

# Whose Mistake? Gender Roles and Physical Violence among Young Married Women

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Young married women in India experience physical violence at the hands of their husbands. This study, based on a survey in Maharashtra, aims to provide contextual information on gender roles, household and family dynamics, and the occurrence of physical violence. Qualitative data from two low-income settings indicate two patterns of initiation of physical violence in young married women: within six months of marriage and after the birth of the first child. Varying gender role expectations by the in-laws determined whether the marital household was stringent or flexible.

Adolescence is a time of transition in the lives of young people, a stepping-stone from childhood into adulthood. However, with early marriage, this transition is lost for many young women in India. Early marriage is common nationally, and usually the decision to marry is made by the family. The most recent National Family Health Survey in India found the national prevalence of marriage before the age of 18 years to be 45 per cent [IIPS 2006]. Early marriage thrusts roles and responsibilities of adulthood and motherhood on adolescents, adversely impacting their physical health and well-being [Bruce et al 2003]. Early marriage also places young women at risk for physical violence by their husbands [Madhurima 1996; UNICEF 2001]. Younger women (less than 19 years) in India are more likely to experience physical violence than their older counterparts [Madhurima 1996; Kapadia-Kundu et al 2004]. The repercussions of early marriage and physical violence can compound distress for young married women [Bruce et al 2003; Haberland et al 2003]. While the reproductive and sexual health needs of married adolescents have been considered, issues related to physical violence in this vulnerable group remain largely unexplored.

A cross-cultural analysis of 90 societies around the world found that physical violence against women exists in at least 75 of them [Levinson 1989]. Several studies point to the combination of factors at the individual, family, and cultural levels promoting perpetration of physical violence against women [Dhawan 1999; Purkayashta et al 2003]. Tacit social sanction for physical violence against women by an intimate partner has resulted in acceptance of the practice at a larger societal level. The mechanisms and modalities through which social sanction for physical violence operates need to be identified and understood. In particular, the attitudes and norms that sanction and condone violent behaviour within early marriage need to be unearthed [Gelles et al 1979; Nayak et al 2003].

The often silent, ongoing physical violence against women is an epidemic that has not been adequately addressed by the public health sector. Much of this violence occurs within the confines of women's own homes and is inflicted by their husbands or intimate partners [Fishbach et al 1997]. Gender-based violence is a public health issue, and its prevention will require innovative approaches. Violence prevention requires more focus at the research, policy, and programme levels. At the level of research priorities are to prevent the onset of violence (primary prevention) by identifying social norms that support intimate partner violence [Graffunder et al 2004].

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A study across seven sites in India found that 40 per cent of married women experienced physical abuse in their lifetime [INCLIN 2000]. The widespread prevalence of violence against women and its impact on health are well recognised globally [Krug et al 2002]. The health consequences for women include maternal mortality, gynaecological infections, unwanted pregnancies, and depression [Heise et al 1994; Cokkinides et al 1999; Jejeebhoy 1998a; Asling-Monemi et al 2003; Parker et al 1994; Kapadia-Kundu et al 2004].

While we have an understanding of physical violence at the macro level, detailed, contextual studies that map family dynamics are required for designing effective interventions for prevention at the household level. The theoretical construct of gender roles provides an analytical framework from which to identify norms and beliefs within a specific cultural context that support violence in a household. The impact of predefined gender roles on physical violence against women has been established, and gender roles have been identified as the pivot around which power relations between women and men are manifested [Verma et al 2003]. Physical violence against women by intimate partners is an extreme form of discrimination and is inextricably linked to gender role demands and expectations [Barzelatto 1998]. A study in north India examined gender norms at individual and community levels and found them to be associated with physical violence and contraceptive use [Stephenson et al 2006]. The concept of "rigid" gender roles and norms has been used in a model explaining the "causation of intimate partner violence" that refers to "disciplining" women when they do not fulfil gender role expectations [Jewkes et al 2002].

Young married women in India often enter households that have clearly defined gender hierarchies and roles [Agarwal 1995]. Prescribed gender roles place a heavy burden on these women. Social mores related to marriage in India dictate various circumstances in a young married woman's life. First, her marital home is located a considerable distance from her natal home [Dyson et al 1983]. Once married, her social ties and social support networks are limited or severed. Compounding the situation, often overriding importance is given to her proving her fertility within the first year of marriage. A survey conducted at one rural and one urban site in Maharashtra indicated that about 85 per cent of married adolescents conceived within that year [IHMP 2004].

However, no studies to date have provided a detailed portrait of the life of young married women – their hopes and aspirations, their household environment, the gender hierarchies within which they live and work, the process by which they settle into a new family, and their initiation into a regular sexual life and motherhood. Further, a deeper understanding is required of the patterns of communication within the household, the pressures of widely prevalent social norms related to fertility and sexuality, and their implications for the health and well-being of young married women. This study assessed the social and family context of young married women in two low-income settings in Maharashtra and explored linkages between gender roles, household environment, and physical abuse. Furthermore,

it explored micro family dynamics of households with differing gender norms (stringent versus flexible).

## 1 Methodology

**Data Collection:** The study described here was part of a larger qualitative study carried out by the Institute of Health Management Pachod (IHMP), on nutrition and gender conducted in three sites – two in India (Maharashtra and Rajasthan) and one in Bangladesh. For the present study, data was collected in Maharashtra in a rural site (36 villages) and an urban site (17 slums). Study participants were identified using purposive sampling for both sites of women who were married at age of 18 years or younger and who were married for less than five years. Data was collected from February to August 2005. The study used qualitative methods including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews.

We conducted 61 in-depth interviews with newly married young women; 31 women were from the rural site and 30 were from the urban site. Data was collected by a team of eight female investigators for in-depth interviews and female focus groups and seven male investigators for male focus groups. The research team underwent a three day orientation training and a 10-day field training in the collection of in-depth, qualitative data. Both sites had a research coordinator with the field teams.

Consent was obtained from all participants, and precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality (including assignment of code numbers) and that women did not face any repercussions at home for disclosing details about physical violence. The WHO ethical guidelines were followed during data collection [WHO 2001; Ellsberg and Heise 2005]. Focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted in separate villages/slums, so there was no overlap between women's and men's reporting on violence. The interviews were often conducted far from the woman's home. The women were asked about their marital household and the occurrence and severity of violence by their husbands, among other measures. In addition, we conducted a total of 32 FGDs (12 with newly married young married women, 12 with husbands of such women, and eight with mothers-in-law of such women) and 13 key informant interviews which included various community-level healthcare workers. The focus groups had an average of seven to eight participants. All in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were tape recorded, transcribed in Marathi, and then translated into English.

**Coding and Analysis:** A common coding guide was developed collaboratively with research partners in the larger multi-site study, and data were coded using Atlas.ti (version 5). Inter-coder reliability was assessed to ensure standardised coding across and between the two sites. Inter-coder reliability was assessed by selecting five random interviews from both sites. These interviews were coded by two coders and the principal investigators. Data analysis was undertaken in stages by analysing the in-depth interviews first, then triangulating with the focus group data.

Violence was classified as severe (e.g., hitting with a stick, a belt, shoes), moderate (slapping), or none.

**2 Survey Results**

The young married women were 15 to 22 years old. Their age at marriage ranged from 13 to 18 years. Some 13 were uneducated, five had completed a primary education, 43 had completed a secondary education, and one had completed higher secondary education. About 75 per cent lived in joint families. A total of 26 of the 61 women reported experiencing physical violence by their husbands (Table 1). Of these, 16 cases were from the urban site and 10 cases were from the rural site. Violence was both more prevalent and more severe in the urban site compared with the rural site.

The forms of physical abuse that the women experienced varied. The most common forms were hitting with items such as a stick, footwear, or a belt (nine cases); kicking (eight cases); slapping (seven cases); and punching (five cases). Several women reported experiencing several different forms of violence.

**Onset of Physical Violence:** Once initiated, physical violence within a marriage tends to continue. Of the 26 women who reported physical violence, eight stated that it began soon after marriage (within the first six months) and another 10 said that it began after the birth of their first child. The rest (eight) reported different times of onset, ranging from six months to two years after marriage and coinciding with various life circumstances: pregnancy, a husband's sudden unemployment, and a husband's consuming alcohol.

In several cases of violence beginning within the first six months of marriage, the onset was within 15 days (Table 2). In the first case, a young woman asked to visit her natal home shortly after marriage; this led to a family disagreement, which escalated into a quarrel and resulted in a beating. In the second case, a young woman refused sex with her husband, so he hit her in the first fortnight of their marriage.

Another three women reported initiation of violence within the first three months of marriage due to in-laws, specifically mothers-in-law (Table 2). The triggers of violence in these cases were "not listening to in-laws", perceived "back-answering mother-in-law", and "complaining to the husband about the mother-in-law's reproaches".

Physical violence began after the birth of a first child in 10 cases (Table 3, p 74). The additional role of motherhood competes with young married women's other roles and work, and

this was a source of tension that triggered violence. Also, they often refused sex with their husbands after childbirth, which led to violence.

Women described how their situation was good before the birth of their first child: "Our married life was happy in the first year of marriage. He used to take care of me, provide each thing, and ask me for my needs such as eating, drinking, etc." – Geeta, 18 years old, married at 13 years, violent home, rural. "First time he was not behaving like this, he used to explain things to me." – Hasina, 19 years old, married at 15 years, violent home, urban.

However, the additional demands of motherhood increased the vulnerability of young married women to physical violence. "Yes it did happen .... I did not pick-up Darshan (baby) quickly. The baby was crying too much. So he slapped me, and said the child was crying for such a long time and I did not pick him up." – Kalpana, 20 years old, married at 19 years, violent home, urban.

The triggers for onset of violence after birth included not being home when the husband came home, not finishing work on time, refusing sex, giving birth to a girl, and quarrels with in-laws.

**'Chukle' as Justification for Violence**

A major theme that surfaced in the data was the concept of chukle<sup>1</sup> (making mistakes/erring). Comments by many participants indicated wide-scale community acceptance of chukle as a justification for physical violence against young married women. This assertion was supported by all of our data sources – focus groups of husbands, mothers-in-law, and young married women irrespective of whether they experienced physical violence. Analysis of chukle is important, as social sanction for physical violence operates through this construct.

Many women reported that they experience physical violence when they make a mistake – chukle. However, chukle represents a broader term in Marathi than the English term making a mistake. It encompasses a wide range of behaviours and expectations, including not completing certain tasks and not fulfilling certain gender role expectations. For example, some mistakes described were "meal was not tasty," "strand of hair in the food," "back-answered husband or mother-in-law", and "went out without permission". One woman reported that her husband occasionally slaps her because of chukle, illustrating that women themselves have internalised this justification of physical violence. Men and mothers-in-law too used this term to justify the abuse.

**Table 1: Violence towards Young Married Women**

Physical Violence	Urban	Rural
Severe	8	4
Moderate	7	7
None	15	20
Total	30	31

**Table 2: Examples of the Onset of Violence within the First Six Months of Marriage (Eight Cases)**

Onset of Violence	Trigger
"My husband started beating me after 15 days of my marriage" – Deepali, 20 years old, married at 17 years, urban	"The bad experience is that once I had asked them if I can go to my natal place because I was missing my mother very much. I was very new here so I was missing my sisters also. So I asked, but it led to a fight because of which, my husband hit me."
"After 15 days of marriage, my husband beat me" – Sulbha, 18 years old, married at 16 years, rural	"For not keeping physical relations. I did not tell this to anybody."
"From the beginning he has beaten me" – Mala, 20 years old, married at 18 years, urban	"If I make any mistake then he slaps me, he talks badly with me."
"After two months of marriage, we started staying separately, and then my husband started beating me" – Meena, 20 years old, married at 17 years, rural	"My in-laws sometimes tell him that I do not listen to them, do not give them certain things. Then my husband gets angry and beats me. This is not a good thing. I do not accept this. He creates a big scene in front of the whole world."

Mothers-in-law in one focus group described how a young daughter-in-law fears committing a mistake. She is often assessed in her new household in terms of her mistakes: "The young daughter-in-law wonders if she is making a mistake (chukle). Some daughters-in-law cry if they make any mistakes. And if they make a mistake and we scold her, then there will be effect on her mind that I made this mistake; therefore, we scold her, then she is scared of us." – Mothers-in-law, FGD, urban.

husband at night). If we make mistake, we feel bad about it." – Young married women, FGD, urban.

The above examples illustrate how the concept of chukle is internalised in the minds of young women, their husbands, and their families. If a young woman is not well and therefore unable to finish cooking on time, it is termed as chukle; if she does not talk, dress, or carry herself according to prescribed norms, it is labelled as chukle.

**Table 3: Examples of the Onset of Violence After Birth of First Child (10 Cases)**

Onset of Violence	Trigger
"After savva mahina (one month and seven days) of the birth of this daughter, he beat me" – Nisa, 20 years old, married at 18 years, urban	"... I had gone to the toilet (public toilet). I was not there at home. My mother-in-law was also not there."
"He started hitting me after the birth of my son" – Rohini, 18 years old, married at 15 years, urban	"Argument would go on continuously because of my mother-in-law. If I was late in doing work, it was because I had a small child, so I had to feed the baby first. Due to that, if I was late in completing the household work, then my mother-in-law would complain to my husband. Then my husband would hit me. . . . There was also continuous argument because I would deny for sexual contact."
"After the birth of a baby girl, he didn't behave normal with me" – Geeta, 18 years old, married at 13 years, rural	"... After the birth of a baby girl, he didn't behave normally. If I make any mistake, he shouts at me and starts hitting me until he becomes tired. He beats me by foot and using footwear. During this year, my husband beat me very cruelly with a pipe also."
"When my son was two-three months old, they started physically harassing me" – Janabai, 20 years old, married at 16 years, rural	"Mother-in-law and sister-in-law did not give me food after they fought with me. When my husband came home, they asked him to send me to my natal home. To finish the argument, my husband beat me on my back twice, but he did not push me or kick or drag me. . . . He then sent me to my parents' home."

The data also indicate that within households, the concept of chukle is applied primarily to women. A mother-in-law in a focus group stated how sons are spared any rebuke while daughters-in-law face verbal abuse when they err: "Some women speak very rudely to their daughters-in-law if they make any mistake but don't say anything to their son in the same instance."

Data from focus groups with men and young married women and in-depth interviews with women who do not experience violence converged on the concept of chukle as a justification for physical violence. Some men in focus groups stated that sometimes there is no recourse but physical violence to solve a quarrel. One husband in a rural focus group said, "The final step to solve quarrel is that a husband should beat his wife and father should beat mother. Sometimes violence is necessary."

Young married women who had not experienced physical violence also stated that a husband is justified in hitting his wife if she makes a mistake. "If he wants to beat his wife, then he can do so for any reason. If the wife has committed any mistake (chukle), then it is not wrong to beat her", said Ashwini, an 18-year-old who married at age 16. She reported that she receives a lot of support from her family and that her husband has never hit her. Similarly, Manisha, 18 years old, pregnant with her second child, has a considerate and appreciative husband, and said, "Those women (who are hit) may have made mistakes; hence, their husbands abused them."

Husbands in a focus group also stated that disputes are resolved on the basis of who made the mistake and women are expected not to repeat their mistakes. The same group said that the frequency of physical violence depends on how often women commit a mistake; if they repeat it, the consequences are severe and the abuse continues. "Frequency of violence .... Once a month means it's on the mistake she does. That is also if at times she repeats a mistake then. If she understands her mistake and does not let it happen again, then it won't happen. And if she knows her mistake and knows that after doing this she gets beating, but still she keeps it going on, then that it will continue for the whole month." – Husbands of young married women, FGD, urban.

Young married women who had experienced physical violence reinforced the apprehension of erring. Nisha, 20 years old, talked of her constant fear of making a mistake in her household chores and coming home late. Similarly, Mala, 20 years old, said, "If I make any mistake, then he slaps me, he talks badly with me (shivya detat). This happens if I say anything wrong or if I answer back to my mother-in-law or him." Vanita, 17 years old, who reported that her husband has a "habit" of hitting her, said, "I felt that my mother-in-law should behave nicely with me, should behave properly, if I commit any mistake then she should tell me that."

The term chukle was seen in different contexts throughout the data set. Below is an illustration of how a woman resolves not to repeat her chukle, to ensure that she is not hit again by her husband. Furthermore, she apologises to her husband for her mistake: "In the past year, many times there were arguments between us. About 5 to 6 times. I was compromising every time to solve that. Whenever there was fight, I used to say sorry, I used to say that every time that I made a mistake, I will not repeat this mistake again." – Deepali, 20 years old, married at 17 years, violent home, urban.

The same views emerged in the group setting: "We do the things very carefully, still there are mistakes. Our mistakes are there. It happens unknowingly .... Sometimes there is hair in the meal also. It is because we work. Immediately fight starts. We feel very bad because of that. We get mental harassment because of that... After working, also we have to face (face

Chukle is probably one of the pathways through which social sanction operates as a deeply rooted and firmly entrenched social construct. The examples indicate that chukle can be considered a construct that justifies and supports the use of physical violence

against women. At the same time, the degree to which *chukle* actually triggered violence varied across households.

### Gender Role Expectations

The data were organised into a framework that enables an understanding of household dynamics and physical violence against young married women. Young married women are expected to seamlessly fit into several new gender roles as they enter their marital home. These concurrent and often competing roles include those of daughter-in-law, wife, and mother. The related gender role expectations are divided into four domains – household chores, mobility, so-called modesty behaviours, and sex.

In their new homes, young brides are quickly enmeshed in a web of intra-familial relations with predetermined hierarchies and asymmetrical lines of communication. If the bride's interactions with her spouse and family elders are even slightly tenuous, the implications are grave. On the other hand, if these interactions are stable, her adjustment into her new home is facilitated. Unfortunately, the nature of these early interactions depends more on the household environment than on the young woman herself.

Since most of the physical violence against young married women occurs at the household level, it is important to have criteria to measure household environment. Household environment can be assessed on a continuum of stringency of standards, ranging from households where standards are strictly enforced (stringent households) to households where there is an adaptable approach to gender role expectations (flexible households). The concept of stringent versus flexible household standards enables an understanding of the family context within which physical violence against young married women occurs. The strictness of gender role expectations within a household determines the backdrop against which physical violence occurs. This is in addition to the known contributing factors to physical violence, such as alcohol, dowry, socio-economic status, and acceptance of physical violence as a means of resolving conflict [Madhurima 1996; Verma et al 2003; Delsol et al 2003; Jewkes et al 2002].

The concept of *chukle* (making mistakes/erring) comes into play because it is a widely prevalent norm used to justify physical violence against young married women. *Chukle* was mentioned consistently and repeatedly across all the data and is viewed as a core trigger and justification for physical violence within the home. The degree of acceptance of a young married woman's mistakes/'*chuk*' depends on the household's strictness. If it is very strict, physical violence is more likely to occur.

**Gender Roles:** Young women assume three new gender roles upon marriage – daughter-in-law, wife, and mother – as expressed by the young married women interviewed as well as in focus groups of husbands and mothers-in-law. The gender role expectations of young married women in stringent households (where household members have demanding and exacting expectations) were compared with those in flexible households (where household members are flexible and adaptive about

expectations). It is particularly important to examine data from households where young married women report no physical violence as they provide an understanding of households where gender role expectations are flexible and the marital family supports the new daughter-in law.

**Role of Daughter-in-Law:** Family members across households have many expectations of young daughters-in-law. These expectations are primarily related to household chores and behaviour with family elders and unknown males.

The following quotations from in-depth interviews and focus groups with young married women describe expectations across households related to how to cook, dress, and behave with family elders. Behaving well was described as "looking after the in-laws' and fulfilling their expectations". These expectations were stated by most of the women interviewed from both violent and non-violent homes and in some focus groups. "When I came to in-laws' house, they expected me to do all household work like cooking, as well as behaving well, dressing well, speaking with respect to family elders .... To fulfil the expectations of my in-laws, I behaved as they wished. I behaved well with all. Cooking had to be done systematically; chapatti should be medium size, that is, not so big or not so thick. It should be thin ... ." – Sarala, 18 years old, married at 16 years, violent home, rural.

"Yes, there is violence in our village and the reasons behind violence are if we don't finish cooking on time, if food is hot, if food is salty or salt is less, if food is not tasty, if we don't cook early, if husband wanted chapattis (wheat bread) and we have made Bhakari (jowar/millet bread), if they don't like the way the vegetable is cooked, if we make the same vegetable frequently, if chapattis are not roasted properly or over-roasted, if vegetable is not of their choice. If sister-in-law give more food to her son and not to my son, then it may create disputes." – Young married women, FGD, rural.

Mothers-in-law expressed similar views if their daughters-in-law did not fulfil certain expectations, indicating the deep social entrenchment of the gender role expectations. "Abuse is done on household chores. If she does not know anything, then under such situation, there is harassment. Once in a month, they beat daughter-in-law. How she will tolerate physical violence, she will leave the house. Once in a year, once in 12 months. Sometimes, daily, such torture is made." – Mothers-in-law, FGD, rural.

Importantly, while the expectations of young married women were largely similar across households, in households with stringent standards, the expectation was that the daughter-in-law should strictly adhere to fulfilling those expectations so that it met family standards; if the family perceived that the daughter-in-law failed to do so, then the family often felt justified in using physical violence as a means of reprisal. In contrast in flexible households, while the expectations were largely the same, the expectation was that the daughter-in-law should adhere to fulfilling those expectations so that they met family standards, but if the family perceived that she failed to do so, then these households often supported the daughter-in-law by mentoring her and teaching her the ways of their family so that she could fit in better at the marital home.

Stringent households had rules and regulations that defined strict behavioural boundaries and restrictions. For example, Rohini (quoted below) was expected from the early days of her marriage to sever ties with her natal family. Her marital family also restricted how she dressed, spoke, and behaved. However, it was the expectation of cutting off ties with her natal family that most distressed Rohini. "They (in-law family members) did not have any good expectations; they had negative expectations from me. I should leave my parents, I should forget my parents and should not keep any contact with them. I should not talk about this (relations with the natal family) to anybody. I should not talk with neighbours also. They (in-laws) used to say that if I want to stay with them (in marital family), then I have to do as per their expectations. I have to follow their rules and regulations (Jar Tula nandayache aasel tar, he tula karave lagel). They were feeling that I should stay in their control. And to fulfil their expectations, I behaved like they wanted." – Rohini, 18 years old, married at 15 years, violent home, urban.

### Flexible Households

In contrast, flexible households were much more lenient with new daughters-in-law. There were many instances where love and support were extended to the young woman during the early days of marriage. Subhadra narrated her experience when she entered her in-laws' home: "I felt good because everything was good; everybody's behaviour was good. I was little scared (initially) because when I was at my mother's place, it was totally different and here I have to wear a sari. Therefore, I was scared, but my in-laws told me not to be scared of anything. From that time I am not scared of anything, and then I became bold (mag dhit zhale). My sister-in-law helped me to tie my hair .... They told me not to cry, and then my mother came to meet me here. ... then I talk to my husband, to my mother-in-law. I get moral support from them." – Subhadra, 17 years old, married at 16 years, non-violent home, urban.

"Initially I was scared .... But when I saw the behaviour of our family members (in-laws), then I did not feel like that. The whole family stays in harmony, accepts others, and is really good. Because of that, the atmosphere in the family was very cheerful. ... early days, I was not feeling good at home, (Karmat navte), used to remember my mother and father. Slowly I got used to it all. Everyone was supporting each other. ... home atmosphere was absolutely fine." – Nilima, 21 years old, married at 17 years, non-violent home, urban.

Many young women such as Nilima reported happy experiences in the early days of their marriage. Some described the household environment as being "joyful" and said that even though they lived in a joint family, they lived in "harmony". They also mentioned how they were "welcomed into [their] new households" and how they "felt good because everybody's behaviour was good".

**Role of Wife:** Gender role expectations of young married women also include a husband's expectations of his young wife. The data suggested that these expectations influence the level of support extended to a young married woman as she enters a new home.

Generally, a husband expected his wife to complete all household chores, behave respectfully with his parents, and "listen to him". However, how these expectations played out again differed between stringent and flexible households.

In stringent households, husbands put many restrictions on their wives. For example, they often gave prescriptions on how to talk, what to wear, and where to go. "My husband had put restrictions on my mobility, I should not go alone to other village, I should not go to my neighbours, I should not wear chudidar (Indian pants), I should not keep my hair untied, I have to tie my hair in simple way and lot more restrictions." – Sarala, 18 years old, married at 16 years, violent home rural.

Often, in such households, husbands' expectations were in two primary domains – modesty behaviours and sex. The range of modesty behaviours reported included not talking or laughing loudly, respecting elders, not talking with other men, wearing a sari, and tying one's hair back (not leaving it loose). Husbands also expected their new brides to fulfil their sexual needs and desires. Many times, young women were not prepared for this aspect of their married lives. "I was scared first of my husband's sexual touch. I am very scared of him for sex as this place is very crowded and everybody is in the home. That time I was a little reluctant for sex." – Reshma, 19 years old, married at 15 years, violent home, urban.

The issue of sex was one on which some young women expressed fear and apprehension, but most complied with their husband's demands.

In contrast, in flexible households, husbands were more lenient with and respectful of their wives. For example, Sangeeta and a few other women noted that their husbands respected their opinion and did not force sex on them: "These people (in-laws) were talking well to me. They treated me well too. Everyone asked if I needed anything. Since I was new, I was given much work. But they behaved well with me. My husband would help me to understand everything. If I did not feel like (having sex), he would not insist." – Sangeeta, 20 years old, married at 18 years, non-violent home, urban.

Similarly, Alka, an agricultural worker living in a joint family, described a happy marriage and a good relationship with her husband: "My relationship with my husband is good. We live together; nobody can say that we are husband and wife. (Did you ever fight?) Never, not a single time. There is no change in my husband's behaviour. We are living happily now as we were before. There are no restrictions. If need arises, he gives me 5-10 Rupees if asked for, but while giving, he does not ask me the purpose. No clashes happen; he does not treat me with anger." – Alka, 18 years old, married at 16 years, non-violent home, rural.

Several young women also talked about how supportive their husbands were. One feature of supportive husbands was that they did not enforce control over their wives.

**Role of Mother:** Some of the gender role expectations of motherhood, evident from the data, included having a child soon after marriage and having a male child. About 83 per cent of the 61 young women interviewed conceived before one year of marriage. Of these, half conceived within the first six months.

This could be due to two reasons – first, the overarching norm that young married women must prove their fertility, and second, their initiation into a regular sexual life without the use of contraceptives. The data showed that the strictness of the gender role expectations associated with motherhood also differed by type of household.

Stringent households had particularly strong expectations of early childbearing. In fact, failure to do so could precipitate violence: “Yes, women do experience violence in our slums. The reasons of violence are some women are abused if they do not have babies immediately after the marriage”. – Young married women, FGD, urban.

In addition, the pressure to have a male child was sometimes clearly stated to women in these households as well: “They (in-laws) wanted that I should give birth to a son. When I was pregnant, my father-in-law used to say every day that I have to get a boy (son) only. Then I said, ‘Do I know that?’” – Kalpana, 20 years old, married at 19 years, violent home, urban.

Although the expectation to have children early was common to all women across the sample, in flexible households there were a few instances where there was the opportunity to communicate about childbearing. While contraception was not typically used, families often accepted whenever the pregnancy occurred: “... In-laws said that they do not want early pregnancy. After marriage, there was no pressure to be pregnant immediately. Both of us have taken this decision. I have participated in it. During three years of the married life, I never used any contraceptives. Two years, there was no pregnancy, during the third year, I became pregnant.” – Ganga, 19 years, married at 16, non-violent home, rural.

### Other Triggers

Although women clearly stated that *chukle* and gender role expectations are some of the triggers to physical violence, the data suggested that there are other triggers and causes as well. One young woman said that men hit women if they make mistakes, but can do so even if women do not make mistakes. Mothers-in-law talked in focus groups about dowries and alcoholism as triggers to physical violence, although dowry was not mentioned as a cause of violence by any of the 26 abused women. These findings indicate that various social groups perceive that there are multiple triggers of and dimensions to the occurrence of physical violence.

### 3 Conclusions

This study describes the onset of physical violence in early marriage among young women and examines linkages between gender role expectations and physical violence in two low-income settings in Maharashtra. The focus on gender role expectations of young married women was intended to provide a better understanding of how to prevent the onset of physical violence within marriage. Two time periods of onset were identified – within the first six months of marriage and after the birth of a child. A social construct that emerged from all the sources of data was that of *chukle* (making a mistake); this construct was largely applied to women when family members perceived that they failed to fulfil certain gender role expectations. The concept of

*chukle* appeared to have broad societal acceptance as a justification for the use of physical violence against women. Another key finding was that although violent and non-violent homes had largely similar gender role expectations, their reactions to perceived failures to fulfil these expectations differed. Violent homes tended to have stringent standards that young married women needed to strictly adhere to; when these families perceived that the daughter-in-law did not meet these standards, reprisal that included physical abuse was often viewed as justifiable. In contrast, in households with flexible standards, if the marital family perceived that the daughter-in-law failed to fulfil expectations, they often gave her support and mentoring.

Although this is a small study undertaken among vulnerable households in Maharashtra, the findings nonetheless provide valuable insights into the early experiences of intimate partner violence among newly married young women. The results are particularly important because they contextualise the nature of violence at the community level and household level. Many earlier studies have established the prevalence of intimate partner violence against women. But very few studies provide detailed descriptions of what these experiences entail and where there may be opportunities for interventions. Moreover, violence early in marriage often sets the tone for the nature of relationships within a marital home between the victim and other family members. Once established, violence tends to continue. Therefore, a better understanding of the context in which violence against women begins is critical for developing preventive interventions.

Several of the findings presented here are consistent with other literature. Gender role expectations and socialisation of men and women are important in these low-income areas of Maharashtra, as they have been found to be elsewhere [Jejeebhoy 1998b, Mahajan 1990, Mohan 1990, Turmen 2003, Duvvury et al 2002, Varga 2003, Nayak et al 2003]. Similarly, as observed in previous studies, much of the intimate partner physical violence in this setting is centred on gender role expectations [Duvvury et al 2002]. Others have noted the need to identify norms and practices within local sociocultural settings that condone or legitimise violence by an intimate partner [Nayak et al 2003]. Such constructs and beliefs need to be better understood because they enable physical violence to continue in a community as they have a “shared meaning” and acceptance [Gelles et al 1979]. In this study, the concept of *chukle* emerges as one such construct that has shared meaning and condones the use of violence against women.

At the same time, the study’s findings also indicate that there appear to be certain types of households in which women are more at risk for violence starting early in their marriage. This suggests that it is important to consider the household environment as a key element in the perpetuation of violence against women. Further research is needed to determine if the concept of “at-risk” households exists in other settings; in addition, quantitative studies are needed to validate the linkages between at-risk households and physical violence. A significant finding is that flexible households, despite adhering to the same social norms and constructs as others in the community (including the concept of *chukle*), rarely use violence as a means of “discipline” or conflict resolution. Further research is needed to deconstruct

what other values drive the decision-making process in these households. In addition, given that the study findings suggest that violence against women is justified and condoned by the community, families, and women themselves through the community-based social construct of chukle, it is important to determine if there are regional variations in meanings and connotations of chukle in India.

In conclusion, the findings presented here highlight a critical social construct, chukle, as a main trigger for physical violence against women, but they also highlight the significant variation between households in whether or not this social construct translates into actual violence. Clearly, efforts to prevent violence against women are needed at several levels. At the societal level, mass campaigns that have already been implemented need to continue as they carry the potential not only of increasing awareness, but also of promoting a shift in values by increasing social consciousness [Graffunder et al 2004, Mehta 2007]. At the community level, public health services and programmes are another avenue that offers opportunities to prevent violence against women [Shumway et al 1999, Roscoe et al 1985, Fife et al 2001, Fishbach et al 1997]. Auxiliary nurse midwives are an example of front-line staff who have multiple contacts with pregnant women in the communities they serve; therefore, providing them with training and skills to address gender-based violence is also a promising approach. Importantly, community-level interventions must include married and unmarried young men to promote behaviour change, by helping them to understand and support the transition their wives experience in early marriage, and teaching them ways to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. Central to the prevention of physical violence is communication with communities and families and between spouses to challenge the inevitability of violence. To break the cycle of violence, research and programmes should focus on deconstruction of gender norms that fuel violence; assessment of the enormous social, economic, and health impacts of violence; and promotion of alternative means of conflict resolution.

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NOTE

- 1 Chukle refers to a broad range of failures to comply with expectations. This is a term to look for as a marker in the context of gender role expectations, where it indicates a failure to fulfil these expectations. In some households, breaches in these expectations led to physical violence.

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