Discourse on Violence against Women

Disari Roy
UGC - Senior Research Fellow
Women's Studies Research Centre
University of Calcutta - India

Abstract
Male violence against women is a key feature of patriarchy. Violence has always been used as a means to subjugate women and keep them in a position of subordination. Domestic violence refers to violence against women principally in marital homes. The perpetrators of domestic violence have often been found to be the males and the victims, their intimate partners. Women are often subjects of social exclusion and abuse from relatives and have nowhere to go. In India, where family structure is patriarchal, women are mostly susceptible to violence. The Indian tradition and custom has never treated women equal to men. The gender of a child plays an important role in socialization process. Victimization of women in India starts right from their birth. Son preference affects women in many countries, particularly in Asia. The consequence can be anything from fetal to female feticide to neglect of the girl child over her brother in terms of essential needs as nutrition, basic health care and education. It is the family that makes a daughter feels like a burden and instills in her mind the belief that her position is only secondary to that of the male child. Gender discrimination within the family develops a sense of inferiority in the girl child, makes her introvert and incapable of meeting any untoward incident in life. Discrimination and exploitation on the basis of gender is a serious issue that means half the human race in unable to realize its potential. Improvement in the status of women depends on the changing perceptions of the roles of women and men in the society. Improvement in women’s status is possible only if they are empowered and this much needed empowerment can come through education, employment and awareness. It is imperative to take positive steps towards uplifting the status of women because on this largely depends the overall progress of a nation.

Keywords: Violence, Patriarchy, Gender discrimination, Human rights, Status.

Patriarchy is a social system in which males are the key authority figures who occupy roles of political leadership, moral authority and control of property. Historically, the term patriarchy was used to refer to autocratic rule by the male head of a family. However, in modern times, it more generally refers to social systems in which power is primarily held by adult men. It implies the institutions of male rule and entails female subordination. The state plays a pivotal role in upholding and sustaining patriarchal institutions and instruments. Patriarchal systems adequately reward those who learn to agree to their defined roles as mothers and wives. Wifehood and motherhood are glorified and granted not only social sanction but also lauded in literature, arts, religion so that women do enthusiastically want to essay their social roles. Marriage and motherhood are the most respectable and religiously valuable achievement for a Hindu woman. Women had no identity apart form that given to them as wives, mothers and daughters. Male violence against women is a key feature of patriarchy. Violence against women becomes even more significant in the context of marriage when a husband who is supposed to love and protect his wife beats her. It is indeed a shocking experience for a woman to be beaten by the man she trusted the most. Women suffer and are made to suffer in many ways. In behavioral terms, violence against women can range from simple restraint to slaps, kicks, broken bones to torture, exploitation and severe oppression. We know it as female infanticide, abortion of female fetus, neglect


and under nourishment of the girl child, denunciation of education to girls, pre-puberty marriage, wife beating, attempted murder and even murder. Violence has always been used as a means to subjugate women and keep them in a position of subordination. Female victimization has often been viewed as a product of socio-economic factors including the position, role and fundamental rights of women. Violence against women has been committed since time immemorial and is present in every country irrespective of culture, class, education, income, and age. Domestic violence is so commonplace that it has often gone unobserved and failed to receive the level of attention it deserves in view of the demoralizing and detrimental effects it can have on children and families. Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women. Domestic violence refers to violence against women primarily in marital homes. Those victimized suffer physically and psychologically. A woman suffers humiliation in silence and blames it on her destiny. Even if she wants to revolt, she is unable to do so because of the fear that her natal family would refuse to keep her in their house permanently after the marriage. The perpetrators of domestic violence have often been found to be the males and the victims, their intimate partners. Internationally, one in three women have been beaten, coerced into sex or abused in their lifetime by a member of her own family. Violence against women is a cycle of abuse that manifests itself in many forms throughout their lives. At the very beginning of her life, a girl may be the target of sex-selective abortion or female infanticide in cultures where son preference is prevalent. During childhood, violence against girls may include enforced malnutrition, lack of access to medical care and education, incest, female genital mutilation, early marriage, and forced prostitution or bonded labor. Some go on to suffer throughout their adult lives – battered, raped and even murdered at the hands of intimate partners. Other crimes of violence against women include forced pregnancy, abortion and harmful traditional practices such as dowry-related violence, sati, and killings in the name of honor. And in later life, widows and elderly women may also experience abuse. Violence against women throughout the life cycle derives essentially from cultural patterns, in particular the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices and all acts of violence linked to race, sex, religion or language that perpetuate the lower status accorded to women in the family, the workplace and the society. The World Health Organization, in its first World Report on Violence and Health in 2002, revealed that between 40 percent and 70 percent of women who die due to homicide are killed by current or former partners. An alarming finding of the 1993 World Development Report pointed out that globally rape and domestic violence account for about 5 per cent of the total disease burden among women in the age group of 15-44. National Crime Records Bureau reveal that a crime against a woman is committed every three minutes, a woman is raped every 29 minutes, a dowry death occurs every 77 minutes, and one case of cruelty committed by either the husband or relative of the victim occurs every nine minutes.

**Domestic violence and its many forms**

Violence is an act of aggression, usually in interpersonal interaction or relations. Violence is a coercive mechanism to enforce one’s will over another in order to prove or feel a sense of power. Domestic violence is a patriarchal mechanism for controlling women. It is defined to include all acts of physical, sexual, psychological or economic violence that may be committed by a person who is a family member or by a person who has been an intimate partner or spouse, irrespective of whether they lived

---


Domestic violence can take a number of forms including physical, sexual, economic, emotional and verbal. Acts of physical violence by the husband against his wife includes pushing, shaking, slapping, arm twisting, hair pulling, punching, kicking, dragging, beating, trying to choke or burn her on purpose, and threatening her or attacking her with a weapon. Acts of sexual violence by the husband include physically forcing the wife against her will to have sex or perform other sexual acts that she did not want to perform. Acts of economic abuse includes controlling access to money and other resources. Acts of emotional violence by the husband against the wife includes jealousy, anger, intimidation, controlling, neglect, humiliation, threats, isolation and verbal abuse. Verbal abuse might involve threats, name-calling, blaming, ridicule, disrespect, and criticism. Victims of domestic violence may be trapped in violent situations through isolation, power and control, insufficient financial resources, fear, shame or to protect children. As a result of abuse, victims may experience physical disabilities, chronic health problems, mental illness, limited finances, and poor ability to create healthy relationships. Victims may experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Children who live in a household with violence may continue the legacy of abuse when they reach adulthood.

**Domestic violence in Indian context**

Two outstanding accomplishments of the women’s movement in India that took off in the 1920s were the constitutional guarantees of equal rights for women and universal adult suffrage in independent India. However, these guarantees did little to better the lives of women. Gradually a new women’s movement came into view in the 1970s. Despite the strong women’s movement, patriarchy remained intensely deep-rooted in India and in a patriarchal society women are mistreated and devalued daily. In 1974 the Indian government published a report, Towards Equality, which states here has been a steady decline in the position of Indian women since 1911. As a result development and progress became gender issues. At this time cases of violence against women and dowry death or wife murder were on the rise and widely reported in the media. It was then that women’s issues emerged as a significant problem to be dealt with and gender began to figure as an issue as well as a category of analysis.

The issue of the growth of women’s rights has concerned the United Nations since the organization’s origin. Yet problems like female targeted violence were not explicitly recognized by the international community until December 1993, when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Domestic violence occurs in developed and developing countries alike. It has long been considered a private matter between individuals by the Governments. In view of the alarming growth in the number of cases of violence against women globally, the Committee on Human Rights adopted resolution 1994/45 of March 1994, in which it decided to adopt the Special Rapporteurs on Violence against women, including its causation factors as well as consequences. As a result the problem of violence against women has been getting ever-increasing attention. In India it was only during the early 1980s, in the wake of dowry and related problems, that crimes against women came to be recognized as an important social problem. In India, where family structure is patriarchal, women are mostly susceptible to violence. The Indian tradition and custom has never treated women equal to men. It is widely believed that a woman’s salvation lies in unconditional and lifelong service to male members of the family. This tradition has its roots in Manusmriti\(^{10}\), whose author Manu is regarded by the Hindus as the supreme law giver. Manu, the ancient Indian sage and progenitor of mankind, prescribed unconditional subservience of women to men in his code of laws known as Manusmriti. The Manusmriti predetermined that a woman ought to

---

\(^{10}\) The Manusmṛti is the most important and earliest metrical work of the Dharmasastra textual tradition of Hinduism.
be under the protection and control of her father in childhood, her husband in youth and her sons in her widowed old age, and furthermore that a women does not deserve independence. This dictate was interpreted into practice given the practices of universal and early marriage for women, post puberty consummation of marriage, early and frequent pregnancies, and violence in the marital home. As a result the customs were legalized due to sanctions from treatises. Women are defined as preservers of family esteem and domestic strength and they should always be governed by male family members. The positioning of women inside the home created a symbol of orthodox privacy whereby women became silent figures who could never speak for themselves. The concept of pativrata is an intention of men to force women into absolute loyalty and subordination to the husband. Manu ordained absolute fidelity to the husband by saying, “Though of bad conduct or debauched, or even devoid of good qualities, a husband must always be worshipped like a God by a good wife.”

Victimization of women in India starts right from their birth. The gender of a child plays a significant role in socialization process. From the start girls are made to accept the norms of patriarchal and male dominated society and they grow up accepting themselves to be inferior to boys. Son preference affects women in many countries, particularly in Asia. The consequence can be anything from fetal to female feticide to neglect of the girl child over her brother in terms of essential needs as nutrition, basic health care and education. The birth of female child is often the source of grief while birth of male child is seen as a blissful moment. A woman’s status is determined by the ability to produce male heirs to perpetuate her husband’s lineage. Among the educated and urbanized who have a tendency to limit the size of their families, a daughter after a son brings a sense of completion; a first daughter is accepted with the hope that the next child will be a son. Desire for a male child is a cultural preference across the class divide. Male children are permitted far greater economic and social mobility. Boys are considered bold, dynamic, and ambitious. Female children are taught from childhood to conform to dress and behavior codes, make sacrifices, to be obedient, tolerant and virtuous. She learns to be submissive and compliant first as a daughter and sister and then as wife and mother. Childhood is the formative phase of life that requires appropriate care for growth and development. Unfortunately millions of girls in the world are deprived of their childhood by not providing affable conditions apt for their overall development. It is the family that makes a daughter feels like a burden and instills in her mind the belief that her position is only secondary to that of the male child. Gender discrimination within the family develops a sense of inferiority in the girl child, makes her recluse and incapable of meeting any troublesome incident in life.

Males are socialized into roles that encourage violent behavior towards females. The first and indeed life-long recipient of male violence is the female. In Indian family culture when girls get married, they become a part of their husband's household and live with his family. Women were supposed to possess basic virtues like piousness, purity, domesticity, and timidity. A woman's actual sphere was the home where a wife created a shelter for her husband and children. The husband is committed to financially support his wife and the wife is expected to respect his authority; his use of force is subsequently viewed as justified because force is an accepted means in the society to control subordinates - whether they are children or wives. Women have been socialized into acceptance of a culture of domination by the male as a result of which obedience becomes a matter of accepted behavior and attitude. This has conventionally tended to strengthen, rather than weaken, patriarchal hegemony. The attitude to women in general, and the norms of behavior prescribed for these women in particular, are conditioned by the prevailing socio-economic conditions in which they arise and thrive. Social structure, cultural norms

---

and value systems are important determinants of women’s roles and their position in society. They influence social expectations regarding the behavior of the two sexes, both as individuals and in relation to each other. Social traditions as well as behavior patterns are major influences in shaping attitudes.15

Facts and figures

The National Crime Records Bureau statistics show that in 1994 there were 4,935 dowry deaths and 25,946 cases of dowry harassment, while in 2005, eleven years after the signing of CEDAW16, that number increased to 6,787 dowry murders and 58,319 incidents of dowry harassment. As of 2008, there were 31,950 pending cases of dowry deaths, 117 cases withdrawn, 1,948 convicted, and 3,876 acquitted or discharged. As of 2009, 2010 and 2011 the number of dowry deaths rose to 8383, 8391 and 8618 respectively. The National Crime Records Bureau statistics further show that in 2002 there were 49237 cases of cruelty committed on wife by husband or his relatives. This figure rose to 75930 in 2007 and 81344 in 2008. Moreover, as of 2009, 2010 and 2011 the acts of cruelty by husband or relatives rose to 89546, 94041 and 99135 respectively. Crimes such as dowry harassment, dowry deaths are on the rise. Therefore it be easily said that the ratification of CEDAW by India did not reduce violence against women because the international agreement was not legally implemented and enforced throughout Indian society. India has not ratified the Optional Protocol to CEDAW. Therefore, India does not comply with regular reporting and finally a reservation India makes states they will not submit to arbitration if there is a dispute of CEDAW.

Conclusion

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the well known nineteenth century social reformer from Bengal had mourned the fact that at marriage, the wife is recognized as half of her husband, but in reality they are treated not as good as animals. It is an established as an act of maleness to exert control over women at every stage of their survival. From childhood, girls and boys are trained to obey the rules of patriarchal values and relations. Patriarchal value system has in turn made both law makers and law enforcing agencies discriminatory.17 Prejudice towards women is deep-rooted in Indian culture. Women are devalued, subordinated and mistreated daily. Discrimination and exploitation on the basis of gender constitutes a serious human rights issue. Violence against women puts an undue burden on health care services with women who have suffered violence being more likely to need health services and at higher cost, compared to women who have not suffered. While some relate violence against women to existing social conditions like customs, illiteracy, poverty, lack of awareness among women, some attribute it to personal characteristics of women like lack of self confidence and inferiority complex. Women’s access to education, health, employment and political participation still remain distant goal in many countries of the world. The status of women in the society depends on the role played by them and how others look at their role. Social structure, cultural norms and value system are important determinants of women’s role and status in the society. Gandhi in his first article on women in Young India said that women should take their proper place beside men. In other words, Gandhi perceived women as playing a complementary role to men. He was against categorizing women as weak and inferior, and condemned child marriage, dowry and the observance of Purdah system (hiding face in veils). He also believed that women were duty-bound to serve their husbands, families and country. Being a devotee of Lord Rama he respected the Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas, but he unmistakably rejected passages in Tulsidas that he found offensive to women and the lower castes. Some feminists

16 CEDAW or Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the first international law instrument focusing entirely on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Adopted by the United Nations on 18 December 1979, the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women entered into force on 3 September 1981. In 1994, India ratified the CEDAW treaty.
are of the opinion that Gandhi’s relation with his wife, Kasturba was not just problematic but was laced with violence. This inference is a stumbling block to his claim that in all his thought and conduct he only was a follower of the principles of satya and ahimsa. Many feminists hold in high esteem Gandhi’s successful efforts in bringing women into the struggle for freedom, and they have understood that Gandhi’s resort to non-violent struggle aided their participation in it. He gave women the chance of being actively involved in political life and in doing so the women got some liberty from the strong hold of marriage. Gandhi celebrated non-violent protest as a feminine principle; neutralizing the masculine brutality of British rule. Feminists are opposed to the idea of ascribing any particular quality or virtue as strictly feminine or masculine. It is here that Gandhi’s thinking appears to clash with those of feminists. Gandhi opined that women, partly as mothers of the human race and nurturers, were naturally more inclined towards non-violence and hence required no training in non-violent resistance, as nature had equipped them with all necessary advantages.18 Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, intellectually, mentally and spiritually woman is equivalent to a male and she can participate in every activity with equal competence as a man. But everywhere in the world women are accorded a lower status than men. 19 Women are considered second class citizens and are accorded a lower status than men. The definition of male and female roles varies from culture to culture and they are not determined by any physical difference of sex as such. The difference in roles rests on an ethno centric misapprehension. Women and men are equal. Equality does not indicate similarity. Equality could only mean as having equal opportunity to decide and live according to their choice but unless one is aware of alternatives available to her one would not be able to put into effect one’s choice.20 One of the hindrances to women’s development is the incident of continuing and ever increasing violence against women. This constitutes serious violation of human rights. Constitutional guarantee of equality has remained a hypothetical concept and Indian women are hardly allowed to enjoy the rights and opportunities entitled for them. Women need to be treated as subjects as capable as men of taking decisions regarding their own life, conception, birth, abortion etc. Creation of self confidence in the girl child is essential to help protecting herself against all sorts of violence in life and family has an important role to play in this respect. Equal treatment of girl child could infuse a sense of self respect and self confidence within the girl and reduces the chances of her victimization in later life whether it is within the family or outside or at the workplace.21 Illiteracy among women is very high but for the entire development of society and nation it is imperative to make a woman educated. In Mahatma Gandhi’s words, if you educate a woman you educate an entire family. Education is a fundamental human right and a necessary requirement for socio-economic development, particularly to improve the status of women. It is universally recognized that mother is the first school of the child and hence mother’s education must be made compulsory. A child’s education starts from his or her mother at the home. Gender equity which upholds human dignity and social justice should be the objective of the society. Greater gender equality cannot be achieved if basic health needs are not being met and if cultural biases that allow for domestic violence in India persist. Improvement in the status of women depends on the changing perceptions of the roles of women and men in the society. Changing status involves the sharing of power on an equal footing with men in decision making and its implementation. For achieving gender equality it is essential to mobilize a favorable public opinion towards women and their development. Improvement in women’s status is possible only if they are empowered and this much needed empowerment can come through education, employment and awareness. Development has to be a multi dimensional process having effect on different segments of

18 Lal Vinay, 2008. ‘The Gandhi Everyone Loves to Hate’, Economic and political weekly October 4, pp.55-62


Improvement in the status of women will have effect on political, economic and social aspects of society and therefore it is imperative to take positive steps towards uplifting the status of women because on this largely depends the overall progress of a nation. A fundamental change in our mind-set towards women and providing a congenial atmosphere for accelerating the process of equality and removing domination of women is the need of the hour. The achievement of empowerment and equality of women has to be a joint effort of the individual and the State. It is essential to promote societal awareness to gender issues and women’s human rights. Mass media can play a pivotal role here in communicating social messages relating to women’s equality and empowerment. Moreover government agencies including the police whose primary duty is to ensure the safety and security of all its citizenry, including women must function efficiently in order to ensure that the objectives of the legislation are complied with.

References

10. The Manusmrti is the most important and earliest metrical work of the Dharmasastra textual tradition of Hinduism.
16. CEDAW or Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the first international law instrument focusing entirely on elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Adopted by the United Nations on 18 December 1979, the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women entered into force on 3 September 1981. In 1994, India ratified the CEDAW treaty