

Breaking the Silence: A Timely Mission of the Catholic Church to Eradicate Spousal Abuse (Domestic Violence) among the Indian Families (Part – I)

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Introduction

Spousal abuse, a kept secret for a long time in the families, one of the forms of interpersonal violence, exists invariably in all societies of the world. Although very common, spousal violence differs in each society, culture and land in its frequency and number of incidents. Veerle Draulans quoting from the *World Population Report* identifies the prevalence of conjugal violence (physical violence) in different societies of the world. Accordingly, 67% of women in Papua New Guinea, 47% women in Bangladesh, 45% women in Ethiopia, 40% women in India, 29% women in Canada, 22% women in the USA, 21% in Switzerland (6% experience both physical and sexual violence), 13% women in the Netherlands, 12% women in the United Kingdom, and 10% of women in France are subjected to spousal violence.¹ Nonetheless, some studies exhibit a variation in the data on the statistics of spousal violence.² An analysis of Draulan's report, suggests that while women of different nations are prone to spousal

abuse, no mention is made of spousal abuse against men. In reality, spousal violence is not only perpetrated by a husband against his wife but also by a wife against her husband. Although there is a lack of research into abused men, the available information shows that only 3-5 % of men are subjected to abuse.³ A comparison of the figures suggests that, although both men and women are involved in spousal abuse, women are far more vulnerable.

Similarly, in the Indian context, according to the *National Family Health Survey – 3* (NFHS – 3), 37 percent of all married women are subjected to spousal violence⁴ while only 1% men are subjected to spousal violence by their women in 2005-2006.⁵ The percentage of spousal abuse against women in various parts of India is as follows: In the North Indian states like Bihar 59%, Rajasthan 46%, Madhya Pradesh 44%, Jharkhand 35%, Orissa 37%, Chattisgarh 28% and Delhi 16% and Eastern States like Tripura 44%, West Bengal 40%, and in Southern States like Andhra Pradesh 39%, Karnataka 22%, and in Kerala 17%. In these states, however, there is not enough evidence to show how many men are abused by women.⁶

In the context of India, it is astounding to note that nearly 42% of women are vulnerable to spousal violence (physical and sexual violence).⁷ Their safety and security are at stake. In this context, the Church has been silent for long time on this issue. However, it is also encouraging to note here the openness and serious discussion of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) with regard to the issues and problems of women in one of the general assemblies. The CBCI has realized that eradicating spousal abuse and empowering women is a vital mission in India. Thus, to carry

out this mission, in this article the following questions are discussed. What is spousal abuse and what are reasons for spousal abuse? In order to eradicate the spousal abuse what the church must do? What are all the pastoral strategies to protect the victims and empower women in this regard?

1. Phenomenon of Spousal Abuse

1.1. Ambivalence in Spousal Violence

The empirical studies, which have been done in Tamil Nadu, show ambivalences of the phenomenon of spousal abuse. Firstly, some show that spousal abuse has been considered as a problem of the lower class community. For spousal abuse coexists with illiteracy, unemployment and lack of autonomy.⁸ It was believed that there was an absence of spousal violence in higher caste families. On the contrary, however, some field studies show that higher class women are more vulnerable to spousal violence due to the family ethos of Tamil Nadu. For, they are afraid that if they reveal conjugal violence, it would bring disgrace to the prestige and honour of the family. Low caste women, on the other hand, are relatively free to discuss marital violence and to seek help.⁹

Secondly, despite higher levels of education and employment in some cases women can still face physical violence in their conjugal relations¹⁰ while in others the greater economic position and education decrease the spousal violence against women and increase the autonomy of women.¹¹

Thirdly, western literature reveals that spousal abuse refers only to the violence against a woman by either her current partner or ex-partner. In contrast, according to the

South Indian research, spousal violence in India covers not only the violence between a husband and a wife but also the violence against the bride by the parents and siblings of her husband.¹² Bride burning is often done with the help of the in-laws.

Finally, some would say that not all acts of violence can constitute spousal abuse.¹³ According to one study, expressive and instrumental violence are identified as two forms of spousal abuse. Expressive violence is seen as an outcome of the escalation of conflicts between a husband and a wife. In this violence both are involved though not equally. Instrumental violence, however, is a planned and systematic violence mostly done by the husbands.¹⁴ Accordingly, common couple violence, or expressive violence, is not considered as spousal violence at all. This understanding of spousal abuse makes spousal abuse even more complex.

1.2. What is Spousal Abuse?

The term 'spousal abuse' has been subjected to multiple definitions. In western scholarship, 'spousal abuse' is referred to by different names in the literature, such as wife abuse, domestic abuse, couple abuse, Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and at times domestic violence.¹⁵ IPV is widely used to connote spousal abuse. IPV refers to violence between heterosexual and same sex couples who are either married or cohabiting. IPV includes also the violence perpetrated by current and ex-partners or spouses.¹⁶ In contrast, the Indian scholar uses the term 'domestic violence' to express the violence between a husband and a wife.¹⁷ 'Domestic violence' in a broader context may also connote all forms of violence against women that takes place in the family setup. Thus, in this paper the term 'spousal abuse' will be used.

In the context of Tamil Nadu, the word 'spousal violence' refers only to violence between a husband and a wife who are officially a married couple.¹⁸ The word abuse is variously understood i.e., for some it means physical, and for some it is both physical and sexual and for others it is physical, sexual, and psychological etc.¹⁹

Generally spousal abuse is described as "criminal assault and abuse either of women in the home by men or of women in their intimate relations with men".²⁰ This delineation of spousal abuse covers all types of male violence against females in the family. Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran and James C. Melamed define spousal abuse as "the intimidation, by physical force or otherwise, of one partner in an intimate relationship by the other".²¹ In addition, spousal abuse does not stop with intimidation. Sometimes it can also lead to homicide. Feminists view spousal abuse as a coercive act that dehumanizes and affects the total well-being of a woman.²² Although the view of feminists that spousal abuse dehumanizes women can be acknowledged, the question persists of why men coerce women? Thus there is a need to explore further the concept that spousal abuse is men's aggressive control of women resulting in physical, sexual, or psychological injuries.²³ While this definition, unlike former definitions, acknowledges the different forms of injuries in spousal abuse, it fails to answer the question of why men wish to control women. To define spousal abuse or violence comprehensively, two questions need to be raised: what is the intention of the use of force? Is it proportional? In a spousal relationship, if an act (or the omission of an act) is perpetrated with the intention of intimidating, dehumanizing or harming women, then that act can subsequently be termed spousal

abuse. If, on the other hand, an act (at the last resort) is perpetrated to protect someone against violence, then this act cannot properly be termed spousal abuse. Yet, any act that is used to protect oneself from danger must be proportionate to that goal or end. If the act is disproportionate to self-defence (for example, when there are less harmful means available but rejected) then the act itself becomes spousal abuse.

Thus spousal abuse can be defined as any behaviour, action or the omission of action, that is wilfully and deliberately perpetrated against one's spouse with the intention of controlling or harming them either physically, sexually, psychologically or economically.²⁴ This definition includes the perpetration of violence against the bride by in-laws in Tamil Nadu.

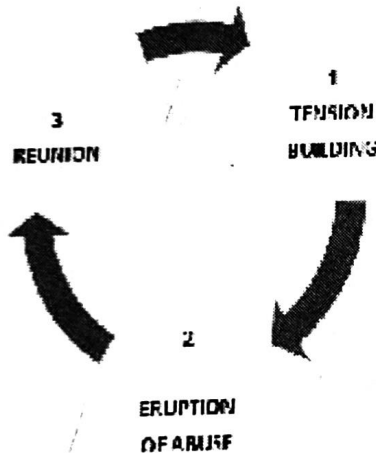
1.3. Nature of Spousal Abuse

The nature of spousal abuse is cyclical and multi-dimensional. According to the studies, spousal abuse doesn't take place all of a sudden. It is seen as a gradual process in the relationship between a husband and a wife. Spousal abuse takes place in a cyclical form. However there is no unified cyclical form for spousal abuse. It is also seen as varied in different research. In this section, how the cyclical and multi-dimensional characters of spousal abuse are understood will be discussed.

1.4. Cyclic Character

The Indian author Subadra states that spousal abuse is cyclical.²⁵ She draws this perception from the American psychologist Leonore E. Walker, the first proponent of the cyclical theory of spousal abuse. According to her findings,

this cyclic character of spousal abuse explains how a woman is victimized in a family and falls into the state of 'learned helplessness' and is not constantly abused in the conjugal relationship. The cyclical nature of spousal abuse is structured as follows: Tension building (tension), the acute battering incident (eruption), loving – contrition (reunion).²⁶



In the tension building phase, the behaviour of a husband is displayed by discrete acts and subsequently friction is created. In this phase, the abuser expresses, although not extremely, an amount of dissatisfaction and hostility towards the spouse. As a result, the woman tries to please her husband and to placate him. She also never tries to respond to his anger. She also has some success in preventing her husband from any further escalation of violence. When the tension escalates, however, she is unable to control her man and she is at greater risk of abuse. As a result, she withdraws from the perpetrator. But, seeing her withdrawal, the man starts to treat her oppressively.²⁷ Ron Clark highlights the reasons for tension in the first phase. It can be due to sleep deprivation, pressure from the workplace and other factors.

The second phase is the “uncontrollable discharge of the tensions that have built up during the first one”.²⁸ In this phase, the batterer unleashes the physical or sexual violence and the woman can be injured severely even though she tries to protect her head and face from severe harm. This phase may end when there is a physiological reduction in tension or the cessation of tension.²⁹ The man will use whatever there is before him to control,³⁰ The eruption of violence does not always happen immediately; in some cases it can take a considerable time. It also depends upon the intensity of the events.³¹

The third phase is described as the honeymoon phase. In this phase, the perpetrator profusely apologizes; he helps the victim; he promises her not to be violent; he makes her happy with gifts. The perpetrator himself does not want to be violent. The woman recalls his earlier love and his words and believes in his ability to change. This phase gives her positive attitudes to remain with him. In this period, he continues to do what he has already done when they were in their courtship period.³² This phase could also be seen as a period of absence of tension and violence without observable loving-contrition behaviour. In this third phase, the scars of abuse are healed. The woman feels that abuse is not the only significant event of the relationship. Considering the love and affection of her husband she recognizes his love. This makes her worry about his health and survival if she leaves the abusive relationship. Even if she leaves him for a short while, she returns to him again because of dependency. Acceptance of abuse is justified because of the good of the family.³³ Although the cyclical nature of spousal abuse has been empirically tested, at times violence need not follow this cycle.

1.5. Multi-faceted Nature

Spousal abuse is described as multi-faceted reality. A study of family violence in India limits spousal abuse to physical and verbal abuse.³⁴ On the other hand, the NFHS – 3 on Tamil Nadu, along with some other empirical studies, discuss only physical, sexual and emotional abuse.³⁵ The former report excludes sexual and economic abuse and the latter economic abuse. Although economic abuse is not frequently mentioned in the Indian context, the economic factor plays a vital role in preventing women from leaving the abusive home and this will be further discussed in the coming pages. The multi-faceted nature of spousal abuse, therefore, must be seen as physical, sexual, psychological and economic.

1.5.1. Physical Abuse

Physical abuse can be viewed at different levels. In some families physical abuse could be seen as an expression of any form of physical action to control the wife.³⁶ There is a common tendency among some scholars to use these terms interchangeably when referring to physical abuse. Because the difference between physical beating and battering is not made clear in the research, it is necessary here to attempt to differentiate between the two terms.

With regard to the term physical 'beating' there are differences of opinion among the research scholars. Felicity A. Goodyear-Smith and Tannis M. Laidlaw have pointed out that a husband and a wife engage frequently in physical violence or aggression; in this type of physical violence a woman can "engage at a greater rate and higher degree of severity" than a man.³⁷ Although it must be acknowledged that sometimes both men and women can be involved in physical abuse, many studies demonstrate that in most cases

it is women who are mostly victimized. Wife-beating includes slapping, pushing, hitting, grabbing, and hair pulling all of which can happen occasionally without causing serious injury to the spouses.³⁸ In addition, a study conducted in India, showed that in addition to those acts mentioned above, some men would also burn the skin of their spouse with cigarette stubs.³⁹ While all forms of beating constitute physical abuse, Helsey Hegarty points out that in addition to the examples above, physical abuse can also include sleep deprivation and the denial of proper medical care.

Unlike physical beating which is occasional, battering is defined as “ongoing and severe acts of physical violence within a context of coercive control not seen as usual by others in that society”.⁴⁰ In addition to this, women are battered “for the purpose of establishing and maintaining authority”.⁴¹ At times, as some studies indicate, that battering could lead to potentially life threatening injuries such as those to the head, genital organs, ribs and stomach which are the bodily organs mostly affected⁴² resulting in severe injuries or fractures, burns, miscarriages, or a ruptured spleen; such prolonged physical abuses can inevitably lead to the death of a wife.⁴³ As battering is prolonged in the conjugal relationship, the abused women can sometimes enter into a state of mind which at times leads them to kill their husbands to defend themselves from the severe battering. For example in India, dowry death is a special form of battering. According to the *National Crime Records Bureau* of India, cases of dowry deaths have increased from 6787 (year 2005) to 7618 (year 2006) and among the registered dowry death cases 2276 cases are linked with suicides.⁴⁴ Spousal abuse, however, does not stop

at physical abuse, but also extends to sexual abuse in the conjugal relationship.

1.5.2. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is described as “any form of sexual contact which involves any ‘unwanted touching’”.⁴⁵ Sexual abuse, therefore, can be defined as the unwanted and unjustified sexual perpetration by male partners merely for the sake of enjoyment. Sexual abuse could involve verbal sexual harassment, the fondling of the sexual organs to penetration, or sadistic sexual acts.⁴⁶

Culture plays a pivotal role in developing this form of abuse in marriage. In the South Indian culture, women are expected to fulfil the sexual desires of men in marriage without addressing their own desires. Accordingly, in Tamil Nadu, men expect that women must be available for sex at any time; and forceful sex is also justified within the marriage⁴⁷ for it is believed that a woman is married only for the sexual procreation of man. Consequently, husbands ignore the need for consent or the wellbeing of women. It is precisely because of this that abusive men think that women are their property and believe that it is their right to have sex with their wives at anytime without considering their wives’ well-being (health condition and interest). Although there are different kinds of sexual abuse, only two will be discussed here: marital rape and controlling the reproductive rights of women.⁴⁸

Marital rape, a form of forceful sex perpetrated against a woman⁴⁹ is a symbolic expression of men’s domination in the relationship. According to one study, some pregnant women along with physical abuse are also subjected to marital rape at the time of pregnancy and this sexual coercion at the

time of pregnancy can bring great harm to the health of the mother.⁵⁰ In this context, Aruna Gnanadasan, a Tamil feminist theologian, has pointed out that marital rape is a violent expression of unjust power in relationships; men use rape as a weapon to control their wives and keep them subservient.⁵¹ In this context, however, sexual abuse happens in marriage not only through the show of power, but also through the ignorance of men on how to treat women during the sexual act.

Controlling women's reproductive rights is also seen as the sexual abuse of women in marriage. This abuse includes compelling women to use contraceptives, to abort the child and to deny motherhood or perpetuate it without considering the well-being of women. This is clear evidence of men's use of power in the marital relationship.⁵² Since men deliberately disregard the will or consent of women to reinforce their desires and interests, then this control over the reproductive rights of women is also an example of spousal abuse. Eventually, sexual abuse results in psychological harm to the victims.

1.5.3. Psychological and Emotional Abuse

Psychological and emotional abuse are perpetrated to cause pain to the victim or to bring her discomfort in the conjugal relationship. Some studies suggest that a battered woman feels more vulnerable in psychological abuse than in physical abuse. The effects of psychological abuse remain in her for a longer period of time than those of physical abuse.⁵³ The available scholarship fairly demonstrates that psychological and emotional abuse is very common in Tamil Nadu. Psychological and emotional abuse greatly harms the self-esteem, self-respect and self-image of women.⁵⁴

Psychological violence is expressed in “humiliating, threatening, loss of custody of children, forced isolation from the family and friends, threatening to harm an individual or someone they care about, repeated yelling, degradation, inducing fear through intimidating words or gestures, controlling behaviour and the destruction of possessions”.⁵⁵ However, in addition to these acts enumerated in the definition, there are some other acts which also cause psychological depression to the victims. For example, some victims of spousal abuse in India have reported that when the husband compares his wife unfavourably with other woman, this brings humiliation and puts them down.⁵⁶ In addition, when the abusers threaten their wives⁵⁷ with divorce in relation to the post-marital dowry, women are psychologically depressed.

Furthermore, seeing women’s capabilities of accomplishing equally as men in different fields, some men become jealous and use their power to belittle women and to stop their accomplishments in socio-economic fields by verbal abuse. Thus, verbal abuse can be both painful and destructive. It can inflict more harm than a physical attack. Verbal abuse creates an indelible scar on a woman, and as a result of this emotional depression, some women suffer from an inferiority complex, and stress. At times, psychological or emotional abuse can also be caused by economic abuse.

1.5.4. Economic Abuse

Unlike in the western world, economic abuse is not widely spoken of in India. This can be described as any behaviour that controls women’s use and maintenance of the economic resources and threatens women’s economic security and potential for self-sufficiency.⁵⁸ Adrienne Adams and

colleagues show how women are systematically exploited by economic abuse in some of the families of western societies. They state that, although not all, some men actively prevent women from working outside the home. Further, they state that men in an abusive relationship will inflict visible injuries and turn off the alarm clock in order to stop women going out to work; men refuse to take care of the children to prevent women attending interviews. Furthermore, some men are very secretive in their financial affair which means that they do not share the financial situation with the family and withhold bank information; do not allow women to participate in making financial decisions; and spend money lavishly without the knowledge of the wives. At times, they take out loans in the name of the wife, purchase things using the wife's credit cards without her knowledge; and eventually force women to pay all their debts. In addition, even though a woman might be employed in a highly payed job, all her income goes into the husband's account. She then receives only weekly allowances for expenses. The husband does not want his wife to control the family finances.⁵⁹

Some of the features of the above mentioned forms of economic abuse are also quite common in some families in South India.⁶⁰ Women are not allowed to have direct access to money.⁶¹ She always has to ask her husband for family and personal expenses. In the rural areas of Tamil Nadu many men can spend the full salary on consuming alcohol. Many do not give their salary to their wives and from pure selfish motives, care little about either children or wife. Some men do not even inform their wives how much they have earned and how much they have spent.⁶² In addition, they insist that whatever the wife earns should be given to the men.⁶³ Further,

if a husband and wife both work for the same company, the salary of both is payed to the husband not to the wife.⁶⁴ In this way, the very structure of society helps men to perpetuate the economic abuse against women. As well, in the context of the dowry system, the majority of men hold the legal rights of the dowry even though it is paid to the families of the grooms. Although women have the rights of access to their dowry, they are often denied. This is great economic exploitation.

This economic abuse affects both illiterate and educated women and low-income high caste women and low-caste women. Some high-caste women are prevented from working outside the home and thus they are also economically abused.⁶⁵ Low-caste women, although they may do outside work, are often affected by alcohol abuse and too many children. Thus, it is apparent that economic abuse is systematically perpetrated to prevent women from making decisions for herself and for the family.

2. Factors Contributing to Spousal Abuse

2.1. Socio-Structural Factors

Human beings and society are inseparable. Each society is built upon a structure. This social structure decides the role of each person in the growth and development of society. If the structure is egalitarian then there will be equality among the human beings and that helps society. If it is hierarchal, more probably there will be inequality among men and women and that works against both society and human beings. The hierarchal structure of Indian society has resulted in inequality in power, education, and employment. These inequalities have caused abuse among couples in the spousal relationship.

2.1.1. Male Power and Control

Historically spousal abuse has been viewed by some feminists as a clear sign of male power over women in order to control, to dominate or to discipline them.⁶⁶ Some argue that “[s]pousal abuse is claimed to be the result of a power imbalance and lack of equality between men and women in marriage”.⁶⁷ In the context of Tamil Nadu, although some say that spousal violence is a regular systematic and structural manifestation of social control⁶⁸ this cannot be generalized for all women, because, some women experience abuse only a few times while others are often subjected to abuse. It depends upon the situation and conditions of men and women. For the patrifocal culture in India justifies the prominent place of the male and, subsequently, men’s control of women. As a result, male authority over women, leads them to have “ownership over women’s bodies, sexuality, labour, reproductive rights, mobility, and level of autonomy.”⁶⁹ Men enjoy unlimited power over the lives of women. To maintain this unlimited authority men abuse women and keep them under their control. Thus spousal abuse becomes a means or an instrument to control women.

2.1.2. Illiteracy

Education is indispensable for women to empower themselves from spousal abuse. For empirical studies highlight the close link between education and spousal abuse. John Simister and Judit Mahowiec demonstrate that high educational attainment of women is associated with a lower level of violence.⁷⁰ The NFHS – 3 highlights that spousal violence is also high where illiteracy is high. In the following statistics, the percentage of women who are illiterate is indicated within the brackets, and the percentage indicated

outside the brackets shows the amount of women involved in spousal abuse: India on the whole (40%) 39.7%, and in Bihar (62%) 60.8%, Tripura (22.4%) 46.6%, Chattisgarh (49.9%) 32.3%, Rajasthan (61.1%) 50.2%, Jharkhand (58.5%) 40.9%, Orissa (40.3%) 41.2%, West Bengal (36.3%) 41.8%, Andhra Pradesh (45.4%) 36.8%, Madhya Pradesh (50.1%) 49.1%, and in Delhi (21.4%) 17.2%, Tamil Nadu (21.7%) 44.1 and in Kerala (3.9%) 19.8%.⁷¹ These statistics show two things: on the one hand illiterate women are vulnerable to spousal abuse and on the other hand in states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, even though the illiteracy of women is less than in all north Indian states except Delhi, the percentage of abused women is disproportionate. That means that some educated women are also subjected to abuse.

Although in many places in India, parents have understood the importance of female education, as K. Shanthi suggests, some people still think that investing money in female education is not profitable. For soon after the education a woman would leave the natal house to enter the marital house and thus, there were no returns from the investment in female literacy.⁷² According to her, it is because of this mentality, that female education is very low in some of the Indian states. However, illiteracy has a great impact on the life of women. It has created disparity in the economic resources and wages and in addition to that women are burdened with unshared household duties.⁷³ The different empirical studies reveal that there is a lower possibility of spousal abuse among educated couples. If an educated woman marries an uneducated man he may respect her and there is, therefore, less risk of abuse. However, in a similar case, if

this man becomes jealous of her education work and salary, she is also at risk of violence.

2.1.3. Unemployment

Unemployment and poverty are other factors which also perpetuate spousal abuse.⁷⁴ Alice Chronesky highlights that, although there is a link between employment/poverty and spousal abuse, one cannot conclude that spousal abuse is common only in poor families rather than in wealthy families.⁷⁵ In the context of Tamil Nadu it cannot be said that only the unemployment of women triggers spousal abuse. For in most of the houses it is the men who are the breadwinners and it is they who face problems related to family, relatives and children if they are not employed.

Although the economic status of women has already been discussed earlier, it is worth noting here how the unemployment of women can cause spousal abuse. Since many women are illiterate the “[...] lack of opportunities for acquiring skills, and of access to information prevent women from seeking employment”.⁷⁶ Consequently, they are powerless to obtain an “equitable distribution of economic resources in the family”.⁷⁷ In addition, there is also the gender inequality in the employment system in India to consider. While many men are employed, many women remain in the home. This inequality also causes abuse in the home. For example, if a woman is employed, she is in better position to leave the abusive home. However, if she is not earning or she earns insufficient money, she has no alternative but to put up with the abuse. In some cases, employed women are at times subjected to abuse because of the unemployment of their husbands.

2.2. Cultural Factors

Culture plays a vital role in the subjugation of women to different forms of abuse. Although there are different cultural elements in India connected to spousal abuse, only the dowry, marrying age, and cultural acceptance of violence which all trigger spousal abuse in Indian families will be discussed here.

2.2.1. Dowry

The dowry⁷⁸ is identified as the main reason for perpetuating spousal abuse in Indian culture. The demand from the husband's family to obtain more dowries from the wife's house serves as a platform for daily torture against women in some families. Some scholars argue that the origin of the dowry probably dates from 2nd century BCE.⁷⁹ Yet, no one has yet been able to give a precise period or date when the dowry first came into existence. Rastogi and Therly argue that historically, the dowry began as a voluntarily gift to the daughter at the time of marriage out of love and affection⁸⁰ and this voluntary gift was offered to the family of the groom to cover the expenses of the marriage and the household things of the newly wedded couples.⁸¹ However, it could also be argued that it was compensation to the groom's family for the bride could be seen as one more person to be fed in a joint family system. As well, in this period, the dowry was called *Streedhan* (women's wealth). This wealth was the daughter's share of the property of her father and it was freely given to her.

Today, in the present Tamil Nadu, the dowry has been institutionalized and its purpose corrupted to become merely a payment to the family of the bride. As Muniruddin Qureshi noted the dowry has become a platform for the lavish use of

black money in the marital transaction by rich people and politicians. Thus, the dowry has become merely a business transaction to buy the future of their daughter.⁸² In the context of Tamil Nadu, therefore, if marriage has become an economic transaction then the dowry has become an essential element in any marriage.⁸³ The dowry has grown rigid and it has become associated with the social status and prestige of the family.⁸⁴ This is seen in the bargaining or negotiating. These people believe that if they provide a huge dowry to the male's family, then the woman will have a good life.

The dowry can be of two kinds: 'demanded payment' at the time of marriage or post-marriage (after the marriage ceremony). Demanded payment at the time of marriage refers to the demands of the groom's family based on their social status, education and occupations; demands include, besides a large sum of money, car, television, home appliances, clothes, land and jewels.⁸⁵ Demand payment of post-marriage refers to the demand of the husband to the wife's family to support his family either in cash or in kind. It covers the expenses of childbirth and other cultural ceremonies (tonsure). The post-marriage dowry can create an unsafe situation for the bride and can lead to women being threatened with divorce and being alienated from the family.

2.2.2. Marrying Age

In Tamil Nadu, the marrying age is identified as one of the cultural factors triggering spousal abuse. While there has been changes in the marrying age in urban areas as well as in rural areas among the educated and employed people, in many places it is still quite normal that the age of a bride should be less than the age of her partner, even among the educated and employed people. This age difference enables

the man to hold a higher position in the family. For example G. K. Pandey and Debashis Dutt reveal in their research that women who are five years younger than their men are more likely to be subjected to physical abuse in the conjugal relations.⁸⁶ On the other hand, they show that women who are of the same age as their husbands are more likely to challenge the male dominance and refuse to condone the violence. Thus, these researchers conclude that the wider the gap between the age of the husband and wife the greater the affect on the status, autonomy and power of women in the family.⁸⁷

2.2.3. Cultural Acceptance of Spousal Abuse

There is common tendency among the majority of Indians to legitimize violence for a few reasons. For example, in school, punishing children in order to discipline them is normal and acceptable. Similarly, Indian culture normalizes violence by men against wives⁸⁸ although it is punitive according to the law. Nonetheless, Vivian F. Go and colleagues state that “[in Indian culture] violence is neither fully acceptable nor socially prohibited. Both men and women implicitly acknowledge a base line level of socially acceptable violence”⁸⁹ in the context of marital relations. This statement is further supported by Go and colleagues by presenting three reasons: intensity, justification and frequency.⁹⁰ First, intensity implies that a man can beat his wife but not very hard, for instance, beating is acceptable but not burning a wife. Second, justification implies that a woman can be beaten for her infidelity to her husband. It can even be legitimized in the case of teaching her a lesson, disciplining her and correcting her.⁹¹ Yet, beating her while under the influence of alcohol is considered unacceptable. Third, frequency implies that when a man is

unhappy with a provided meal he can beat his wife. This is acceptable but continuous beating is unacceptable. In this cultural acceptance of violence it is clear that violence is acceptable provided it does little harm to the person (wife). This is dangerous. It is unacceptable; for this understanding always justifies violence against wives. It is precisely because of this understanding in India in general and Tamil Nadu in particular some women are subjected to abuse irrespective of education and employment in some families.⁹² In addition, it is unfortunate that some women of Tamil Nadu feel that their husbands have the right to beat them when they fail in their household duties.⁹³ Social acceptance of violence always endangers both the perpetrators and victims.

2.3. Individual Factors

Maintaining the honour of the family and keeping secret about spousal abuse can only be accomplished through the silence of the abused spouse. The cultural factors outlined above are expected through the individual participation in maintaining the *status quo*. The woman lacks an effective social voice.

2.3.1. Maintaining Honour and Keeping Secret

It is a very strong belief, as Uma A. Segal points out, that Indian society often believes that the family is a *sacrosanct* social institution.⁹⁴ Thus, the sacredness of the family should be protected from any form of intervention into the family and its problem by outsiders. In addition, all members of this institution should pay honour and respect to it. In this sense, spousal abuse is considered a private matter, and it is not often noticed. Kanchan Mathur affirms that in the Indian family setting, “women are conditioned into believing that all that takes place within the four walls of the home is ‘personal’

and hence not to be made 'public'".⁹⁵ Further Mathur underpins the fact that women are trained in the home not to reveal the abuse and if she were to reveal it, it would bring 'shame' and 'dishonour' to herself. In addition, the body of a woman is culturally moulded to 'fit in' and 'adjust' to the situation of the family and Mathur concludes that a woman also consciously or unconsciously trains herself to be the keeper of the family honour, tradition and harmony.⁹⁶ For example, marital rape, which is a delicate matter, is not seen as a crime or attack on a woman but rather as a matter of dishonour when it is revealed.⁹⁷ Since women are expected to silently bear abuse without finding a way to escape from it, they are more vulnerable to that abuse.

2.3.2. Alcohol and Abuse

Selwyn Stanley shows that high alcohol consumption is often associated with spousal abuse in India. His study reveals that men who heavily consume alcohol seem to harm their wife more than non-alcoholic men do in the family. For, he says that in the arranged marriage system in Tamil Nadu, it is possible to hide the drinking habits of a man and this is probably only revealed after the marriage. Furthermore, he adds that at times, in the rural areas, the husbands sell the properties (jewels) of their wives and family to satisfy their alcohol consumption and some men quarrel with the wives to give them money for alcohol consumption.⁹⁸ If she refuses to give her money to him, she is subsequently subjected to abuse. In the research conducted in Tamil Nadu, the victims of spousal abuse have reported that drunkenness is one of the main contributing factors for spousal abuse.⁹⁹ The study conducted in Tamil Nadu, shows 33% of spousal abuse is associated with alcohol abuse.¹⁰⁰

2.4. Relational Factors

Go and colleagues, in their research, identify relational factors as another leading cause of spousal abuse in India.¹⁰¹ They point out different factors related to spousal abuse in the context of the relationship between a husband and wife: “1. wife speaking out of turn; 2. the wife neglecting household duties; 3. suspicion of women’s [fidelity]; 4. the wife’s refusal to have sex; 5. the husband’s alcohol consumption”.

The first two of the five factors recall the power relationship or authoritarian relationship among couples and this relationship is the result of the socio-cultural traditions of Tamil Nadu. In an authoritarian relationship the communication between the couple is non-interactive.¹⁰² So, a man does not like his wife speaking in turn. This type of communication results in marital conflicts and abuse.¹⁰³ Furthermore, in authoritarian relationships women are expected to do their culturally assigned duties, and she is the person in sole charge of household duties. The neglect of her household duties can result in physical abuse.

The third and fourth factors deal with male sexual jealousy and the suspicion of being unfaithful which become the leading causes of spousal abuse.¹⁰⁴ There is also the possibility that both suspect each others’ fidelity to their conjugal love. If either of them is unfaithful in their relationship, it becomes a betrayal and hurts very much and can eventually end with spousal abuse and at times even homicide.¹⁰⁵ If any one of the couple suffers from the suspicion of infidelity, there is a probability of refusing sex. As a result, there will be marital conflict subsequently leading to spousal abuse.

3. Consequences of Spousal Abuse

Spousal abuse was brought to light because of its consequences in society. Although women are the primary victims of spousal abuse it affects children, in-laws, parents, siblings and society. It is not a private problem but a crucial social problem. However, in the following text only the impacts or effects of spousal abuse on the life of women and the children are analysed.

3.1. Women

Being the direct and immediate victims of spousal abuse women face different physical and mental health problems. Each abuse has its effect on the life of a woman. Firstly, the physical abuse probably results in the poor health of a woman and as a result the poor health care of children. In addition, battering during pregnancy can lead to foetal, neonatal, maternal morbidity and even mortality and the deformed birth of a child.¹⁰⁶ Secondly, any form of forceful sex without respecting the feelings and bodily condition of the woman leads to depression. Thus, the absence of loving sex harms the woman.¹⁰⁷ Thirdly, a psychologically battered wife experiences fear and nightmares, an inability to trust and low self-esteem, shame, helplessness and an inferiority complex and low ego-strength. In addition, she suffers loneliness, pessimism, introversion and from suspicion, and consequently an increased risk of suicide.¹⁰⁸ Fourthly, where there is economic abuse, women and children suffer from poverty. Consequently, the abused women lose their mental health; among these women the depressive symptoms are higher than in other women who are not abused. Fifthly, as battering is prolonged in a conjugal relationship, abused women enter into a syndrome widely known as battered

women's syndrome which makes women weak and helpless and, at times leads them to kill their husbands to defend themselves from severe battering.

3.2. Children

It is clear that those children who witness spousal abuse are affected. The children, who are exposed to spousal abuse in the family, suffer from post traumatic stress and a deep sense of helplessness and hypertension.¹⁰⁹ In addition, some children are likely to be aggressive, disobedient to the parents, and delinquent. These children are at greater risk of committing criminal acts. Sandra M. Stith and her colleagues suggest that some children who witness spousal abuse are at greater risk of perpetrating violence in the future than the children of non-violent homes.¹¹⁰ Malnutrition, and health problems, and dropping out of school could be identified as other effects of spousal abuse.

The forms of spousal abuse and their consequences reveal the precarious situation of women in the Tamil society. Women face a lot of difficulties in the abusive home. In many families of Tamil Nadu, women are silently suffering because of spousal abuse.

3.3. Barriers to Leaving the Abusive Man

In a continuous abusive relationship a woman wants to leave her husband. However, there are some factors that are identified which prevent a victim from leaving the abusive husband. The woman does not know how to leave him and she worries that the children cannot live without the father. She is anxious that the man might kill her, and whether she will be able to manage on her own.¹¹¹ Catherine Clark Kroeger and Nancy Nason-Clark enumerate different factors which

make women unable to leave the abusive home: Fear, financial causes, fantasy of change and religious views.

The first, the victim is afraid for her future and that of her children. She also fears that her husband, if she leaves him, may kill her. This fear does not allow her to sleep and she has nightmares. It is precisely because of this fear that she is unable to take the decision to leave the abusive relationship.

The second reason, remaining in such a relationship is financial dependency. In this culture, the family man is usually the sole breadwinner of the family and he provides all the necessary things for the wife and children. She has been a home maker. Without employment and money she cannot support herself. Thus she feels the abuse is 'payment' for her food, shelter and the schooling of her children.¹¹²

The third reason is a belief in change. The victim of spousal abuse believes that this abusive relationship will come to an end someday. In the cycle of violence, after the abusive incident, there is remorse and she forgives her husband, subsequently there is happiness. In some cases, some abusive men do change and make the home peaceful.¹¹³

The fourth reason is the religious background. The victim of spousal abuse sometimes believes that God does not like her to leave her abusive husband. The religious belief is that marriage is a divine institution that should not be broken.

It can be observed that in Tamil society, family and marriage are being given prime importance. Family and marriage are also considered as binding forces for the people of Indian society. This concept is prevalent all over India. Almost all of the Indians like to prolong the duration of

marriage until their death. It is precisely because of this that divorce is very seldom seen in India, albeit cases of spousal abuse are increasing. Suvarna Cherukuri et al point out that the divorce rate in India is comparatively low; it is less than 1% and in rural areas it is even lower.¹¹⁴ In addition, women are tolerating this abuse because they need to maintain the honour of the family.

Further, if a woman leaves the abusive home and returns to her natal home she is often not fully supported by her parents.¹¹⁵ They feel that her arrival from her husband's home brings disgrace to the family.¹¹⁶ If she has another unmarried sister in her natal house, her sister's marriage is also affected due to the social stigmatization. She is also unable to share this experience with others in her society because of their belief that she should have adjusted to the situation.

4. Responses of the Government

Considering the vulnerability of women and in order to protect women from spousal abuse and to empower women, the government of Tamil Nadu has launched different schemes. Such as: Girl Child Protection and Cradle Baby Scheme, All Women Police Unit and Self-help Groups.

4.1. The Girl Child Protection Scheme

The *Girl Child Protection* and *Cradle Baby Schemes* were started in 1992 to help women of poor families. *Girl Child Protection* helps the families to end the preference of male children and encourage parents to accept female children. According to this scheme, money is deposited in the account of the female children of poor families. These children also receive complete free education. The *Cradle Baby Scheme* was

started to stop the criminal act of female infanticide. In this scheme, the 'cradle' will be kept in different places like hospitals, primary health centres, orphanages and children's homes in order to rescue female children who are abandoned by their biological mothers or parents due to various socio-economic situations of the family.

4.2. The All Women Police Unit (AWPU)

AWPU consists of women police was started in Chennai in 1992 to protect women from domestic violence.¹¹⁷ The first AWPU was opened in April 1992 at Thousand Lights area in Chennai, a metropolitan and capital city of Tamil Nadu. This project was extended all over Tamil Nadu and now they are 188, including the newly sanctioned units. These units typically consist of women police inspectors and women constables whose main duties are getting petitions and listening to the complaints.¹¹⁸

In most of places AWPU's have separate buildings and in a few places it has been attached to normal police stations. These units have increased the confidence of women in dealing with and approaching problems. Women police spend a whole day with the petitioner and try to get as much information as possible. While dealing with these problems these units start with the negotiation and dialogue with the parties and their relatives who arranged this marriage and the women inspectors are in-charge of hearing the petitions. Consequently, women inspectors help the abused women in different ways. The abused women mostly expect the police to warn their husbands and they do not like to go to court. When the abusers break the reconciliation then the women police take legal action against the perpetrators.¹¹⁹

4.3. Women's Self-Help Groups (SHG)

The government of Tamil Nadu, considering the causes and factors of spousal abuse and in order to create the peaceful situation in the home, launched the SHGs. Establishment of SHGs are not only the efforts of the government but also the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), farmers association clubs, banks, and some individuals. SHGs are considered milestones in the process of liberation of women from the various forms of oppression. They have a great impact on women as well as on the Indian society.

In Tamil Nadu, SHGs are very active. In his research, Frank Tesoriero narrates the establishment of SHGs in Tamil Nadu. To help women of this area SHG was started with 7238 poor women. These women were divided into 362 different groups and each group had approximately 20 women. SHGs are being supported by the Civil Society Organisation (CSO) and Rural Unit for Social and Health Affair (RUSHA). Two general objectives are identified as self-help groups: social and economic empowerment.¹²⁰ Social empowerment includes women's equal status and decision making; economic empowerment includes accessibility to the resources and controlling over it, reducing the economic related abuse and increasing the income.¹²¹ Tesoriero, further indicates how SHGs works for the change and empowerment of women in society. Further, they are involved in social activities such as motivating the parents to send their children to school; agitating against the alcohol shops in the village; working for the rights of the victims. In addition, these groups also help men to accept the mobility of women involved in these works and encourage their women to become involved actively in community building.¹²² In addition, these groups also inform

women about the legal rights and legal protection from different forms of abuse. Thus, SHGs by bringing together the potentialities and capabilities of women improve the conditions of women and promote the socio-political-economic life of women in Tamil Nadu.¹²³

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Endnotes

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