



Readers' Forum



Domestic Violence Against Women

Domestic violence is not something new but its recognition as a problem has come slowly. Some types of violence are unacknowledged even today and are either not taken seriously or are dismissed as being irrelevant and even inconsequential.

Within a nuclear family, the persisting sexual division of labour and the cultural definition of man as being the principal breadwinner does not reduce the women's burden even when she is employed and makes a substantial monetary contribution. Physical violence against women may have been defined as undesirable. Yet, in practice, it is widespread and common. What is forgotten is that there is a link between structural and physical violence.

There is another type of violence, which may be routine and informal but is not recognized by women activists and feminists. This is so because no written documents or pronouncements about such violence exist. Its occurrence is communicated, if ever, through word of mouth. Secondly, it neither invites the attention of the media nor disturbs the collective conscience of the society. It is dismissed as being inconsequential. Third, no visible and organized resistance can be planned against it, given the nature of this form of violence. Fourth, it does not attract the attention of policing agencies as do murder, rape or physical assault.

Domestic violence is not a unilinear but a multi-polar phenomenon. It is resorted to not only by men against women, but even by women against men. To understand its vicious character, it is necessary to note the instruments through which it operates in everyday life.

Typical examples are cessation of physical relationships and communication, slander and

gossip, nagging and humiliation, false deference, false compliance, feigned ignorance and an indifference to one's roles and responsibilities. These are not defined as acts of violence yet they invariably explode in the form of structural violence. Therefore, an inquiry into routine domestic violence is a necessary first step in locating and understanding both structural and physical violence.

One of the forms in which routine domestic violence manifests itself is expression of opinion by the powerful members of a family (e.g., the father, the husband, the mother-in-law) about the powerless members (e.g., the wife, the mother, the unemployed son, the daughter-in-law). The powerless cannot, and often do not respond to these articulations. The only option left for them is to gossip about the powerful. Thus slander and gossip become a kind of "democratic voice" of the powerless members in the family to counter the oppression they face.

One can talk about two scripts here, the public and the private—the public being an edited version and the private an unedited one. It is not uncommon for powerful members to use an edited version for outsiders and strangers while reserving the unedited version for insiders. There could be considerable isomorphism between the two versions. In contrast, the two scripts would be drastically different in the case of the powerless member. In fact, the private script of the powerless can hardly be shared with anybody. Viewed thus, the revolt by powerless members consists in making their private script public.

What is applicable to verbal articulations is equally true in the case of everyday behaviour. The powerful member can show disrespect to the

powerless member in “public”. On the other hand, public respect and private rebuke for elders can co-exist in the lives of powerless members.

The third context in which routine domestic violence manifests itself is in the contention over the conceptions of work, role and responsibility of family. While men invoke tradition and custom to define roles, women resort to more current conceptualizations.

Their opposing world-views often create insurmountable barriers and discord. When matters reach such a head, violence becomes open and visible. That is, “invisible” routine domestic violence turns into physical violence. The situation is further complicated by structural violence. The three forms of violence feed on one another.

If routine domestic violence is such an omnipresent phenomenon, why is it that no one talks about it openly? There are several reasons, which inhibit open protest. Firstly, routine domestic violence is often suffused with false compassion and confession. It is indeed difficult to tackle an “enemy” who blows hot and cold. Secondly, domestic violence acquires different forms that depend on class and social categories. Therefore, the uniting factor, namely gender, is rarely rendered salient and often gets subsumed under factors such as religion, rural-urban differences, caste and class. This obliterates the possibility of united action. Thirdly, it is tolerated precisely because alternative institutions to marriage and family do not exist.

Compared to the suspicion that a single woman is perceived with, the stigma attributed to an unwed mother, the torture administered to a widow and the tribulations that separated or divorced women have to face, the oppression within the family often appears to be more tolerable. Fourthly, compulsions of survival are so great that taking a recourse to open protest is ruled out. Further, the State does not provide support to the victims. All these factors conjure up a situation wherein suffering in silence often turns out to be the lesser evil. Sometimes, revolt is voluntarily suppressed and suffering accepted, for the sake of children. Open protest is also constricted by factors such as, the scene of protests and the target of attack.

Is the present situation a *fait accompli*? Is routine domestic violence inevitable? Certainly not. If so, what ought to be the strategy of change?

There are three logical options. First, being able to accept status quo and recognize that so long as family exists, there would be inequality among the

sexes and therefore domestic violence. This may be called the ‘inevitability thesis’, which is essentially defeatist. Second, since violence takes place within the confines of home, family as an institution should be dispensed with. The adverse consequences of this, particularly on children, can be disastrous.

The third option is to evolve a new family wherein equality, rational distribution of authority, and humane division of work co-exist. Once this is accepted as the goal, the strategy becomes self-evident. We have to work on both the fronts—the public and the private.

Dr. P.B. Rathod, Gulbarga, Karnataka

Give it a Try

There are countless women all over the country who feel that they have the talent, the capability, degrees rusting in the cupboard, and also the time to manage their home and a job which they so badly wanted to take up but could not possibly manage when their children were growing up. There is in every such woman, a wish to step out of the four walls of the house and equal her peers.

What holds them back from making a headway in a career is the initial spirit and courage. Mrs. Malini Ahuja, who is presently in Delhi says, “I never thought of picking up a job till now because my kids needed me in their growing years and since my husband is in the Army, I somehow, never found an opportunity to look for a good job, or frankly speaking never really took enough initiative. Teaching never actually interested me much.” This view is echoed by a large number of army wives.

There is another category of women who are educated, talented and capable but are too caught up in the rut of a large joint family to venture out and take the initiative to look for a suitable job. Mrs. Shivani Singh who was married fifteen years back into a large joint family has an unused MBA degree to her credit, but she still has not found the opportune time to utilize her degree. She opined, “Family pressures kept mounting and though the wish kept alive in my heart opportunity never came to this day.”

It is never too late. I strongly feel that, every educated woman should, if only once in her lifetime, pick up courage and venture into the outside world. She may find it difficult to cope and give up midway but she will not have the dissatisfaction of not having given it a try.

Seema Chugh, New Delhi □