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Displaced Women due to Domestic Violence- A Study on Women Survivors living in Shelter Homes

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ABSTRACT

Women account for around half of the world's population and contribute significantly to the development of all nations. Despite all the legal and social provisions existing in India for the protection of women's rights, human rights violations experienced by women are on the rise. Apart from physical and psychological implications of domestic violence women survivors experience homelessness. These women are forced to live in shelter homes with minimum facilities and are often excluded from their family and decision making processes. Even though they face significant risks, they try to adapt to the shelter home environment as they feel 'safer' than their violent home environment and their desire to thrive. This study focused on understanding the life situation of women displaced from their own families due to domestic violence.

Violence against women is one of the critical social issues by which women are forced into a subordinate position. The term "violence against women" means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life (UN General Assembly, 1993). Common forms of violence are battering, sexual abuse, dowry related violence, rape, sexual harassment, trafficking and forced prostitution. Despite constitutional provisions of protection of human rights, women are subjected to torture and cruel and degrading treatment from the family and other social institutions. Violence against women is present in every country, cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity, age.

There is adequate research evidence to prove strong correlation between domestic violence and homelessness among women. Women survivors of domestic violence are forced to move away from their own house and seek shelter in residential care facilities. One study in Massachusetts found that 92 percent of homeless women had experienced severe physical or sexual assault at some point in their lives, 63 percent had been victims of violence by an intimate partner, and 32 percent had been assaulted by their current or most recent partner. In India crimes against women increased 34 percent, with cruelty by husbands and relatives being the most widely reported crime, according to the data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). These survivors require access to safe, stable, affordable housing, but it was observed that these women approach governmental and non-governmental residential care institutions with meager facilities which are inadequate to lead a life with quality.

This study on 'Displaced Women Survivors of Domestic Violence' aims to understand the life of women survivors of domestic violence who have been moved from their spouse's house or natal family due to the violence from their spouse or other family members. The respondents were residents of various shelter homes- both government and private in the Thrissur Corporation Area of Kerala State. The general objective of the study was to conduct a situation analysis of women survivors who have been displaced from their home environment and currently living in shelter homes. The specific objectives were to understand their socio-economic condition, impact of domestic violence on their personal life, the circumstances lead to the displacement and to understand their life situation and their aspirations. Sixty women who live in shelter homes were interviewed using a structured interview schedule.

Results of the Study

Socio – Economic condition of the Women

The age-wise distribution of respondents indicated that 76 percent

of the respondents belonged to below 40 age group, out of which 38 percent in 20-30 age group. The mean age of the respondents was 39. With regard to the religion of the respondents, 63.3 percent of the respondents were Hindus, 21.7 percent of the respondents were Christians and only 9 percent of them were Muslims. All the respondents were educated. 27 percent of the respondents were graduates, 3.3 percent post graduates and 58.3 percent have had high school education. The occupational status of the respondents revealed that 60 percent of the respondents were un-employed. 20 percent were engaged in un-skilled (mason, house maid etc.), 15 percent were professionals (teacher, nurse etc.), 3.3 percent were skilled employed (tailor, driver).

With regard to the marital status of the respondents 90 percent of the respondents reported that they got separated from their spouse. Out of them 50 percent of the respondents were legally divorced. 45 percent of the respondents got separated from their spouse within 10 years of their married life. It was reported that 8 percent of the respondents have got married below 18 years of age and 46 percent between 18 and 20 years of age. Mean age of respondents at the time of marriage was 22.41 With regard to the education of spouse, it was observed the their spouses were less educated than the respondents. 76 percent of the spouses have had education up to high school. The spouses of 57 percent of respondents were engaged in unskilled labour.

Impact of domestic violence on the respondents

Who are the abusers in the family was a relevant question for a study on domestic violence. To this question, 73.3 percent of the respondents reported that their husbands were the abusers. 10 percent reported that their in-laws abused them and 16.7 percent reported both.

Alcohol consumption by the spouse (31.7%), financial issues (18.3%) and dowry related problems (16.7%) were reported as major reasons of violence. Mental illness (6.7%), extra marital affairs (6.7%), health problems (3.3%) etc were also reported.

With regard to the type of abuse, one third of the respondents reported physical abuse, 15 percent reported emotional abuse. 48.3 percent of the respondents reported that they have experienced all forms of abuse in their family. It is very important to note that 91.7 percent of respondents did not face any kind of abuse from their families during child hood or prior to their marriage. 60 percent of the respondents reported that they have not received any kind of support from their own family members while experienced violence in their husband's house.

With regard to the impact of violence on the life of the respondents 30 percent of them reported adverse effects on their interpersonal relationship, physical health, mental health and

financial situation. The women also reported negative effects on their children's education, relationship skills, mental health and physical health. Out of the 21 respondents who were employed, one third of the respondents reported violence by their husbands towards them at their workplace and reported that they had to stop working due to the humiliation experienced as a result of the abuse. 55 Percent of the respondents reported physical injuries and mental health problems due to the experience of domestic violence. It is significant to note that 18 percent of the respondents attempted suicide due to the violence issues. 15 percent of the respondents required hospitalization due to the injuries. Others reported that they haven't approached doctors or mental health professionals as they were embarrassed to disclose to others. 58 percent of the respondents reported that they still suffer from health problems due to the physical and mental torture they experienced in the past. However, only 19 percent of the respondents reported that they currently seek help from health professionals.

Receipt of formal support

In India, apart from special legislation, there are formal support mechanisms established both by the Government and NGOs for protecting women who experience domestic violence. Separate help line and special cell for women, Service Providing Centre established to implement the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, and family counselling Centres etc are some of those mechanisms. To the question whether the respondents have reported the violence to Police 46.7 percent of the respondents reported affirmatively, while 53.3 percent reported negatively. Out of those who have approached Police, only 32 percent of the respondents received protection order. To the question, whether respondents approached any support organizations, 66.7 percent reported positively. One of the major hindrances the respondents reported was the criticism from family members as they report violence to Police or other formal support system. The study also explored respondents' awareness about the protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act. 60 percent of the respondents reported that they have heard about the Act, but not fully aware about the provisions. It is disheartening to note that 40 percent of the respondents are not aware about such legislation.

Displacement and further life situation of the respondents

The following table gives the reasons given by the respondents to move to the shelter homes.

83.3 percent of the respondents moved from the husband's home and 15 percent from their own home. 50 percent of the respondents stated that they had to move to the shelter homes as they experience severe health problems. Financial problems (28.3%), Lack of family support (11.7%), Loneliness (6.7%) and Poverty (3.3%) were other reasons reported by the respondents.

With regard to the duration of stay in shelter homes 83.4 percent of the respondents spent 1-5 years in the shelter homes and 13.2 percent of the respondents completed 5-10 years. 3.3 percent of the respondents spent more than 10 years. It is heartening to note that 96 percent of the respondents reported that they were able to adjust with the shelter home environment as they feel 'safe' there. When the researcher explored the coping strategies of the respondents they reported praying, sharing with others and helping others. 55 percent of the respondents reported that they disclose their personal problems to their friends and 35 percent to their relatives. With regard to the availability of counselling service at the shelter homes 57 percent reported that there are no such services in their shelter homes. The study also made an attempt to know whether the respondents have any visitors from their own or husband's family. 37 percent of the respondents have visitors from their own family and 8.7 percent of the respondents have visitors from husband's family. With regard to their desire to go back to their own home, 50 percent of the respondents expressed their desire to return to their home while 50 percent wanted to stay back in the institution for the rest of their life. As regards to the employment, 87 percent of the respondents expressed their need to do remunerative jobs. To the question what do they do if they

experience future abuse 70 percent of the respondents reported that they will definitely approach Police and 20 percent reported that they will approach other support organisations. 9.4 percent reported that they will apply self-defense techniques.

Suggestions

The following are the suggestions proposed by the authors as social workers based on the findings of the study.

Domestic violence is a major cause for homelessness among women. Institutionalization of survivors of domestic violence may not be considered as an effective solution to curb the issue of domestic violence. All women have right to live in their own home and no one likes to move away. There should be strong mechanisms to protect women in their own home. Apart from providing formal education to women, there should be campaigns to make everyone aware of their rights and legislations to protect them from violence and all forms of abuse. Such programmes should be targeted to younger men and women. A training on 'alternatives to violence' to be included in the education system.

It was found that alcoholism of spouse is one of the major reasons for domestic violence. A strategic intervention to prevent alcoholism and associated violence to be undertaken by government and NGOs. It was found that the respondents experienced severe form of physical injuries and mental health problems as a result of domestic violence. However, most women survivors feel embarrassed and failed to approach health professionals for timely treatment. This may lead to chronic health conditions among women. The study also observed that a few women have attempted suicide as they were not able to cope with the violent family environment. Even though government has initiated special counselling centres for women who experience abuse and violence, these centres lack competent professionals and legal experts. The women should feel confident in approaching these centres and these centres should have a mechanism to provide confidential and ethical interventions.

It was also observed that these centres are not equipped with adequate facilities to enhance the quality of life of these women. Government should have appropriate policies, procedures and standards for establishing and maintaining such centres. There should be proper counselling and case management services to help the survivors gain appropriate vocational training, job opportunities and interpersonal skills as part of rehabilitation services.

Above all, deliberate attempts should be made by parents and teachers to train younger generation on how to respect each other, how to be kind to others and help them manage conflicts using non-violent strategies.

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