

Women Living with Abusive Husbands A South Indian Rural Scenario

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Introduction

One of the most common forms of abuse or violence against women is that performed by a husband or an intimate male partner. The abuse of women by their husbands or intimate partners and its damage is unquestionably same, undermining a women's sense of worth, agency and independency. It also diminishes a women's ability to care and provide for her children and to participate in the work force. The fact that women are often emotionally involved with and economically dependent on those who victimize them has major implications for both the dynamics of abuse and the approaches to dealing with it. Violence or abuse is a global issue reaching across national boundaries as well as social, economic, cultural racial and class distinctions. This problem is not only widely dispersed geographically, but its incidence is also extensive, making it a typical and accepted behavior. Violence is wide spread deeply in grained and has serious impacts on women's health and well being. Although women can be violent in relationships with men and violence is also sometimes found in same sex partnerships, the overwhelming burden of partner violence is borne by women at the hands of man.

The marginal role of women and cultural practices that uphold this status are plentiful in history. Women are mostly branded as lesser than men and virtually all societies saw women as property. This can be seen today in [bride price](#) and [dowry](#) practices in some cultures. Arranged marriages still exist in many societies where the women have a minimal say in her future.

What is domestic violence or abuse?

It can be described as the power misused by one adult in a relationship to control another. This violence can take the form of physical assault, psychological abuse, social abuse, financial abuse or sexual abuse. The frequency of the violence can be on and off, occasional or chronic. It is a pattern of coercive control that one person exercises over another. Abusers use physical and sexual violence, threats, emotional insults and economic deprivations as a way to dominate their victims and get their way. The most common victims of domestic violence are women. It affects the women across the life span from sex selective abortion of female fetuses forced suicide and abuse and is evident to some degree in every society in the world. The World Health Organization reports that proportion of women who had experienced physical or sexual violence or both by an intimate partner ranged from 15% to 71% with the majority between 29% and 62%. India's National Family Health survey –III carried out in 29 states during 2005 – 2006 has found that substantial proportion of married women have been physically or sexually abused by their husband at sometimes in their lives.

What leads to Abuse or Violence of Women?

Abuse or violence against woman is an age old phenomenon. Women were always considered weak, vulnerable and in a position to be exploited. Violence has long been accepted as something that happens to women. Cultural mores, religious practices, economic and political conditions may set the precedence for initiating and perpetuating domestic violence, but ultimately committing an act of violence or abuse is a choice of that the individual makes out of a range of options. Although one can not underestimate the importance of micro systems – level focus (such as cultural and social norms) in the etiology of gender based violence within any country, including India. Individual level variables (such as observing violence between one's parents

while growing up, absent or rejecting, father delinquent peer associations) also play important roles in the development of such violence. The gender influence in domestic violence is partly related to difference in physical strength and size. In societies with a patriarchal power structure and with rigid gender roles, women are poorly equipped to protect themselves if their partners become violent. Husbands who abuse wives typically feel that they are exercising a right, maintaining a good order in the family and punishing their wives delinquency – especially their wife’s failure to keep their proper place. The emotional abuse of certain specific women population like “ Immigrant and refugee women, lesbians, older women, women with disabilities, women with intellectual disabilities, teen women, college and university women, rural and farm women, women belonging to SC/ST communities “ are more significant. Women’s organization around the world have lay drawn attention to violence against women, and to intimate partner violence in particular. Though their constant efforts, violence against women has now become an human rights issue and partner violence is increasingly seen as a Public health problem. Yet no other major problem of public health has been so widely neglected and so little understood. Hence an effort has been made to do a qualitative study of women who go through a severe abuse, lives with their respective husbands, with the following objectives:

- 1) To develop a deeper understanding of the experience of women who live with an abusive partner.
- 2) To explore the issues and challenges women encounter in their lives with their abusive partners.
- 3) To discuss the cultural factors which sanction and accept the abusive behavior of their husbands.
- 4) To elicit the strategies women adopt to cope-up with these issues and challenges.
- 5) To look at the roles, relationships, resources and support system which women access and which contribute them to perceive themselves as valued and capable member in the community.

Review of Literature

The major sources of data on women abuse have not included majority women including immigrant, native, lesbians and older women. This lack of attention created inconsistencies in research and research that generalizes abuse across culture often does not mention who are marginalized. Various types of abuses generally coexist in the same relationship. However prevalence studies of partner violence are a new area of research and data on the various types of partner violence, other than physical abuse are generally not yet available.

The literature provides several definitions as well as several names for emotional abuse. It includes psychological maltreatment, non physical abuse, psychological abuse, psychological aggression and indirect abuse. Abuse also includes verbal attacks, harassment, belittling, excessive possessiveness, isolation of partner and deprivation of physical and economic resources. The protection of women from domestic violence act 2005 says that any act, conduct, omission or commission that harms or injures or has the potential to harm or injure will be considered domestic violence by the law. Even a single act of omission or commission may constitute domestic violence – in other words women do not have to suffer a prolonged period of abuse before taking recourse to law. Though domestic violence is perpetrated by and on both men and women, most commonly the victims are women, especially in our country. India’s National Family Health Survey III carried out in 29 states during 2005 – 06, has found that a substantial proportion of married women have been physically or sexually abused by their husbands at sometime in their lives. Data from a wide range of countries suggest that partner violence accounts for a significant number of deaths by murder among women. Studies from Australia, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the United States of America show that 40% – 70% of female, murder victims were killed by their husbands or boyfriends, frequently in the context of an ongoing abusive relationship. A study of female deaths by murder in Alexandria, Egypt found that 47% of the women were killed by a relative after they had been raped.

In more traditional societies, wife beating is largely regarded as a consequence of a men’s right to inflict physical punishment on his wife – something indicated by studies from many countries including India. Cultural justifications for violence usually follow from traditional notions of the proper roles of men and women. In many settings women are expected to look after their homes and children and show their husbands obedience

and respect. If a man feels that his wife has failed in her role or over stepped her limits, then violence may be his response. A wide range of studies from both industrialized and developing countries have provided a remarkably consistent list of events that are said to trigger partner violence which includes:

- 1) Not obeying the man
- 2) Arguing back
- 3) not having the food ready on time
- 4) Not giving adequate care for home and children
- 5) questioning the man about money or girlfriend
- 6) going some where without the men's permission
- 7) refusing the sex
- 8) the man suspecting the women of infidelity.

The pattern of men's violence against women in the domestic sphere remains virtually unaddressed in Japan. In Japan there is no specific law defining spousal violence as a crime, nor any civil remedies available for women battered by their intimate partner. Most of the studies do not attempt to explore the socio cultural components and context of the violence. In the study by Yoshihama and Sorenson 1994, out of the 796 respondents, 523 indicated that they experienced one or more of the emotional abuse. The largest population reported verbal abuse. The fourteen types of emotional abuse include ongoing verbal abuse, verbal threats, behavior threats, activity restrictions, driving recklessly while she was in the car, threats to kill her family, no empathy when sick or pregnant, opening her mail, neglect, humiliation, financial abuse, husband having extra martial affair, endorsing her mother as the authority figure who supervise and evaluates the abused women and the condemning of the abused women's family and friends. The patriarchal beliefs and values of the confusian traditions in China, often place the Chinese women in submissive and subjugated positions. Violence towards one's wife, either through physical or non physical means is often condoned as a legitimate treatment of Chinese women. In the country Nicaragua, emotional abuse is recognized as a crime. Studies consistently show that abuse or violence is more common in families with many children. Population based studies from Canada, Chile, Egypt and Nicaragua have found that 6% - 15% of married women have been physically or sexually abused during pregnancy by their partner. Violence can lead to injuries physically. Population based studies suggest that 40% - 72% of all women who have been physically abused by a partner are injured at some point in their life. Women who are abused by their partner suffer more depression, anxiety and phobias then non abused women, according to studies in Australia, Nicaragua, Pakistan and the United States. Abuse also places an enormous economic burden on societies in terms of lost productivity and increased use of social services. Among women in a survey in Nagpur, India, 13% had to forgo paid work because of abuse, missing an average of 7 working days per incident and 11% had been unable to perform domestic chores because of incident of violence. So the abuse or violence against women does impact the women physically, mentally, emotionally, economically and causing health wise implications.

Methodology

This project is a qualitative Research method, using ethnographic design. When compared to quantitative research, qualitative research methodology is usually considered a more descriptive and in depth approach to collecting data. A qualitative approach may be more beneficial in a research project in which a topic or question is not well defined or easily counted. It focuses on obtaining a truthful description of how a problem or situation is experienced by those who undergo it.

Sampling:

Three married women who go through a severe abusive lives from a rural village of Tamil Nadu have been chosen as samples by purposive of sampling method. Qualitative research projects often focus on small samples of participants. These research families are often dismissed as anecdotal and not generalizable. The value of qualitative research lies in the diversity and depth of the data collected and analyzed and understanding attained of the context and conditions under which particular findings appear. Moreover qualitative research using small sampling is often very useful for

identifying future research questions and directions.

Data Collection:

The data was collected through participant observations, non participant observations and unstructured in depth interviews. Numerous informal and casual interviews were also done.

Findings

The Three women who participated in the study ranged in age from 46 – 52. All the respondents had two children each, totally six children. All the three were married for a period of 25 – 33 years. Their children were ranging in age from 14 – 32 years. All the three women have studied from 5th standard to 10th standard and none is a graduate. All the three belonged to the same community and all these three husbands also have studied from 6th standard to 10th standard. Their main occupation is agriculture and one family is involved in their own family business also, additionally. Of these three one, Woman has become a grandmother.

Case Narrative sample 1:

This woman aged 52 years, has studied up to 5th standard and hails from a middle class agricultural family. Got married when she was 19 years old to a man of 29 years old. Married for 33 years, has got 2 sons, one son is employed and the other one is taking care of the family business, besides their agriculture job. Elder son is a post graduate and is married for 2 years, and has got a baby. This woman's husband is a severe alcoholic dependent and his abuse is of no direct nature, but indirectly he used to abuse his wife, by putting her in shame and embarrassment situations in front of the outsiders. He is also a chain smoker and does not have a good health. Wherever wife used to check him and admonish him, about his alcoholic intake, he used to react, by again consuming more alcohol and get into binges. This woman has been watching her husband, consuming alcohol since her marriage and she is helpless, and the children also have witnessed their father's drunken behavior right from their childhood. This woman attempted for suicide twice, but was saved by the workers who work in their family trade. She says that she did not walk out of her marriage as her children will suffer, she will lose her respect and reputation and in that rural set up, a woman who leaves her husband is not respected and is not invited for any family and social function. She is honoured only if she is in the marital bond, even if she goes through severe abuse. But her husband does not beat her or do any physical damage and no verbal abuse, all he does is only emotional abuse. The main thing is he makes her embarrassed in front of others, by again drinking and the consequent, uninhibited, unruly behavior. Almost she just dies of embarrassment often. Moreover, she does not get any support from her natal family, hence all the more she just prefers to stay in the marriage. Moreover she feels if she leaves her husband permanently, he will surely get another woman and all the property he has earned, he may write on her name.

Case Narrative sample 2:

This one is married for 26 years, has got 2 daughter, and hails from a lower middle class agricultural family, studied up to 6th standard, and her husband has studied up to 7th standard. This husband is a teetotaler and is very very prudent in spending money. He expects his wife to work in the fields like a labourer, in addition to her domestic chores, does not allow her for any entertainment, does not give her the required money causing financial abuse. This woman goes through lots of verbal abuse, even for small silly matter, he used to be mean and reprimand her. Even when she is sick also, she is expected to do the hard work in the fields. She could never relax or take rest. She used to do all the hard work like a male, even when they constructed their home, she was doing the construction workers job. Since this husband is a miser to the core, he would not allow his wife and children to have their own way of spending. He has a control over his wife in all the ways and means, especially in financial sources wife has no freedom. Even for spending Rs.2/- she has to get her husband's permission and is expected to show the account to her husband. Sometimes she feels very sorry for her own state of affair and her unfortunate situation. She had many times left her

husband in the beginning of her marital life, and had gone and stayed in her brother's family, and finally elders would talk and arise at a compromise and she would come back to her marital family. Both her children are females and now they are grown up. When she had her second baby also as female, her husband got so annoyed with her and was fully upset and did not talk to his wife for some days, as if it is her mistake. This woman goes through severe verbal abuse and emotional abuse and she even tried to commit suicide once. But saved fortunately by the neighbors. She says that just for the sake of her daughters she survives, otherwise long back she would have finished her life. She is also concerned of her community and the social respect and reputation it commands. She does not want to sully the image of her family and continues, hence she commits to be in the marriage.

Case Narrative sample 3:

This woman is aged 47 years, married for 25 years and has got a son and a daughter. Son is 24 years and daughter is 14 years belongs to an agricultural family and her husband is an agriculturist. She also contributes a lot towards the family work. Her husband is an alcoholic dependent and when he is in intoxication, abuses his wife a lot. Wife does not retort and keeps quite when she sees her husband is inabriation. He used to call her using all sorts of bad, obscene words, when he is fully intoxicated, wife used to tolerate all the nonsense, considering her family situation and her children. She also says that she tolerates all the harassment and abuse of her husband for the sake of her children's future. Her son who is 24 years old educated boy, attempted for suicide once, not bearing his father's abusive behavior.

All these three women have gone through severe abuse, harassment and violence, physically, verbally, emotionally and financially. The same community all three women, belong to has some severe norms and principles, which impose directly or indirectly towards the subordinate, subservient and subjugated behavior of women. This matter is common in almost all the men dominated societies.

Discussions

A recent United Nations Population Fund report also revealed that around two – third of married women in India, were victims of domestic violence. The survey indicated that, nationwide 37.2% of women experienced violence after marriage. The women belonged to 41.9% of Tamil Nadu experienced violence after marriage. In 48 population based surveys, from around the world, between 10% to 69% women reported being physically abused by an intimate male partners at some point of their lives. Research suggests that physical abuse or violence in intimate relationships is often accompanied by psychological or emotional abuse and in one third to over one half of cases by sexual abuse. Psychological and emotional violence covers "repeated verbal abuse, harassment, confinement and deprivation of physical, financial and personal resources". Much of the literature on emotional abuse describes it in conjunction with physical abuse and the literature reflects a range of 59% of physically abused women also reporting emotional abuse. Various types of abuse generally co-exist in the same relationship. However prevalence studies of violence or abuse are a new area of research and data on the various types of partner violence, other than physical violence are not available. However the lack of a precise definition and a focus on treatment specifically for these women may be contributing to the trivialization of this phenomenon in our society.

In many developing countries women often agree with the idea that men have the right to discipline their wives, if necessary by force. In Egypt in a study done, over 80% of rural women share the view that beatings are justified in certain circumstances. As the author of the study from Pakistan notes "Beating a wife to chastise or to discipline her is seen as culturally and religiously justified, because men are perceived as the owner of their wives, it is necessary to discourage them for future transgressions. Even when culture itself grants men substantial control over female behavior, abusive men generally exceed the norm. Qualitative studies have confirmed that most abused women are not passive victims but rather adopt active strategies to take care of their safety and the children. Some women resist and some attempt to keep the peace by giving in to their husbands demands, in order to survive in the marriage and protect herself and her children. The commonly included factors, which keep the women in the abusive relationships are, fear of restrictions, lack of alternative means of economic support, emotional dependence, concern for the children, a lack of support from family and friends

and on abiding hope that the man will change. In the developing countries women also cite the stigmatization associated with being separated as an additional barrier to leaving abusive relationships. The main reason for the women staying in the abusive relationship is being socially stigmatized and ostracized. Research similarly suggests that women abused by their partners are at heightened risk for suicide attempts.

In the three case narratives, the factors which are possibly influencing the strained relationship and the consequent abuse of women are mostly, marital discord, alcoholic dependence, personality disorders, psychological factors of the men such as poor self esteem, inferiority complex, economic factors and social factors.

Suggestions

The majority of work carried out to date on partner violence has been spearheaded by women's organizations, with occasional assistance from governments. The first wave of activity has generally involved elements of legal reform. Police training and the establishment of specialized services for victims. Many countries have now passed laws on domestic violence, though many officials are still either unaware of the new laws or unwilling to implement them. Those within the system like Police or legal personal, frequently share the same prejudices that predominate in society as a whole. Research on investments in developing countries is even more limited. Unfortunately, there is at present little co-ordination between programmes or research agenda on youth violence, child abuse, Substance abuse and partner abuse, despite the fact that these problems regularly co exist in families.

Public health workers have a responsibility to build awareness by creating awareness and disseminating materials and innovative audio visual messages, which project the image of girl child and women in the society. Co-ordinating councils or inter agency forums are an increasingly popular means of monitoring and improving response towards intimate partner violence at the community level. A growing body of wisdom on partner violence, accumulated over many years by large number of service providers, advocates and researches suggests a set of principles to help " guide practice" in the field.

These principles include,

Actions to address violence should take place at both national and local level.

The involvement of women in the development and implementation of programmes and the safety of women should guide all decisions relating to interventions.

Efforts to reform the response of institutions – including the police, health care workers and the judiciary – should extend beyond training to changing institutional cultures.

Interventions should cover and be co-ordinate between a range of different sectors.

Interventions should be designed to work with women who are usually the best judges of their situations, and to respect their decisions. Recent reviews of a range of domestic violence programmes in the Indian states of Gujarat, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, for instance have consistently shown the success or failure of projects was determined largely by the attitudes of organizers towards intimate partner violence and their priorities for including the interests of women during the planning and implementation of interventions. Concerted and co-ordinated multisectoral efforts are key methods of enacting changes and responding to women abuse or violence at local and national levels.

Programmes should place greater emphasis on enabling families, circles of friends and community groups including religious communities to deal with the problem of partner violence.

Government and other donors should be encouraged to invest much more in research on violence by intimate partner over the next decade. Programs on partner violence should be integrated with other programs such as those tackling youth violence, teenage pregnancies, substance abuse and other forms of family violence. Programs should focus more on the primary prevention of intimate partner violence. Resolving the problem of partner violence involves many sectors working together at community, national and international levels. At each level response must include, empowering women and girls, reaching out to men, providing for the needs of victims and increasing the penalties for abuses. It is vital that responses should involve children and young people and focus on changing community and social norms. The progress made in each of these areas will be the key to achieving global reductions in violence against intimate partners. The issue of women abuse must be brought into open and examined as any other presentable health problem and best remedies available be

applied.

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