

Do Battered Women in Rural India have Access to Freedom?

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reviews options available to women in rural India and whether these opportunities grant them freedom. Initially, I distinguish the term freedom from autonomy, recognizing the flaws in the theory of autonomy. I identify freedom as a human's ability to make choices without external coercion. This differs from the concept of autonomy because autonomy does not recognize culture as a form of coercion; autonomy also neglects to consider the possibility of a person making a decision that affects his or her life negatively. These concepts tie into battered women in rural India because of the pressure they receive from cultural forces to make decisions reflecting practiced gender norms. Through case study research, I found that battered women in India lack access to freedom, being unable to access their freedom because of the constant threat of violence and/or ostracism. I drew this conclusion after reviewing opportunities of financial freedom through micro-credit loans, land-owning, and women's employment. I reflect on freedom of mobility, and examine women's threat of violence in both the public and private sectors. Lastly, I reviewed women's political freedom in rural India, reviewing laws that were passed to ensure women's equality. Women in India are already in a vulnerable position because of existing gender norms that require women to perform tasks for the benefit of the men in her life. A woman under the threat of domestic violence is twice as vulnerable because of her positionality as a woman in her culture, as well as a wife in her marriage. She is bound by gender norms in society, as well as her expected marital duties as a wife. Being unable to escape the threat of violence in both her private and public spheres, a woman experiencing domestic violence has virtually no access to freedom. I suggest that state and community-

level empowerment is necessary before individual-level empowerment is effective and culturally accepted.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Being a woman in rural India is a challenge, especially in the fight for freedom. The state of women in India is dismal, as women are subjected to many forms of disparities. Women are subjected to inequality in their economic, political and social spheres. Many of their disabilities include economic dependence, childhood and other forced marriages, patriarchal roles within the family, joint family systems, illiteracy, violence within the home and on the streets, etc. (Maan, 2008). Several of these inequalities are brought on because of ignorance. However, with globalization, transformation of cultural, political, social and economic aspects of life bring the potential for opportunities available that women have not previously had access to. Women have access to a better variety of occupations due to the globalization of several different industries, allowing them to work outside of their homes; the globalization of technology has allowed women to have access to information at their fingertips that they normally would not have, including communication with international agents that may push the ideals of women's rights; certain practices are being challenged due to the information women are receiving regarding their opportunities of equality; also, efforts from international organizations and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have led to the passing of various laws and acts, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 and the Panchayati Raj, that promote gender equality (Maan, 2008). Such innovations to women's rights in India could not have come without

consequences. The state of women in India is still negative, even with the efforts of globalization and the concept of liberal autonomy.

With opportunities arising in every direction in India for women, she is expected to take advantage of at least some of the choices brought to her by globalization. With the grip of culture on gender norms, not only are women expected to uphold their duties as women, wives, and mothers, but now they are also burdened with the opportunity to work. Employment may seem like a step toward autonomy, but in reality, it potentially strips women of their ability to act freely with their time. Therefore, “globalization, despite its obvious economic agenda poses a serious threat to cultural autonomy as conditioning and fixation of human choice and value is a facilitator of economic process” (Maan, 2008). Advancement of women’s position in the economic world will have direct consequences to her position in the social world. It is because of this give-and-take relationship of freedom and advancement that I chose to perform this study. If a woman’s positionality in the economic sphere in India is improving, does she have access to freedom if her positionality in other aspects of her life is suffering?

If being a woman in India is not challenging enough, being a woman subjected to domestic violence further complicates her positionality in all domains of her life. Her position as an abused woman includes an additional factor rarely considered by support groups, NGOs, or any other organization for refuge. Corrine H. Rocca et al. found that women’s empowerment groups tend to lack the consideration for the consequences that vocational and occupational training could have on a woman’s personal life, such as an increased risk of domestic violence (2008). By the conclusion of this thesis, I will have not only examined the aspects of women’s freedom, but also its accessibility for victims

of domestic violence. Are victims of domestic violence able to freely make decisions as well have access to economic, political and social freedom?

Without consideration of cultural response to empowerment, autonomy cannot be obtained even when the factors contributing to autonomy are present. A woman can have a job, an education, own property and attend self-help groups. However, is she autonomous when leaving her abusive husband would result in her being ostracized in her own community due to the cultural stigmatization of divorce? Is it autonomy when the factors increase the frequency of abuse? This thesis will ultimately examine the factors of autonomy and whether or not they can help battered women obtain freedom with cultural consideration.

This thesis will contribute to the academic community in areas such as political philosophy, social justice, and other feminist topics including women's rights and violence against women. My research contributes in a unique way because it recognizes the subjectivity of autonomy, realizing that access to freedom is a personal choice women have to make given the options and information are available to them. That being said, my research also reviews empowerment, including the most common means of empowerment for women in India – self-help groups – and assesses the effectiveness of self-help groups not only on female autonomy, but also on women's access to freedom. This thesis serves as a focus on the vulnerability of women as a group in rural India, but also with the added vulnerability of domestic violence, to emphasize the need for intervention in the area of women's rights in India. Lastly, my research primarily focuses on recent data (within the last 10 years), making my analysis on the state of women in rural India more accurate and recent.

Each section of my thesis provides detailed information regarding opportunities available to women in rural India. I include analysis on the differentiation of autonomy and freedom to provide a more accurate description of opportunities for freedom for women in India. Chapter 2 outlines comparative literature that helps to answer the main components of my research question. It also provides background on the motive for my research question. I provide information on the status of women in rural India in regards to economic opportunities and lack of education. I take the literature on the state of women in rural India a step further and include the state of battered women in India into the literature review. The literature outlines ways in which the Indian government has attempted to alleviate the issue of domestic violence through the passing of laws. The literature also finds that these laws remain ineffective because of the stigma of seeking help for private matters in traditional communities, mainly in rural areas. After providing background for the research question, I provide background for the reasons I question the intentions of the word *autonomy*. I provide literature analyzing both autonomy and freedom, in an effort to give a detailed description of why it is important to distinguish the two. Lastly, Chapter 2 provides literature on the importance of empowerment, and why it cannot be used in the same way as freedom or autonomy, because empowerment is the necessary factor in obtaining freedom.

Chapter 3 seeks to analyze the features of women's freedom. It begins with an examination of women's opportunities to obtain financial freedom, through microloans, land-owning, and employment. The obvious factor of violence against women was essential to the analysis. I provided information and analysis on women's freedom of mobility, concerning their access to public spaces and risk of violence. In this subsection,

I provided cases of violence against women in the public sector, as well as more information on domestic violence in the home. This subsection provided a brief overview of dowry violence and violence in the workplace and how that strips women of their freedom of mobility. Regarding opportunities available to women to gain freedom, I gave information on self-help groups and how they are both beneficial and negative to women's freedom. The final section of Chapter 3 provides opportunities for women to gain political freedom in their communities and within their households. This section allows for the introduction of positive programs initiated on the state-level that gave women efficient access to freedom. This section also includes political freedom within the household considering decision-making power.

Chapter 4 provides a discussion of the data analysis. The section begs the question if women actually have access to freedom. The discussion also provides an in-depth explanation of why the term *autonomy* is insufficient in describing the ideal opportunities available to women to obtain freedom. In the discussion chapter, I take a closer look into the opportunities available to women to gain financial freedom, freedom of mobility, and political freedom. Chapter 4 concludes with an emphasis on the importance of state and community-level empowerment, showing that individual-level empowerment is actually potentially harmful to a woman without the support from her community and state.

Chapter 5 concludes my thesis by reviewing the data analyzed for the purpose of seeking opportunities for women to obtain freedom. It challenges other researchers not to lose focus on the purpose of autonomy in efforts to define it. More importantly, Chapter 5 provides suggestions for rural India in empowering its women to gain freedom.

Moreover, women are not going to have true opportunities of freedom without state and community-level action.

After evaluating the data collected through case studies, I was able to conclude that the opportunities available to battered women in rural India are not sufficient enough to provide them access to freedom. Women in India are already subjected to risks of ostracism and violence if they neglect the status quo. Being a battered woman in rural India subjects a victim to even greater risk to her life in both the private and public spheres. Without state and community-level intervention and empowerment, battered women in India can only worsen their freedom and autonomy through acts of empowerment.

Methodology

The methodology for my project consisted of conducting qualitative case study research, where I explored multifarious studies conducted by other researchers that would contribute to the strength of my project. Many of these studies have quantitative data, as well as qualitative data, that also contributed to my project. These case studies were limited to areas in rural India, mainly in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, with other minor exceptions to South Indian rural states.

Case study research is the most appropriate research method for this thesis, not only because of the limited time frame, but also because this study seeks to evaluate opportunities available to women. Case study research allows researchers to “explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources” (Tellis, 1997). This form of research allows the researcher to evaluate programs, people, and interventions

from an external point of view, so that the researcher is able to evaluate the data and interpret it in a way that is flexible to his or her own research. The most efficient method to discover opportunities for freedom is through the research of others, who conducted their own in-person interviews and evaluations. With this methodology, I was able to review many other case studies on women's opportunities in rural India and evaluate the status of rural Indian women at large, from an external perspective.

While case study research is the most appropriate methodology for this project, it presents limitations. Using data and analysis from other researcher's projects subjects my analysis to bias. Being unable to conduct my own interviews, I had to rely on the interview data and other data from other researchers. The primary researchers may have shown their bias in their research, ultimately affecting my own analysis of their research. Also I cannot ignore my own liberal bias. Being a Caucasian female student in a social justice field in the United States prevents me from being able to interpret freedom from the perspective of women in India. Another major limitation came from the lack of research available on violence against women in the public spaces in India. I was able to gather information from news and magazine articles regarding specific, localized instances of violence; but without census data or proper population data, I could not accurately depict the wide-spread frequency of public violence against women in India. I adjusted my research to the limitations in order to provide a more accurate analysis of the status of women in rural India. A final limitation I had to face was the restrictions brought on by a liberal framework that is evident throughout my analysis. This thesis fails to consider intersectional factors such as caste, class, religion, and region, and instead assumes women as a single identity seeking the same goals of freedom. It should be

distinguished that women of different social positions will not have the same goals for freedom. In recognizing this limitation, I attempt to alleviate the assumption that women in India experience the same struggles and have the same goals throughout the country.

Uttar Pradesh is a region that still upholds the caste tradition, as evident in Goli, Kumar Maurya and Kumar Sharma's study (2015). The authors found that caste inequalities in landholding, education and wealth are as strong in Uttar Pradesh as they were six decades ago, and that reforms and laws over time have had little to no effect on the inequality. The survival of harmful caste traditions may provide evidence for the same survival of harmful gender practices in similar regions. Evidence of this shows in the 2011 Census, where only 48 percent of females are literate compared to the 76 percent of males in rural areas of Uttar Pradesh (Census2011, 2011). There are comparable statistics on other rural regions in India, such as Rajasthan and Bihar. In Rajasthan, only 52.12 percent of women were literate in 2011, compared to the 79.19 percent of men. As for Bihar, 51.1 percent of women reported literate compared to the 71.2 percent of literate males (Census 2011, 2011). The comparison of urban versus rural areas must be made considering the evidence from the same census, where 60 percent of women are literate in urban areas. While education is accessible to at least 70 percent of the rural population, the large margin between literate females and literate males shows that there are stigmas that prevent women from seeking and/or obtaining education. This evidence provided my research with a specific area of interest, where there is little opportunity for education, employment, and therefore empowerment for women. Most of the rural population in India is in the northern regions; therefore, much of my research is conducted focusing on northern rural states in India.

This thesis seeks to discover ways in which women in rural India can access freedom. To specify freedom, I intend to use a definition of freedom surrounding women's rights to make decisions without external coercion. This coercion includes cultural pressure and threat of violence. While my research question surrounds the opportunities available to battered women in rural India, it is essential to distinguish which opportunities define access to freedom. In defining freedom, I am able to assess its accessibility in rural India.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this section, I plan to not only give comparative literature contributing to my thesis, but also to provide background to the development of the research question. In the patriarchal culture of India, being a woman is a factor of vulnerability on its own. Women's rights groups have been fighting for equality and equity for decades in India. While there have been some advancements in the Indian law, the widespread recognition and practice of women's equality in India has yet to surface. The literature will review factors that contribute to the vulnerability of women in India. In the following subsections, literature will provide background on rural India, and why rural Indian women are more vulnerable than their urban counterparts. Domestic violence also plays a role in women's vulnerability, and will be outlined in the following subsections. Lastly, the literature will provide insight on why my research focuses on freedom versus autonomy, and how empowerment plays a role in defining freedom. The literature will help to answer the question: Do battered women in rural India have access to freedom?

The State of Women in a Rural Indian Economy

Women in India are already at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchies of power in all of India due to their sex and gender. When it comes to vulnerability, women in rural India are in a more sensitive position than their counterparts in urban India. A reason for this may be correlated with the adaptation to literacy and education for women in urban cities, while women in rural cities remain in fields performing

agricultural labor, where literacy is not required. Shweta Singh and Gretchen Hoge take on the task of comparing women in rural India to those in urban India directly. Their study compares options for women in rural areas to those of women in urban areas. The authors show data that women in rural India have significantly less options and opportunities to find work outside the home than women in urban areas. Women in urban economies are also more likely to have fruitful, more specialized employment with opportunities of upward mobility than women in rural economies. This is because women in rural areas are less likely to be educated and therefore have less opportunity outside of agriculture. (Singh and Hoge, 2010).

Considering Singh and Hoge's findings, what would happen to women if agriculture no longer demanded as many laborers? Dipankar Gupta points out how the structure of the Indian village is transforming with the introduction of capitalism. With capitalism comes industrialization, and with industrialization comes the lack of necessity of physical labor. Many farmers who do not own land, which includes most women, are losing their opportunities to work on other's farms because of the mechanization of farming. This is forcing farmers and other villagers to seek urban jobs. Family farming is the most prevalent form of agriculture in rural India. However, the shift from agricultural prestige to urban employment will have many implications for women in rural India looking for freedom. I believe that this shift could present the opportunity for women to seek education and urban employment out of necessity, ultimately allowing her more freedom than she would have if she remained on her family farm (Gupta, 2005). On the other hand, if women should not seek education and vocational training, she will be left in her vulnerable state within the home, without a form of income. The implications for

the modernization of farming make women in rural and agricultural India particularly vulnerable.

Nisha Srivastava and Ravi Srivastava take into account the different options rural women have and how they are left vulnerable with their options. Working women usually entail that they are in a lower class or caste, which leaves them already more vulnerable. Rural women are more likely to enter into subsidiary status work, or part-time. This is because these women are also culturally expected to manage their children, households, and manage their family farm duties. According to Srivastava and Srivastava, working women face various forms of discrimination, such as job-typing and inequity in salary (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). The authors also point out that higher work participation rates do not necessarily correlate with higher levels of welfare. “Only when higher work participation rates are accompanied by higher educational capabilities and/or asset and income, do they become meaningful from a welfare and, especially, income point of view” (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). Without education or assets, women are left vulnerable in their particular fields. While the authors recognize that all working women are disadvantaged, they also note that those women belonging to rural areas are even more vulnerable. An important lesson the authors want the reader to understand is that, to enter into non-agricultural work, a woman needs to have some level of education and autonomy. Without that, she will have to remain in the agricultural field or restricted to household work.

Indira Hirway and Anil Kumar Roy also recognize women’s vulnerability in rural India in the agricultural field. Their research found that women in a rural economy are even more vulnerable in the workforce than their number represents in the census.

Without education, women tend to under-report their hours (because they are unable to tell time). Also, these women are underpaid or are forced to work without pay on their family farms. The authors conclude that “it is only rural female workers who are experiencing negative occupational diversification in India in the recent years when all the other components of the labour force are experiencing larger diversification!” (Hirway and Roy, 1999).

The State of Battered Women in India

Women’s rights groups have pressured the Indian government to pass laws promoting gender equality in India. From the pressure arose the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, the finalized version passed in 2005. Predating the 2005 bill, the option of divorce was present, but had serious negative implications for the women. Not only would women face social stigma, but also economic disadvantages. Divorce never guaranteed shelter, economic support, or custody of children post-marriage, and the women rarely ended up with anything. There was no specific, explicit definition of domestic violence, only a vague understanding that dowry-related violence was considered domestic violence. Following the 2005 law, appropriate changes were made so that the new law would be more efficient. The law includes clarity on court procedures and domestic violence includes sexual, physical, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse. The law no longer is limited to just abused wives, but also other members of the shared household including blood and adopted relatives. Manjeet Bhatia based his research off of interviews conducted by two researchers of 99 cases. Their research concluded that the new Declaration is mainly used by young, upper-class

women. The interviews also revealed that violence in the natal home is hardly reported. Bhatia's research further shows that women in rural India are less likely to seek justice for domestic violence, especially women in the agricultural field. Interviews showed that going to the police after an act of domestic violence is highly stigmatized and expensive (Bhatia, 2012). While the Act showed improvement from India's government to ensure equal rights for women on paper, women are less likely and unable to practice their equal rights because of patriarchal values.

To review more options for women abused in rural India, Meerambika Mahapatro, R.N. Gupta and Vinay Gupta review and analyze the resources available to women seeking rescue from domestic violence. The authors develop Control and Support Models that encompass all the viable options for these women. The Control Model includes all legal options for women, including the police, taking legal action, and even divorce, while the Support Model includes community action, counseling centers, and family. This research helps to answer my original research question because it reviews options for both working and non-working women in both rural and urban areas. The data also includes perspectives of women who are currently in domestic violence relationships, as well as women at risk of being subjected to domestic violence. Finding both the Control Model and the Support Model ineffective in aiding women who are subjected to domestic violence, the authors developed a new, theoretical model called the Integrated Development Model, which uses the healthcare system to alleviate domestic violence, since doctors are seen as respectable to all socioeconomic positions. (Mahapatro, Gupta and Gupta, 2014).

According to Bhatia's study on the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005, taking legal action should be a much easier task for abused women in India. However, taking legal action proves to be even more of an obstacle. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh found that the patriarchal tradition in India is strongly reflected in their legal system. The author outlines the reason women get married in India, being that she is an economic burden to her parents, and then seen as a paycheck to her in-laws. If the money she brings to the marriage is not adequate, she will be abused until her in-laws receive a desirable amount. Women often will not report domestic violence because they feel as though it is deserved because they neglected their household duties or their children. The author proves that going through the legal system is not an effective way to end domestic violence. She presents the solution of fixing the problem at its source: the men. Ahmed-Ghosh provides an example of a male-based solution called S.T.O.P. (Start Treating Others Positively) that provides seminars relating to power and control and classes on anger management. This article provides my research with viable options in finding a solution for women facing domestic violence, even if it is not directly. (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004).

Women are not just vulnerable to domestic violence in rural India, but all over India. However, dowry payment is still a practice in traditional villages, many of which make up rural India. In the instances of dowry, women are susceptible to violence because they are seen as a transaction. If the transaction is not large enough, then the husband and his family will demand more. Francis Bloch and Vijayendra Rao researched into why dowry violence is still prominent among Indian families. In their study, they found that dowry violence is used as a means to bargain for resources. The article states,

“...to have an older unmarried daughter is a tremendous misfortune with large social and economic costs.” Ultimately the authors conclude that women coming from rich families are more likely to be beaten for resources by the husband and his family; however, the greater the husband’s satisfaction with the marriage, the lesser likely the wife is to be beaten. A husband’s satisfaction is directly correlated with the amount of male children the wife has produced. Bloch and Rao’s study goes to prove women’s vulnerability due to factors beyond their control, such as her ability to produce a son or their husbands’ satisfaction with their marriage. The authors make the powerful statement that: “Once the wedding is celebrated and the newly married bride has moved to her husband’s home, she is not only a bride but also a potential hostage” (Bloch and Rao, 2002).

While small dowry payments are risk factors of domestic violence, Vivian Go et al. find other factors contributing to the risk of domestic violence. Some of these risk factors include financial and work-related stress, exacerbated gender norms, speaking out of turn, perceived neglect of household duties, refusal to have sex, suspected infidelity, and alcohol consumption (Go et al., 2003). Their study also found that society neither condoned nor prohibited the practice domestic violence. The study also questioned under which circumstances women would seek help from an incidence of domestic violence. Women who witnessed their father abuse their mother are more likely to seek help. Also, women who are inflicted with physical injuries are more likely to seek help from medical practitioners. Women are also concerned with the social consequences of seeking help. Go et al. presents the fact that even the most minor social interactions between a woman and her husband put her at risk for domestic violence (2003).

Autonomy

When talking about women's rights, it is easy to assume that autonomy and equality are the ultimate goals. It is also easy to rely on a list of constituents of autonomy and allow those components of autonomy to apply to women on a universal level. However, autonomy is subjective. Not everyone is going to define personal autonomy in the same manner, a fact that is pointed out by Marilyn Friedman. Friedman questions whether the current implications of autonomy should only apply to certain groups or if the constituents of autonomy should be reevaluated. She recognizes the issue of liberal choice and how this does not properly reflect autonomy, while also critically evaluating the normative content of autonomy and the social influence on autonomy. (Friedman, 2003).

Andrea Baumeister considers participation in terms of autonomy. To define autonomy, one must consider the background conditions that have to be met before a woman can exercise democratic participation. She compares the concepts of the *authentic choice model* and the *participation strategy*. Baumeister discusses the degrees of *authentic choice* regarding empowerment and autonomy. She states that just because women are living lives that reduce their autonomy due to cultural norms does not mean that they did not make the autonomous choice to live such a life. Authentic choice does not always entail a liberal concern or decision. A woman can refuse to go to literacy classes provided by her government. It cannot be said that she is denied her right to

education. While education is a common constituent to autonomy, she makes the autonomous decision to refuse education because of cultural norms and gender expectations. Another potential issue with autonomy is that a person who makes the decision to uphold certain practices may not have critically reflected on the cultural practice, therefore not realizing its negative consequences. Baumeister presents the possibility that autonomy may only be attainable through community action – by eliminating a cultural practice in a community. The author states “social and political forums can play a vital role in enabling women to challenge existing norms and practices and to persuade the community as a whole to embrace change” (Baumeister, 2012).

The participation strategy seeks to empower women by “creating new institutional mechanisms that facilitate critical debate about established cultural norms and practices” (Baumeister, 2012). The authentic choice model tends to focus only on liberal norms and does not take into account cultural practices. The participation strategy focuses on power dynamics that influence women’s practices and choices. However different the models seem, they both aim to empower women to question the motives of those who have control over them or their resources. Baumeister presents many holes in the idea of autonomy, mainly that it does not take into account cultural norms and the weight culture has on a woman’s autonomous decision. (Baumeister, 2012).

The original issue presented with autonomy is that it lacks regard to cultural context. Shweta Singh posits that concepts of autonomy developed for other countries do not necessarily apply to women in India (2010). For women in India, there are a lot of cultural indicators that affect her level of autonomy, including class, caste, region and religion. Women in northern India have less perceived autonomy than women in southern

India, mainly because South Indian women have higher levels of education, employment, and they marry within their community. While there are common factors among all women in India, the major cultural differences influence the perceived definition of autonomy for women in different communities. The universal concept of autonomy typically encompasses ideals of free will and control over one's life: control over one's decisions, control over one's resources, freedom from the control of others, and freedom of one's course of life. Autonomy defined by control fails to recognize culture as a determining factor of decision-making. A woman may have control over her decision and her resources, but ultimately, she may choose a less desirable option that is more culturally acceptable to her. For example, an upper-class woman in India may want to use her education to get a job in a respectable field; however, because of cultural expectations and the belief that a working woman insinuates that the husband is not making enough money to support his family, she chooses not to work. Even though she has the desire and ability to use her education in an advantageous manner, she chooses to neglect her own desire to avoid community judgement and other social consequences.

Singh also considers power dynamics in the family to be a constituent of autonomy. The division of household labor, decision-making power, and conflict resolution strategies contribute to a woman's level of autonomy. Other levels of household functioning can determine a woman's level of autonomy, such as the purchasing of food, the kinds of clothes her family wears and buys, the decision of whether to save or spend money, whether the children are educated, visits to festivals or even just visiting extended family. Liberal views of autonomy suggest that women should be able to obtain an education and employment with mobility to achieve autonomy.

However, Singh provides examples of autonomous decisions outside of vocation. The resource theory suggests that the distribution of power within the household is dependent on whoever has the most economic resources. This theory implies that, while autonomy can be achieved through household decision-making, household decision-making power is greater when the woman provides the most economic resources for her household. In the same sense, if the overall social goal in India is to improve one's social status, a woman should contribute economically to her household. Singh points out, however, that studies show that women in high social classes and castes show less autonomy. Singh's review of autonomy shows the multiple dimensions of autonomy, and that there is no accurate, universal definition of autonomy. Autonomy is fluid and changes for every cultural factor that is present in a woman's life.

An assumption that is commonly made by feminists is that autonomy will contribute to a woman's overall happiness and well-being. Thomas de Hoop et al. evaluate the autonomy women receive in return for their self-help group attendance and its effect on their subjective well-being. In rural India where gender norms are conservative and traditional, autonomy could have negative effects on a woman's well-being. She could be subjected to community ridicule or domestic violence. De Hoop et al. state that "the utility loss entailed by the failure to conform to the dominant gender norm can be so large that agency results in a decline in subjective well-being, particularly if gender norms are conservative" (2014). While self-help groups proved to be beneficial to women's autonomy, women's autonomy in return was detrimental to women's subjective well-being. Women's empowerment toward autonomy could be undermined by the negative feelings autonomy brings to a woman's subjective well-being. Women's

autonomy has to be promoted on the community level before it can have a positive effect on her well-being.

Freedom

This thesis uses freedom to review the opportunities available to women in rural India. After reviewing the criticisms of autonomy within the literature, I find that autonomy, freedom and empowerment can have different meanings in consideration of women's rights. Autonomy lacks the consideration of cultural norms and pressures. I believe that freedom can take on a much simpler definition, yet encompass what so many researchers and authors are trying to describe when they use the term *autonomy*. Arthur Ripstein (2009) interprets Immanuel Kant's idea of freedom. Ripstein seeks to distinguish *force* from *freedom*, two terms which seem easily distinguishable. Simply put, freedom is the ability and right of an individual to act free from the coercion of others; on the other hand, force is the state's tendency to make its citizens act or not act in a certain manner. In the case of India, I believe that these definitions of freedom and force are versatile, being able to relate to women and the pressure to which they are culturally bound. For a woman to be able to act freely, she has to be able to make decisions without the influence from her husband or community. In the juxtaposition of force and freedom, women in rural India are more often subjected to force. Every decision and life event was predetermined by cultural expectations. If she is to act independently outside of the cultural norm, she becomes vulnerable to violence and negative social consequences. Unfortunately, genuine freedom can only be achieved if the legal system has the given setting of freedom, which would allow for women to act freely without the threat of

violence or ostracism. While India has put a lot of laws in place that encourage women's equality, political and community authorities have yet to choose the path of women's empowerment to encourage the practice of their rights.

Jun Naito expands on the definition of freedom by defining three levels of freedom: 1) freedom as autonomy, 2) political freedom and 3) conditions for substantive freedom (2007). Freedom as autonomy includes the definition of freedom provided by Kant, and emphasized by Ripstein: freedom to act on one's own will, without external coercion. If a person is unable to act on his or her own free will due to the interference from another person or structure, this is called *negative freedom*. Political freedom entails a person's right and ability to participate in and be effective in the state of society through social or political activities. Without being able to exercise political freedom, Naito claims that autonomy will be difficult to maintain. Conditions for substantive freedom are twofold. First, for a person to effectively choose his or her way of life, he or she must have the information and means to provide the alternatives or opportunities to do so. Secondly, a person cannot practice his or her freedom without the appropriate resources. Without appropriate resources, one cannot be independent from others. (Naito, 2007).

The three levels of freedom provided by Naito give a quality perspective of the freedom women lack in India. Women are unable to act freely without coercion from their communities or relationships. Given that a woman wants to have a job, or an education, cultural norms prevent her from acting on her desires that defy all three levels of freedom described by Naito: she will be ostracized for neglecting her cultural duty to be a wife and a mother first, patriarchal practices do not create an environment that is

nurturing for women's participation in politics or social events, and a woman will always be financially dependent on a man, whether it is her father, her husband or her son.

Reviewing literature on freedom has allowed for me to come to the conclusion that the term *freedom* encompasses a variety of capabilities, while reflecting on the influence of culture. Authors attempting to define autonomy while specifying the constituents lose focus on the goal: equality. Autonomy is fluid, and ultimately a constituent of freedom. Freedom allows for women to choose the life they desire, whether it is an autonomous life as an influential businesswoman, or the life of a mother, dependent on her husband for food and clothing, while taking care of her children. I found it difficult to locate literature challenging the definition of freedom, while there was endless literature challenging the concept of autonomy.

Empowerment

Empowerment is essential for women to be able to make autonomous decisions that can lead to freedom. Kathleen Rowan, Elizabeth Mumford and Cari Jo Clark review empowerment on individual, relationship and state-levels for help-seeking measures for women experiencing domestic violence. The authors found that individual-level empowerment does little in encouraging women to seek help, as social and cultural barriers work together to enforce patriarchal values that justify a husband's negative treatment of his wife. Women come to validate the abuse, believing it to be appropriate punishment for neglect of a marital duty or guidance to encourage a different action or response by the wife. The authors found that empowerment without the societal level of acceptance of gender equality can be harmful to the individual. For example, women

participating in educational and vocational training led to a greater frequency of abuse than for women who did not participate. Empowerment on the societal level could aid in changing the perspectives of a community regarding gender equality, which in return would empower women on the individual level to take steps to improve their freedom. In an environment where abuse is tolerated, seeking help could negatively affect a woman's autonomy, increasing the risk of violence. State-level empowerment was found to positively affect women's help-seeking behavior. Women who have the resources available to them and community resistance to domestic violence have shown to improve women's help-seeking behavior. This article suggests that, for empowerment to have a positive effect on women's freedom, it has to start at the state level, and then at the community/relational level, to be effective at the individual level. (Rowan, Mumford and Clark, 2015).

The consequences of empowerment without the state and community level efforts can be harmful to the status of women. Corinne Rocca et al. demonstrate the risk factors of empowerment for women in India. They studied the effects that empowerment through vocational training, employment opportunities and social groups had on women's safety. Women who worked during their marriage and attended vocational trainings were more likely to report domestic violence. The women in vocational training had three times the odds of reporting recent abuse (Rocca et al., 2008). Women attending social groups were also more likely to report domestic violence. Rocca et al. conclude that "although there do not appear to be overt restriction on women's mobility in these communities, unspoken norms pertaining to women's mobility may be operating" (2008). Conforming to the community norms serves as a protective factor for women and domestic violence.

Women's empowerment can be dangerous without taking certain measure of community empowerment prior to individual empowerment. Rocca et al. suggest incorporating men into the empowerment programs to decrease the risk of domestic violence.

CHAPTER 3

DATA ANALYSIS

Distinguishing Empowerment, Autonomy and Freedom

In this thesis, I will explore the concepts of women's freedom in rural North India. I have heard many people use the terms *freedom*, *autonomy*, and *empowerment* interchangeably, and I have not been able to find a source that distinguishes these words from each other. Many authors dwell on the concept of women's autonomy, and many have attempted to define it. Dyson and Moore (1983) define autonomy as "the capacity to manipulate one's personal environment," and "...the ability – technical, social, and psychological – to obtain information and to use it as a basis for making decisions about one's private concerns and those of one's intimates." Anderson and Eswaran (2009) define autonomy as "the ability of women to make choices/decisions within the household relative to their husbands."

When describing "freedom," I choose to incorporate Nisha Srivastava and Ravi Srivastava's definition of women's autonomy: "...measured in terms of control over land, mobility, and a willingness to join self-help groups..." (2010). I, however, choose not to use the term *autonomy* because, while many women have control over land, mobility, and a willingness to join self-help groups, cultural barriers prevent said women from gaining the autonomy they seek. Andrea Baumeister states that "Many preferences, desires and emotions that influence the choices of individuals are learned in society and are shaped by social norms," (2012) further proving that freedom can only be obtained when there

are no outside social pressures influencing a woman's desire to perform a certain task or achieve a certain goal. Martha Nussbaum pointed out that people tend to format their desires based on their possibilities, further eliminating any ambitions that seem to be unreachable (1998). For a woman in a culture that lacks recognition of women's equal rights, reachable goals may only include having children or getting married. For a woman in the same culture, with the added environment of violence and domestic abuse, she cannot create the same goals as a woman in an accepting environment. While she lives in the same community as the woman who is married, has a career, education and is literate, she cannot access the same freedoms. It is important to recognize the effect culture and social pressure have on autonomy. Therefore, I choose to use the term *freedom*, refraining from the expectation of autonomy without regards to culture.

Furthermore, the term *autonomy* limits women to choose the liberal form of the term. A perfect picture of autonomy is a working woman, with vocational mobility, who is able to afford her own home, support her own family, and make her own decisions without the influence from external factors. While considering Srivastava and Srivastava's interpretation of autonomy, I keep in mind Naito's concept of the term *freedom*, where he considers freedom in the autonomous form, but also in the political and decision-making forms. To obtain freedom, a woman must not only have access to the autonomous life described by so many researchers as financial, social, and political empowerment, but also in her influence in her community and in her ability to make decisions for herself.

Empowerment usually entails an external actor who informs people of their rights, enabling them to practice their rights. However, as I said with autonomy, there are factors

that prevent women from exercising their rights. A woman in rural India experiencing domestic violence may not know how to navigate the social pressures instilling the importance of staying in the home. She knows her rights, but also knows that seeking help creates the possibility of increased violence. Snigdha Chakrabarti and Chaiti S. Biswas recognize that “women’s empowerment does not merely mean their upliftment and providing opportunities to them in the context of basic human rights; it is an environment, which ensures the full freedom to make use of these opportunities and in which equality with men can be enjoyed by all women everywhere” (2011). In regards to freedom and autonomy, empowerment is the means to achieving freedom. The empowerment needed, however, is not just in the form of information, but also with cultural considerations. In consideration of rural India, empowerment is needed in the form of awareness of negative patriarchal practices along with literacy and education campaigns. Empowerment should be about finding solutions to the underlying problems. For women experiencing domestic violence, conquering the negative practice of women living for the service of men, rather than the equal division of power not only in the household, but in everyday aspects of a woman’s life, should be the priority of empowerment.

Women’s Financial Freedom in Rural India

There are a considerable number of factors that constitute financial freedom. I choose to focus on women’s ability to own land, earn an income, and access to vocational mobility. In this section, I will also outline the effects of microfinance on women’s financial freedom. One study recognizes women’s financial empowerment as a woman’s

ability to manage independently from her husband and family in the event of abandonment (Guérin, Santhosh and Agier, 2013). I find this to be a simple, yet versatile, definition of financial empowerment that can act as a description of financial freedom for women. Financial freedom, in this sense, is a woman's ability to survive independently from her husband and family if she so chooses without cultural barriers. Lastly, I plan to review the risks of financial empowerment, and how these risks prevent women's access to true financial freedom.

Microfinance

Without a formal education, employment, or land ownership, a main option for women to obtain financial freedom is through microcredit. Guérin, Santhosh and Agier point out that only 4.5 percent of microcredit loans are utilized for business. Rather, they are mainly used for health costs, children's education, housing, ceremonies, and paying debts (Guérin, Santhosh and Agier, 2013). Additionally, for women to use microcredit to gain financial freedom and independence, they must have an interest in entrepreneurship and a talent for some form of business. The same study by Guérin, Sathosh and Agier found that the successful businesses started by women with microcredit loans included small trade, handicrafts and tailoring, food processing, and services (such as photography, aesthetic services, catering, etc.) (2013). However in this study, financial freedom is challenged due to several cultural barriers recognized by researchers, such as religion, motherhood, region, domestic responsibilities, and caste of client basis. Many women did not express their desire for financial freedom with the intentions of living independently, but more to improve their status within their community or in the eyes of

their in-laws. A woman cannot accept a microcredit loan without considering the risks following the acceptance of the loan. Women reported the main conflicts of microcredit loans to be the taking of control of the loan by the husbands or in-laws.

Land Ownership

Women are able to own land through a variety of sources, whether the land was purchased through microcredit loans or inherited from a woman's natal family. Roy and Tisdell maintain a positive outlook on the implications of women's property rights. Their study shows that, in terms of efficiency, women are more likely to use techniques with less negative ecological consequences and therefore contribute to the conservation of land. The authors also state that women are more likely to use their land output towards their families' well-being, improving the nutrition and health of their children. Granting women the right and ability to own land would also decrease the rate of migration to cities, preserving the tradition and cultures of rural India (Roy and Tisdell, 2002). In terms of empowerment, Roy and Tisdell argue that granting women property rights places them in a position of respect in men's eyes. However, the authors recognize that "The legal right to land in the absence of customary right has no teeth" (Roy and Tisdell, 2002). Customary rights take precedence over legal rights to land. Roy and Tisdell's study found that in 145 communities, 90.34 percent showed patrilineal patterns of land ownership (2002). Even in cases where a woman does inherit the land from her natal family, if that land is too far away from her husband's family, where she traditionally will live, she will have to surrender the land to the next male in her family. If a woman decides to take legal action, she has to jump through extensive and expensive legal hoops

that most often will end in her giving up her right. The cultural barriers preventing women from truly taking advantage of their property rights serves as the primary obstacle to women's financial freedom in regards to land ownership.

Furthermore, a separate study found that household land ownership actually decreases women's autonomy. While individual land ownership can be seen as beneficial to women's freedom, the participation of the woman's husband and other family is counterproductive to her quest for financial freedom and independence. Goli and Pou recognize external contributing factors to their findings that were not considered, such as literacy and education. The authors however maintain the result that "in spite of the fact that women are educated and employed, male continues to dominate particularly in large landholding families, and women do not have much socioeconomic freedom to exercise their choice" (Goli and Pou, 2014), further suggesting that even with the unconsidered external factors, women would still lack the economic freedom they seek.

Women's Employment and Income

One of those most recognized forms of women's financial freedom is her ability to achieve and maintain employment. While this statement seems simple, it is multifaceted. Performing household work for the family and working without pay on the family farm are not considered legitimate forms of employment. To maintain household and familial responsibilities alongside employment outside of the home is uncommon and difficult for a woman to achieve in rural India. According to the World Bank, in 2012, 25.5 percent of women were employed in India, 59.7 percent of whom worked in the agricultural sector (World Bank, 2013). In rural India, agriculture is the primary form of

employment. However, women either face no-pay to low-pay wages because they work for family farms. Women's employment can only play a successful role in women's empowerment if it is in fact improving their access to opportunities to enhance their well-being. Nisha Srivastava and Ravi Srivastava state that "women's autonomy, measured in terms of control over land, mobility, and a willingness to join self-help groups, enables them to move into non-agricultural jobs" (2010). The authors also point out that education is the main determinant of better quality work outside of agriculture (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). The standard agricultural occupation for women in rural India is counterproductive to the empowerment of women in India. If women are working for no pay or low wages, it is difficult and discouraging for upward economic mobility. Nisha Srivastava and Ravi Srivastava state that the only solutions to the lack of women's autonomy are their access to a higher level of education and employable skills, and policy initiatives that allow women to obtain opportunities of land ownership and autonomous mobility (2010). If women are to remain in agriculture, "There is a strong need for a gender-sensitive agricultural strategy which strengthens the role of women workers in all aspects of agriculture" (Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010).

The options for women outside of agriculture are limited. In 2012, of the total women employed, only 19.4 percent worked in service sector, while 20.9 percent were in industry (World Bank, 2013). Female labor participation rates decrease each year, most likely resulting from the unlikeliness of women to work after marriage, childbirth, or with improved social status. Another cause for the decline could be the due to the types of jobs available, as there are limited jobs available outside of agriculture (Chatterjee, Murgai and Rama, 2015). An article from The Times of India found that, in 2013, 9.1 million

women lost their jobs in 2 years in rural India. Subodh Varma believes this is because “A decline in public investment in agriculture, and in extension work for dissemination of knowledge coupled with increasing mechanization” (Subodh, 2013). With 59.7 percent of employed women working in agriculture, industrialization will force them to seek alternative employment. A study conducted by Indira Hirway and Anil K. Roy found that the National Sample Survey (NSS) fails to recognize women who work on family farms or participate in home-based and subsidiary work (1999). However, even with a flawed NSS report, it cannot be denied that far less women participate in the non-agricultural labor market in rural India than men. Jayati Ghosh notices that, because of the feminization of employment, more women are leaving industry-related jobs for more domestic jobs (2002).

While there are employment opportunities for women outside of the family farm, the social stigma of working outside of the home prevents many from financial empowerment. Working outside of the home is seen as a low-status activity for many reasons, including the inevitable socializing with men outside of the family at the place of work. It is common to assume that economic status would parallel social status, enabling women to work outside of the home without judgement. However, Eswaran, Bharat and Wadhwa found that the greater a woman’s social status, the less autonomy she has, showing that the institution of castes discourages female equality and autonomy (2013). To many women in rural India, their family status precedes their individual status. The authors found that improving the family’s status requires the woman to utilize the profits made by her husband in the labor market to provide household goods to her family. Because of the desire to improve family status, “greater affluence may lower the

individual autonomy of women” (Eswaran, Bharad and Wadhwa, 2013). Working outside of the home creates the image that the husband does not profit enough to provide for his family, lowering the family’s overall social status. Therefore, social stigma towards women working outside of their homes prevents women from obtaining financial freedom.

Women’s Mobility, Access to Public Spaces, and Violence against Women

One major constituent of freedom for women is a woman’s ability to move about her life without risk or obstacle. The India National Crime Records Bureau reported an increase of crimes against women by 9.2 percent during 2014 (NCRB, 2014). In 2014, 36,735 women reported being raped, a large increase from the 24,206 reported cases in 2011. The states with the most reported cases were Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, two rural North Indian states. Cases of kidnapping and abduction of women increased by 10.4 percent during 2014, with a total of 57,311 cases (the highest rate of occurrence in Uttar Pradesh). Within that same year, 8,455 cases of dowry deaths were reported, 29.2 percent occurring in Uttar Pradesh. Cases of domestic violence, or “cruelty by husband or his relatives,” increased by 3.4 percent (118,866 cases) over 2014. Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh accounted for 22.2 percent of the cases. Given just a snapshot of recent data, reported crimes against women are increasing each year and are evident in rural North India. Being a woman in India is risk enough for violence on the streets and even within her home.

Even with efforts to include women in democracy and citizenship in India, women still face fear in public spaces in India. Natasha Behl’s research on situated

citizenship of Sikh community participants found that most respondents acknowledged women as only “partial members of their communities with limited rights and duties” (2014). Behl’s study revealed that women’s fear of violence and safety prevented them from accessing public spaces, excluding them from the ability to participate in labor, education, or any other activity outside of her private sphere (2014). While women have been given fundamental rights, it is common that women in rural India are unable to interpret and therefore exercise their rights. According to the Census of India, only 58.8 percent of women in rural India are literate as of 2011, leaving almost half unable to read, let alone interpret their rights (2011). If a woman tries to move about her community outside of her home and practice her rights, she risks the potential for violence. Ghosh and Choudhuri point out that “assertion of rights by women as well as increasing participation of women in public life may also engender hostile responses from their male counterparts in both public and private spheres” (2011). Violence against women can be seen as an expression of “patriarchal domination,” as an attempt by men to exercise control over the vulnerable female (Ghosh and Choudhuri, 2011). In a patriarchal society, it is dangerous for women to roam about freely while there is a risk of patriarchal domination around every corner.

Even with fundamental rights available to women, support from law enforcement and legal advocates is hard to come by. There has been a lot of pressure on the Indian government to enact laws protecting women, especially from the local women’s rights groups and organizations. While India has enacted many laws, including the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961 and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005, violence against women has seen a steady increase within the last decade. Since

domestic violence is considered a “private matter” in the Indian home, many cases go unreported each year. In a study conducted by Biswajit Ghosh and Tanima Choudhuri, research showed that “the mere passing of acts may fail to guarantee any reduction in the number of violence” (2011). The police are notably unhelpful in times where they are needed. In the same study by Ghosh and Choudhuri, they found that police were easily influenced by the most affluent person in any given legal situation. Therefore women, often being the least affluent persons in a legal case, are forced to fend for themselves and their own protection (Ghosh and Choudhuri, 2011).

Women in India have never experienced gender equality, as the concept of “*Ardhangini*” states that a woman is only half of a person until she marries, becoming whole as long as her husband still lives. Starting from birth, a woman is always under the control of some man, whether it be by her father, her husband or even her son. The Laws of Manu state “In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent” (Buhler, 1969). According to this law, and according to the cultural practices in India, a woman is bound to slavery the moment her sex is decided by genetics. From birth, her role in society is determined as a puppet for the pleasure and benefit of men.

Violence on the Street

Below I provide examples of women who are considered immobile, being unable to safely move about their public and social spheres without the risk of violence.

Case 1: Jyoti Singh

On December 16, 2012, a 23 year-old female student, named Jyoti Singh, was gang-raped by six men on a moving bus in New Delhi, while her male friend was assaulted. According to a BBC News article, during the assault, the bus passed through five different police checkpoints without being stopped or questioned (BBC, 2012). Jyoti remained in the hospital in critical condition while the attackers are arrested over the next couple of weeks. On December 26, 2012, Jyoti died from internal injuries. Five of the attackers went to trial, while one exempted charges because he was only 17 years-old. He was later tried by the Juvenile Justice Board and was sentenced to three years. One of the accused was found hanging in his jail cell, while the four others were sentenced to death. While Jyoti's death was brutal and horrific, the attack led to stricter laws regarding gang-rape, including a minimum sentence of 20 years (NPR, 2013). However, the attack only proves that women cannot move about freely in their communities without the risk of violence.

Case 2: A Nun in West Bengal

On March 11, 2015, six armed men broke into the Ranaghat convent and raped a 74 year-old nun while she was being held at knife-point. The crime was meant to end with burglary and vandalism, but the nun's presence during the incident led to her rape and assault. The two suspects who were arrested are originally from Bangladesh. While the accused were not Indian, the crime against the nun exemplifies that there is no safe place for women in India, not even within religious infrastructures. (Thoppil, 2015).

Case 3: Kidnapping in Jhunjhunu

A 25-year old married woman was kidnapped by five men on her way to the market. The five men gagged and drugged the woman, and then proceeded to gang-rape her. The five men were members of the same village of Chidawa as the victim. After each of the perpetrators raped her one-by-one, they then threatened that they would kidnap her again if she reported the rape to anyone. The victim, only semi-conscious, was dumped back in her village and sought help from a nearby house, where she called her in-laws and the police. (Times of India, 2013).

Case 4: Two Cousins Gang-Raped Looking for a Toilet

On May 27, 2014, two cousins, ages 14 and 16, left their homes in Uttar Pradesh to look for a toilet, not having access to one at home. These girls found a discrete spot in a field after sunset. Three men were waiting for the two girls. The men abducted the girls, raped them, and left them hanging from a tree by their head scarves (Frost et al., 2014). This act is common, as women do not have access to private restrooms in rural areas. Women are left vulnerable every time they are burdened with the need of a restroom.

Case 5: 65 Year-Old Gang-Raped in Uttar Pradesh

On January 17, 2015, a 65 year-old woman named Phoolmani was gang-raped by four men she sold illicit liquor to in her hut. The men were allegedly inebriated and proceeded to rape and sexually assault Phoolmani with foreign objects. Phoolmani died from excessive bleeding after being left in her hut for dead in a semi-nude state (Dikshit, 2015). Review of case studies such as this one shows that women are never safe in India, regardless of age.

Domestic Violence

Dr. Sanjay Salunke appropriately characterizes domestic abuse as “one of the most pervasive of human rights violations, denying women equality, security, dignity, self-worth, and their right to enjoy fundamental freedoms” (2012). From birth, a woman is at risk for violence in the form of physical beatings, marital rape, emotional abuse, abandonment, starvation, threat of death, and confinement. Along with violence, husbands also abuse the wife in the way that he threatens to take away her children, denies permission for her to visit her parents, violates her privacy, and torments her through the services of prostitutes (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Domestic violence is the most socially accepted crime in India. As outlined by Mudita Rastogi, the reasons for this acceptance are as follows: women are financially dependent on their husbands or other male members of their family, there is cultural stigmatization of divorce, and women are expected to uphold the tradition of marriage despite marital disputes or violence, and religious practices dictate that women consider their husbands as God for her salvation (Rastogi and Therly, 2006). However unfortunate, domestic violence is a lifestyle and an issue of the family that should remain in the family, as it is justified by the man’s right to control his wife and her behavior; therefore it often goes unreported to law enforcement.

Many women justify the beatings stating that it was deserved and only a form of discipline. A survey conducted by Ahmed-Ghosh showed that 56 percent of the women interviewed felt as though the beatings they received were deserved, due to their neglect of their children, house, cooking, from excessive socializing, tension with in-laws, inadequate dowry, infertility, or inability to provide a son (2004). Not only do social structures reproduce patriarchal ideations in favor of domestic violence within the men in

India, but also in the women. Women are culturally taught that their position in society is to remain in the home, and that what she neglects the responsibilities of her position, she deserves the consequences brought on to her by her husband.

Dowry Violence

Because of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, dowry payments in exchange for matrimony is now illegal in India; however, dowry is still a socially accepted and exercised cultural practice that is prevalent throughout all social classes and castes in India. Insufficient dowry payments provided by the family of the bride is a common causal factor of domestic violence from the husband and his family. Francis Bloch states, “Once the wedding is celebrated and the newly married bride has moved to her husband’s home, she is not only a bride, but also a potential hostage” (Bloch and Rao, 2002). By this, Bloch and Rao make the point that divorce is never an option in an Indian marriage; and despite any form of violence that the wife may be faced with, she cannot leave her husband. Because of this, wife-beating can be used as a tactic by husbands to demand more dowry money from the wife’s family.

A practice that has advanced from the act of dowry-giving is the act called “dowry-death.” Dowry deaths are gruesome because of the manner in which the husband or his family murders his wife, either by setting her on fire, poisoning her, or other violent methods. Another term used to describe dowry-death is called “bride-burning,” describing the way in which women are doused in kerosene and lit on fire. The dowry given was inadequate, and bride-burning becomes an option to the husband so he can get remarried and receive another dowry (Segal, 1999). The act of bride burning goes to

show the expendability and disposability of women in India, as they are seen for their dowries; and when their dowry is insufficient, they are thrown away so the male can find a new wife with a new dowry. Dowry deaths and dowry violence are acts that prove that women are not able to participate in the institution of marriage without risk of violence or death.

Violence in the Workplace

In a survey conducted by IOMA's security director, 26 percent of workers in India reported experiencing sexual harassment in the workplace, while 25 percent reported being assaulted in the workplace (Security Director's Report, 2011). While this survey includes responses from both men and women, India still reported the worst frequency of workplace violence than any of the other 24 countries surveyed. Yasmeen Abrar, a member of the National Commission for Women (NCW) shared with The Hindu that 60 percent of the complaints they receive from women are regarding domestic violence or sexual harassment at the workplace (The Hindu, 2009). Oxfam India surveyed women working in major cities regarding sexual harassment, and found that 17 percent of the women experienced some form of harassment (Times of India, 2012). The most dangerous industries to work in are labor, domestic help, and small-scale manufacturing. The Times of India reports that "26 percent of working women reported to be the sole earning members of their families, indicating that economic vulnerability renders them further vulnerable to harassment" (2012).

As of April 23, 2013, women now have the right to report incidents of sexual harassment to their employers. Employers have to develop a mechanism in which

employees can submit complaints, requiring an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) which holds orientations, workshops, and awareness programs for sensitization of sexual harassment in the workplace (Suri, 2013). Although there have been efforts after the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh, violence in the workplace is still a risk that is consequential to a woman attempting to gain financial freedom; furthermore, the risk she takes to gain financial freedom is also the risk she takes when she access public spaces, such as her place of employment.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs)

Self-help groups (SHGs) geared towards women focus on credit-building strategies, saving strategies, and social empowerment. According to Desai and Joshi, “Collective action by the poor has been shown to strengthen property rights, increase bargaining power in labor markets, improve access to financial markets, and increase public investments in poor communities (2014). While the existence of caste and class hierarchies in India prevent women from organizing at large, community organization among the poor proves to be beneficial to women’s economic mobility. Rural women in India are among the least literate and educated in the country. The presence of self-help groups is potentially their only opportunity at education, however informal that might be. In a two year study conducted in a rural North Indian village, the presence of a SHG proved that women were more likely to improve their decision-making abilities in their households, participate in group programs, participate in organized collective action on village issues such as water and sanitation, and participate in community affairs (Desai and Joshi, 2014). The same study showed that women with exposure to financial and

vocational training services had better access to labor and credit markets (Desai and Joshi, 2014).

While there are obvious benefits to SHGs with vocational and financial training, a study conducted by Corinne Rocca et al. evaluates risks associated with this form of empowerment. Rocca et al. state that “Efforts to help women empower themselves through vocational training, employment opportunities and social groups need to consider the potential unintended consequences for these women, such as an increased risk of domestic violence” (2008). It’s possible that increased female autonomy could negatively affect the women’s well-being, especially in communities with conservative gender norms (de Hoop et al., 2014). Rebelling against dominant gender norms could potentially have detrimental effects to women’s well-being and safety, especially in communities that are bound by a certain status quo. Negative emotions brought on by autonomy could have a counterproductive consequence to empowerment. De Hoop et al. propose that collective community action, that includes the men in the community, is the best option in small, traditional communities (de Hoop et al., 2014). SHGs should be reserved for communities that are not shaken by change, unlike many communities in rural India, which are bound by gender norms.

Women’s Political Freedom

In rural India, women typically influence political actions in an indirect manner, discussing political views with politicians’ wives, sharing opinions with outspoken and influential women, or to passively remain silent during meetings to express disagreement (Girard, 2014). Because of women’s lack of public political participation, they are seen as

inactive in the political community. The reality is that women in rural India often lack the appropriate political resources to participate in formal political processes. According to Alexandra Girard, northern India's "patriarchal governance and natural resource management norms traditionally exclude women from formal decision-making and labor force in their community" (2014). Men make the decisions regarding agriculture and irrigation while women manage the household and family land. Traditionally, according to Girard's study, men have managed the canals, or *kuhls*; however, recent institutional interventions that seek to democratize kuhl systems have given women the opportunity to challenge gender norms in the area of irrigation, not only as laborers, but also policy-makers.

One major intervention was the 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA), which was one of the first comprehensive policy approaches that provided direct intervention in enforcing social justice (Chakraborty, 2014). The MGNREGA has allowed for "effective participation of women and the fair distribution of wages without any gender discrimination" (Chakraborty, 2014). Panchayati Raj, the Seventy-Third Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, requires a female quota of 33 percent in all grassroots and local government institutions. The act, along with the MGNREGA, brings women working in agriculture as an extension of their household duties out into the labor market, allowing them to get paid for the labor they are most likely already performing, as well as make decisions regarding labor on the political level. The act brings women "into the world of formalized and equalitarian labor force participation, with equal wages between men and women, official registration and contracts, opening of bank accounts, and benefits such as payment for the non-provision

of requested work or free access to crèches” (Girard, 2014). Because of the required female quota, women also participate in the local Panchayat Raj Institutes (PRIs), which are local governance institutions, where women occupy 33-50 percent of the seats; therefore, women are enabled as formal decision-makers in natural resource management.

While all these advancements in agriculture and irrigation management have provided a setting for female participation in politics, do the existing gender norms prevail in preventing women from actually participating? I ask this question only because past acts that seek to provide women with equal rights have shown to actually diminish women’s rights. After the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961, incidents of dowry violence and dowry death actually increased. The same goes for the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005. India’s patriarchal predisposition in the government as well as in the communities has shown to win out in all fights for women’s equal rights. Girard’s study found that, while women do not vocalize their opinions as much as expected, the institutionalization of women’s participation in the labor force showed women’s increased participation in formal political processes (2014). Women who were part of political families, women whose lives were strongly affected by agriculture, women who had many children, established women in villages, and women from Backward Castes were more likely to engage in public political meetings (Girard, 2014). It can be noted from Girard’s study that, even though other acts that intended to provide women with equality have failed in enforcing their policies, the MGNREGA has allowed for women to formally participate in political processes. Women in rural India have been taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the MGNREGA, such as paid labor and participation in formal, political decision-making.

Political participation can be hindered by a number of factors including caste, class, education, literacy etc. Women in rural India are amongst the poorest and least educated in the country (Desai and Joshi, 2014). Santosh Nandal calls for improvements to literacy and mass communication to improve women's political participation (2003). In his study, women face difficulties assuming any political power because of patriarchal norms and their financial dependence on men. However, once women can get their foot in the political door, they are shown to be able to independently perform their jobs and determining the necessities for their villages, only a decade after the Panchayati Raj was passed. He found that if women can overcome the gender discrimination of local communities, they can be utilized as effective agents of change within their communities (2003).

Women's Decision-Making Power

An additional constituent of freedom and autonomy is a woman's ability to make decisions without the influence of external forces. However, when she has a family, there are many external forces influencing her decision, such as her husband and her children. Household decision-making does grant woman freedom within her private spaces. She can decide what her family eats, what they wear, what to buy, if her children will attend school, how much money to save etc. In rural India, Kompal Sinha found that women who have higher wages and education tend to have more bargaining and decision-making power within her household (2012). Given the validity of these findings, 151 million uneducated or minimally educated mothers in India (Chawla, 2002) lack the decision-making power in their households.

Summary of Analysis

A summary of my findings goes to show that for every opportunity available to women in India, there is a consequential factor that removes her freedom from another aspect of her life. In her quest for financial freedom, she is stripped of her position within her community, having to fear ostracism or even violence as outlined in the analysis. To gain political freedom or any form of financial and economic freedom, she risks consequences of violence as change is not easily accepted by the patriarchal communities in rural India. Without education, she cannot gain financial freedom; with education and financial freedom, she loses even more of her freedom of mobility. With the risk of the consequences, a woman in rural India cannot truly make a decision without the influence of the constant risk of the negative consequences.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis suggest that freedom in one aspect of a woman's life cannot be achieved without the diminishment of freedom in another aspect of her life. Despite the efforts of the government and NGOs to provide opportunities of gender equality, women's state of freedom in rural India is deteriorating. Because of the efforts to empower women on the individual level through SHGs without the support from the state or the communities, women are being subjected to violent resistance from community members in both private and public spaces. Being in the most slave-like state, women subjected to domestic violence in India risk their lives for opportunities of freedom. In every action she takes to gain freedom, she risks a violent reciprocation from her community or her family. If the data analysis pushes any motive, it is that individual-level empowerment through the ideals of liberal autonomy are harmful to the state of women's freedom. Trying to push women towards autonomy without cultural consideration, the empowered women are destined for failure. Changing the framework of patriarchy requires state and community-level intervention, to change the problem where it started: within surviving cultural practices.

The Theory of Autonomy

The theory of autonomy states that autonomous decisions are made out of competency, with rationality, and voluntariness, where the person makes the decision of her free will (Ekstrom, 1993; Goldstein, 2012). For a person to act in an autonomous

manner, there have to be conditions that offer that person a choice. She must act in a way that is free from other's ideas and suggestions. The issue with the theory of autonomy is that it is suggested that there are no influential factors that affect one's free will; furthermore, these same influential factors might subconsciously eliminate other options a person can choose. While one may be acting in her own free will, there are undoubtedly external forces influencing her decisions. This thesis has mainly focused on the current status of women in rural India, and their access to opportunities that are constitutive of autonomy. Before we can question women's access to autonomous opportunities, we have to question the theory of what is autonomous.

One of the main constituents of democracy is what we consider autonomy (Kalyvas, 1998). In India, there is the ironic establishment of a patriarchal democracy, bringing into question the validity of their democracy. While women have been established in influential governmental positions, the experience of women in other non-influential positions does not represent a proper form of democracy, equality, or what should be considered autonomous. The theory of autonomy addresses the hyper-individualist, who can separate herself from all connections with outside influences, such as other people, surrounding culture and other aspects of the social environment to exercise her autonomy (Christman, 2003). In many cases, people make decisions which oppose the decisions best for their livelihood and health. In the case of drug users: while addiction may negatively influence their lives and causes many negative consequences, can it be said that the choice to use again is an autonomous one? Dwelling on the issue of autonomy only clouds the issue at hand: the neglect of the rightful equality of all humans. Instead of considering the constituents of liberal autonomy, my research accepts the

influential forces acting upon a woman's ability to make autonomous decisions, and in turn, calling it *freedom*. While this simplification of the term may ironically complicate the research, answering the question of whether a woman has access to freedom proves to be less complicated than defining the terms of her autonomy.

Financial Freedom

In my data, I discuss the opportunity for financial freedom for women in rural India. Without education, mobility in the labor market is virtually impossible being a woman in rural India. Women are not only less valued in the labor market, they are paid less (if at all) and are rarely offered full-time positions due to the lack of demand in the agricultural sector. Many rural women work for their families' farms; therefore, they do not get paid for their labor. Working outside of agriculture would require education, influence, or a specific, demanded talent (such as photography, tailoring, food services, etc.). To gain financial freedom, a woman has to be able to accumulate, save, and spend her money in her free will without the influence of external factors. Starting a small business seems to be an effective strategy for women in pursuing financial freedom, given she has the appropriate resources and talents to maintain her business. To profit in a small business, women can apply for microcredit loans. Loans are a means of diminishing financial freedom on their own, as the woman can only apply for the loan if she meets the appropriate requirements. She is obligated to her microcredit lender until her loan is paid. She also risks the possibility of being taken advantage of by her husband or in-laws, who could potentially take over the loan and control where or how it is used (Guérin, Sathosh and Agier, 2013). In conditions where a woman does not have the

external influence from her husband, in-laws, caste, class, or community, microcredit loans could be an effective means to gaining financial freedom once the loan is paid off and her business is successful. However, finding these perfect conditions is impossible, as a woman cannot abandon her culture or environment.

In rural India, the primary form of labor is agriculture. Owning land reserves citizens a means in which to profit. Owning land could potentially be another manner in which a woman can gain financial freedom. Unfortunately, less than 2 percent of land in India is owned by women (Goli and Pou, 2014). If landowning is a reliable means of income and financial freedom, why is less than two percent of India's land owned by women? This is because it is customary for land in India to be owned and managed by a male. If a woman inherits land from her family, in most cases she has to surrender it to the next male in her family because of the distance of the land from her marital home, or she has to surrender it to her husband (Roy and Tisdell, 2002). Even if she does not surrender her land to a male family member or her husband, she risks the chance of losing her autonomy because of gender norms in maintaining the land, where the husband would manage the land while she is diminished to a laborer. Therefore, owning land presents the risk of countering the pursuit for financial freedom.

When reviewing the literature, I frequently came across data on the lack of opportunity for women in agriculture. There is no opportunity for mobility and cultural practices and the patriarchal norms do not allow for women to manage their own farms. Employment can only be empowering for women if it is in fact improving her freedom and her opportunities. Working in agriculture means no pay to low-income wages for women, without opportunities for advancement. For women to move into non-

agricultural employment, they must have resources or education to do so. Freedom in the liberal sense can be obtained by financial autonomy, and to obtain financial autonomy, a woman either has to come across a substantial amount of money by chance (i.e. winning the lottery), or she has to earn money through employment. Cultural gender norms for women, especially in rural India, expect women to cease working after marriage or childbirth.

The irony of financial freedom is its implications for women regarding her caste and class. The more money a family makes, and the greater its caste and/or class, the less freedom a woman has (Eswaran, Bharat and Wadhwa, 2013). Working outside of the home insinuates that the husband cannot sufficiently provide for his family without help from his wife, further injuring the family's status within their community. When reviewing the theory of autonomy, an autonomous woman should have the ability to decide to work without the influence of anyone else. Given she is not concerned with her husband's opinion of her employment, a woman still has to consider how her decision to work will affect how her family is treated in her community. While there are no external influences from her community on her decision to work, the potential adverse effects of her decision ultimately affect the manner in which she will proceed.

Reviewing the literature, financial freedom can be pursued, but it will have effects on the other areas of a woman's life in rural India. She may be ostracized for abandoning her family, or neglecting to get married so she can pursue an education and career, or working while she maintains her household. Moreover, every decision she makes in pursuit of financial freedom will be made with cultural influence. While the end goal will be freedom, no choice she makes is autonomous unless she neglects her cultural

environment. Women do not have access to financial freedom without risking the diminishment of her freedom in other aspects of her life. She risks her freedom of mobility due to the probably ostracism and the risk of violence within and outside of her home.

Mobility, Public Spaces, and Violence against Women

It is a universal human right to be free from the risk of violence, no matter where one goes. Women in India are living in fear of violence everyday, and everywhere they go, because violence against women is an accepted practice, particularly in rural India. The National Crime Records Bureau shows the greatest incidents of multiple forms of violence against women in India to be in rural North India, mainly in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. Women not only have to face the high probability of domestic violence, but they also have to risk being victims to rape, kidnapping, and dowry violence regardless of their age or class. If being a woman is not risky enough in India, being a woman trying to exercise her fundamental and democratic rights increases her risk for violence (Ghosh and Choudhuri, 2011). While women may have the freedom of mobility in India, the threat of violence strips them of their right to move about their public and private spaces freely. The fear of violence prevents women from exercising their rights, such as getting an education, participating in the labor market, or performing any activity outside of her private sphere (Behl, 2014).

I presented many cases from news sources of women being assaulted in the public spaces in India. The case of Jyoti Singh caused an uproar among the people of India. People gathered, demanding justice for the young student, calling for the heads of the

rapists. While this single incident was horrifying and made world-wide news, it is not the only case of its kind in India. Gang-rape occurs too often to count in India. I presented five cases of gang-rape within my thesis. In scrolling through hundreds of news articles, I discovered the difficulty in finding articles about violence against women that did not include an incident of gang-rape. Because census data proves that other forms of violence do occur in India, I could only draw two conclusions based on my discovery on the lack of data on public violence that did not include gang-rape: 1) the media is apathetic towards other forms of violence against women in public and therefore does not find it necessary to report it, or 2) public violence against women is so common that members of the public, including the victims, do not find it necessary to report incidences of violence to the police, and therefore news never reach the hands of the media.

The lack of concern coming from the public in instances of violence less severe than gang-rape encourages the continuation of violence in the public space. The absence of data regarding public violence also shows that women are not reporting violence experienced in public spaces as they should, further suggesting that violence in public is normalized, if not expected. While a woman is able to leave her house on her own accord to go to the market, she is not being directly threatened by any external forces. However, the threat of violence in the public ultimately influences her decision to go to the market, as she has to consider if she should go with a companion and what time of day she should go. The theory of autonomy fails in this sense, and the freedom of mobility for women in public spaces is non-existent.

Domestic violence is by far the most socially accepted form of violence in India. Because of its deeming as a private matter, it often goes unreported to law enforcement.

If cultural pressure did not play as significant enough of a role in deciding a woman's lifestyle, the threat of domestic violence takes the cake. Married women face the risk of domestic violence in almost every decision she makes within her household, starting even before marriage with dowry violence. Dowry violence and domestic violence are often committed not only by the husband, but also by his family. In the case of dowry, violence ensues because the bride's family has not surrendered enough money to the man's family. In cases where divorce is not a foreseeable option for an unsatisfied couple, the wife then risks the threat of dowry death, where the husband or his in-laws kill the wife so the husband can remarry and receive another dowry. Even after the Dowry Prohibition Act, the percent of dowry violence in the population of India has only increased.

Having a small dowry is not the only risk factor of domestic violence married women face on a daily basis in rural India. A small mistake in her household decisions can cause a physical outburst from her husband that is culturally accepted as a husband's right to discipline his wife. The acceptance of domestic violence extends even to the victim; many women accept physical beatings as justifiable because she neglected her duties as a wife to properly take care of her children, perform household chores, provide a son, get along with her in-laws, provide sex to her husband, etc. (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). The home is where a woman should feel the safest, as her own personal space. Women in India face the threat of violence, more so in their private spaces than in the public spaces. Getting dinner on the table 5 minutes late could result in an incidence of domestic violence, especially in rural India where domestic violence is a cultural practice. In the private space, a woman is expected to make her decisions for the benefit of her husband.

Every “autonomous” decision a woman makes within her own household is influenced by the threat of domestic violence if she makes the wrong decision.

For a woman to seek help in India, she has to have a certain level of autonomy to be free to move about her community to act in self-assertion. Kathleen Rowan, Elizabeth Mumford and Cari Jo Clark found in their study that “although she may have freedom in her movement which could increase her access to help, such help may not be available in contexts where abuse tolerated” (Rowan, Mumford and Clark, 2015).

Empowerment

Women in India are among the most vulnerable when it comes to gender violence. In the pursuit of change, empowerment is essential. There have been many efforts to empower women to seek forms of liberal autonomy, such as education and vocation, to reduce their vulnerability. One major form of empowerment is through self-help groups. SHGs in rural India mainly focus on informal education, vocational training, and financial strategies. One step in enabling women towards autonomy is providing them with information so that they are aware of their options. The theory of autonomy states that an autonomous actor must have the awareness of their options and the ability to choose. SHGs provide women their options and allow them to have access to more opportunities through awareness and training. Research shows that SHGs do increase women’s overall autonomy (Desai and Joshi, 2014; de Hoop et al., 2014). While SHGs are beneficial to women’s liberal autonomy, it is important to recognize the risk factors of SHGs for women in India that would affect their freedom. With a woman’s liberal autonomy increasing through her job or education, she is defying the patriarchal norms

that have existed in India since the second century with the Laws of Manu that state that a woman's actions should be for the benefit of man (Bühler, 1969). There are consequences that come with change, and for women, these consequences are likely to be violent.

Empowerment on the individual level will have little, if no, positive effect (Rowan, Mumford and Clarke, 2015; Rocca et al., 2008). External influential forces will prevent any lasting change among women trying to obtain better financial and social autonomy. Empowerment has to occur on the state and community levels, so that existing gender expectations can be challenged not only by the women in the community, but also by the men. Without the encouragement and acceptance of women's freedom from the community, a woman will allow cultural pressures influence her day-to-day decisions. Issues like domestic violence have to be addressed by the community or enforced by the legal system before it becomes extinct to rural Indian culture. Until then, rural Indian women will not have the ability to take part in opportunities brought on by autonomy.

State-level empowerment has shown to be effective in the political and economic empowerment of women in rural India. After the MGNREGA, women had the opportunity to work for equal pay as men, as well as the opportunity to participate in the political decision-making regarding irrigation management. Provided that a community is behind a state-level action, such as with the MGNREGA, women have the opportunity to reach a certain level of political and financial freedom they would not have had access to in communities that practiced patriarchal gender norms. Community participation in a state-level action has not always panned out to be successful for the protection of women's rights, as we see from the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of

2005 and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961. Perhaps the failure of the 2005 Act and the 1961 Act were due to the state's failure to enforce its newly passed policies; however, it is evident with the MGNREGA and the Panchayati Raj that state-level enforcement of policies can act as a powerful advocate for women's rights in India.

Limitations

There are several limitations to my research that should be considered. First, there were no interviews conducted for my thesis. Due to a limited time frame, all research was conducted on a case study basis. This could act as a limitation because many concepts I developed were based off of second-hand research. I could not estimate nor prevent bias from the primary researcher's work. Given the qualitative setting for my thesis, my data was interpreted for data and analysis of other researchers. I do not, however, believe this limitation takes away from the validity of concepts presented within this thesis. I used a significant amount of literature to develop concepts, each concept of which was backed by multiple sources.

A second limitation to my research is my own liberal bias. Being a feminist student in a social justice program in the United States subjects my opinions to ideas of freedom and autonomy that I witness and experience in my own environment. Freedom to me, as a Caucasian female in the United States, is a drastically different concept than freedom in rural India. To adjust to this limitation, I address the fault of many Western feminists' ideals of autonomy as liberal, and consider the positionality of a woman in rural India in regards to her gender, culture, and social and economic status. I also address the flaws of the term *autonomy*, in that it does not address the cultural influence

on women's decisions; instead I utilize the term *freedom*, to entail women's ability to act depending on their own desires, with culture being an influential factor in her decision-making.

A third limitation comes from the lack of literature available on women's safety in public spaces in India. Much of the research on violence against women in India focuses solely on dowry violence and domestic violence. When researching violence in the public space, I had to draw information from news and magazine articles. While these are efficient forms of public news, it is common to collect incorrect information and vague event recollection. Without census data on violence in public spaces in India, we cannot get an accurate description of how pervasive the issue is in terms of population.

A fourth and final limitation concerns the danger of using a liberal approach in evaluating the state of women in rural India. Using a liberal framework keeps my analysis from reviewing the state of women in an intersectional manner, assuming that all women are working in conjunction towards a common goal in India. It does not allow for me to take into account that women of different religions, castes, classes, regions, etc., may not have the same goals for freedom. The liberal framework prevents me from considering the cultural limitations for women to report crimes committed against them, such as their further risk of violence not only from family members, but members of their community. There are also less reporting stations for women in northern India for domestic violence than in southern India, further preventing women from reporting incidences of domestic violence. It must be said that the murders of women in India are not condoned by Hindu or any other Indian *tradition* (Narayan, 1997). Murder is not a tradition in India. When confusing traditions such as dowry with dowry-murders, we, as

researchers, mistakenly associate traditions with extremely negative contexts. I do not wish to make the different Indian traditions into features that should be eradicated. When I speak of traditional practices in India, I refer only to the gendered norms and the expectations of women as wives, daughters-in-law, daughters and mothers. With the liberal bias, I am quick to assume that women should have equal opportunities as men, and therefore equal expectations and duties. Unfortunately, as I pointed out when I explored the various issues with the theory of autonomy, the liberal framework fails to consider the effect women's duties as wives and mothers has on their goals towards freedom. I attempted to address this limitation by critically analyzing the restrictions of the term autonomy; however, even though I addressed the issues with autonomy, I cannot remove the negative aspects of the liberal bias from the entire study. Given more time, the ideal study would have been to conduct an intersectional study on women of different regions, castes, classes, and religions. It would also have been ideal to explore the pressures men receive from their communities to be perpetrators of violence.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis sought to explore the opportunities for freedom available to women in rural India. Because of the wide-spread pandemic of domestic violence in India, the thesis includes options that are available to battered women in rural India. Before any case studies on opportunities for women in rural India could be researched, I had to distinguish the term *autonomy* from what I choose to call *freedom*. While there are many factors that distinguish the two terms, they are often confused. It is essential to differentiate the terms because, in the battle to define autonomy, we as researchers lose focus on the battle *for* autonomy. I found endless research on what autonomy is and why one researcher's definition of autonomy is incorrect or correct. However, in defining autonomy, we neglect to recognize the ability that humans have to make their own decisions, whether or not the decisions they make are seemingly positive to their lives. Researchers lose sight of the purpose we have for defining autonomy because of the belief that there is one standard of living that is best for humans universally. In the end, freedom and autonomy come down to one action: the ability to make a choice.

While I criticize researchers for losing sight of the purpose of autonomy in their attempt to define it, this thesis does not want to lose focus on the issue at hand: the state of battered women in rural India. It is crucial to determine whether I research their autonomy or their freedom because many of the decisions women in rural India make daily are informed and carefully decided. We can call their ability to make their own informed decisions autonomy, but with the state of women in rural India being so

negative, we find it difficult to accept their status as autonomous. Whether or not women have the capability of autonomy in rural India is not the focus of this thesis. I focus on their ability to obtain *freedom*. Freedom is the more general term of autonomy that envelopes all aspects of autonomy, but includes *free will* with regards to culture. The term *freedom* recognizes that a woman may choose to be less autonomous, financially, socially, politically, etc., because of her positionality within her culture. Freedom not only includes the hopeful aspects of autonomy, but also the less desirable factors that culture contains that influence a woman's decision. The question, "Do battered women in rural India have access to freedom?" ultimately asks if battered women in rural India are able to make decisions, positive or negative, without external influences. To answer this question, I reviewed case studies of the status of women in terms of financial freedom, freedom of mobility, and political freedom.

The ultimate findings of my research answer the question of whether battered women in rural India have access to freedom. In India's current social and political state, women do not have access to freedom in the liberal sense that international influences would prefer. Battered women have even less access to freedom, as they are bound to their marriages, in constant fear for their safety. In terms of the liberal autonomy, women in certain areas of rural India have access to social groups, or SHGs, that empower them through elements of autonomy; but with that empowerment comes the loss of their ultimate freedom. By accepting vocational or educational training, a woman loses her freedom in other parts of her life. She may gain some form of financial empowerment that can potentially lead to financial freedom, but she loses her freedom of mobility,

where she has to fear that her newly discovered empowerment will cause unsettling feelings in patriarchal actors of her community that may threaten her with violence.

It is a general understanding that change is unsettling for societies bound by shared patriarchal practices. In India, the patriarchal tradition is over 20 centuries old, and the recent developments in women's activism have undeniably stirred discomfort into the mix of patriarchal communities. Rural North India is a region in India that is particularly patriarchal, as dowry and domestic violence are still prevalent practices. Because of the level of patriarchy, rural India has had a slow movement towards women's equality, with prominent evidence of resistance. While the theory of autonomy suggests that these women lack autonomy because they lack awareness of their options, disabling them from the opportunity to make a choice, evidence of local empowerment programs suggests otherwise. An unfortunate realization is that women are not taking the actions necessary to gain true freedom, where they will be able to make decisions on their own without the threat of violence or ostracism. Freedom, however, does entail that they can choose the traditional practices of their community, however harmful to the liberal form of autonomy that practice may be; however, for it to be a choice of free will, the choice has to be made without fear of violence or ostracism.

Looking back over the data, opportunities for women to gain several levels of freedom are evident. They have opportunities for financial freedom through microloans, land ownership, and employment. Women have freedom of mobility because they are not legal slaves to anyone in their country, and are therefore free to move about their public and private spaces. They have political freedom because of the laws enacted by their government, such as the MGNREGA and the Panchayati Raj that allow women to

participate in their local community decision-making events. Women have freedom in their households, to act freely and make decisions.

On paper, all of these opportunities show the potential for autonomy for women all over India. Herein lies the problem with autonomy. It is true that women are provided with the options of empowerment through local SHGs and laws enacted to provide equal rights for women. However, is the centuries-old patriarchal tradition not an influential factor in the decisions women make each day? When women are empowered through their local SHGs, now having knowledge of financial strategies, to pursue financial freedom through owning and managing their own land, are they not influenced by patriarchal practices to let their male family members or husbands manage the land that the women own? When they go to the market, utilizing their freedom of mobility, do they not have to fear, such as in the case of the 25 year-old in Jhunjhunu, that they are going to be kidnapped and gang-raped? If she seeks political freedom in her local agricultural community, does she not have to fear that her community members will ostracize her for speaking out of turn in meetings or working in agriculture while she has a family and husband at home? If she has to fear ostracism by her local community if she obtains employment, how is she going to achieve decision-making power in her household? There are many cultural factors impeding women's access to autonomy, therefore impeding her access to freedom. She cannot make a decision without considering the social and physical consequences of her actions. In the end, can she be called free if she has to fear negative consequences in every decision she makes?

While my study finds that no woman in rural India can have access to true freedom, I chose to include the additional factor of domestic violence. In a culture where

each and every decision a woman makes risks negative consequences, a woman who faces domestic violence in her private space has twice the risk in every decision she makes. I chose to include domestic violence to emphasize the need for community and state action to change harmful practices that legitimize restrictive gender norms and practices such as domestic violence. Not only do these battered women in rural India have to face the challenges preventing them from financial, political and social freedom, but they have to face challenges that prevent them from their own physical freedom. Without support from the legal agents in the state or their community members, she loses all aspects of her fundamental and human rights. The status of women in India is negative in its current state; the status of battered women in India is calamitous. So to answer the original research question of whether battered women in rural India have access to freedom: not in the least respect. Could a battered woman in rural India have access to freedom in the future? She could have access to freedom with significant action in local communities and in the state.

To improve the status of battered women in rural India, I suggest many forms of empowerment. Empowerment is a significant feature of this thesis because it is the only action that can improve the status of women in a patriarchal culture. As found by Rowan, Mumford and Clark, state-level empowerment is an effective actor in change. However, the state-level intervention has to be supported by its political and legal actors (2015). Empowerment without support of influential actors has no backbone. Privacy in the Indian home is a feature that plays into the survival of the harmful practice of domestic violence. Many women will not report incidences of domestic violence because they fear the reaction from their families, communities, as well as the inaction of their legal actors.

I propose that a major step in state-level empowerment is to change the way Indian law looks at domestic violence as a personal crime. Domestic violence should be a crime against humanity, and therefore a perpetrator should be charged regardless of whether the victim chooses to press charges. While this poses the question of whether that empowers women towards freedom or strips them of their right to prosecute, I suggest that any crime violating a human right should be a crime against humanity. An effective form of community-level empowerment would be SHGs geared towards both men and women. These SHGs should seek to discourage harmful practices and encourage community members to empower each other. This can be done through redirecting the goal of the SHGs from gender equality to improving the economy, health, or status of a community. After state and community-level interventions, individual-level empowerment is possible. The SHGs that teach women financial and vocational strategies would enable women to be competitive in the labor market, or to obtain an education. Ultimately, community-level empowerment would allow women to make the choice of whether they want to live lives of liberal autonomy, or live predictable lives of being primarily mothers and wives. The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate women's opportunities to make choices, no matter what that choice may be. The only way to grant women the true ability to make choices without external influences is to eliminate the threat of violence and ostracism; the only way to eliminate the risks is through state and community-level interventions.

CHAPTER 6

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