

Love Should not hurt-Why Women stay in an abusive relationship?

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October 05, 2022

Abstract

Domestic violence is physical, sexual, or psychological abuse directed towards one's spouse, partner, or other family member within the household. Domestic abuse is a pattern of one person exerting coercive control over another. The one who abuses, uses physical and sexual threats, emotional insults, and financial deprivation to control and manipulate the victims. The aggression might be intermittent, infrequent, or chronic in nature. Violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women causes major public health problems and violations of women's human rights. According to the World Health Organization, globally about 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide suffer either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Worldwide, almost one third (27%) of women aged 15-49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have faced mild to severe forms of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. (WHO, 2021).

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"With emotional abuse, the insults, insinuations, criticism, and accusations slowly eat away at the victim's self-esteem until he or she is incapable of judging a situation realistically. "He or she may begin to believe that there is something wrong with them or even fear they are losing their mind." ("Beverly Engel Quotes (Author of Healing Your Emotional Self)") They have become so beaten down emotionally that they blame themselves for the abuse."

Beverly Engel (Author) The Emotionally Abusive Relationship

Introduction

In India there is an increasing trend of Intimate partner violence against women. Even when we were facing unprecedented COVID outbreak globally, in our country, data shows police receiving 112,292 complaints from women or one every five minutes against violence. Amid a raging pandemic, the number of women reaching out to the National Commission for Women to report violence and harassment within their homes has shown a significant rise in 2021 when compared to 2020. In the second year of the pandemic, the commission received 30,865 complaints of which 72.5% (22,379) fall in three categories - to secure their right to live with dignity (36%); protection from domestic violence (21.6%); and matters of harassment of married women including for dowry (15%) as quoted by WHO 2021.

It is unfortunate that globally there is a trend showing violence against women; with World Health Organization, claiming that one out of every three women in the world subjected to gender-based violence, the majority of which perpetrated by intimate partners.

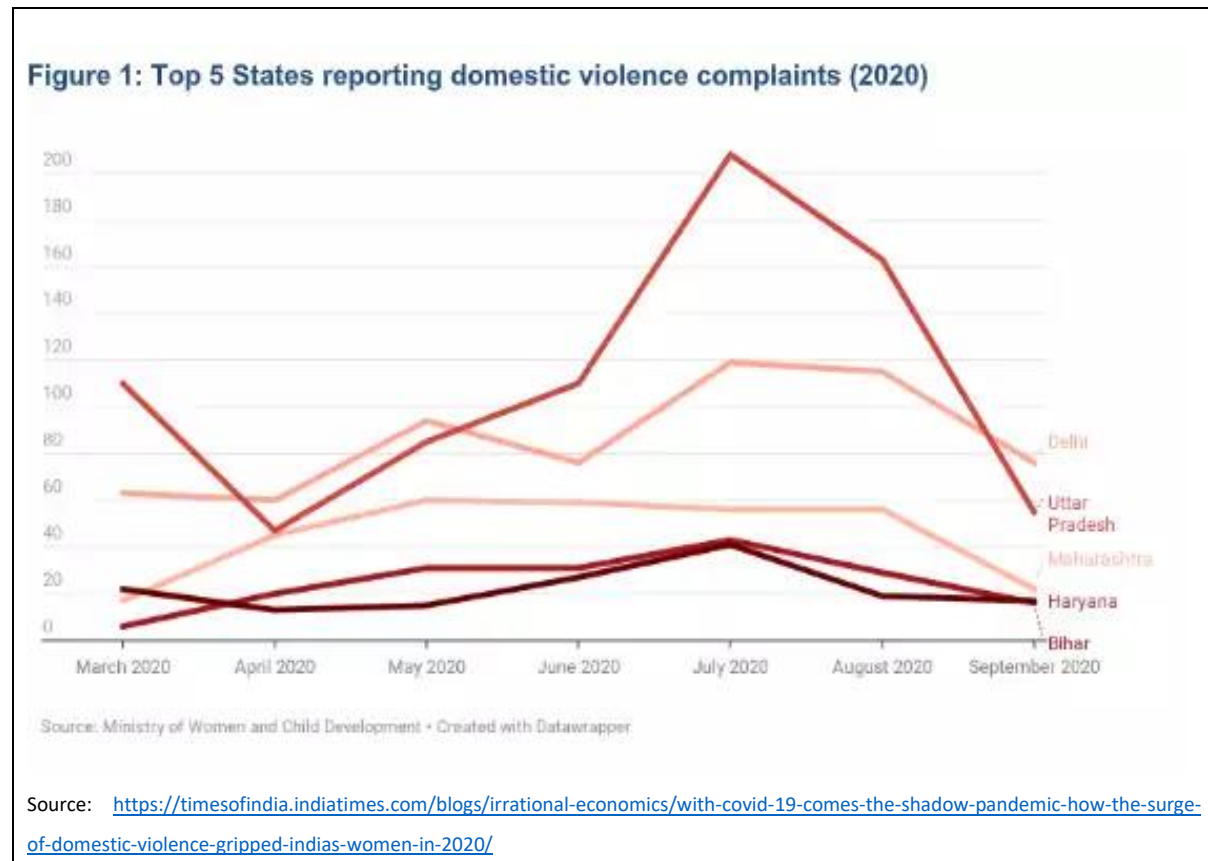
From a social lens, gender-based violence has passed on from generations, with women mostly being at the receiving end. The most recent results from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS5), the government's most thorough household survey on Indian society, are eye-opening as shown by Kanougiya, S., et. al (2021).

It shows how more than over 40% of women and 38% of men said it was OK for a man to beat his wife if she mistreated her in-laws, ignored her home or children, went out without letting him know, rejected sex, or did not cook, according to government pollsters. "More than 77 percent of women in four states justified hitting their wives." ("40 % Women and 38% Men in India Find Domestic Violence Acceptable in ...")

What comes as a shock is how culturally more women than men justify wife beating in most states, and more women than men thought it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife if she did not cook correctly in every state except Karnataka.

Although the statistics have decreased since the earlier poll five years ago, when 52 percent of women and 42 percent of men justified wife beating, the attitudes have not, according to Amita Pitre, who heads Oxfam India's gender justice programme (Fatima, et. al 2018).

According to her, patriarchy is at the foundation of violence against women, as well as its justification. Because women are an inferior gender in India, there is widespread acceptance of intimate partner violence as shown in Figure 1 below.



Socio-cultural perspective on how a woman needs to behave (example- mostly dependent to the male, look after the family, children and make peace at home) and not behave (example- no discord with husband or in-laws, earn less than her husband) are moral values passed down to newer generations. Also, “Patriarchy enforces gender norms, and women internalise the same views, their beliefs get formed by the family and society,” says Amita Pitre, explaining why more women excuse wife abuse. A common question often thought if not asked by well-wishers is “why is she still in the relationship”? There are judgements a woman must face when she speaks up both culturally and psychologically. Reactions from looking weak to being the instigator of raging her partner are commonly cited by women who then prefer to stay away from judgments as much as she can. Research points to pertinent themes across cultures explaining why an abused woman continues to stay in an Intimate relationship as discussed below:

False Beliefs: an abused woman feels it is their fault and that is why it is happening to them. Other reason it by using self-blame statements like “I deserved it,” and, “I was ashamed, embarrassed, and blamed myself because I thought I triggered him.” And for others they minimize the abuse to cope with their trauma with statements like “[I stayed] because I did not think that emotional and financial abuse was really abuse. and “Because I didn’t know what he did to me was rape.” She may stay because she loves him, and he regrets the violence. She may want to try to make the relationship work and help him to change. (“Why Women Stay in Abusive Relationships”)

Injured Self: women commonly discuss low self-esteem that is poor self-worth in the relationship. It is clear from statements like “He made me believe I was worthless and alone,” and, “I felt I had done something wrong, and I deserved it.” (“Eight Reasons Women Stay in Abusive Relationships | Family ...”) Their self-respect is not equal to those of their partners.

Angst: there is always a constant state of panic when their partners are around expecting unpredictable attack and humiliation. Women are aware it is not easy leaving the relationship as manipulation and blackmailing (threat to them and their loved ones) brings them back.

Protector of the relationship: women see themselves as “fixer” or “saviour” in the relationship to mend wrongdoings of their partners. This attitude to be “forgiving” and starting new every time there is an abuse stands out in statements like “I believed I could love the abuse out of him.” Others described internal values or commitments to the marriage or partner when they say “I thought I would be the strong one who would never leave him and show him loyalty. (“8 Reasons Women Stay in Abusive Relationships - Psychology Today”)

For the sake of family/children: women from the point of view of being protective towards their children face their partner’s fury so that children do not have to face it. They tell reasons like “I stayed for 20 years while I protected our children all while I was being abused” while others mention staying to benefit the children: “I wanted my son to have a father.”

Intergenerational Violence hence acceptance: as children women have seen troubled marriages thus assume this is how intimate relationships work. They discuss how they “have watched [dad] beat mom. Then they found someone just like dad.”

Financial dependency: women explain self and children’s financial dependency to keep them in an abusive relationship. Even financially independent women feel manipulated by their partner and as she is in a relationship, she is not aware where to go.

Isolation from family: due to embarrassment or harassment by their partners keeps women away from their closed ones. Their cut off from their social support is the commitment in the relationship.

Tarnishing her partner’s image: assuming violence is temporary she feels ashamed to bring the “bad side” of her partner’s personality out in the open.

Divorce is not an option: she is scared as she is not keen to take the bold step due to fear of financial burden, nuisance of following up with case proceedings and judgements from family and friends.

The Cycle of Abuse: after every abusive incident comes a make-up honeymoon phase. Often when an abusive situation happens, partner follows it by doing something nice or apologizing and promising that they will never do it again. This makes her minimize the original abusive behavior.

Society perpetuates a ride-or-die mindset: Those in unhealthy relationships might stay with their partner or get back together after a breakup because they feel pressure to not give up, forgive and forget or “ride it out.” “There is incredible pressure to be in a perfect relationship, and some cultures and social media only accentuate this pressure.” (“11 Reasons Why People in Abusive Relationships Can't 'Just Leave'”)

Fear of Judgement: to talk openly about an abuse floods an overwhelmed person with judgement, blame, feeling marginalized, pitied upon, or looked down on. For example, at times in LGBTQIA* relationships, someone may stay with their partner for fear of being outcasted.

No life outside the relationship: women discuss shared interests, children, home, finances, social circle as a major reason to stay. They are unable to see themselves outside a life they created with their partner thus continue to stay and pray for a miracle of change in their lives.

WHY DO PEOPLE STAY IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS?

“Why don’t they just leave?” It’s a common question people who have NOT been in abusive relationships ask. But there are many reasons people stay and endure domestic abuse. These are just a few:

FEAR Domestic violence victims worry that if they leave, that partner might retaliate with violence.	SHAME Victims might be too embarrassed to admit they’ve been abused.	FAULT They might believe the abuse is their fault.
FAMILY The abuser and abused may share children and worry that fracturing the family will destroy a child’s life.	FINANCES The abused may be financially dependent on the abuser, and worry fleeing would leave them in financial ruin.	NORMAL The victim may not know what a healthy relationship looks like, and see this behavior as normal.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/MCADVdotORG/photos/why-do-people-stay-in-abusive-relationships-there-are-many-reasons-why-people-stay/1322816381215047/>

Discussion

Domestic violence is physical, sexual, or psychological abuse directed towards one’s spouse, partner, or other family member within the household. Domestic abuse is a pattern of one person exerting coercive control over another. The one who abuses, uses physical and sexual threats, emotional insults, and financial deprivation to control and manipulate the victims. The aggression might be

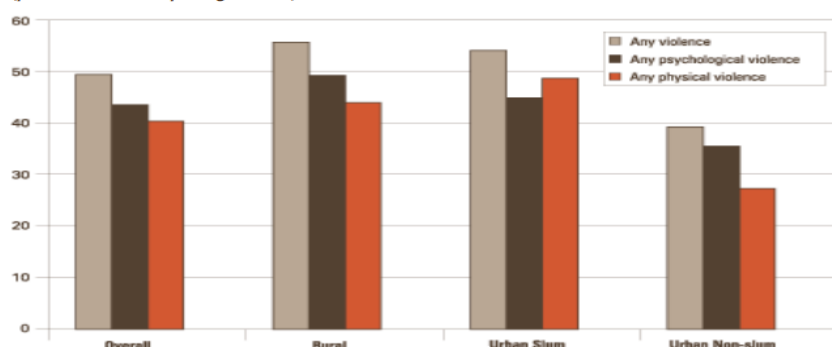
intermittent, infrequent, or chronic in nature. Violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence and sexual violence against women causes major public health problems and violations of women's human rights. According to the World Health Organization, globally about 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide suffer either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Worldwide, almost one third (27%) of women aged 15-49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have faced mild to severe forms of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. (WHO, 2021)

The International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), in collaboration with Indian researchers, summarizes the research studies in India on domestic violence against women in 2000. The graph cited in the report (ICRW, 2000) shows percentage of women reporting violence.

Violence can negatively affect women's physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health. The 2013 analysis found that women who have experienced intimate partner violence were twice as likely to

Domestic Violence in India: A Summary Report of a Multi-Site Household Survey

Figure 1
Overall Prevalence of Violence
(percent of women reporting violence)



Source: Cited in International Centre for Research on Women and The Centre for Development and Population Activities.

experience depression and problem drinking. (WHO, 2021)

These information and statistical data show the severity in consequences of violence as a challenging barrier to women's development, with serious negative impact on their physical and mental health. In our society, victims of domestic violence continue to stay in their intimate relationship finding probing questions embarrassing as to why they stay even when the relationship is harming them.

In the view of this, main goal of this paper is to understand why women continue to stay in intimate partner violence.

In our society complex and interconnected institutionalized, social, and cultural factors have kept women particularly vulnerable to the violence directed at them. These factors show unequal power relations between men and women within family and social context. These unequal power relations are influenced by socio-economic forces, the family institution where power relations are enforced, fear of and control over female sexuality, belief in the inherent superiority of males, and legislation and cultural sanctions that have traditionally denied women an independent social status. (Sanjeev Kumar, 2019)

As per research publications and reports, women do stay in domestic violence due to economic dependency to be the central reason. Women who lack the financial means to support themselves stay in violent situations and are unable to be free of abuse. Women do not like the choice of separation or divorce due to deeply ingrained values and culture. They are also afraid of the repercussions of reporting abuse and express a desire to avoid the stigma of a battered women. Women suffer silently within the four walls of their houses due to a lack of information about alternatives. Unfortunately, women may think that they deserve violence because they did something wrong. (Ravneet Kaur, 2008)

The stereotypes of gender roles have continued over the ages and an Indian woman sadly adopts contradictory roles. On one hand, she is the source of strength and support to ensure that she effectively plays her traditional roles of nurturance as daughters, mothers, wives, and daughters-in-laws. While, on the other hand, the stereotype of “a weak and helpless woman” ensures patriarchy. Childhood conditioning to violence between parents and close family members strengthens “no harm” belief in intimate relationships. The primary role for women has been marriage and motherhood. In the settlement of marriage, it preferred that the woman is younger, nonworking, and less educated than her husband. Thus, the “brother-sister” or “father-daughter” model continues into marriage with the husband having the right to dominate and discipline his wife. (Sharma, 2015)

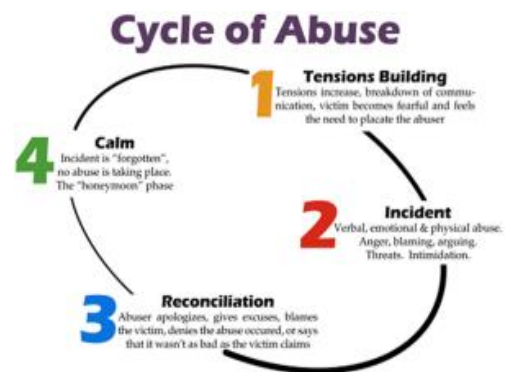
Women from higher castes may be more worried about social shame and less likely to show physical violence. The ICRW research shows that 75% of women who stay silent cite worry for their husband's and family's honour as the key reason for their silence. Abused women often felt they had little options, especially when they could not get help from their parents.

Abused partners report that they considered fleeing or committing suicide, but that these alternatives were out of the question because of their young children and a lack of places to go. Women cannot always return to their birthplace, and divorce is not an option. Lower caste women may have nowhere to turn since they have limited access to and control over economic resources. The impression that violent conduct is "normal" in a married relationship was the most prevalent explanation women gave for sticking with their husbands. (ICRW, 2000).

The cultural construct of traditional society discourages women from approaching formal support systems, and at the same time, the formal support system in India is neither fully developed nor friendly.

Apart from all the above mentioned larger social aspects, an individual's personal agency plays a huge role in their perceived sense of control on their response to abuse. Studies conducted globally as well as on Indian context on help seeking behaviour in survivors of intimate partner violence. Help seeking behaviours come from external locus of control, passivity, lack of critical thinking skills, learned

helplessness. Lack of awareness among the women about, whom to approach for help itself a barrier. Women reported getting only limited support from family, friends, or neighbours. (Narasimha, 2019). Based on learned helplessness, a theory explains victims of domestic violence called the theory of cyclic abuse, a cycle that is sometimes known as battered women syndrome. In this theory, a relationship in which domestic violence has occurred is likely to continually involve violence in a predictable and repetitious pattern (Rakovec-Felser, 2014).



When the abuse is in a continuing cycle, no matter what they do, they are likely to feel completely helpless and unable to avoid the abuse. *Source: Positive Psychology (learned helplessness)*

Information, attitude, and action

India's first domestic violence law (The Protection of Women from Domestic Abuse Act, 2005) went into effect in January, protecting the rights of women who are victims of violence. The key difficulty today is enforcing it in the actual meaning. A bill alone will not prevent domestic violence; we need a shift in thinking, via a variety of tactics.

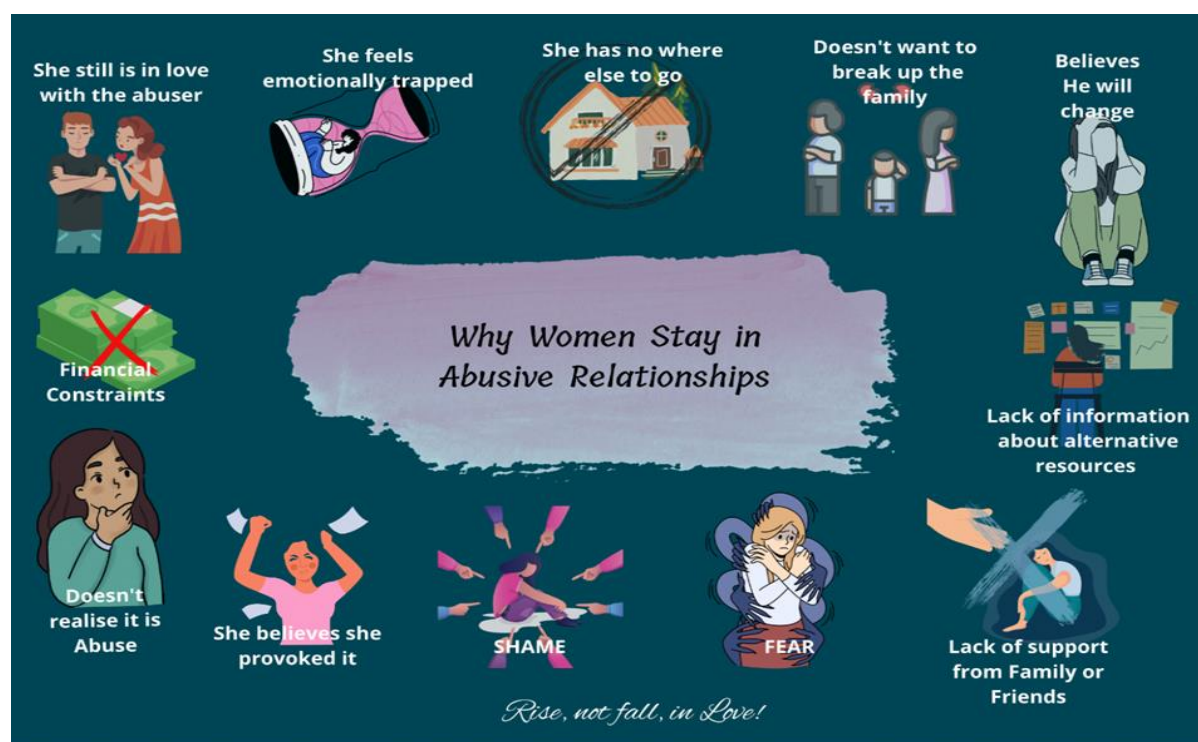
Gender-sensitive education focused on males, the establishment of women's groups to reduce isolation and strengthen power, and the use of mass media to promote more balanced, and to investigate healthy conceptions of male-female interactions. It is important to underline the need of growing male accountability in ending domestic violence. Efforts to improve the well-being of women via psychological and therapeutic treatment, as well as medical services and facilities needed. As a result, psychological issues concerning a woman's worries of added violence, the conflicts she may be experiencing about staying with the abuser, worry for her children, and her own poor self-identity need consideration.

The role of mental health professionals and media is immense, and inter-sectoral collaboration with the policymakers and legal services is the key. Change is possible through collective efforts through socially committed interventions aiming at increasing awareness, empowering women, deconstructing the maladaptive social constructs, mental health literacy, instillation of hope, care for survivors to preserve their autonomy, personal agency and widening their choices.

Conclusion

The occurrence of domestic violence / intimate partner violence and its multiple consequences on individuals, family and community seen from social perspective which demands first order change on setting up formal measures like health care, legal support, and psychological care as well as second

order radical change on causal factors. We can strengthen our values of non-violence, equal rights, freedom, and dignity for every human being by holding on to the framework of Human Rights of India.



Source: Author's original work

Declarations

Ethical Approval: Data used for this write-up was secondary in nature. There was no requirement for ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board.

Informed Consent: This study did not involve subjects. Therefore, there was no need for informed consent.

Conflict of Interest: The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Links

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