



Violence Against Women: Where Does India Stand Today?

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The United Nations (UN) declared the 25th of November as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women at its General Assembly, on February 7, 2000. The need to officially designate this International day was due to the increasing and unending violence against women worldwide. As per the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women by the UN General Assembly in 1993, violence against women is defined as, "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." Violence against women (VAW) has also been stated as one of the most devastating human rights violations.

As the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women 2021 is approaching, it is necessary to reflect and see where India stands today in terms of violence against its women. India celebrated its 75th Independence Day on August 15, 2021 and needless to say, it has come a long way from rigid patriarchal dominion, apartheid and blatant violation of basic human rights of women. The female gender was considered the lesser human being, meant to remain in the confines of a house- starting from a childhood of secondary priority in terms of care and education to being passed on as gifts with relief before or upon attaining the official adult age of 18 years in the name of marriage, birthing children irrespective of her mental and physical ability, and finally, after a life of domesticity she was forced to end her life in the funeral pyre of her deceased husband in a practice known as *Sati* or live

on as a social outcast without any possessions. However, pioneers in social reform emerged and fought against all odds to raise the status of women in India society such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy who stood up against Sati and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, who fought against child marriage and was instrumental in introducing the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act.

But the male dominated traditions are so intricately woven into the fabric of Indian society that it is still struggling to break the chains of oppression and concomitant violence, in their old or modernized forms. The *Dowry* system of mandatory material provision by the bride's family to a groom's family is still prevalent in various forms. This practice strongly influences the preference for a male child resulting in female foeticide if conception is otherwise and there is differential treatment of male and female children with grooming of gendered behaviour [1]. Girls are pressurized early on to conform to the traditional 'good' Indian girl image and made to assist in household chores whilst the boys go out to play or head out for additional tuitions. Later on, husbands doing household chores are considered "helping" and women working beyond the confines of kitchen consider themselves "lucky" since their husbands "allowed".

It is when these social norms are deviated that violence against girls and women emerges. Women joining the workforce irrespective of cadre experience violence at the hands of their partners as the social norm and dynamics shift [2]. Violence manifests in physical, sexual and psychological forms and includes a range of atrocities such as harassment (street/workplace harassment, stalking,

cyber- harassment, forced marriage), sexual violence (child sexual abuse, forced sexual acts, unwanted sexual advances) intimate partner violence (battering, psychological abuse, marital rape, femicide); human trafficking; female genital mutilation; and child marriage [3]. It is concerning that India being the second most populous country in the world also ranks high on crime against women [4]. Most women across India prefer to adopt a silent and avoidant attitude towards acts of violence inflicted on them or those around them for fear of aggravating the perpetrator(s), facing the societal consequences or just the lack of safety nets [5]. Moreover, honour killings due to alleged dishonour to a family, caste or religion persist to this day and moving out of the in-laws' house to live as a nuclear family, by the daughter-in-law, not son-in-law, is still a "not a good Indian girl" thing. Women unable to bear a male child face higher violence at the hands of their partner, with subsequent psychological trauma and ill health [6]. So much violence is kept under wraps due to the stigma that in some instances, only when extreme steps are taken by the tortured woman such as attempted suicide or eventual death that relatives, acquaintances or society realize the extent of her suffering. Moreover, marriages breaking down due to immense physical torture, dowry deaths, beatings despite adjustments or addictions are still acceptable but incompatibility, verbal abuse, indifference to spouse, mental wear and tear are not yet considered unlawful by society though punishable under law. In fact, a tortured marriage is an easier cause for separation or divorce than a complete lack of compatibility. Adding to the mayhem is the plight of women who are supposedly elite or the educated, upper middle class. These women are not exempt from the "traditional" expectations and seldom report emotional and physical abuse for fear of social prestige and morality [7]. Many seek professional help in secrecy and this often does not reduce the acts of violence committed against them. Senior educated women who have faced and overcome violence need to come forward and support others in breaking the cycle of stigma and shame.

Indeed, it is high time for all citizens to introspect and speak up on violence faced by women. Breaking the glass ceiling through education and awareness, change in mindset through behaviour change communication needs to be done. Educational institutions can instil respectful attitude and behaviour among students, explore making martial arts training mandatory for females and communities can contribute towards ensuring safe spaces for girls and women. Medico-legal systems and law enforcement need to act

promptly and perpetrators should be brought to book without fear of intimidation. As India is strongly influenced by celebrity culture, the entertainment sector needs to get rid of the display of damsel in distress and knights in shining armour kind of portrayals. Additionally, the health care sector needs to train its workforce in managing mental health of women affected by violence.

To conclude, freedom is a basic human right, not to be fought for, not to be won, not to be given because one is born with it. India has a long way to go in making women feel free from the shackles of traditional bondages instead of subjecting her to violence when she tries to rise beyond the pre-defined boundaries. A "freedom revolution of mindset" is the call of the day if favourable indicators for the nation is desired to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

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