THE MUNDANE AND THE EXTREME

Women's Experiences of Housework and Marital Violence in India

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Mainstream theories tend to consider housework a form of labor and its gendered division a result of resource exchange or bargaining and an act of "doing gender." These theories, however, insufficiently reflect the centrality of housework in many women's lived experiences of marital violence, particularly in the Global South. Our in-depth interviews with 22 women survivors of marital violence from Assam, India, show that housework features prominently in the women's experiences of marital violence. Drawing on our interviews, we show that marital violence can manifest in and through housework in three interlinked dimensions: (1) the coercive enforcement of how, when, and to what standard housework is performed; (2) the physical and mental harms inflicted in and through housework; and (3) the restrictions it imposes on women's capabilities in other life domains. Uniting gender research on housework and marital violence, our study shows how a violence lens

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helps render visible the ways in which housework may be organized, enforced, and experienced for some women. In doing so, it highlights that the mundane (housework) and the extreme (violence) are not separate regimes of gender control and demonstrates how they intersect to (re)produce domestic gender inequality.

Plain Language Summary

Women's experiences of housework and marital violence in India

In this paper, we present findings from in-depth interviews with 22 women in Assam, India, on their experiences of housework and marital violence. In doing so, we reveal three interlinked ways in which marital violence occurs in the women's experiences of housework. Our findings highlight how the mundane (housework) and the extreme (marital violence) intersect with each other in reinforcing gender inequality in family life in a Global South context.

Keywords: *gender; housework; India; violence*

> "For me, it (marital violence) would be . . . .the manner in which I was made to do housework—is that not violence?"
>
> (Mitali, 47 years, primary school teacher)

Housework[1] is often described as the "final frontier" in the unfinished gender revolution (Kelley 2013). Despite a long march toward gender equality in women's labor force participation, career advancement, wages, political representation, and civil rights (Prillaman 2023), women still shoulder the lion's share of housework in many countries (Hu and Yucel 2018). Extensive research has examined the gender division of housework, focusing on the differential time women and men spend on housework (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Gupta 2007; Hu 2019; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011). India has one of the widest gender gaps in housework time globally (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2014), where women spend nearly ten times the number of hours on housework compared with men (Janiso, Shukla, and Reddy 2024).

Although research on housework time offers valuable insights into the state of domestic gender inequality, it provides limited understanding of the type of lived experience and perspective captured in the opening quotation. Mitali was not alone in highlighting housework in

her experience of marital violence.[2] In our interviews with women in the Indian state of Assam, we found that housework featured prominently in the women's experiences of marital violence. Why is this the case? Scrutinizing the connection between housework and violence, we examine how housework intersects with violence and explore how a violence lens can help us understand the gendered organization and experiences of housework. By doing so, we unite two long-standing, yet often separate, lines of gender research: the gender division of domestic labor and marital violence. Although feminist scholars do recognize the connection between housework and violence (e.g., Kelly 1988, 2003), empirical research tends to treat the two as separate areas of study. Research on housework has focused largely on the gender division of time and labor (e.g., Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Gupta 2007; Hu 2019; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011), whereas research on violence has not paid dedicated attention to housework except as one among many triggers of marital violence (e.g., Anwary 2015; Bhattacharyya, Bedi, and Chhachhi 2011; Das et al. 2013; Ragavan, Iyengar, and Wurtz 2014). Although several studies on violence against women have briefly mentioned housework as a key area of conjugal conflict and domestic violence (Agarwal and Panda 2007; Bhattacharyya, Bedi, and Chhachhi 2011; Das et al. 2013; Kelly 1988, 2003; Ragavan, Iyengar, and Wurtz 2014), there has yet to be a focused investigation of how housework and violence may intertwine with and mutually shape each other.

Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with 22 women survivors of marital violence in Assam, we reveal three distinctive and interlinked ways in which marital violence can manifest in and through housework: (1) the coercive enforcement of how, when, and to what standard housework is performed; (2) the physical and mental harms inflicted in and through housework; and (3) the restrictions it imposes on women's capabilities in other life domains. Although not all women experience all three aspects of violence in housework, these aspects often reinforce and legitimize one another, and their concurrent occurrence creates an interlocking cycle that makes it challenging for women to (fully) recognize, resist, and exit the violence. Overall, we demonstrate that the mundane (housework) and the extreme (violence) are not necessarily separate regimes of gender control; rather, they often intersect with each other and operate in coalition in (re)producing domestic gender inequality.

GENDER AND HOUSEWORK: KEY THEORIES

Housework has been a subject of extensive gender research (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Davis and Greenstein 2013; Gupta 2007; Hu and Yucel 2018; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011). Conceptualizing housework as a form of reproductive labor required for sustaining everyday family life, a large body of research has focused on the uneven and gendered division of housework between family members (Oakley 2018). Following the economic tradition, many studies have examined the gender division of housework through a resource perspective. Conceptualizing conjugal relationships as akin to social relations in a marketplace (Becker 1981), exchange theory posits that in traditional male-breadwinner families, spouses are cooperative actors whereby the husband specializes in market production in exchange for the wife's specialization in household labor (Davis and Greenstein 2013). Viewing spouses as competitive rather than cooperative actors, resource bargaining theory posits that, as men tend to monopolize economic resources, such resources confer on them the power to bargain their way out of housework (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994). According to autonomy theory, working women in individualized late-modern families can leverage their own income to reduce their own housework burden (Gupta 2007). Studies drawing on these theories have examined the relationship between socioeconomic resources and housework extensively (Brines 1994; Davis and Greenstein 2013; Hu 2019; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011). They show that although socioeconomic indicators such as education, work, and money cannot fully explain the gender gap in housework time, women's housework burden tends to decrease alongside an increase in their socioeconomic status and income. In India, however, women's socioeconomic standing has a limited impact on their marital power and gender equality at home (Dhanaraj and Mahambare 2022; Weitzman 2014). Regardless of their economic participation and status, Indian women are widely expected to undertake the lion's share of housework (Costagliola 2021).

Building on the "doing gender" perspective (West and Zimmerman 1987), gender theories consider housework as a socially constructed form of gender performance—a behavior imbued with gendered meanings and enacted to construct and maintain one's gender identity. Under patriarchal norms, paid work is typically associated with masculinity and housework with femininity (Becker 1981). As women "do" femininity by doing housework (Bittman et al. 2003), housework is no

longer a static set of tasks to be distributed among family members but rather a site of symbolic interactions underpinning the creation of gender order and relations (Oakley 2018). Gender theories, therefore, contend that women's work and socioeconomic empowerment are insufficient; it also takes normative changes to achieve gender equality in housework. Although research drawing on the "doing gender" perspective often suggests that women are "compelled" or "obliged" by normative expectations to do housework (Bittman et al. 2003), less is known about the micro-social mechanisms of how gender norms surrounding housework are enforced on the ground, particularly when such enforcement involves violence.

MARITAL VIOLENCE: CONSIDERING HOUSEWORK

Housework is not an unfamiliar topic in research on marital violence against women (Agarwal and Panda 2007; Anitha 2019; Bhattacharyya, Bedi, and Chhachhi 2011; Jackson 2007; Koegler et al. 2022; Yount, Zureick-Brown, and Salem 2014). Tension over housework division is widely observed to be a key source of family conflict. In North America and Europe, such tension undermines family satisfaction and heightens the risk of union dissolution (Hu and Yucel 2018; Kluwer, Heesink, and Van de Vliert 1996), and violence arising from conjugal conflicts over housework is occasionally observed (Macmillan and Gartner 1999). In contrast, it is not uncommon for conflict over housework to escalate into violence against women in Asian societies, such as India (Agarwal and Panda 2007; Das et al. 2013; Ragavan, Iyengar, and Wurtz 2014), Bangladesh (Anwary 2015), and China (Li and Wang 2022), where housework is often cited to "justify" violence against women (Anwary 2015; Li and Wang 2022; Ragavan, Iyengar, and Wurtz 2014). In her book *Surviving Sexual Violence*, based on evidence from the United Kingdom, Kelly (1988) observes that abusive men often seek to control almost every aspect of household organization, and questioning a woman's performance of household tasks is the most common event that precedes physical violence. Nevertheless, how housework plays out to be violent in women's lives and the nature of the violence in/through housework are yet to be systematically examined.

Stark's (2007) theorization of coercive control as a gender strategy places the micro-regulation of women's everyday lives at its center, and housework is an extensive, core part of everyday family life. Stark (2007,

228–29) defines coercion as "the use of force or threats to compel or dispel a particular response" and control as "structural forms of deprivation, exploitation, and command that compel obedience indirectly by monopolizing vital resources, dictating preferred choices, microregulating a partner's behavior," while depriving one of the support needed to exercise independent judgment. Coercive control is often established through the micro-regulation of everyday behaviors (e.g., housework) that are often defined in gendered ways (Kelly and Westmorland 2016), thus reinforcing gender norms by restricting women's capabilities to the domestic sphere (Stark 2007). Framing coercive control as a liberty offense, Stark (2007, 15) also argues that it "prevents women from freely developing their personhood, utilizing their capacities, or practicing citizenship." These conceptualizations thus encourage us to examine violent forces mobilized to enforce housework on women, mechanisms sustaining the violence, and the ways violence curtails women's capabilities in and beyond the household.

In India, domestic labor is still rigidly viewed and accepted as a woman's responsibility—an ideal grounded in and normalized through gender socialization (Gangoli and Rew 2011). Young girls are often trained on housework, while boys are taught to expect this from women, establishing gender roles that perpetuate inequality in marriages (Rew, Gangoli, and Gill 2013). As a precursor to married life, the early reinforcement of these roles is also legitimized as women are often considered repositories of household honor (Rew, Gangoli, and Gill 2013). In this context, violence in housework—both its means and effects—often converges with behaviors commonly associated with women's devalued status in family life, and the control tactics involved are widely normalized and easily confused with the sacrifices women are expected to make as homemakers, mothers, and sexual partners (Stark 2007). In her writing on inequality regimes, Acker (2006) argues that as multiple practices and processes intertwine to reinforce gender inequality, inequality regimes can be understood only with attention to the interplay between seemingly distinct practices and processes. She further highlights that invisibility—taking gender inequality for granted as something unseen or irrelevant—is a crucial mechanism that legitimizes and reproduces gender inequality in an organizational setting. Extending Acker's insights to our study of family life, we argue that the embedding of violence in housework not only conceals the violence as "everyday mundane" but also shows how different gender regimes can intersect to reinforce and reproduce domestic gender inequality.

In a patrilocal context such as India, marital violence often extends beyond spousal violence and involves multiple perpetrators within the marital household, especially women in-laws (Gangoli and Rew 2011; Rew, Gangoli, and Gill 2013). Such a context means that coercion and control in/through housework can be particularly difficult to detect, partly because gendered socialization before marriage familiarizes women with restrictions, regulations, and control over their capabilities and potential, making their identification challenging when similar restrictions and control are imposed during marriage (Sarma 2025). As we show, this context adds to the difficulty of not only detecting the violence but also escaping it when a "control web" involving multiple family members enforces and normalizes the violence.

The tactics used in coercive control are known to narrow a woman's "space for action" (Kelly 2003), which can be further restricted by severe, systemic gender inequality beyond the household in a society such as India. Yet, as our data show, even under the most constraining conditions, women can act by applying various resistance tactics and developing coping and survival strategies both within ongoing abuse and in its aftermath (Kelly 2003). Given our empirical focus on those undergoing or who have survived marital violence, by no means do we suggest that violence is an integral part of housework. Rather, our evidence will show that as women reflect on their experiences of marital violence, housework is no longer "unexceptional" or "mundane," as it emerges as a key site/part of the violence.

To understand how the mundane (housework) and the extreme (violence) intersect, we need to examine the interactional mechanisms through which gendered housework is enforced and experienced. Daminger's (2020) study shows that in the United States, gender-egalitarian couples construct a sense of fairness in their gendered housework division by de-gendering or avoiding a gender perspective in their housework allocation process; by practicing "shallow" de-gendering, couples re-label traditional behaviors as gender-neutral compromises while maintaining the gendered housework outcome. Daminger's research highlights the importance of scrutinizing the micro-social interactions through which gendered housework is "done" and legitimized on the ground—an approach we take in this study. Meanwhile, we are mindful of the fact that how individuals make sense of their experiences and actions is closely embedded in local sociocultural contexts. Whereas conjugal negotiation is a core perspective through which gendered housework is understood in Western societies (Becker 1981; Daminger 2020; Davis and Greenstein 2013),

rigid patriarchal norms in India mean that women are usually afforded limited autonomy and power to negotiate their housework participation. Situating our exploration in the Global South, we examine how and why our interviewees view housework as a crucial site and component in their experiences of marital violence, and how a violence lens sheds new light on gendered housework in these women's lives.

RESEARCH CONTEXT: ASSAM, INDIA

Our empirical investigation is situated in Assam, a state in Northeast India. Families in Assam, as in the broader Indian society, are largely patriarchal and patrilineal, following the male line of dominance and descent (Kaul 2018; Mondal and Paul 2021). Heterosexual marriage is considered essential for men and women to transition into social adulthood, and is thus universally expected (Chaudhry 2021). With some community variation, many marriages are still arranged by families to maintain caste, religion, and class endogamy (Desai and Andrist 2010). Most households still follow a patrilocal system, where a married woman is required to reside with her husband and marital family (Gangoli and Rew 2011). Under a stringent age–sex hierarchy, married women are often subordinate, and subject to the authority of both men and older women in the marital family (Fernandez 1997).

Marital violence is prevalent in Indian families. The 2019–2021 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) shows that 32 percent of ever-married women ages 18 to 49 have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional spousal violence (Pradhan and De 2024). Such violence is widely accepted, justified by women's supposed failure to comply with patriarchal expectations (Mondal and Paul 2021). Indeed, national surveys show that "unsatisfactory" housework performance is a top reason cited to justify marital violence against women (Pradhan and De 2024). Unlike in nuclear families widely studied in Western societies, extended family members, particularly mothers-in-law, are often complicit in perpetrating violence against women in India (Gangoli and Rew 2011). Kandiyoti (1988) explained the violence perpetrated by women in-laws through the "patriarchal bargain" framework, whereby the mother-in-law compensates for her oppression by dominating her daughter-in-law.

Research on marital violence in Northeast India, including Assam, is scarce compared with other regions. Although traditional practices such as

son preference, dowry, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, and wearing veils or burqas do not feature prominently in Assam and the Northeast (Choudhury and Kumar 2022), the departure from these traditions has not necessarily translated into the economic or political empowerment of women. While women's employment is widely considered a key driver of gender equality, women's labor force participation rate in Assam, at around 15 percent (Bordoloi and Bedamatta 2022), is much lower than the national average of around 30 percent (World Bank 2023). Additionally, despite a mandated 33 percent reservation for women in local governance in Assam, women's political participation remains low and largely symbolic, with men in the family often regulating their choices and involvement (Ahmed and Moorthy 2021).

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2021), Assam had the highest rate of crime against women for five consecutive years nationwide between 2016 and 2021. In 2021, the rate was 168.3 per 100,000 population in Assam, 2.6 times the national average of 64.5 per 100,000 population. Among all reported crimes against women in Assam, "cruelty by husband or his relatives" was the most common, with 12,950 reported cases in 2021. Scholars, activists, and police officials offer two explanations for the increase in reported spousal/domestic violence: While some attribute it to increased awareness, others attribute it to an actual increase in violence (Ramesh 2021). Without comparable prevalence data and reporting data, it is difficult to draw a definitive conclusion.

METHODS

This study is part of a bigger project on marital violence in Assam aimed at understanding marital violence, and how such violence is sustained or resisted (Sarma 2025). The research design draws on critical grounded theory, which is suited for developing new understandings and perspectives that help revise, enhance, or add greater depth to existing theories (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019).

Sample

The sample for the bigger project included both women survivors of marital violence ($N = 22$) and key informants ($N = 22$) (e.g., legal advocates, government officials, police personnel, and representatives from

nongovernmental organizations). This study draws on the former. Aligning with the specific tenet of grounded theory that encourages the generation of theory that is grounded in data (Hoddy 2019), we encouraged the women to narrate their experiences of marital violence in the manner they deemed fit, with minimal prompts. They used terminology of their choosing. Though not asked, 15 of the 22 women voluntarily spoke about housework in a critical and in-depth manner. The absence of an explicit link between violence and housework in the accounts of seven interviewees could be attributable to an actual absence of the link or the possibility that they did not recognize the violence embedded in their housework experiences. Thus, we draw primarily on interviewees who have explicitly noted housework in their experiences of marital violence. Although our sample does not allow us to gauge the extent to which violence in/through housework is experienced by women in general or when and for whom housework leads to violence, it is useful for demonstrating that housework features prominently in women's experiences of marital violence.

The fieldwork was conducted in two phases: in January–February 2020, before the first COVID-19 lockdown, and April 2021, when the lockdown was lifted in Assam. Echoing global trends, India, including Assam, saw a dramatic increase in domestic violence during the pandemic (Vora et al. 2020). Nevertheless, although the interviews took place before and in-between COVID-19 lockdowns, 20 of the 22 women were separated or divorced at the time of interview. For most of the interviewees, therefore, their experiences of marital violence predated the pandemic. The remaining two interviewees who resided with their husbands when interviewed did so through a protection/residence order and did not particularly mention the impact of the pandemic on their experiences of violence.

Given the hard-to-reach nature of our interviewees and the need to prioritize interviewees' safety, we used a purposive sampling strategy combining formal help channels with the first author's local, personal contacts. We adopted a multi-channel approach to diversify the sample and exhaust different types of formal support. Four of the 22 interviewees were recruited through the Assam State Commission for Women—a state-level organization that promotes and safeguards women's rights; six through the One Stop Centre (OSC) in Kamrup (metropolitan) district; and two through the 181 Women Helpline. Five were recruited through the first author's personal contacts: Four were divorced, one lived with her husband through a protection order, and all had sought formal help. The last five interviewees were introduced to us through key informants.

We recognize that our sample is not representative of women experiencing domestic violence because many do not seek formal help. During preliminary fieldwork, key informants warned that interviewing women still residing with their perpetrators would be risky. For our interviewees' safety, we focused on those who had approached formal help, lived separately from their abusive partners or in-laws, or lived with their marital family under legal protection.

As described in Table 1, the 22 interviewees, ages 25 to 49 years, were from different districts of Assam with diverse rural/urban origins, religious and community affiliations, education backgrounds, motherhood and work status, and occupations. While seven had rural affiliations, the remaining 15 were urban women. All resided in the Kamrup (metropolitan) district at the time of interview. Marriages were arranged in 12 cases, and the women chose their husbands themselves in the remaining 10 cases. Eighteen of the 22 women waited five or more years since their initial experience of violence before seeking formal help; nine of these women had waited for more than a decade. The interviewees' motherhood status and their children's role in their marital life varied: Some spoke about tolerating marital violence to keep the family "intact" for their children, while others cited the safety of their children as a reason for exiting their marriage. Thirteen women had a higher education degree, but overall, 17 were in precarious or temporary employment, which reflects the challenge for Indian women to translate their education into stable employment (Barhate et al. 2021).

Data Collection

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with all 22 women. Interviewees were not provided any definition or predefined categories of marital violence, which allowed us to generate knowledge that was largely framed by and rooted in "narratives [the interviewees] construct(ed) to understand their selves" (Berns and Schweingruber 2007, 241). Adopting a "free-flowing" interviewing format meant that the interview lengths varied from one to four hours. While self-recognition of marital violence was the first step for all interviewees to approach help, several shared that the support they received from formal help organizations enabled them to more fully recognize the violence and strengthened their resolve to seek an exit. To prioritize interviewees' convenience and safety, all interviews were conducted at a venue the interviewees preferred, including their residences, shelter homes, and cafés/restaurants.

TABLE 1: Interviewee Characteristics

#	*Pseudonym*	*Age*	*Rural/ urban origin*	*Education*	*Work/occupation*	*Relationship status*	*Religion*	*Community*	*Child*
1	Anima[a,b]	36	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Railway services	Divorced	Hindu	Telugu	1 daughter
2	Bidisha[a,b]	26	Rural	High school	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; in shelter home)	Hindu	Assamese	1 daughter
3	Deeksha[a,b]	47	Urban	Judicial services training	Temporary teacher, previously judicial magistrate	Separated (not divorced; case in court)	Hindu	Assamese	1 son
4	Grishma[a,b]	39	Rural	Higher secondary (12th standard)	Small business	Separated (not divorced; Residence and Protection Orders)	Hindu	Assamese	2 sons
5	Himakshi[a]	36	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Receptionist	Separated (not divorced)	Hindu	Assamese	1 son
6	Jahnabi	46	Urban	Master's degree	Runs a paying guest accommodation and language tutor	Separated (not divorced)	Hindu	Assamese	1 daughter

(*continued*)

TABLE 1: (continued)

#	*Pseudonym*	*Age*	*Rural/ urban origin*	*Education*	*Work/occupation*	*Relationship status*	*Religion*	*Community*	*Child*
7	Jyoti[b]	49	Rural	High school (dropped out)	Unemployed	Lives with husband (Residence Order)	Hindu	Assamese	2 sons
8	Kriti[c]	40	Urban	Master's degree	Temporary teacher, previously bank official	Divorced	Hindu	Assamese	None
9	Minu[a,b]	26	Rural	Illiterate	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; in shelter home)	Hindu	Assamese	3 daughters
10	Mitali[a,b]	47	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Permanent teacher	Divorced	Hindu	Assamese	None
11	Natasha[a,b]	34	Urban	PhD	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; case in court)	Hindu	Assamese	None
12	Neeta[a,b]	31	Urban	High school	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; case in court)	Hindu	Assamese	None
13	Pallavi[a]	39	Urban	Bachelor's medical degree	Sabbatical from medical practice	Lives with husband (Protection Order)	Hindu	Assamese	2 sons

(continued)

TABLE 1: (continued)

#	*Pseudonym*	*Age*	*Rural/ urban origin*	*Education*	*Work/occupation*	*Relationship status*	*Religion*	*Community*	*Child*
14	Rehaana[a,b]	27	Rural	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; case in court)	Muslim	Assamese	1 daughter
15	Rekha[a,b]	25	Urban	High school	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced)	Hindu	Assamese-Ahom	1 son
16	Saira[a,b]	36	Urban	Bachelor's degree	Temporary teaching	Separated (not divorced; case in court)	Muslim	Bengali	None
17	Sangeeta[c]	34	Urban	PhD (about to begin)	Medical researcher	Divorced	Hindu	Assamese	1 son
18	Sewali[a]	28	Rural	Primary school	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; in shelter home)	Hindu (tribal)	Karbi	None
19	Sneha[a,b]	32	Urban	Judicial services training	Government judicial officer	Divorced	Hindu	Assamese	None
20	Sumona[a,b]	40	Urban	Higher secondary (12th standard)	Small business	Separated (not divorced)	Hindu	Bengali	2 sons
21	Tora	48	Urban	PhD	Lecturer	Divorced	Hindu	Assamese	1 son
22	Urmila[a,b]	38	Rural	Bachelor's degree (dropped out)	Unemployed	Separated (not divorced; case in court)	Hindu	Assamese	None

Note: All characteristics refer to the time of the interview unless specified otherwise.
[a] Patrilocal residence during various periods of marriage. [b] Interviewee explicitly spoke about housework without prompting in narrating their experiences of marital violence. [c] Interviewee married twice and faced violence in both marriages.

The study was approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University, with which the authors were affiliated at the time of data collection. All interviewees were provided with a written participant information sheet in Assamese/English, which was verbally read and explained to one interviewee who was not literate. All interviews were conducted in Assamese, except for one in Hindi. With the informed consent of all interviewees, the interviews were audio-recorded. Pseudonyms are used to ensure anonymity throughout the article.

Data Analysis

All interviews were translated and transcribed verbatim into English, and ATLAS.ti was used for data organization and analysis. We coded the data in several stages, following the principles of feminist grounded theory, by iteratively re-examining raw data and focusing on subjugated knowledge from marginalized groups (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019). First, the theme of housework emerged when we sought to identify life domains in which the interviewees experienced marital violence. Next, we focused specifically on narratives related to housework. Using a combination of open and axial coding (Hoddy 2019), we identified subthemes including the women's experiences of marital violence in/through housework, perceived normative and familial expectations regarding housework, consequences of and responses to housework-related violence, and how such violence related to the women's experiences in other life domains. The second-stage coding was conducted separately by the two authors. Finally, the two authors cross-validated, deliberated, and critically reassessed the codes to finalize the analysis.

Positionality

The first author is an Assamese woman. Her insider status and perspective not only helped enable crucial access to a hard-to-reach population but also provided an in-depth understanding of the local context for embedded data interpretation and for managing potential sensitivity and risks associated with the research. The first author's "insider" status also called for critical reflexivity that allowed the researcher to avoid taking the familiar for granted (Brannick and Coghlan 2007). Putting critical reflexivity into practice, the first author took detailed fieldnotes documenting her assumptions and thoughts before and after the interviews, and she actively reflected on these during the data collection and analysis

process. The "outsider" status of the second author further helped render the familiar unfamiliar by interrogating the data from a fresh perspective. The researchers' reflexivity led to critical re-learning, especially regarding how housework relates to marital violence.

FINDINGS

Fifteen of our 22 interviewees (Table 1) explicitly noted housework as a site, source, or form of marital violence without prompting. The physical and mental harms and coercive control inflicted on them in and through housework, coupled with a normalization of the harms, underscore the severity and systemic nature of the violence they experienced. Our data analysis revealed three distinct dimensions in which gendered housework constituted a form and site of marital violence in our interviewees' experiences: (1) the coercive and manipulative manner in which a rigid housework regime is enforced; (2) the physical and mental harms inflicted in and through housework; and (3) the impact of housework, as a regime of gender control, on women's capabilities in other life domains. We report our findings for these dimensions in three corresponding sections.

Rigid Housework: Organization, Coercion, and Mental Manipulation

At first glance, the housework tasks our interviewees undertook, namely cooking, cleaning, laundry, and washing utensils, resemble those widely observed in many countries. It was not until our interviewees described the rigid and, in their words, "punishing" regime around housework that we understood the violent nature of housework. Housework was modulated at extremely intense levels, and women were held to stringent standards in completing household tasks. Urmila (38 years old), who had been in an abusive marriage for nearly a decade, explained further:

> His [husband] routine was such that he would go to the gym at 5 a.m. He would need a good breakfast after he was back from the gym—a glass of milk, five eggs, whey protein, bananas—that would be his first meal. He would then rest for a while after coming back. By 9.30 a.m., an entire meal should be ready. He is very particular about his food. He would need *bhaat* [rice], *dail* [lentils], *sabji* [vegetable dish], and chicken or fish. Everything had to be ready.. . . .There wasn't a single day that I could skip this routine.

While Urmila highlights how the temporal regime of her housework revolved around her husband's routine, such a regime also often revolved around other family members, including one's in-laws, beyond the couple dyad typically examined in Western research (Davis and Greenstein 2013). In our sample, 17 of the 22 women lived in a patrilocal joint family during various periods of their marriage. Placed at the bottom of the household hierarchy, the women not only had to juggle the complex housework demands of multiple family members but were also subject to the family members' rigid control and surveillance in doing housework. Bidisha (26 years old), who was born into a low-income family in the Kamrup (rural) district, married into a family that was relatively better off than her own. She illustrated the stringent standards and scrutiny her in-laws imposed on her housework, and the arguments arising from her failure to meet the standards:

> My morning routine involved cooking breakfast for the family. Both my brother-in-law and father-in-law would leave for work, and I had to serve breakfast consisting of rice, *roti* [flatbread], *dail* [lentils], and *sabji* [vegetable dish]. Everything had to be ready at 9 a.m. I also cooked dinner every day—five to six dishes had to be cooked almost every day. I did everything. I still told my husband that I was ready to do everything, all chores, provided I was not mistreated by his parents. They would pick a fight every day over every small issue. If I was late in serving food, even if there was a delay of 5 minutes, there would be a fight. If the *dail* was a little runny, even that would be an issue.

Resource theories (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994) predict that women's labor force participation alleviates their housework burden. However, in our study, wage work did little to free women from housework. Although the working women in our study could capitalize on their income-generating ability to leave their abusive marriages, cultural barriers such as widespread stigmatization around divorce prevented or delayed several of them from doing so. The working women in our study found it challenging to meet the rigid standards of housework along with wage work. This is illustrated by Mitali (47 years old), who had a permanent job as a teacher and was the only interviewee who had managed to leave her abusive marriage within three months of the onset of the violence:

> I had to cook before going to work and after returning. Again, at night, I had to cook. And if sometimes something didn't taste right, they'd [in-laws]

> yell at me. . . . If you do household chores willingly, that's a different thing, but when you're forced to do them, that's torture.

Mitali was not alone in struggling to juggle demanding housework responsibilities alongside her work commitments. In another example, Deeksha, 47 years old, one of the most educated interviewees and from a relatively well-off upper-middle-class family, had previously worked as a judicial magistrate. After childbirth, her husband emotionally manipulated her to feel guilty about returning to work:

> When I rejoined work after the birth of our son, he accused me of neglecting my duties as a mother. During my work hours, I had hired help who used to take our son to my mother's place, as my family was nearby. My husband was quite upset about this arrangement. His everyday dialogue was, "Why did you birth our son if you couldn't look after him?"

Following her return to work after childbirth, Deeksha's husband frequently criticized her childcare arrangements, accusing her of failing her duty as a mother.

In other cases, the husbands and in-laws often mobilized gender stereotypes and slurs. For example, Neeta (31 years), who spent five years with her abusive husband and his family, recounted the constant humiliation from her in-laws she had to endure:

> It was as if they found faults in everything I did. They said I didn't know how to broom the house or wash the dishes. All in all, according to them, I was good for nothing. I was supposed to cook for 10 people all on my own. They all kept on watching TV or doing something else but didn't help.

Besides withholding their help, Neeta's marital family members frequently blamed her for failing to meet their housework standards.

The rigid housework regime imposed on our interviewees amounts to what Stark (2009) termed "micro-regulation"—of when and how housework was performed—that left little room for autonomy. The liberty denied by the micro-regulation was "much a part of the taken-for-granted fabric of everyday affairs" (Stark 2009, 349). This is vividly reflected not only in how various forms of manipulation were used to normalize the coercive enforcement and regulation of housework, but also in how several interviewees internalized such normalization as "duty." Such internalization is partly rooted in childhood socialization. Grishma (39 years old), for example, had believed that rigid housework routines were an

essential part of her married life of nearly 16 years: "I would be exhausted after doing all the chores for the whole day. At times, my sisters-in-law helped, but the main duty as a daughter-in-law was mine. My mother had taught me that it's the duty of the daughter-in-law."

Women experienced the rigid regime of housework across class, religion, age, and rural/urban affiliation. They were often physically and verbally abused, manipulated, and coercively controlled to do housework. It was no surprise that many interviewees perceived housework as "torturing" and "punishing." Like Mitali, quoted at the beginning of this article, several interviewees highlighted the violence embedded in housework.

Violent Housework: Physical and Mental Harms

The rigid regime of housework paved the way for physical and mental violence inflicted on women. They suffered various forms of harm for purportedly "underperforming" housework. For example, Urmila described the severe physical violence she endured for skipping a minor task in her husband's daily routine:

> One day, I wasn't feeling well. It was around 10 a.m., and he was resting. I prepared the food but didn't serve it on a plate. I went to lie down for a while. Seeing me sleeping sent him into a murderous rage, and he threw a burning *saaki* [a lit lamp for worship] at me. He then dragged me from the bed and asked me to serve his food. When I expressed my inability to do so due to ill health, he kicked me hard in the stomach. He hit me on the head and threw a guitar at me. I was very sick by then. The next morning, I suffered severe bleeding. The entire bathroom floor was red with blood. I was petrified. . . . I lost the baby. It was the fourth baby I had lost.

Urmila's deviation from her husband's routine triggered her husband's physical assault on her, causing her to miscarry. Her experience was far from uncommon. A number of the other women were abused by their husbands and other marital family members for failing to perform housework in expected ways. Grishma explained,

> He [husband] would come home very late from work, sometimes after 12 at night. . . . I would be tired, and if there was a slight delay in opening the door after he rang the bell, he would hit me. . . . He would enter the house uttering profanities. He would tear the mosquito net if he saw that it wasn't hung properly. I would hang it again, and he would tear it down again. He had a pattern: he would tear down and break things and, by around 3 a.m., he would be tired and then he would fall asleep. He would wake up at

> around 11 a.m. or noon the next day. But I would have to wake up early since I had to look after the child. I was so harassed during this period that when I went to my mother's home after a year, people could not recognize me. I was quite healthy and fit but had lost considerable weight. I was sleep-deprived.

Other interviewees also spoke about a myriad of ways their physical and mental health was compromised due to housework, including loss of appetite, intense feelings of anxiety and fear, and depression. The women were often expected to do housework under poor health conditions. Neeta recalled her experience after an abortion:

> I had to continue washing my husband's clothes [by hand] and perform other household chores. I had to mop the seven rooms of the house twice a day. . . . All in all, I was their servant. I was physically very weak after the abortion, but I still had to do the housework. One day, what his sister did was when I went to get clean water for washing my husband's clothes, she came in and pushed me and the bucket of water that I was holding.

As Neeta noted, other family members, often the mother- and sister-in-law, were frequently involved in perpetrating violence through housework.

Echoing Neeta, 12 other interviewees spoke of instances in which members of their marital household instigated fights between the couple, and encouraged various forms of violence against them for not following housework expectations. For example, Urmila's mother-in-law often complained to her husband about her cutting corners in housework, which led her husband to accuse her:

> When he returned home from work in the evening, he used to first go and meet his mother in her room. I don't know what would ensue between the two of them, but he used to accuse me each time after meeting his mother. He used to question me about what I did during the day. . . . His mom used to say that I didn't do any housework during the day. The point is, I did everything.

In most cases, such accusations by in-laws led to escalated verbal, physical, and mental abuse of the women. Bidisha recalled,

> It was such a small issue. There was no one [else] at home. I had to do the usual chores. My child was troubling me, and I could not do the chores. My husband just got home, and I asked him why he was late—if he had been

> home earlier, he could have looked after the child, and I would have been able to finish the chores sooner. It was just that issue, but he screamed at me, saying that he was late at work and that he was stuck in a traffic jam and not because he was having fun. My father-in-law got home then. When he saw us arguing, he questioned my husband's masculinity by asking what kind of man he was for allowing his wife to argue in that manner—he said that had it been his wife, he would have physically hit her to submission. . . . My in-laws would always add fuel to the fire, turning my husband against me always.

Bidisha's narrative highlights how a minor disagreement with her husband over housework escalated into an instance of marital violence when patriarchal norms are further reinforced by other marital family members. It is clear that such violence exists as both a consequence of the women's failure to meet unreasonably stringent housework standards and a threat that compels them to comply with the standards. Ultimately, the violence served as a disciplinary mechanism to enforce and reproduce the rigid regime of gendered housework.

Locked in and Exiting Violent Housework

The coupling of housework and marital violence further curtailed our interviewees' capabilities in other life domains, including education and work (Stark 2007). Several interviewees recognized housework as a regime of control through which their husbands and marital family members dominated them and ensured their subservience. For example, Jyoti (49 years old), a mother of two adult sons, was coerced by her parents to marry at the age of 16 to a man who was 26 years older than she was. She recognized housework as a regime of control, as her husband confined her to the household and limited her from going outside the home:

> He [husband] just wanted to dominate me. He wanted me to live under him like a servant. He wanted me to do the household chores and keep me confined in the house. He didn't want me to go out or even wear a good piece of clothing!

After years, Jyoti reached the tipping point and called the 181 Women Helpline to file a formal complaint. The intervention and support she received enabled her to obtain legal assistance, which helped mitigate the violence she experienced.

Researchers often conceive of the time spent on housework as a trade-off: As one spends more time on activities such as paid work, one has less

time for housework, and vice versa (Bittman et al. 2003; Davis and Greenstein 2013; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011). In contrast, in our study, housework was largely an immutable, non-negotiable, and dominant part of women's lives, compromising pursuits in other life domains. Bidisha described how her husband and mother-in-law dissuaded her from pursuing education:

> I wanted to study. I wanted to take my exams, and my husband told my mother-in-law about that. She said that no good would come from it and reprimanded me for having such aspirations. My husband hit me black and blue when I expressed my disapproval. That day, I was sure about their true intentions—they just wanted me to do the chores in the house, and that was the only reason they brought me to their house—that's it, nothing else! . . . Once, my mother-in-law asked me to leave their house. This was after she had not permitted me to continue my studies. She said that since I have no qualifications, I will have no option but to survive by selling my body as a prostitute!

Bidisha and her four-year-old daughter were taking refuge in a shelter home where the interview took place. Coming from a low-income family and lacking economic resources, she was worried about the uncertain and precarious future for her daughter and herself.

While housework and marital responsibilities disrupted the education of five women in our study, those who did pursue education after marriage highlighted their struggle in managing educational pursuits alongside housework. The tight time bind meant that the women often had to skip meals and cut their sleep short. Sneha (32 years old), who pursued a bachelor's degree in law after marriage, said,

> The timings of my classes were from 1:30 to 5–6 in the evening. Before going to classes, I had to complete the housework. Often, I would have no time even to have my food. I used to attend my classes on an empty stomach. Their [in-laws] mentality was such that once a girl was married, she should be confined within the house and raise children. . . . When I completed my LLB, I expressed my desire to practice [law] to my in-laws. They told me to bin [trash] my degree.

At the time of interview, Sneha was divorced and was employed as a judicial officer. This transition was made possible only by her parents' emotional and financial support, along with her own educational qualifications.

Natasha (34 years old), who was in the final year of her PhD, similarly struggled to juggle her studies alongside household chores:

> I told my mother-in-law that since I'm not quite accustomed to household chores, we should hire some help. She refused, saying all these years she herself had looked after the household. . . . Also, they used to keep me so engaged in household chores that I didn't even have time to think about my work. I had reached the last phase of my PhD by then. I was very frustrated.

Having spent nearly three years in various courts fighting the case against her husband, Natasha expressed her frustration at the judicial system. For the few educated professional interviewees, neither their education nor their work alone freed them from having to perform housework. Despite having a well-respected job as a judicial magistrate, Deeksha was constantly reminded of her failure to perform housework, which placed her under tremendous pressure to quit her job:

> Eventually, my husband started giving me an ultimatum: either leave the job or him. He said if I couldn't look after our child, I should either leave my job or him. He started pressuring me, stopped talking to me. . . . I had to travel for work, and my husband would complain to his family, saying that his meals were compromised due to my inability to cook during the day. He rejected the idea of hiring help and said, "Why would I hire a cook when I have a wife who is supposed to cook for me?!" I used to come back from work in the evening and cook for him, but he wasn't satisfied with that. In the meantime, due to my long travel to work, my health started to deteriorate. He refused when I suggested that I move closer to the workplace with our child. My health deteriorated further due to the everyday stress and the work pressure. One day, suddenly out of impulse, I just resigned from my job!

At the time of interview, Deeksha had a low-paying temporary job at a local college and lived with her aging parents, feeling that she was a burden to them. She thought that her husband's abuse was aimed at stripping her of her power because she was more qualified than he was, which her husband perceived to be a threat.

The rigid expectations around housework constrained multiple domains of the women's lives, ranging from physical confinement and withdrawal from education and wage work to a lack of freedom in how to use their own time. The vulnerability of the educated/professional women illustrates that factors typically associated with women's empowerment in

Western societies, such as education and employment, played complex roles in shaping our interviewees' experiences of marital violence in and through housework. While wage work intensified violence for some (e.g., Natasha and Deeksha), it also provided some women with the resources needed to exit marriages (e.g., Sneha and Mitali).

DISCUSSION

To understand women's experiences of marital violence that featured housework prominently, we brought together two ostensibly unrelated lines of gender research: household labor and marital violence. Despite a recognition of the connection between housework and violence in feminist scholarship (e.g., Kelly 1988, 2003), research on housework tends to focus on the gender division of time and labor (Bittman et al. 2003; Brines 1994; Gupta 2007; Hu 2019; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011). Research on violence has not paid enough attention to housework except as one among many "triggers" of marital violence (Anwary 2015; Bhattacharyya, Bedi, and Chhachhi 2011; Das et al. 2013; Ragavan, Iyengar, and Wurtz 2014). In contrast, our study reveals three interlinked dimensions that deepen scholarly understandings of the housework–violence connection.

First, violence is embedded in the stringent enforcement of a rigid regime of how, when, and to what standard women are expected to do housework. Under a rigid regime of housework, as illustrated, women are tasked with unreasonable housework burdens, according to punishing schedules and unreasonably stringent standards, and often under inhumane conditions. Such a rigid regime leaves women little room for autonomy and agency. Extending the violence lens to bear on housework, our study reveals the potentially violent nature of housework. It underscores the necessity of going beyond examining how much and what household tasks are done by whom to consider the micro-dynamics of how housework is (expected to be) performed.

Second, violence is used to enforce the rigid regime of housework. As our findings show, diverse forms of violence—physical violence, verbal abuse, mental manipulation, and coercive control—are inflicted on women to ensure they do housework in the expected manner. In the patrilocal context of India, the existence of a "web of violence" highlights that the perpetrators often include not just one's husband but also other members of the marital family. The web creates a microcosm in the household that normalizes marital violence. Through coordinated control, surveillance,

and social isolation within the family, the web makes it challenging for women to recognize and exit their abusive situations. These findings suggest the limitations of economic theories (e.g., exchange, bargaining, and autonomy) that view housework division as something negotiable based on one's economic resources (Becker 1981; Brines 1994; Kan 2008). Under India's rigid patriarchal system and patrilocal residence, the violence mobilized to enforce gendered housework leaves many women little room for negotiation. While existing research suggests that individuals unconsciously or proactively do housework as an act of "doing femininity" (Brines 1994; Davis and Greenstein 2013), our findings urge researchers to go beyond treating "doing gender" as merely normative compliance.

Third, the enforcement of a rigid housework regime through violence often restricts women in other life domains, such as education and paid work. Whereas some researchers show that education and wage labor can relieve women from household work (Brines 1994; Gupta 2007; Hu 2019; Kan 2008; Killewald 2011), we show that higher education and paid employment can be a double-edged sword. Women's employment often intensified violence within their marriages, and in some cases, it provided resources for their eventual exit. Under the pressure of housework, however, many were coerced into exiting wage work or giving up the pursuit of a higher education. We highlight the need to understand the interplay between marital violence and housework as integral components of a broader system of gender control, which constrains women's basic freedom and overall physical, social, and economic mobility.

Although not all interviewees experienced all three dimensions fully, the three dimensions of the housework–violence nexus reinforce one another and form an interlocking cycle that heightens the challenge for women to recognize, resist, and exit violence. The mechanism underpinning the cycle resonates with Acker's (2006) theorization of inequality regimes, which calls for attention to the assemblage of interlinked practices and processes that (re)produce and render invisible gender inequalities. In this cycle, housework and violence are not separate regimes of gender control; rather, they intersect in (re)producing domestic gender inequality. Failure to meet housework standards (the mundane) legitimizes the exercise of violence (the extreme). In turn, the embedding of marital violence in everyday routines hides the extreme in plain sight as a "normal" response to women's "deviance" from the mundane.

It is important to interpret our findings in light of a few limitations. Although our in-depth study embedded in a Global South context demonstrates the necessity for going beyond theories derived from the Global

North, our in-depth qualitative inquiry is limited to Assam, India. We would, however, expect our findings and conceptualization of the domestic violence–household labor nexus to resonate in other contexts characterized by a strong presence of gender inequalities, patriarchy, and patrilocality. Second, our study focused only on women. While it would be useful to interview members of the marital family, given the nature of the topic (i.e., domestic violence), it is difficult to interview the perpetrators of violence who are all members of the marital family.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Acker (2006) emphasized invisibility and legitimacy as key factors underpinning the persistence of inequality regimes, arguing that we need to render visible (the construct of) inequality regimes before we can undo them. Notwithstanding its limitations, our study responds to Acker's call by revealing how the interplay between supposedly separate gender regimes (e.g., housework and marital violence) co-constitute and mutually reinforce one another to reproduce systemic gender inequality. We also enrich an understanding of how a "continuum" of violence against women (Kelly 1988) blends the mundane and the extreme. We show that the gendered expectations around household labor and domestic violence are not independent of each other—that often, gendered compliance to such labor is not a mere act of "doing gender," but is wrought through violence inflicted and normalized by a web of perpetrators, involving both the husband and his family. Thus, our study demonstrates the value of scrutinizing the interplay between gender regimes to understand the persistence of domestic gender inequality and find ways to address it.

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NOTES

1. Although prior research often distinguished housework from care, we use the term *housework* interchangeably with *domestic labor* to also cover routine care provision such as childcare. This better reflects our interviewees' under-

standing of housework, which includes routine reproductive labor that sustains everyday family life.

2. In the context of our research, the term *marital violence* includes violence perpetrated not only by our interviewees' husbands but also by their marital family members (e.g., in-laws).

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