

**Forms of Violence and cruelty Against Women and Girl Child in India –
A Social Work Concern**

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Introduction:

The violence and cruelty against women and girl child is a crucial problem faced by the Indian society since immemorable times. The rights of women and girl child are hampered and exploited at every stage of their lifespan. The right to take birth is always disturbed and the exploitation of girl child starts in the uterus of the mother itself. In a developing society like India where poverty and illiteracy are the major black scars, having a huge impact on the health, malnutrition, education and development of the girl child and women. Thereby facing a violence and cruelty before birth and also after birth.

Violence and cruelty against women is a reality and not a myth that denies women equality, security, dignity, self-worth and their right to enjoy fundamental freedoms in the society. There may be variations in type, intensity, frequency, and control of violence and cruelty but no society can claim to be free from it. It limits women's choices directly and indirectly by inculcating fear in them, destroying their health, limiting mobility, controlling their sexuality, limiting access to resources and service.

In India, the position of women and girl child continues to be poor and vulnerable. Nearly 60 % of women in rural India are got married before the age of 18 and 50 % of married women become mothers before they turn 18 or 19 years. The female literacy rate is approximately 50 %. In such a situation, where women lack awareness about her socio-economic and legal rights, having little decision-making powers, low status then there is a great chance of perpetuation of gender based violence and cruelty. Reports and Statistics show that violence and cruelty against women is on the rise in all spheres of life, whether private or public. Unfortunately, this happens despite the various laws and legislations, which are available to protect women and girl child.

Forms of violence and cruelty against women and girl child:

1) Domestic Violence and cruelty:

Domestic violence and cruelty is the most popular by relatively hidden form of violence and cruelty against women and girls, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and attitudes about gender relations in the Indian society. In most cases, it is looked upon as an intra-family affair, which means non-intervention of both outsiders and relatives of the concerned party to stop the violence and cruelty. Generally, there are many forms of domestic violence and cruelty like –

1. Dowry-related Violence and cruelty
2. Battering
3. Physical Torture
4. Mental Torture

2) Female Foeticide and female infanticide:

In the Indian society the social system of traditions and customs still prevail and the parents regard girl as a liability and there is a strong preference for a male child. The religious obligations also strengthens this belief and the problem of female Foeticide is at its peak.

3) Rape:

Rape is the most violent, abrupt and physically painful instance of male aggression. At the physical level, it represents an invasion of person; at the psychological level, it often results in deep trauma, shame and guilt.

In the last one and half decade, rape cases have more than doubled in India. Further, rape is the third most committed crime against women in India. Rarely the motivating factor for rape is sexual desire. It is rather a violent, hostile and aggressive act used as means to degrade, humiliate, terrorise, control, dominate and assert power over women and girls. It can be said that, it is a mindset of the male that, by raping a women or girl from a family or community, the perpetrator attacks not just women but the entire family/community.

4) Sexual Harassment at workplace:

In 1997 in Vishaka Vs. State of Rajasthan and others, sexual harassment had been explicitly and legally defined as an unwelcome sexual gesture or behaviour whether directly or indirectly as

- Sexually coloured remarks
- Physical contact and advances
- Showing pornography
- Demand or request for sexual favours
- Any other unwelcome physical or verbal/non-verbal conduct being sexual in nature.

Recently in 2014 a new law by name Protection of women against sexual harassment at workplace is enacted in India. This law aims at safeguarding the basic human rights of gender equality and guarantee against sexual harassment and abuse of women at work place.

5) Kidnapping and Abduction:

Kidnapping (under section 363 of IPC) is taking away or enticing a minor or a female less than 18 years without the consent of the lawful guardian. Abduction (under section 363 of IPC) is forcibly or deceitfully taking away a women with the intent of seducing her to illicit sex or compelling her to marry a man against her will. The purpose for this may varies from adoption, begging, marriage, prostitution, ransom, to slavery and sale.

6) Acid attacks:

Whether it is a man who has been rejected or one sided love, a dowry seeking husband or his family or a land or property disputes, in all such cases, acid is used as a weapon which is not intended as much to kill the victim as to scar her physically and mentally. The aftereffect of such an attack not only leads to physical disfigurement but makes it difficult for the victim to function in the society and to earn a living. At the same time, they have to deal with greatly increased healthcare needs and the prohibitive cost of essential medical treatment.

7) Prostitution:

In all societies of the world, female sex workers are a stigmatized group of people. Hypocritically, most mainstream societies have relegated them to the margins, abused them and restricted their rights as citizens. There are approximately 10 million prostitutes in India. Sex workers are at high risk for both sexual and physical violence and cruelty, specially in India where sex work is regarded as illegal. The demand for sexual services has resulted in the increasing use of violence and cruelty to locate and supply sexual labour. The principal means is trafficking which is becoming fastest -growing areas of international criminal activity. Trafficking victims are subjected to conditions tantamount to slavery and to serious physical abuse.

Child prostitution is also commonly seen violence and cruelty against girl child in India, with 3-5 lakh children engaged in this profession in the country. Due to the prevalence of the HIV pandemic, sex workers have been the first group in many nations to be targeted as victims. Their livelihood places them in a highly vulnerable position with no bargaining power and little access to health care.

8) Witch hunting:

Witch hunting means a women or girl having a evil magic powers, witches are popularly depicted as wearing a black cloak and pointed hat, and flying on a broomstick. The murder of individuals and entire families accused of witchcraft is common in many Indian states. From 1991 to 2010, over 1000 cases of witch hunting have been registered in different states of India. Unlike popular belief, it is not superstition that is the root cause of many of these cases but socio-economic factors: land grabbing, property disputes, personal rivalry and resistance to sexual advance, in such incidents, mostly women or widows are targeted, especially when it comes to property disputes.

9) Honour killing:

In a society like India many cases are being witnessed of honour killing in the last decade. Honour is vested in the chastity of woman and girl. If she transgresses caste community dictated norms in the expression of her sexuality, she shames her entire community. To restore honour, the transgressor and her partner has to be punished or be killed. Central to such violence and cruelty is the subordinate position of women. It is interesting to note that such cases of barbaric violence and cruelty takes place among the sections of the rural elite where the sentence of punishment is given and executed by the caste panchayat.

Thus, the above are the major forms of violence and cruelty against women and girls. Which are commonly seen in the Indian traditional society. Violence and cruelty against women and girl considerably increases women's risk to poor health and leads to serious consequences on her mental and physical health. The physical consequences vary and can be fatal, including suicide, homicide, maternal death, miscarriage/perinatal death, unwanted pregnancy, HIV/ AIDS and other STDs either through sexual abuse or by affecting a woman's ability to negotiate contraceptive use.

Mental violence and cruelty like verbal abuse, harassment and deprivation of women and girl of physical and financial resources, may be more widespread than physical violence and cruelty. Such forms of nonphysical violence and cruelty create fear among women and girl, making them more vulnerable to lead a happy and enjoyable life in the society.

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