A Qualitative Research On Natal Family Violence By Shakti Shalini
Unkahī
The Unspoken
A Qualitative Research On Natal Family Violence
Acknowledgement

This research and report have been made possible by the encouragement and funds from the American Jewish World Service (AJWS). They, like us, were keen to understand and share with others in the 'violence against women' ecosystem the under-explored phenomenon of natal family violence. This research would also not have been possible without the participation and trust of the survivors who came forward to share their lived experiences. Our gratitude to both AJWS and the survivors.

Survivors

We acknowledge the contributions and bravery of all the women who took part in this study. It is through their lived experiences that the report attempts to draw a political and humanitarian attention to the less explored and rarely reported natal family violence. The main source of this work is their exchange of knowledge, ideas, and emotions. We will always be grateful to the women who gave the “outsider in us” a “glimpse into” the most trying weeks, months, and years of their lives. We commend them for their courage and hope to channelize their stories and their activism to make life safer, healthier, and more wholesome for many.

Research Team

Amrita Nandy (Research Consultant), Dolly Singh (Research Coordinator), Tanmoyee Bhattacharjee (Researcher), Lovepreet Singh (Researcher) and Monika Tiwary (Research Interviewer)
About Shakti Shalini

Section 1. ................................................................. Why this report?

Section II. ......................................................... Salient Findings: Highlights

Section III. ...................................................... Recommendations

Annexe. ......................................................... List of survivor participants
Shakti Shalini supports survivors of sexual and gender-based violence since 1987 and works to prevent it since 2014.

Our mission is to play a concrete role in shaping a world that is gender-equal, safe for children and adults across the gender spectrum, free from systemic violence, and founded on a deep regard for the freedom, agency, and dignity of individuals.

Shakti Shalini aspires to play a pioneering role in the prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination at the grassroots, in supporting adult and child survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, educating and training youth to become gender equality champions, activating the digital media space for large-scale gender awareness and sensitization, and setting up a unit dedicated to interdisciplinary and intersectional gender-based research and knowledge generation.

Shakti Shalini aims to work towards gender equality through a lens that is intersectional and inclusive, democratic and participatory, research based, empathetic, and sensitive. We strongly believe that the nurturing of a strong core team that operates through a practice of mutual care, kindness, support, empathy, and compassion is the foundation of achieving the mission of the organization. In the long run, our mission is to make a significant and sustainable contribution in nurturing a world that considers equality, safety, agency, dignity, health, care, and compassion to be the operative principles in all arenas of human life.
Section 1: Why This Report?

Many of us are made to believe that only those who have our blood in their veins are truly ‘our own’. It is they who have our best interest in mind. Parents, we are told, top this list of well-wishers because no one can love us like they do. And the mother she cannot be surpassed in her love and sacrifice for her children.

There is definitely truth to this belief. Parental care can often be matchless. Yet, it is not the absolute truth, and certainly not true for each one of us.

Girls who grow up believing these “truths” unquestioningly can encounter a rude awakening. This happens especially when the family pulls them away from the horizon outside the home—the horizon of friendships, education, vocation, and other callings of the heart-mind. That is the moment of reckoning—that the warm circle of care can sabotage their dreams and selves. Dreams that they could not even dream fully, selves that they did not unpack wholly.

What can make this tug-of-war between the path one wants and the one chosen by the family tricky to resolve, among other reasons, is that the family restrains the daughter in the name of love, safety, and protection. Such a stance, often also the collective narrative about the birth family, is like a thick-and-tough wall, difficult to bend or dent.

It took a devastating pandemic to shake it.

By the time COVID-19 unleashed its full fury upon us in India in early 2021, there was another piece of ‘breaking news’ that made it to the headlines. Here are a few examples:

- Domestic violence complaints at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown[1]
- Is domestic violence the next pandemic in India?[2]
- PIL filed in Delhi HC seeking protection of domestic violence victims during lockdown[3]
- Domestic violence surges amid Covid-19 lockdown; Delhi HC to hear plea[4]

---

Although the legal term used in these news headlines - ‘domestic violence’ - can refer to a range of persons who has caused harm, it is often imagined or inferred that ‘domestic’ connotes women’s marital home. By this logic, the conclusion drawn is that the persons who has caused harm are the husband and the in-laws. During the pandemic in India, surveys and research studies from different states also established that the number of married women calling for help during the pandemic was unusually high[5]. This reinforced the image of the marital home as ‘the’ site of violence for women.

However, at Shakti Shalini’s helpline and women’s shelter home in Delhi, another kind of truth bared itself. An unexpectedly large number of single women had reached out after facing violence at the hands of their birth family or natal kin—parents, siblings, uncles, and so on. Figure 1 (below) shows the exact number of women who complained of domestic violence by their natal families and the rise in it during the pandemic.

![Figure 1: Number of survivors reaching out before and during lockdown](https://northeastnetwork.org/summary-of-findings-in-the-series-of-rapid-surveys/)

The number of calls received by Shakti Shalini as well as the survivors who accessed Shakti Shalini’s services (via its Crisis Intervention and Counselling Centre) during this period saw an increase during this period. 45 percent of these survivors were women who were never married and residing with their natal family and 10 per cent in live-in relationships.

The natal family - often might be one’s first port of call for support - was the one to cause harm in these cases. Given the imposition of nation-wide lockdowns and social distancing measures, these single women had no alternative safe space to turn to. They were locked in, 24 hours, in abusive environment. The government's heavily publicized, pandemic-prevention public message - ‘stay home, stay safe’ - was not viable for them, and certainly not for married women facing abuse at home.

What makes natal family violence especially difficult is the myth-making around it. Socialized into believing that genetic ties are sacred and that parents (and elders, as such) epitomize physical safety and emotional well-being, we Indians can find it especially challenging to name and shame our biological kin. It is harder for women because in the socio-cultural imaginary, they are symbolized as carriers of family honor. Speaking against one’s natal family, especially parents, can be seen and even seem like an act of brutal impiety.

What makes the situation (arguably) worse for single women in abusive natal relations is that it is difficult to process and resist such abuse.

Yet, what we were witness to at Shakti Shalini during the peak of the pandemic exposed a less acknowledged, barely reported, and less documented reality. Even though the ‘honour crime’ variety of stark violence against girls and women is well-known and reported, even that has continued with brazen regularity and is condoned by families who see the daughter’s body and sexuality as their property.

To help understand and share with others this less-explored aspect of domestic violence against girls and women and to aid in future interventions, we decided to record what we encountered.

This report is our account of that 'unspoken' reality.

It aims to understand and document the violence faced by women from their natal family during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic in the National Capital Region of Delhi. Specifically, we have tried to:

1. identify the various forms of violence enacted by natal families towards women;

2. understand the pandemic-related experiences and challenges of women who sought help from designated systems and services around domestic violence; and

3. offer recommendations for the feminist-civil society collective and state actors.
The design of the study involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 women who had approached Shakti Shalini between 2020 and 2021.

Participants were purposively selected so as to have a reasonably representative spectrum of accounts that speaks to a diverse range of faith and caste affiliations, sexual, vocational, educational and relationship identities, as well as forms of natal family violence. The participants who were receive support from Shakti Shalini were aged between 18 to 27 years, with 65 percent of them belonging to the 22-27 age band.

A majority of these women belong to the working class and lower middle class. 60 percent of our participants were “not aware” of their (natal) family income, and 40 per cent did not have a bank account. Less than half of them owned a phone. 60 per cent belonged to SC, ST and OBC categories, and 60 per cent to the minority communities (Muslim, Sikh, and Christian).

All participants were first briefed about this study, its purpose, eventual form (this report) and its dissemination. Only those who saw this exercise as useful and offered us their consent to participate were involved. During the consent taking exercise, they were informed of their rights as participants and also of the confidentiality clauses and anonymous nature of reporting. Thereby, names of all participants have been changed.
THE LINK BETWEEN THE PANDEMIC AND NATAL FAMILY VIOLENCE

As media reports in 2020 and 2021 revealed, the constant presence of the abusive husband at home had hiked the incidence of marital domestic violence. Unmarried women living with their natal families had a similar experience—it was the long company of the abusive parent and/or sibling, without respite, that made the natal home quite distressing. Karishma[6], a 26 year old graduate from Delhi, indicated a direct relationship between the pandemic and the violence she faced from her father. Although the lockdowns left us all confined at home, for women such as Karishma this was in addition to the already existing restrictions in mobility:

Earlier, when Papa used to go to work, this (her father’s anger and abuse) was far less. Since the lockdown, Papa used to sit at home, get angry at every small issue and vent it at me. He would hit and scold me. Home became toxic all the time. It was anyway always violent but the lockdown brought an additional layer of restrictions. Like, I was a volunteer at an organization before the lockdown but I lost access to that. My education had anyway been stopped. So, I could not step out of the house at all!

Her ordeal of being home bound with the father who was causing harm was worsened by the constant fear of being forced into marriage:

Since my father used to be home all the time during the lockdown, his only mission then was to look for a husband for me, and talk about potential grooms. Each time he would do this, I felt such anxiety as if I would be married off the next morning. Whenever I asked him to allow me to have a job, he would say “I will first marry you off”. Because he had come to know of my relationship, he would say, “You should not even be given a mobile phone, let alone allowed to work outside the home before you are married”.

Yet, a key difference between the married and the unmarried survivor is the social outlook and response towards the person who has caused harm. The woman who complains against her marital kin may still garner sympathy and concern for her lot, but the one who seeks public support against her parents and other natal kin may not, as other narratives affirm.

[6] The age of each survivor is mentioned the first time her name appears in the report. For a list of the names and age of all participants, refer to the table in the Annexe.
NEGLECT OF AND DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE DAUGHTER

75 percent of the participants reported unequal treatment of girls and boys in their family, with male children receiving preferential treatment. This is not surprising. India, rather South Asia, has a peculiar, patriarchal sensibility of favoring the male child for economic, religious, and social norms. Through the disparity in the child sex ratio, the Census of India has established that this discrimination has at least a 100 year old history.

While sharing the suffering they experienced within natal families, women often brought up a comparison with how their male siblings were treated. They perceive a difference between their parents' positive attitude towards their son as against their daughter. A part of this difference is expressed through the multiple fetters that these women live with, like it was for 23 year old Shanno:

When I recall my time at home, my only regret is that I could not do anything of my choice. I had my phone but I was not allowed to use it without permission. I got my phone when I was 18 but my brother got his phone when he was in 6th class. I was not allowed to have friends, go out on my own, or wear what I wanted. But my brother could do anything he liked. He had many friends and could go out alone and at anytime. If I wanted to go somewhere there was always either my mother or brother going along with me.

26 year old Faiza, a Master’s student from Faridabad, also lived through a sharp sense of discrimination at home:

My father has always said that he treats boys and girls equally but when the moment came to walk the talk, like when I had to go to college or get a job, he was the first one to stand in my way and say that a girl cannot do this.

Faiza was able to trace this discrimination by her parents starting from incidents in her childhood—incidents of neglect and the lack of warmth towards her.

I have two brothers about whom I have always heard positive things being said like “he is a lawyer’s child”. I too have craved that they would lovingly place their hand on my head or hold me in their lap and say “oh she is such a good student or “she is so sweet”. It was as if I was lost to them in a crowd or that they did not want to see me. I remember once I was quite sick. My mother made me lie down. After she read the namaz, she prayed that if someone is close to their death, let that person be me. But with my brothers, she was a mature mother. She would even say to them, “If you are going to be home late, just let me know” or even ask what they would like to eat. Nothing of that sort for me.
For others, discrimination was expressed through neglect, including neglect of physical and emotional health. The following two narratives by (21 years old) Rachna and (22 years old) Raaesa respectively expose how for some, daughters are unwanted burdens:

I started to experience terrible migraines when I turned 19. I would be crying in pain and ask my mother and brother to take me to a doctor but to no avail. I would be bedridden in pain for three days at a stretch. My father would walk past me as if I were a corpse (Rachna).

There has never been anyone in the family I could talk to freely. So I used to talk to myself and wish for someone I could talk to...a friend. When I first started menstruating in class 8, my mother threw an underwear at me while telling me to use a piece of cloth with it. She did not tell me anything about menstruation! And the underwear she gave me was hers. My periods used to be very painful. I had to take a painkiller each day. It was so difficult to sit in the school but I had no one to share all this with (Raeesa).

**• CONDITIONED BY THE ‘GOOD GIRL’ SYNDROME**

Although the definition of a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ woman varies across societies, some common features cut through cultural differences. For example, women who claim or even assert their sexuality are often seen as morally loose and unhinged, and therefore disliked. Or, as news reports have told us over the years, the clothes that women wear can be an essential yardstick for how to judge and treat them. The women who came to us had similar anecdotes to share about the flawed and dangerous overlap between women’s appearance, dressing, and safety.

For 26 year old Reshma, puberty meant bidding goodbye to clothes she had grown to like and be comfortable in. Her father prohibited her from wearing jeans and so her mother played along this diktat:

When I turned 15, I was told I could not wear jeans anymore. All I could dress in were salwar kurtas. I was always worried that the dupatta should not slip off the chest because I was told so. In my family, the girls were an obedient lot. They did as the elders told them to. But I would do what I thought was right so I was seen as the ill-mannered one.
Make-up and other notions of beauty too can be seen as signs of a woman’s sexuality, so those are a part of the surveillance net for those with power over young women. Recollecting the memories of childhood, Faiza said:

I recall that for my maternal uncle’s wedding I had worn a bindi. When my father saw it, he slapped me in the presence of everyone and said that I cannot wear it. I felt deeply insulted. I was barely 12 or 13 years old then.

Since patriarchy deploys women’s bodies as sites of male control and power, girls and women are assaulted, shamed, and even killed for wearing clothes or makeup that do not meet the approval of her family or community.

**YOUNG WOMEN’S SEXUALITY AND PARENTAL POLICING**

In the garb of ‘safety’ and ‘protection’ from sexual harassment and assault, young women’s freedoms can be curbed ruthlessly by their natal families who (mis)perceive the girl child and young woman as the beacon of their ‘honour’. One of the worst forms of damage that such tight controls cause is upon the fledgling confidence and agency that girls and women possess.

24 year old Neelam recalled the fears that she lived with, even while away from the natal family. In a way, the physical distance from the family actually meant greater controls and surveillance:

When I stepped out to study in Faridabad, I faced so much resistance from my family. My relatives would interfere a lot and say that I should not be allowed to get out of the house by myself, that girls get corrupted when allowed to be by themselves. My parents had to give me a phone to keep a tab on me. It came with many restrictions, terms and conditions, and much surveillance. Each time I visited home, I was reminded that I better not have any relationship with a man, “you have gone there to study, you are the honour of the family”, they would say. Meaning the entire burden of the family’s honour is left on the woman. But a man can ruin this honour too!
For 20 year old Prerna, physical violence and captivity were used to ensure that she towed the family’s line:

*If I ever befriended a boy, my mother would lock me up in the room. Because having a male friend was unacceptable. For them, it meant that I could run away with him. My mother would scream at me for such things, she would often even hit me for this.*

Reshma was never given a chance to know the textures and dynamics of relationships with the opposite sex, and thereby denied the opportunity to learn about its joys and challenges, and also kept ignorant about the nature of her own sexuality:

*I was not even allowed to talk to boys or cousins in the family! I had only one friend, a girl, and that was allowed so that I was accompanied by someone to and from school.*

19 year old Rumi recalls an incident that worked as a game changer for her perception about her natal kin:

In our family, we girls could not talk to any male outside the family. During a COVID-19 lockdown, I once scribbled a note for a boy in the neighbourhood to buy us vegetables. Someone recorded a video of me handing over the note to him. That video was tweaked with some nonsense and sent to my brother and our neighbours. My brother was livid. He dragged me by my hair...it is then that I realized that I was not safe with my own family.

Natal families stunt the physical, psychological, and affective growth of their daughters by an almost incarcerated existence within the home, filling them with fear and anxiety about the world and men. Faiza led a life of near-total confinement:

*Stepping out of the house by oneself was never a possibility. My brother would drop me to school, my father would pick me up from school. I was never allowed to attend any school functions. If I ever had to go somewhere, my brother would accompany me or get me what I needed. If I wanted to eat something, if and when my brother felt like it, he would get it. I could never live as per my choices, never ever. I barely attended two or three weddings in the family of close relatives.*
FORMS OF VIOLENCE

Among the cohort of young women this study focuses on, ‘violence’ connotes a wide range of abusive and coercive behaviours by their natal family. Some were more physically abusive than others. Emotional abuse and psychological trauma is reported by all. Economic control emerges as yet another way to establish power and control over the daughter/sister.

15 out of 20 women who participated in this study faced physical and verbal violence that included being slapped. Three women reported physical abuse while being forcibly married while one was threatened with forced marriage. In terms of the identity of the person who caused harm, in 60 per cent of the cases, it was both male and female relatives. For Raeesa, the physical battering was rather extreme:

My family members would say that I would corrupt their daughter-in-law. This is why they wanted to marry me as early as possible. Once, after I heard them plan my marriage, I completely refused to be married that early. My father was so angry at this that he shut all windows and doors and hit me a lot. I cried for help but he did not stop. My brothers took me to another room and shut me inside. Since I was 13 years old that time, I had to wear a dupatta all the time. That day they used my dupatta to tie my hands and beat me a lot. When the neighbours heard me and knocked on the door, my father said that he will break my arms and legs and go to jail than leave me unwhipped.

Shanno survived rape besides physical and emotional abuse by her mother's male cousin while all her mother about it was to condone it.

My mama had an affair with my mother but whenever he found a chance, he would hold or touch me. When I told my mother about this, she asked me to keep quiet and not tell my brothers. If I tried to avoid him, my mother would hit me and ask me to do as he said. In fact, she would go away when he was around me. Things worsened so much that he raped me for three years, in my own home. Once when I put my foot down, I was beaten badly, my books were thrown in a drain, and my clothes burnt. This was done so that I am forced to depend upon him for money and material support.
UNKAHIH
Karishma was born with a short leg syndrome (one leg shorter than the other), yet her disability became a source of trauma for her in the family, instead of compassion and support:

Since my childhood, I have faced much at home, I always felt suffocated. My mother would say things like I came into her life with a problem in my leg, then they had to get the leg operated...that I may as well have died. I too have always wished I had died or run away from home. I finally left home after my father had hit me a lot because I intervened in an argument between my brother and sister. My father hit me against the wall, the bed, and the almirah. If my sister did not hold his hands, he would have killed me that day. He hit me despite the fact that I had accidentally dropped boiling hot tea on my foot. It got completely burnt and had boils. And of the six members of my family, no one bothered to look up the burns or take me to a doctor.

- DISTRIBUTION OF VIOLENCE PERPETUATED BY FAMILY MEMBERS (MALE AND FEMALE)

The study reveals that the perpetrators of violence were – in equal measure - both male and female family members. In most of cases where the violence was perpetrated by female members of the family, the women were also tasked with gatekeeping of gendered and patriarchal values and norms. In this study, female gatekeepers of patriarchy or female patriarchs are mothers, sisters, mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. Under the influence of patriarchy and its false consciousness, these female gatekeepers too have been controlled by the values of their male gatekeepers who call the shots about ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.
SAME SEX RELATIONSHIPS AND NATAL FAMILY VIOLENCE

In a country where even boys and men can struggle to talk about gender and sexuality, women can have it far worse. It becomes impossible when the woman’s sexual orientation is non-normative or not aligned to patriarchy. How then can those from the LGBT community speak of violence from the natal family, without having to reveal their sexual orientation?

Between 2019 and 2021, 80 per cent of young women who approached Shakti Shalini to report violence from the natal family identified themselves as heterosexual and 15 per cent called themselves lesbian. 23 year old Jasmine was among the 15 per cent. When Jasmine’s family got to know about her relationship with a woman, she was forced to marry a man:

No one in my family knew about my relationship till my brother got wind of it. When he broke this news to the family, things took an ugly turn. The family thought I will run away. My mother took me to Kanpur to her sister’s where they forcibly got me engaged despite my disagreement. My mother and brother would argue with me, hit me. My brother would object to my conversations with that woman. That is when I thought to myself that I cannot live there and I left home.

Despite the repeal of Section 377, it remains quite challenging for same sex couples to seek help from the police to complain against their parents because they can (and often do) use the law to separate their daughter from her girlfriend by slapping charges of wrongful restraint and confinement (Section 339 and 340) and abduction (Section 362). It is also common for parents to use Habeas Corpus to pull their daughter back into the natal family. For 21 year old Bhavya, the fear of violence from the natal family has become the lens with which she views them.

When Section 377 was repealed, I thought I will gently introduce my parents to the idea of homosexuality. So, I told them that women can marry each other. My mother’s first reaction was that this is madness, society has lost its moral bearings, how can this happen, how will kids be born if women marry each other. I realized that this was not helpful, they would not change. Instead, if they came to know about my sexual orientation, they would pull me out of school, they would make me sit at home, so it was better that I do not come out to them.
These testimonies expose the sanctimony granted to both the natal family as well as heterosexuality. Yet, public discourse and norms make it difficult for families to see this side of their attitude and behaviour towards their own daughters and sisters, let alone adult citizens of the country with rights to make their own choices.

- **WHITHER THE RIGHT TO CHOICE?**

A pervasive form of violence by natal families against girls and women is the complete neglect of their desires and aspirations, especially for education, employment, relationships and marriage. The natal family has a heavy and formative role to play in how girls grow up imagining themselves and charting their path. Barriers to a fuller life and its many personal and public dimensions begin early for many like Raeesa who finally reached out to a women’s rights NGO in Delhi to escape her family’s control over her decisions:

_Ever since I was a child, I wanted to be independent. But when I reached class eight, my father said I was the right age to be married, and they will marry me soon. I really wanted to become a professional beautician but my father refused to let me learn that skill. Instead, all he allowed me to learn was stitching._

Rachna narrated incidents that reveal how little control she had over her life and how much sway her parents had over her every day life:

_In college, I had lent a book to a male classmate. My father came to know this through the teacher. For 4-5 days, my father did not let me go to college. And once, the Principal of the college told me to not attend classes. It was later that I learnt from my friend that it was my father who had convinced the Principal that I should not go to college and had also asked him to tell me to not go to college. When I asked my father why he did this, he said because I was friends with some boys at college._
Shanno had not just endured sexual violence in the natal family. It was accompanied by strict surveillance and total lack of autonomy:

> When I got a job, the surveillance by my mother and brother continued. They would constantly doubt me if they saw any man around me. They kept a check on my salary and take it all away. My mother would say, “since your brother drops you to work, you do not need money, and if you want to buy something, tell us”. But I never got my own salary from them. About my relationship, at first they very lovingly asked me if I have someone in my life and said they will talk to him. But as soon as I told them, I was made to quit work. They took my phone away and locked me up at home. My brother had me with a pipe.

**INTER-CASTE/RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES AND NATAL FAMILY VIOLENCE**

Violence by the natal family is most known (and even accepted) in cases where women are in romantic relationships or have a marriage of choice. Despite women's legal right to choice with regard to relationships and marriage, in conservative families and communities, it is norms around family honour that hold more clout than constitutional values. In such instances, women lose whatever support they may have otherwise found from natal kin. Much like what happened with Neelam:

> My parents did not support my inter-faith relationship. It changed the entire dynamics between us. My mother thought I was crazy. She started feeding me some medicine in my tea that I accidentally saw in the kitchen. My father did not let me step out of the house, they snatched away my phone, I was not allowed to talk to anyone. If I was unwell, they would be sarcastic and say that my illness was a reflection of the wrong I was doing (meaning my inter-faith relationship). It turned so bad that when I complained to my parents about a male cousin who leered, flirted, and once even tried to touch me, my mother said, “So what? Atleast he is a Shia, a Muslim, and you can even marry him, and this is still better than your 13 year long relationship with a Hindu man”.

25-year-old Sambhavna described herself as a pampered child. Her parents had been rather supportive all through, even though she disliked their “over protection”. They had stood by all her choices around education, career, clothes and so on. When she told them about her relationship with a man from a different caste, she was in for a startling revelation. They behaved in ways that were starkly different from what she had known and seen in their decades together. All of a sudden, her daily life was one of umpteen restrictions:
In the South Asian socio-cultural dynamic, even after women marry and leave their natal families, their emotional connection with each other stays intact. For married women, their parents continue to play an integral part in their daily lives, especially through emotional support. Married women are often seen to depend on their natal family for support, such as childcare and especially during challenging times and crisis. Women who face abuse in the marital family are seen to reach out first to their parents and siblings. However, not all of us have birth families that become our sites of succor and support.

Rachna married a man chosen by her family. Yet, when the relationship turned out to be physically, sexually, and emotionally violent, her parents offered no support. In the quote below, Rachna shares an experience of running into her father (at a family function) after she had ended the marriage and started living by herself:

First, I informed my family. My father’s response was that if there were too many problems I faced in the marriage, I could kill myself. “We cannot help you every other day”, he said. That is when I had to look for support elsewhere and I called an NGO.

In the quote below, Rachna shares an experience of running into her father (at a family function) after she had ended the marriage and started living by herself:

Even today when I meet my family, it is not like my father would appreciate that I am independent, that I live on my own, and I did all this without any help from any family member. Instead, my father still says that I should have compromised, that I should go back to my husband, live with him.

For 26 year old Simran, walking out of her abusive marriage and going back to live with the natal family did not bring much ease. Before she got married, the family had placed many restrictions on her mobility, friendships, clothes and so on. After her divorce and move back to the natal home, the concern of the natal family is around her employment to ensure that she pays for herself:

**MARRIED WOMEN AND THEIR NATAL FAMILY**

In the South Asian socio-cultural dynamic, even after women marry and leave their natal families, their emotional connection with each other stays intact. For married women, their parents continue to play an integral part in their daily lives, especially through emotional support. Married women are often seen to depend on their natal family for support, such as childcare and especially during challenging times and crisis. Women who face abuse in the marital family are seen to reach out first to their parents and siblings. However, not all of us have birth families that become our sites of succor and support.

Rachna married a man chosen by her family. Yet, when the relationship turned out to be physically, sexually, and emotionally violent, her parents offered no support.

For 26 year old Simran, walking out of her abusive marriage and going back to live with the natal family did not bring much ease. Before she got married, the family had placed many restrictions on her mobility, friendships, clothes and so on. After her divorce and move back to the natal home, the concern of the natal family is around her employment to ensure that she pays for herself:
In the spectrum of sexual-and-gender-based violence that girls and women have faced in India, the most common and arguably the least reported is the denial to their rights to family property and thereby financial autonomy. Property ownership and financial independence have a clear and vital link with women’s safety, security and ‘empowerment’. Yet, the denial around women’s rights to property is normalized. Not only is it culturally imposed by family and community but can also be driven by women themselves wherein they do not assert or claim the right to family assets and finances. This situation is made more difficult by the fact that women are not aware or sure of their legal rights to natal and marital property.[7]

This small survey too validates these larger realities. Not even one respondent identified their natural family house as one of their possessions. 60 per cent of the respondents did not know the income of their natal families.

To be able to own, inherit and control assets is fundamental to their ability to make choices with regard to walking away from violent relationships. This survey establishes this association explicitly-- respondents who faced marital family violence had no roof to turn to as the doors of their natal home was closed for them. 80 per cent of the respondents had no place to live after leaving their abusive home and hence sought shelter as well as care at Shakti Shalini.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS TO PROPERTY AND FINANCIAL VIOLENCE

In the case of Simran, she lost access to her natal family home after her “love marriage” to a man from another caste turned sour. She faced harassment from her in-laws but could not seek support from the natal family either. In fact, her marriage became the root of much violence she faced from her natal family, including being ousted from the natal home:

After my stay at Shakti Shalini, when I went to my natal home, my family did not let me stay there. I was moved to a different rental accommodation. They said there was not enough space at the family home. This rental home became yet another tool to torture me with. They would threaten me saying they would stop paying the rent for that house, end the electricity connection and so on. After my marriage, I was shown a house that they said would be mine, but they send me to a rented place despite there being a house they own.

**WOMEN’S UNDERSTANDING OF ‘DOMESTIC VIOLENCE’ AND THEIR ‘RIGHTS’**

Among the many expressions of our socially-engineered values is our resistance towards calling out abuse or harassment by our parents and siblings. Girls and women especially struggle with this because they, again thanks to social norms, are supposed to be the embodiment of the family’s izzat or honour. A majority of our respondents or survivors of natal family violence faced this struggle—one, to call their experience of the natal kin ‘domestic violence’ and two, to put an end to this violence by letting any outsiders or the ‘system’ involved.

Rumi, for example, had to suffer till it became insufferable, before she could ask for help:

Initially, I was not ready at all because it is my parents I would have to speak against! How could I do that? I could not go against them. When I reached the threshold where I had to choose between what they wanted or lose forever what I desired, that is when I realized that for them, my choices mean nothing.

Sambhavna went through a similar dilemma between the conditioned mind of the ‘good daughter’ and the complete lack of autonomy:

I just did not like that I had no rights at all. What my parents decided for me is all I can have. Although I knew that legally I had the right to decide for myself, yet I could not. After my parents pass on, it would be a husband who would take decisions for me. As if all my education had made no difference to my life. I knew that their response would not be agreeable but I had not anticipated that they would react in such an extreme manner.
**MARITAL RAPE AND NATAL FAMILY SUPPORT**

Talking about sex, even if it is sex with one’s husband, remains a difficult subject for many women, given the notions of shame and propriety that undergird women’s speech. Talking about non-consensual sex by the husband and to call it ‘rape’ can get a notch more difficult for some. And then, to have to share all this with one’s parents adds to the issue an extra degree of difficulty. Young women and their natal families continue to grapple through these inter-twined layers of silence, shame, and abuse. Following are two accounts, from Rachna and Akanksha, respectively that touch upon this challenge:

Marriage means a husband who will force himself on you, will drink and make you drink too. When my in-laws saw that my natal family was not supporting me any longer, they too started harassing me. Papa told me that there are other things he has to look after in life and cannot spend more time on my marital concerns. (Rachna)

He would force himself upon me during the day too. When I protested, he said since he is my husband, he can do this. I found this quite abnormal, so after much hesitation, I shared it with Mummy. But she told me to carry on and go back to the marital home. My mother-in-law said that since it was my husband who was doing this, I must not turn this into an issue. But it was daily suffering for me. If I refused, he would get physically abusive. When I was pregnant, even then he would trouble me and say things like, “Whose child are you carrying? Let us get a DNA test” because according to him, I would hardly let him have sex (Akanksha).

**HELP-SEEKING CHALLENGES**

One of the biggest hurdles faced by these women is to undo the chains of their own beliefs and attitudes about seeking help against the family. Bhavya spoke about the layers that shackle girls and women:

The social norms around women’s rightful place come in the way of approaching shelter homes. If the girl lives with her natal family, then she must stay indoors. If the woman is married, then she belongs there and must stay put in the marital home. She must not ask anyone else for help. She is also told to not assert her rights. If she goes to the police, they too tell her the same things, like “adjust to your circumstances, these issues are a part of family life, it keeps on happening”. For all these reasons, women are afraid to contact anyone outside.
Faiza’s experience, on the other hand, tells us how dangerous even help-seeking could be for some. She was gripped by fear when she decided to seek help and find a safe alternative space she could call home:

When I reached out to Shakti Shalini and left home, my brothers caught me enroute. They asked me where I was going. I felt terribly scared. This was the time of the lockdown and everyone was home. In the meantime, my father had also followed me. I was so frightened that if I went back home then, I will not be spared. They all took me back home. And again they started saying that all was okay. So they were not even willing to accept how bad things were for me.

For others such as Neelam, the lack of public conversation on violence against women within the natal family led her to doubt the validity of her own abuse and if at all she would find help:

I first got to know about Shakti Shalini via the internet. I was confused and anxious if about whether they would understand my case and support me. Because often domestic violence is seen as that which happens to married women, in their marital homes. Violence by one’s parents is not in the spotlight. And often people can be heard saying that whatever parents do, even if abusive, is for the well-being of the child. This is why I would wonder if despite being a genuine survivor of abuse I would get any help.

• ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ‘SYSTEM’

Police officers are usually the first in the network of representatives from the ‘system’ to be contacted by women in distress. Since women take the step of reaching out for help usually after enduring much abuse, this encounter with the police becomes a very crucial interface. The response from the police and their attitude towards the survivor can make or break their trust in the system.

Despite being hopeless about the ability of the police to offer help, Neelam gave it a shot in good faith. What she encountered was ridicule and shaming, making her yet another survivor who will not go back to the first line of support the police are meant to be:
I did think of seeking help from the police. But a friend told me that they do not help in matters of natal family, that they say “but, after all, these are your parents”. A couple of such situations had happened with my friend so she was speaking from experience. Yet, I went to the police. And they did not even treat me like an adult. They joked about me and young women’s false sense of adulthood. “How can you leave home, this is where you young women get it wrong”, the cops said.

In the case of Faiza, the first response by the police jeopardized her safety and blew the little hope and confidence she had placed on them:

When I complained about my family to the police, they asked me to share my phone number with them. I did not know how these things work, and I was not sure I could trust them. But then I also thought that since it is the police, they will support me. But, as soon as I left home, they called my family and told them that I am leaving home.

• ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ‘SYSTEM’§ SHAKTI SHALINI’S UNDERSTANDING OF AND RESPONSE TO NATAL FAMILY VIOLENCE VIA COUNSELLING

Over our decades of work with survivors of natal and marital family violence, our counsellors have been able to identify some clear differences and concerns between working with survivors of natal family violence and those of marital family violence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Family Violence</th>
<th>Natal Family Violence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survivors tend to identify violence early and clearly</td>
<td>Survivors grapple in accepting that ‘their own’ can perpetuate ‘violence’ and therefore it takes them time in identifying their experience as violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivors reach out for help somewhat earlier, before the situation takes and extreme turn</td>
<td>Survivors reach out when the domestic circumstance is quite extreme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivors may have some knowledge aware of their rights with regards to domestic violence at the marital home</td>
<td>Survivors are sceptical and diffident about complaining against their natal family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving or escaping from the marital home can, in many situations, be doable</td>
<td>Leaving or escaping home is disproportionately difficult because of the constant surveillance because of the issue of the family’s ‘honour’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
UNKAHI
Given these differences, our Counsellors at Crisis Intervention Centre follow a specific approach of counselling survivors of natal family violence survivors.

Most of the work is around facilitating reflection on the events at natal home, identification of discriminations and restrictions whether in childhood, adolescence and/or adulthood. Since we are deeply engineered – socially and culturally – the Counsellor faces the survivors’ psychological barriers around raising their voice against members of their natal family.

**WHAT DO THESE FINDINGS SAY?**

Across these themes and narratives by young survivors of violence, what is most striking is the many gaps that crisscross the ecosystem of violence–from the survivor and her family, to the institutions and actors that the survivor is in touch with (such as the school principle or friends), and of course the authorities that make up the legal justice system established to protect girls and women from domestic violence and offer support to survivors of domestic violence. These gaps range from women’s lack of access to knowledge about their rights as women and citizens, their own patriarchal conditioning about their own roles and the socio-cultural norms that grip them (and sometimes they grip to), the barriers in exercising agency to assert their rights, the family’s patriarchal and gendered perspectives about their duties, rights and, boundaries vis-à-vis their daughters as well as the gaps within the public systems of support and of course between these systems and the survivors. It is as if the survivor and her rights are alien from each the other, and as if the survivor inside the abusive home and the ‘system’ outside the site of abuse are in seclusion from each other. Given all these gaps, Shakti Shalini has drawn up a list of some concrete, short- and-long-term measures that can help undo these fractures within the ecosystem.
Section III: Recommendations

- More research on natal family violence for feminist knowledge building and advocacy.

- Awareness among the donor partners to support with funds for participatory action research and programmes that address natal family violence.

- Long-term, sensitization interventions with girls and boys in schools and colleges for perspective building. Help facilitate in identifying and normalizing that even kins can perpetuate violence.

- Campaigns to build young women’s awareness and agency regarding their right to choose and laws on property.

- Sustainable funding for shelter home for (cis and genderqueer) women survivors of violence.

- Systemic perspective building among stakeholders on girls’ and young women’s vulnerabilities in natal families.

- Psycho-social support and mental health and counselling for girls and young women in schools and colleges.

- Spotlight new sub-indicators for natal family violence to garner disaggregated data.

- Focussed community-based, public interventions and campaigns on girls’ autonomy and right to choose.

- Building exclusive spaces in communities to talk about natal family violence.

- Substantive and continuous awareness about natal family violence on social media.

- Similar research in other regions of the country to understand the contextual nature of natal family violence.

- Training the team in Shakti Shalini around the psychological, social and legal aspects of natal family violence.

As a next step, Shakti Shalini plans to leverage the findings of this research to generate greater awareness and sensitisation about natal family violence against girls and women. We will share this research among all relevant stakeholders, both in person and digitally, as also integrate it with our violence prevention programs, especially among younger men and women.
### Survivors who participated in this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Rachna</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Raeesa</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Manjula</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Deepika</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Shanno</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Simran</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Akanksha</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bhavya</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Haryana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Priya</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Punjab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Faiza</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Karishma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Prerna</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kirti</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Rumi</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Sambhavna</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Roza</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Neelam</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Maryam</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Meena</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Delhi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Punjab</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About The Research

By the time COVID-19 released its full wrath upon us in India in early 2020, there was another piece of “breaking news” that made it to the headlines: Domestic violence reports at a 10-year high during COVID-19 lockdown. Although the legal phrase “domestic violence” used in these news headlines might pertain to a range of people who have caused harm, it is frequently assumed or inferred that “domestic” refers to women’s marital homes. Surveys and research studies from several states have been done on the exceptionally high number of married women appealing for help during the pandemic in India.

However, we, at Shakti Shalini, were witness to another kind of truth during the peak of the pandemic. “Unkahi” brings in this less acknowledged, barely reported, and less documented reality and asserts the relevance of recognising and addressing natal family violence in the global context of “Domestic violence” through the voices of women survivors.

About Shakti Shalini

In the 1980s, Satyarani Chadha and Shahjahan Begum, two women found their daughters subjected to death by burning by their respective in-laws on the pretext of insufficient dowry. The violent loss of their daughters galvanized them to tell their story to everyone: to the media, the courtroom, and the public. They committed to joining hands and dedicating their lives to fighting gender/sexual violence, especially domestic and dowry violence. In 1987 they established Shakti Shalini and it became a pioneer of grassroots gender equality work in India.

Shakti Shalini is a non-governmental organization based in Delhi, India, that is committed to gender equality. It provides support services to survivors of gender/sexual violence across India which include counseling, crisis intervention, a shelter home, legal aid, health aid, rehabilitation and/or reintegration, and follow-up. It works across five socio-economically marginalized communities in Delhi to prevent gender/sexual violence and discrimination by carrying out daily outreach, gender/legal awareness, health-aid, skills/vocational trainings, theatre and arts interventions, and mobilization of gender equality community leaders.