative</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Reflection on Supportive or Influential Figures</li> </ol>

## **Results**

### ***Survivors' Experiences in Marriage Prior to Departure***

The survivors' experiences during their marriage was divided into two categories; instances of abuse, and factors that kept them in their relationship. The first category is divided into three categories: abuse from the husband, abuse from the marital family, and abuse from the natal family. The latter category, the factors that kept them in their relationship, is used to examine the opposing pressures working on the personal, familial, and societal level that cause women to stay in their violent environments. This contradictory dynamic of experiencing both violence (first category) and pressure (second category) is what this sections explores.

### **Instances of Abuse**

#### ***Husband's Abusive Behaviour.***

Attitudes towards marriage, their husbands, and marital families varied among respondents but there were many consistencies. For example, all four participants experienced a period of time after their marriage in which their relationship with their husband was free from violence. All respondents also suffered from both physical and verbal abuse from their husband's to differing degrees.

Chandani reported limited physical abuse from her husband to start, she said, "he beat [me] but not much, he would do one slap or something like this." This experience changed throughout the marriage as her husband's family continued to negatively influence his beliefs about her. These beliefs were Incited by her father in-law's passing, just six months into the marriage, and her mother in-law deciding she was to blame. Violence from her and her husband escalated from there and reached its highest point when Chandani found out about

his extra-marital affair. After she brought this up, her husband beat her profusely causing many injuries. In Chandani's experience, the violence from her husband escalated over time and was due to a few triggering factors.

Nitya described the abuse from her husband to be more severe, she said, "he was very abusive physically, he used to beat me when I was pregnant...he used to beat so much the kids as well." Like Chandani, Nitya mentions an extra-marital affair that incited violence from her husband but she talks about other factors too. Her mother-in-law briefly lived in their home but left a year into the marriage because she was also subjected to his violence. After her departure, violence onto Nitya escalated. The overarching cause Nitya discussed was her husband's alcohol usage, and how he would take her valuables to sell and spend on his habit. Nitya experienced violence throughout her marriage and like Chandani, violence escalated over time. However, much of Nitya's experience was provoked by her husband's alcoholism.

Also reporting her husband's alcoholism, Brihati experienced extremely severe physical and verbal abuse from her husband. Unlike the other participants, Brihati's marriage was very short, this means violence did not escalate over time in the same way. This said, there was three to four months at the beginning of her marriage in which Brihati reported limited abuse. Like Nitya and Chandani, Brihati referred to an extra-marital affair. She recalled a specific incidence of extreme physical and verbal abuse,

When he was coming from this enjoyment [affair], he was asking me; why are you calling, why are you doing this, you are only my worker, you don't have right to ask me anything... If I have to cook something for him, then he will throw it out on [my] face and [say], what is this? This is wrong, cook me again. In the midnight, cook me

again. You are not a good girl, you even don't know how to cook. Like this he'll harass me, mentally and physically.

Brihati shared more about this same night, reporting emotional and sexual abuse. She said, He's telling me you are not a good-looking girl, I wanted a model type girl wife for me, you are not good. Sometimes he was – what I can say – he was drinking so much he was abusing me sexually also.

In addition to explaining the degrading details of his verbal abuse, Brihati makes the connection between his alcoholism and his abusive behavior, a pattern displayed by Nitya's husband too. Furthermore, when asked about his drinking habits, she said, "He was drinking daily," a frightening reality when always accompanied by such abuse. Brihati's experience demonstrates both a correlation of abuse and alcoholism and of abuse and extra-marital affairs.

Asmita talked about her husband's abuse in a much less detailed manner than the other women, mostly talking about it in passing. On one occasion she talked about how her husband would belittle and make fun of their daughters career aspirations. She was visibly upset talking about this. Of the participants, Asmita had the most difficulty retelling her story and although her unwillingness to share the details of her trauma are entirely valid, it did provide a less precise understanding of her husband's abusive behaviour.

### ***Marital Family's Abusive Behaviour.***

Two of the four respondents experienced abusive behaviour from their husband's family. The women who experienced this, spent the most time living in the same house as their in-laws. Brihati, one of participant who didn't experience this abuse, never lived with her husband's family and reported a mainly supportive relationship with her mother in-law.



Brihati speaks about her mother-in-law, “She was a good women because she has been— she told me all these story about my husband. She told me all bad habit about her own child, her own son.” Brihati explains that her mother in-law did not condone her son’s behaviour. Most likely referring to her son’s alcoholic tendencies, this factor, which caused Brihati’s mother in-law to lose allegiance to her son, is very important.

Nitya was the other participant who didn’t experience this form of violence and only lived with her mother in-law for the first year of marriage. Interestingly, she credits her mother in-law’s presence as a protective factor in their home.

He started [abuse] very regularly, when my mother in law stepped out of the house...

One year she stayed there, and it was very smooth and nice because all the fighting— she was taking on herself. But at the moment she felt very tired, and she moved out of the house and everything just came on me.

In Nitya’s case, her mother in-law’s departure was the main reason her abuse became worse. The mother acted as a shield, carrying the burden of her son’s abuse on herself. As previously discussed, a unique commonality between Nitya’s husband and Brihati’s is their habits with alcohol. Of the four respondents, only they reported their husband being an alcoholic during their marriage. Because of this shared experience, it is understood that their husbands’ alcoholism and violence is what caused them to lose the trust of their mothers. Particularly in Nitya’s case, the consequence of her husband’s alcohol use was aggression, either towards herself or her mother in-law

Although not representative of the entire population, this finding explains how alcohol use is viewed by these mothers. Given that the other two respondents reported that their husbands did not use alcohol during their marriages, and that their husbands remained glorified by their families despite displaying abusive behaviour; this could suggest that some

subcultures view alcoholism as a more severe moral sin than many forms of domestic violence.

The remaining two women represent those who lived with their marital family's for the majority of their marriage. Chandani experienced violence from her marital family more than any of the other respondents and she reported living in a joint home with her mother, father, and sister in-law for the entirety of their marriage. Six months after her wedding, Chandani's father in-law died from a heart attack and the rest of the family blamed her for bringing the bad luck that caused his death. Following his passing, abuse from Chandani's mother in-law and sister-in-law began and never stopped. Their insistent blaming and torturing of Chandani influenced her husband to believe she was the source of the bad luck as well and to partake in the violence.

Asmita also lived with her mother in-law for the majority of her marriage and experienced a similarly abusive relationship with her. Asmita and her husband were forced to move into his mother's house due to his neglect and lack of economic support. After moving, tensions arose quickly between Asmita and her mother in-law, mainly due to economic strain they were imposing on her. Asmita recalled this period, but as she explained the contentious relationship with her mother in-law, she began to cry and requested the interview be paused. Given that her last statement before requiring a break was related to this relationship, it is reasonable to deduce that her mother in-law's abuse was severe. Following the short break, Asmita suggested that her mother in-law blamed her for the husband's bad habits, a similar type of blaming that Chandani experienced. Asmita and Chandani are also the two women who spoke in the least detail about their husband's abusive behaviour. Therefore, although living with their marital families increased the likelihood of the family's abusive behaviour, it might also indicate a decreased severity in the husband's abusive behaviour.

There were common factors between the respondents who did and who did not experience abuse from their marital family. Although the obvious factor is the survivors proximity to her marital family, other commonality were their husbands alcohol usage and their support or lack of support from marital families. Therefore two main take-aways have been identified: alcoholism may be less normalized or accepted in Indian culture than wife beating, and living in a joint home with in-laws may be a risk factor for abuse from the in-laws and a protective factor for abuse from the husband. Additionally, although the quality of the relationship with marital families varied, all respondents had a significant relationship.

### *Natal Family's Abusive Behaviour*

The relationships between the participants and their biological families were not always supportive, with three of four describing their relationship as negative at some point throughout marriage. Often strained because of disagreements regarding the marriage or the husband's mistreatment, these relationships deteriorated causing lack of support, neglect, or physical abuse. Of the three who reported this type of relationship with their natal families, two have returned two generally healthy relationships.

Nitya's relationship with her parents worsened because her husband's verbal abuse towards her natal parents. Over time, this hostile environment caused her parents to distance themselves from their daughter. Instead of defending her or advocating her to leave him, they neglected their daughter and separated from the situation. Nitya recalled this time without their support when she said,

Because he used to be very verbally abusive to my parents, ... they had stopped talking to me for two years. Meanwhile I was pregnant with a baby, and I had no one to talk to. For two years her mother did not try to call her because of the differences.

Nitya's parents rejoined her life after a particular incident during her pregnancy. She recalled her husband kicking her out of the house at 2:00am in the pouring rain. When she called them in that condition and they saw her in such desperation, they decided they had to step in.

Asmita's relationship with her parents experienced a similar period of instability but it happened during the early years of her marriage. Asmita had a love-marriage and her parents did not approve of the man she had chosen. When she moved in with her husband, her parents simply refused to support her. When her and her family were struggling financially because of her husband's laziness and neglect, she wished she could turn to her parents in that time. Although neither Asmita's nor Nitya's relationship with their natal parents were violently abusive, the neglect each of them encountered caused intense hardship and enabled instances of more severe abuse from their husbands and their marital families.

Brihati's relationship with her biological family was volatile from a young age. As a young woman she refused to marry her parents initial suitors and required them to send her to secondary education. After completing her teachers diploma, she was unable to find a proper job and her parents pressure to marry continued. Eventually succumbing to their request, she agreed to marry on one condition, her husband must allow her to continue to pursue higher education. After struggling to find a suitor who would comply, they found the man she later married. When Brihati told her parents about his abusive habits they neglected her concerns. Brihati recalls this conversation,

After marriage my parents had abandoned all their responsibility... They told me, now you are married, and this is only your problem, not our problem. You can face this problem or what you want to do but you can't come in our house again.

Unfortunately, this neglectful behavior was only the beginning of the abusive history between Brihati and her family. Following the separation with her husband, she filed for divorce but struggled to make progress due to the ineffective legal system. During this time, she met a

man of a different who she believed had a good heart and would treat her well. she planned on marrying him after the divorce was finalized. When she told her parents about this man and her plans to remarry, they reacted drastically.

I told them, my parents, when my case is finished, I will get married with him, so my parents began haggling. In these 8 years [my] parents are not ready to get even my information [if I am] alive or not. They are suddenly... thinking about [themselves] because of their dignity only. They thought they will kill me because of their dignity. Where I have been kidnapped me in their house for two months. No relative, no friends can meet me. They have taken my whole laptop from me.

Brihati was kidnapped and held against her will in her childhood home. The kidnapping forced Brihati to miss her court date and her absence caused the case to be dismissed. In this quote Brihati contrasts her parents' neglect during her abusive marriage with their eagerness to intervene when she planned to remarry outside of their caste. After the kidnapping, Brihati's parents forced her to return to her husband and encouraged him to continue his abusive pattern. She said, "And my parents sent me back to him and told him, do whatever you want to do with her."

Brihati's story illustrates the power of caste endogamy and the sacrifices many are willing to make to prevent the familial shame caused by inter-caste marriage. For Brihati's parents, their caste dignity far surpassed their feelings of obligation and responsibility as parents. When situations like this escalate further, honour killings<sup>12</sup> often take place. Thankfully after this transgression, Brihati found information about Snehalaya and was able to benefit from their programs providing legal assistance, shelter, and medical care.

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<sup>12</sup> Honor killings refers to the practice of murdering a family member to avoid inter-caste marriage. Often done by parents or siblings.

Although Brihati's story is unique among the other participants, the differing levels of familial support demonstrate the variety across social status' and in general. Brihati is a highly educated woman with parents capable of providing her with this education, yet these factors are not protective against her parents' abusive treatment. On the other hand, Chandani's natal family was far more supportive despite coming from much less. Overall experiences of natal family abuse ranged significantly from lack of support and neglect to more severe cases of kidnapping and the fear of death.

### ***Reasons for Staying in Their Relationships***

#### ***Personal***

Personal factors for staying were generally only about participants lingering love and respect for their husbands. Two of the participants brought up conclusive evidence that their fond feelings for their husband restricted them from leaving the relationship despite his behaviour.

Chandani looked back at the case she filed against her husband just five months ago and expresses lingering love for her husband when she said,

My family insisted [I file the case] but now I feeling regret. I know my husband shows me love, now also. So, I feeling bad. He is showing me love so why did I file the case?

Despite the physical abuse and extra-marital affair, her loyalty and love for him remained. Although Chandani's abuse from her husband was less severe than other respondents, his actions were certainly cause for feelings of hatred, betrayal, and distain. Why Chandani remained loyal to her husband after the filing, and at the time of interview, is very interesting. Chandani talked about admiring her husband's love for their children and his efforts as a

father regardless of how he treated her. This admiration and prioritization of her children's well-being could contribute to why she stays.

A similar sentiment is exemplified by Nitya when she talks about the multiple times she complained to the police about her husband's violence. After the police would scold her husband, beat him, and propose Nitya take additional legal actions against him, he would apologize, and Nitya would forgive him. Nitya recalls these moments when she says, "I thought it would be better, he would try to improve. He tried to sugar coat things and I just went with him again." She expresses her tendency to believe the claims that he will improve his behavior despite a pattern emerging proving the opposite. Due to the social pressure to present an unbroken home, complaining to the police regarding domestic violence is looked down upon, similar to the ways women living independently are perceived. However, in these circumstances Nitya is minimally affected by this social taboo because she turns to the police for assistance on multiple occasions. Rather, it is only when her husband faces more severe punishment, or long-term imprisonment, that her love for him returns. This might suggest a personal fear of life without his love in her life and not a fear of social judgment. This finding is corroborated by Nitya when she refers to the many mistakes, she has made regarding her decisions to stay with her husband. She said, "out of the low self-confidence I've made very wrong decisions in life." This comment suggests a need for his love and companionship due to low self-esteem. This feeling embodies the personal factors that may cause women to stay in their violent relationships, even when empowered to oppose oppressive social structures. These examples show that one reason survivors stay with their abusive partners is because they remain in-love with their abusers despite the pattern of violence.

### *Social*

Social reasons for staying in their abusive relationships had to do with participants acceptance or rejection of certain societal pressures. For some, these social factors weren't a huge barrier to leaving; remaining staunchly opposed to many confining cultural norms. Others expressed that it was these pressures exactly which encouraged them to remain in their relationships. Nitya explains this sentiment when she speaks on why she continues to return to her husband. She said,

I know how society views divorce and women who aren't in their husband's home. It wasn't nice for me to stay at my mother's place, how long am I supposed to stay there?

Nitya expresses how she might be judged or viewed by society if she were to leave her husband. This quote is particularly important because Nitya exemplified moments of empowerment against these norms when she went to the police multiple times. This proves that even though she overcomes the social pressures on certain occasions, it is clearly still influencing her decisions and thought processes.

Brihati represents someone who refuses to submit to these cultural pressures despite mirroring Nitya's understanding of them. She encounters this societal expectation in the justice system when she reports her case. After speaking with the officers at the station, she recalled what they told her,

you can't file complaint [against] your own husband because you have to go with him and you have to live with him, at least for your parents because their dignity. If you will leave him, their dignity will be less.

Brihati brings up the theme of familial dignity, a force which has shaped her circumstances quite heavily. The police reinforce this concept by explaining the responsibility she has to her



family to remain in this relationship. Brihati vehemently opposed the pressure to remain with her husband when she reflected on her decision to leave him and said,

I have decided against society, against my parents, against the police, against all persons, I have taken this decision to leave. Not for money, not for anything, only for my life. But society, my parents, and all them— you can kill by him but you can't leave him. This is all person's mentality.

Social pressures are absolutely a reason many stay in abusive relationships. Fear of judgement from family, friends and their communities, this social pressure is a very real deterrent for many survivors of domestic violence. As Brihati explained, the pressure is more than judgement or isolation, it is the normalization and fear of being killed.

### ***Economic***

Another factor for participants staying in their relationships was the economic burden of living alone, often relating to their ability or inability of providing for their children. Economically, Brihati had unique circumstances. She is the only participant without children, and the only participant to have her own bank account during her marriage. Regardless, Brihati had concerns regarding her inability to find work and her reliance on her abusive husband's income. After talking about her parent's unwillingness to support her, she spoke on the financial burden of living alone and explains why she stayed with her husband. She said, "I don't have money, I don't have job, and my parents also told me like this, that's why," showing that during her marriage but before she separated, the reason she stayed was due to economic concerns. Brihati left her husband shortly after this, so although this feeling did not last long, her thinking in this situation shows that economic reliance was a factor for her staying in the abusive relationship.

Other participants were also reliant on their husbands, in many ways more than Brihati. Asmita's biological family provided her with minimal financial assistance, yet she does not identify this as a main reason for staying in her marriage. However, when asked about whether she had her own bank account, she said, "he would do all the work. I did not have a bank account of my own. He had an account, and I did not even know how to do it." Given, Asmita's reliance on her husband for financial management, it is clear that her lack of self-sufficiency was a barrier to living independently. This case is interesting because Asmita's husband was not financially prudent, something Asmita cites often as a source of conflict between them. Although she reported not having a bank account during her marriage, her husband's incompetence forced her to become more self-sufficient. In this way, their lack of financial comfortability was a liberating factor Asmita because it forced her to find an income of her own.

The opposite situation is true for Chandani when she expressed that the reason, she did not have a bank account was because her family's financial flexibility. She said there was no need for her to know how to deal with these things because both her natal and marital families were in good financial conditions. Despite experiencing severe neglect from her in-laws, Chandani was able to turn to her natal family who continued to support her to the best of their abilities. Unfortunately, when this support was no longer sustainable and her husband's abuse escalated, she found herself with no one to turn to and no skills to rely on. She lacked the self-sufficiency she may have learned had her family been less well off.

In this way, Chandani's situation represents how women's dependency is cultivated in wealthier communities. Women not having to earn, or being able to stay in the home, is a financial privilege and sign of status. This luxury becomes incredibly detrimental to women's independence as they are raised without the skills to succeed on her own.

These stories show the ironic dichotomy of economic comfortability and women's independence. Rather than high economic status being a factor that increases independence, and low economic status decreasing it, the inverse is true.

### *Survivors' Experiences at the Point of Separation*

At the point of separation survivors of domestic violence stand up against their abusers and command agency over their lives. Given that most survivors are never able to reach this point(NFHS-5, 2021), this moment is a testament to the survivor's strength and ability oppose the multitude of forces restraining them. Although not always linked to a particularly painful or out of the ordinary event, these points of liberation are nonetheless extremely powerful moment in survivors' lives. This section looks to determine the triggering events that caused each participant to reach a breaking point.

Brihati's point of separation occurred only six months into her marriage and was triggered by a particularly horrifying incident in which her husband beat a woman to death. Although her husband would regularly not return home for days at a time, this night was different. Brihati was on a video call with her husband when he informed her, he would be home shortly. In the background, Brihati saw her husband's friend and his friend's wife, who was severally beaten. After Brihati's husband ignored her calls throughout the night, she called her mother in-law to help facilitate communicate. When Brihati finally got on a call with her husband she could hear the woman in the background suffering. Without remorse or shame, her husband began a video call to flaunt the abuse he had done to this woman. Brihati recalled this night,

He received my call, I have listened and the woman... she was screaming very loudly about the pain. I have listened all the things and he is laughing and telling me I can do

this with you also. He video called and that time he has given me that pictures. Blood in the car, her husband was beating her. ... he told me I will do this with you also if I have seen you to talk with another person. So that's why, in that situation I feel that he's not a human, he's just an animal, a cruel animal. I have decided to leave him at that time.

The woman later died in the hospital and Brihati packed her bags and prepared to leave the next day. When Brihati's husband returned from work the next evening she told him she would not be living with him anymore. She recalls what she said to him, "You are just a killer, you are not the right person for me... I am not your slave. I'm not your worker, you are not paying me for this." After expressing herself extremely bravely, her husband beat her profusely causing many injuries. She left the apartment that night with the bags she had packed earlier.

Brihati's relationship with her husband prior to this point was not absent of physical violence. What was unique about this instance was his display of extreme violence, his ability to get away with the murder, and his lack of remorse regarding the crime. Lastly, Brihati's husband threatened her when he said, "I will do this with you also if I have seen you to talk with another person." This threat, in combination with the uniqueness of this crime caused Brihati to leave her husband after only six months of marriage.

Marrying her husband in 2005 and staying with him until 2022, Chandani experienced an abusive relationship for a long time. Her breaking point came when she learned about her husband's extra-marital affair and the sever physical abuse which followed. Despite not having family or friends who could support her at this time, Chandani left her husband's home and briefly stayed at the railway station, before being guided to Snehalaya by a taxi driver. Although mainly a result of her husband's extra-marital affair and the physical abuse which followed, Chandani's breaking point is also the result of many compounding factors.

As explained, Chandani's marital home was an unsafe living environment for a long time. Her mother and sister-in-law blamed her for their father's death and convinced her husband to do the same. Over time, the blame escalated into ostracization and then into financial neglect, verbal abuse, and physical abuse. These factors accumulated over time caused her stress and discomfort to become unbearable. Culminating with the discovery of her husband's extra-marital affair and his severe violence, she reached her breaking point. Chandani also shared a return to her

Like Chandani, Nitya's experience was a culmination of many forms of abuse over many years. As explained, Nitya went to the police about her husband's abusive behavior on multiple occasions. This is important because it indicates multiple breaking points occurring throughout her marriage rather than a single event. The moment of separation, which was previously thought to be an extremely important and decisive movement in a survivor's life, is clearly much blurrier in Nitya's story. Rather than a grand moment of empowerment, Nitya explained multiple times she was able to stand up for herself for a short but ultimately would return to her husband after he apologized. This complicated mess of empowerment, forgiveness, submission, and fear, prove that Nitya's moment of separation is much less defined than assumed.

In one of the instances Nitya went to the police, she explained that her husband was in a car accident and severely injured. To help him recover, her in-laws brought her and her husband back to their village but blamed her for the accident and for his injuries. This blaming was followed by severe physical abuse from her marital family which was ultimately the reason she went to the police. In another example, she describes going to her sister's house and being beaten by her brother-in-law (her sister's husband). It was this moment which caused Nitya to reach out to Snehalaya and decisively leave the many abusive relationships in her life. She said about this experience that the "water was above my head,"

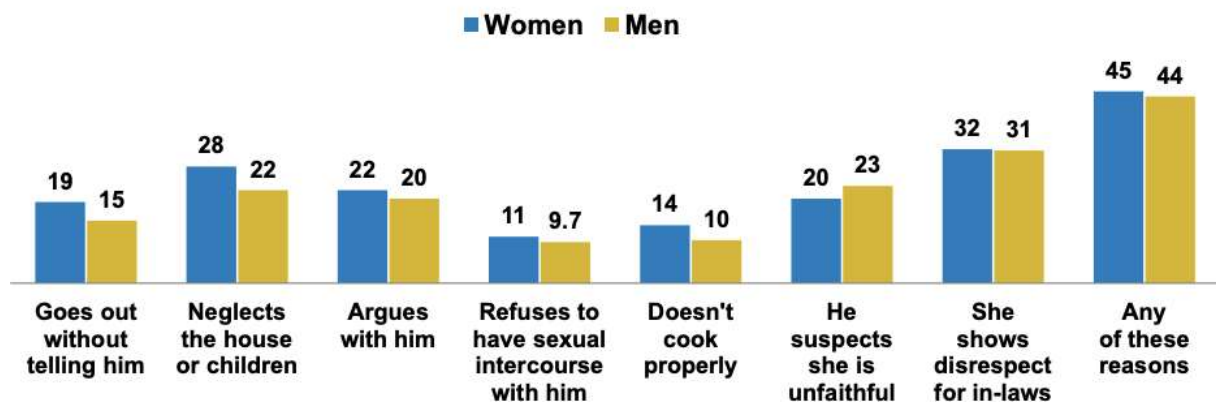
suggesting that this event was merely the final straw in a long sequence of physical and emotional abuse. Although none of the breaking points Nitya described included her husband directly, his neglect and lack of support caused her to feel alone and scared. Compiling these factors, Nitya suffered heavy challenges from many directions and her husband's absence was one of the many compounding factors.

Asmita initially came to Snehalaya in 2016 and stayed for two years before her husband convinced her to return home, assuring her he would act differently. Not a year after returning, it was clear his habits had not changed, and she returned to Snehalaya. Regarding the decision to return, Asmita says she was okay with him hitting her, it was when he hit their children and when he refused to send them to school, that she was pushed over the edge. This mentality exemplifies a primary concern for her children's safety and education in addition to a normalization of violence onto herself. These two sentiments are described similarly in her first moment of separation in which she came to Snehalaya for the first time. She explained that the initial departure was caused by her husband's unwillingness to work and provide for the family. When neither of their maternal homes were capable of housing them, Asmita's husband became very abusive. She said these circumstances led her to conclude, "he's not earning, since he hits me, he hits my children, what's the point of living with this man, it's better to go." Like her second breaking point, when she returned to Snehalaya, this explanation shows the general ambivalence to the violence she was experiencing. She lists these three factors insinuating that the physical abuse towards herself was not a justifiable reason to leave him, it was the combination of economic vulnerability and the violence towards her children that drew this conclusion. Given Asmita prioritizes her children's safety in both moments of separation, her husband's mistreatment of them is clearly the triggering factor to leaving him.

Asmita being somewhat comfortable with her husband beating her is exemplary of national data which shows high acceptance of husbands physically abusing their wives. The latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), reporting on 2019-2021, provides data on various aspects of domestic violence prevalence, acceptance, and causes. Section 14.8 of the NFHS-5 covers “Attitudes Towards Wife Beating,” under the following seven circumstances: she goes out without telling him, she neglects the house or the children, she argues with him, she refuses to have sex with him, she does not cook food properly, he suspects her of being unfaithful, and she shows disrespect for her in-laws. The table below, provided by the national survey, illustrates the percentage of men and women who agree that husbands are justified to beat their wives in the previously listed circumstances.

**Table 3:**

*Percentage of women and men age 15-49 who agree that a husband is justified in beating his wife for specific reasons*



Forty-five percent of women and 44 percent of men believe that a husband is justified in beating his wife in at least one of seven specified circumstances. This statistically similar agreement level shows little variation between men and women. Although this data indicates

a decrease in agreement with wife beating<sup>13</sup> from NFHS-4, agreement remains high. The national data contextualizes Asmita's attitude within the larger Indian perspective on the issue.

Each of these stories present a different approach to the same difficult decision. The ways they have dealt with their circumstances show their attitudes towards; what is normal behavior in a marriage, what is acceptable by society, and what they will or will not tolerate from their husbands. All these women made the decision to leave their husband, that is the commonality that led them to be a part of this study. The ways they went about doing that, the amount of time it took them to do so, and their stories are each unique. Asmita reported leaving her husband twice, both decisions revolving around the physical abuse of her children. For Nitya, she was able go to the police on multiple occasions throughout the duration of her 15-year marriage but continued to return to her husband until the abuse became intolerable. Chandani experienced a particularly abusive incident centered around an extra-marital affair, but her moment of separation was also due to many stressors accumulating over time. Brihati's unique case of her husband's involvement in a murder was the main trigger of her separation but not an isolated incident either. The variety of responses shows that no two moments of separation are alike, but all are results of many factors. Even when triggered by specific incidents, the causes of departure are not isolated within its circumstances.

### *Survivors' Experiences After Separation*

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<sup>13</sup> "Agreement with wife beating" is defined as agreeing a husband is justified in beating his wife in **at least one** of the seven categories.



The participants' experience during the post-separation period was divided into three categories: current motivations and hopes for the future, current feelings towards their husband, and reflections on supportive or influential figures.

### ***Current Motivations***

This category is split into two motivating factors: children's well-being, and personal endeavors. All three mothers reported that their main hopes for their future surrounded their children's success, either in health or education. Brihati, the only participant who does not have children, reported a plan to start a legal counseling center to help women experiencing domestic violence navigate the convoluted justice system.

### ***Children's Well-Being***

When asked about their hopes for the future, the overwhelming response from mothers involved their children's education. In Asmita's response concerning her children's education, she said,

I was afraid my daughter would be uneducated. I want my children to be able to help others. I want them to be so well made that they'll be able to help others, make money for yourself and also help others.

Asmita later discussed how her husband held their daughter from going to school during which caused her to be held back a year. When she mentioned that her daughter is now completing 10<sup>th</sup> standard, Asmita began to tear up in intense pride for her daughter who has surpassed her own education level. This feeling is shared by Chandani when she said,

I want that my kids should study, take higher education, and become something capable and great. I think I want to make my daughter doctor.

She smiled hopefully when talking about her daughter in that way. Like Asmita, she held specifically high value in her daughter's education. This sentiment is important because it shows an awareness of the oppressive systems which restricted their access to education and an eagerness to avoid it from continuing onto their daughters. This commitment to avoiding the cycle's reproduction is a huge accomplishment. It shows the progress and empowerment they have instilled in themselves through these extremely difficult circumstances and a hopefulness that their children will not face the same violence they did.

Nitya did not talk about her daughter specifically but reiterated the commonly expressed value in education and its ability to help her children succeed. She said,

All I want is good education for my kids, I don't want anything for me. Any money I have [I] would not spend on a flat or property, I would want to spend that on my child. All I want is good education for my child.

This unanimously shared perspective on the importance of education is significant because all three women did not receive education past 8<sup>th</sup> standard. It shows a belief, or partial belief, that receiving education would have helped them avoid their violence. If they had a higher degree, more lucrative skills, and economic freedom, maybe they could have avoided their violence entirely. Although it is true that more financial flexibility would have greatly improved these women's lives, as exemplified by Brihati access to funds and higher education, these factors are not directly tied to greater safety from domestic violence.

### ***Personal Endeavors***

Nearing the end of the interviews, participants were asked what they hoped for themselves in the coming years. Although sometimes taken back by this question, upon further thought, many responded with positive attitudes towards the coming years. Brihati, the

only participant no longer living at Snehalaya's rehab center,<sup>14</sup> is a year away from completing her law degree. When asked why she decided to pursue this degree she said,

If any girls [in] this situation are coming, will come, then I can give her directly suggestions... I have wasted eight years in this process, they don't have to face these problems. I can [tell] them directly: you can go to Snehadar<sup>15</sup>, otherwise you can go get direct legal help in the court– they can give you free legal service. So that's why I am doing this legal law course... [so] I can give them suggestions, because they too suffer.

Brihati later expanded on this dream, explaining that her and her friend plan on establishing a center that will provide free legal advice for women in similar situations. She specified that the program will be geared toward helping women who do not want to live in a shelter or file a complaint with Snehalaya. Instead, the center will be for women who need only legal assistance to file against their husbands in court. Brihati exemplifies, not only an understanding of how her own safety was stifled, but deep feelings of solidarity and responsibility towards those in similar situations. Her decision to start this project and to see change done at a larger level shows empathy and compassion. Her ability to recognize the issues at hand, determine the course of action required to alleviate them, and make substantial strides towards accomplishing those actions, is highly impressive and commendable.

Brihati exhibits an ability to make sense of the social and legal systems working against her. She further shows this when she explains who she believes is to blame for her circumstances. She said,

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<sup>14</sup> Snehalaya's rehab center houses, feeds, educates, and employees over 250 women and children struggling from various causes. Founded in 1982 by Girish Kulkarni to house sex-workers, it has since grown to assist many underprivileged or struggling communities.

<sup>15</sup> Snehadar is a project of Snehalaya focused on providing relief for survivors of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence.

There were so many causes. If someone gets abused there is not one person can [blame]. For this, not only my husband, my parents also responsible for this, society also responsible for this, and– what you can say– our legal system is also responsible for this, the police who don't want to take my complaint, they also responsible for this. That's why this has happened.

Brihati follows this analysis of what caused her situation with suggestions of how to reform the system and stop-gap some of the larger issues. She said,

If legal system is aware, if there is a provision [that] they will give justice a woman in a year, then how can they do this. They know we can be free. If police are ready to take complaint and ready to take action, how can anyone abuse? If parents tell their daughters, we are behind you, you have to struggle against him, no one can harass you like this, then no one can do this. This is, all these are main causes. That's why bad guys like him they are doing this.

To summarize, Brihati suggests three locations in need of reform: the legal system, police officers, and within the home. Starting with the legal system, if there was an effective provision to hear all survivors' cases within a year, Brihati believes perpetrators would not hold the same power. She speaks to the control perpetrators have over those they abuse because of their understanding that the legal system is rarely the effective. This suggests that greater trust in the legal systems ability to convict and prosecute abusers, would cause lower sense of legal immunity and more fear that their actions will have consequences. Secondly, Brihati speaks on the police and their inability to listen to complaints or act against abusive partners. Like the legal system, reform to these factors would lower perpetrators feeling of immunity. Lastly, she speaks on the ways girls are taught to act in relationships and the responsibility of her parents to provide unwavering support. Brihati's suggestion is for parents to empower their daughters to demand safe relationships and to communicate they

will always protect her. She believes these changes would increase women's freedom and decrease the perpetrators' ability to subjugate their partners.

Nitya and Chandani, both residents and employees at the rehab center, shared their aspirations for working in environments outside of Snehalaya. Chandani said, "I will take divorce and I will work in company I will do some job and I will live alone." Chandani had previously shared that she would ideally return home but expressed here a willingness to work and live independently if she must. This decision shows confidence in herself and a fearlessness in the decision that would challenge conventional gender roles. Nitya echoed this feeling of confidence when she spoke about being a fast learner and her ability to pick up a wide variety of vocational skills in order to provide for her family. This is particularly important for Nitya who spoke about the regrettable decisions she has made and the cause being low self-esteem. Challenging social norms in similar ways, these women display pride in themselves and high self-confidence.

### ***Feelings Towards Husband***

In this section, respondents' feelings towards their husbands were divided simply into, positive emotions and negative emotions. Although an incredibly complex emotional circumstance, this section aims to find commonalities between those who reported positive emotions towards their husband and those who reported negative ones. Some positive emotions presented were an eagerness to return to their husband, admiration for their husband, and wishing for his safety. Negative emotions presented were not wanting to remain in contact, and eagerness for divorce finalization. Interestingly, the sample was evenly divided on this topic; Brihati and Asmita harboring negative emotions and Nitya and Chandani with positive emotions. The obvious unique commonality between Brihati and Asmita appears to be the longer amount of time since their separations. Brihati found

Snehalaya in 2019 but has been separated from her husband since 2014. Asmita initially came to Snehalaya in 2016, after a brief return home, she has been back since 2018.

Comparatively, Chandani and Nitya are more recently separated. Nitya's separation took place this past April (2022) and Chandani's this past July (2022). This finding concluded that among this sample, positive attitudes towards abusive husbands decrease over time. It is also likely that Asmita and Brihati's lengthier involvement with Snehalaya; and the empowerment, independence, and self-determination this organization instills in its beneficiaries, has impacted their attitudes towards their abusive partners.

Examples of these sentiments are exemplified by Brihati and Asmita not wanting communication with their husband. Asmita reported that her husband often tries to get in touch with her and that she has had to take measures to avoid him. She said, "[I] told the authorities if he comes around asking for me tell him I don't live here, I've left." Brihati reported similar experiences, having to avoid her husband's attempts to contact her. Despite living alone, holding a job, and having legal support from Snehalaya, Brihati says, "Now also I just want to leave him. Now also, I'm not free, I'm his wife. I want to I have filed mutual consent." After experiencing severe domestic violence from her husband, she has struggled against her maternal family, her workplace, and the justice system, yet her marriage continues to haunt her. This quote reflects a sense of urgency to finalize her divorce in court and no remanence of admiration for her husband.

Chandani and Nitya have been separated from their husbands for less than a year and although both remain emotionally attached to them, the degree varies. Nitya recalled many times she went to the police about her husband's violence, on multiple occasions these instances resulted in her returning with him and dismissing the case. Nitya said that when the police detained him and beat him, she wouldn't like it. Today her parents are encouraging her to take legal action against him, but she remains hesitant about these filings. This hesitation

to file for divorce, especially compared to Brihati's urgency, expresses remaining feelings of love, sympathy, and compassion for her husband.

Chandani on the hand, expressed regret towards filing for divorce. She said that her husband does shows her love, he loves their children, and does not beat them. She remains eager to return home, she said, "I want to unite with my husband, I want to go back home, live with him." This quote reflects remaining feelings of love for her husband despite his previous abuse. At a later point, Chandani explained that her husband and his family refused to let her take her children with her to Snehalaya. Chandani recalls what her mother in-law told her, "She says...your kids don't need you, I will give them property and give them everything." It's clear that in addition to the physical abuse she has encountered, her marital family has taken a way her agency as a mother. Although being away from her home was the right decision for her safety, it was incredibly hard for her leave her children. In this way, the primary factor that has kept Chandani from moving on from her abusive husband is the control that he and his family have over her children.

### ***Reflection on Supportive or Influential Figures***

This section looks to identify people in the participants' lives who were influential or supportive figures. These people are important because they influenced the participants in ways which allowed them to seek freedom from their abusive circumstances. Somehow, against many social and cultural forces that cause most domestic violence cases to go unreported, the women of this study took agency over their lives. The purpose of this line of questioning, and of this section, is to determine who these people were, where they existed, and what they taught the participant.

Many participants referred to their parents as support systems and figures who they continue to rely on today. Although Nitya's relationship with her parents was strained

because her husband's abusive tendencies, when Nitya's situation became more severe and she needed a place of refuge, her parents were there for her. Prior to Nitya's final departure from her husband, she mentioned her sister as another person who helped her when she needed brief time away from her husband. Similar reliance on their natal family is exemplified by Chandani's experience when she turned to her brother for financial support. These two scenarios reflect strong relationships with their natal family and could be because a shared experience when growing up. When asked about how they were treated growing up compared to their brothers, both Chandani and Nitya expressed there was no such difference. Although the accuracy of this statement is questionable as gender-based differential treatment can be an allusive and intangible phenomenon, this commonality is nonetheless significant. Their perception, or memory, of equal treatment is not something that Asmita or Brihati expressed when asked the same question. This reflects that among the study's participants, equal treatment from parents during childhood correlates to greater support during experiences of domestic violence in adulthood.

Throughout Brihati's marriage, divorce litigation, and kidnapping, she said she did not have much support. However, she mentioned a few people in passing, people who saw her in need and lent a hand. For example, the day after her husband was involved in murdering his friend's wife, she remembered a group of students who lived in a flat nearby and overheard the violence. She said their support intimidated her husband and caused him to act much less violent. She also mentions a female police officer who listened and believed her story, something that male officers were not doing. Examples of relatively random acts of kindness from people unconnected to the participants or their husbands are exemplified by others'. After Chandani left her husband, she went to the train station where she lived for a brief time. While there, Chandani mentioned a taxi driver who saw she was injured and offered to drive her to Snehalaya's rehab center. Nitya mentioned the family living in the



apartment next to hers who would host her for dinner when she needed a break from her husband. These stories show the importance of seemingly random individuals whose small acts of kindness drastically changed the participants' lives.

Brihati also talked about support from her mother in-law, an experience mirrored by Nitya with her mother in-law and by Chandani and her relationship with her father in-law. Chandani's father in-law passed away six months after she married her husband but before his passing, she did not experience issues of violence in her home. She remembered how he treated her with respect and would help her resolve conflict with the rest of the family. Nitya lived with her mother in-law for the first year of her marriage but moved out because Nitya's husband was abusive towards her. She said, regarding the marriage prior to her mother in-law's departure, "it was very smooth and nice because all the fighting— she was taking on herself." In Brihati's case, her mother in-law understood her son's bad habits and tried to help her in a few instances but was unable to intervene because she lived nearly two hours away. Brihati praised her mother in-law for her support saying, "my mother in-law who has helped me so much, she also told her son- if you harass the girl, I will file complaint against you." Her mother in-law's willingness to file a complaint against her own son shows the great extent of her support. The support these participants experienced from their marital families defy the dominant cultural belief that in-laws are the sources of domestic violence.

Lastly, when questioned about her upbringing and about influential figures in her childhood, Brihati mentioned a former student who spoke to her class. She reflected on the female student who had a large impact on her, describing the experience as "inspirational," and later said, "She became class one officer... when I saw her, I decided [I will] become like her." As a woman from a similar background and a graduate of the same school, this woman had a big impact on Brihati. She displayed, by example, that it is possible to seek higher education, become financially successful, and achieve career goals. This reflection exhibits

the importance of representation in young women's lives and the benefit these influential figures can greatly have on the audience's self-esteem, goal-setting ability, and career decisions.

## **Conclusion**

Through in-depth interviews with beneficiaries at Snehalaya, this project was able to greatly improve the understanding of domestic violence survivors and their struggle for safety. Within its first section the study examined the many potential sources of violence from survivors' natal families, marital families, and their husbands. Next, it investigated the personal, social, and economic barriers survivors face when seeking freedom from their abusers. In the second section, this study examined the complexities of separation triggering events and how they are due to many compounding variables. In the last section, the study investigated the participants current motivations, designating children's well-being and personal career endeavors as main driving forces. It also sought to understand participants' current feelings towards their husbands, noticing both positive and negative feelings. Finally, it examined influential people in survivors' lives who provided necessary guidance or counseling that assisted in their recover. By conducting this research, the researcher hopes relevant knowledge will be added to the field of domestic violence research in India.

## **Discussion**

One of the key findings of this project determined that women from higher classes were not necessarily more likely to possess greater social or economic freedom. This was because women from lower classes were more likely to be responsible for some or all of their family's income. In more economically comfortable homes, families were able to retain more traditional gender roles, with women strictly participating in domestic labor. This led to

fewer vocational skills, financial management skills, and other knowledge needed for independent living. When women from these backgrounds were subjected to domestic violence, they lacked the necessary tools to leave their partners, whereas women from lower economic positions were more likely to have the income and financial independence to live on their own. This finding is interesting because the assumption many have of educated or high-class women, is that their status is protective against domestic violence. Although not entirely false, high-status survivors of violence face very different social and cultural pressures. For example, many assume a woman from this background would be able to stand up against her abuser, leading to greater shame and fear of judgment when violence occurs. This might cause fewer women coming forward and would lead to lower progress towards empowerment and freedom in this population.

In a similar analysis, its important discuss how Brahmanical patriarchal structures victimize men as well as women. Firstly, men also experience domestic violence, and as is true with women of higher status, men are more pressured to remain silent about their abuse. Gender roles expect men's physical strength to protect them against domestic violence but when cases occur, they have less access to legal and social support. Despite all the factors causing women to stay in their abusive relationships; legally, a wife's claim against her husband regarding domestic violence is far more accepts than a husband's. Furthermore, male perpetrators of violence are also victims to this oppressive system. The narrow and strict gender roles force men to withhold their emotions, resort to violent problem solving, and unhealthy habits such as alcoholism or substance abuse. These men will go their entire lives being aggressive, unhappy, and unhealthy people. In the end, the perpetrators of violence are far less liberated than the survivors of violence who have escaped their abusive partners.

Through many interviews with professional social workers, legal advisors, and with the project's primary subjects, this research discovered many aspects of the cultural barriers

facing survivors of domestic violence. Within this section, it is important to discuss how some of these issues could be alleviated or reformed. A primary sector in need of reform is the justice system and law enforcement. These institutions are known to be highly corrupted and ineffective, causing citizens to lose faith in their ability to operate properly. In turn, perpetrators do not fear repercussions for their actions and recipients of violence do not view legal assistance as a viable solution. Specifically, this study observed many government and non-government programs primarily focusing on survivor's reentrance to their family. Although often a viable solution through counseling and couples therapy, this course of action can be highly detrimental to the survivor's safety and well-being. It is interesting that even within NGOs working to alleviate these issues, they continue to reproduce this problematic pattern. Another issue within the police force is that domestic violence complaints often go ignored due to the abundance of male officers not believing their stories. This issue would be alleviated with higher percentage of female police officers present to listen and file complaints. This issue has been addressed nationally, however, as law requires every station to have at least one female officer. This is not upheld and is representative of another large issue across the country which is the disconnect between Indian penal code and implementation.

Education is another topic worth further discussion because of the important role it plays in children's development. Sex education in particular is an area in which India lacks significant progress. As discussed by Sham Chavan, the head of Snehalaya's legal team, poorer families and single-room households often experience uniquely detrimental sex education. In these cases, parents will avoid being intimate until they believe their children are asleep, however, when children are restless or remain awake, their first encounter with sex is watching their parents. Often these intimacies are not consensual or sexually violent and teach children unhealthy sex practices.

Further discussed by Sham, and many other professionals spoken to throughout this project, was the impact of mobile devices on creating conflict within couples. One reason phones have created conflict is because they increase the opportunity for suspicion between partners, particularly related to extra-marital relations. A wife spending too much time on her phone may be cause for a husband to assume she is talking to someone else. Furthermore, spending significant amount of time on individual devices leaves less time for each other, disconnects them from one another. Sham also discussed the impact of targeted advertisements and how they may cause added suspicion between partners.

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### Appendix- Interview Questionnaire

1. What does society think about widowed women?
2. How does society view women who marry outside of their caste?
3. Can you tell me about, growing up were you treated differently than you brothers?
  - a. Did your brother go to the same school as you?
  - b. Did your brother receive more schooling than you did?
  - c. Are your brothers married?
4. How do you think society views women who are divorced?
5. What are the responsibilities of husbands and wives in marriage?
6. When you married, how old were you?
  - a. Was your marriage arranged or love marriage?
  - b. Did you live in a joint-home, or did you and your husband live alone?
  - c. Was there a dowry attached to your marriage?
  - d. During your marriage, was your husband an alcoholic?
7. How soon after you got married did the abuse begin?
8. Where are you from?
9. When did you come to Snehalaya
  - a. How did you find Snehalaya
10. What was you husbands' occupation?
11. When you were married, did you also work?
12. Do you have your own bank account?
  - a. Could you take out money without your husband's permission?
13. How many children do you have?
  - a. How old are they?
14. How old are you?
15. What was your relationship like with your marital family?
16. What is your relationship like with your natal family?
  - a. What is your relationship like with your siblings?
17. What are you hopes for the future?
18. How do you feel towards your husband today?
19. Can you point to any supportive people in your life that helped you through your struggle?

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