

Wife Battering: Issues Facing the Women's Movement

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There are various forms of violence that women face throughout their lives; the violence in the street, in the form of eve teasing, molestation and rape, or sexual harassment at work and at home; mental and physical cruelty within the family affect most of us. While violence on the streets is at least recognised as a crime, wife battering has to result in grievous bodily harm before it is even perceived as a crime at all. For example, battering within the family precedes a 'dowry death' which is seen by all as a most violent act.

After dealing with this problem in 8 out of every 10 married women who come to Saheli, we have become aware on the various levels of physical violence, and also are able to understand why most women tolerate it for a number of their married years.

With our experience, we can definitely state that physical violence or the "wife battering" syndrome transcends all class and caste barriers. There are no "types" of men who batter, and no "types" of women who get battered. We believe that violence within the family is a reflection of the power relationship between a husband and wife, where the husband derives power from being the provider and head of the household. This power includes coercive power which in our society is often manifested in physical and mental subjugation, through violence. In many instances, while the husband may not be able to fulfil his commitments, he still draws power from a society which holds men to be superior to women, and a woman's dependency on man as natural. In these cases, many men use coercive power to change the actual balance of power in the husband/wife relationship, and gain an upper hand.

The pattern of violence differs from one class to another. At the bustee level, there is nothing private in a husband beating his wife - half the neighborhood is witness to the act. The sympathies for the wife vary according to rules already established. If the husband is an alcoholic or a womaniser, there is always a lot of sympathy for the wife, and the neighbors very often reach out and help the wife by stopping the husband. But if they perceive the husband as a decent sort of man, with no major vices, the blame is usually laid on the wife - basically because wife battering is considered legitimate. In the upper middle and middle class, where privatisation of both emotions and acts is given a very high priority, the situation is very different. Very often, no one else - even in the house, knows what is happening.

The first time when a wife confides in a friend or a relative, it is received with stunned silence and disbelief accompanied with the usual set of questions - "but he is so educated", "so well employed", "not excessive in his habits", "so respectable", etc. The one levelling point between all these classes (if the husband is not an alcoholic/womaniser or has no other social vice) is the attitude that the wife must have provoked the husband, it could not be all his fault - which, in other words, is the overall acceptance of physical violence towards the wife.

From our experience, certain general observations emerge:

1. An odd slap or a kick now and then, is not perceived as problem enough.
2. The connection between the above and regular physical assault is not perceived
3. A lot of women who suffer physical abuse are willing to continue suffering, provided 'he' would change his other habits.
4. No women perceive it as an act which is to be condemned unequivocally.

Together these observations may lead us to believe that generally women have a very low self esteem. Yet paradoxically, somewhere in the sub-conscious, all women who talk about being beaten feel more humiliated by this act than any other form of subjugation and it is battering which finally breaks down their resistance. It is the most painful experience of their lives to reveal. Yet, they feel that this form of chastisement is natural for a man to use, and hence accept it. Our experience with women who are victims of violence within homes - regular battering by husbands - has taught us many lessons.

A. Acceptance of Violence

When Saheli just started, we could not quite accept the fact that women continued to live within such marriages. The first lesson is that a woman in today's society is not yet ready or in a position to leave her home because of violence alone. For a step to be taken, the problem of violence has to be compounded by infidelity, sexual demands, lack of care for the family, alcoholism. While this, would lead a woman to take certain steps, the extreme step of ending the marriage is rarely taken. The steps consist of trying to create a new power balance whereby the beatings are reduced and there is a longer period of calm between outbursts. This balance may be created by either finding a support group, or approaching the police, or having the children on one's side.

Acceptance of violence is also somewhere rooted in women's own experience. While some see violence as normal because of childhood experiences, others legitimise it by constant violent behavior towards the children and being generally aggressive. At some level, these women have internalised societal values which propagate the use of force for maintaining the status quo. They allow themselves to be beaten up because they feel that they have a subordinate role within the family.

B. Existing Choices and Exercising Them

In the majority of cases, women do not choose a husband or in-laws, but enter marriage with very clear instructions to subordinate themselves to the family. Any attempt to assert their independence is strongly opposed by husband/in - laws/ family and society. Hence, it also becomes very difficult for women to be able to assert their rights, or seek help. The magnitude of violence has to be of an extreme nature for any woman to step out and seek help either from sympathetic relatives and friends or from a women's organisation.

Even when women do overcome these psychological barriers, they are confronted with an extremely adverse environment. In most cases, they have children to take care of and no jobs or sources of earning which would enable them to survive. It would be extremely difficult for women, especially middle class women, with two or more children, to cope economically on their own. Working class women are more ready to take on privations and in a violent situation, are often already fending for their families, even though they might become much more vulnerable to other men. It is not surprising that some women even think of committing suicide.

In some instances, problems are further complicated by joint interests, such as ownership of common property. This is not necessarily the problem of propertied classes.

In fact it is pertinent to mention here that we have a shelter with very modest facilities. Pramila who had left a violent husband, on reaching the shelter said "My house is much better than this", and went back to get beaten some more. Kalpana who came from a relatively better economic background, returned to her husband who had hit her in the solar plexis, because she could not cope with the hardships of living in our shelter and doing her own work. Such experiences of failure by women to survive outside violent homes and their subsequent oscillation breaks clown their will and self-confidence to take initiatives in the future. Women in such cases, choose to pay the price for economic comforts by regular violation of their person and just attempt to increase the periods of calm, but they know that they would never succeed in stopping the violence altogether. Their husbands in the process become even more aware of the power differential and hence in most cases, exploit this vulnerability.

Some women might reach out for help for momentary release of tension. For instance, one woman came to us desperately wanting to leave her husband and wanting our help and protection so that he could not find her. The next day, she decided she wanted to go home. When questioned, she very simply stated that she was sure that the night before he was going to beat her since the tension had been mounting for some time. As the tension by now must have lessened, she was quite willing to go home.

C. Role of Saheli

At our level, what we really try to get across is empathy with the woman's pain, bewilderment, insecurity and show her that there is an alternative, which is also not easy to cope with, but that it

would be her choices which count with us and not the demands and expectations thrust on her. We try giving her a sense of security, the knowledge that she is not alone in her struggle, we are all with her, and show her linkages between her personal oppression and oppression of women within our society.

In short, it is a process of empowerment in terms of support and developing consciousness. Some women learn to talk more openly and seek help and some may even retaliate. We can provide, by and large, only intangible support. While it is necessary, it is by no means enough. Safe housing and employment do need to be offered so that women do not go back and suffer a worse fate. Our resources to provide material and tangible support are quite limited.

D. Societal Values and the Role of the State

The State, despite all the progressive legislation, hardly shows an attitude towards a battered wife that is sympathetic. This form of physical abuse, sometimes verging on homicide, is generally seen as a personal problem between husband and wife. The reasoning of the police is that, after lodging the complaint very often the wife withdraws it, so it is a waste of time and not to be taken seriously. They refuse to see the various social and family pressures on the woman to withdraw the case.

The police have to learn that section 498A of the Criminal Code has to be approached differently from criminal cases. For criminal cases, success is judged by winning the case and sending the man to jail. For 498A, success could be judged if the husband stops beating his wife, or the wife is helped to leave the violent situation.

498A is today used more for dowry harassment and cruelty or attempted dowry murder than for simple wife beating. As in all legislations, the scope of 498 A is wide and easily interpreted in different ways. The most prevalent interpretation of "grave injuries" is that a couple of bones should be broken. The trauma of the women, being questioned by strange disbelieving policemen, and then being subjected to an examination by a government doctor, is usually more than a woman, who is already crushed in spirit, mind and body, can bear. Very seldom is she treated with basic human kindness which victims deserve.

The state further offers no homes for battered women and their children where they are treated with respect and warmth, so that they can once more live a life of human dignity. Providing shelter for women is a facility which even Saheli has so far, not been able to adequately organise. The government has no scheme as yet (though it has been debated for a long time) to help autonomous women's organisations by providing houses to be run as shelters. We find that no landlord is prepared to rent his house as a shelter for women. The moment we mention the purpose for renting the house, the offer is withdrawn, as for them, a women's house/home becomes synonymous with vice—a myth perpetuated in reality to some extent by the corruption in state run Nari Niketans.

The few state run homes which provide vocational training programmes, usually concentrate on imparting skills for women - which are far from adequate to generate a career for a woman who has to provide for her children and herself. What real alternatives does a woman with three children, eighth-class pass or fail, in her mid-thirties have? Very often even women who have been with us for some time, go back to their husbands, since the economic constraints at times become insurmountable, especially among middle class women. The state needs to provide housing, jobs and social security as effective means to a dignified life.

The state itself does not see women as equal to men, or even all men as equal. The politics of a large number of political parties is one of perpetuating class/caste/religious divisions as witnessed in the recent legislation in case of Muslim women. That the Government views women as second class citizens is, evident in the way women's employment is under the control of the Ministry of Social Welfare and not Industry, Mines or Energy.

Society allows the use of force and violence to maintain the balance of power between any social groups; for example, nations go to war, our chief ministers ask party workers to carry knives; the state maintains its power by using violence against people-lathi charging peaceful demonstrations.

We see all these types of violence as being linked with each other.

Role of the Women's Movement

We need to play a role at different levels if we want to effectively change the situation of women with regard to domestic violence. We have to intervene and try to influence not only the situation of women desiring change and the state policy with regard to women, but also societal violence and acceptance of the same. We broadly classify the different strategies as follows:

(a) Consciousness Raising

Not only is it important to raise the consciousness of battered women, but we have to reach out to a large segment of women and make them recognise it as a gross violation of human rights. As a step towards this, we are carrying out a survey to determine the existing attitudes on wife battering and what needs to be done to change them. We need to bring the problem out of the four walls of the home so that a campaign can be launched against it.

(b) Support Groups

Many more women's groups are needed if we want to help any reasonable number of battered women, and change the psyche of potential batterers who often believe, and rightly so, that women are alone and they will not get support. As the problem of battering is widespread, support groups have to provide counter- pressure and be a force which can change the existing balance of power. Supporting women by formal and informal networks, and enhancing their understanding of the multifaceted reasons for their oppression is a vital task, because then alone can women come forward to help other women.

(c) Shelters and Employment

We have to agitate and demand from the government more jobs for women and safe temporary as well as permanent housing. These alone can bring about any change in the balance of power in the true sense.

(d) Violence in General

It is clear that the problem of violence cannot be solved through legislation alone. As long as social inequalities exist between men and women, and people of different classes, violence will remain with us. We have to establish the links between violence - of different kinds on the one hand and agitate against violence at different levels on the other.

The women's movement will have to look beyond itself - at other issues of society, e.g. peace movement, human rights movement, etc. We have to work for social justice in a much broader context.

Taken from Saheli's Site: <https://sites.google.com/site/saheliorgsite/violence/domestic-violence/wife-battering-issues-facing-the-womens-movement>