

# Violence Against Women: Wife Battering in Chennai

*Subadra*

<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsia/forums/dv/articles/chennai.html>

*Domestic violence, more often than not, is rooted in patriarchal notions of ownership over women's bodies sexuality, labour reproductive rights, mobility and levels of autonomy. The phenomenon of wife battering is shrouded in myths and stereotypes that need to be debunked. A study in Chennai located in the context of the rising curve of crimes against women in the city.*

DEVELOPMENT is about protection of human rights of the concerned populations. It pre-supposes active participation of the populace in the decision-making processes while social justice remains one of the most important and cherished goals of development. However, contradictions do remain as a result of various processes not only among nations at a global level, but also significantly within sections of population within a country. People continue to be marginalised on the basis of class, religion, ethnicity, colour, sex and in India specially, on the basis of caste. Discrimination and exploitation on the basis of gender constitutes a serious issue which effectively means that half the human race is unable to realise its potential and condemned to sub-optimal standards of existence. This problem has received worldwide attention and several efforts have been made to, bridge the seemingly ever-widening gap. Yet even after years of efforts to integrate women into the mainstream development process the effectiveness of the same remains to be questioned owing to a multitude of factors which aid the continued marginalisation of women. Women's access to education, health, employment and political spaces still remain distant goals in many nations of the world. One of the most serious impediments to women's development is the phenomenon of continuing and increasing violence against them. Needless to say, this constitutes a serious violation of women's human rights. Violence against women is one of the most significant, yet little understood and acknowledged factor instrumental in the phenomenon of marginalisation of women in the development processes. Gender violence manifests itself in various forms - female foeticide and infanticide, sexual abuse, incest, molestation, sexual harassment at work and on the streets, marital rape, domestic violence in the form of wife assault and woman battering. In some places, there exist culture-specific forms of violence against women like female genital mutilation in some African countries and harassment/murder/beating for dowry in India. Of all the forms of violence that women face, domestic violence remains the least reported and largely suppressed.

For women, violence is a phenomenon which starts at conception and carries on through their entire life span. In India, pre-birth selection and consequent infanticide is a common occurrence and the preference for a male offspring widespread. Discrimination continues by way of access to adequate food, prompt medical facilities, burden of housework, care of siblings and so on leading to lack of education and consequent lack of awareness and empowerment and imparting of skills. Adolescence brings with it the complete withdrawal of the little freedom of mobility, fear of and occurrence of sexual assaults; both within and outside of the family. Vulnerability is further compounded by early marriages and early child bearing and the disastrous consequences of the same on the health of women. In India specifically, child marriages further accentuate the girl's

vulnerability. The reproductive age is, for a lot of women, punctuated with physical, mental and emotional abuse by their husbands. Millions of Indian women face severe harassment due to unfulfilled dowry demands and many are victims of homicide and are even driven to suicide. All these foster a deep and inescapable sense of dependency in women who are left with no alternative but to continue to live with depend on abusive partners for want of any other choice. Additionally, women constantly need to negotiate their space and contend with abuse at the workplace too. An important fact is that a woman may experience violence either once in one of her life-cycle phases or be continually exposed to multiple instances of violence at various points in time. It has, however been established beyond doubt that wife- battering is probably one of the most endemic forms of violence against women throughout the world.

Domestic violence arises from patriarchal notions of ownership over women's bodies, sexuality, labour, reproductive rights, mobility, and level of autonomy. Deep rooted ideas about male superiority enable men to freely exercise unlimited power over women's lives and 'effectively legitimises it too'. Violence is thus a tool that men use constantly to control women as a result of highly internalised patriarchal conditioning which accords men the right to beat their wives and thus ostensibly perform the duty of chastising them. The unequal and hierarchical gender relations manifest itself clearly in the familial setup and is accentuated by clear demarcation of sex roles and sexual division of labour. Violence within the home constitutes, more often than not, a 'private' affair because of the high value attached to family as an indisputably sacrosanct social institution. Infact, this belief disables rightful cognisance of the fact that more often than not, the family, in reality, is the site of and the root of unequal gender relations and oppression of women. This in fact, puts violence (which is systematically meted out to women within the family) above public scrutiny, thereby creating a public/private dichotomy with respect to violence against women. Not surprisingly, thus, marital violence, especially woman battering goes largely unnoticed or more importantly, hushed. It has also been quite apparent for a long time now that violence against women within the family does not constitute an occasional, rare incident, but is a regular systemic and structural manifestation of social control. One of the main causes for the non-recognition of wife battering as a serious social crime has been the fact that the phenomenon has been shrouded in myths and stereotypes which need to be debunked to enable an understanding of family violence. These range from viewing battered women as mentally disturbed or sick individuals, batterers as products of an abusive environment; and violence as a result of abuse of drug and alcohol.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

In the past few decades, with increasing evidence regarding the phenomenon, marital violence has drawn the attention of several concerned feminists, human rights groups, social scientists and social work practitioners. Also, many scientists have since attempted to study the phenomenon and have proposed several theories to explain the same. An overview of the various theories that have been put forward follows.

According to Anjali Maydeo of Nari Samanta Manch, a Pune-based women's group, theories related to domestic violence can be grouped into three categories; psycho-analytical theories, social learning theories and the socio-political critique. Psycho-analytical theories are those that focus on the emotions/ feelings instilled during child rearing which make women and men behave in a particular fashion. The social learning theories view violence as a direct consequence of socialisation processes and the family environments from which the women and men learn to be 'helpless' and

'aggressive' respectively. The socio-political critique highlight the role of patriarchy in the manifestations of violence which forces women into sub- ordinate positions.

Two of the most often discussed theories on battered women are Lenore Walker's 'The Cycle Theory of Violence' and 'Psychosocial Theory of Learned Helplessness'.

The cycle theory of violence comprises three distinct phases in the cycle of violence - the tension building stage, the acute battering incident and kindness and contrite loving behaviour. In the first stage, when minor battering incidents occur, the woman adapts, rationalises and externalises the problem. Tension mounts in the second phase leading to the acute battering incident leading to severe repercussions on the woman - physically, emotionally and psychologically. Phase three is welcomed by both the partners which is marked by uncontrolled love, affection and promises by the husband never to repeat the incidents again. This cycle keeps repeating itself in the lives of almost all battered women. The psycho- social theory of learned helplessness focuses on the factors which reinforce battered women's victimisation. According to this theory, battered women operate from a premise of 'helplessness' which further serves to only aid passivity and a fatal acceptance of the exploitative situation.

As opposed to the cycle theory, E W Gondolf and E R Fisher proposed the survivor theory in 1988 which views women not merely as passive victims but proactive help-seekers and survivors. The assumptions of the survivor theory are in sharp contrast to the above theory of learned helplessness. The survivor theory credits women with the capacity to innovate newer strategies of coping and acknowledges the efforts of the survivors in seeking help from formal and informal sources. In addition, the survivor theory stresses the need for accessible and effective community resources for the woman to escape from the batterer. As mentioned earlier, the survivor theory takes cognisance of the multiple help-seeking behaviour of women in the face of increased violence. Further, it also lauds the 'female survivor instinct' which focuses on nurturing rather than destruction, the willingness to adapt and the efforts directed at furthering of self- growth.

Despite violence being the primary issue which brought the new women's movement in India in the early seventies, there have only been sporadic efforts at a theoretical understanding of the issues which confront women, in India. Field level action and protests have, more often than not, occurred in the absence of a theoretical framework. However, significant theoretical initiatives have been put forward by Sharad Patil, Sharad Joshi and Vandana-Shiva, pioneer intellectuals and activists associated with women's movements in the spheres of the anti-caste, the peasant and the ecology movements in India respectively. Gender relations, sexual domination, matriliney, etc, form an essential part of Patil's analyses of caste/class oppression. Traditional Marxist frame work forms the basis of the analyses where patriarchal attitudes towards women's sexual freedom, power of sexuality seek to bind women culturally. In Joshi's view, patriarchal oppression is seen as arising out of accumulation of material and economic surplus and the concentration of the same in a few hands. When the imbalance is sought to be corrected, the processes result in the suppression, rape and slavery of women, western science and technology and the imperialist west are seen as the primary causes of women's exploitation in Shiva's view. This theory asserts women's positive relationship with nature (evident in the Chipko movement) similar to the Gandhian philosophy. Also, this approach views women not as mere victims but as powerful agents with the power to change the course of their lives.

Women's groups all over the world have continuously campaigned to draw public attention to the issue of gender violence. Unfortunately, an accurate estimate of the dimensions of the problem has been difficult to obtain because of the gross under-reporting of the phenomenon.

According to recent victimisation surveys in the US, only 2 per cent of intra familial child sexual abuse, 6 per cent of extra familial sexual abuse, and 5 to 8 per cent of adult sexual assault cases are reported to the police. By comparison, 61.5 per cent of robberies and 82.5 per cent of burglaries are reported [Koss 1990]. According to Lise Lachance in 1994, the following estimates emerged about the extent of violence against women in Canada:

- One-half of all Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of sixteen.
- One-in-four Canadian women can expect to be sexually assaulted in her life, half of them before the age of seventeen.
- From 1960 to 1987, the number of declared rapes increased by 125 per cent. Half of them were committed in the victim's houses.
- A study on women with disabilities found that almost half had been sexually abused as children, and one-in-four had been sexually assaulted as an adult.
- 80 per cent of women in federal prisons had previously suffered physical or sexual abuse.
- Six-in-ten Canadian women who walk alone in their own area after dark feel "very" or "somewhat" worried doing so.
- The World Bank estimates that rape and domestic violence account for 5 per cent of life lost to women of reproductive age in demographically developing countries. In developing countries such as China, where maternal mortality and poverty-related diseases are relatively under control, the healthy years of life lost due to rape and domestic violence again account for a larger share (16 per cent) of the total burden. In established market economies gender-based victimisation accounts for nearly one in five healthy years of life lost to women of age 15 to 44 [Heise 1994].

**Table 1: Crimes Against women - National Trends  
(Actual Figures)**

Crime Head	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994
Rape	9518	9793	11112	11242	12351
Kidnapping and abduction	11699	12300	12077	11837	12998
Dowry Deaths	4836	5157	4962	5817	4935
Torture	13450	15949	19750	22064	25946
Molestation	20194	20611	20385	20985	24117
Sexual Harassment	8620	10283	10751	12009	10496
Importation of Girls	-	-	-	-	167
Sati Prevention Act	-	-	-	-	2
Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act	-	-	-	-	7457
Incident	-	-	-	-	389

Representation of Women					
Total	68317	74093	79037	83954	98948

Source: National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India 1994, Government of India

In India, there has been very little research done on the subject of domestic violence despite the fact that the women's movement in India came to the fore campaigning against the issue. This is largely because, like in the rest of the world, in India too there is a tendency to overlook the incidence of the phenomenon with only the few heinous cases attracting media and public attention. According to Mahajan (1990), we have limited knowledge on family violence. Not much research has been done, he says, and for a variety of reasons. Firstly, the semi-sacred nature of the family in our society makes research into family violence a taboo. Secondly, research into the family has been largely devoted to the study of the joint family which diverted attention from family conflicts in general and physical violence in particular. Thirdly, paucity of research on family violence can be attributed to the apathetic attitude of society which has relegated intra-family violence to a form of individual pathology and has led members of the family to believe that physical conflicts in the family do not constitute violence. Sriram and Bakshi (1988) in their study of 617 battered women found that in the percentage distribution of causes of violence against married women, dowry demands, extra-marital affairs and bigamy, alcohol and gambling were the highest. Their analysis revealed that for more than 50 per cent of the cases, regular beating was a fact of life. Besides manual beating, 10 percent of the women were assaulted with instruments. Ranjana Kumari's study (1989) of dowry victims shows that one in every four was murdered or driven to commit suicide and more than half (61.3 per cent) were thrown out of their husband's house after a long drawn out period of harassment and torture. Gautam and Trivedi (1987) found that the victims were mostly young (18-30 years), less educated than their spouses, dependent on husbands or in-laws for their living and mostly died from burn injuries [Action Aid 1994].

Over the past few years, the phenomenon of women burning and rapes has registered a sharp increase throughout India. In Delhi on an average in 1983, two women died of burns everyday. In Bombay, a survey from two police stations indicated that in a period of eight months in 1984, one woman was burnt to death every five days. In Bangalore, suicides and 'dowry deaths' nearly doubled in 1984 as compared to the previous years. According to police reports, on an average two women committed suicides every day in 1984. In Madhya Pradesh, records from the biggest hospital showed that one woman died of burn injuries every five days. According to various women's organisations an equal number of burning/suicide cases go unreported. Mostly this is on account of the refusal of the police to register the cases or when they do register, they tend to minimise the offence.

### CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN IN CHENNAI

As a background to a field study, an attempt was made, to focus on the phenomenon of crimes/violence against women in Chennai city in the period 1986- 1996. Also juxtaposed with the said data is the national level data to highlight trends and focus on police action with respect to the same.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau data of 1994, the following patterns were observed at the national level (Table 1).

As is evident from the table, the over- all trends in crimes against women from 1990 to 1994 registered a gradual, steady increase of 45 per cent. A closer look at the data revealed that the highest increase was in the area of 'torture' of women; i.e., harassment for dowry under Section 498-A of the IPC. Also, at a national level, the incidence of crimes showed a consistent pattern of increase from 1990 to 1994. So also, the proportion of crime against women went up to 5.6 per cent in 1994 from 4.3 per cent in 1990.

The National Crime Records Bureau has classified all the states and union territories on the basis of high crime prone and less crime prone. Tamil Nadu ranks eighth among the list of 10 high crime prone states. With specific reference to Chennai, the trends in the crime against women from 1990 to 1996 November as, per the Chennai Crime Records Bureau are as shown in Table 2.

The incidence of crime against women has not followed any particular pattern as is evident from Table 2. While remaining more or less constant from 1990 to 1992, the incidence of crime shot up by nearly 55 per cent in 1993. The incidence came down significantly in the two years that followed, but shot up by 121.5 per cent in 1996 as compared to the figures in 1995. A possible explanation to this could be that the reporting went up in 1993 following the establishment of three all- women police stations in Chennai; first at Greams Road in 1992 and then at Adyar and Kothwalchawdi in 1993. The phenomenal increase in 1996 could be attributed to a rise in the actual incidence compounded with increased reporting owing to the knowledge of and the access to a woman-dominated set-up like the all-women police station. As has been mentioned above, the above data does not include cases of sexual harassment since these are registered under the 75 Madras City Police Act to enable speedy disposal. Only the offences which are considered to be of a 'serious' nature are registered under the IPC.

**Table 2: Proportion of Crimes Against Women in Chennai Against Total IPC Crimes 1990-1996**

Year	Total IPC Crimes	Crimes against women (IPC Cases)*	Per cent Increase over Pervious Year	Per Cent of Total IPC Crimes
1990	12372	66	-	0.5
1991	12633	74	+12.1	0.6
1992	13174	77	+4.0	0.6
1993	6930	119	+54.5	1.7
1994	5789	86	-27.7	1.4
1995	5642	51	+40.6	0.9
1996 **	5633	113	+12.15	2.0

\* Does not include cases of sexual harassment (even teasing) and kidnapping

\*\* Data available only till November 1996.

Source: National Crime Records Bureau, Crime in India - 1994, Government of India.

Table 3 depicts the progression of crime against women in Chennai in the period 1986 to 1996 November as per the data available with the Chennai Crime Records Bureau. From Table 3 it is

evident that over the years, there has been a distinct upward and harassment for dowry, while in the other crimes, the trend is mixed.

**Table 3: Crimes against women in Chennai, 1986-1996**

Year	Dowry Death	Dowry Harassment	Rape	Molestation	Sexual Harassment
1986	1	3	9	22	550
1987	2	4	21	13	692
1988	4	5	26	17	868
1989	6	18	18	18	661
1990	8	19	18	21	706
1991	14	20	21	19	667
1992	13	37	17	10	578
1993	10	79	17	13	571
1994	12	44	14	16	534
1995	3	23	11	14	639
1996*	8	82	11	12	384

\* Data included only till November 1996.

Source: Crime Records Bureau, Chennai.

The police set-up is an important law enforcement machinery which is resorted to by the masses as natural redressal forums. Tables 4, 5 and 6 provide an overview of the action taken by the Chennai police department with respect to crimes against women specifically in the cases of dowry death, harassment for dowry, rape, molestation and sexual harassment as per the data available with the Chennai Crime Records Bureau. In Table 4, the police action is depicted in terms of the number of cases reported (Rep); convicted (Con); acquitted (Acq); pending investigation (PT); under investigation (UI); action dropped or facts misrepresented (AD/MF).

**Table 4: Police Action Against women in Chennai (Actual Figures) January 1996 to November 1996**

Crime	Rep	Con	Acq	PT	UI	AD/MF
Dowry Death	81	3	29	23	24	2
Dowry Harassment	334	5	14	183	105	27
Rape	183	32	54	57	21	19
Molestation	175	58	30	44	8	35
Sexual Harassment	6800	6170	198	198	91	143

\* Note registered under IPC but under 75 MCP Act.

Source: Crime Records Bureau, Chennai.

The law enforcing machineries have an important role to play in the checking of the phenomenon of violence against women. As is apparent from the above table, the number of persons convicted of as serious a crime as dowry death is only 3.7 per cent while the number of persons acquitted is as high as 36 per cent. As mentioned earlier, more often than not, this is owing to lack of 'adequate' evidence. It is common for a woman's death to be construed as 'accident' or 'suicide' resulting from a loss of status owing to the suspicious moral character of the woman. The guilty manage to suppress all evidence and emerge victorious. In the case of harassment for dowry, 55 per cent of the cases are still pending trial while another 31.4 per cent of the cases are still under investigation. It would come as no surprise if the rate of convictions in these cases would also follow a similar pattern. Such matters are normally viewed as private domestic disputes where evidence is fairly difficult to collect. Also, dowry is considered so much an integral part of a marriage by all sections of populations and is seeped in so widely in the Indian cultural norms, that viewing dowry demand as a crime is still to meet with appropriate righteous indignation. 20 per cent of the molestation cases could not meet with any concrete action owing to either 'misrepresentation of facts' or the concerned parties taking back the cases. This is not in the least surprising owing to the phenomenal pressure that is experienced by the parties who decide to act against injustice.

The conviction of the husband may not be the best solution to the problems of a battered wife. The various alternatives that she has to choose from, each one in itself a compromise, may make it impossible for her to follow up the criminal case. Since the law does not protect a woman's right to the matrimonial home, or offer her shelter during the proceedings she may have no other choice but to work out a reconciliation. At this point, she would be forced to withdraw the complaint as the husband would make it a pre-condition for any negotiations. Secondly, if she has decided to opt for a divorce and the husband is willing for a settlement and a mutual- consent divorce, again withdrawing the complaint would be a pre-condition for such a settlement. Thirdly, if she wants to separate or divorce on the cruelty, she would have to follow two cases, one in a civil court and the other in a criminal court. This would exert tremendous pressure, especially when she is at the stage of rebuilding her life, finding shelter, employment and child care facility. If compelled to choose between the two proceedings, most women would opt for the civil case where they would be entitled to maintenance, child custody, injunction against harassment and finally a divorce which would set them free from their violent husbands [UNESCO 1993]. Needless to say, the process causes tremendous amount of emotional trauma. Moreover, the struggle involved in wading through the various layers of the infinitely slow moving bureaucracy is also enormous. Hence, very often, parties are forced to abandon their struggle, midway or are compelled to resort to some kind of out- of-court settlement.

Undoubtedly, the incidence of violence against women within the family has been on the increase too in the past decade as is revealed by Table 5.

The trends evident in Table 5 are quite disturbing. Familial violence in the first half of the decade formed 27.66 per cent of the total number of crimes reported. However, the incidence jumped to an alarming high of 66.34 per cent in the latter half. One possible explanation could also be that the reporting went up during 1991-1996. This could be due to the heightened levels of awareness created by widespread media coverage and attention on the issue; setting up of all-women police stations, family courts; awareness about the legal amendments like 498A and the innumerable campaigns waged by various activist groups throughout the country.



In Tamil Nadu, the Tamil Nadu State Legal Aid Board plays a fairly significant role in the cases of battered women, dowry-related problems and such other matrimonial disputes. Table 6 gives a brief analyses of the cases handled by the Board in Chennai from 1993 to 1996.

**Table 5: Trends in Familial Violence in Chennai, 1986-1996**

Years	Dowry Death + Dowry Harassment	Rape + Molestation	Total Crimes Reported	Per cent to Total Cr.
1986 to 1990	70	183	253	27.66
1991 to November 1996	345	175	520	66.34
<b>Total</b>	<b>415</b>	<b>358</b>	<b>773</b>	<b>100.00</b>

Source: Crime Records Bureau, Chennai.

**Table 6: Cases Handled by Tamil Nadu State Legal Aid Board**

Year	Total	Settled	Failed/Disposed	Family Court	Transfer
1993 *	485	51	15	248	11
1994 **	492	47	42	214	7
1995 ***	498	40	14	198	4
1996	493	39	20	225	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>1968</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>885</b>	<b>27</b>

\* Date unavailable for January and September 1993

\*\* Date unavailable for June 1994

\*\*\* Date unavailable for November 1995.

\*\*\*\* Transfer of cases takes place to branches of the Tamil Nadu State Legal Aid Board in the various districts of the state by the Chennai Centre in the cases which are out of their geographical jurisdiction. This normally done to facilitate greater speed in investigation and redressal of the cases.

Source: Tamil Nadu State Legal Aid Board, Chennai.

Cases are considered settled when the parties either reconcile to live together or go in for a mutual-consent divorce. When either parties are unable to reach a workable solution or are unclear about their expectation or seek the assistance of some other forum, cases are closed or disposed of. Family court is the destination for women seeking maintenance, divorce, custody of children or restitution of conjugal rights. However, it needs to be borne in mind that in cases of prosecution for dowry harassment or dowry death, legal action is entirely dependent on the police investigation. More often than not, cases get hushed up at the investigation level itself owing to the cumbersome,

laborious and lengthy process of evidence gathering which is wrought with unwilling witnesses, corruption and so on.

It is important to bear in mind that both at the national and at the local levels, statistics specifically on wife-battering as a crime is conspicuous by its absence. Indisputably, battering would be an intrinsic component of the rampant incidences of harassment for dowry and dowry death. Whether a rightful cognisance of the problem at an early stage would save women from disastrous consequences is a matter which does not need too much thought.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

A sample of 90 battered women for an in-depth study was purposively drawn from the Tamil Nadu State Legal Aid Board's Counselling Centre for Women, the All-Women Police Stations (Greams Road and Kothwalchawdi) and counselling centres-cum-shelters for victims of domestic violence run by voluntary organisations and women's groups in Chennai. The study primarily focused on obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of wife-battering and gain insights into the situations that battered women face on a daily basis and the nature of violence - physical, mental and psychological - endured by them for prolonged periods. In addition to focusing on the responses of women, the study also highlighted the structural and other constraints under which decisions about help-seeking, leaving or reconciling to the situation have to be taken.

It is obvious that wife battering cuts across all religions, castes, and educational level barriers. While Hindus formed a majority of the sample, the proportion of Christian women was far higher than that in the population which could be due to higher reporting. Muslim women formed a mere 3.3 per cent of the sample. A combination of factors ranging from greater community level support systems to low literacy to lack of awareness of options could be possible explanations of this phenomenon. Also, the phenomenon is prevalent in all castes ranging from most backward caste/other backward caste, scheduled caste and scheduled tribes and forward castes. This was amply evident from the fact that women from all these groups were seeking help from the three referral points. Significantly the majority of the respondents were aged below thirty years highlighting the high incidence and/ or reporting of the problem and thereby the vulnerability of young women to abuse.

The sample showed respondents with fairly high educational levels with a mere 10 per cent of them being illiterate. Seventy-nine per cent of the women had received formal education ranging from primary to the higher secondary level and 11 per cent were graduates/postgraduates. While it is evident that irrespective of educational levels all women are victims of wife-battering, it is also evident that with a significant level of education, women are unwilling to put up with exploitative situations.

Most of the respondents were largely homemakers and their economic dependency heightened their vulnerability to abuse too. Nearly 70 percent of the women who had been employed prior to marriage had been forced to quit work by their husbands. However, a significant proportion of the respondents took up employment as a direct consequence of abuse and donned the role of the consistent bread-winner for the family. However, owing to the lack of skills, most respondents were engaged in semi-skilled labour in the various export units in and around Chennai city. Most of the respondents' husbands had the opportunity to acquire skills which enabled them to negotiate better in the labour market and also earn incomes that were significantly higher than those of the respondents. The families of both the respondents and their husbands were mainly engaged in

blue-collar jobs. Overall, the respondents in the sample hailed from middle and lower-middle socio-economic strata. While most respondents had gone in for arranged marriages, a significant proportion (35.5 per cent) had opted for self-arranged marriages which ranged from inter-caste to inter-religious marriages. With marriage seen as an ultimate goal in a woman's life, over 60 per cent of the respondents had been married before they had turned 20 highlighting the trend of early marriages prevalent in Indian society. Not too surprisingly, the onset of abuse, therefore, in the majority of the cases (nearly 70 per cent) was well within a year of marriage. This was irrespective of the type of marriage- either arranged or choice. In as many as 44 per cent of the cases, the onset of violence was within a month of marriage. All the women, irrespective of education or class backgrounds, experienced various forms of violence- ranging from severe physical battering to psychological and sexual abuse. Physical violence constituted 50 per cent of the total number of abuse while psychological violence formed 48 per cent including economic deprivation, desertion, restrictions on mobility and so on. On an average, every woman experienced twelve different forms of abuse with varying frequencies. Almost all the women reported being slapped/beaten, kicked and insulted in the presence of others. Seventy-nine per cent of the women experienced violence on an everyday basis. Almost always, the causes for battering were multiple. Suspicion of infidelity, alcoholism, dowry and instigation by in-laws formed the main causes of violence in the case of most respondents. Verbal retaliation and independence and confidence of some women posed a real threat to men and heightened their vulnerability to increased violence. Significantly, the type of marriage that the respondents had opted for had no bearing on either the onset, frequency, or causes violence.

The phenomenon of continued violence on the respondents had adverse multiple consequences on the women ranging from injuries to acute tension and anxiety, lowering in self-esteem and nervous breakdown to internalised shame and guilt. This affected women's responses to the clearly exploitative situation: they took a long while to actively respond to the situation. Complaints to natal family was the most common from a response. Gradually, many women also retaliated verbally. Over a period of time, women's efforts at help seeking became fairly evident and multi-pronged; they started seeking help from various informal and formal sources which included parents, siblings, in-laws, friends/ neighbours, community leaders, employers, police, counselling centres, lawyers and doctors. Significantly, in an overwhelming 92.2 per cent of the cases, parents of the respondent had been the most consistent primary source of support. Among the formal help sources, police and counselling centres were most prominent. However, as mentioned earlier, help was sought actively only after a prolonged period of abuse. Sixty per cent of the women had sought help only after six months from the onset of abuse. In most cases, this was due to an irrational hope that things would change for the better. Educational level, type of marriage and time of onset of abuse had no impact on propelling women towards early help seeking.

In keeping with the earlier observation, despite all the dilemmas, complications and compulsions linked with parental support, an overwhelming majority found their support to be a turning point in their lives. Similar sentiments were expressed regarding the intervention of the counselling centre at the TNSLA and those run by voluntary organisations. However, over 65 per cent of the respondents found interventions at the all-women police stations to be less useful or totally useless. It was amply clear from the patterns in the respondents' help seeking that their expectations of formal bodies was respect for their decisions and a tangible outcome in keeping with their personal choices. Most respondents found the authority of the police stations, intimidating, while by contrast, the atmosphere of the counselling centres especially those run by contrast, voluntary organisations extremely reassuring.

When women's effort at help seeking met with repeated hurdles, a majority of them (53.3 percent) resorted to an extreme step of attempting suicide. This phenomenon was specifically observed alarmingly among younger women, who, undoubtedly experienced a heightened sense of vulnerability driving them towards desperation. Of the women who had attempted suicide, as many as 76 per cent had done so more than once.

At a certain point, some violent incident served as the precipitating factor and prompted many women to leave the marital home. Over 60 per cent of the respondents had left their matrimonial homes due to reasons ranging from increased violence, incurable alcoholism, intolerable levels of suspicion and so on. A significant proportion of women had subsequently sought refuge in their parental homes while others had found a safe haven in shelter homes run by voluntary organisations. 42 percent of the women who had left their marital home continued to be harassed by their violent husbands who attempted repeatedly to persuade them to return, beat them up for money, claimed access to children and so on. Also, while an overwhelming 69 per cent of the women were clear about their decision not to return, the others were ambivalent but were willing to return if their conditions were met.

On the other hand, the sample also comprised of women who had at an earlier date reconciled with their husbands owing to interventions of the officials at the three referral points. The reasons for the same included advice given by the counsellors, economic dependency, concern for children's future and so on. However, of the women who had reconciled, a significant 44 per cent had not experienced any change in their situations while another 41 per cent perpetually feared the outbreak of violence or were unhappy about only partial resolution of their problems.

Irrespective of whether they were separated or still living with their husbands, most respondents felt trapped, helpless and confused about their uncertain future. Significantly most women in the shelter homes were distinct by the clarity they exhibited about not wanting to return to the violent relationship and were well on their way to carve out an independent existence for them selves and their children.

The need of the hour is the conscious classification of wife-battering as an intrinsic and integral part of violation of human rights. It is imperative to recognise woman-battering as a serious social crime and accord it the same status as other crimes. It is also vital to recognise the role of the media in shaping societal attitudes, values and public opinion. Responsible media portrayal of women's lives and minimising negative, stereotypic imagery are essential steps in achieving the said goal. Public services need to be made more accessible especially to women in crisis situations. Also, while it is necessary to review as well as initiate services for battered women, it is far more important to consciously move away from the image of battered women as victims. Rather, it is imperative to view them as survivors negotiating spaces with several informal and formal set-ups which, in fact, need to be revamped to empower women in a positive fashion. One of the biggest hurdles in the recognition of wife-battering as an issue of importance is the failure to transcend the public/private dichotomy regarding the issue. The challenge remains; in terms of formulation and implementation of strategies, legislations and sensitising of machineries to effectively deal with the multifarious manifestations of violence against women. Above all, there is an urgent need for drastic changes in societal attitudes towards battered women and also those of professionals involved in dealing with/helping them.

---

## References

Action Aid (1994): "Violent Homes": a study of Shakti Shalini's Experiences with Women Victims of Domestic Violence.

Atal, Yogesh and Meera Kosambi (eds.) (1993): "Violence Against Women", Report from India and the Republic of Korea, Bangkok, UNESCO Principle Regional Officer for Asia and the Pacific.

Gondolf, E W and Fisher, E R (1998): *Battered women as survivors*, Lexington Books, Canada.

Heise, L. Lori, Jacqueline Pitanguy and Adrienne Germain (1994): "Violence against women - the hidden health burden", The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Washington, DC, USA.

Lachance, L (1994): "Marital Violence in Canada - A Journalistic Report", Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Bombay.

National Crime Records Bureau: "Crime in India 1994", Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, New Delhi.

Omvedt, Gail (1990): *Violence against women - new movement and new theories in India*, Kali for Women, New Delhi.

Sushma Sod (ed.) (1990): *Violence against women*, Arihant Publishers, Jaipur.

Walker, E. Lenore (1979): *the Battered Woman*. Harper and Row Publishers, New York.

---

*Violence Against Women: Wife Battering in Chennai* by Subhadra. **Economic and Political Weekly**. April 17-24, 1999. P. ws 28-ws33.

Copyright © rests with the Editor/Publisher. [EPW](#), Hitkari House, 284, Shahid Bhagatsingh Road, Mumbai - 400 001.