

# Understanding Violence against Women

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Violence can be visible or invisible or camouflaged in moral terms. It is always a coercive instrument to uphold or enforce cultural codes of honour. The articles in this special issue have discussed different forms of atrocities against women.

Violence accompanies power. It is committed to prove or feel a sense of power maintained as an instrument of coercion. Any individual or group facing the threat of coercion or being disciplined to act in a manner required by another individual or group is subject to violence. Though physical violence is pervasive against women, it can take other forms which generate an atmosphere of threat or reprisal. There are crimes specifically directed against women like rape, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, prostitution, domestic violence and pornography. The forms may vary between cultures and settings, but what is near universal is male violence far exceeds female violence. During most wars and conflict situations, atrocities against women are ways of asserting power over the enemy – to show the other side cannot protect their women. We have our Partition stories, and more recently, the Godhra carnage. Dalit subjugation routinely takes the same form – by aiming at their women.

Violence is almost always a coercive instrument to uphold or enforce cultural codes of honour. It can also be a show of resistance. There are frequent reports about male members of families killing the girl or boy who has violated norms of caste marriage or contracting tabooed alliances like sagotra marriage. Upholding honour is both an individual and community concern. Breaches of caste hierarchy invoke stringent penalties on offenders – atrocities on dalits are retaliatory measures for their exercising what democratic rights bestow on them. Such upholding of so-called honour also relates to gender roles within marriage.

Women have been the victims of patriarchal sexual practices through exploitation by landlords during caste riots, in marital rape, in state policies concerning reproduction, and of course, through wife battering. Feudal practices existed where landed gentry demanded “first night privileges”. Domestic violence is part of this scenario of upholding socially sanctioned norms and practices. An important aspect of the norm is male privilege to women's bodies within marriage. Rather than being exceptional it is symptomatic of the sexuality of everyday life as women live it in the context of marriage and family. Is violence a function of complex patriarchal structures and, therefore, an uneven experience which affects women in different ways? Or is violence an essential aspect of a problematic of masculinity – a general masculine way of being for which one can construct a common grammar? Husbands (from narratives reproduced here as well as in many places) appear to represent their familial, economic and social status and power as well as their sense of themselves as husbands and men by controlling their wives. Masculinity expresses itself in the context of marriage through sexual demands.

The family is complicit in this. It has a stake in male virility to produce progeny. The studies which have been reported here, refer to

women's absence of decision-making in avoiding pregnancy in the first year of marriage. The main focus of the studies is about the effects of early pregnancy on adolescent girls, on their health and nutrition. However, it raises larger issues of the absence of autonomy, of inability to make decisions regarding their own bodies. Social acceptability and family power influence the practice or non-practice of contraception. "Newly married adolescent girls have little power and social status in their marital family and are rarely able to negotiate their first pregnancy in arranged marriages", says the introduction. The case studies further point to the fact that violence is not merely that of direct assault, but can take the form of *deprivation* – of mobility, or food, of a girl's natural inclinations and interests. She has to subordinate her own well-being to the demands of husbands and in-laws.

### Social Status

The perception, attitude and practices related to health and nutrition of girls and young women are governed by the girls' social status and gender roles. In addition, domestic violence as in the case of rape, invests the victim with guilt about her "mistakes" in not sufficiently honouring her expected duties to husband and in-laws. The young girl entering her marital family is suddenly forced to take on the role of daughter-in-law, where she is answerable to in-laws for her behaviour; she is also the young mother. Thus, early marriages thrust roles and responsibilities of adulthood on young girls and invite violence for non-performance or neglect of expected behaviour. The triggers can be anything from not being at home when the husband comes home, not finishing work

assigned, refusing sex or quarrels with in-laws. The young girl in the marital family has the least power, least voice, no capacity to negotiate or influence decisions – including that of delaying pregnancy. The assumption of internalised guilt by the victim is the way invisible, but intimidatory threat extracts compliance.

Paradoxically, yet predictably, questions of male sexuality have not engaged the attention of scholarly analysis. It was Gandhi who perceived violence as an essential ingredient of male sexual desire and advocated celibacy to reform male sexuality. In the family planning campaigns for a long time the target was woman without accepting the fact that she was not the decision-maker. It is only now that male responsibility is acknowledged. Pregnancy and child birth after all are full of physical pain for women. I remember a family planning poster in the west which showed a man pregnant and the caption said "Would you be so careless if this happened to you?". This was when the moral right was running campaigns against abortion on the basis of the right to life. It only meant they wanted a child to be born, but had no interest in providing any support for the mother or parents for the health and well-being of the infant or parents. Legislation was sought against pharmaceuticals selling contraceptives. At no time was the issue addressed to men's responsibility.

Violence can be visible, invisible, camouflaged in moral terms, but the underlying power is the threat of penalties, of coercive power, of increasing the vulnerability of the victim in many subtle ways that deny options or autonomy for her own well-being.

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