

SHORT ARTICLE

Economic violence and its health impacts among married women in an urban slum of Puducherry, South India – An exploratory study

Jyothi Vasudevan¹, Lalithambigai Chellamuthu², Aravainthkumar Muruthy Kavitha³,
Thamizhmaran Sundararajan⁴, Subhojit Dey⁵, Anjali Borhade⁶

^{1,2,3,4}Department of Community Medicine, Mahatma Gandhi Medical College and Research Institute, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, Puducherry;

^{5,6}DISHA Foundation, Nasik-Maharashtra, India

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Dr. Lalithambigai Chellamuthu, Assistant Professor, Department of Community Medicine, Mahatma Gandhi Medical College and Research Institute, Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth, Puducherry 607402

Email: lalli.muthu@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Economic violence prevails to be one of the unexplored domains of intimate partner violence. **Objective:** To explore the perceived forms of economic violence and its health impacts among married women in Puducherry. **Methodology:** A community-based exploratory study was conducted in urban slums in Puducherry. All married women aged 18 to 65 years belonging to low socio-economic status residing in two selected slums were included by purposive sampling. A total of seven focus group discussions were conducted till the point of saturation and manual content analysis done. **Results:** Four major themes emerged, namely: experiences of economic abuse, health impacts of economic abuse, perceived factors influencing economic abuse, and suggested preventive measures for economic abuse. **Conclusion:** Economic abuse against women in India exists in multiple dimensions. It has profound consequences on the physical and psychological health of women.

KEYWORDS

Economic violence, Health impacts, Urban slums, Exploratory study, Puducherry

INTRODUCTION

Economic Violence or abuse has been defined as “controlling a woman's capacity to acquire, utilize, and maintain economic resources which puts her financial stability and potential for self-sufficiency at risk” and is a lesser-explored domain of intimate partner violence.(1) It is important to note that poverty

and socio-economic inequality are both causes and consequences of economic violence.(2) There is a dearth of studies on the prevalence of economic violence in India. Moreover, there is a need to measure economic abuse and understand its effects on women's physical and mental health. With this background, the current study aims to explore the perceived

forms of economic violence and its health impacts among married women in the urban slums of Puducherry, Southern India.

MATERIAL & METHODS

A community-based exploratory study was conducted for a period of two months from 1st August to October, 2022 at two urban slums in Puducherry located around five kilometers apart, populated by migratory workers and labourers. All married women aged 18 to 65 years belonging to low socio-economic status (according to Modified B.G.Prasad Classification), residing continuously for more than one year were included, and moribund and seriously ill and with any diagnosed mental health disorders were excluded.(3)

Purposive sampling was employed and seven FGDs were conducted till the point of saturation. Six to eight women participated in each FGD which lasted for 45 minutes and the discussions were audio-recorded. A phenomenological approach was used in this study which helped in the exploration and description of the subjective views of the women.(4)

A pre-tested, semi-structured interview guide was employed to collect the data. Manual content analysis was performed as per guidelines given by Graneheim and Lundman.(5)

Ethical Consideration: Written informed consent was sought from all participants. The Institute's scientific and ethical committee approval was received before commencement of the study (Ref no. MGMCRI/2022/03/IHEC/24).

RESULTS

The socio-demographic characteristics of the fifty female participants (mean \pm SD age 36 \pm 5.60 years) has been depicted in Table 1. The table 2 illustrates the manual content analysis of focus group discussions.

Experiences of economic abuse

The quotes below illustrate some examples of comments recorded under the category "Preventing financial independence"

"I was working before my marriage. Two months later, I was forced to quit my job as my mother-in-law was unhappy.... she felt that I

would dominate my husband and his family members." (22-year-old diploma holder, currently a homemaker)

"Exploiting resources & situations" was recognized as another category.

"At the time of my marriage, they did not demand dowry but after the birth of my first child, my husband wanted dowry from my parents and threatened to leave..." (24-year-old mother of one child, homemaker)

Health impacts of economic abuse

"Physical impacts" was recognized as a category and the quote below highlight an example from our field notes.

"I used to get beaten up for not giving money to my husband whenever he wanted to drink alcohol..." (46-year-old widow)

Based on the respondents' perspectives, "psychological impacts" were considered as a category. The codes were picked from the following statement.

"Looking at how they treat me and my children I feel dejected with life.... I even had suicidal thoughts..." (37-year-old working as housekeeping in a hospital)

Perceived factors influencing economic abuse

Low educational status, unemployment, and patriarchal society were listed as the "perceived facilitators" for the occurrence of economic violence.

"My parents did not allow me to study, saying that they had to pay large sum of dowry for educated grooms..." (41-year-old housewife educated up to 8th std)

Family support, positive attitude/behavior, and financial freedom were cited as the "perceived barriers". The quote provided here substantiates the same.

"If my parents and siblings were supportive, I would have not ended up with my abusive husband.... Divorce still have stigma in our society" (43-year-old tailor)

Suggested preventive measures for economic abuse

Introducing laws, strict enforcement of laws, help in financial independence, awareness about legal recourses and knowledge on options for financial independence were listed as suggested preventive measures by the respondents.

“Even though anti-dowry laws exist many poor women do not file any case as they are not aware of those laws or are afraid of the process or fear of social stigma... similar laws must be made against economic violence too.” (27-year-old working as a babysitter)

“Self-help groups by women should be given support so that people like us will have a way to stand independently...Loans with lesser rates of interest can be given to women like us for setting up small-scale businesses” (42-year-old catering worker)

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

Socio-demographic characteristics	n= 50 (%)
Age group (in years)	
18-25	7 (14)
26-35	21 (42)
36-45	15 (30)
46-55	4 (8)
56-65	3 (6)
Residence	
Karuvadikuppam slum	22 (44)
Kann doctor thotam slum	28 (56)
Education	
Illiterate	6 (12)
Primary school level	14 (28)
Middle school level	19 (38)
High school level	6 (12)
Higher secondary school level	4 (8)
Diploma	1 (2)
Occupation	
Homemaker/ unemployed	17 (34)
Unskilled	18 (36)
Semi-skilled	10 (20)
Skilled	2 (4)
Clerical/shop owner	3 (6)
Socio-economic status (according to Modified B.G. Prasad classification)	
Lower class	28 (56)
Upper lower class	16 (32)
Lower middle class	6 (12)
Religion	
Hindu	39 (78)
Christian	9 (18)
Muslim	2 (4)
Marital status	
Currently married	43 (86)
Divorced/ Separated/ Widowed	7 (14)
Type of family	
Nuclear	21 (42)
Joint/extended/ others	29 (58)
Family size	
1-3	9 (18)
4-6	29 (58)
>6	12 (24)
Number of living children	
1-2	43 (86)
3-4	4 (8)
>4	3 (6)

Table 2: Manual content analysis of FGDs

Themes	Categories	Codes
Experiences of economic abuse	Preventing financial independence	Preventing women to work Denying legally owned property Excluding from financial decision-making
	Exploiting resources & situations	Demanding dowry Using money earned by women Refusal to contribute for household expenses
Health impacts of economic abuse	Physical impacts	Wound and injuries Inadequate nutrition Worsening of existing chronic condition
	Psychological impacts	Acute mental stress Chronic depression Anxiety about future
Perceived factors influencing economic abuse	Perceived facilitators	Low educational status Unemployment Patriarchal society
	Perceived barriers	Family support Positive attitude/behaviour Financial freedom
Suggested preventive measures for economic abuse	Administrative measures	Introducing laws Strict enforcement of laws Help in financial independence
	Community measures	Aware about legal recourses Knowledge on options for financial independence

DISCUSSION

The study included fifty females, predominantly aged between 26-45 years with a mean age of 36 years. A comparison with an Iranian study on intimate partner violence showed similar age demographics.(6) Four major themes emerged from focus group discussions of our study: experiences of economic abuse, health impacts, perceived influencing factors, and preventive measures. A qualitative study in Britain among South Asian women revealed six types of economic abuse.(7) Facilitators for economic violence from our study included low education, unemployment, and patriarchal societal norms, aligning with findings from a study in rural North India among backward Muslim women.(8) Psychological impacts of economic abuse under the theme “health impacts of economic abuse” revealed codes, namely, acute mental stress, chronic depression, and anxiety about the future. Similar findings were noted in studies from Mumbai, India, and Bangladesh, which suggested associations between economic abuse and mental health issues including anxiety and suicidal ideation.(9, 10)

The strength of the present research is that it is among the first community-based studies in Southern India to explore economic violence against underprivileged married women. However, its limitation lies in the exclusion of unmarried women, potentially skewing perspectives on economic abuse. It is suggested that future studies should follow mixed methodology and consider diverse stakeholders' viewpoints, including family members and male partners, to better understand the causes of economic abuse. The current study underscores the hidden yet profound impact of economic abuse on women's physical and psychological well-being and it is recommended that stricter enforcement of legislation, along with initiatives promoting women's education and employment, be implemented. Collaboration with NGOs can enhance the effectiveness of schemes aimed at empowering underprivileged women.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

VJ & CL: Contributed towards concepts, designing, literature search, and manuscript preparation and review. AMK &ST:

Contributed towards data acquisition, statistical analysis, and manuscript preparation and review. DS & BA: Contributed towards concepts, designing, intellectual content, and manuscript review

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflict of interest.

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DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors haven't used any generative AI/AI assisted technologies in the writing process.

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