

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: A PERSPECTIVE IN WOMEN'S STUDIES

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Abstract: Violence against women has been a constant element in society since time immemorial. A reason behind this can be the callous approach of patriarchy coupled with a submissive attitude of the women themselves. One can easily say that women have internalized the idea of being the appropriate victims and at times, see violence as something deserved by them. More often than not, an attitude of helplessness emerges from relationships they are in and which they can neither sustain nor walk out of. Such battered women who can also be called, the active survivors, develop a sense of hopefulness that things will change for them and this hopefulness results in a vicious circle most detrimental to their existence. Law, in all its forms, can only help them to an extent but the proactive step of taking a stand against any form of abuse needs to be taken by them. The connivance of the society and families too, howsoever well-meaning, is equally responsible and needs to be confronted and the fact emphasized upon that feminism is very contextual and it needs to be asserted and reasserted outside as well as inside homes.

Key words: violence, women, abuse, family

Introduction: In the preface to *Law of Domestic Violence: A User's Manual for Women*, Indira Jaising writes that very often, the first question that a woman in distress asks when she comes into a lawyer's office is, 'What are my options?'. This book is an effort by the Women's Rights Initiative, Lawyers Collective, towards providing comprehensive knowledge to women about the various legal provisions identifying the problem of domestic violence and provide for a redressal mechanism for the same. This is indeed a remarkable effort since unlike us who had signed up for the course on Understanding Violence Against Women, not all women are aware of the recourses available to them to fight domestic violence, nor are they taught the same. While this idea is in a good direction but the more important question that we are concerned with here is, once a woman understands that the atrocities being inflicted upon her are violating her rights, dignity and self-esteem and are causing her physical and many a times, mental damage, what does she do next? Is it followed by a resolve to leave the place and people responsible for causing the above-mentioned? Does she fight back or does she quietly stay back in the relationship despite the torture and humiliation? Also, if she does the latter, what is the reason behind this?

Women: The "Appropriate" Victims: The Oxford dictionary defines the word "victim" as "a person harmed, injured, or killed as a result of crime, accident or other event or action". Richard J. Gelles calls women the most "appropriate" victims. He further goes on to say that some researches even claim that marriage is in reality a "license to hit" He also discusses courtship or dating violence and says that between 10% and 67% of dating relationships involve violence. But the most striking and saddest finding from the researches in this direction is how

individuals perceive this violence. More than one fourth of the victims, and 3 out of 10 offenders, interpreted the violence as a sign of love. It stands true for marriages too. The pattern of this type of violence helps us in understanding some important things about domestic violence, primarily violence by husbands and boyfriends.

First, there is a tendency on part of many victims as well as offenders to view the violence as appropriate. Second, female victims are very reluctant to blame their husbands/boyfriends for the violence/abuse and tend to say that both persons were to be blamed for the abuse. Third, victims might blame themselves (the "I asked for it" approach). And last, there is a tendency to not talk about the violence with family or friends. Such violence is generally in the form of physical violence (hitting, etc.) coupled with sexual violence (which includes marital rape, etc.) and psychological abuse and in extreme cases, can cause death of the woman.

There are various reasons for violent behavior of men towards their girlfriends/wives. Studies from Canada and the United States show that men who assault their wives are more likely to be emotionally dependent, insecure and low in self-esteem, and are more likely to find it difficult to control their impulses. But we are more concerned with the women here and whether they have a choice of walking away in such cases. It is indeed a tough call for a battered woman to make and easier said than done. One thing that gets clear as we study more and more on the research that has been done on wife abuse is domestic violence is not a one-time event; rather it is a pattern which endures over a considerable period of time. More often than not, people assume that since a woman is an adult and not a child, hence, the solution for abuse in a relationship

is for the battered women to leave or divorce their husbands. The psychologist Lenore Walker examined numerous cases of battered women and developed the theory of “learned helplessness” to explain why so many women endure such extreme violence for so long. She further said that the repeated beatings results in low self-esteem which leaves women with the feeling that they cannot control what happens to them. Walker went on to revise her initial conceptualization of learned helplessness and proposed that women in battering relationships experience a constellation of effects that make up the Battered Woman Syndrome (BWS). The repeated battering results in psychological trauma which explains some women’s reluctance to flee an abusive relationship and some other women’s decisions to kill abusive husbands resulting in incarceration, again an extremely unfortunate situation which doesn’t take into account the extreme circumstances which led to such killing.

The Forces at Play: It has been seen that most of the battered women are not passive. They try contacting various people like, social workers, the Police and agencies working for mental health and staying at friends’ or parents’ places and try fighting back. But there are many social forces which constrain them from permanently leaving a violent relationship. In this regard, Elizabeth Truninger lists seven factors that may explain why women do not break off relationships with abusive men:

1. The Women have negative self-concepts;
2. They believe men will reform;
3. Economic hardship;
4. They have children who need a father’s economic support;
5. They doubt they can get along alone;
6. They believe divorcees are stigmatized; and
7. It is difficult for women with children to get work

We can try to understand it further in a way which is much simpler. Women’s reactions regarding domestic violence and their decision to leave or to stay are not because these are the characteristic traits of a battered woman but because of many social, psychological, economic and physical factors which are at play and work efficiently in holding a woman tight to an abusive relationship. It is interesting to note that once such a woman leaves, chances are there that she won’t return to her husband but leaving itself is extremely tough in the first place because of the reasons mentioned. Also, in the Indian context, once the girl has been married off (and in many cases, after giving huge sums as dowry), she is considered to have become an outsider and going back to her parents, in some way, is looked extremely down upon. Sometimes, the brothers of such women say that their share has been spent on

the marriage and in dowry and now they can’t stay in their maternal home.

Who are the Women who Leave?: There are certain women who don’t leave their husbands/boyfriends despite being in an abusive relationship but there are also certain women who take the path of liberation from such an ambience. There may be certain factors that distinguish these two kinds of women. Sometimes, the women who leave seem to experience the most severe and frequent violence. Also, some research shows that women who experienced more violence as children were more likely to remain in violent relationships but there is contradictory research to this which shows that such woman sometimes, leave just after the first time such violence is committed against them. Women with limited educational attainment and occupational skills are more likely to stay with battering husbands. This can be explained as the fewer resources a woman had, the less power she had, the more she was entrapped in a marriage and the more she suffers at the hands of her husband. Sometimes, women who stay back are the ones who are more “committed” to the relationship which is an outcome of years of social conditioning instilling the belief that she should leave her husband’s place only on her death.

Battered Women or Active Survivors: Edward Gondolf and Ellen Fisher write that instead of categorizing battered women as experiencing learned helplessness, we need to see them as active survivors. Often, women respond to abuse with help-seeking efforts that remain largely unmet because the community isn’t able to do as much as is needed in that particular situation. Also, the entire issue has to be seen from a larger cultural context. The socialization of girls to women, both within the family and the larger culture, involves the learning of a belief system that doesn’t put enough value to women, more so, unmarried women, and efficiently creates a sense of responsibility for the maintenance of a family which is emotionally stable. Thus whenever there is a failure of a relationship or a marriage, it is the woman who is blamed, even when it is the result of severe violence or abuse. Women learn to endure and remain in such relationships. This may be referred to as “learned hopefulness” rather than learned helplessness. This means the continuing hope a battered woman has that her partner will change his abusive behavior or his abusive personality.

Fear-factor: Perhaps the highly psychologically damaging and dangerous but far less emphasized factor in the entire dynamics apart from learned hopefulness and economic dependence is that of fear and it plays quite a determining role in a woman’s decision to stay in or leave a violent relationship. There is a fear of retaliation if a woman leaves or tries

to leave a violent relationship coupled with the fear of losing her children. Many such women have reported that their partners threaten to kidnap and sometimes even kill their children if the woman tries to walk out of the relationship. There is evidence that suggests that violence or abuse has increased when a woman has tried to walk out and this reinforces the fear. Another kind of fear is a more emotional one wherein the woman fears a life without her husband, howsoever violent one he is.

The Case of Molly Midyette: The case of Molly Midyette is considered as the classic case of abuse in an intimate relationship. Like many other battered women, she also kept overlooking her husband's abusive behavior in the hope that he will change his ways. She soon became pregnant but even this did not deter her husband from restraining from inflicting violence on her. Her son who was born after some time, died within two months of his birth due to multiple broken bones and a fracture in the skull. She got increasingly convinced that the behavior of her husband might have played a vital role in her son's death. But when her husband and his family got to know of this, they threatened her with dire consequences and thus she remained quiet. Molly and her husband had been charged for the death of their son and because she did not speak a word of what could have proved that her husband was the culprit, eventually, she got convicted for "child abuse resulting in death" and sentenced to sixteen years in prison. Yet, Molly said later that behind the bars, she finally experienced freedom from the abuse from her husband. She divorced her husband while in prison and her husband was later convicted too but for a lesser charge. This is a classic example of how keeping quiet in a situation like this ultimately led to extremely tragic consequences.

We may feel forced to think then that it is neither a moral dilemma alone nor is it a helpless disability which makes a woman stay in an abusive relationship. It is a mix of all the above mentioned factors coupled with certain others depending upon the personality of the woman faced with such circumstances. It is highly wrong to generalize any such situation though with some study we can try and reach the understanding that has been discussed in the previous pages.

Conclusion: We have seen at length how the problem of walking out of an abusive relationship is

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extremely complex and many factors like economic dependence, social stigmatization, care of children, lack of paternal support, fear, etc. form a web inextricably intertwined with it. Howsoever easy it may seem, its impact is only understandable by a woman who undergoes it. Just like we encourage women of sexual abuse to report such crimes, we also encourage women of domestic abuse at the hand of their partners to report it. But we forget that what we want is to bring the perpetrators to book but perhaps there is a very delicate, emotional side to the story too. Once a woman has complained against her partner, the obvious repercussion is that she cannot go back to him. As much as we would like to believe that law can coerce him to behave well, we know that law cannot keep a continuous eye on the things going on inside a home. The husband holds the wife liable for the legal hassles he has gotten involved in and in many cases, the situation even worsens. We also know how many *naari-niketans* treat women who seek shelter with them. Many such *niketans* make those women do physical labour they are not supposed to do and often, do not let them meet their family members in the name of providing protection. Therefore, there is a need to strike hard at the root of this problem. More research needs to be conducted on what can be the possible solutions. Logically we may think that educating our boys, while they are still young, to respect women and not be violent in general may be a solution. Our girls also need to be made economically independent. They need to be taught to break away from the orthodox and regressive notions of society which solely burden them with the responsibility of keeping a family together. A sense of self-worth also needs to be instilled within them. Proper recourse to legal remedies, protection while the case is going on and after its closure and better treatment at shelter-homes form the basic requirements.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar once said that the biggest force that can ratify a law is the conscience of the society. This is especially true in this case wherein society can play the greatest role in bringing about a change in a battered woman's life. There is still hope that if not our men, at least we can mould our boys into men who do not end up making their wives/girlfriends choose from two equally excruciating alternatives.

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