

In India, Domestic Violence Rises with Education

By Swapna Majumdar

Debate about the cultural underpinnings of domestic violence in India is being stirred by a study that found a woman's risk of being beaten, kicked or hit rises with her level of education.

NEW DELHI, India (WOMENSENEWS)—In New Delhi, India, a brilliant doctor tries to commit suicide after her husband slaps her for contradicting him in front of his friends.

In Manila, Philippines, a former beauty queen tells police she was coerced into “entertaining other men” after being locked in a room without food for days by her husband.

In Santiago, Chile, neighbors respond to distress calls from a woman battered by her husband for refusing to let him watch a particular TV program in front of the children.

In Cairo, Egypt, the wife of a highly placed bureaucrat finally speaks up after enduring years of physical and mental abuse for being unable to bear a child.

The incidents were documented in a series of studies carried out by the Washington-based International Center for Research on Women in collaboration with independent Indian researchers. The cross-cultural study looked at the problem of domestic abuse in India, Egypt, Chile and the Philippines and found that violence against women was prevalent across regions, communities and classes.

New Round of Debate

While the findings are not new, the



Preet Rustagi

study has incubated a new round of debate about the cultural underpinnings to domestic violence, especially in India, where the study found a woman's risk of being beaten, kicked or hit rose along with her level of education.

In the aftermath of the report, advocates are anxious that the data not be used to retard the push for women's education. That effort was given new urgency this week with the release of a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, finding that girls in many countries continue to face “sharp discrimination in access to schooling.” The report also finds that girls in India had just a little better than three-quarters the chance of boys to receive a primary-school education.

“Interpretation of this data needs to be done very sensitively,” warned Preet Rustagi, a junior fellow at the New Delhi-based Center for Women's Development Studies. “Education is an empowering tool for women and should not be seen as impacting negatively. In fact, this correlation points to the imperative need for an attitudinal change among men and society in general.” Rustagi has analyzed crime records

relating to violence against women and also found a correlation between education and domestic violence.

Risk Rises with Education

According to the 2002 study, 45 percent of Indian women are slapped, kicked or beaten by their husbands. India also had the highest rate of violence during pregnancy. Of the women reporting violence, 50 percent were kicked, beaten or hit when pregnant. About 74.8 percent of the women who reported violence have attempted to commit suicide.

Kumud Sharma of the Centre for Women's Development Studies in New Delhi traced the correlation between education and domestic violence to patriarchal attitudes. "Educated women are aware of their rights," she said. "They are no longer willing to follow commands blindly. When they ask questions, it causes conflicts, which, in turn, leads to violence. In many Indian states, working women are asked to hand over their paycheck to the husband and have no control over their finances. So, if they stop doing so or start asserting their right, there is bound to be friction."

Domestic violence experts say the problem in India stems from a cultural bias against women who challenge their husband's right to control their behavior. Women who do this—even by asking for household money or stepping out of the house without their permission—are seen as punishable. This process leads men to believe their notion of masculinity and manhood is reflected to the degree to which they control their wives.

"The behavior of men stems from their understanding of masculinity," said Nandita Bhatla, researcher with the International Center for Research on Women, "and what their role should be vis-a-vis women, especially their wives."



Jyotsna Chatterjee

Problem of Perception

Men have always been taught to perceive themselves as the superior sex, said Jyotsna Chatterjee, director of the

Joint Women's Program, a women's resource organization based in New Delhi. It is this conditioning, she said, that makes them believe they have to control their wives, especially if they are considered disobedient.

Although men's preoccupation with controlling their wives declines with age—as does the incidence of sexual violence—researchers found that the highest rates of sexual violence were among highly educated men. Thirty-two percent of men with zero years of education and 42 percent men with one-to-five years of education reported sexual violence. Among men with 6-to-10 years of education—as well as those with high-school education and higher—this figure increased to 57 percent.

A similar pattern was seen when the problem was analyzed according to income and socioeconomic standing. Those at the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder—migrant labor, cobblers, carpenters, and barbers—showed a sexual violence rate of 35 percent. The rate almost doubled to 61 percent among the highest income groups.

Researchers have not determined why men with higher incomes and educations are more likely to be violent towards women.

Charming Colleague Is Revealed to Be a Wife Beater

Indian theater personality and feminist Tripurari Sharma was shocked to learn that a well-educated and respected actor in her theater group was abusing his wife, also an established actress.

“He was the most helpful, cordial and endearing man,” she said. “His wife would attend rehearsals with bruises at times that she would cover up. Later, I found out she was being beaten. If the actress herself had not told me, I would have never believed it. So, I think it is a myth to think that the high education and economic status will lessen the risk of violence against women.”

Equally disturbing is the finding that two of every five women in an abusive relationship in India remain silent about their suffering because of shame and family honor. The studies have also shown, nearly one-third of the Indian women experiencing abuse had thought about running away, but most said they feared leaving their young children and had no place to go. Activists felt that for intervention strategies to succeed, attitudes about violence would have to change and the level of awareness, among both men and women, about the negative impact of violence had to be raised.



Swapna Majumdar is an award winning Indian journalist writing on politics, gender and development. She

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Besides the Prabha Dutt award for investigative journalism, Swapna has also received several prestigious journalism fellowships including the United Nations Dag Hammarskjold fellowship, the South Asia Media Fellowship and the Medialinks fellowship.

Her articles have appeared in national newspapers including The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Indian Express and The Hindu and international newspapers including The Guardian, The Sydney Morning Herald, the South China Morning Post and Womensenews.

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