

HOME - A SITE OF VIOLENCE.

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ABSTRACT

This paper first deals with the definitions of violence, and analyses how in contemporary times, they are extremely limited as they only cover physical abuse. It then analyses the depths of emotional violence and how the domestic becomes the site of such exploitation and abuse for women. Further, we trace the life of ordinary women - from the time of birth to the time of their death, analysing and understanding the violence they face at each stage. These stages include the natal home, the conjugal home and old age. The paper explores the inherent and subtle ways in which women are treated as alien and external beings. The conclusion looks at the importance to documenting emotional violence as a legitimate kind of violence and the need for mass populations to understand the feminist agenda in a more nuanced manner.

Keywords: Violence, Emotional violence, Domestic Violence, Site of violence

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In a world where even though physical violence is seen as a crime, it exists in almost every household; the argument regarding emotional abuse almost seems redundant. Patriarchy has plagued our society to the extent that in our heads issues like dowry get justified. To a large extent, the criminal system reinforces this patriarchy and misogynist perspective. Crimes today are defined as those that have a certain tangibility attached to them. This essay will focus on the various mental health aspect of violence which further induces physical and somatic disorders in women and how it is an area that is neglected by the government and sociological / psychological researchers. In "Domestic Violence", an article which appeared in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 33, Issue No. 27, 04 Jul, 1998¹, Malavika Karlekar attempts to define the nature of violence to include the 'domestic' as the space in which it is most perpetuated.. To begin with it therefore also becomes important to have certain clarifications. Karlekar overturns the definition of violence as synonymous to physical abuse. Instead, emotional and psychological

¹ Karlekar, M. (1998). Domestic Violence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(27), 1741-1751. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4406963>

abuse take a center stage as she proposes a counter-narrative that emotional abuse is as if not more harmful than physical abuse. She argues that while the tangibility and degree of hurt cannot be measured, it is unfair to take away from the damage it causes. While both men and women are subject to violence and face brutalities, this paper essentially focuses on how the home, a place meant to act as safe space, becomes the site of the most brutal violence for women.

Violence can therefore have several types of repercussions. While the popular discourse associates violence primarily with physicality, this paper presents evidence for us to consider otherwise. Domestic violence has repercussions on the victim's psychological state and their perception of the world. A study conducted by the *Anveshi Research Centre in Women's Studies in Hyderabad* (1995) highlights that, while gender does not influence the incidence of severe mental disorders such as schizophrenia and manic depression, twice as many women than men are afflicted with more common mental disorders such as anxieties, phobias and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. The paper concluded that when a particular mental illness has a biological basis, its prevalence is the same across genders.; however "where mental illness has a psychosocial basis, women are far more frequently ill than men". The idea that the trauma and violence that women face is not the result of singular or independently existing events. Rather, they are a part of the everyday being and/or living, which throws light at exactly how unsafe patriarchy makes society for women. While physical abuse leaves visible bodily scars, the emotional scars, best understood in terms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD), often go unrecognised.

Normatively, family is understood a safe space. It is the site from which every member can draw physical and emotional support. However, the idea and the construct of family fails women. Family becomes a site of exploitation and violation. This is because the family is a cultural ideal and focus of identity. Furthermore, familial concern with property and rhetoric around honour and reputation makes it difficult for researchers interested in investigating domestic violence. Thus, it is hardly coincidental that a large percentage of available data on violence against women locates the family as a major cause of oppression and ill health and loss of identity.

The Anveshi paper (aforementioned) noted that marriage and family are necessary stressors causing mental illness among Indian women. However, apart from noting the biological aspects, several scholars have broadened the definition of violence from it being confined to the idea of a perpetrator causing physical harm to a victim. Violence is an act of aggression also includes aggression of an individual against herself through suicide, self-mutilation, sex determination tests, and even food denial, which leads to concepts of boundary maintenance. Indian scholars in Women's Studies have emphasised the dynamics of power and powerlessness involved in a violent act. Govind Kelkar situates violence against women 'in the socio-economic and political

context of power relations'.² She feels that defining domestic violence as *an act of illegal criminal use of force* is inadequate and should include *exploitation, discrimination, upholding of unequal economic and social structures, the creation of an atmosphere of terror, threat and forms of religious and political violence*. Thus, violence fails to remain a concept limited to an act or an event. Social structures itself become sources of violence.

The family and its operational unit, the household, are sites where harm against bodies and psyches belong to structures of acquiescence. As the focus is on the household, 'domestic violence' is preferred to that of family violence: the former helps focus on the physical unit of the home rather than the more amorphous context of the family.

In terms of a joint or nuclear family, clearly a joint family imposes certain emotions and physical burdens on the daughter-in-law. MS Gore, in his work, "The traditional Indian family"³, cites two main causes of strain in the joint family: the evolution of a strong conjugal relationship and "the difficulty of socializing the women members into enveloping a community outlook and a sense of identity with the family groups." Gore sees households as "task-oriented residence units", whereas families are "kinship groupings that need not be localized". Here, the term household implies a physical structure with goods and services, while family is a more amorphous concept that is marked by a developmental process.

After establishing this difference it becomes important to see the direction in which Karlekar takes her essay. She analyses the stages through which a woman passes in her life. It characterizes the kind of life a woman leads and how at different ages and stages she faces violence and trauma at every age.

The Natal Home

We therefore start this essay at the time of naissance. When we say that women face discrimination, it isn't a simple assertion we pass about the plight of women in general rather a conclusion we draw after analysing the state in which they attempt to live their lives. Female foeticide is a social catastrophe that is rampantly practiced all over the country. In this section, feminists can argue how women control their bodies and attitudes of their daughters who are often the manifestations of a dominant ideology which valorises the male child. Various ethnographic studies point to a far more deep-seated yearning for the male child. This yearning is

² Karlekar, M. (1998). Domestic Violence. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(27), 1741-1751. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4406963>

³ Gore M.S. (1965). "The traditional Indian family." In M.F.Nimkoff (ed.), *Comparative family systems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

specifically prevalent in Hindu household, where the male child facilitates the passage of a Hindu to the next world - the male child bears the responsibility of carrying the lineage forward. Female foeticide has become popular with the spread of amniocentesis, a medical technique evolved to discover birth defects. A field study by Sanjeev Kulkarni (1986) of the Foundation for Research in Community Health brought to light that, in the 1980s, 5,000 amniocentesis tests were carried out annually in Bombay for determining the foetal sex. Researchers in India and Canada, in the 1980's for the Lancet journal, said "prenatal selection and selective abortion was causing the loss of 500,000 girls a year".⁴ Why does this necessarily happen? Why do men decide to kill babies in the womb? How does half the population justify inflicting violence so openly? Poverty, alcoholism among men, ignorance of family planning and the cost of dowry are possible causes of this practice. Hence, foeticide is the first natal stage in which women experience violence.

The second stage in the natal home where women necessarily face violence is that of childhood. This includes physical abuse, sexual aggression, and child labour. Various studies have shown that children are victims of substantial abuse of a physical, psychological and emotional nature (MARG 1996). Neera Burra in her work (1994) has divided child labour into four categories: those who work in factories, workshops and mines, those who perform bonded work, street children and children who form part of familial labour force. When beating a child isn't about the punishment you want to impose but the violence you want to inflict, it is child abuse. While child abuse of course is relevant to both boys and girls, various studies show that girls are much more sexually vulnerable and that their social climate places them in vulnerable positions.

The natal home also perpetuates violence toward women in the form of inequality <You should clarify what form of inequality this is in this sentence itself>. The kind of living conditions within which women survive are extremely discriminatory and unjust in nature. The prevalence of a dominant ideology which confines girls and women to definite role and obligations leads to their devaluation. The normative societal assumption is that girls are inferior, physically and mentally weak and sexually vulnerable. In earlier times (before laws pertaining to marriage age were spelt out) early marriage was encouraged to confine the mobility of girls and women. Further, even in terms of basic treatment, rural health surveys in North India show that women and girls are more often ill than men. However a record of a medical institution reported that there was only 1 women patient among every 3 men who used hospital facilities. There also exists forms of discrimination in the distribution food in upper class homes. A "critical manifestation" of discrimination against girl child "is the under-allocation of medicine and

⁴ BBC News. (2006). *India 'loses 10m female births'*. Retrieved from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4592890.stm

food”, which most popularly gets manifested the denial of various food items like milk, eggs, meat and fish to girls because it causes ‘heating’.

The Conjugal Home

The idea that the sole purpose of a woman’s life is marriage and that her only means of contribution to the world is procreation still disables women, socially, psychologically, professionally and emotionally, across the subcontinent. In India, marriage establishes a network of interacting individuals: it is rarely only a highly personal relationship between a man and a woman. In marriage traditions for most of India, the bride is a vehicle for the passage of her valuables from her own kin to that of her husband. Nothing describes the transient nature of a girl’s life better than the north Indian saying ‘paraya dhan’, which means estranged valuable(s). Therefore primarily the burden on the natal home of the girl is simply the safe transference of her sexuality to her husband. Sex, too, is seen as an act for the man, an act in which only men are supposed to enjoy and an act simply for the pleasure of the man. Therefore, it is not surprising to hear about cases of violence and wife beating within the conjugal home.

The power dynamic established between a woman’s natal and conjugal home further perpetuates violence for women. The constant practice of gift-giving is another such manifestation of power play. Dowry is not a one-time transaction. Ritual occasion, festivals and indeed any minor pretext results in more demands being made on the daughter-in-law’s family. There seems to be a high degree of acceptance of male-violence in society. Like child rape in the family, another area about which little is known is marital rape; there exists no law to include rape within marriage. Feminine socialization which stresses docility, compliance and shame predisposes a wife to accept a range of physical behavior from her spouse, where, without doubt, her sexual satisfaction is of little consequence. If a woman did not satisfy her husband’s demands the outcome is usually physical abuse.

OLD AGE

Perhaps the last stage at which women are targeted and made victims of domestic violence, is that of old age. An ageing person within the domestic doesn’t always necessarily live in good conditions. Studies are testament to the fact that various old people face abuse and ill-treatment. However even at this stage the treatment meted out to women is worse. A study on the conditions of widows for instance showed that widowed women of rural India are in all

likelihood much more disadvantaged both socially and economically.⁵ There is an increase in neurosis due to increase in domestic work load and loss of self-respect in these cases.

It is therefore fair to conclude with two primary ideas. First the fact that violence isn't necessarily a concept as black and white as seen in status quo. The degree and type of violence inflicted is also extremely relevant. Second, the abysmal conditions within which women are forced to function and lead their daily lives are mostly un-accounted for and seen as 'normalised'. As the feminist movement, when we demand equality it isn't us asking for some concessions or 'pity' favours. It is us demanding the legitimate lifestyle we are entitled to that was snatched away from us.

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⁵ Chen, Dreze. (1992). *Widows and Health in Rural North India*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33Vol. 27, Issue No. 43-44, 24