

GENDER VIOLENCE AND WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

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Abstract

Gender plays an important role in the field of mental health in the sense that it acts as an important determinant factor. More specifically gender violence has a direct role to play in the field of mental health. Violence meted to women has a direct impact i.e. an adverse impact on her mental health. The after effect of violence against women is not confined to only mental health; it has adverse effects on physical health also. But yes, violence against women affects most adversely her mental health. This is so because such violence devastates women physically and emotionally. Women are target to violence (mostly in the nature of physical and sexual abuse) by their partners, family members, acquaintances and strangers as well. This paper tries to analyze how violence meted out to women affect them physically and mentally

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1. Concept of Mental Health

A good mental health is essential for an individual's effective development and wellbeing. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health to be "...a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." (World Health Organization [WHO] 2001, p.1).

Good mental health is a prerequisite for a healthy life of women. "Good mental health is intrinsically important, conferring a subjective sense of emotional well being on the individual woman and extrinsically important, representing a significant resource to the broader society in which she lives and works." (WHO, 2000, p.11).

Good mental health lays down the foundation for effective functioning and well being of individuals and the community at large. Good mental health bestows "a subjective sense of emotional well being on the individual woman and extrinsically important, representing a significant resource to the broader society in which she lives and works." (WHO, 2000, p.11).

The World Health Organization's Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (1986) looked at health as multidimensional and espoused a social model for health. It defined health as a 'positive concept emphasizing social and personal resources as well as physical capacities.'

The WHO Report of 1981 defines mental health. It states that 'Mental health is the capacity of the individual, the group and the environment to interact with one another in ways that promote subjective well-being, the optimal development and use of mental abilities (cognitive, affective and relational), the achievement of individual and collective goals consistent with justice and the attainment and preservation of conditions of fundamental equality.' (WHO, 2000, p.11) Going through this definition we can find that this definition actually favors and highlights woman's mental health. It does so because it-

- "stresses the complex web of interrelationships that determine mental health and that the factors that determine health operate on multiple levels
- goes beyond the biological and the individual

- acknowledges the crucial role of the social context
- highlights the importance of justice and equality in determining mental well being” (WHO, 2000, p.11-12).

This definition of mental health does not make a mention of gender. But then gender cannot be ignored. Gender has its impact on the “production of mental health at every level- the individual, the group and the environment- and is critically implicated in the differential delivery of justice and equality.” (WHO, 2000, p.12). Thus, gender needs to be considered as a determinant factor of health i.e differences in health between men and women.

2. Types of Gender Violence

The very term gender violence includes child sexual abuse, rape, sexual harassment at the workplace, sexual molestation / assault, and domestic violence.

The following are some of the ugly form of violence against women-

- Sexual abuse and rape in intimate relationships- Most of the women are subjected to this form of violence. But then in many countries sexual abuse and rape by an intimate partner is not recognized as a crime. Women who are married also do not consider forced sex as rape as they are of the belief that once married their husband has an unlimited right to sexual access to her. However many countries like Australia, Austria, USA, UK, Germany, Finland, France, Russia have taken this matter into consideration and begun to legislate on marital rape.
- Femicide- It means murder of women by their batterers. Femicide is recorded to occur at the domestic level.
- Sexual abuse of children and adolescents- This is one of the most frequent occurring of violence at the domestic level. Girls are subjected to such form violence frequently. This type of crime is committed by father, grandfather, uncle, stepfather, brother or other male relative who are in a position of trust. “The rights of the child are usually sacrificed in order to protect the name of the family and that of the adult perpetrator.” (UNICEF, 2000, p.6).
- Forced Prostitution- “Forced prostitution or other kinds of commercial exploitation by male partners or parents is another form of violence against women and children reported worldwide.” (UNICEF, 2000, p.6) Many a times, families who are unable to maintain themselves sell or hire out their children who are thereby forced to enter prostitution. Also young girls who are sent as domestic workers are physically and sexually exploited by their employers.

- Domestic violence- It can have an adverse effect on the mental health of women. There can not be any denial now that abuse whether it be in the childhood or in the adult life leaves its impacts on a women's life be such as development of depression, mental health disorders, self-harm, suicide and attempted suicide, eating disorders

3. Effects of violence against women

Violence against women is indeed a global epidemic which actually leads to torture, killings, maims her physically, economically, psychologically and sexually. Violence against women actually results in violation of human rights as it denies to them the equality status, dignity, self worth, denial of fundamental rights.

Violence against women is prevalent in almost all parts of the world. Although there are many societies that proscribe violence against women but then the fact is violence continues- many a times under the garb of cultural practice or religious misinterpretation. "Moreover, when the violation takes place within the home, as is very often the case, the abuse is effectively condoned by the tacit silence and the passivity displayed by the state and the law-enforcing machinery." (UNICEF, 2000, p.2)

Certain groups of women like indigenous and migrant women, refugee women and those in situations of armed conflict, women in institutions and detention, women with disabilities, female children, and elderly women are more susceptible to violence

At the international level too, the negative impact of violence against women has been recognized and their rights have been upheld. The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna (1993) accepted that the rights of women and girls are "inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights." The United Nations General Assembly (in December 1993) adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. This Declaration is the first international human rights instrument which deals exclusively with violence against women, a groundbreaking document that has become the basis for many other parallel processes. In 1994, the Commission on Human Rights appointed the first UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. The Rapporteur was entrusted with the task of analyzing and

documenting the phenomenon of violence against women and holding governments accountable for such violations. Also the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995) included elimination of all forms of violence against women as one of its twelve strategic objectives, and laid down concrete actions to be taken by governments, the United Nations, international and nongovernmental organizations. Although the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) does not specifically talk about gender based violence, in the year 1992 the Committee overseeing CEDAW implementation adopted General Recommendation 19, which states that it is a form of discrimination that inhibits a woman's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men. It asks that governments take this into consideration when reviewing their laws and policies.

Under the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, the ratifying States have recognized the authority of the Committee overseeing the implementation of CEDAW to receive complaints from individuals or groups within the jurisdiction of that State and consider those. It is on the basis of such complaints that the Committee will be in a position to conduct confidential investigations and then issue requests to the government in an urgent basis for taking steps and actions for the purpose of protecting the victims from harm.

The above mentioned throws light to the fact that the international community thinks seriously about the violence that are done to women. The violence meted out to women needs to be condemned as it no way helps her and actually violates her human right.

4. Violence gainst women- when and how?

It is indeed shocking and scary but then it is true that violence against women erupts in the family. Evidence reveals that family is the “place that imperilslives, and breeds some of the most drastic forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls.” (UNICEF, 2000, p.3). At the domestic level, violence against women is usually committed by the male which actually reflects the power relations at home. These males are those who are in the positions of “trust and intimacy and power- husbands, boyfriends, fathers, fathers-in-law, stepfathers, brothers, uncles, sons, or other relatives.” (UNICEF, 2000, p.3) Violence against women at the domestic level is usually of the following type-

Phase	Type of violence
Pre-Birth	Sex-selective abortion; effects of battering during pregnancy on birth outcomes.
Infancy	Female infanticide; physical, sexual and psychological abuse.
Girlhood	Child marriage; female genital mutilation; physical, sexual and psychological abuse; incest; child prostitution and pornography
Adolescence and Adulthood	Dating and courtship violence (e.g. acid throwing and date rape) economically coerced sex (e.g. school girls having sex with “sugar daddies” in return for school fees); incest; sexual abuse in the workplace; rape; sexual harassment; forced prostitution and pornography; trafficking in women; partner violence; marital rape; dowry abuse and murders; partner homicide; psychological abuse; abuse of women with disabilities; forced pregnancy.
Elderly	Forced “suicide” or homicide of widows for economic reasons; sexual, physical and psychological abuse.

(Source: “Violence Against Women”, WHO., FRH/WHD/97.8

5. Psychological pain as a result of violence

Physical abuse done to women is usually visible. But what about the psychological pain that a woman undergoes by way of these violence. The intangible nature of psychological abuse is hard to measure and understand but it leaves a woman “in a situation where she is often made to feel mentally destabilized and powerless.” (UNICEF, 2000, p.4)

The impact of violence on women’s mental health leads to severe and fatal consequences. Battered women have a high incidence of stress and stress-related illnesses such as post-

traumatic stress syndrome, panic attacks, depression, sleeping and eating disturbances, elevated blood pressure, alcoholism, drug abuse, and low self-esteem. For some women, fatally depressed and demeaned by their abuser, there seems to be no escape from a violent relationship except suicide. (UNICEF, 2000, p.9)

Psychological abuse of women includes such behaviour that is intended to intimidate and persecute, and takes the form of threats of abandonment or abuse, confinement to the home, surveillance, threats to take away custody of the children, destruction of objects, isolation, verbal aggression and constant humiliation (UNICEF, 2000, p.2).

6. Conclusion

It is not possible to single out one specific reason for violence against women. There are interrelatedness of various factors that actually results in violence against women. Various social and cultural factors also results in the violence against women. Violence against women actually reflects the unequal power relations (between men and women) in the society. There may various factors that leads to these unequal power relations and these may include: socioeconomic conditions, the institution of family and its relations as to how power relations are enforced, fear of and control over female sexuality, belief in the superiority of males, cultural sanctions and legislations that have since ages denied women their independent status, legal and social status..

Lack of economic independence is also one of the reason for the prevalence of such violence. Because of economic dependence women are not able to escape from the wrath of violence inflicted on them. Also cultural ideologies (both in the industrialized and developing countries) legitimizes such violence against women. Traditions and religions has also approved and allowed such violence against women. “Excessive consumption of alcohol and other drugs has also been noted as a factor in provoking aggressive and violent male behaviour towards women and children.” (UNICEF, 2000, p.8)

If a woman has been diagnosed with a mental health disorder, she will be in a particularly vulnerable position and are likely to find it even harder to report domestic violence than other women.

Women who suffer from domestic violence needs emotional support of some kind. But such needs may vary. Every women needs to be listened with respect and without being judged while they are talking about their experiences.

It is not of importance that at what point of life a woman has been subjected to violence-physical, sexual or psychological (i.e. regardless of whether such violence occurred during childhood or in adulthood). What is important is that women who undergo such violence are victims of depression, anxiety, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and other psychological disorders in their adult life.

Steps should be taken to reduce psychological pain and this can be achieved by way of improving psychological well being of women who are victims of violence. Violence meted out to women actually results in violation of human rights. These sort of violence strikes principles of various international instruments. Participation by women in all fields strengthens a nation's growth. Violence against women actually comes in way economic development of a nation.

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