

‘REAL MEN DON’T BEAT THEIR WIVES’

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ABSTRACT:

Despite the numerous Domestic violence laws, women protection acts and women cells in India at present; physical abuse and domestic violence is still rampant and grossly underreported. This article describes my experience in dealing with victims of domestic abuse as a medical student.

Article

She sat there looking at us, her eyes brimming with tears and pleading with us. There was nothing that we could do; we had no comforting words to offer to her. We told her to lay back, rest and feed her new born baby daughter. This was Chandni Devi’s sixth consecutive daughter. She had had a son few years ago but he died soon after being brought out into this world by an untrained Dai

(untrained birth attendant). Chandni herself merely survived that pregnancy as her womb became infected and her perineum was torn due to rough handling by the village dai during labour. Her husband had just abandoned her because she gave birth to another daughter. The minute he was allowed to meet her in the post delivery room he came in and hit her hard on the face while verbally abusing her as well not caring that there were doctors and medical students around. The head nurse of the wing tried to stop him but he shouted at her as well, said it was not her business and actually pushed her away. He then hit his wife a few more times, told her that he is divorcing her, that her five daughters were with their maternal grandmother and left her forever.

This is not just the story of Chandni, this is the plight of thousands of women in India.

Domestic violence is far from over. Studies from different parts of the country draw our attention to the shockingly high rates of domestic violence. While urban South India and the eastern part of the country report rates as high as 56% (1,2), 62% women from Pune (3) report to have been the victims of domestic violence and physical abuse. Calcutta (4) fairs slightly better with a prevalence of 17%. Ruikar et al have characterized the forms of violence inflicted and found that the most commonly reported husband's behavior included slapping (98.8%) followed by pushing (39.8%) & kicking wives (33.7%). (3) The figures paint a clearer picture of the story that these anecdotes attempt to tell.

Nahar Singh was a 3 year old first born male baby in a well to do family diagnosed with Hypoxic Ischemic Encephalopathy Grade 4 commonly known as Cerebral Palsy. He had not even achieved neck holding till the age of three years. He did not recognize his mother, could not feed and had not attained a single milestone. The reason for his condition was

that his mother was beaten up by her mother-in-law during labour and had not been allowed to undergo an institutional delivery, the baby had not cried at birth and the untrained birth attendant had slapped him several times on the head and poured ice cold water over his body to make him cry. He had seizures since birth and a host of other complications and was doomed to live a miserable life because of cerebral palsy.

Women who experience physical violence from their husbands are significantly less likely to adopt contraception and more likely to experience an unwanted pregnancy (5). It was a fine Monday morning and we were posted in the family planning department when Bhupendra came in tagging along 2 sons and 1 daughter with another child in her arms. She came requesting for an abortion, she had her last child 4 months ago and did not want any more but her husband would not allow any contraceptive measure. She told us that contraception was against their religious practices and even suggesting it to him would

only lead to her being beaten up. Since this is such a usual story we thought we would try talking to the husband despite being told by the workers around that it would not help. We were in our third year and still had the enthusiasm to try and change things around and so we went ahead and tried. All we managed to achieve was Bhupendra being beaten in front of us and forcibly dragged home without even getting her abortion. This left us scared and guilty because we knew that now she would be forced to get an illegal abortion from a quack doctor and would risk her life in turn. It was then that we realized the futility of enthusiastic convincing and coercing.

Besides the obvious psychological and sexual health related issues, domestic violence has been reported to be associated with chronic malnutrition and anemia among women growth retardation in children. (6)

It is so usual for women to come to the hospital with remote complaints of backache, pain in limbs, who on examination are found to have multiple bruises and cuts over their bodies.

Even on direct interrogation most on them will not admit that they are being physically abused and tortured. In fact the Ruikar et al report in their study that 17.8% women actually justified physical abuse by husband. The most commonly reported behavior of women included crying (85.2%) & silently bearing the physical abuse (59%). (3) We have seen rape victims with third degree perineal tears and vaginal lacerations not admitting because of the fear of society, because of the fear of the trial where they would have to 'prove' and because they would be forced to carry around the stigma for life. Neeta had slipped on the floor of her bathroom for the third time in a month. The truth was that her husband had beaten her up yet again. Even the doctor knew the truth but we all would pretend. We did not want to add to her agony especially because her husband was accompanying her, making sure that she does not let on the truth. We hoped the play acting would help - somehow...

The reason why females do not rebel and complain about the torture on the domestic

front stems from the ancient Indian belief that their husband is their God and that once they have been married and sent into their husband's family only their pyre is allowed to leave that place which implies that the scope for separation or divorce from the side of the wife is next to nil. A divorced woman is said to be a stigma to the society thereby belittling her will to live an independent happy life without her husband's care and shelter. It is this fear of separation that makes even the educated, seemingly aware females silently accept physical and psychological violence in their marital lives. They want their marriages to work at any cost; they want social and financial security for their children for whom they even undertaken brutal humiliation and subjugation.

We all know that when two big countries fight and when missiles and tankers attack there is violence, death, calamity and ill health but little do we realize how small scale violence affects the health status of a country and hence the world. The effect of domestic

violence in India on global health can be understood if we look at the adverse impact it has on health indices of the country. I would rate Domestic violence as being the main cause of our dismal health indicators of High Maternal and Perinatal mortality, high Infant Mortality rates and the lopsided sex ratio. Infact the reason for India being the second most populous country is also explained as females are not allowed or don't dare to make their family size choices due to fear of being subjected to violence.

Even the classes of Indian men not actively beating their wives up are causing emotional turmoil and psychological damage because of the patriarchal pattern of society. In the Southern part of the country where a matriarchal system exists there is a better sex ratio, a higher female literacy rate and a lower maternal and child mortality. Gandhiji had stated years ago that if you educate the woman of the family, you educate the whole family!

The violence against Chandni and other women across India is entrenched in South Asian cultural beliefs and practices. It does not fit into the usual definition of violence concerning migration and wars but it is true and existent. It influences health, both national and global. It stems from our prejudices, biased perspectives, egos and negative attitudes. We have to strive as a country and as citizens of this world to break these shackles binding us. We have to work really hard - as doctors, as students, through NGO's, as law enforcing agencies as it is a concerted effort of all of us together that might help us fight violence in everyday life and attain a healthier world. We need to create an attitudinal change. We need to spread the one line slogan that originally started in the Philippines - Real Men don't beat their wives!

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