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Abstract

Indian mothers-in law are consistently legally implicated in violence against their daughters-in-law, particularly in dowry-related cases. This paper explores whether current sociological, psycho-dynamic and feminist explanations are adequate, arguing that policy and research must incorporate deeper understandings of the relationship between violence, abuse and the continuum of everyday practices of power and control in middle-class Indian households if women are to be protected from abuse. Critically, policy and research must recognise the impact of the socio-cultural preference for sons. Daughters are viewed as inferior; however, mothers to sons enjoy a relatively elevated position within the family. Even leaving aside issues of socialisation into traditional gender roles, this encourages a particularly close bond between mothers and sons that causes tensions between mothers- and daughters-in-law once sons marry. These tensions are complicated by the normative nature of patrilocality where sons stay within their parents' home even after marriage, while married women join their husbands in their in-laws household. Thus, mothers-in-law, having finally obtained a relative position of power, often have a vested interest in perpetuating practices of control and power over their daughters-in-law. This represents a culturally specific form of patriarchal bargain that has significant implications regarding addressing the gender inequalities endemic in Indian society, with equally distinct psychological implications.

Key Words: mother-in-law violence, dowry violence, discourse

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Introduction

Violence perpetrated by women causes considerable discomfort to feminists: the fact that some women perpetrate violence against other women erodes many cross-cultural ideals of solidarity between women across generations and social classes. Western feminist debates on violence against women have largely concentrated on violence committed by men as there is abundant evidence that this is the most endemic form of gender-based violence (Radford & Russell, 1992). Indeed, studies in the UK indicate that 92% of domestic violence perpetrators are men, and 91% of victims are women (Hester, 2009).

However, recent feminist research has explored the fact that, although such cases are relatively rare, some women do perpetrate violence in intimate relationships, whether these are same sex or heterosexual (Donovan, Hester, Holmes & McCarry, 2006). However, the focus in the West has been on cases in which women have abused children (Fitzroy, 2001) and instances of retributive or retaliatory violence (Walker, 1989) in which battered women kill their violent male partners (Birch, 1993; Ahluwalia & Gupta, 1997; Ballinger, 2000). Recently, the discussion has expanded to encompass women engaged in political violence (Hamilton, 2007) and women in violent armed conflict, including female suicide bombers (Brunner, 2005).

However, within the Indian context, there is substantial evidence of violence perpetrated by women, particularly female infanticide, though it is also not uncommon for women to take part in violent communal conflicts (Miller, 1981; Hegde, 1999; Sudha & Irudaya Rajan, 2002). Despite this, even notorious cases of domestic or dowry violence where the violence is perpetrated by the woman's mother-in-law have received little attention from academics and policy-makers. Although women represent less than 4% of the total prison population in India (Walmsley, 2006), mothers-in-law are the most likely persons to be convicted, and to serve custodial sentences, in cases of dowry-related deaths, coming a close second to husbands (Palkar, 2003). Moreover, even when abuse does not culminate in death, there is growing evidence that many Indian women suffer violence at the hands of their mother-in-law (Dave & Solanki, 2000; Gangoli & Rew, 2011). While Indian feminists have acknowledged violence by mothers-in-law against daughters-in-law, yet there has been little work done to explore the implications of this violence for both sociological and feminist theories. Therefore, Fitzroy, talking about Australian women offenders, underlines the need to "develop an understanding of women's oppression in the broad social fabric of their everyday lives, but still highlight women's agency and make women accountable for the violent crimes they choose to commit" (Firzroy, 2001, p. 26): this resonates with the Indian context.

The first part of the paper reviews sociological and psycho-dynamic analyses of middle-class Indian households, exploring how the socio-cultural norms and traditions that structure these households affect the mother and daughter-in-law dynamic as practices that embody structures of power and control within the patriarchal bargain. The second part examines feminist explanations of mother versus daughter-in-law violence in India, particularly on dowry violence. Using Kandiyoti's seminal paper (1988), we explore the phenomena of mother-in-law violence against daughters-in-law as a culturally specific form of 'patriarchal bargain' between the mother-in-law and the extended household. In her discussion of 'classic patriarchy', Kandiyoti points to the centrality of the mother and daughter-in-law dyad in Middle Eastern, and South and South-East Asian, familial systems. In India, the mother- and daughter-in-law dynamic is especially significant given that the culture is structured by a model of patriarchy that stresses "corporate male-headed entities rather than more autonomous mother and child units" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). Women derive power from being mothers of sons within this set up, but as mothers and wives are inextricably

connecting with maintaining male honour and prestige. Kandiyoti also suggests that the mother- and daughter-in-law dynamic is cyclically reproduced through generations of the patrilocally extended household: for the daughter-in-law, "the deprivation and hardship she experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279).

Our central concern is to use a conceptual framework based on everyday ideas of power and control to develop this discussion to create an enhanced understanding of this violence that could, in turn, be used in policy development. Critically, rather than attempting to isolate this relationship from those involving the rest of the extended household, we aim to explore the broader implications of this relationship, including on Indian patriarchal structures. Our discussion responds to Kandiyoti's own critique of her patriarchal bargain argument, which she later recognised as denying women's agency and resistance to the bargain (Kandiyoti, 1998); in line with Moore (1994), she acknowledges that the cultural and the symbolic are equally constitutive of the socio-economic inequality within the mother and daughter-in-law relationship and the extended household. However, Kandiyoti's conception of the patriarchal bargain assumes that women are on the whole unaware of the degree of their participation and co-option within the classic patriarchal model.

As Talwar Oldenburg has pointed out, the violent nature of marital life for the daughter-in-law is currently mediated through legislative and popular discourses on 'dowry violence'; however, "the unidimensionality of dowry legislation ... stifles the voices of women and obscures the real violence that takes place within the home" (Oldenburg, 2002, p. 219). Indeed, research (Gangoli, 2007; Kishwar, 2000) indicates that there are cases in which the police and/or lawyers have pressurised young women to describe their experiences of domestic violence and marital discord as dowry-related: this, in turn, has become a convenient shorthand for culturally acceptable reasons for marital breakdown. However, as yet no research has explored the range of forms that this type of violence takes, nor how ideas of power and control are acted out within the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship.

Everyday practices of power and control

Ideas of power and control are often employed, particularly in the North American context, to explain both the violence perpetrated by men against intimate partners and other forms of domestic violence, including abuse committed by victims' adult children (Brandl, 2000). The strength of the power and control model is that it identifies how these dynamics feed into, and are legitimised by, violence. Further, it erases the false distinction between emotional abuse – often trivialised as 'conflict' – and physical violence, viewing both as lying within a single continuum of abusive actions. Although the model was constructed to explain the experiences of white American women, it has been effectively employed to explain domestic violence in other contexts, including intimate violence against Samoan women in New Zealand (Crichton-Hill, 2001).

However, analyses of mother on daughters-in-law violence need to expand to incorporate both an understanding of the everyday embodiment of these dynamics in traditional practices and the findings of contemporary sociological work on Indian familial systems. Some everyday abusive practices may be both intentional and strategic, especially when they are backed by other members of the household through, for instance, threats to send the woman in question back to her natal household or refuse her access to her children. Others are culturally and habitually embodied: for instance, the community often plays a role in monitoring and even controlling women's movements

outside the household. Other ways of controlling the daughters-in-law include exerting control over their clothes and appearance, belittling their natal household for failing to provide an adequate dowry, and/or preventing them from exercising their reproductive rights. While there is a wealth of sociological and anthropological literature on the Indian household; middle-class Hindu families have formed the focus of much of the literature on mother versus daughter-in-law violence.

As Kandiyoti herself has pointed out that, the classic model of patriarchy needs to be subjected to closer class-based analysis (Kandiyoti, 1988: 275), not least because the Indian middle class, in particular, is undergoing substantial change, especially in urban areas. The Indian middle class is numerically large, though of its size estimates range between 50 million (Singh, 2009) and 300 million (Sharma, 2000). The middle class is projected to increase in the next fifteen years, potentially comprising 41% of the country's population within the next two decades (Singh, 2009). However, there is enormous diversity of practice in India, particularly between the North and the South; in the South, women consistently exhibit "greater female autonomy and more favourable demographic performance" (Dyson and Moore, 1983: 35). They argue further that the North Indian kinship and marriage systems based on village exogamy compared with South Indian systems of cousin marriages have led to lower rates of female seclusion and a more favourable sex ratio for women in South India than in the North (Dyson and Moore, 1983).

Despite these differences, the middle class at a national level is broadly emblematic and representative of important potential changes in women's position in society and, thus, in the family, not least because different brackets within the middle class are currently undergoing major changes in attitudes to notions of wifely duty and motherhood. This is not least because globalisation has contributed to the erosion of some regional differences and the homogenisation of gender roles (Gangoli, 2007), while leading to the renegotiation of familial roles for women. Recent work by Donner (2008) has shown that middle class Indian motherhood does not simply represent a life of submission; instead, the middle class maternal body is 're-inscribed' through the practices and the technologies of modern childbearing and class-based social change. Young middle class women are still largely expected to be good wives and mothers, but globalisation has reshaped the ways in which they can perform these roles. For example, middle class women's education is seen to perform a dual role in liberalised India, they are expected to work outside the home, but also to use their education to look after their children well, and to educate them. The mother and daughter-in law dynamic is similarly being negotiated regarding the forms of motherhood and wifely duty that are considered socio-culturally legitimate, especially concerning women's degree of participation in both the formal and informal labour force and their control over their own income. However, it is urban lower-middle class households that are most commonly involved in dowry violence cases in which the mother-in-law is the chief perpetrator (Talwar Oldenburg, 2002) and this may have to do with consumerist and class expectations.

The structural dynamics of the household have important implications for the mother-in-law's position within it and the forms of power and control that she can assert. As far as the familial system is concerned, there are three key socio-cultural norms regarding household relations that cause tensions within the mother and daughter-in-law relationship: first, the cultural devaluation of girls and the preference for sons; second, the fact that the centrality of marriage for women conflicts with the parallel importance of maintaining a joint virilocal household, and; third, the importance of the mother-son relationship.

Much has been made of the potentially liberating affect of globalisation through the "transformed media landscape and the increased celebration of cosmopolitan lifestyles" (Derné, 2005: 37), not least with cultures that prefer sons to daughters (Kakar, 2000). However, this hope

has not yet been borne out by Indian demographic trends, which continue to demonstrate a sex ratio skewed in favour of men. The most recent census figures indicate that there are 933 females per 1000 males. India's 'missing women' have been a key social policy concern since the early 1990s (Sen, 1992). It is widely acknowledged that girls are devalued in Indian society, while a preference for sons is the norm (Kapadia, 2002; Gill & Mitra-Kahn, 2009). This preference is tied to the fact that once daughters are married they usually go to live within the virilocal home (i.e. the house of their husband's parents): sons remain at home, acting as a crutch for their parents in old age. The roots of this preference lie in the norms around inheritance, particularly of land, that grow out of these patterns of joint residence: in the 'classic' type of patriarchy outlined by Kandiyoti, "the daughter has no claim on her father's patrimony" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279). Although this has changed following revisions to the Hindu Code (1956) and changes in property rights for women caused by the **Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005**, many key rituals (including the kapalakriya and shradha death rituals[i]) can only be performed by men, reinforcing the centrality of male responsibility for the continuity of the patrilineage.

Girl children who survive sex selection procedures and female infanticide are often treated as inferior (Gill & Mitra-Kahn, 2009). They are groomed in appropriate behaviour by their mothers through spending much of their time helping with domestic chores; thus, their childhood and adolescence serve as training for married life. Due to their inferior status, girls often have less access to food, education and leisure time than their brothers. However, they are simultaneously seen as repositories of household honour and prestige; often their every act and utterance is closely scrutinised as inappropriate behaviour by a family's womenfolk threatens the whole family's honour and, thus, their marriage prospects (Kakar, 1978; Derné, 1994; Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004).

Scrutiny of girls' sexual behaviour is maintained by the older women of the household, primarily mothers, sisters and aunts. Where strict rules of gender segregation apply for example, control over women and girls' mobility, compulsory purdah or veiling, women's spaces are only partially regulated by male control; older women, in their roles as mothers and eventually mothers-in-law, therefore exercise a great deal of power over their daughters and daughters-in-law (Ballard, n.d.). Equally, brothers enjoy power over their sisters, whether older or younger; through this, boys are socialised into 'appropriate' masculine behaviours and attitudes. The monitoring of the behaviour of young women is usually continued within their new households after marriage, primarily by mothers- and sisters-in-law.

Mothers-in-law traditionally enjoy forms of power over their daughters-in-law that are manifested in numerous everyday actions and verbal statements, while girls are socialised to accept rather than challenge these. However, the degree of restriction on a daughter-in-law's spatial freedom is key to the power and control the mother-in-law has over her and, thus, to the potential for this relationship to become violent. Spatial control includes not allowing women to go out alone, not letting them see their parents, and preventing them from working. A recent national survey of married women between the ages of 15 and 49 revealed that one in six working women nationwide has no say in how her earnings are spent as her husband and/or in-laws make all the family's financial decisions. Even in the two groups of women where one may expect to see most control over their income, that is, the oldest age-group of working women, and the group of the wealthiest and the most highly educated women, only 28-31% had control over their wages. Most married women also had little or no freedom of movement: only half were allowed to go shopping or to a health facility alone, while 62% were not allowed to travel unaccompanied outside their city or village (Infochange, 2007).

While at one level it could be argued that the class dimension of the patriarchal bargain could hinge on the degree that the daughter-in-law is able to either ameliorate her position by claiming her right to participate in certain social spaces, such as the informal or formal labour force, and therefore reduce her financial dependence on her marital family. However, strong and independent women tend to suffer most as when they are defiant they are often subjected to violent attempts to control their behaviour (Kishwar, 1997, 2000), and this is not confined to India (Stark, 2007). In India, there is certainly some evidence to suggest that financially independent women are subject to acts of violence within the family because they are seen as a threat to familial stability (c.f. Gangoli, 2007).

Therefore, daughters are seen as, at best, paraya dhan (essentially 'someone else's wealth': they are seen as belonging to the household of their future husbands) and, at worst, as social and economic burdens to be jettisoned quickly. Either way, daughters often find it difficult to feel a sense of absolute belonging in their natal household; this sense of isolation is intensified when they are married and move to their marital home. On marriage, a young woman is placed in unfamiliar circumstances, among unfamiliar people, and is expected to adjust to her husband's family. Ultimately, the degree of power and control that husbands and in-laws hold over new brides lie in the extent of the break between brides and their natal kin group. Critically, the mother-in-law often plays a key part in legitimising the break, either through consolation or through more authoritarian justifications for the severance of the bride's natal ties. Moreover, it is the mother-in-law who often takes the chief role in perpetuating the preference for sons through her desire that her son should have sons, not daughters, of his own (Bumiller, 1990; Kakar, 1978).

Mothers, sons and daughters-in-law

Sociologists have noted the centrality of marriage in Indian society (Stein, 1988) while acknowledging that it is not simply the marital relationship that is important, but also the relationship of the married couple with the extended household. Marriage for Hindu women is almost inescapable; it is a major life-cycle ritual for women that fundamentally alters their status, group affiliation and future life course, including motherhood. However, it is not necessarily a nurturing space, but a potentially dangerous one full of emotional and social contradictions and ambiguities (Fruzetti, 1982; Gangoli, 2007).

The social ideal amongst north Indian lower middle-class men is to live in a joint household with their parents, brothers, wives and children (Derné, 1994, 2005). Arranged marriages are the preferred option for the bulk of Indian youth (Jejeebhoy, Singh, Santhya, Mohanty, , Acharya, Ram & Ram, 2009). However, young Indian women may not share this preference for living with their husband's extended family: this is often a source of tension between mothers- and daughters-in-law. Moreover, in spite of the marriage representing a symbolic end to the relationship between the bride and her natal household, the bride's household may continue to have financial and ritual obligations to the bride's new household that continue for a lifetime: these obligations are made manifest in the giving of gifts every time the bride returns from a visit to her natal household (Wadley, 1980).

The dynamic between mothers- and daughters-in-law changes once the daughter-in-law has children. As the joint household system weakens the possibility of strong sexual and romantic connections between husband and wife, women often feel isolated within the marital household; therefore, married women are often eager to get pregnant quickly. However, they are

especially keen to give birth to sons. While maternal love is reified and exalted as it offers women an emotional outlet, pervasive son preferences mean that mothers of sons are seen as both fortunate and auspicious (Bumiller, 1990). Indeed, there is usually a marked and often permanent improvement in women's status in both their marital and natal home after they become mother to one or more sons. Thus, being the mother of a son does not merely yield short term benefits, but lifelong ones, not least with the likelihood of one day becoming a mother-in-law. For this reason, Indian mothers tend to develop very close relationships with their sons (Kakar, 1978), which can make separation, once the son reaches adulthood, difficult for both.

Indeed, supporters of Kakar's thesis argue that the close connection between Indian mothers and sons means that mothers find it difficult, if not impossible, to share their sons with another woman, even as infants (Nagpal, 2000); these problems become even more pronounced when the son marries. Therefore, the mother- and daughter-in-law relationship is often complicated by the mother-in-law's desire to thwart the development of intimacy between her son and his wife. This fact lies at the sociological and psycho-dynamic heart of the patriarchal bargain, impinging on wives' ability to develop a deep rapport with their husbands: this has significant implications for both women's role in decision-making and the fulfilment of their romantic dreams that may consolidate the distance between wife and husband (Sonpar, 2005; Derné 1994) as well as feeding into the perpetuation of norms concerning masculine economic independence and control of women.

After marriage, middle-class Indian women become increasingly emotionally invested in the idea of romantic love; for instance, Kakar (1989) comments on the importance of the idealised idea of the jodi (i.e. 'pair'), with its connotations of sexual fulfilment and companionship within marriage. However, this can conflict with familial and societal expectations that the ideal daughter-in-law should be focussed on serving her wider household, especially her parents-in-law. In addition, members of the son's household, especially the mother-in-law, may fear that a close sexual and romantic tie between the couple could lead to separation from the son, both emotionally and spatially. Thus, although in the context of the Indian family sexuality is seen as inferior to motherhood and, thus, young married women are viewed as less worthy of respect than mothers (Kishwar, 1997), their sexual potential is simultaneously seen as a threat to the security of the extended household. Therefore, norms regarding gender segregation are seen as an important means of regulating young women's behaviour, at least partially to restrict their ability to bond with their husbands; mothers-in-law commonly obstruct moments of privacy (Sonpar, 2005) by interrupting or ensuring that their daughters-in-law are too busy with household chores to have opportunities to be alone with their husbands.

Psychoanalytical explanations often posit the issue in relational terms with the oedipal mother-son relationship being threatened by the sexualised presence of the wife. The resultant tension often causes conflict between older and younger women, though not all of this conflict is violent. The older woman (i.e. the mother-in-law), having suffered the trials and tribulations of being a young woman in an Indian household, first as a daughter and then as a daughter-in-law, is loath to sacrifice her dominant position as a "demi-matriarch" (Nagpal, 2000, p. 299); she comes to identify closely with the same traditions that proved so oppressive during her own youth now that she is a beneficiary of these practices. Thus, for a variety of interconnected reasons, mothers-in-law play a major role in encouraging daughters-in-law to adhere to the notion that domestic labour is the ideal form of wifely duty. Moreover, for mothers-in-law to be accorded respect for being good mothers, they must be seen to play their part in ensuring that the younger

women in the family do not intentionally or unintentionally damage the family's collective honour: in other words, they must take an active role in exerting power and control over the younger women in the household, regulating their behaviour in line with socio-cultural norms and traditions. However, jealous husbands often perceive dishonour where there is none, encouraging their mothers to abuse their wives for conducting themselves in an 'inappropriate manner', imagined affairs, or even simply wearing what they see as sexually provocative clothes. Thus, the men in a household may well incite the mother-in-law to violence by stressing her responsibility for keeping her daughters-in-law in line.

Although these sociological and psycho-dynamic theories explain the nature and causes of the tension between mothers- and daughters-in-law, they do not explain when or why this often tense relationship will turn conflictual and violent. While conflict in mother- and daughter-in-law relationships may be endemic, violence is not. The next section explores why current feminist conceptualisations of mother versus daughter-in-law violence offer inadequate explanations of this phenomenon, not least because these theories do not address how different forms of violence relate to the continuum of everyday practices used to exert power and control in middle class Indian families.

Feminist explanations of violence against women

Generally, scholars studying violence against women in India have tended to explain violence committed by women in strategic and functionalist terms: that is, about what women may gain from this violence. Women who commit infanticide or abort female foetuses have often been represented within feminist discourses as victims of patriarchy, coerced or indoctrinated into upholding ideals of son preference (c.f. Gangoli, 1998) because, especially in South Asia, women benefit from having sons and, conversely, suffer from having daughters (Bumiller, 1990; Hegde, 1999). Thus, female infanticide can, at a very basic level, be seen as an act of self-interest by mothers.

Explanations of mother-in-law violence often hinge on the traditional custom of the bride's household giving the bridegroom's household a dowry or wedding gift. Dowry signifies that women are an economic burden on the marital family, and serves as compensation paid by the natal family to the marital family. A social practice primarily by upper caste Hindu families, it has recently spread to other castes and communities (Menski, 1998), exacerbating women's inferior status. Moreover, the notion of dowry has been transformed, through the processes of both commodification and globalisation, from a gift-giving relationship at the point of marriage to a means of extortion by the groom and his household that sometimes leads to violence. Often the mother-in-law plays a critical role in dowry violence (Block & Rao, 2002), which is often described as retribution for an inadequate dowry (Kumari, 1989; Waters, 1999). The functionalist explanation here hinges on the economic benefits that dowry brings to the marital family, and by extension to the mother-in-law.

Dowry murders have become increasingly common since the 1970s (Kumari, 1989; Rudd, 2001), and this has been attributed to an increase in consumerism. In the 1980s, Indian feminists campaigned successfully for domestic violence and dowry-related violence to be recognised as important social problems. This led to a number of changes in the law, including amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act. In 1983, the Indian Penal Code was also amended: the addition of Section 498A specifically criminalised domestic violence. However, this legislation has primarily been invoked in dowry-related cases rather than other domestic violence

ones. Furthermore, in 2005, India passed the Domestic Violence Act, offering civil protection to women experiencing domestic violence. On paper, the Act appears to distinguish between dowry violence and domestic violence, extending women's rights to matrimonial property, custody of children in domestic violence cases, and compensation. However, case law has interpreted this legislation primarily through the lens of dowry violence (Gangoli, 2007). The gendered consequences of women's violence against other women have been subsumed through this focus on dowry-related abuse rather than other forms of domestic violence. This leads to an elision of the differences between dowry related murders and other forms of domestic violence. This is significant because dowry related murders are legally and socially constructed as women's violence against women, i.e. mothers in law as perpetrators (Gangoli & Rew, 2011), and domestic violence as male violence against women.

One of the most common ways in which women were murdered in fatal dowry violence cases was immolation, or what was popularly construed as 'bride burning'[ii], in the 1980s and 1990s. As immolation often destroys much if not all forensic evidence, obscuring any clues to whether a death is the result of suicide, murder or an accident, it represents a shrewd way to kill and get away with it. Moreover, Indian feminists have claimed that the boundaries between suicide and murder blur in many cases as constant harassment by in-laws and husbands often pushes married women to commit suicide (Waters, 1999).

Talwar Olderburg (2002) cogently outlines the complex historical causes and antecedents of the current problem of dowry violence. For example, in the northern state of Punjab, the interaction between the masculine economy, embodied in an increased skew in the sex ratio, and colonial attitudes towards land tenure. Shifts in land tenure in the Punjab included the curtailing of women's rights to ancestral land, and a transfer of power to an intermediate landowning class, who were rewarded for their loyalty to colonial rule in the 1857 anti colonial revolt, by being made landowners, and acted as a comprador class with colonialism (Talbot, 2007). The devaluation of women in these land transactions led to women being unable to inherit land as they were able under customary law, and dowry became the sole form of female inheritance. Further, the strengthening of the rural elite led to increased impoverishment and rural debt, and pushed working class men to secure jobs within the emerging colonial state, led to an increased preference for sons. Post independence, shifts to land rights has given women the right over property, but this has often taken a tokenist form – with for example, women giving up their property rights in favour of their brothers or husbands to preserve their position in the natal family – and culturally, for the majority of Indian women, dowry takes the primary form of inheritance (Gangoli, 2007; Kishwar, 2001).

The links between dowry and dowry related violence may not be automatic, but the role of the extended family in dowry related and other forms of domestic violence is indisputable. In their study of battered women in India, Panchanadeswaran and Koverola (2005) noted that nearly half the women cited encouragement from in-laws as a key causal factor in abuse by their husbands; however, there was little discussion of which in-laws were instrumental. Feminist discussions of dowry violence in India often discuss the 'in-laws' as undifferentiated members of the wider virilocal household who support, condone and legitimise male violence. This sublimation obscures the gendered nature of domestic violence, including dowry violence, where the domestic violence benefits men rather than women.

Further, Kishwar, (1999; 2000) and Talwar Oldenburg (2000) have argued that the overarching discussion of dowry-related violence and conflict with in-laws pushes young women to name these as causes for marital break-up, even when the primary cause may lie elsewhere. Given the general public silence around issues of sexuality in India, young women often do not

feel they can name lack of attraction or sexual compatibility with their husband as legitimate reasons for wanting to end a marriage. However, greedy in-laws and dowry demands are seen as socially acceptable explanations for the collapse of a marriage. Similarly, mother- and daughter-in-law conflict often masks tensions between sons and fathers as it is a more culturally acceptable form of intergenerational tension and, thus, an acceptable reason for the separation of the son from the parental home (Sonpar, 2005).

However, Agnes (1992) and Talwar Oldenburg (2002) argue that there is no automatic connection between dowry violence and domestic violence, though dowry violence often subsumes other forms of household violence perpetuated against the daughter-in-law in legal discourses. Moreover, feminist understandings have only partially penetrated the lawmaking and law enforcement processes associated with mother-versus daughter-in-law violence, not least because forms of culturally sanctioned patriarchal power are still deeply embedded in the law (Gangoli & Rew, 2011). Stark argues that current legal thinking on domestic violence does not take into account the structural roots of women's inequality and their vulnerability to abuse; though Stark's work focuses on violence committed by men, many of his findings hold true regarding women's violence against other women.

Future work on the violent potential inherent in the tensions between mothers and daughters-in-law needs to consider how the social structure of the Indian household is embodied of tendencies towards violence that fall along an oscillating continuum between possible violence and women's agency. These tendencies are best understood through notions of power and control enforced through everyday forms of coercive control in the context of male to female intimate partner violence, which can be experienced as a form of intimate terrorism'(Stark, 2007). Stark's model of coercive power and control sees violence and abuse as everyday humiliations and degradations within the home, including isolation and threats: often, these are a precursor to physical and sexual abuse. However, applying this conceptual framework to the Indian family is complicated by the fact that mother versus daughter-in-law violence is often legally subsumed under the label of dowry violence (Rew and Gangoli, 2011), minimising and often rendering invisible the impact of the specific roles that women play in perpetuating patriarchal power and control in all aspects of household affairs.

Future research and policy work also needs to recognise that the fast pace of urban change following globalisation and liberalisation in India may actually be driving forward improvements in the lives of married women. For example, in urban middle-class families, more money and jobs are in the hands of women, reducing the level of economic inequality between the sexes. Moreover, the divorce rate is 40%, compared to a national average of 1% (George, 2008). Therefore, urban India appears to be changing faster in the area of gender relations than rural India, and it can be postulated that the increase in the divorce rate testifies to the reluctance of women to stay in unhappy marriages. Dowry related abuse perpetrated by mothers-in-law is a popular stated cause for many of these divorces (c.f Talwar-Oldenburg, 2001), however more research is needed to look at the exact nature of this abuse.

As Talwar Oldenburg (2001) and Jaisingh (2009) argue, the increase in legal recourse to domestic violence provisions is also encouraging, especially as data indicates that women are using these laws to challenge established forms of power and control within the household. Meanwhile, there are also indications that mothers-in-law are starting to adopt strategies of appeasement towards their daughters-in-law, particularly in landless, low-income, urban families; (Vera-Sanso, 1999). Vera-Sanso's ethnographic work in Chennai points to the increased vulnerability of mothers-in-law as families become both more independent and more reliant on cash income than control over land,

which also threatens the solidity of the joint household. More of this type of detailed ethnographic work is needed to inform both the production and use of government data on household dynamics, particularly when assessing levels of power, control and possible abuse within the household.

Conclusion

Violence is only ever partially resolved through legal processes (Das, 2000; Harstrup, 2003). The central dilemma for feminists and sociologists seeking to understand and explain violence against women committed by other women is that intruding into an intimate realm of suffering where the testimonials of both victims and offenders require an immediate response often requires a significant amount of time and expertise to render data intelligible (Das, 2000).

Sociological debates on violence and abuse in Indian households are often underpinned by a life cycle approach (Dube, 1988; Wadley, 1980) that addresses the subordinate role of women in the household as daughters, sisters and wives, while also recognising that as mothers to sons and, eventually, mothers-in-law, women can enjoy a relatively elevated position within the home. Thus, mothers have a major stake in maintaining a close relationship with their sons from infancy through to adulthood; this results in tensions with daughters-in-law regarding their ability to achieve (sexual) intimacy with their husbands. It also perpetuates the preference for sons. Gender segregation often provides the context for older women to exert power over younger women in ways that are not directly mediated by male power. Indian feminist conceptualisations of this issue, however, often ignore the specific gendered dimensions of mother-in-law violence, or attempt to understand it (i) in functionalist terms as dowry related violence or (ii) as intended to support violence against women perpetrated by men. Instead, both policy and research needs to develop a deeper understanding of the continuum of violence and abuse involved, and the causes behind it, if these abuses are to be addressed

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[i] *Kapalakriya* involves the breaking of the skull of the corpse before cremation; this symbolises the release of the soul from the body. *Shradha* is an annual ritual that is seen as necessary to guarantee the passage of the soul to heaven.

[ii] A large number of dowry related murders in the 1980s and 1990s took the form of what was popularly called 'bride burning' and took place in the kitchen where young married women were burned alive often after having kerosene thrown on it. Many of these incidents were explained by the family as "cooking accidents" (Hess, 1999: 23) caused by malfunctioning kerosene stoves, which were used extensively by middle class families in the 1970s and 1980s, though kerosene stoves are less common among middle class families now, and replaced by cooking gas. This form of immolation has been linked by some anthropologists as symbolically linked to Sati – or the historic Hindu tradition of upper caste widows immolating themselves on their husband's funeral pyre – it has been argued more recently that immolation may not be a 'cultural' form of gender based violence, as much as a shrewd way of destroying evidence – as forensic evidence is often eradicated in a fire, and also an easy way of constuing murder as a cooking accident or at worse, suicide