



Intimate Partner Violence and Traditional Societies in Transition

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In these times, gender roles have been turned on their heads as has the concept of family. Some societies however have been slow to catch up. Paradoxically in this age of communication, trends elsewhere percolate down into such societies too challenging rigid stereotypical concepts of femininity and masculinity. This often results in a backlash from more conservative sections which seek to perpetuate age old traditional mores, one of the methods used being community sanctioned aggression (emotional, verbal and sometimes) and controlling behavior in the family to ensure conformity and punish dissenters. Intimate partner violence in such societies is often tied up inextricably with these factors.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as any behavior within an intimate relationship, with or without marriage, that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in that relationship. This includes physical, sexual, and psychological aggression/abuse or controlling behavior of any kind [1-5].

The prevalence of emotional abuse, psychological aggression and controlling behavior may be much higher than physical abuse. It may in fact be the starting point for actual physical violence to occur but it is less commonly reported by itself [6,7]. This may be because of the mistaken assumption that it is less damaging. It is likely that females may employ nonphysical means of aggression more commonly but studies are scarce. Majority of the perpetrators especially of physical aggression are male but female to male aggression is not uncommon [7].

Sometimes the aggression is bidirectional, as retaliation or defense by either partner. Homosexual partner violence has only recently been a topic of research interest and hardly any statistics are available [8,9].

Factors responsible for IPV may be numerous and interlinked like self-esteem and personality issues, alcohol, norming of violence having been brought up in abusive families and so on but in traditional societies, intimate partner violence is often less likely to be reported. The woman is regarded as a possession of the man

and hence has the right to chastise her as a part of 'correction of her undesirable behavior'. Wife beating is accepted in such cultures as part of domestic life by both the man and the woman. Women endorse this kind of thinking in such societies because that is what they have been brought up to believe. Conversely, aggression by the female partner in such societies is also not reported because it might make the man appear unmanly and an object of ridicule.

Patriarchy legitimizes control over women's sexuality too. In many societies, a woman's sexuality is linked to family honor. Traditional norms in these societies allow the killing of women who have been deemed to have brought dishonor to the family. This can also include individuals who complain about their partner's aggression or seek to escape from intolerable abuse. In such societies economic dependence and low educational status of women further compound the problem. Risk and threat of violence as part of economic control may prevent women from seeking jobs. This reduces their avenues for escape from abuse.

The law enforcement agencies too are not of much help. They frequently reinforce the batterers' attempts to control and demean their victims. 'Victim shaming' and lack of support from her immediate social environment often deters many women from complaining to the law in cases of abuse. In many cases, despite the legislation in place, the perpetrators of IPV are dealt with more leniently compared to perpetrators of similar violence with strangers. The victim is often made to feel guilty for complaining about something which is supposedly an intimate matter concerning only the couple. The bias is stronger in case of persons who report abuse in non-traditional settings like live-in relationships or homosexual relationships. The problem is worsened by the underrepresentation of women in power, politics, the media, and in the legal system in traditional societies. Women, who do hold some authority in such societies, are often unsympathetic to their sisters who report abuse, because of their own discriminatory beliefs.

Most traditional societies are in a state of transition to modernity. Globalization, exposure to other cultures and ways of thinking,

improved levels of education, also challenges traditional gender roles. Women have started becoming more aware and vocal about their rights. In the still slow to change patriarchal societies, especially in rural areas, women who dare to voice their angst are labeled trouble makers or 'bad' and therefore in need of punishment to set an example to others. Sexual, physical violence and emotional aggression in the form of shaming and putting down, are often the means of silencing such women in the family [10,11].

Violence and abuse as conflict resolution tactics are the norm in some families and children growing up in such families continue the intergenerational perpetration of violence [12].

Apart from the obvious marital maladjustment and dissatisfaction, IPV has major mental health consequences like depression, anxiety, PTSD, sexual dysfunction and somatization and emotional problems in children of such families to cite a few [6]. A wide range of physical health complaints have also been found to be associated with physical abuse, including gastrointestinal disorders, chronic pain or fatigue, loss of appetite and eating disorders, gynecologic and urologic disorders.

Mental health professional dealing with such clients, need to be aware of and sensitive to the cultural background facilitating and maintaining the problem of IPV. Implementation of existing legislation, public awareness, and education need to go hand in hand, to empower and protect the victims and help the perpetrators get the psychological help they need.

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