

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

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5. The Church and Eradication of Spousal Abuse

In the first part this article which was published in the previous volume, the problem of spousal abuse in the Indian families is scientifically stated. In this part, let us see how the Catholic Church in India must respond to this problem and protect women from this crucial problem? And what sort of strategies must be developed to launch the mission of eradicating spousal abuse (domestic violence) among the Indian families? Thus, there emerges a need for a new paradigm to address this issue. We name this paradigm as *redemptive paradigm* to address the issue of spousal abuse. Basing this paradigm and considering the great necessity for this mission, effective interventions to this problem are put forward. They are: theological, ecclesial, pastoral and communitarian.

5.1. Redemptive Paradigm

The redemptive paradigm to be constructed in this article includes addressing the issue, eradication of spousal

abuse by various interventions and the empowerment of both women and men. Focusing only on the empowerment of women is too narrow and insufficient in the context of spousal abuse. For, in many cases men are unaware that they are abusing their wives constantly and some do not know how to treat their wives with full dignity. In addition, at times women can also become the cause for spousal abuse.

The redemptive paradigm defines marriage as a relationship. It is neither a marital ceremony nor only a procreative act. This relationship does not consist only of the spouses but rather it is extended to the children, parents, relatives and friends. The relationship does not remain in a particular act and moment of life but rather it moves to the fulfillment of marriage. Although firmly believing in the sacramental nature of marriage, in the spousal abuse situation where there is no good relationship among the spouses can it really be said that the marital bond exists? Thus, to eliminate spousal abuse and to strengthen the marital relationship, the redemptive paradigm proposes a shift from functionality to love, from a power relationship to mutuality, from dependence to interdependence and from domination to co-responsibility.

5.1.1. From Functionality to Love

At large, Indian society judges a woman by her function. If she doesn't do well in her function as wife, daughter-in-law and mother she is physically abused. In this context, there is a need to propose the validity of love in a marital relationship. In arranged marriages, the spouses mostly do not know each other before marriage, although there are changes happening in this regard. Thus,

in India, it is believed that true love begins only after the marriage. However, this true love is often lacking. Thus, can be seen the validity of the proposition of conjugal love. Conjugal love is not merely a sexual love but involves rather a radical openness and radical transcending to one another. This love is more personal which is reciprocal and intimate. Conjugal love enjoys the different contributions of each person for the strengthening of the relationship. The intimate conjugal love is not an attitude but it is a way of life in all moments.¹ The different aspects of conjugal love are never one-sided. Therefore, if a husband exploits his wife to satisfy his quest for power and passion without having love and respect for his wife's well-being, he commits sin against her and against the marital covenant.² In addition, without mutual and reciprocal love, the conjugal relationship is defective.

5.1.2. From a Power Relationship to Mutuality

In India, although there is rapid change in female education and employment, women are still often powerless. The deciding power is always with men. On the one hand, in India some men think that women are idiotic; they are not equal human beings with men and subsequently women are often deprived of their basic rights. On the other hand, the culture has made women think of themselves as inferior, useless creatures and non-dignified human beings. In this context, men hold the power in society, economics and politics. Therefore, the relationship between the spouses is based on power and it is unequal. Thus, there is a need for mutuality in a spousal relationship. Mutuality is a relational power which creates interrelatedness between a husband and wife. Mutuality

does not say that woman is created only for procreation. In this relationship of mutuality there is no place for hierarchy and domination. Mutuality considers both spouses as equal.³ There is no place for a dualistic understanding of the spousal relationship in mutuality.

5.1.3. From Dependence to Interdependence

As a result of the enormous power of men in India, a woman is always dependent on a man. Since a man is often the bread winner of the family, he holds the control over all life-sustaining resources. In some families women are prevented from having control over the economic resources. Even if women bring their dowries from the families, men often become the legal holder of their wealth. Men think it is sufficient for them to be independent. In this context we suggest interdependency. To be interdependent there is a need for the freedom of a woman and economic independency in the family.⁴ This interdependency is not the interdependency between a master and slave. Rather it is between equal persons. If the relationship is mutual, subsequently it must be interdependent. Interdependence is the choice made by two independent spouses. Interdependency in marital life is in contrast to both the traditional marriage and to the modern concept of marriage. In short, interdependence means two independent people who come together and co-create the home in peace and love.⁵

5.1.4. From Domination to Co-responsibility

Finally, Indian society is often a male focused society. The religious, cultural and social ethos is in favour of men. Therefore, man is always dominant in the decision making in the families. Women are often not consulted or asked to

discuss issues. This domination always makes men as the 'I' (the 'powerful' or 'superior') in the family. In order to maintain this domination, women are responsible for household work and men responsible for public work. However, the power of making decisions in her household work is also given to men. For any household work women need permission from the men. In addition, men do not want women to take part in the public work; and some men will not participate in the household work. In this context, co-responsibility is proposed. Co-responsibility makes the couple see themselves as 'we' rather than 'I'.⁶ Proper negotiation, discussion and consultation with regard to family matters would strengthen the spousal relationship.⁷ In co-responsibility the care of the other is more important. Co-responsibility consists in co-parenting and taking care of each other.

This contribution to Catholic conjugal morality is especially valid in the context of spousal abuse. When this paradigm is realized in the lives of spouses every day, that home may become the safest place in the world for women. There will be no room for abuse and divorce. All spouses will move forward to the fulfilment of their marriage. To achieve this mission of the prevention of spousal abuse of women and ways of empowering women three ways of interventions are proposed.

5.2. Theological Intervention

Catholic theological disciplines are vast and very broad. Although there is universality of Christian theology each person needs to ask how far the theology is meaningful to his/her life and context. Thus, there is a need to reinterpret the theology from one's own context. The

feminist theologians who have been working on spousal abuse ask how far the theology of death and resurrection, forgiveness and reconciliation are meaningful to the victims of spousal abuse. Without underestimating the Christian virtues or principles, some feminist scholar found that too much emphasis of Christian moral principles such as “affection, sacrificing love, modesty, forgiveness, gentleness, reconciliation, patience and service, justify and conceal violence against women” as Lee Hyun Sook points out.⁸ In addition, although Ron Clark does not underestimate the value of the suffering of Jesus, he points out that overemphasis on the suffering and redemption of Christ, makes women become dependent and helpless in an abusive situation, seeking redemption through suffering.⁹ In this context, this theological intervention attempts to reinterpret or reconstruct the traditional understanding of some theological elements which at times have victimized the spouses in the family.

5.2.1. Why is Spousal Abuse Unacceptable?

This redemptive conjugal morality addresses the problem of spousal abuse by identifying it as an evil, a crime and a sin. It is worthwhile stating that, as the documents portray woman in the image of God,¹⁰ it is implicit that the abuses perpetrated against women are therefore also against the image of God. Further, as a man perpetrates violence against his spouse, he harms the image of God which is inherent in her and in him. For any form of violence based on gender, race, caste and colour is “contrary to God’s intent.”¹¹ The abuses which are perpetrated based on these elements are also contrary to the intention of God. Gnanadasan, quoting Mary Grey, says

that “hospitality, justice and compassion, care, respect and honour, all flow from our being created ‘in the image of God’”.¹² She continues, a woman must also be hospitable to herself by not allowing violence to her body which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Therefore, the *Imago Dei* would encourage women to resist violence for in violence the image of God itself is violated. *Imago Dei* gives self-image, self-esteem and self-worth to women.

Further, the implication of God’s image in human beings is that human beings are subjects, never objects. Since each human person is endowed with intellect and will, each person is unique. Thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church invites human beings to respect the human person and condemns anything that is against the core of the human person: “Respect for the reputation of persons forbids every attitude and word likely to cause them unjust injury”.¹⁴ In the context of spousal abuse, since the violence is perpetrated against women as persons, and their fundamental rights for peaceful living with freedom and dignity, spousal abuse is against not only the personhood of women but also the personhood of men.¹⁵ Since spousal abuse disrespects the core of personhood, and blocks the mobility of women in relating to others and making history, it is surely against the totality of women as human persons. If it is an evil and unjustifiable, then why should women remain in this suffering?

5.2.2. Theology of Suffering

The death and resurrection of Jesus are the basic elements of Christian faith. Our traditional understanding is that Jesus sacrificed his life and underwent immeasurable suffering on the Cross to redeem humanity

from sin and death. Christians who are baptized in remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ are called to be His disciples. Thus, there is a need to imitate Christ by being obedient to His beck and call and to endure suffering and pain.¹⁶ This theology of suffering is further developed by three different classical theories: '*Christus Victor*', 'Satisfaction' and 'Moral influence'.¹⁷ The theory of '*Christus Victor*' argues that Jesus' suffering on the Cross is a "mortal confrontation with the powers of evil that oppress human life". The death of Jesus is a triumph of evil and his resurrection demonstrates that God has power over all.¹⁸ The theory of 'satisfaction' highlights that Jesus died for the sin of the people and his death is seen as 'paying the price'. In other words he died for us "to satisfy God's sense of Justice".¹⁹ The 'Moral influence' theory demonstrates that our fallen nature becomes a barrier to redemption. The death of Jesus is seen as a demonstration of Divine mercy. God's love is unfathomable which shows God's readiness to die for us. Therefore, we need to trust in God and be obedient to His will.²⁰ Thus, these theories demonstrate God's love and mercy to humanity and thus, Jesus' suffering brought redemption to the whole of humanity. Although His suffering has the greatest value in the context of redemption, we ask that can the suffering of women in spousal abuse be redemptive? How do we understand the suffering of women in spousal abuse and the suffering of Jesus on the Cross? How do we understand the concept of self-sacrifice?

Feminist theologians Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker argue that narrow understanding of

theology of suffering victimizes women in spousal abuse; the embedded idea of suffering and self-sacrifice does not allow women to leave the abusive home.²¹ They observe that the atonement theology is based on the 'killing of Jesus' which encourages martyrdom and victimization.²² It is unfortunate that Brown and Parker have overlooked the value of the suffering of Christ. They have failed to reinterpret the theology of suffering in the context of spousal abuse. As well, they have not differentiated the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of woman in the abusive home.

Reference is made, therefore, to Maria M. Fortune who presents two types of suffering: voluntary and involuntary.²³ Voluntary suffering is personally chosen to attain greater good. It is a particular way of acting to attain a particular end. Thus, it is optional. Here, people wilfully endure suffering in order to accomplish something. Fortune locates the suffering of Jesus on the Cross in the voluntary category which is not unjustifiable (1 Pet 2:21-23). She says "[...] it is an example not of simply being a sacrificial doormat but of choosing, in the face of the violence and oppressive authority which threatened him, to suffer the consequences of his commitment. It was a witness to his love, not his suffering". Thus, Jesus accepts the voluntary suffering in order to attain the greater good and peace.²⁴ The involuntary suffering is not freely chosen and it doesn't provide a greater good; this inflicts suffering against the will and desire of another person. Thus, she identifies spousal abuse as involuntary suffering. It is never justifiable.²⁵ How, then, is the voluntary self-sacrifice of women in a family relationship to be regarded?

5.2.3. Self-Sacrifice of Women

Annemie Dillen argues that women are vulnerable to spousal abuse in some families which advocate self-sacrifice to protect the *sacredness* and honour of the family.²⁶ The *sacredness* of the family is often emphasized in the traditional marriage based families.²⁷ Here, *sacredness* refers to the relationship of a husband and wife which is culturally designed. This relationship is the binding force of marriage, family and society. As has been seen in Tamil culture, although each member of the family has to protect the honour of the family, it is the women of these families who are forced to keep the *sacredness* of the family. Revealing spousal abuse brings dishonour to the family and breaks the *sacredness* of the family. Thus, many victims sacrifice themselves to protect the *sacredness* of their relationship by silently suffering abuse.

In many families, women are often sacrificing themselves for the various needs of the family. Since it is the women who are often attached to the children, many sacrifice themselves for their sake. As Dillen states, this concept of self-sacrifice may probably have resulted in tolerance towards spousal abuse.²⁸ Although tolerance is always needed to some extent, can it be allowed to accept everything (intolerable)?²⁹ Thus, Dillen argues that in this context, the concept of self-sacrifice prevents woman in an abusive home from seeking her over safety. Referring to Christine Gudorf, she says that a one-sided emphasis on sacrifice, endangers the family members and the relationship and because of this ideal of 'self-sacrifice', one is not inclined to look at the dangers of sacrificing oneself to others. At times, the mentality of parents to sacrifice

everything for the sake of the children will also endanger the family. She concludes that the term *real sacrifice* be used rather than the general term of *sacrifice* which will be misunderstood in spousal abuse.³⁰ In addition, in the context of spousal abuse, some would argue that the self-sacrifice of women cannot be morally good. For self-sacrifice “contributes neither to her own well-being nor to the development of greater mutuality within her relationship”.³¹ Thus, any one-sided understanding of self-sacrifice will endanger the family relationship; instead the mutual self-sacrifice will strengthen the relationship of the spouses. In addition, the theology of suffering and self-sacrifice needs to be converted into providing the means for the transformation of couples.

5.2.4. Suffering – Means to Transformation

Some women tend to look positively at the suffering in spousal abuse using some Scriptural passages and are consoled by reading them. For example, some may literally use the text 1 Pet 2:19-21 to justify even involuntary suffering.³²

For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you endure suffering even when you have done right, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

Sook suggests that these words were written to console the victims of the early persecution and should not be connected with spousal abuse.³³ Thus, it is clear in Sook’s opinion; no one is advised to bear involuntary suffering and

to justify it in the name of Jesus. A woman as victim suffers involuntarily and unjustly; victims do not have control over their situations; their suffering does not bring greater good.³⁴ However, we are also aware that if a woman accepts suffering to protect someone else such as a child or any good purpose this is voluntary and salvific. For, this suffering is the consequence of a salvific. At the same time, if a woman undergoes suffering merely for the sack of protecting honour of the family and status in society or merely because she is a woman or a spouse then this suffering becomes involuntary and injustice. One cannot equate this suffering with the redemptive suffering of Christ. For, Jesus underwent suffering or wilfully accepted suffering precisely because he lived out the message of salvation that means that he lived compassionately and not simply according to the rules and acceptations of others. In fact, according to the gospels, Jesus brought salvation to many before his suffering on the Cross.

Christ's suffering is to resist violence and to bring peace and to break subordination in the world. Sook quotes Ruether who points out that women consider their anger towards abuse sinful. She adds that the victims consider their sufferings as the suffering of Jesus by accepting the brutal actions of the husbands without realizing their potentialities to escape from abuse.³⁵ For, victims of spousal abuse believe that God has a plan for their suffering and that God sends the suffering; the victims have to endure patiently and find meaning for suffering.³⁶

Thus, there is a need to use the suffering of Jesus for the transformation of both women and men. For instance,

liberation theologians argue that the suffering of Jesus “reveals God as a God of love in a real and credible way rather than in an idealistic way. From the ultimate depths of history’s negative side, this God of love thereby opens up the possibility of hope and a future”.³⁷ It is apparent that the theology of suffering becomes a means for the commitment to justice and liberation in liberation theology. As some feminist theologians suggest, the concept of suffering must be used to transform the abused women and the society.³⁸ For, referring to Rene Girard, Dillen indicates, Jesus accepted being a scapegoat to denounce it and to make it unbearable and impossible. She continues that his self-sacrifice ended all forms of new sacrifices.³⁹ Therefore, “many feminist theologians also shift the emphasis from the Cross to the complete life of Jesus, including the resurrection, a message of liberation, wholeness, and justice”.⁴⁰ Clark argues that the theology of resurrection, which is a transformation of suffering of Jesus, would transform the life of women too. For, first and foremost, resurrection gives the sense of empowerment to the victims. They do not need to be slaves of suffering in the abusive relationship; for, Jesus did not perpetually remain in suffering. This resurrected Christ wants the victims to be strong in their safety. Secondly, the theology of resurrection reveals that the victims are to be freed from guilt, suffering and shame to live with love, compassion and respect and to experience justice. Thirdly, resurrection gives the hope of forgiving the perpetrators and healing from the abuse. For, victims need not live with anger, bitterness and guilt.⁴¹ Nevertheless, when and how forgiveness is possible in spousal abuse needs to be asked.

5.2.5. Forgiveness – Empowerment of the Victims

Human beings are not “autonomous individuals” but rather they are “a network of relationships”.⁴² In this network of relationships, forgiveness is a must for peaceful living. Therefore, both Catholic tradition and secular institutions present the importance of forgiveness in human life. There is openness in Christian ethics for forgiveness. For, without forgiveness, Christian ethics would be at risk of becoming “intolerant, fanatical and even cruel”.⁴³ Therefore, considering the importance of forgiveness in human relationships and to restore the broken relationship, Pope John Paul II declared the year 1999 as the ‘year of forgiveness’ in preparation for the Jubilee year 2000.⁴⁴ The Church portrays God as merciful to sinners and a forgiving God. In addition, many secular researches on forgiveness show the increasing importance of this virtue.⁴⁵ The Christian tradition spiritualized the concept of forgiveness. Frits De Lange observes that “[the doctrine of justification] has concentrated too much on the sinner who receives forgiveness, while it has lost sight of the victim against whom is sinned [... everything is covered] with the cloak of a God who is merciful to the sinner”.⁴⁶ No one can deny the Church’s efforts to provoke sinners to regret, repent and to restore broken relationships. However, its emphasis on the uncountable forgiveness of God to the sinners makes forgiveness a ‘cheap grace’ as some suggest.⁴⁷

Embedded in this understanding of forgiveness and considering their obligation to forgive, the battered women often forgive their perpetrators. For, as Fortune states, the battered women are directed by their family members, friends and priests ‘to forgive and forget’; Fortune considers

this is the least helpful advice to the victims.⁴⁸ Some Christian women think that only through forgiveness they can stop the cycle of abuse. Unfortunately, however, abuse can escalate in marital life.

5.2.5.1. What is Forgiveness?

The Greek words *aphiemi* and *apolyo* are used to connote forgiveness.⁴⁹ *Aphiemi* refers to “to put something away, set it free, as well as to put one thing aside in order to move on to something else”.⁵⁰ *Apolyo* refers to “the idea of losing or freeing ourselves from anger and resentment toward another”.⁵¹ The meaning of these two words suggests how the victim should be in order to have inner peace. *Aphiemi* and *apolyo* do not present an objective meaning of forgiveness, for they do not speak of the offenders. It is appropriate, therefore, to look at Fortune’s view on forgiveness.⁵²

Forgiveness neither disregards a harmful act nor heals the sore of spousal abuse by merely saying ‘peace’. Forgiveness is also not based on any form of expectation of the future relationship with the perpetrators. But, rather, forgiveness is bringing justice and through which, healing of the wounds. It is the gift of God to heal those who are abused. It is also the accountability of the perpetrators for the purpose of repentance through doing justice and restoring the relationship.⁵³ In addition, she states that “[f]orgiveness is not forgetting”.⁵⁴ For, the memory will always be with the victims for sometimes until the healing takes place. Remembering is important in the process of forgiving. Andrea Lehner-Hartmann states that in therapeutic treatment the victims learn to remember the abuse and they work on it for its integration in their lives. Healing takes place only in the process of remembering.⁵⁵

In the above description of forgiveness, it is obvious that forgiveness is not something that automatically happens; no one can demand forgiveness. It is a gift of God and it is a process in a human relationship.

5.2.5.2. *Process of Forgiveness*

Andrea Lehner-Heartmann argues that the process of forgiveness is achieved by the following steps:⁵⁶ acknowledging the abuse, repentance and restitution. Acknowledgement of the abuse refers to recognizing the harm that is done to someone. This harm is never justified. The perpetrator of spousal abuse is accountable and responsible for the abuse. For, he has failed to recognize the 'otherness' of women. Offenders should admit their offence. Such acknowledgment will bring healing to both victim and perpetrator.

Second, repentance – it is something more than remorse. Repentance means “fundamental change”.⁵⁷ Frederick W. Keene points out in his analysis of the New Testament text on forgiveness, that it is not possible when there is a power relationship or hierarchy.⁵⁸ Quoting some of the examples from the New Testament, therefore, to be forgiven, there is a need for change in the power structure to bring about equal status. Forgiveness will be fruitful to the victims when the perpetrators completely repent.⁵⁹ Without change, any forgiving attitude will merely escalate the violence in the home.⁶⁰ Therefore forgiveness demands justice.⁶¹

Third, spousal abuse is an injustice done to women and, therefore, there is a need for restitution – it means doing justice to the victim. This justice could be done in different ways. Firstly, justice in spousal abuse refers not

only to the concrete acts which include not only taking responsibility for the act, providing necessary aids such as material help, medicines, and treatments,⁶² but also establishing equal rights and responsibilities incorporating mutual respect, freedom in making decisions.⁶³ Secondly, justice refers to efforts to strengthen the relationship by mutuality, sufficient autonomy, sincere communion, and appropriate acknowledgment of differences of each person. Thirdly, justice refers to the rebuilding of the broken relationship with holistic intimacy and developing the power of caring for each other.⁶⁴ Fourthly, justice refers to works of reconciliation among the couples. Reconciliation is described as the “mutual acceptance by groups of each other [...] It means that they come to see the humanity of one another, accept each other, and see the possibility of a constructive relationship”.⁶⁵ According to O’Conner, reconciliation means the “restoration of what once was. But if a good relationship never existed, the challenge is one of conciliation, not reconciliation”.⁶⁶ When reconciliation and love are used, without taking into account the attitude of the abusive husbands, spousal abuse continues.⁶⁷ Therefore, justice in a conjugal relationship means bringing safety to the victims in the family. Subsequently, forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. For, “Forgiveness does not mean that offenders can deny responsibility for their actions and the consequence of such actions”.⁶⁸

The above analysis on the process of forgiveness is from the perspective of perpetrators. For the empowerment of women it is also necessary to state what forgiveness means to victims. Nancy Nason-Clark suggests that

"Forgiveness for the victim involves the process of letting go of the immediacy of the trauma and memories associated with it".⁶⁹ She continues referring Fortune that "the choice to go longer allow the memory of the abuse to continue to abuse one's life".⁷⁰

In sum, the theological intervention, equating the suffering of spousal abuse with the suffering of Christ is meaningless. This is not a Christian attitude. The forgiveness of the perpetrator is not possible unless justice is done to the victims. Although there is openness for forgiveness in spousal abuse, the victims ought to forgive the perpetrator. The reconciliation is only possible when there is a complete change in the perpetrators. Nonetheless forgiveness will help the victims to come away from the trauma and be liberated from psychological anxieties.

5.3. Ecclesial Intervention

It is apparent that the victims are healed and can move away from the trauma when justice is done to them. As some suggest, however, it is not sufficient to merely say that the perpetrators must do justice to the victims; this justice must also be extended to the Church as a community of faith, the civil legal system, and the family and friends.⁷¹ Therefore, ecclesial intervention is also necessary for the prevention of spousal abuse and the empowerment of women. For, the Church as the community of faith, also has an obligation to raise its voice against this problem. This voice can be expressed through its media, such as pastoral letters, its catechism and its liturgical services. In addition, the Church needs to encourage those theologians and activists who are working for the eradication of spousal abuse and the empowerment of

women.⁷² It has to truly enact what God desires by theologians and victims speaking to the abused victims and listening to their silence respectively. In addition, as Jesus preached freedom to the oppressed (Lk 4:18-19), now the Church must speak up for the freedom and peace of the victims of spousal abuse.⁷³ This could be done through the prophetic mission and expressing solidarity with the victims.

5.3.1. Prophetic Mission – Confronting Abusers

A healthy confrontation for the holistic growth of the couple is necessary in spousal abuse. This confrontation is one of the elements of the prophetic mission of the Church. To be prophetic, first and foremost, the Church needs to confront its patriarchal teaching on spousal relationships has itself, at times, contributed to spousal abuse. Thus, the Church has a responsibility to address spousal abuse and to bring about change in its outlook towards women. The Church has to provide ample opportunities for women to participate in the decision making ministries. In addition, to change the traditional understanding of women, the Church must come forward to transform both the family and society.⁷⁴ In addition, just as the prophets confronted the people, the church needs to confront the abusers and call them to a complete repentance.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the Church should also seek to confront governments to take all necessary steps to abolish spousal abuse and set right loopholes in the laws concerning spousal abuse. The Church has to confront the power structure of society if it is to bring hope to the victims. This healthy confrontation would show a moral commitment to and solidarity with the victims.

5.3.2. Solidarity with the Victims

In the social ethics of the Catholic Church the principle of solidarity is widely spoken of. However, in the case of spousal abuse, this solidarity is missing. The moral commitment begins with the acknowledgement of spousal abuse and a refusal to ignore, excuse or justify it. Spousal abuse needs to be affirmed as something against the intention of God. This affirmation will not only be helpful in preventing the victims from blaming themselves but will also make the perpetrators accountable in spousal abuse. When the perpetrators of spousal abuse are not willing to change, the victims have the right to obtain justice from other institutions. Thus, if the victim applies to obtain civil justice, she must not be discouraged; rather, she needs to be encouraged and supported. For, her safety is more important than her return to her abusers.⁷⁶ This solidarity could be extended to the liturgical celebration of the community. Marjorie Procter-Smith points out that the liturgy articulates not only our faith but also the forms of our self-identity and self-understanding of our relationship to God and to human beings. For, the liturgy articulates not only that which ought to be believed but also that which shapes our consciousness.⁷⁷ In this way, the liturgy could be utilized as a forum to speak and discuss the concept that spousal abuse is not only accepted but also divinely sanctioned. Not only the perpetrators but also the Church as a community of faith have become accountable for spousal abuse because of their ignorance and silence about the issue. Therefore, two possible ways to express solidarity with the victims are put forward: annulment and the formation of ministers.

5.3.2.1. Annulment

“A declaration of nullity, states that a real marriage did not exist”.⁷⁸ Although the marriage seems to be a valid one, in the cases of nullity something is missing from the outset.⁷⁹ The CCL presents some of the conditions which serve as a means to annul the marriage.⁸⁰ However, any valid, ratified and consummated marriages could not be annulled (CCL, 1141). Although CCL, 1151 speaks of legal separation in this type of marriage, many do advocate that women be reconciled with the perpetrators. This does not pave the way to end the problem. However, if marriage is considered as a relationship, there is a need to reinterpret the concept of a ratified and consummated marriage. Selling suggests that “[s]ome serious, theological reflection has lately been suggesting that the notion of consummation should be expanded to refer, not simply to the performance of a single act of sexual intercourse as the tradition proposes, but rather to the establishment of a marital life together”.⁸¹ Then, other possibilities for the annulment can be considered. For example, in the context of India, in some arranged marriage cases, spousal abuse takes place in dowry related disputes. Although these marriages are ratified and consummated, in dowry cases, it is clear that the consent of the person could have been given only for money and material things, not for love. Thus, it is probable that the absence of love in the marriage invalidates consent in this case. In addition, the process to obtain an annulment of a marriage makes it very difficult for the victims. In general, the process of the annulment often depends upon the personnel of the tribunal and disposition of the local ordinary.⁸² Therefore, to take into account both the safety of women and the future of the children, the Catholic

Church should make the annulment easier for the victims by reading out their experiences. To achieve this, however, there is need for further formation of the Clergy of the Catholic Church.

5.3.2.2. *Formation to Priests and Religious*

A USA based survey demonstrated that Catholic priests were not taking seriously the problem of domestic violence.⁸³ Fortune has pointed out that many do not want to go to the leaders of the Church for, the ministers do not have sufficient knowledge about domestic problems and some have a lack of sensitivity in dealing with them. Moreover, usually the minister of the Church is a man. Thus, the victims are afraid to go to them.⁸⁴ In contrast, the victims will often report to the local clergy, although this attitude is slowly changing. However, the priests often try to reconcile the couple without any further analysis of the problem. A sense of fear and helplessness, a lack of involvement in the issue, misconceptions about abuse, sexism, and a lack of appropriate training are the identified reasons for the silence of the priests and the church on spousal abuse.⁸⁵ Although there has been some change among priests on those matters mentioned above, as the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops stated, there is still a grave need for priests to deal with battered women.⁸⁶ The special training for the clergy to encounter the abuse cases could be integrated in the priestly formation.⁸⁷ This need not be merely theological but also practical with the help of those with expertise in handling spousal abuse. In addition, the Church leaders should organise seminars, meetings, and different programmes to equip the clergy both theologically and practically to read the experiences of victims.

5.3.2.3. Formation for the Couples

Formation for the couples begins in the prenuptial catechesis. Although there has been a change in the prenuptial catechesis in the Church of India, this has mostly involved the information section on the traditional teaching of marriage. The revision of the catechetical pedagogy which insists on sexual stereotypical roles in the family is necessary. This pedagogy would inform the young people of the causes and consequences of violence; and the necessity of autonomy and respect of the couple. This formation to the young people needs to be given by the professionals in human relationships. In addition to that, the married couples also need ongoing formation. Suggesting tolerance and adjustment in the conflict situation can at times escalate the violence. Thus, they need a psychological formation. Communication and cooperation is very much needed based on the proposed redemptive paradigm. In this ongoing programme for couples, there must be an insistence that a woman is more than a wife, and mother. She is a human person and thus, the rights of women must be respected.⁸⁸

In sum, in ecclesial intervention we suggest the prophetic action of the Church. The Church must provide ample opportunities for women to hold esteemed positions in the Church. The official Church needs to encourage and listen to the different local churches and Catholic ethicists who are working for the empowerment of women. In community intervention, the local community must come forward to stop spousal abuse by creating various social movements, and bringing awareness through the local cultural media. The government needs to implement the

Legislation and give protection to victims and establishing justice without further delay.

5.4. Community Intervention

Violence in the family in general and spousal abuse in particular is often culturally sanctioned in Indian families. However, it must be noted that some communities in India do not support spousal abuse. They are non-profit centres which help victims of dowry related problems. In the rural areas and in some semi-town villages the family dispute is handled by the *panchayat* (rural governing body) which consists of a small group of mostly men with a few women elected by the villagers. It is inexpensive, immediate, accessible and reliable. However, as *panchayat* members were mostly men, women were urged to alter the situation. Now more women are elected and the system is slowly changing.⁸⁹ When *panchayat members* are unable to solve the problem, then victims go to the court. Some non-profitable centres also offer medical, vocational and educational training to abused women. They also struggle very hard to bring greater awareness with regard to dowry problems throughout India. Since they do not have any legal power, they are unable to confront the abusers.⁹⁰ Special family courts for spousal conflicts, they are only in major cities. The village and poor people cannot afford to come to the court. Since the numbers of courts are few, people have to wait for a long time to obtain the result from the court.⁹¹ Therefore, to break the social stigmatization of family honour, spousal relationships and women, there is a need for the proper education of women and the creation of women's social movements. The methods of education could be both formal and informal. The former will be helpful

in bringing awareness and in creating and empowering relationships in the marital life of the younger generation. The latter could use the local media (folk media – folklore, dance, song and street plays) not only to bring an awareness of abuse to women but also help them to escape the situation. Further, Indian films could be used to bring an awareness of the dignity of women and to stop spousal abuse by showing some examples of women who have survived spousal abuse.

In addition, the local government could remove the loopholes in the legislation to enhance the safety of the victims and children. The government must use all its machinery to forbid the dowry and social stigmatization against women. Moreover, the government needs to come forward to embrace the victims by offering them economic opportunities to support themselves. Finally, the State Commission for Women should work for justice which would heal the victims and try to establish healthy relationships which would empower women and men. Although three forms of intervention are suggested, it also lies in the hands of the victims and perpetrators to change their attitudes. Eventually the empowerment of a woman in spousal abuse depends upon the empowerment of both a man and a woman.

5.4.1. Empowerment of Women

The 'empowerment' derives from the English verb 'empower' which is a combination of the French preposition 'en' and the Latin word '*posse*'.⁹² The word 'en' is used to connote 'into', 'onto', or 'toward/against'. The word '*posse*' connotes 'to be able' (physical, intellectual, political, economic, etc.). Thus 'empowerment' refers to 'making someone powerful', 'bestowing power on someone' and

'gaining or assuming power'.⁹³ Although the usage of the word 'power' is unavoidable, empowerment means neither a physical power nor a power in itself but rather it is a 'process' of making someone powerful at all levels.⁹⁴ Some Indian feminist writers denote that empowerment is basically the 'development of the status of women';⁹⁵ and having greater "control over the sources of power" by challenging the power relations.⁹⁶ Does, then, the term 'empowerment' only refer to the development of women, even though many Indian women are powerless? Again, if a woman aims for a greater control over the resources, will there not be disparity?

In the context of spousal abuse in India, the term, 'empowerment' challenges the extreme stress on functions, power relations, dependency, and domination in the family. Many have attempted to empower woman only in spousal abuse. If spousal abuse is regarded only as the problem of women, it subsequently becomes too narrow and absurd. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter on spousal abuse, both a husband and wife are involved and thus both must be empowered. For example, Shobna Nijhawan quotes the Indian feminist Sarojini Naidu, "Your men are enslaved. They are caught in the chains of Bondage. They have handcuffs around their hands and their feet are in fetters. The keys [of the handcuffs and fetters] are in your hands but you are not opening them. You are capable of breaking the chains but you are not doing it. You can free them but you are not."⁹⁷ Therefore, it is obvious that if women need to be empowered, the men who are abusing their wives must also be empowered.

The Tamil feminist activist Hilaria Soundary, describes empowerment as a process which helps an individual or a group or a community to take control over their situation and in this process individuals help themselves and others to “maximize the quality of their lives”. This could be done through educational, economic, psychological, social and political empowerment.⁹⁸ Soundary depicts empowerment as a process to empower all sorts of powerless individuals, groups and communities on the Indian sub-continent. In her definition, however, the empowerment of the self and the necessity of the inner power of a victim are missing. The Indian sociologist Agarwal argues:

Empowerment is the process by which the powerless gain great control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources (human, physical, intellectual, financial) and over ideologies (beliefs, values and attitudes). It means not only greater extrinsic control but also a growing intrinsic capability – greater self-confidence that enables one to overcome external barriers to according, to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology.⁹⁹

Based on this definition, an abusive husband is powerless to control his spousal abuse although he is physically powerful and a wife is powerless to resist it. This definition portrays not only the external empowerment but also the internal empowerment of the person. This internal empowerment of the self is more important in the context of spousal abuse. In addition, external empowerment is also equally important. This could be achieved by discarding all forms of discrimination and equally distributing power in the family and community for the attainment of the equal status and position of man and woman.¹⁰⁰ In addition, in the context of spousal abuse,

empowerment consists not only in the changing perspectives of women but women themselves also learn and receive information to change their situation.¹⁰¹

5.4.2. Couple's Personal Empowerment

In the process of empowerment, some feminists propose that women must become first and foremost moral agents. It means that women are responsible for themselves. They need to take action to shape their lives instead of expecting someone to help them in life endangering situations.¹⁰² However, the ecclesial and the social dimension of intervention in spousal abuse, personal responsibility and involvement are more important.

The Indian Feminist writer Rita Noronha presents four forms of personal empowerment: power within, power to, power with and power over. First, power within (altering self) – refers to “one’s own inner wisdom, intuition, self-esteem, even the spark of the divine”.¹⁰³ This inner power or wisdom is embedded in patriarchal thinking, feeling and acting. It brings out the potential in both subjugated women and men to resist spousal abuse and to discipline themselves against spousal abuse respectively. Further, the inner power says ‘no’ to abuse. It aspires towards the holistic growth of both spouses.¹⁰⁴ The inner power broadens the understanding of human sexuality and this broader understanding gives strength to women to resist the ill-treatment and to men to stop abuse.¹⁰⁵ Although the first principle of empowerment is referred only to women, this principle should be applied to both spouses. Since they are primarily responsible for themselves, they both need to empower themselves from spousal abuse.

The second, power to – (enhancing life skills) refers to the ability of women to change the abusive situation by developing skills, acquiring knowledge and changing their attitudes. It also refers to women's ability to be at one with the other victim and to intervene in the problem. "It is developing life skills such as those of good governance, decision making, creative problem solving, communication and human relations and management."¹⁰⁶ In this context, men also need to develop the skills to avoid abuse of their wives.

Third, power with – (building solidarity) refers to a "process of developing solidarity among women and like-minded men."¹⁰⁷ It refers to an involvement in the network of initiatives stopping spousal abuse and various forms of discrimination and building a society in favour of the victims. "Power with is the power of an individual to reach out in a manner that negates neither self nor other. It prizes mutuality over control and operates by negotiation and consensus".¹⁰⁸ Fourth, power over – (overcoming domination) refers to "enhancing the control women have over material and knowledge, resources and opportunities so as to govern their own destiny".¹⁰⁹ In addition, it refers to the change of the present existing structure which consists of a power relationship on the basis of male domination. It is a process of integration.¹¹⁰

5.4.3. Socio-Political-Economic Empowerment

In order to enhance personal empowerment, there is also a need for socio-political-economic empowerment. The social power of leadership, the political power of deciding authority, and the economic power of self-independence are very much needed for Indian women. This could be

achieved through a proportionate participation of women in public work as well as the proportionate co-operation and assistance of men in household duties. Although the government promotes laws and policies for this socio-political-economic empowerment of women, they exist merely in the letter. Unless the letter of the law becomes the spirit of law, the empowerment of women and the eradication of spousal abuse will not progress very far in Indian society.

Conclusion

It is very clear that whether or not spousal abuse is culturally accepted or some women themselves accept it as a normal act in a family or wilfully perpetrated, spousal abuse must always be condemned. For spousal abuse are an evil and a crime. Thus, there is a need for a range of interventions in spousal abuse. As it is mentioned in the introduction eradication of spousal abuse is a timely mission. To prevent this spousal abuse, as the historical records suggest, there is a need to return to the original story about the esteemed position of women in Indian (Tamil) society, when women decided for themselves. In addition, although the constitution says that the giving and receiving a dowry is illegal in India, this has not been properly enforced. This legislation has not reached many women in Indian society. Therefore, there is an urgent need to create a considerable amount of awareness against the dowry. The government needs to take steps to implement this legislation more strictly. Therefore, a radical cultural change is very much needed for the prevention of spousal abuse. Priests should not participate in the marriage in which the dowry plays a pivotal role.

However, many women in India are forced at times to remain in the spousal relationship for various reasons. If they leave the abusive relationship, will they survive in Indian society? Therefore, the importance of women's education and economic independence must be stressed. If a woman chooses to sacrifice her life by living in an abusive relationship for the better future of her children and other noble purposes, this too must be recognized. In this context, men need to be educated on the importance of women's dignity and on how to treat women. As well, women also need to be educated to recognise their inherent dignity. In addition, women must have an empowering perspective on themselves and other women. In short, there is a need to deconstruct a male focused society into a woman-man focused society.

Often, men think that marriage is only for procreation and women are often considered as objects of pleasure. They consider women from the procreative perspective of marriage. Therefore, unless the attitudes of both men and women are changed, there will be no end to spousal violence. Despite their political, economic and educational empowerment, women are still subjected to spousal abuse. For, it was also found that men are not empowered. Both a woman and a man have to have power to prevent or to stop spousal abuse and to empower themselves.

Spousal abuse is against the very dignity and personhood of a woman. Therefore, the Catholic Church needs to engage in further dialogue concerning the social situations of women and to reinterpret its position with a view to the eradication of spousal abuse and to create a new social structure wherein women are fully dignified

and their talents are fully recognised and used for their emancipation and empowerment in the family and society.

It is the 'sign of the times' for the Church and Catholic ethicists to reflect upon the diversities of women's experiences in the context of spousal abuse. It needs the attention of Catholic ethicists to listen to the silence of the victims. Thus it is an urgent need to provide a new horizon in Catholic conjugal morality to eradicate the spousal abuse among the Indian families and empower the couples.

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Endnotes

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