

Psychosocial Understanding of Domestic Violence and its Impact on Mental Health of Women in India

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Abstract

The present paper explores the issue of domestic violence experienced by 21st-century women in India. The causes of domestic violence lie in the deep-rooted systemic, societal, and cultural norms. Hence, the paper explores the root cause of violence as well as the psychosocial factors contributing to domestic violence and its impact on women's mental health. Several research studies and survey reports that, there is an increased rate of domestic violence against women in India; hence, the overall data as well as pandemic data is discussed in the present article. Also, recommendations are discussed to manage domestic violence and its impact on women's mental health.

Key Words: Domestic Violence, Women, Mental Health, Psychosocial perspective

Introduction:

Every human being has the right to live safely regardless of their gender, age, caste, class, religion. Even today, however, some of these factors affect the human right to live. To name a few, Gender disparity can be considered one of the significant factors which compromises the right of women to secure life in today's century. This paper focuses on understanding the issue that creates a lot many challenges for women even in today's global society. One of the important issues faced by women is domestic violence. In Indian society women are given a priority in some cultures, goddesses are being worshiped, women are considered as a crucial part of the development of the country, today's century women are moving forward in different fields and trying to explore opportunities to make their identity beyond the roles and responsibilities assigned to their gender. Women are taking efforts to

come out and work with their full potential in the male-dominant supremacy. However, they still have to deal with some of the problems that have plagued society for so long. One such problem that is observed in India every day is violence against women. Violence against women and its variants are many, it is seen in different settings like an office, households as well as in multiple social gatherings and events. Domestic violence is one of the oldest forms of violence against women and even today women in India is the victim of it.

One of the great Indian philosophers, Swami Vivekanand stated that "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the situation of women is improved". Every woman in the world has the right to a dignified and secure life, but women still suffer from global problems like domestic violence. In India, for the safety of women, there are rules and regulations to improve their situation, like the Domestic Violence Act (2005) which

was established for the protection of women but even today women have to endure domestic violence with great intensity. Hence, it is important to look at the reasons why women have been enduring domestic violence despite the laws and punishments. Domestic violence involves violence against all genders, sexual orientations, however, research has shown that majority of the women are the victim of it even today. This paper explores the various psychosocial factors contributing to the issue of domestic violence. Domestic violence is carried out in various different forms at multiple levels of society. Some of the types or forms are physical violence, psychological abuse, harassment, neglect, exploitation, verbal, emotional, sexual abuse by the partner, humiliation, slapping, etc. The National network to end domestic violence (2011) also state that domestic violence does not necessarily mean physical, it can also be kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, harassment, stalking, etc.³

Domestic Violence Against Women in India:

There are many different surveys conducted in different parts of India to get a deeper understanding of this concern. A research survey conducted in Pune found that women living in slum areas have 22.9 percent experiences of domestic violence, whereas women staying in non-slums areas have 14 percent experiences of domestic violence, (Ruikar, Pratinidhi, 2008, cited in ⁶) This is a reflection of socioeconomic status, area of living being the contributing risk factors for domestic violence. In 2020, when the lockdown was imposed, during that time national women's commission received 5,297 complaints of domestic violence in India. The NCRB(2005) reports that an average

of 160 women experiences domestic violence every day.⁸ Studies have found that the prevalence of domestic violence against women in rural India is 20-50 percent (Schuler et al, 1996 and Jejeebhoy, 1998)¹⁰ National Family Health Survey (2005-2006) found that a substantial number of married women has experienced abuse by the husband at some time in their lives.⁸ Thomson Reuters Foundation conducted a worldwide survey and found out that India is the fourth most unsafe country for women to live in.¹⁵ Therefore, it is important to understand these issues in India.

Prevalence of Domestic Violence Against Women during COVID-19 Pandemic:

Studies have found an increased rate of domestic violence against women during the COVID-19 Pandemic, where all the family members were at home for the longest duration and women were also trapped in the same environment. Graham and Harrison et. al (2020) stated that during the pandemic, India was observed to have an increased number of domestic violence cases.⁵ Delhi, the capital of India reported around 2500 calls received on emergency helpline about violence against women and 1612 calls among them were of domestic violence. (Hindustan Times, 2020). The NCW data states that there was an increase in domestic violence against women during the lockdown, however, NCRB reports states that cases registered by the police recorded a decrease in cases of domestic violence in the country. According to NCRB, 446 cases were reported of domestic violence which was less compared to 2019 data.⁷ The reason for it was observed that in the year 2020, lockdown restrictions were imposed. Hence, considering the lack of

support system for women, they were away from the resources needed to report the case of domestic violence. It was also noted that as restrictions were relaxed, women started coming in greater numbers to report the cases of violence.⁷ These surveys show that despite any new epidemics, the old concern like domestic violence and their severity is still there and women are suffering.

Psychosocial Factors determining Domestic Violence:

Humans are considered to be a social animal, so they have been accustomed to living in environments like home, society, community, and with family. In India, a collectivistic culture is cherished, so the need for safety, belongingness is expected to be fulfilled in the household setting. Sometimes these needs are met but most of the time in such an environment women have to face a lot of problems. Hence, even today the question arises if a woman of this century is safe from domestic violence. If we look at domestic violence from a psychological and social point of view, we can see the grains of domestic violence today even in the 21st century, however, the roots of this lie in ancient culture, history. Women were delighted in having an equal position with men in the early Vedic period. However, the status of women began to decrease with the Mughal era when women were not treated equally, they were considered inferior to men. After independence many steps were taken, policies, programs were implemented to improve the status of women. However, even in today's century, there seems to be a gap between existing policies and their implementation. Women have been viewed from a point of view as if they are weak, vulnerable, unable to fight for themselves. Also, because India

has a family-oriented culture, women were kept dependent on the family for everything and are controlled first by the father, then by husband, and later by the children.

If domestic violence is studied from a psychosocial point of view, a deeper understanding can be developed. Like, when a person commits an act or behaves in a certain way, ex. the act of violence, it is based on various aspects like their own experiences, values, attitudes, needs, etc. India being a country of the male-dominant culture, the need to exert power, control is also one of the important factors leading to the act of domestic violence. Gender theories have found that considering the male dominant society and sociological aspects of patriarchy, domestic violence against women exists on a higher scale (Robertson and Maruachver, 2007)¹. Evolutionary psychologists claim that the male gender feels the need to protect the females from other males, they need to show aggression to gain greater control over the partner. Males having more aggression against the female gender is often a reflection of male reproductive striving (Burgess and Draper 1989, Daly and Wilson 1988)¹³. This can be a reason for men being more dominant towards women. Women are targeted by other family members or by intimate male partners to express repressed feelings such as anger, hatred, power which were not expressed elsewhere. The acceptance of a belief that male being superior and women being inferior in a way acts as a booster for the ideas of such violent expression. Social tolerance or acceptance of violent behaviour is likely to be learned in childhood, through the exposure to harsh physical discipline, witnessing the father beating the mother during childhood.¹⁰ As Psychologist Bandura's Social learning

theory describes, individuals learn about a new behaviour by observing other's behaviour. Violence is transmitted from one generation to another in a very cyclical way (Crowell and Sugarman, 1996)³. Sometimes the family history of hostility, resentment, and childhood trauma can also be the contributing factors for domestic violence. Witnessing violence in families can be one of the reasons for the perpetrator to learn about violence as accepted behaviour to carry forward in adulthood. This reflects how a perpetrator's experiences, familial environment, representation of female, defines their values, moral system and determine their behaviour or acts of violence.

The social, cultural norms of patriarchy, masculinity are some of the dominant factors contributing to domestic violence since ancient times and even today in the 21st century. Murthy et al, (2004) state that there are a number of factors that contribute to domestic violence, some of them are, family members, types of families, types of marriages, lack of education.¹² At times domestic violence can be a result of a complex interaction between various factors like social, biological, psychological, cultural, religious etc. Ecological Model by Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979),

Fig1, helps in exploring the risk factors and understanding the multifaceted nature of violence.¹⁴ The model informs about four levels, first is the individual level which involves biological and personal history that influences individuals' behaviour, acts and likelihood of becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Individual factors involve personal history, demographic characteristics, psychological or personality disorders, substance use, history of abuse, aggression experienced at an individual level. The second level of the ecological model involves relationships with family, friends. Also, having friends who engage in violence or who encourage violence, this can also influence the risk of being a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence. The third level involves community contexts in which social relationships occur, such as schools, neighbourhoods, residential mobility, some characteristics of these settings can also have an impact on the risk for violence. The fourth level involves societal factors that help create a climate where domestic or any kind of violence is either encouraged or inhibited, ex. availability of weapons, cultural norms. This model shows how women can experience domestic violence at a different level since childhood and for a lifetime. These levels can be the determining factors, reasons, or risk factors for domestic violence.

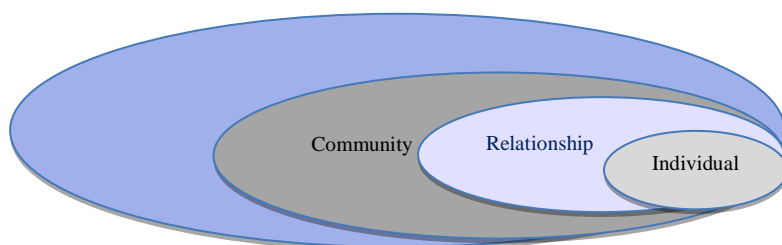


Fig 1. Ecological Model for understanding Violence

(Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1977), cited in World report on violence and health: summary. World Health Organization, 2002)

Impact of Domestic Violence on Women's Mental Health:

Any form of violence can have a long-lasting impact on an individual. When women experience domestic violence it's a traumatic experience for them. Gerlock (1999) found that women experience various physical and mental health concerns which are related to domestic violence.¹ Most of the time the impact of domestic violence on physical health is observed by women or people around her but the impact on mental health is often being neglected. Hence, it is important to understand the 'invisible' yet a very deep impact on violence on women's mental health. Many studies have found some of the common effects of domestic violence on mental health, which are, depression, mood disorder, personality disorder. Women do experience physical injury post the incident of domestic violence; however, they also experience an emotional injury which is much more damaging. (Hill et al 2009)¹. The psychological impact or effects of this kind of violence on mental health involve, nightmares, anxiety, depression, self-harm. It is found that women who have lower autonomy and freedom to express themselves are more likely to experience violence than women with high autonomy and freedom of expression. Psychological disorders can make women prone to repeat victimization, and this also has an impact on the long-term health of women with more injuries, sleeping and eating disorders, social dysfunction, and suicidal behaviour (Howard et al, 2010; McCaw et al., 2007).¹

Domestic violence not only affects the mental health of women but their thoughts, feelings, attitudes towards themselves.

When negative things are told to an individual constantly, when they feel or experience it, at times they tend to internalize it, and when a woman has to face violence, she gets injured, mentally manipulated, and blamed. When she starts internalizing the blame, criticism has an impact on her self-worth, self-esteem. After experiencing domestic violence, women may have extreme trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and are likely to experience loneliness due to lack of social support. PTSD can also be combined with the feeling of guilt, body/self-image concerns, flashbacks, environmental triggers, sleeping problems, eating problems. (Abbot and Williamson, 1999; Howard, Trevillion, & Agnew-Davies, 2010; McCaw et al. 2007)¹ When women experience domestic violence at a greater frequency, she may start perceiving herself as a victim and may start believing that abuse or violence is a normal part of her life. Domestic violence can have an impact on women's physical health, mental health, mood, behaviour, day-to-day functioning etc.¹

The silence and invisibility around the concern of domestic violence especially within the families and in non-urban areas result in perpetrators not being accountable for their actions (Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre, 2015)⁴ This and other studies reflect that sometimes in certain situations women are observed to justify the actions of perpetrators and normalize domestic violence. Whereas in some other situations women are resisting violence in whatever capacity they can every single day. Women at all levels experience violence but are trying to cope with it by their small acts of resistance, however, domestic violence is still taking

an immense toll on their physical and mental health.

Recommendations to Manage the Issue of Domestic Violence and its Impact on Women's Mental Health:

A few recommendations that may help to manage the concern of domestic violence and its impact are, building awareness about violence, informing women about assertive communication, their rights, boundary setting, building social support for them. Gender sensitization by parents and teachers is needed from an early age. Also, how women are portrayed in media needs to be changed so that they can promote gender quality. At a societal level, providing equitable access to goods, services and opportunities for women is a must. Prevention of domestic violence needs to be done in social, educational policies to promote respect for women. From a psychological perspective, a few interventions like premarital counselling, training or awareness building on the safety of women can be done.³ Along with this, informing women about seeking professional help for their safety and mental health is important. Identifying risk factors, triggers in the household and eradicating them is a must but at the same time building on some protective factors is also important. Given the consequences of domestic violence on the mental health of

women, it is imperative for them to stand up for themselves. The cause of domestic violence in India is a complex interaction of many social, environmental, cultural, psychological factors. Hence, the ecological model also suggests that the prevention of such violence should happen at several different levels. Lastly, implementing the women's protection laws and rights is equally crucial to maintain the safety, security, and respect of women in 21st-century and protect them as well as their mental health from domestic violence.

Conclusion:

Although the concern of domestic violence against women is one of the oldest concerns, it is still a rising concern in today's 21st century. Hence, exploring this issue from a psychological, social, systemic perspective may help in understanding the different causes, effects of violence at a different level and accordingly interventions can be developed for the safety of women in India. These perspectives can be considered while making and implementing the policies. Identifying the causes of such issues and its impact is a must; however, developing a psychosocial perspective and then dealing with these issues can be a way to move forward towards the protection of women.

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