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Understanding the Psychology of Urban Domestic Violence in India

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Abstract

My experience with domestic violence is limited to a few cases that I have handled in my long years of practice as a mental health professional. But the limited exposure by itself left me wondering and pondering to seek answers to certain questions that raised within me as a result of certain similar traits in all the cases. What was a commonly striking factor was the refusal to quit the relationship by the victims and in a few cases by the abuser too.

This paper is a theoretical analysis as to understand the cause for victims to stay in an abusive relationship. My experience showed lot of studies being conducted to study the economically weaker women victims whereas my concern relates to the educated, financially independent victim.

More studies may be recommended to understand the predicaments of the educated class of victims and another objective of this paper is to promote psycho social intervention as an important factor of providing assistance to these victims.

Keywords: Victim, Seeking Help, Staying in Relationship, Psycho Social Intervention

1. Introduction

Violence within families, right from the denigration of honour, is considered to be domestic violence and is covered under the general provisions of penal codes even if not explicitly mentioned therein.

The spectrum of domestic violence (which, incidentally, has a high level of recidivism) may include psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse which may manifest itself as physical injury, the deprivation of food, money or other resources, intimidation, humiliation and degradation, and may result in anhedonia, pain, exhaustion, isolation, alienation, depression, fear, and decreased levels of self-esteem, productivity and attentiveness.

A frequent perception of domestic violence against women is that it is limited to physical harm perpetrated on adult women within a marital relationship. While this understanding may capture a large universe of the experience of women, an equally large universe of women in relationship too experience abuse. Thus one may infer that violence is often not restricted to the current husband but may extend to boyfriends, former husbands, and other family members such as parents, siblings, and in-laws. A definition that acknowledges these multiple possibilities would lead to interventions that are more inclusive of the experiences of all women (ICRW, 1999).

According to available statistics from around the globe, one out of every three women has experienced violence in an intimate relationship at some point in her life. This is an average based on available national surveys across industrialized and developing countries (World Health Organization 1997). Statistical evidence on the actual prevalence of domestic violence in India is scant however. The few studies available indicate that physical abuse of Indian women is quite high, ranging from 22 percent to 60 percent of women surveyed (Rao 1996 and Mahajan 1990).

A study in rural Gujarat by Leela Visaria found that violence was less reported with increasing levels of education among the couple. When she says not reported, are they occurring and not being brought to the open is a point to be considered. A study conducted by Bontha V Babu and Shantanu K Karin the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Orissa also found that domestic violence decreased with the educational status of women and with higher earnings of the women. This is further strengthened by a study conducted by John Simister and Judith Makoweic (2008) who suggest in their conclusion that better education can bring down violence in India. Contrasting these studies, a more recent study by Centre for Women's Development Studies, India discovered that more the education, greater the risk of being abused, as now the woman is aware of her rights and questions authority, leading to conflicts and abuse.

The above results are probably reflected in the cases studies mentioned in this paper. This paper, based on case illustrations, is an attempt to understand why women continue in abusive relationship and also an expression of how educated women, by seeking professional help could deal with the same. The paper focuses on empowerment of the abused or the victim while in most cases, in reality, the society at large focuses on the accused and is more determined to punish the same rather than enable the victim to rehabilitate, pick up strings and get back to the normal lifestyle, letting go of the baggage of victimisation and starting afresh.

All the women (mentioned in the case illustrations) who experienced abuse were well educated, financially independent, held permanent jobs, were fertile as they all had children and lived in nuclear families. All their husbands too were well educated, held respectable jobs and led a decent life. The similarity in the cases did not end here. All their husbands were regular drinkers, although none of them were alcoholics.

The women were used to being abused verbally most of the time and physically occasionally. One of the women was regularly abused physically too. Two of their husbands sought professional help of a mental health professional.

1.1 Case Study 1

The couple was college mates who fell in love and married. Verbal abuse persisted even during the dating days which the girl pretended to overlook. Physical abuse started soon after marriage whenever there was a difference of opinion between them. It escalated during her pregnancies. She was determined to keep the marriage going in spite of regular humiliations and battering. He was also aware of her determination. It took her 16 years of abusive relationship to seek professional help.

During the psycho therapy sessions she not only got rid of her emotional baggage and healed her mental injuries she also learnt assertiveness and derived the courage to say "no". This helped her as battering stopped with time. Verbal abuses continued but with her assertiveness training she was able to give him a message that she didn't care and would not take it any more. This helped to bring down the frequency but the intensity continued. She realized, if she had to continue in the marriage, she had to develop a steely mask and remain unaffected in order to maintain her mental balance.

This woman preferred to continue in that institution called marriage as she believed that a woman is complete only as a married woman. Although her sessions with the mental health professional helped her healing to a

certain extent, abuse continued, although in lesser frequencies. Hence one cannot affirm that a state of normalcy was achieved. The children continued to face the brunt of such a situation and the family continued to be starved of love and emotional security. They continued to live under the same roof as hostile companions to each other.

1.2 Case Study 2

The couple belonged to the same profession, fell in love and married in spite of family oppositions. Verbal and physical abuse commenced over financial issues and differences in opinions on the same and abuse seemed to be his solution for any argument or dissonance. He displayed an extremely sweet demeanor at work as a result of which she was unable to receive any support or help from office colleagues. She sought professional help of a mental health professional after 10 years of marriage. She had to learn to stop self pitying, nagging and most importantly learn to say "No". With sessions, she became assertive enough to tell him that he could not touch her. This shocked him and he immediately stopped physical abuse. His verbal abuse reduced to minimal only after he underwent sessions himself through which he discovered that he was a very rigid personality unable to accept any kind of defeat and that he was displacing his anger due to his failures on his wife.

This woman did not want to quit the marriage as the same had been against her family's wishes and she did not wish to prove them right. It was this determination that pushed her to continue in the relationship. The equation did tilt towards positivity although their respective innate qualities such as her nagging and his rigidity did cause some troubles on and off. The children however began to experience a calmer atmosphere at home.

1.3 Case Study 3

Childhood sweethearts, with successful career ahead of them, married with all the good wishes of both families. With time, the woman began to progress steadily in her career while he did not. He slowly began to feel possessive of her and with time got in to habitual drinking. Slowly and steadily he began to abuse her. The dynamics in their relationship changed drastically experiencing the extremes of emotions alternatively. There were days when they were intensely in love and life was bliss and then there were days when they were at each other's neck and life was hell. It took her quite a while to understand the abuse in their relationship. She sought professional help of a mental health professional after 8 years of marriage. The sessions helped her understand his extreme possessiveness and to deal with it, besides working on her emotional scars. He too willingly underwent therapies and discovered his childhood experiences to be the root cause for his pessimistic perceptions. They also helped him understand his insecurities and work on them. This helped him to bond better with his child and their relationship improved. Although the extreme situations in their relationship continued, they were spaced afar and they also began to experience more periods of moderate affection. His drinking lessened and for her part she became more assertive and became more demonstrative with her emotions and also learnt to accept him as he was with his mediocre career.

It took more than three to four years for the abuse to reduce to almost nil although even now the abuse occurs on rare occasions. Since both did experience periods of intense love for each other, she did not wish to end the marriage. The sessions helped them to understand their responsibility in making the marriage and also their role in abuse. Being receptive individuals, they were able to reform and lead a more qualitative life.

There have been a few cases of young girls who have sought help to deal with the emotional trauma after ending an abusive relationship. Although they had broken up, they found it extremely difficult to heal emotionally. They also confessed to be yearning to be contacted by the boy. They, at the bottom of their hearts wished to be back in the relationship.

Why do women cling on to an abusive relationship?

2. Literature Review

A multi site household survey conducted in India by International Clinical Epidemiologists Network (INCLEN, 2000) found that fewer than 10 percent of the women reported that they left their husbands. Of these women, the vast majority returned either because their husbands asked them to or because their natal family convinced them to do so. More than 55 percent of the women reported that they perceive violence as a normal part of marriage. Many women take up on themselves the sole responsibility for the continuation of marriage and blame themselves on its failure. In order to prevent this self blame, they prefer to stay on.

Fear of loneliness has been cited by respondents who have chosen to remain in relationships in spite of being abused (Helen Mhendy et al, 2003). Several studies hypothesized that women with a greater sense of commitment would be more likely to remain with the abuser compared with women with less commitment (Deborah K. Anderson, Daniel G. Saunders, 2003).

While every woman unquestionably deserves to be in a healthy relationship and to live a life free of violence, there is reason to believe both that meaningful change may be possible within the context of existing relationships, as well as that leaving may not be a “magic bullet” for improving victims’ lives (Margret E. Bell et al,2007).

While empirical studies as early as 1980s have revealed that battered women have a better sense of reality than those who batter them and they are more “social” more “sympathetic”, and less “masculine” than their non battered counterparts, and they attempt to change their situation using a broader range of strategies than non battered women who are also in problematic relationships, the question still put out was why they continued in such relationships (NanditaSaikia). However, a study by Margret E. Bell et al in 2007, on 406 women in mid Atlantic city, suggest that leaving the abusive relationship may not be the right solution always.

Judith Lewis Herman, in her book *Trauma and Recovery?*(1942), suggests the following reasons for a woman to continue in an abusive relationship:

- Practical Difficulties such as being financially dependent on the abuser and having nowhere to live but this was not the case of the above mentioned case studies.
- Social Conditioning such as believing that a woman's value as an individual is derived from her ability to 'keep' a man which is reinforced by living in a societies where women will be looked down on for supposedly failing to do so. Our cultural expectations are an important factor of social conditioning. Even today, in spite of technological advancement, our society still looks down upon separated women or divorced women. They fear the taboo of “a broken marriage or a broken relationship” and also are wary of carrying the blame of the break up on their shoulders. This was a baggage carried by all of them.
- Personal Beliefs such as those where a woman is unable to believe that she is worthy of being treated with respect or kindness as a result of having had her self-esteem torn to shreds by being abused. Women allow themselves to be trampled; stepped over; dominated and accept abuse as part of their life. They are unable to understand how they ought to be treated. They assume it is o k to be treated shabbily. They believe that their men have a right over them; their body; their thoughts and their freedom. They are non assertive when it comes to their personal rights and dignity within a relationship. Financial independence has no bearing on their right to live their life as they want. They are emotionally dependent on the men in their lives and unable to let go.
- Institutional Responses such as finding it difficult to convince police to file charges against the perpetrator, not having access to shelters, knowing that courts are unlikely to convict the perpetrator.

3. Discussion and Analysis

Somewhere deep within, women feel the need for protection and this, they perceive as being provided by the men. Women also tend to criticize themselves and blame themselves for the abuse as they often feel they are the cause for the man's anger. Again our society tends to blame the victim for the abuse and this has got ingrained in our women who willingly accept the blame for abuse. Many women indulge in self pity too. Women feel they have to be “handled” and allow their men to handle them the way they want. Women have also been taught to accept the aggression of men. Women generally get emotionally involved with the man they are married to or in a relationship and believe that they have to give their whole self to them.

Women who have broken away from the men find it extremely difficult to let go emotionally. They remain emotionally connected for a very long time. Moreover, they yearn for him to reconnect. There seems to be an inherent instinct in women that encourages them to get abused and continue being abused.

In Indian context, marriage is considered a sacrament and a woman does not just marry the man but she marries the whole family. It goes without saying that any woman expects and is made to believe marriages happen only once a life time and as a result an Indian woman's commitment to marriage is complete and total and this could probably be one reason why Indian women choose to stay in their marriage.

The young women mentioned, took many months to emotionally let go of their abusing men. Are women made this way? Or are they taught to behave this way? Most behavior is learned; learning through modeling or imitation. Women learn docility from the women in their lives. Right from a very young age, women in India are taught to be docile, to be patient and accept situations as they are. Unconsciously, they have been taught to accept the role of a victim in their life. It was surprising to note that all the married women as well as the young unmarried reported that they did not realize that they were being abused for a long time.

Does the responsibility of abusive relationship lie solely on the women?

No. men too play an important role in turning out to be the abusers. Why do men abuse the women they love? The need to control their spouse is one of the main factors causing domestic violence (Sunita Kishor, Kiersten Johnson, 2004). This aspect is further strengthened by Feminist theorists who argue that domestic violence is used by men to exert power and control over their female partners [(Adams, 1988, 1990; Walker, 1979, 1994) Jay Peters et al., 2002]

After observing destructive relationships for 20 years, Laura Petherbridge Guest Columnist, CBN (The Christian Broadcasting Network) discovered twelve traits that are most often exhibited by abusers.

An abuser is typically:

1. Charming

Initially, he showers his woman with praise, adoration, and attention. His courtship is sweet and intense filled with phrases such as, "I can't live without you." He quickly pushes for an exclusive relationship or engagement.

2. Jealous

He views other men as a threat to the relationship and accuses of flirting with everyone from his brother to the mailman. "I know you are looking at him." The irony is that he often is the one who is cheating.

3. Manipulative

This man is very intelligent. He knows how to detect the weak spots, and he uses his spouse's vulnerability and past pain to his advantage. "You were abused as a kid because you are so ugly."

4. Controlling

He wants to know where his spouse goes and who she is with at all times. He often refuses to allow her to work because she might "meet someone."

5. A Victim

His poor choices are everyone else's fault. When he loses his job, gets into a fight, or a business deal falls through, it's always because of the other person. He is never at fault. "You make me hit you."

6. Narcissistic

The whole world revolves around him. As the "little woman who is beneath him," it is his spouse's job to meet his every need. He is the master; she the unworthy slave. It's invigorating for him to know that everyone around him "walks on eggshells."

7. Inconsistent

Mood swings are a common trait for an abuser. One minute he seems happy and sweet, the next he is pounding his fist.

8. Critical

He can not be satisfied at all. He thinks nothing of but degrading and verbally assaulting her. "You are a stupid, fat, disgusting tramp. You can never leave me. No other man would have you."

9. Disconnected

His main goal is to isolate his victim from family and friends so that she is totally dependent on him. "Your family causes too much trouble for us. I don't want you seeing them anymore."

10. Hypersensitive

The slightest offense sends him ranting. Everyone is out to "get him."

11. Vicious and Cruel

A significant number of abusers harm children and animals as well as a partner. Inflicting pain and intimidating others is what gives him power. "I'll kill you before I'll let you go. If I can't have you, no one will."

12. Insincerely Repentant

He will swear to never "hit you again." But unless he receives professional help and strong accountability it's very unlikely that he will change.

All the men in the mentioned case studies possessed the above mentioned characteristics. Again Indian culture teaches men that they are the powerful; they are important; they are considered to be supreme. This learning causes men to develop a need to control; to dominate and to exert their power. A closer understanding of the cases mentioned indicates a personality crisis. The men who abuse are mostly experiencing emotional blocks or have certain inner struggles. Unable to tackle the same, they displace their frustration on the women who may be

their girl friend or wife. Many of them derive a sense of satisfaction of having overpowered their women at the same time many of them experience remorse after each abusive episode. But the cycle goes on.

One of the important factors contributing to the man turning abusive is his perception about women which he has developed based on his early childhood experiences, learning patterns with regard to respecting relationships and their own self concept. A man who has grown up in a family that respects women and gives her due learns to respect the women he meets in his life. A man who grows up in an environment that belittles them and abuses them, grows with a very negative concept of the fairer sex and believes that they are worth nothing. This concept is an important contributing factor that decides how the men treat the women in their life. Many a time the abuse could simply be a defense mechanism of displacement. As in the cases described above, the men were experiencing an inner struggle with regard to their failures/ their position in the family. Instead of seeking a positive solution for their struggles, they displaced their frustrations on their women and sought a secret satisfaction of having "overpowered" them. None of the men in the above cases wished to quit the relationship. They were trying to overcome their feelings of insecurity by satisfying themselves through abuse of their partner. In such cases it is important the couple seek professional help and deal with the emotional insecurity.

When this aspect is explored deeply, one realizes that most abusive men are in reality shielding their own incompetency and depicting a macho personality which is a reassurance to themselves about their power. These men do not have the courage to be aggressive to others in the outside world. In all the above mentioned cases the men were extremely well behaved individuals in their social circle which made things even more difficult for the women in terms of seeking help.

In a way the abusive men were victims of their own defense mechanism. Solutions to domestic violence and abusive relationships have to be reached through multiple sources. Although legal support is one possible solution, many women are unwilling to end the marriage. Men too are not prepared for such a step. In such a scenario, multi level approaches have to be planned out. It is important that women DECIDE not get abused anymore. Women need to begin to feel secure from within and not depend on a man for security. Women need to believe in the Shakti potential in them and utilize it to regain their lost status. Women need to believe that they are already empowered and they just need to awaken their empowered self and deal with life and the relationship it offers in an assertive manner. They need to begin to love and respect themselves and take care that they are not indulged in to any act that demeans their dignity or self respect.

Firstly all the members require individual counseling. The family as a unit requires therapy to heal and to get closer to one another. As members of the society, the society needs to wake up and reach out to the victims instead of pointing fingers at them. Many studies especially the ones conducted in India focus only on the legal assistance and medical assistance to be provided. Psycho social intervention as an important part of victim assistance is sadly neglected. In fact this is one assistance that may be required for a much longer time than the others. Hence this intervention ought to be given more importance and recommended by family, friends and other professional bodies as the first intervention in handling domestic violence.

Women need to be made aware of their empowered status and guided to utilize their empowerment especially with regard to mental and emotional empowerment. Men require help to work on their incompetency, change in their mindset with regard to women and develop better tolerance levels.

At the community level, various organisations need to work towards a shift in perception of women. Every male member needs to learn to respect women and give her due. Male members expressing derogatory remarks about women need to be severely punished. Punishments for the erring male have to be prompt, stringent and appropriate enough to act a deterrent. Simultaneously they also need to be provided psycho social interventions and helped to get rid of the abusing role. This step is sadly lacking in our system. The reason to abuse has to be explored and dealt with professionally. The women would require the support of their extended families in approaching mental health professionals for help.

Last but not the least women have to learn to stand up for each other, support each other and stop blaming each other for any abuse. Women need to derive the strength from within and from each other to fight the injustice they are being subjected to. The women mentioned in the case studies empowered themselves with the help of counseling and therapies and learnt to deal with the abuse. As a result they succeeded in convincing their husbands(two of them) to seek professional help. The same helped improve their family life and they succeeded in devictimising themselves.

It is essential that more research be conducted to understand the educated and financially independent victims especially in India to understand the cause of abuse and their reluctance to seek help and their awareness with regard to importance of psycho social intervention in such situations.

4. Conclusion

A multi rehabilitative approach, as a solution to domestic violence may be summarized as follows:

- Considering professional psychological help consisting of therapeutic counseling as an important intervention
- Availability of easy psycho social intervention strategies and professionals
- Avenues that help and focus on women empowerment.
- A community level awakening and intervention to change the common man's perspective towards the issue of domestic violence to perceive the woman as a victim requiring assistance and support and not as an individual to be ostracized.

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