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Why Abortion Opinion Can't Be Linear: A Bordieuan Reading of Practice

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When a headline last September declared¹, “**72 per cent Indians in favour of abortion: IDF survey**”, one’s instinctive reaction was disbelief. Having grown up in North India, the idea that a majority supports abortion felt far removed from lived reality. For many, especially those assigned female at birth, the body is not just personal - it is persistently public. Surveillance, control, and shame often accompany decisions about it. The female body becomes a site through which families, communities, and the State assert power. So, what does it really mean when a majority claims to *support* abortion?

Women’s sexuality, as perfectly captured by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (1998), occupies a space in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations. Her body is a territory to be conquered, claimed, and marked - and history has witnessed that repeatedly. Such a statistic then came as a shock to one. It was imperative to dig deeper and go through the detailed findings².

The intersectional lens was visibly applied to a great deal, with factors and social positions of gender, age, class and geographical location been considered in the analysis - the underlying influences shaping opinions and lived experiences.

Undoubtedly, an individual’s life experiences - including subordination, discrimination, representation, and attitudes are moulded by complex, interconnected and plural contexts of identity, unique to each person. However, the intent to my interpretation of the analysis was to step beyond the quantitative data. I thought it would be relevant to utilise Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* – a model of habitus, field, and capital to explore how these elements constantly interact and influence individual worldviews and decision-making processes.

For Bourdieu, the aim was to create a framework that could predict *practice* – that is, actions and attitudes of people. For this, he combined the two prominent schools of thought in the world of social sciences - the Objective, that gave importance to social structure, power,

¹ [72 per cent Indians in favour of abortion: IDF survey, Health News, ET HealthWorld](#)

² ipasdevelopmentfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Abortion-Opinion-Survey_Report_2024.pdf

and material circumstances, believing that the world is already constructed and an individual only holds the capacity to react - and the Subjective, one that gave importance to agency, desire, deeming in the ever construction of the world where the individual acts. Habitus, a mental construct then became the product of the dynamic interaction of these two worlds. It is the site of a person in action, generating possibilities, varying for all. These possibilities are dependent on the capital one possesses - financial, social, cultural, symbolic, thus presenting a sense of limits as well. The field refers to a structured social space where individuals and groups vie for capital and recognition. It is not random but governed by specific rules and relations. Practice emerges from the interaction of habitus, capital, and field. It produces lived behaviours, choices, and perceptions within the boundaries set by one's disposition and resources.

Seen through this lens, the abortion opinion survey conducted among 13,255 respondents does not simply report preferences or attitudes; it traces the contours of a structured social practice. The practice in question - the articulation of opinion on abortion - is the outcome of dispositions formed through histories of capital accumulation, enacted within fields marked by specific rules of recognition and struggle. That 72% of respondents support the legal allowance of abortion reflects, at a superficial glance, a broadly liberal orientation. However, the deeper structuring of habitus becomes apparent when only 29% of respondents agree that women should be the primary decision-makers regarding abortion. Beyond making clear the assumed agency women should (can) hold in our society, this disjuncture exemplifies the sense of limits that habitus produces: a simultaneous internalization of the discourse of rights and an embodied, often unconscious, boundary around women's autonomy.

The relational logic of habitus and field becomes sharper when one considers the intersectional stratifications revealed by the data. Holding in focus, in terms of **age**, younger adults aged 18-24 years, despite exhibiting greater support for abortion in general, show a statistically significant lower support for abortion access for unmarried persons (aOR 0.86), and lower comfort levels discussing abortion with peers and family. Their habitus, as one understands it, is shaped by a fractured accumulation of cultural capital: enough to access more liberal discourses, yet insufficiently deep or stable to displace inherited moral economies that stigmatize non-marital sexuality. Conversely, older adults aged 46 years and above, with greater life course accumulation of experiential and cultural capital, show increased support for unmarried persons seeking abortion (aOR 1.24), suggesting that habitus, though resilient, remains open to modification through trajectory and time.

Gendered structuration of habitus is starkly visible. Women, relative to men, are significantly more supportive of abortion for unmarried persons (aOR 1.38) and more comfortable engaging in conversations around abortion (aOR 1.28). Yet, the remarkable statistic that 68% of women themselves oppose the idea of women as sole decision-makers underscores the degree to which habitus is inscribed by dominant symbolic orders. This dynamic suggests that while certain aspects of the field may shift - such as acceptance of abortion under particular conditions - deep structures related to gender and decision-making authority struggle to fully dislodge entrenched normative schemas.

Spatial positioning within fields further refracts the distribution of habitus and capital. With 75% of respondents from rural areas, the survey reveals that rurality does not uniformly predict conservatism; rural respondents are more accepting of abortion for unmarried persons (aOR 1.15) than urban counterparts. However, they are significantly less likely to support women's primary decision-making role (aOR 0.56). This bifurcation suggests that different fields operate with partially overlapping but distinct logics: one may tolerate the act of abortion under certain conditions while simultaneously refusing to concede decision-making autonomy to women.

Education, as a form of institutionalized cultural capital, shows consistent effects: even a primary level of schooling substantially raises support for abortion rights, while postgraduate education dramatically increases the likelihood of supporting women's autonomy (aOR 2.04). The slow accumulation of cultural capital thus enables shifts in habitus, yet not without friction from other structuring forces.

Capital, then, mediates the relationship between habitus and field, determining not only individual dispositions but also collective possibilities for transformation. Those embedded in networks facilitating open dialogue around abortion - an index of social capital - are more likely to espouse liberal attitudes, demonstrating how access to relational resources conditions both the circulation of cultural capital and the reshaping of habitus. Economic capital, though not explicitly captured in the survey, silently underwrites access to education, mobility, and networks, structuring the very possibility of acquiring the capitals that transform opinion.

Intersectionality materializes not as a mere layering of identities but as a complex weaving of multiple axes of capital and field relations. The empowered allies, those holding symbolic capital - older, urban, educated respondents - accumulate cultural, economic and social capital sufficient to sustain a habitus oriented toward rights and autonomy. Yet, in a

society where dominant structures continue to valorise traditional hierarchies, symbolic capital itself remains unevenly distributed. The conservative youth - young rural males with lower education - navigate a field where fragmentary exposures to modern discourses coexist with dominant traditional moralities, producing a conservative but unstable habitus. The hesitant sceptics - rural men with limited education - inhabit a field saturated by symbolic violence, where access to cultural and social capital is thin, and where habitus stabilizes around suspicion and discomfort with abortion rights.

In sum, abortion opinion in India, as captured by the survey, is not merely an aggregation of individual views but a structured and structuring practice produced at the intersection of habitus and field, mediated through varying forms of capital. Intersectionality - across gender, age, education, and location - determines the dispositions individuals internalize and the social spaces they navigate. The practice of opinion thus reflects not only personal belief but the deeper structures of society: the possibilities, limitations, and tensions inherent in the social fabric of contemporary India. What is visible is that Bourdieu's theoretical architecture accommodates the framework of intersectionality to its very core. For the future, it would help if the survey could accommodate aspects of religion, caste and ethnicity into its purview. In the end, one's initial surprise at the statistic that '72% of Indians support abortion' finds its explanation: the terrain of opinion is neither straightforward nor uniform. Rather, it is a contingent negotiation - a weighing of conditions that shapes both thought and action.