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Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore the nature of domestic violence and responses to it among a cross-section of women who sought help at a Family Counselling Centre in Bengaluru. They were interviewed with the help of an in-depth interview guide for qualitative data. The women interviewees described their experiences, their reasons for staying on in abusive relationships, suffering violence at the hands of husbands and other family members, their future plans and the alternatives open to them. Interventions by agencies meant to help them have a vital role to play and must offer a wide range of services.

Keywords

Domestic violence, battered women, counselling services

Introduction

Domestic violence is a major contributor to the physical and mental ill-health of women, for the effects of violence can be devastating. Negative consequences extend beyond women's sexual and reproductive health to their overall health, welfare of their children and even the economic and social fabric of nations (Heise et al., 1999). The available literature shows that gender based violence is taking a heavy toll of the lives of women, causing serious problems. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that globally 29 to 62 per cent of women have

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experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner (WHO, 1997).

Various personal, familial and socio-cultural factors influence women's decision to continue in a relationship despite abuse. The process of terminating the relationship usually involves leaving and returning several times before the woman can end the relationship for good (Merritt-Gray and Wuest, 1995; Newman, 1993). Most of the research on domestic violence has been conducted from a quantitative perspective which does not specifically reflect the personal experiences of women. Researchers mute women's voices by limiting language and words that they are allowed to use to describe their experiences of domestic violence. Their voices are defined, definitions falling into acceptable categories such as physical or sexual abuse. Spender (1990) feels that once certain categories are constructed within the language, we proceed to organise our world according to those categories. Ferraro and Johnson (1983) in examining women's rationalisations for staying in or leaving violent relationships have used categories based on the deviant behaviour perspective. Using pre-conceived categories of thought may affect understanding the seriousness of the issues and has limited implications for practice. Qualitative research into the experiences and issues of women while they are in a violent relationship are limited in the Indian context. Moreover, research on the nature of the phenomenon of abuse, as defined by those experiencing it, has been minimal. The current study was carried out to explore qualitatively the nature of domestic violence, the needs of women who seek professional help, reasons for women being in such abusive relationships, and the alternatives available to them. Qualitative research in this area will provide rich information that has the potential for developing intervention strategies to help women seeking help at counselling centres. Moreover, a better understanding of the experience of domestic violence from a woman's point of view will also help in the development of culturally sensitive psycho-social intervention modalities at varied levels.

Methods

Since the objective of the study was to understand women's experiences expressed in their own words, it was felt that there was a need to use

qualitative methodology. This is because qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in a particular universe. A well detailed, pre-determined methodology limits the agenda for research as in 'forced choice' situations. Often when researchers using the paradigm of the natural sciences claim to understand and speak on behalf of the groups that are being studied, the community being researched is usually silenced and variety is truncated into simple categories (Silverman, 2000), while social constructionism, on the other hand, involves people speaking about themselves (Shotter, 1993).

Qualitative studies seek to convey the complex world of respondents in a holistic manner using 'thick description' rather than particular categories and variables. Furthermore, they assume a dynamic reality, a state of flux which can be captured via prolonged engagements with clients. These methods are the only means of understanding certain psycho-sociological phenomena, such as motivations, beliefs, decision processes and also, they allow participants' reflections on, and understanding of, social phenomena (Patton, 1990). Qualitative researchers strive to understand lived experience and meaning that participants give to objects and symbols in this social world (Berg, 2001).

The data for the current study was derived from in-depth interviews with 20 women clients who sought help at the Family Counselling Centre situated within the Police Commissioner's Office at Bengaluru, using the purposive sampling method. Women aged 18 years and above, seeking services at the Centre were also included in the study. Women with psychiatric problems and those not speaking the local language Kannada were excluded. Their ages ranged from 20 to 36 years. Fifteen women were literate and five were illiterate. Of the 20, 10 women were in an abusive relationship, six were separated from their husbands and four had been deserted. Six of them were employed and 14 were unemployed. Twelve women were from a lower socio-economic background, six were from the middle class and two from an extremely low socio-economic background.

For collecting data the researchers prepared a semi-structured interview guide based on the research aim and review of literature. The semi-structured interview guide was first validated by experts working in the field of domestic violence and pilot tested. It was prepared in English and later translated into Kannada. The guide was predominantly designed with open-ended questions to explore the various issues such as forms of

violence experienced by the women (in their own words), reasons for women remaining in the abusive relationship, efforts made by women to end abuse, the alternatives available to women who wished to end the abusive relationship, and future plans. The schedule was administered individually at the family counselling centre after obtaining informed consent from the women. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Narratives were obtained from the women, which allowed them to speak for themselves and reconstruct their experiences. These were recorded. The researcher used the ATLAS qualitative software programme to assist with the content analysis. Coding was carried out on a computer using a scientific software ATLAS.ti (Version WIN.4.2). This is a powerful workbench for qualitative analysis of large bodies of textual, graphical and audio data. It offers a variety of tools for accomplishing tasks associated with any systemic approaches to 'soft' data, for material which cannot be analysed by formal statistical approaches in meaningful ways. Many researchers have used ATLAS.ti software for coding and analysis of qualitative data (Swanberg and Logan, 2005). The qualitative data in this research consisted of interviews and session notes. Interviews were transcribed from field notes to understand processes, links and various themes. They were fed into the computer and read for identification of themes and patterns. During the initial stage, coding was carried out by reading and rereading every line of the text in search for units of meaning. Coded material was retrieved in the form of quotes, memo-ing which involves writing reflexive commentaries on some aspect of the data, theory or method. A method for deeper analysis was also used to expand on the codes and explain them in detail.

The Findings

The major themes reported include quotes taken directly from the interviews, presented in the participant's own words.

Experiences of Violence

The women experienced different types of violence committed by their husbands and in-laws—physical, verbal, social and economic. Fifteen

women reported that the persistent demand for dowry by the husband and in-laws was a major cause of violence. Thus, abuse was mainly on account of dissatisfaction with dowry. Husbands wanted more dowry, which was promised at the time of marriage. Six women reported their husband's excessive alcohol consumption as another reason for violence. Four women whose husbands were involved in extra-marital relationships reported abuse in the form of emotional distancing; forcing them to divorce and end the conjugal relationship. Not spending time with children, and not contributing finances to maintain the family were other complaints. Women reported that their refusal to have sex often triggered episodes of violence. Often, women avoided sexual contact with their husbands out of fear of HIV/AIDS.

The common forms of violence experienced by the women are listed here.

Physical Violence

All the women reported physical violence in the form of beating with sharp objects, attempt to kill by pouring kerosene on them, attempt to strangle, burning with cigarettes or an iron rod and forced sex under the influence of alcohol.

Other Forms of Violence

Violence included threats of dire consequences, verbal abuse, deprivation of food and social contact, being constantly thrown out of the house and physical isolation resulting from being locked inside the home.

Social Violence

This included abuse before neighbours, the humiliation of being beaten at the workplace, and demands for money. Four women reported that their husbands suspected them of having an extra-marital relationship, even doubted the paternity of their children, and did not allow them to interact with neighbours and other men.

Economic Violence

Another type of violence shared by the women was financial control, whereby women's access to or control over money was highly restricted. This contributed to their dependency on their abusive husbands for money.

My husband beats me and reminds me that my parents are supposed to give him a bike which they did not. He also demands that I bring additional money (Rs. 20,000/-) to start a business. He does not understand that my father does agricultural work and whatever money he gets is not sufficient to repay the debt which he made for my marriage. How can I ask him for money? My father also needs to save money for my sister's marriage.

He comes to [my] office at the end of every month to collect my salary. Many times I refused to give my hard-earned money… What to do? I have to give, otherwise he beats me….

I feel like committing suicide. He beats me in front of my colleagues under the influence of alcohol… I have no way to go…

Every day he creates nuisance in front of neighbours. He shouts at me [using] filthy language. Last night he came home fully drunk and pulled me out of the house and beat me… He humiliated me in front of everyone. You can see marks on my body. It's paining like hell…

Reasons for Staying in Violent Relationships

Several factors influenced women's decisions to stay in or leave the violent marital relationship. The particular reasons that influenced women's decisions to stay on in an abusive relationship were: financial dependency, the children's future, fear of retaliation and ongoing harassment, and cultural beliefs in marriage held by society. The women offered multiple reasons for staying on; their responses were not limited to any one reason.

Lack of Financial Independence

All the women reported that financial dependency made them stay on in the violent marital relationship. They said that they are afraid of the poverty that can result from leaving their husband. Poor economic conditions of their natal family and the presence of unmarried siblings whose future might be affected if they were to return are other reasons. Marriage by choice (or 'love marriage') prevented three women from going back to their natal families.

Children

Children's well-being was a major concern. Women focused less on themselves than on their children, not wishing to render them homeless

and fatherless. Women said that there were times when they had wanted to leave but were helpless as they did not know where to go and how to care for their children. But women with young children reported that they would leave for the sake of their children.

Cultural Belief in Marriage

The response of the larger social network, cultural belief in marriage and the woman's position also influenced the decision not to opt out of the violent relationship. The women had grown up with certain beliefs like 'women should always stay with their husbands' and therefore moving away would not be considered appropriate by society. Eight women revealed that although their parents asked them to come back, they chose to stay on as their going back would bring dishonour to the family.

> I cannot go back to my parents. My going back will bring dishonour to them. I have a sister who needs to be married. It would be difficult to get a guy for her if I go back to my natal family. People would blame me only for leaving my husband.

Future Plans and Alternatives Available

With regard to future plans nine women openly reported that if nothing works out, they would prefer to die. Six women wanted to become independent and secure a job, while four women preferred to stay with their parents. One woman had no plans for the future and blamed it on her own fate. Death was the final option that emerged.

> I don't know what to do and where to go. If nothing works out I prefer to die….

Another said, on a positive note:

> I want to [get a] job and take care of my children so that I need not have to depend on my husband.

Different kinds of help were expected by these women from the Family Counselling Centre to end the abuse. Their needs were multiple.

The majority wanted police assistance to stop abuse by their husband and in-laws, while 15 wanted free legal help to end the abusive relationship. Ten women felt that counselling or advice to their husband might improve him—he could be persuaded to stop drinking alcohol or give up his extra-marital relationship. Five expected to be given a temporary shelter, a place where they could stay with their children.

Discussion

Causes of Battering

The findings are in consonance with those of other studies. The husband and in-laws are the major perpetrators of abuse. Dowry demands emerged as a major cause of violence against women. It was common for the husband's relatives to instigate violence. Alcohol was another reason for marital violence. An association between alcohol use and marital violence has been noted in many studies (see Chowdhury, 2000). Kaur and Garg (2010) studied the prevailing culture of bias and violence against rural women in India. Their study revealed that physical violence was a major cause of fear among women. Some women suffered violence even during pregnancy. The majority of women preferred to remain silent despite being victimised. Suspicion and infidelity were also related to abuse (Chowdhury, 2000). Abuja (1987) reported that 72 per cent of women face violence at the hands of their husbands and other men in the family whom they know well, even in places they would consider safe.

Staying On

The women feared to resort to the law for fear of implications such as social isolation. Some of the reasons for women to continue in violent relationships are economic dependency, absence of family support, presence of children and the social stigma attached to marital breakdown. Women also report having carefully thought about what the response of the larger society would be and how they would cope with that. Their staying on in the relationship cannot be simplistically understood as

'dependency or helplessness'; rather, it needs to be seen as a rational decision that they have made after considering all options open to them in their circumstances. Further, women's faith in marriage as an institution is still strong and they felt committed to their marriage despite the odds.

Pagelow (1981) explored three reasons that explain why a battered woman does not take any action to get out of a violent situation. The first one is traditional ideology, cultural norms and their influence on sexual inequalities. Second, lack of 'resources', which includes money, material goods and support of family and friends, constrains a bid for freedom. Finally, 'institutional responses' responsible include the amount and type of support and assistance available and received by the battered women, as well as pressures exerted against them to confine them within the violent relationship. Moreover, women's faith in marriage as an institution is still strong, as could be seen in the majority of the women in the study who were still committed to preserving their marriage despite the violence. This finding directly implies that there is socio-cultural acceptance and tolerance of violence. Belief in the value of relationships coupled with emotions such as hope (Thompson, 1989), loneliness and helplessness propel many abused women into staying on despite violence (Johnson et al., 1992). Too many women encounter lack of support from friends and family, uninformed social service providers, lack of economic resources and the terror of looming homelessness (Anderson et al., 2003).

The majority of women had no plans. Nearly 50 per cent of them 'preferred to die if nothing worked out'. A few wanted employment to become economically independent. Wilson, Baglioni and Downing (1989) concluded that working away from home appears to be a crucial survival strategy, possibly because it lessens the battered woman's economic, social and emotional dependence on her husband. But survivors who intend to leave permanently may need to return to their marital home due to insufficient resources. Further, learning to live independently is often frightening and quite difficult, for domestic violence survivors have always been told by their abusers what to do, how to do it and when to do it (Senter and Caldwell, 2002). Leaving permanently means that for the first time in perhaps years a survivor will have to figure out what to do by herself, often with very little emotional and financial

support. This in itself may be quite overwhelming for a woman experiencing battering (ibid.). In the current study most of the women wanted to stay in the abusive relationship for the sake of their children's well-being. Leaving the marital home for the sake of the children seems the only way out when the violence has spread to the children.

Strube and Barbour (1984) found that three factors influenced the likelihood of a woman leaving an abusive relationship. First, frequency and severity of the abuse: the more frequent and severe the violence, the more likely the woman would leave. Second, history of abuse: women without a history of abuse as a child were more likely to leave the relationship. Finally, availability of resources: women with more resources were more likely to leave the relationship. The authors also found that the longer a woman was in an abusive relationship, the less likely she was to leave it. Women who left were more likely to have had several previous abusive relationships, filed assault charges and obtained restraining orders. Those women who had attempted various ways to end the abuse and failed were more likely to take action (Strube and Barbour, 1984).

Feelings of 'learned helplessness' are clearly present among these women. Women who have been subjected to prolonged unpredictable and uncontrollable abuse are more likely to suffer from a decreased sense of mastery and self-esteem, which hinders their ability to take active steps to change their situation, and show signs of learned helplessness which results in severe psychological distress, particularly depression (Shepherd, 1990).

Implication for Social Work Practice

Such findings provide useful insights to social workers working in service agencies/counselling centres, to assess the realistic expectations of the women and to plan proper intervention strategies at various levels. Women who wish to leave abusive partners or seek police protection are faced with a number of legal and other problems such as failure of the agency to provide support before separation is obtained. Legal services are extremely slow or not available when needed. Solving these difficulties may encourage more women to seek help. Of particular importance

is the provision of adequate protection and shelter for battered women who wish to leave. A significant proportion of women stated that their partners had threatened to kill them if their needs were unmet. Although these threats may be exaggerated, they are perceived as very real. Without adequate protection, many women consider it futile even to discuss making changes in their lives. However, there is no single treatment modality for any relationship problem; for example, couples counselling is not universally recommended for treatment of domestic violence. The social worker's/counsellor's decision on suitable therapy must rest on an assessment of the couple's overall psycho-social functioning, particularly whether they demonstrate sufficient self-control as to preclude further violence. If the couple's relationship is highly volatile and the woman is fearful of violence, the counsellor's attention should be directed at emergency measures such as police assistance, shelters and legal intervention. The counsellors should have adequate knowledge of risk assessment and a range of therapeutic modalities. The general goals of therapy in violence cases must include *(a)* an immediate cessation of violence, *(b)* awareness of and intervention in the pattern of escalation by the couple, *(c)* improved problem-solving abilities and *(d)* expanded marriage contracts and general decrease in relationship rigidity, sex roles, expectations and projection of hostility. The service agency should provide interventions that are likely to improve the self-esteem of the women and help them to identify the resources available to and preferred by them.

Our study has few methodological issues that need to be mentioned. Findings from a small study can typically be replicated in larger samples. This study has clearly brought out the concerns of women in violent relationships which need to be addressed by agencies that deliver services.

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