

# *Domestic Violence: Towards a New Theoretical Approach*

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The discussion in this paper is confined to four major types of domestic violence: wife-battering, wife burning, exploitation and humiliation of widows, and child abuse. Data on each of these four types were collected through an empirical study in selected cities from one state in western India. The total number of cases studied on wife-battering was 133, on bride-burning was 93, on widows was 190 and on child abuse was 167.

## **Wife-battering**

When a husband who is supposed to love and protect his wife beats her, slaps her, or kicks her, it becomes a shattering experience for the wife. This beating may be for her refusal to obey her husband's advice or command, for her extravagance, for using vile and disgusting language, for neglecting husband's parents or siblings, or for satisfying her husband's complexes. Beatings may be occasional or frequent. In many cases, they start soon after the marriage. Since the problem of wife-battering is concealed from the public eye, it is difficult to estimate its extent in society. Marriage in every society is based on the feeling of companionship. In Indian society, however, the woman enters into marriage with old values and convictions. She is expected to shift her loyalties from parents and siblings to husband and in-laws. After marriage she has no independent social or economic status of her own. Her social status is directly determined by and is dependent on her husband's status in the family. In low and middle-income groups, illiterate and less educated and economically dependent wives are made to feel empty and meaningless. Whenever a family runs into problems, such problems are generally attributed to her. For all marital problems also, it is the

wife who is criticised for maladjustment. Marital violence is mostly directed by the husband against the wife. The wife prefers to tolerate victimisation and remains docile. The girl's childhood training and experiences in adolescence condition her to such oppression and suffering.

My empirical study found that:

- it is not only economically dependent housewives who are battered by their husbands;
- family structure, presence or absence of children and the size of the family have little correlation with wife-battering;
- the husband's occupation and family income make no difference in wife-battering;
- there is no significant relationship between the fact of beating and the educational level of the victim, but illiterate and less educated women and women belonging to low income families are battered more frequently than highly educated or middle-class women;
- the behaviour of wife-batterers is mostly learned. There is a correlation between growing up in a violent home and violent behaviour as an adult. Early socialisation to violence teaches and reinforces violence as a method of conflict-resolution or as a coping mechanism (*see also* Bandura 1973);
- husbands who batter their wives are mostly neither attached to their families nor committed to their family roles;
- use of alcohol in wife-battering is only a 'cooperative' factor rather than the 'basic' or 'chief' factor;
- the high-risk category of women physically battered by their husbands are women who are conservative, submissive, unintelligent, irrational and who lack confidence in self and have a weak ego;
- the high-risk category of batterers are those men who have conservative attitudes towards women, who have uncontrolled jealousy, who had faced battering in childhood, who are depressed and insecure, and who suffer from status frustrations;
- battered wives do not seek any police protection or any help from neighbours. This is the reason that the severity of violent acts in wife-battering cannot be assessed in a society like India. The reasons are that however violent the beating may be, the wives generally suffer in silence and avoid hospitalisation.

## **Bride-burning**

Dowry is banned by a 1961 act, yet dowry deaths are on the increase. Indian weddings are occasions for conspicuous spending and this is related to the maintenance of what is believed to be the status of the family. Marriage is the time when the groom's family makes up all the losses and plans to live the good life on the demands they make from the bride's kith and kin. Even after paying dowry, girls' parents are not sure whether their daughters will lead a happy married life. About 43 700 cases of crimes against women were registered in 1990 in whole of India. Dowry deaths constituted 5.4 per cent of these total crimes against women. An exhibitionist culture has induced dowry-based marriages in which better positioned bridegrooms are highly rated and demanded in the matrimonial market. Demands are made after the marriage for cash, vehicles, gold and electronic goods. It is not only parents-in-law who torture young brides to bring more money from their parents, husbands also start abusing their wives. Young brides are humiliated, tortured and even burnt alive for failing to bring the expected dowry. They are physically beaten, denied food, verbally abused, and made to work like slaves. They are not allowed to visit their parents and sometimes even locked up in a room.

Parents of brides by and large do not make any efforts to save their daughters from being tortured by their in-laws because they feel that their daughter's real home is her in-laws' home, that daughters are 'guests' in their parental homes and that parents should never interfere in their daughter's affairs after marriage. Our empirical study also revealed that in a large number of cases, even after the marriage of their daughter, parents continue to meet with the demands of her in-laws. The parents who could not help their daughters were poor, had more daughters to marry, and were ignorant of the ill-treatment of their daughters.

The major findings of my empirical study of bride-burning are:

- the majority of brides who were burnt were between 21 and 25-years-old;
- in a large number of cases (88.2 per cent), brides were killed within three years of their marriage;
- ill-treatment and humiliation of brides by their in-laws started soon after marriage;
- in most of the cases (61.3 per cent), the brides' parents knew about the ill-treatment of their daughters by their in-laws but did not encourage their daughters to leave their husbands;
- in a majority of cases (57.2 per cent), the victims of burning died before reaching the hospital;
- in about one-fourth of cases, the victim was able to give a dying statement (26.9 per cent);

- in a large number of cases (62.4 per cent), the victim's husband was involved in burning her;
- the victim's parents were generally not satisfied with the police investigation and felt that the police had colluded with the offenders' families;
- three main methods were adopted in killing the victims: burning, strangulation, and beating and then setting on fire.

## **Violence against Widows**

Widowhood is both a personal condition and a social status. The life of a widow is made miserable by the norms of patriarchy. She faces emotional trauma, familial exploitation and social stigma. She has to find new support systems, new sources of attachment, and new social networks, which are often difficult. She has to adjust to in-laws, find some job for supporting her young children and face the 'male gaze', seductive overtones and even molestation. However, the problem of widows has been ignored by the researchers, reformers and social scientists.

In traditional Indian society, involvement in social roles, social relationships, and support systems is not determined by choice or through life events but by family, caste, and social norms. A widow's life is dependent upon her in-laws, her parents, siblings, and relatives. The traditional culture discourages her from any assertive social engagement outside of the private domestic sphere of the home. The widow is poorly evaluated by her in-laws and others in a mother's role, daughter-in-law's role and leisure role. This lowers her self-esteem. She is harassed, humiliated, exploited and tortured. Even if she makes sacrifices to please others, she is taunted and terrorised. Violence against widows may be both visible and invisible; emotional as well as physical and sexual; denial of normalcy of life available to married women as well as conformism to norms of widowhood. It includes: physical battering, emotional neglect and torture, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, depriving her from legitimate share in property, and abuse of her children.

The low social status of widows in Indian society is evident from the fact that they are considered inauspicious on many occasions. To see a widow in the morning or to face her while going on a journey or some mission is regarded as a bad omen, bringing calamity, misfortune and frustration. Consequently, she has to keep herself away or at a distance on such occasions. While widowers can carry on with life as if nothing has changed, can sport new clothes and acquire another wife, a widow's life has to be ascetic. She is expected to remain chaste and virtuous in word, thought, and deed.

The nature of violence against the widow depends upon the person who is the victimiser, for instance, the mother-in-law, sister-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law, husband's maternal uncles and children. Mothers-in-law are involved in physical violence, passing sarcastic remarks, accusing for immorality, assigning heavy household chores, and beating or ill-treating

children; sisters-in-law are involved in passing sarcastic remarks, accusing for illicit relations, giving heavy household chores and ill-treating the children. The males in the family exploit the widow by denying her share in her husband's property, taking away her husband's economic assets and also by molesting the widow. Of the three most important motives of victimisation—power, property and sex—property is a crucial factor in victimisation in the middle-class widows, sex in the lower-class widows, and power in both the middle-class and the lower-class widows.

Widows also face violence from children. After the death of a husband, a woman becomes dependent on her son economically, emotionally and socially, a son who considers her immature and inexperienced. The son may want to become the power in the family and may transfer the mother's property to his name and take over decision-making. Three types of mothers are most likely to be victimised by their children. Those who:

- lack social resources to retaliate effectively against abusive children;
- have no other place to go and are totally dependent on their sons;
- give full authority to their sons during their adolescence.

### **The New Theoretical Model**

Women have been victimised in traditional Indian society. Dependent on men, they have been humiliated, tortured and exploited, routinely defined and assessed on the basis of sex. They have never been equal with men. Wives are treated as domestic drudges and as an instrument of male pleasure. A large number of educated women have started working outside the home, but they remain dependent on men. Until recently they have failed to organise collectively. Today, however, a search for identity has started. Women have felt the need to discover themselves. But the stereotypes and myths prevalent in our male-dominated society limit this search.

### **Reference**

Bandura, A. 1973, *Aggression: A Social Learning Analysis*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.