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Rebuilding the self: resilience and protective factors among women experiencing intimate partner violence

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has traditionally concentrated on harm, risk and psychological distress, while comparatively less attention has been given to the conditions through which women sustain agency, safety and well-being following violence. This critical review examines resilience among adult women exposed to IPV, with particular attention to gendered power, relational resources, economic conditions, family and marriage, and institutional responses. Rather than treating resilience as an individual capacity, the review interprets it as a dynamic process shaped by the availability, accessibility and cultural meaning of resources. The literature indicates that social support, meaningful work, economic autonomy, spirituality, supportive relationships with children and opportunities to reconstruct identity can facilitate recovery. At the same time, family pressure, economic dependence, stigma, coercive control and inadequate institutional responses may constrain these resources. Evidence from India is especially important because marriage, kinship, family expectations and material dependence can influence both exposure to violence and the possibilities available for responding to it. The review argues for a gender-responsive understanding of resilience that recognizes resistance and survival while locating recovery within broader social and structural conditions.

Keywords: intimate partner violence, resilience, women, gender, agency, India

1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is commonly discussed through the consequences it produces: physical injury, psychological distress, disruption of relationships, economic insecurity and restrictions on everyday life. This emphasis is necessary, but it leaves another question comparatively underdeveloped: how do some women sustain a sense of self, mobilize resources and rebuild their lives while living with, or after experiencing, violence? Research on resilience has increasingly addressed this question.

However, the concept becomes problematic when resilience is treated as an internal quality that women are expected to possess irrespective of the circumstances surrounding them. A woman may demonstrate considerable psychological strength and still be unable to secure safety when she lacks income, housing, supportive family members or effective institutional protection.

This distinction is particularly important in IPV because violence is not simply an adverse event occurring independently of social relationships. It is frequently embedded in patterns of coercion, dependency and unequal power. Stark (2007) conceptualized coercive control as a pattern through which an abusive partner restricts autonomy and everyday freedom. Such control can affect employment, friendships, mobility, finances, communication and access to services. Consequently, the resources available for recovery cannot be separated from the social organization of intimate relationships. Resilience, in this context, is better understood as a process through which women negotiate constrained choices and use available personal, relational and institutional resources to preserve or reconstruct agency.

The gendered character of IPV also requires attention to the social meanings attached to women's relationships, roles and responsibilities. Violence within intimate relationships can be normalized through expectations concerning obedience, marriage, motherhood, family reputation and women's responsibility for maintaining household stability. These expectations may influence whether violence is named, disclosed or challenged. They can also shape the resources women can access after violence occurs. A supportive family, for example, may provide accommodation and financial assistance, while the same family may pressure a woman to remain in the marriage. Resilience therefore cannot be understood simply by counting the number of social supports available to a woman. The meaning and consequences of those relationships must also be examined.

The Indian context makes this relational and structural perspective particularly important. Evidence from the fifth National Family Health Survey indicates that help-seeking following IPV remains limited. Ghoshal et al. (2024) analysed NFHS-5 data from 72,320 women aged 18–49 years who had experienced IPV and found that only 14.2% of women experiencing physical and/or sexual IPV had sought any form of help. Among women who sought assistance, informal support was substantially more common than formal help, with approximately three-fifths approaching their natal families. These findings demonstrate that recovery is often negotiated through family and community relationships rather than through formal institutions alone.

Research specifically examining resilience among Indian women further illustrates this complexity. Shanthakumari et al. (2014) interviewed 16 Indian women who had experienced IPV and identified support from women, men and family; personal attributes; dignity and work; being strong for children; and faith as important elements in women's resilience. These findings suggest that resilience is connected simultaneously to internal resources, relationships, meaningful activity and social identity.

The present review therefore asks a broader question than which factors are associated with high resilience scores. It examines how women experience and construct resilience within gendered social environments and how the availability or absence of material and relational resources shapes this process. Particular attention is given to agency, resistance, social support, economic autonomy, family and marriage, and institutional responses. The purpose is not to romanticize survival or imply that women are responsible for

overcoming structural violence. Rather, it is to recognize women's capacities while simultaneously identifying the conditions that make those capacities more or less actionable.

2. Approach to the Review

This article presents a critical narrative review of literature concerning resilience and recovery among adult women who have experienced IPV. It is not presented as a PRISMA systematic review and does not claim exhaustive retrieval of all available studies. Literature was identified through searches of major health and social-science databases and through examination of references and related publications in relevant studies. Search concepts included combinations of terms relating to intimate partner violence, domestic violence, resilience, recovery, coping, agency, empowerment, self-compassion, social support, economic resources and India.

Priority was given to peer-reviewed empirical research and influential conceptual scholarship addressing resilience as a psychological, relational or socioecological process. Studies involving adult women experiencing violence within intimate relationships were emphasized. Research concerning married, cohabiting, dating and other intimate relationships was considered where findings were relevant to the processes of recovery and resilience. Literature focused exclusively on children was not included in the substantive synthesis.

The purpose of the approach is interpretive rather than numerical aggregation. The literature was examined for recurring explanations of why recovery becomes possible or constrained. Particular attention was paid to whether a factor operated primarily at an individual, relational, community or structural level and whether it expanded or restricted women's practical agency. This approach also allows evidence from India to be considered alongside international research without assuming that concepts developed in one cultural setting operate identically elsewhere.

Gendered Constructions of IPV and Resilience

A gendered analysis begins with recognition that IPV occurs within social arrangements in which power is unequally distributed. The problem with describing resilience only as successful adaptation is that adaptation can occur under conditions that remain unsafe. A woman may learn to anticipate a partner's behaviour, avoid situations that trigger violence, protect children, manage household finances covertly or maintain employment despite interference. These behaviours may be essential survival strategies, but describing them simply as resilience can obscure the coercive environment that makes such adaptation necessary.

The concept of coercive control is particularly useful here because it shifts attention from isolated incidents to the cumulative restriction of autonomy. Stark (2007) argues that abuse may involve patterns of intimidation, isolation, deprivation and control that progressively reduce a woman's freedom. Within such circumstances, resilience cannot be reduced to emotional adjustment. It also involves the capacity to negotiate an environment in which choices may be restricted by another person's behaviour.

Research with women survivors supports this broader understanding. Shanthakumari et al. (2014), for example, found that Indian women identified supportive social relationships, personal attributes, dignity, work, children and faith as resources that helped them maintain or regain resilience. The significance of

these findings lies in their multidimensional character. Resilience was neither exclusively psychological nor exclusively social. It was constructed through the interaction between women's own capacities and the relationships and activities that gave those capacities meaning.

Howell et al. (2018) similarly demonstrated the importance of resources outside the individual. Their study of 112 women exposed to physical, psychological and/or sexual IPV found that greater social support and spirituality, as well as fewer violent relationships, predicted higher resilience after demographic characteristics and circumstances of violence were taken into account. The final model accounted for 36.5% of the adjusted variance in resilience. The findings are important because they identify potentially modifiable resources while also showing that resilience is connected to the woman's social and relational environment.

A socioecological interpretation therefore provides a more appropriate framework than a purely individual model. Ungar (2011) conceptualized resilience as emerging from interactions between individuals and their social ecologies. In IPV research, this means asking whether women can actually obtain resources that are meaningful and usable within their circumstances. A service may formally exist but remain inaccessible because of cost, distance, stigma or lack of privacy. A family may be emotionally close but simultaneously insist that a woman preserve her marriage. Employment may provide income but become a target of partner control.

The presence of a resource is consequently not equivalent to its practical availability. This distinction is central to a gender-sensitive understanding of resilience.

Agency and Resistance

Agency is central to understanding resilience without reducing recovery to individual responsibility. IPV can progressively narrow the range of choices available to women. Coercive control may affect where a woman goes, whom she contacts, what money she can use and whether she can make decisions independently (Stark, 2007). Under such circumstances, agency may be expressed through small and cumulative decisions rather than through a single act of leaving.

Maintaining employment, protecting a child, preserving a friendship, saving money, seeking information, refusing to internalize blame or planning for future safety can all constitute meaningful exercises of agency. These behaviours may appear ordinary when viewed outside the context of abuse, but their significance changes when a woman's autonomy is actively being restricted.

Research on resilience and recovery also challenges the assumption that leaving an abusive relationship is the only marker of successful recovery. Heywood et al. (2019), in their qualitative examination of 'thrivership', described recovery in terms of changes in self-worth, identity, relationships, safety and future orientation. The authors' model emphasizes that movement beyond surviving involves both personal transformation and the social conditions necessary for that transformation.

Mantler et al. (2022) similarly found that resilience among rural women experiencing IPV was cultivated through personal changes as well as environmental conditions. Their qualitative study included 14 women and 12 shelter staff and found that women described hope, integrity, determination and mental resistance as aspects of resilience, while unhelpful services and environmental barriers could undermine it.

These findings suggest that resilience is not a linear progression from victimization to recovery. Women may move between dependence and autonomy, connection and withdrawal, or safety and renewed risk as circumstances change. A woman who remains in a relationship because immediate separation would increase danger should not automatically be interpreted as lacking agency. Her decision may represent a strategic response to a constrained environment.

This distinction is particularly relevant within India, where marriage may be closely connected with housing, financial security, childrearing and social identity. The consequences of leaving may therefore extend beyond the intimate relationship itself. Agency becomes meaningful when women possess resources through which decisions can be enacted.

Social and Relational Resources

Social support is one of the most consistently identified resources associated with resilience following IPV. Support can provide emotional validation, practical assistance, information, temporary accommodation, childcare and assistance in navigating services. Howell et al. (2018) identified social support as a significant predictor of resilience among women exposed to IPV.

However, the important issue is not simply whether women have social networks. The quality, reliability and safety of those networks determine whether they expand women's choices. Ahmad et al. (2013), studying South Asian immigrant women who had survived partner violence, found that recovery involved individual abilities, social support and professional assistance, alongside changes in women's social networks. These findings demonstrate that social relationships may be actively reconstructed during recovery.

The family occupies a particularly complicated position in this process. Indian women may receive accommodation, financial assistance, emotional support and childcare from natal family members. The NFHS-5 analysis by Ghoshal et al. (2024) found that informal help was overwhelmingly more common than formal help among women who sought assistance, with natal families representing a major source of support.

At the same time, family cannot automatically be classified as protective. Expectations surrounding marriage, family reputation and children's futures may encourage women to remain in relationships despite violence. A family may therefore function simultaneously as a source of refuge and a mechanism through which gendered expectations are maintained.

This contradiction is particularly important for gender scholarship because it prevents a simplistic distinction between supportive and unsupportive environments. The same social institution may protect a woman materially while constraining her decisions relationally. The meaning of support must therefore be assessed in relation to women's autonomy and safety.

Children can also occupy an ambivalent position. Women may derive motivation, meaning and future orientation from protecting children, while responsibility for children may make separation more difficult because of concerns about housing, schooling, custody and financial security. Shanthakumari et al. (2014) found that being strong for children was one of the themes associated with resilience among Indian women.

Children should therefore not be treated simply as a protective factor. Their presence can simultaneously strengthen women's motivation and increase the practical consequences of decisions about leaving or seeking help.

Economic and Material Conditions

Economic resources are central to resilience because they influence whether psychological and relational agency can be translated into action. Financial dependence may restrict a woman's ability to leave, relocate, obtain legal assistance or maintain an independent household. Conversely, employment, education and control over financial resources can expand practical choices.

Economic autonomy should therefore be understood not merely as an economic outcome but as a dimension of agency. It changes the range of decisions that women can realistically make.

The importance of material resources is particularly visible in research involving South Asian women. Sabri et al. (2018), in qualitative research with South Asian immigrant survivors, found that IPV was shaped by multiple factors including gender-role expectations, family honour, arranged-marriage systems, economic concerns and fear of losing children. Protective resources included supportive relationships, religion, safety strategies, education and empowerment.

Although this research was conducted among South Asian immigrant women in the United States, its findings are relevant to understanding how cultural and material conditions may interact. The point is not that all South Asian women experience marriage or family in the same manner. Rather, it illustrates how gender norms become consequential when they intersect with dependence, migration, social isolation and limited access to services.

Employment and education may similarly increase access to resources, but neither should be regarded as automatically protective. An abusive partner may attempt to interfere with employment, control earnings or restrict mobility. Economic empowerment therefore needs to be accompanied by safety planning and recognition of coercive control.

Economic support programmes can nevertheless make important contributions when they provide women with meaningful access to income, employment, financial knowledge, independent accounts and housing. Such interventions should be understood as components of recovery rather than optional additions to psychological treatment.

Family, Marriage and Indian Gender Norms

Marriage occupies a particularly important position in the Indian social context. It can provide belonging, material security and social recognition, but it can also create expectations of endurance and adjustment that shape responses to violence.

The significance of family and marriage is evident in Indian help-seeking data. Ghoshal et al. (2024) found that approximately 95% of women who sought help following IPV sought informal assistance, while formal help was much less common. Among formal sources, the police were the most frequently approached.

This pattern is important because it demonstrates that women's recovery is often negotiated through informal institutions before formal services are involved. Consequently, interventions that focus exclusively on police, hospitals or specialist services may fail to engage with the actual pathways through which women seek assistance.

Gender norms can operate through everyday expectations rather than explicit prohibitions. Women may be expected to maintain household harmony, care for children, tolerate marital difficulties and protect family reputation. Such expectations influence whether abuse is recognized as violence, whether disclosure is considered legitimate and whether separation is socially acceptable.

Yet women do not simply absorb these norms. They interpret, negotiate and sometimes resist them. A gender-sensitive account must therefore hold constraint and agency together rather than portraying women as either passive victims or completely autonomous actors.

The existing literature also demonstrates that relationship status should not be treated as a simple indicator of resilience. Married women may face obligations associated with children, shared property, in-laws and marital continuity. Women experiencing dating or cohabiting violence may encounter different forms of stigma, uncertainty about social recognition of the relationship and different support structures.

The relevant question is therefore not whether married or unmarried women are more resilient. It is how different relationship arrangements alter access to resources, safety and decision-making power.

Institutional Responses

Institutional responses can either strengthen or undermine resilience. Health professionals, police, courts, shelters, counsellors and community organizations may provide safety, information and material assistance. Conversely, disbelief, delays, lack of confidentiality, repeated retelling of traumatic experiences or insensitive responses can reinforce feelings of powerlessness.

The low level of formal help-seeking identified in NFHS-5 data suggests that accessibility and trust remain significant concerns in India (Ghoshal et al., 2024).

The institutional environment should consequently be understood as part of the ecology of resilience. Effective services require more than formal availability. They need to be experienced by women as safe, respectful, confidential and practically useful.

The legal framework is also relevant. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 recognizes multiple forms of domestic violence and provides mechanisms relating to protection, residence and monetary relief. However, the existence of legislation does not guarantee that women can access its provisions. Legal awareness, economic resources, institutional responsiveness and family circumstances all affect whether formal rights become meaningful in practice.

Psychological interventions can contribute to recovery when they are not detached from these realities. Li et al. (2024), for example, conducted a pilot randomized controlled trial involving 50 Chinese immigrant women who had experienced IPV in the preceding year. The intervention combined self-compassion, health and empowerment components. A significant group-by-time interaction was found for self-judgment, while

other outcomes showed trends rather than statistically significant differences. The authors concluded that a fully powered trial was necessary.

This study is therefore better interpreted as preliminary evidence that self-compassion and empowerment may be useful components of intervention rather than evidence of established efficacy. The distinction matters because psychological interventions cannot substitute for safety, housing, income and institutional protection.

Reframing Resilience

The literature supports a shift from asking whether a woman is resilient to asking what makes resilience possible, for whom, and under what conditions.

This reframing avoids two opposite errors. The first is deficit-oriented thinking, in which survivors are defined primarily through symptoms and impairment. The second is the romanticization of resilience, in which endurance becomes evidence that structural conditions are unimportant.

A gender-responsive framework must recognize strengths without making survival a moral obligation.

Resilience can be conceptualized across four interconnected domains.

The first is personal agency, including self-worth, emotional regulation, future orientation and decision-making. The second is relational support, including family, friends, children, peers and trusted professionals. The third is material security, including income, housing, education, employment and access to financial resources. The fourth is institutional and social recognition, including safety, legal protection, responsive services and social environments in which women's experiences of violence are believed.

These domains interact. A woman may possess strong psychological resources but lack housing. Another may have substantial family support but face intense pressure to remain married. A third may have employment but experience financial control by her partner. Resilience therefore emerges from the relationship between personal capacities and the environments in which those capacities are exercised.

Self-compassion may be relevant within the personal domain because IPV frequently involves shame, self-blame and attacks on self-worth. Yet self-compassion should not be presented as a substitute for social change. The Li et al., (2024) trial demonstrates the potential value of targeting self-judgment while also illustrating the preliminary nature of current intervention evidence.

Similarly, social support cannot fully compensate for economic deprivation or institutional failure. A supportive friend may provide emotional assistance, but cannot necessarily provide long-term housing or legal protection. A family may offer temporary accommodation but may also insist on reconciliation.

Resilience should therefore be understood as a relational achievement rather than solely an individual attribute.

This reframing also changes the meaning of recovery. Recovery is not necessarily the disappearance of psychological symptoms, nor does it require forgiveness, reconciliation or a return to a previous identity. It

may involve establishing safety, developing economic independence, rebuilding relationships, recovering dignity, redefining motherhood or partnership, or creating a future less organized around the perpetrator's control.

For some women, recovery may occur while contact with the abusive partner continues because immediate separation is unsafe or materially impossible. Such circumstances should not automatically be interpreted as failures of resilience.

3. Research Gaps

Several limitations remain within the existing literature.

First, much resilience research has been conducted outside India. Indian qualitative work has provided valuable insight, but evidence remains relatively limited and frequently comes from small or localized samples. Shanthakumari et al. (2014), for example, provided important qualitative evidence from 16 Indian women, but their participants were recruited in a specific clinical context involving husbands receiving treatment for alcohol problems. Such findings cannot automatically be generalized to all Indian women experiencing IPV.

Second, resilience is often measured as an individual psychological construct without simultaneous assessment of access to material and institutional resources. This creates a conceptual imbalance: women may be described as resilient even when the structural conditions surrounding them remain unchanged.

Third, family and community support are frequently characterized as protective without sufficient attention to their contradictory functions. Research with South Asian women demonstrates that family honour, gender-role expectations and marriage-related norms can both shape exposure to violence and influence women's decisions about help-seeking and recovery (Sabri et al., 2018).

Fourth, marital status is often treated as a demographic variable rather than a social context. Future research should investigate how marriage, cohabitation and dating relationships influence access to economic resources, family support, social legitimacy and institutional protection.

Fifth, longitudinal research is needed. Resilience may change across phases of violence, separation, legal proceedings, economic transition and longer-term recovery. Cross-sectional designs cannot adequately capture these transitions.

Finally, intersectional research should examine how caste, class, disability, age, rurality, migration and other social positions shape access to protective resources. Intersectionality should not be reduced to adding demographic categories to statistical models. It requires examining how social positions interact with institutions and relationships to produce different possibilities for action.

4. Implications

The review has several implications for research, practice and policy.

First, resilience-oriented interventions should assess women's safety and material circumstances before emphasizing individual coping. Psychological services should, where possible, be connected with legal assistance, housing, economic resources and community support.

Second, practitioners should interpret women's decisions within the circumstances in which those decisions are made. Leaving an abusive relationship may be an important safety strategy, but immediate separation may not always be feasible or safe.

Third, family-inclusive approaches require caution. Family members may be crucial sources of assistance, but interventions should not assume that reconciliation or marital continuity is inherently beneficial. Support should be oriented toward women's safety and autonomy.

Fourth, economic empowerment should be incorporated into recovery planning. Access to income, employment, financial literacy and independent financial resources can increase the feasibility of safety decisions.

Fifth, institutional services should be evaluated not simply by their existence but by whether women experience them as accessible, respectful, confidential and useful. The low level of formal help-seeking evident in NFHS-5 data suggests that institutional accessibility remains a substantial issue in India (Ghoshal et al., 2024).

Finally, community-level interventions deserve greater attention. Women's organizations, self-help groups, community networks and locally accessible services may create social and economic resources that formal institutions alone cannot provide. Such interventions should, however, challenge victim-blaming and gender norms that normalize violence rather than simply encouraging women to tolerate adversity more effectively.

5. Conclusion

Resilience among women experiencing IPV is best understood not as evidence that violence has been overcome through individual strength, but as a process through which women negotiate survival, safety, identity and future possibilities within unequal social conditions.

The literature identifies social support, meaningful work, economic autonomy, spirituality, children's well-being, self-worth and responsive services as important resources. Yet the same social environments can constrain recovery through economic dependence, family pressure, stigma, coercive control and inadequate institutional responses.

A gender-sensitive understanding of resilience therefore requires attention to both agency and structure. Women are not merely recipients of protection; they actively interpret their circumstances, make decisions and develop strategies for survival and rebuilding. At the same time, those strategies are shaped by the resources that families, communities, economies and institutions make available.

The Indian context makes this perspective particularly important because marriage and family remain significant social institutions through which both support and constraint are organized. Future scholarship

should move beyond asking whether women are resilient and instead examine the social conditions under which resilience becomes possible, sustainable and meaningful.

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