Media, nationalism, and the body: Exploring masculinities, male partner violence, and HIV vulnerability among female sex workers in northern Karnataka, India

Shamshad Khan, Sapna Nair, Anthony Huynh, Claudyne Chevrier, Raghavendra Thalinja, Ravi Prakash, Prakash Javalkar, Satyanarayana Ramaiaik, Shajy Isac, Parinita Bhattacharjee & Robert Lorway

To cite this article: Shamshad Khan, Sapna Nair, Anthony Huynh, Claudyne Chevrier, Raghavendra Thalinja, Ravi Prakash, Prakash Javalkar, Satyanarayana Ramaiaik, Shajy Isac, Parinita Bhattacharjee & Robert Lorway (2019): Media, nationalism, and the body: Exploring masculinities, male partner violence, and HIV vulnerability among female sex workers in northern Karnataka, India, Global Public Health, DOI: 10.1080/17441692.2019.1650948

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2019.1650948
Media, nationalism, and the body: Exploring masculinities, male partner violence, and HIV vulnerability among female sex workers in northern Karnataka, India

Shamshad Khan* a, Sapna Nair b, Anthony Huynh c, Claudyne Chevrier c, Raghavendra Thalinja b, Ravi Prakash b, Prakash Javalkar b, Satyanarayana Ramaik b, Shajy Isaac c, Parinita Bhattacharjee c and Robert Lorway c

aDepartment of Communication, University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX, USA; bKarnataka Health Promotion Trust, Bangalore, India; cDepartment of Community Health Sciences, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada

ABSTRACT
Public health and media discourses on men and HIV prevention in India have largely focused on changing knowledge, attitudes and risk behaviour pertaining to condom use and safe sex. Little attempt has been made towards intervening in areas such as masculinity, dominant gender norms and intimate partner violence (IPV) that have been shown to have a direct link to HIV prevalence. In this paper, drawing on findings from an ethnographic study in northern Karnataka (India), we show how socio-political and communicative contexts influence and perpetuate violent behaviours by men in intimate relationships with female sex workers (FSW). We argue that constructions of masculinity, the stereotypes of which are reinforced through contemporary media, and movies, are intricately linked with processes of nationalism and play out in forms of chauvinism among working-class men. Violence, celebrated through various patriarchal discourses, legitimises and reinforces gender ideals that govern the private lives of men and their female intimate partners. This study provides a complex and nuanced understanding of structural factors that lead to IPV against FSWs and offers implications for HIV intervention planning in the region and beyond.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 February 2019
Accepted 12 July 2019

KEYWORDS
Masculinity; intimate partner violence; female sex workers; HIV/AIDS; health communication

Introduction
Over the last few decades, despite efforts toward more accessible prevention and treatment services, female sex workers (FSWs) have borne a disproportionate burden of the HIV epidemic globally, with high incidence particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Deering et al., 2014; Shannon, Goldenberg, Deering, & Strathdee, 2014). The importance of understanding and addressing structural drivers of the HIV epidemic has been increasingly recognised in prevention programmes across the world, including India (Auerbach, Parkhurst, & Cáceres, 2011). In northern Karnataka, where the country’s epidemic is most concentrated, high incidence of HIV among FSWs can be related to a number of gendered economic and cultural arrangements (Halli, Ramesh, O’Neil, Moses, & Blanchard, 2006; O’Neil et al., 2004; Panchanadeswaran et al., 2010). One form of gender inequality that shapes the contexts in which FSWs become vulnerable to HIV infection is intimate partner...
While extensive research has been conducted on workplace violence (Deering et al., 2014; Erausquin, Reed, & Blankenship, 2011) encountered by FSWs (e.g. from clients, police, etc.), only a few studies have focused on the issue of IPV among them, and very few involve the perspectives of their male intimate partners (Aubé-Maurice et al., 2012; Blanchard et al., 2018; Huynh et al., 2019; Karandikar & Próspero, 2010; Onyango et al., 2019; Pack, L’Engle, Mwarogo, & Kingola, 2014). However, research has amply demonstrated the close connections between violence and masculinity and particularly masculinity that is ‘hegemonic’ in the sense of becoming a ‘shared’ social ideal for both men and women in society (Connell, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes, Flood, & Lang, 2015). Much of IPV can be read through the lens of hegemonic masculinity where men’s behaviour can be seen as rooted in social practices that associate ‘ideal’ men with toughness, physical strength, and overt show of power and domination (Jewkes, et al., 2015; Morrell, Jewkes, & Lindegger, 2012).

Increasingly, it is being recognised that for IPV interventions to be successful and for addressing violence against women, we need to engage men (as well as women) and go beyond individual behaviours to critically examine socio-cultural, economic and communicative contexts that shape and perpetuate violent behaviours (Katz, 2006; Pease, 2008; Huynh et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2007). Critical scholars have much to contribute to this field, both in terms of unravelling the intricate relationships between violence, masculinity and gender inequities prevailing in societies and in designing effective interventions that challenge traditional gender norms and redefine masculinity instead of changing individual behaviours in the short term (Dill-Shackleford, Green, Scharrer, Wetterer, & Shackleford, 2015; Giaccardi, Ward, Seabrook, Manago, & Lippman, 2016; Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013; Savage, Scarduzio, Lockwood Harris, Carlyle, & Sheff, 2017). Mainstream media have traditionally reinforced cultural values and societal norms to help maintain the status quo and to legitimise it. Studies on media effects have shown how frequent use of media is linked to the maintenance of sexist attitudes among both male and female viewers thereby perpetuating gendered social hierarchies and hegemonic masculinity in society (Giaccardi, et al., 2016; Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013).

In keeping with the need to understand gender complexity in relation to geographic, historical and social contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), this paper seeks to understand how socio-political factors join with media in reinforcing masculinity and violent behaviours toward intimate partners. In Bagalkot district, Karnataka, particularly where HIV prevalence is high among FSWs, we examined local arenas where notions of manhood circulated and converged and were enacted and contested by working-class men. We undertook six months of ethnographic research among FSWs and their intimate partners to explore the complex landscapes of ideologies and practices that constitute and reinforce hegemonic masculinity and that, we argue, legitimise forms of IPV. More specifically, in this paper, we explore Indian masculinities in three ways: firstly, drawing upon participant observational work, we explore how ideal notions of manhood (in which certain masculinities are rated higher than others) are implicated in local reconstitutions of nationalism, ideals which are venerated in various media depictions and manifested in body images. Secondly, we refer to qualitative in-depth interview and focus group discussion findings to represent how men understand and view their relationships with women within the context of family and community. Lastly, we also describe the perspectives of men on the domestic violence legislation, passed by the Government of India in 2005, and repercussions of their views on violence towards women.

We argue that this study is extremely important and timely as India continues to grapple with rising violence against women. Especially, by exploring the complex linkages of hegemonic masculinities with IPV and by foregrounding the historical trajectory and social construction of manhood within local, regional and national contexts – that have direct implications on men’s intimate relationships with women in general and FSWs in particular – this study fills a major gap in the literature. At least, until recently, discourses pertaining to men and HIV prevention largely focused on individual behaviour change (promoting safe sex and condom use) with little attempt towards intervening in masculinity or dominant gender norms (Aubé-Maurice et al., 2012; Huynh et al., 2019;
Khan, 2014; Kovacs, 2018; Ramanaik et al., 2014; Stern, Buikema, & Cooper, 2016). Our effort here is to not only understand a particular social, structural and media landscape, but also to bring to light possibilities for social change necessary for HIV prevention.

Indian men and masculinities in historical context

We begin with a historical sketch of the men and masculinities in Indian socio-political discourse to provide a framework for discussing contemporary masculinities. Societal supremacy of men over women and over resources was evident since the ancient period in India when hierarchical caste system defined complex hegemonies interlinking caste and gender (Stein, 2010; Thapar-Björkert, 2006). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, during the British rule, India like other colonised nations went through complex effects of subjugation and domination (McClintock, Mufti, & Shohat, 1997). The colonial dismissal of Indian men as subordinate, effete and incapable resulted in upheavals in the masculine ideals, drawing forth the historic nationalistic ideals of moral, physical and spiritual strength as a primary requirement for postcolonial nation building (Banerjee, 2005; Falk, 1998). One of the key strands in men’s nationalism in India was an emphasis on celibacy and sexual potency that essentially fed the appetite to gain power (in an otherwise powerless situation) and sexual control over women (Derné, 2012; Pinch, 1996). Furthermore, under colonialism, while Hinduism was constructed by colonialists as an inferior religion that encouraged the subjugation of women, many nationalists glorified Hinduism and equated it with national identity (Derné, 2012). Indian independence movement in the process resulted in formation of new ideologies of masculine domination that associated Indian women with tradition, religion and home (seen as hallmarks of Hinduism) and allowed men to use male power and dominance over women as a symbol of patriotism and strength (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013; Derné, 2012; Pinch, 1996). The nationalist discourse in India popularised the socially constructed ideas of the warrior citizen and ‘mother’ land where the nation was seen as ‘mother’ (woman) and citizens as warriors defending her honour (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013; Datta, 2000; Derné, 2012). Viewing nationalism through a gender lens thus reveals how women become symbols of nationhood and how their lives and ‘bodies become sites of contesting culture, tradition and nation’ (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013, p. 9).

The past few decades have seen a revival of Hindu nationalist discourses, particularly under the leadership of political organisations like Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with the propaganda that Hinduism is under attack (again) and that Hindus (men in particular) need to show their physical strength and dominance to defend their traditions against the onslaught of Westernisation and globalisation (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013; Derné, 2012; Srivastava, 2014). Since the 1990s especially, chauvinistic ideologies and the use of violence to subjugate have echoed across socio-political discourses of the nation state (Mawdsley, 2006). Recent years have particularly witnessed violent protests by Hindu fundamentalists groups against celebrating Valentine’s day, holding beauty pageants in the country, and any suspicion of cow slaughtering (as cows are revered in Hinduism) or of homosexuality, which has often escalated in mob lynching (Banerji, 2009; Das, 2012; Krishnan, 2018). It is interesting, but not surprising, to note that many of these incidents of violence have been directed primarily against women for apparent violation of socially-defined sexual boundaries or against religious minorities and non-hegemonic masculinities (as a display and continued affirmation of hegemonic masculinities).

Recognising this rise of aggressive, violent masculinities and the historical patriarchy is particularly useful for understanding the use of violence against women and its legitimisation in the public and personal domain. Although India and the state of Karnataka have seen vibrant women’s movements and collectivisation against sexual violence, there remains a gap in theoretical evidence to strategise structural interventions that could mitigate such violence (Thapar-Björkert, 2006). Also, though masculinities are well researched from a historical, gender-nationalist perspective, there is a need for linking it with local understandings and public health implications, which can only be
revealed through empirical studies. Attending to masculinities as they unfold in everyday life, we insist, yields invaluable insights for developing strategies to reduce the levels of violence in intimate relationships.

**Methodology**

The study was a part of a larger research programme that focused on men, masculinities and IPV that took place in three talukas (sub-districts) of the Bagalkot district in northern Karnataka in order to address the structural drivers of HIV (Huynh et al., 2019). A local sex worker collective provided the point of entry to the participants, FSWs and their male partners. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were initially conducted with FSWs \( (N = 17) \) to understand the relationships with their partners which then formed the basis for four FGDs \( (N = 34) \) and in-depth interviews \( (N = 30) \) with male partners of FSWs, selected by purposive and snowball sampling. Participant observation and ethnographic field notes taken over a six-month period by our team in sites, including villages, temples, market places, restaurants, agricultural fields, movie theatres, cultural events, and homes, helped us to gain an in-depth understanding of the contexts and everyday dynamics in which masculinities play out. The findings shared in the paper draw primarily on the interviews and FGDs with men and the fieldnotes from participant observations.

This study was approved by the University of Manitoba Ethics Review Board and the Institutional Ethical Review Board of St. John’s Medical College and Hospital in Karnataka. Field researchers administered informed consent in the local language (Kannada), and interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, translated to English and analysed. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity. Transcripts were initially read by three team members individually, with each identifying preliminary codes that were collectively discussed and refined to reach a consensus and to create a coding guide which was then used to code the rest of the transcripts using NVivo 12. The data within the codes were subjected to further analysis, with key themes identified and subsequently refined through discussion within the team and synthesised into findings. With the research team having a long-established relationship with the local sex worker collective, which facilitated the research project, it was possible to hold a workshop within the community where the study findings were shared to confirm that the identified themes reflected their views, experiences and interpretations – as a way to strengthen the credibility of the analysis. The findings, along with relevant ones from literature to place them in the context of larger discourses, are presented here.

Most men identified as Hindus and belonged to Scheduled castes/tribes (lower caste) or Lingayat (upper caste), and only four of them identified as Muslims. Participants ranged in age between 23 and 52 years with the mean age being at 34 years. Almost all (93%) were married. More than half of the participants (58%) had received some formal school education (ranging from 1 to 9 years of school). Some (32%) were able to continue their education further (with one having attained a university degree), while 10% identified as illiterate. The men in the study represented the rural working class with their occupations being low skilled and temporary such as drivers (29%), construction workers (22.5%), service industry workers (16%), farmers (10%), and the rest being electricians, tailors, factory workers, security guards and handloom weavers (22.5%).

**Findings**

**Ideal masculinity and body image**

The men who took part in the study subscribed to certain concepts of how masculinity is physically expressed. This was particularly illustrated during a body building show which took place in Mudhol Taluka one evening. A parking lot was transformed into an arena where contestants rippled their...
muscles under the spotlight to the cheers of about 1000 male spectators. The men would perform a routine for 30 seconds with audience cheering loudly for men with overtly masculine physique and bulging, bronzed muscles. Such shows celebrating muscled manhood were indeed quite common throughout the rural areas of north Karnataka and attracted big crowds.

As a corollary, we have the historical images of the *Pehelwan* (Indian wrestler) and a celibate yogi (ascetic). The image of the yogi, though spiritual and therefore most ideal, is also physical, because physical control was viewed as a means to steady the mind to achieve higher-order spiritual goals. Matching the yogi in moral and spiritual discipline was the *Pehelwan*, the Indian wrestler, the ultimate image of physical prowess (Alter, 1994). Such a combination of the physical and moral ideals was also referred to by the men in the study.

An ideal man will not have any bad habits. He thinks about his own family. He does not even take tobacco and have any bad habits. The person who is such can be called as an ideal man. He must be healthy, strong, good looking, and not have any bad habits. (Prasham, 36, factory labourer)

Recent ethnographic studies that have illustrated similar cultures of body building in other states of India (Roy & Das, 2014) further support the ubiquity of these ideals. Body building as a part of nation building was popularised by the Hindu nationalists through revival of the *akhadas* (rural gymnasiums) to build ideals of masculinity and inculcate loyalty to the Hindu nation (McDonald, 1999). Karnataka has been a success story for such a grassroots wooing of rural and especially marginalised castes into the Hindu stronghold (see Figures 1 and 2). The body building shows witnessed by our research team was in fact part of a publicity event organised by caste organisations with historical roots in violent retaliatory uprisings against casteism (Yadav, 1998).

The moustache is another symbol of hegemonic masculinity particularly in this region. The linkage between being a man sporting a moustache and regionalist pride has been described in situations where masculinity and pride have been challenged (Niranjana, 2000).

Moustache looks good on men; it is like the characteristic of man. If he removes it, he will be called a *chakka* [effeminate man]. People will talk badly about him. (Quamar, 30, painter)

![Figure 1. Exterior view of a local rural gymnasium in northern Karnataka. Murals depict 'ideal' masculine looks, a king in fight with a beast and lord Hanuman (Hindu god).](image-url)
The men linked disqualified masculinities to the absence of physical strength and facial hair. The aversion shown towards men who did not conform to the behaviour or aesthetics of accepted masculinity were clearly demonstrated in men’s responses to the physical ideals and gender roles. In the body building show, the negative response from the crowds even caused contestants who were not ‘up to par’ with their more muscled counterparts to slink back into the shadows. These reinforcements, praise and shame, were well embedded in the everyday lives of men. For instance, a man felt rewarded by successfully wooing his lover by proving his strength in front of his friends:

They [friends] challenged me to lift a big rock, I lifted it. She [lover] got impressed; gradually we started loving each other. (Akash, 33, weaver)

In another case, it was observed that a man was chided by his friends for shaving his moustache and ‘acting like a woman’. Calling him a chakka, they made fun of the fact that he was soft-spoken and shy. The repulsion these men expressed for chakkas echoed the opinions made during interviews:

If a man doesn’t act like a man, he will be called a chakka … acting like a woman, doing what women do, like washing clothes, dishwashing. These are not a man’s job. (Charan, 30, manual labourer)

Such terms were often deployed as mechanisms to reaffirm a man’s sense of masculinity and simultaneously denounce other men who did not conform to their gender roles. As aptly noted by Kimmel (2004, p. 186) ‘We [men] are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval’.

Media, masculinities and nationalism

The movies and the ‘man’

The macho male stereotype has been showcased and celebrated in Indian movies for a long time (Dwyer, 2010). Indian cinema was born around the time of nationalist struggle against colonial rule and, in that sense, has always had a key role in constructing Indian cultural identity and social imaginary (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013; Rao, 2007). Towards the end of the twentieth century and in the early twenty-first century, Indian movies have particularly mirrored the tensions between tradition and modernity and between the search for a homogenised Indian identity and the effects of...
neo-liberalism and globalisation that have created contrasting worlds of rich/privileged and the aspiring or underprivileged (Rao, 2007). A series of movies were produced that depicted males in ‘angry young man’ roles, fighting their way out of a world of poverty and unemployment, reflecting on a generation whose aspirations and dreams remain unfulfilled even after decades of gaining independence from colonial rule (Rao, 2007; Srivastava, 2014). Similar sentiments echo in Kimmel’s (2017) study among white American rural working-class men who expressed anger, resentment, and a feeling of ‘agrieved entitlement’ and victimisation by their government and larger social forces in that they felt cheated out of certain benefits and privileges that had been theirs and to which they felt entitled. As Kimmel (2017) notes, the anger of these White men is ‘real’ but not ‘true’ as ‘our enemy is an ideology of masculinity that we have inherited from our fathers . . . an ideology that promises unparalleled acquisition . . . ’ (Kimmel, 2017, p. 9). It is in this global context of patriarchal ideologies and hegemonic masculinities that we can understand how media portrayals of anger, dominance and violence get not only widely accepted but appreciated, particularly by the male audience, as a way of reclaiming their identity, tradition, manhood and gender entitlements within their own national, regional and local contexts.

In fact, Indian movies featuring the ‘angry young man’ and warrior Hindu male patriots had found widespread viewer identification particularly among the working-class men as it represented ‘provincial masculinity’ that resonated with them not only because of similar skin colour of the heroes (darker tones from hard labour) and use of colloquial language but also in terms of men claiming their rightful privileges through pride, dominance and violence, as necessary (Srivastava, 2014, p.43). The Indian lead male stars have thus been cast in violent, dominant and powerful roles in contrast with female leads, who are mostly cast in clichéd roles, which are soft, traditional and emphasise beauty (Ciecko, 2001). And in this sense, movies can be seen to present violent masculinities in an idolised and idealised manner in that men aspire to be in that role and to establish rigid gender boundaries and supremacy.

Insight into how particular constructs of masculinity are championed in movies was exemplified in a local screening of a movie, Vishwaroopam (Form of God) playing at the time of the study. The storyline concerns a woman intending to leave her husband for being effeminate. The mainly male audience in the movie theatre openly expressed disdain for the hero’s posturing, wrist flicking and prancing as a dance teacher at the beginning of the movie but the jeers quickly faded into enthusiastic cheers when the same man engages in violent combat. His masculinity is simultaneously affirmed and redeemed through the violence. This affirmed the typical image of masculinity in Indian movies—that is, the hero using violence as a normalised expression of love (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003).

Besides the content of the movie, the audience behaviour itself reproduced hegemonic masculinity. The predominantly male audience, as typical of filmgoers in rural India, engaged in a camaraderie of loud public expressions, inspired by the images and storyline being portrayed, thus simultaneously reflecting, endorsing and reproducing violence and dominant masculinity.

Aspirations and norms
The role models portrayed in Indian movies also fuel the aspirations, dreams and ideals of the men and women of India (Dwyer, 2010). But often they create such fantastic images of masculinity and femininity that are unattainable to most, yet desirable (Ciecko, 2001). With the liberalisation of India’s economy and the globalisation of the film industry, contemporary movies feature westernised themes, clothing, English phrases and an overall portrayal of glamour and elitism that cater largely to the tastes and consumptions of upper middle-class people, leaving the rural and working masses wanting and conflicted (Rao, 2007). Western ideals get repackaged to create new sellable ideals in a market that caters to the local as well as the global Indian movie audience (Balaji & Hughson, 2014). The market relies on the ideal of an upper middle-class man chasing power, success, money, good life and good looks, with some exceptions of more fluid masculinities (Rajan, 2006). Such modern mainstream movies may be unobtainable ‘fantasies’ for the rural working class (Rao, 2007); yet they undeniably present a constant source of inspirational images and behaviours.
The stereotypes perpetrated by media presented a dilemma in the daily lives of the working-class men in our study as they struggled with the ironies of being exposed to the ideals in the movies of fair-skinned, rich men with access to resources, and the harsh realities of belonging to the rural working class. The contemporary or ‘modern’ images of manhood, perpetuated by mass media, often threw local aesthetics of manhood into conflict, as noted by a 43-year-old tailor, Samir, ‘Nowadays [the] moustache is gone. Men who are engineers and who are employees (with well-paid jobs) remove [their] beard and moustache.’ These participants coming from the traditional wrestling culture that emphasised body building and physical traits of manhood found it hard to reconcile with the projected elite images of manhood in media and cautiously approached the effects of modernity influences – conflicted between aspiring for it while at the same time rejecting it in favour of ideals of Hindu nationalist masculinity.

While earlier masculinity was conceptualised through toiling on the land under the sun, the more modern conception focusses on men being fair-skinned, handsome, and well groomed. This was particularly observed in a barbershop in Chinchakhandi village where advertisements of hair colours and skin whitening cosmetic procedures decked the walls. The barber, Hansaraj, explained that one could judge a man’s intelligence and respectability from his physical appearance. Physical attractiveness, besides strength, became a factor for wooing women:

Women get impressed when we wear good clothes. If we wear filthy clothes, they won’t talk to us – they won’t love us … (A Man) must have a vehicle, mobile phone, wear sunglasses, and dress well. (Kulik, 28, driver)

In addition to the pressures of complying with the physical ideals of masculinity, these men also valued the image of the generous man. As pithily noted by Gagan, a motor mechanic, ‘A real man is generous with his money and spends it on drinking, his friends, his lover and family.’ In general, the idea of consumerism, or rather the ability to spend, was a common narrative during informal discussions with men in the study. It was clear that gradually a ‘modern man’ was replacing the historical ideal, with consumerism at the forefront as an after-effect of globalisation. Movies have had a big role to play in this process of transition from small-town masculinity to the idealised modern hegemonic masculinity as presented and promoted extensively in the media. As noted earlier, movies on the theme of ‘angry young man’ representing provincial or small-town masculinity in a metropolitan milieu were particularly powerful as a tool to show how working-class men – largely depicted as violent, rebellious, and daring – could make their way through the city life and achieve the aspired lifestyles of the upper middle class, thereby intertwining provincial and metropolitan spaces and masculinities (Srivastava, 2014). These influences created conflictual experiences for working-class men where, on the one hand, the media showed the possibility of local ideals of masculinities converging with larger modern masculinities while, on the other hand, such paths were exceedingly difficult to follow within the existing structural realities of their lives, a contradiction often leaving them aspiring, wanting, and in transition.

Nationalism

Indian movies, particularly regional movies, not only reinforce masculine stereotypes but also link constructions of masculinity with notions of nationalism. At the time of our field research, the movie Kranthiveera Sangolli Rayanna (Sangolli Rayanna, the Warrior) was a great hit among men in the region. It was described as ‘patriotic and very emotional movie’ and the warrior (Sangolli Rayanna) as the ‘protector of the poor’, a ‘patriot’ who ‘dedicated his life’ for the nation. Although he waged a war against the British in the 1800s, the event still resonates in the everyday lives of men. In Chikkur village, a 20-year-old man outlined his plan of entering the military service. He used the metaphor of ‘mother’ to describe India, a country that has given him ‘health, wealth, food, land and property’ and so he would be willing to risk his life to guard it.
The warrior is an ideal image of masculinity in India and again has historical religious connotations. For example, masculine Hinduism has been represented through two powerful images: the ‘Hindu soldier’ and the ‘warrior monk’ (Banerjee, 2005; Pinch, 1996). These images have been successfully utilised to imprint ideal masculinities of a martial muscular Hindu, ideals that are entrenched in nationalist and patriotic discourses (see Figures 3 and 4).

Masculinity was expressed by the local men as a sense of duty to the state in chauvinistic terms. Under the political leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), right-wing conservatism has fuelled aggressive chauvinistic attachment to the ideal of a Hindu state and sharpened anti-foreigner sentiments. This was expressed directly to the research team at a small farming community. A man who thought that one of the researchers was a terrorist stated his patriotism fiercely.

Figure 3. Statue of Shivaji, a warrior king. Mudhol town, of around 12 sq. km area, has prominently placed idols of historical leaders.

Figure 4. Statue of Sangolli Rayanna, an Indian military chief warrior from Karnataka.
claiming that he would kill anyone who he suspected would pose a threat to his country. The narrative of nationalism among these men highlights not only the male working-class chauvinism but also that the core ideas of ‘masculine Hinduism’ thrive on the sense of threat, which legitimises the use of violence.

The idealised body of the Hindu men (a body builder, soldier or gymnast), associated with masculinity as well as nationalism—with some aspiration for a polished upper-middle-class aesthetic — thus remained largely the ideal body image for men in the region. There are implications of this celebrated view of men, especially as they relate to intolerance towards ‘lesser’ men or alternate identities and to violence against women.

**The ideal woman**

Men have historically employed notion of idealised femininity to control and restrict women. We explored this in our study, looking at how men in northern Karnataka defined these ideals for the women in their lives, including wives and lovers. The intimate partners’ narratives mirror the historical symbolisation and control and indicate that men developed a deeper bond with their lovers if they displayed what they believed to be virtuous behaviour: subservience, obedience, and docility. This ideal construct of women does not differ substantially if applied to either the men’s lovers or their wives.

It is women’s responsibility to speak nicely and to listen to his stories when a man comes from outside. She has to behave gently and cook what he likes, and then no fights happen … (Charan, 30, coolie)

The ability to meet men’s needs and to fulfil all household responsibilities is viewed as necessary behaviour constituting ideal ‘womanhood’, the violation of which may result in physical punishment.

If she doesn’t take care of the children, keep the house clean, co-operate with me in sex, speak against me or not take care of my parents, then I have a reason to beat her. (Banu, 31, electrician)

When she doesn’t agree to sleep with me when I am drunk, I can beat her and when she goes against me, not listen to me, then I can beat her. (Gajanan, 33, driver)

Women have often been represented in an idolised and objectified manner in both contemporary and historically male-dominated socio-political discourses in India. The status of women during the pre-colonial and Vedic ages era was glorified in the scholarly reconstructions in order to overcome the strong criticisms by the West of the social atrocities like the sati (widow burning) and child marriage (Falk, 1998). The enforcers of these ideals, the male religious and political forces, left little room for the idea of women’s self-determination (Banerjee, 2005).

**Good woman, bad woman**

Some of the men eloquently spoke about the relationships with their lovers and how it was often more satisfying and emotional as compared to the formal relationships with their wives. But, the men also perceived their lover (a sex worker) as a woman who defiles her body for money and therefore expected her to put more effort into their relationship in comparison to their wives, to deserve him.

I feel that my lover likes me and cares for me more than my wife. You know what a wife does. A wife only gives water to wash when we come from outside, but my lover not only gives water, she goes beyond it. She cleans my legs with her hands and shows more love to me. (Samir, 43, tailor)

As a consequence, men also put in more effort into the relationship with their lovers.

I wish she is always happy with me. I want to live longer and have a good relationship with her. There is still a lot to do. Weddings of her children … I want to be called ‘father’ during the weddings. (Hamid, 52, coolie)
In some of the relationships, the lovers are accorded similar (if not higher) status as their wives. For these men, the relationships were not based solely on sexual satisfaction but also on a deep emotional love and concern:

Because of her, I am on the right path today and she poured love into my life. She is everything to me. (Rahul, 25, construction worker)

This emotional bond can be particularly understood within the historical and cultural context of India where arranged marriages have been the norm and often ill-matched couples have maintained a life-long marriage just to meet societal expectations. Yet men always have had opportunities to find love and sexual satisfaction outside of their marriage, without serious consequences, as long as they kept their 'illicit' relationships outside of the sacred domain of their home. Even with the resurgence of Hindu nationalism and with BJP making a case that Indian family structure is under attack from modernity influences, the onus nevertheless lies with women/wives to uphold social norms and traditions; and any transgression of social boundaries by them is not tolerated. On the other hand, under the garb of male power and show of masculinity, men are able to get away with discretions on their part so long they do not attempt to legitimise their relationships. Men in the study thus were found to have strong connections with their lovers to the extent they wanted to partake in their important life events and even be identified with the children. While it is not common for men to ‘claim’ children that are not born out of socially sanctioned marriages, given the rigid rules of Hinduism that emphasises sanctity of marriage, there is also a societal pressure on men to procreate and extend family lineage, preferably within marriage but even outside as it gets viewed as proof of masculinity.

However, even with emotional ties, men have been socially ingrained to view these women lovers in a particular light that makes them exotic and demeaning at the same time and that enables the application of different set of rules in their relationship with these women. In our study, we found that despite the deep attachment with their lovers, the men perceived the women in sex work as having higher sexual needs, which directly challenged their image of ideal women. The narrative of their lovers as ‘sexually deviant’ was commonly invoked:

If men have sexual desires, [these] women have them three times more. (Akash, 33, handloom weaver)

Paradoxically, the stereotype of the sexually voracious woman justified men’s sexual exploitation and abuse of the sex workers and invoked pressure among men to prove their masculinity by satisfying the women’s perceived sexual appetites:

I want to have sex with her, to satisfy her so that she does not feel like seeing another person. I do not want her to see another person (Gagan, 48, motor mechanic).

Men must work, earn money … must make the woman[lover] sexually satisfied, otherwise she will find another man to fulfil that need. Men have a very important role to play. (Ijay, 35, hotel server)

This could be read to reflect the men’s deep attachment to their lovers or as a way to maintain control over the women. Some of the men implied that it was always the woman who manipulated and captivated them:

She does all those things, uses all techniques to make us love her more and fall in love with her. That will force us to have more love for lovers than for wives, and we become interested to take her outside, provide everything she asks for. Feelings of having enjoyment with our lovers will develop. (Samir, 43, tailor)

This illustrates the kinds of contradictions at play in the relationships of these men with their sex worker lovers. While the relationship is based on an emotional bond, men would still question the character of these women and compare with the image of ideal womanhood in their minds. The findings reflect an ambivalent form of stigma and discrimination that gets directed at women who sell sex. Many of the families of the men including their wives knew about their relationship with the sex workers, yet it never got acknowledged as long as the two domains remained separate.
The men led dual lives; one, with a respectable and socially acceptable wife and another secretive with the lover in a taboo, albeit sometimes a more emotionally satisfying relationship. The patriarchal view works here to subjugate women as the conflicted object of men’s desire, by classifying them into two opposing categories: the respectable and legitimate versus the morally suspect. The wife, the good and chaste woman, remains within the protection of the husband and family, unavailable for sexual adventures, while the lover, the hypersexual deviant woman, is cast as the social pariah.

The objectification of women is particularly evidenced in the movies, which justify, reiterate and reinforce the patriarchal view of the ideal women as lacking sexual expression, self-effacing, and virginal (Ciecko, 2001; Nandy, 1981). For long, Indian movies have portrayed contrasting images of women with the female lead being shown as the modest, traditional, sacrificing, non-confrontational and, hence, clearly desirable as a wife, and the ‘vamp’ woman shown as bold, demanding, immodest and tempting but dangerous in that she would take the hero on a wrong path (Derné, 2002). Indian audiences have regularly shown disdain for the vamp woman to the extent that actresses playing such roles have often been harassed by film magazines and fundamentalist groups with comparisons drawn to Western singers like Madonna and Samantha Fox and with the message that these actresses had crossed the limits of decency (Derné, 2012). Scholars like Connell (1998, 2013) have argued that when global forces challenge male power and attempt to change the established local patriarchy, men tend to fall back on traditions to reaffirm local gender hierarchies and boundaries. With globalisation and wide circulation of media images of western masculinity and femininity, men feel conflicted in that they get attracted to the new forms of male dominance but at the same time fear loss of control with new possibilities for women and, in the process, emphasise femininity to maintain traditional order of men’s dominance over women (Connell, 1998). Although in recent years, with women’s movement gaining momentum, many filmmakers (often women) have produced movies that contest traditional notions of sexuality and ‘brought women from the margins to the centre of their texts’, yet Indian media continues to portray a patriarchal image of female sexuality which works to the benefit of hegemonic masculinity and with even many women subscribing to the ideology (Datta, 2000, p.73). As argued by Connell (2013),

[Women] may find the hegemonic pattern more familiar and manageable. There is likely to be a kind of “fit” between hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. What it does imply is the maintenance of practices that institutionalize men’s dominance over women. (Connell, 2013, p. 185)

To a large extent then the negative portrayals of women in Indian movies work for both men and (some) women in that it helps maintain the traditional sense of order and control by outlining the socially approved qualities of ‘good’ woman, who gets idealised, and against which other women get measured.

Idealisation often has complications for the women by contradicting the existing realities of her modern life. Here, the daily reality is that many of these women engage in sex work as a means of livelihood, to support themselves and their entire families. Many of them are Devadasis, ritually dedicated to serve the goddess Yellamma, in a historical cultural practice that serves the sexual interests of the upper caste men (Khan et al., 2018). Though their position can be characterised as gendered exploitation, these women traditionally wielded considerable social influence given their ritualistic power and relations with powerful men. The changes in social, political and legal framework in modern India reversed the tide of power and made them increasingly marginalised and stigmatised (Khan et. al., 2018; O’Neil, et al., 2004; Orchard, 2007).

The fall from grace of the Devadasis coincides with the changes in the moral ideals that denigrated women in sex work as deserving less respect. According to this view, as the narratives below indicate, these women are thought of as being under the control of their intimate partners:

She [Devadasi] is my keep and she is supposed to listen to me. We rule over them by power - we don’t bend (listen or respect) to her. That’s why we have more value in the society. (Lakhan, 28, driver)

Anyone who becomes intimate partners and lover has the right to beat Devadasi. (Prasham, 36, factory labourer)
The men thus justified violence against the *Devadasi* sex workers and assumed their unconditional silence. They were also well aware that these women were less likely to report the beatings, let alone get support from the community or authorities, who are part of the structure that delegitimises her:

See, my lover makes adjustments and tolerates it even if I beat her. But I know that I will be punished if I commit violence against women outside (Kiranmay, 24, daily wage labourer/farmer)

Some of the men genuinely wanted to marry a *Devadasi*; but tradition generally forbids *Devadasi* to marry. One man, a son of a *Devadasi*, despite being in a relationship with his *Devadasi* lover since high school, married another woman to ensure his mother was cared for and continues to maintain a loving relationship with his *Devadasi*. The women struggle to find their own space within a largely masculine political economy which is rapidly replacing cultural norms with western ideals without accounting for traditions (Rao, 1999). The narratives bring out the contradictions in the men’s relationship with their lovers, whom they idealise and hold unrealistic expectations towards, yet deny these women the status and respect as a legitimate partner. This lack of legitimacy, social status and stability leaves these female sex workers in a precarious position and dependant on their partner with less control over their lives. This in particular makes them highly vulnerable to HIV as they are not in a position to negotiate safer sex (which might be viewed as mistrust in an already fragile relationship) while, at the same time, men are permitted to have relations outside. With neither family nor social legitimacy to support their relationship, these female sex workers remain quite vulnerable to a host of physical and mental illnesses when violence and control by partners becomes common and accepted.

Violence as a tool to subjugate women is prevalent not only in the relationships of men with sex workers but also in the wider society where the study was conducted.

It’s not a big deal. It is very common for a man [in the community] to beat a woman when he is angry. (Kulik, 28, driver)

[Women are] like donkeys [they need to] get beaten [to] be convinced. Men can understand words, but donkeys cannot understand words. It needs to be hit. (Durgappa, 28, driver)

If we don’t beat them, the mistakes done by women will become visible and then the public will talk about me and question my manhood. (Kiranmay, 24, daily wage labourer/farmer)

The violent punishment of women is highly instrumental in maintaining women’s subordination in a patriarchal society. Violence itself is firmly entrenched in men’s quest to secure their socially dominant position.

**Violence and the Law**

The men’s acceptance of violence in their relationships with women was also displayed in their perception of the laws governing violence in the domestic sphere, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), which seeks to address the complex social causes and effects of domestic violence. Instead of viewing the law as protecting human rights, many men in the study saw it as a nuisance primarily because it absolves women from ‘instigating’ violence and the responsibility to keep the family together, and rather punishes men. Most men, as such, believed in the laws protecting women from violence but nevertheless viewed women as responsible for instigating violence and thereby deserving the consequence.

If the wife co-operates with the husband and understands him and adjusts with him, then men will not drink and they begin to take care and think of the family. (Abra, 28, bank peon)

See, being a woman, she must respect men. She must cover her head with the saree when my uncle comes- that is a way of respecting. If she doesn’t do that and when she doesn’t cook properly, when she doesn’t take care of the children, she deserves to be beaten up. (Kiranmay, 24, daily wage labourer/farmer)
Thus, the solution for mitigating violence, as offered by the intimate partners, lay with women, not the law. If women were good, beautiful and virtuous then violence is averted. Instead of appealing to men on ethical and moral grounds the law evoked fear, for it threatened their sense of masculinity, and their position of social dominance. Moreover, they felt that the law unfairly discriminated against them.

We cannot say anything to women because in our society, there are more laws to protect women. By mistake, if we say something and beat them, we will be taken to the police station. (Akash, 33, handloom weaver)

I am scared of laws against beating women. Because the laws are very strict. What if I got arrested and put in jail? (Kulik, 28, driver)

Men in the study clearly believed that the cause of violence was the women’s behaviour and thus the law appeared to have little effect in changing men’s attitudes and remains highly contested in Indian society (Ghosh & Choudhuri, 2011). On the one hand, it has been lauded for attempting to mitigate the patriarchal biases and critical gaps of the older laws; yet concerns have been raised by others for challenging the set boundaries for women’s behaviour, such as by condoning women in live-in relationships, thereby sanctioning it and honouring ‘sinful’ women. This highlights that for laws to deliver social change they need to be buffered by societal level action on the norms and ideologies (i.e. hegemonic masculinities) that perpetuate violence against women.

Discussion and implications

As engaging men as change agents in preventing violence against women is gaining widespread acceptance worldwide, this study looked at IPV from the perspective of men to gain an understanding of what perpetuates and legitimises violent behaviours in society and particularly within the sex work industry. The study findings provide valuable insights about the larger historical patriarchal contexts within which these men are located and how these contexts shape their perspectives on intimate relationships. Men in the study were clearly guided by traditionalist notions of ideal manhood and womanhood, rooted in nationalist patriarchal ideologies that often collided with the harsh realities of their everyday lives as well as those of women, causing tensions and violence in their relationships.

Studies have shown clear association of lifetime IPV with high incidence of HIV, particularly in the case of marginalised groups like FSWs, with much of IPV experiences arising primarily from gender inequity and power imbalance in intimate relationships (Argento et al., 2014; Jewkes, et al., 2015). When targeting IPV as a structural driver of HIV, we insist that there is a need to see the violent man not as ‘perpetrator’ and therefore a problem to be fixed but as a product of various convergent discourses and practices that shape his thoughts and behaviours. As found in our study, it is often these contextual factors and social norms that govern accepted and revered local masculinities and thus need to be addressed for an effective reduction in IPV. Critical media literacy and advocacy that seek to re-frame dominant media discourses around violence and gender can be used as an effective strategy in this direction. Research has demonstrated how mainstream media is a powerful medium for creation, maintenance and reinforcement of local cultural norms and how consistent exposure to such media themes lead viewers to adopt these narrow hierarchical gender stereotypes and often encourage high-risk behaviours (Dill-Shackleford, et al., 2015; Giaccardi, et al., 2016; Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013; Savage, et al., 2017). As found in our study as well as others’ (George, 2006; Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013), Indian films notably perpetuate hegemonic masculinity by idolising physical prowess of men and their domination over women, and the effects of such gendered media representations are particularly pronounced on young men who have grown up in an otherwise sex-segregated society and thus quick to adopt gendered beliefs as shown in media. However, such evidence also provide hope that the same media can be used to challenge dominant gender norms, redefine masculinity and engage men in addressing violence against women in society.
The use of entertainment media as a powerful tool for change has been recognised for years and effective health and social campaign messages have been imparted with varying degrees of success. However, in recent times, communication scholars (Dutta & Basnyat, 2008; Khan, 2014) have emphasised the need to design health and social interventions that go beyond specific short-term goals (e.g. promoting family planning or spreading awareness about HIV) to critically assess and combat the embedded gender hierarchies that might inadvertently be present in media messages and may promote notions of hegemonic masculinity. While there have been only a few studies that have evaluated the impact of public health campaigns against IPV, they do indicate that these interventions have had limited success in significantly changing attitudes of men partly because of the traditional way of educating the audience who were quick to react to overt manipulation (Dill-Shackelford, et al., 2015; Keller, Wilkinson, & Otjen, 2010). For long-term sustained gender equity and to address violence against women, specifically against FSWs who are particularly vulnerable, we need to use entertainment media in a way that not only challenges traditional gender norms by showcasing women’s empowerment but also by providing alternate models of masculinity that resonate with local men, their cultures and historical contexts (Lapsansky & Chatterjee, 2013). Planned media interventions can be a great tool to spark critical dialogues and thinking among men and women about social issues like IPV as well as to question traditionally accepted gender norms.

Besides media interventions, opportunities for critical dialogues and consciousness raising can be offered through formation of collectives and forums led by peer leaders, where women and men are able to discuss their relationship challenges, the consequences of violence in their lives, including vulnerability to HIV/STI and other mental/physical health issues, and attempt to understand and challenge structural disparities that perpetuate violence and abuse in society which then gets translated in their intimate relationships. In fact, our partner organisation in the region (Karnataka Health Promotion Trust), informed by the study findings, has already initiated a programme for FSWs and their intimate partners that includes group reflection sessions where participants are able to share their thoughts and figure out solutions to common problems, thereby taking a more collective approach to combating violence. Some of these interventions include individual and couple counseling, crisis management and referrals to health services, and community awareness around violence and the law. These programmes could be complimented with entertainment media interventions starting from local levels (like theatres, street plays, local radio and television programmes) that show changing images of masculinity and femininity within local contexts. We also suggest increased focus on legal literacy with the help of forums and dialogue that interpret the spirit of laws governing domestic violence. Bringing about sensitivity towards violence and gender, and familiarisation with the protectionist laws by both men and women maybe the first step in this process.

**Limitations of the study**

Our study was conducted among a select group of male partners of FSWs (complimented with discussions with FSWs) who were recruited with the help of a local sex worker collective. To that extent, it is possible that despite efforts we may not have had access to diverse perspectives of men, although we have tried to mitigate this by grounding the findings in observational field notes taken in venues and cultural spaces that were inhabited by men in general as well as by an extensive analysis of media and academic literature to bring in the varied viewpoints. Furthermore, the study was conducted in a specific region (peri-urban areas) of Karnataka and, therefore, the findings should be cautiously extended to other settings.

**Conclusion**

This paper draws on the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the way it operates within particular historical, cultural and local contexts to help us understand how male dominance and violence, as a form of discipline, make sex workers vulnerable to IPV, thereby increasing their risk of contracting...
HIV/STIs in intimate relationships. The study showed that while men used violence to dominate in their relationships with their wives and lovers, the latter were viewed as more sexually voracious and demanding, which ran contrary to the projected ideals of good women, and thereby justified their abuse and exploitation in society and in intimate relationships. This points to the larger need for a sustained change in the prevailing patriarchal norms and attitudes particularly as they relate to IPV – and this can only happen through consistent and sustained efforts at gender equity. Given that meanings of masculinity and gender roles take shape and evolve within historical, economic and cultural contexts, it is of paramount importance to locate and interrogate them in order to make violence against women, whether in private or public sphere, unacceptable. Engaging women and men on an equal standing in this fight against IPV and HIV is essential for any real, sustained change in society.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the support we received from the Chaitanya AIDS Tedegattuva Mahila Sangha in gaining access to our research participants and thank all the participants for their active participation in the study. We would also like to thank Srikanthamurthy, Gautam Sudhakar and Priya Pillai for their initial work on this project. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the UK Department of International Development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The project was funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) [grant number PHGHHD7610] as part of STRIVE, an eight-year programme of research and action devoted to tackling the structural drivers of HIV (http://STRIVE.lshtm.ac.uk/).

References


