

Abuse of Women: A Psychological Perspective

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International Centre for Ethnic Studies
Colombo

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I am grateful to all my clients for enriching and educating me with their life experiences and allowing me to be a part of their growth process. I salute all those who have surmounted their abusive situations, and respect the tenacity with which psychological freedom has been re-established. I thank them for proving that women in abusive situations can reclaim themselves.

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Introduction

The "Bhai"¹ was washing the clothes as she muttered.

I miss my husband at times like this. He died due to excessive alcohol. He couldn't bear my even having a cold or cough, he was so concerned. He really loved me although he used to beat me almost every night and quite often locked me out of the house. It wasn't his fault, he was drunk. When I used to be locked out in the cold months without dinner, my neighbours were very kind and asked me to stay in their houses till my husband "cooled down", but I never went because, after all, he was my husband and I felt that I should be there when he needs me, even if I have to shiver in the cold a little. If I go away it is very simple for him to get another woman and then my situation will be worse.

At first the author was not paying much attention to the rambling but the apparent absurdity of what the woman was saying intrigued her. On second thought, was this attitude towards abuse really "absurd" in the Asian context, or for that matter even in most non-Asian contexts?

¹ This is a term used in India to refer to a female domestic worker or housemaid.

The "Bhai" in question was not a typical passive, docile rural woman but rather a "fighter" who had mastered the art of survival in a huge cosmopolitan city like Bombay. Hence the psychological contradictions baffled the author and gave rise to some questions: What makes them tolerate this abuse? Why this contradiction of attitudes by the same individual, depending on the sphere of functioning? Is this approach the exception or the norm ?

This paper was written with the hope of achieving a deeper insight into the psyches of women (both abusers or accomplices to abuse, and victims) involved in abuse. Further, not only will the psychological consequences and dynamics involved in physical abuse be looked at, but also psychological or emotional abuse per se without accompanying physical abuse will also be considered.

A scientific survey or sampled study has not been undertaken, but rather an overview of the psychological issues has been attempted. The case studies and elucidating histories are from the author's experience as a psychotherapist and from empathic conversations with many women outside the "therapeutic" setting. All identifying details of these women have been changed to maintain confidentiality. At every stage, objectivity and a balanced perception have been the goals of the author who hopes that these have been achieved to a large extent, if not totally. Complete objectivity in an area of inquiry such as this is impossible, due to the unseen, intangible dynamics of the author's own psyche. Although objectivity has been attempted, the richness of perceptual interpretation has not been denied its due place or been overshadowed by "sterile" observation.

"Abuse of women" as an area of study covers many topics, each of which is vast in itself. As such, detailed

psychological exploration of each of these topics or sub-areas is beyond the scope of this paper. The author has rather attempted to "zero in" on the strengths and weaknesses of the female psyche (whether inherent or acquired through "socialization")². and the role played by the psyche in facing the traumatic experiences of abuse, being alert to, or ignorant of psychological abuse and preventing, to whatever extent possible, abuse to self and others. Focussing on the female psyche does not in any way indicate that the woman victim is to "blame", and "correction" or "adjustment" to the female psyche will "solve" the problem of abuse against women. Rather such focussing is an attempt through this paper to empower women by making them question the concept of "control" in their lives. Have they inadvertently given control to men for the sake of "harmony", and if so is the "cost benefit" analysis of such a situation worth it in psychological terms? Is it too late to rethink and question societal norms and their appropriateness in today's context?

If women are being abused physically or psychologically, must we wait any longer before educating ourselves and every other woman as to the effective, though at times, difficult, strategies in attempting to at least reduce such abuse? Hopefully, focussing on the female psyche will achieve this end.

A greater percentage of research in this field is on physical abuse and the subsequent psychological trauma rather than psychological abuse per se. This paper will touch

² The debate amongst psychologists regarding the question of nature vs nurture still remains unresolved. A compromise in terms of giving both nature and nurture importance appears to be the current trend.

on both types of abuse with an emphasis on the latter. Very little research has been done in Sri Lanka on the psychological dimension of abuse against women.

A recent Sri Lankan-based study of domestic violence is the one by Sonali Deraniyagala (1992).³ However, this too is more from the sociological perspective than the psychological. Anne Muneke Doney's article on "Psychological consequences of exposure to violence"⁴ also throws some light on the psychological aspects of trauma in the Sri Lankan context. However this article focusses on trauma in general and not specifically on abuse of women.

A large amount of non-Sri Lankan-based research material is available in this field. Reuteran and Burcky (1988)⁵ have attempted to develop a profile of those who have experienced dating violence by comparing them to individuals who have not had such experiences. Loring Clark and Frost (1994).⁶ have developed a new model of therapy for emotionally abused women. The applicability of this to

³ Deraniyagala. Sonali. *An investigation into the incidence and causes of domestic violence in Colombo, Sri Lanka*, Women in Need publishers, Colombo (1992).

⁴ Doney. A.M. - "Psychological consequences of exposure to violence". *The Thatched Patio*, Vol. 5. No. 3 (May/June 1992), International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

⁵ Reuteran N.A. and Burcky W.D. "Dating violence in High School: A Profile of the Victims"; *Psychology, A journal of human behavior*, Vol. 26 No. 4 (1989).

⁶ Loring. M.T, Clark. S. and Frost. C. - "A Model of Therapy for Emotionally Abused Women" in *Psychology, A journal of human behavior*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (1994).

the Sri Lankan situation will be discussed later in this paper. The international researchers and their publications are too voluminous to mention here, but the sheer contrast in terms of volume of research done in this field internationally and locally gives a clear indication for the need for Sri Lanka-based research in this field. Thus the necessity and importance of this paper is obvious.

In this paper we will be taking a closer look at "abuse" and what it means to different women. With respect to psychological abuse, many women do not even realise they are being "abused" since it is considered the "norm". The psychological dimension will be analysed from the functioning of the female psyche to the effects of social norms on the psyche and the interpersonal dynamics. Self-help strategies will be discussed, based on theoretical formulations as well as applicability in the Sri Lankan context. "Prevention is better than cure" certainly applies here. Hence preventive measures, or should I say possibilities (since every abusive situation is different in terms of the psychological dynamics), will be discussed with specific emphasis on the role of women in such prevention.

This paper does not in any way hope to provide answers to the questions regarding abuse, but rather aims at shedding light on the intangible yet critical forces at play in the dynamics of abuse. If this sharing of the author's thoughts and experience (gained through many years of helping abused women regain control of their lives) elicits a sense of inquiry, thirst for further analysis and a sense of determination (to contribute in whatever way possible to reduce such abuse) in the reader's mind, the purpose of this paper will have been served.

II

Recognizing Abuse

What is abuse? Starting with the general definitions, the Oxford dictionary defines "abuse" as (a) use to bad effect or for a bad purpose, (as in abuse of power) (b) insult verbally and or (c) maltreat⁷. In the context of abuse of women all the above explanations are applicable. The male member abuses his position of trust, power, love or whatever advantage has been granted to him by the female victim. Verbal insults and maltreatment exist in most cases of abuse.

Referring to "abuse" more specifically in terms of violence against women the following definition gives the different dimensions of "abuse". Violence against women has been defined as "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 private life."⁸

This definition clarifies three aspects, viz. (1) that results of violence occur at different levels, physical, sexual or psychological, (2) the act of violence need not occur, but the

threat of it alone is also considered violence and (3) deprivation of freedom is also a form of violence or abuse.

Walker (1979) defines domestic violence in terms of cycles of battering, and in her sample study, a woman is considered to be battered if she has been through the cycle more than once.⁹

It is evident, then, that "abuse or violence against women" cannot be given an all-inclusive concise definition since this abuse or violence takes various forms with interconnections or overlapping of these forms being common. Also abuse is often in an intangible form (especially emotional or psychological abuse) which quite often escapes all but the professionally trained eye.

Misdiagnosis of "woman abuse" is not uncommon. According to findings by Michele Harway and Marsali Hansen, of the 362 respondents surveyed in a mail questionnaire sent at random to members of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), virtually all failed in recognizing domestic violence and its potential lethality.¹⁰

In the broadest sense, violence against women is any violation of a woman's personhood, mental or physical integrity or freedom of movement, and includes all the ways our society objectifies and oppresses women.

In the past, only physical abuse was considered "abuse" since it leads to tangible, observable consequences that could be assessed. Today social scientists realise that

⁷ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (8th Ed.) Oxford University Press, Delhi (1990), p. 6.

⁸ Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Preliminary report submitted by the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes and consequences", UN Commission on Human Rights (Fifth Session), p. 221.

⁹ Deraniyagala, Sonali, op. cit. p. 3

¹⁰ Harway, Michele and Marshal Hansen, "Therapists Recognition of Wife Battering : Some Empirical Evidence", *Family Violence Bulletin* Vol. 6, No. 3, Fall 1990. Cited in *Network News* (Nevada Network Against Domestic Violence), Summer 1992, p. 3.

the psychological implications and damage of such abuse are more crucial to the victim's life than the physical injury itself. Also, the area of psychological and emotional abuse per se without the accompanying physical abuse is more difficult to assess or prove since it is often in an intangible form.

Emotional abuse may take overt forms (eg. criticism, name calling), or covert (eg. continuous discounts and negations of a woman's perceptions and/or feelings). Tolman (1989) described primarily overt emotional abuse, which he called psychological maltreatment. He devised a questionnaire in which he measured such overt emotional abuse as criticism, restricted car or telephone use, public insults, blaming, and sulking. He also included more subtle forms of emotional abuse, such as insensitivity to the woman's feelings. Loring (1994) has described such covert behavior as undermining the woman's confidence: glaring, and rageful looks at the woman, non-verbal threatening noises such as sighing (as disapproval or pre-rage signal), subtle forms of preventing independent growth, questions that imply criticism, and accusations about the woman's ideas, feelings, appearance or behavior.¹¹

Emotional abuse, although present in physical abuse, has been recognised as a process that is separate from physical abuse (Loring 1994). It is an extremely subtle and covert process that is difficult to observe. Further, this type of abuse is continuous and linear (Loring 1994) rather than cyclical as in the case of physical abuse (Walker 1984).¹²

Usually the victim knows that "things are not quite right" but is often unable to identify the exact form of abuse, since the victim is made to believe that she is "psychologically imbalanced". The victim usually ends up very confused, not knowing where the "fault" lies and is hence reluctant to talk about the problem. In the words of an abused woman as spoken to her therapist :

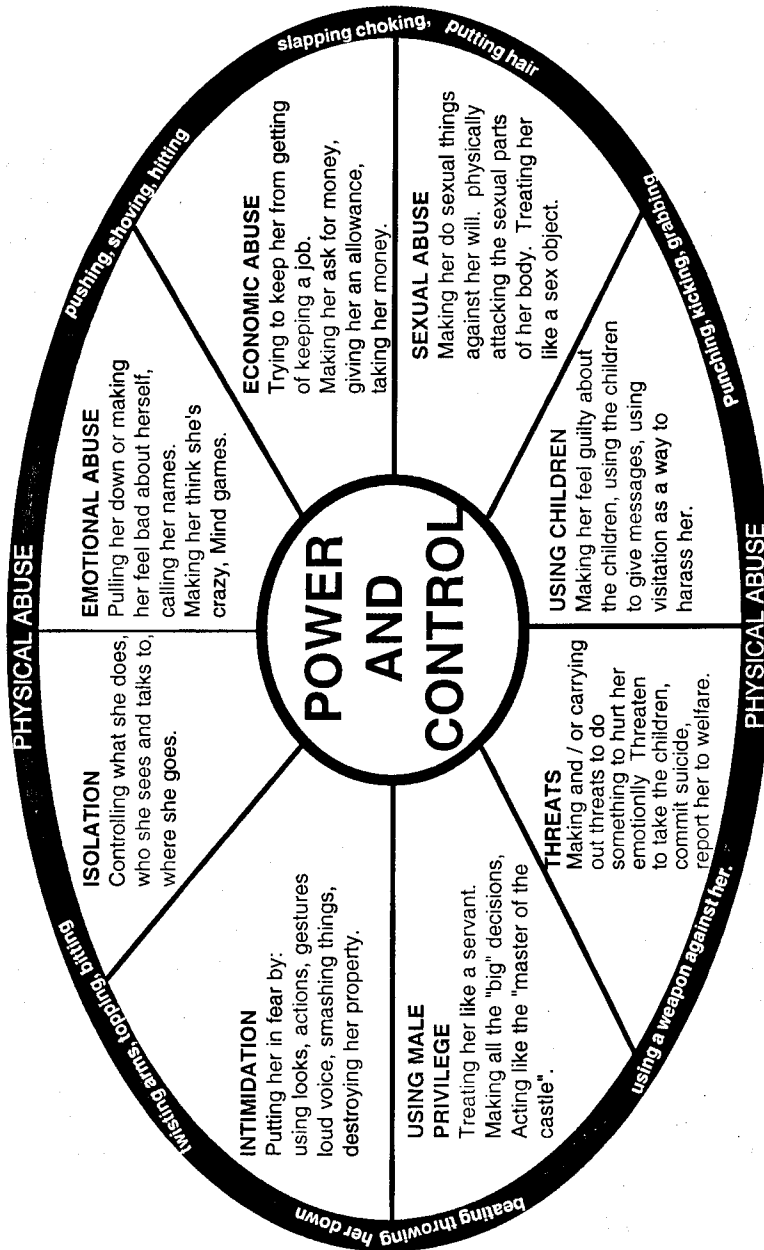
I always thought that I was the problem. It is only after talking to you that I realise that the problem is mainly with him. I was reluctant to talk to anyone about this because I did not want anyone else to know that I had a psychological problem like he made out I had. In fact even my parents don't know about his beatings. No point telling them because they will also say that as a woman I should tolerate this. I don't want to blame anyone but I just can't continue living like this. I have no confidence in myself.

There are different types or forms of "abuse". The following diagram depicts that all these have the common control factor of effecting power and control over the victim.

¹¹ Loring.M.T., Clark.S., and Frost.C., "A model of therapy for emotionally abused women", *Psychology, A Journal of Human Behavior*, Vol 31, No. 2, 1994, pp 9-10.

¹² Loring.M.T., Clark.S., and Frost.C., op. cit. p. 10.

Diagram I



Although this has been formulated specifically in relation to domestic violence, the author feels that this applies to other non-domestic relationships as well. The following case elucidates this:

Sriyani was brought for therapy by Lal, since she was feeling very depressed and unable to cope with life. They were at the courtship stage of their relationship, hoping to announce their official engagement and wedding plans shortly. On talking to Sriyani it was found that she was not happy in the relationship, and knew that she wanted to extricate herself from it, but was lacking the courage to do so. She was not sure what exactly was bothering her. All she knew was that "things were not right". In her words :

He is such a good man, and loves me so much, why am I so ungrateful? I know that I can make this work if I forget about what I want and just do as he says. Part of me died long ago. I don't know who I am any more because everything I choose or do is wrong, whether it be my friends, my dressing, or even the fact that I don't want premarital sex. I am frightened of him because one day he tried to force himself on me, and he was like an animal. Is there something wrong with me? He does all the errands *et cetera* for me and my family, so they are very fond of him and will never understand my wanting to leave him. I don't understand why he insists on becoming indispensable because I was quite capable of doing these things for myself, but now I just don't have any confidence in myself. I have become isolated from my friends and even my family. My post-graduate studies have also got adversely affected.

He sulks and throws a temper tantrum if I associate with people he doesn't like, which is almost everyone, because he doesn't have any friends - whole day he is sitting at our place.

This relationship has almost all of the diagrammatically represented forms of abuse. Knowing that she was a strong person with a good social network, he first isolated her from the support systems, making her entirely dependent on him so that she would be psychologically forced to marry him. The interesting part of this situation was that knowing her vulnerability resulting from his "psychological games", he confidently said, "she doesn't have to marry me if she doesn't want to, I only want her to be happy". He finally made her discontinue therapy, realising that his "good work" of emotional destabilization was being undone.

The Battered Women's Movement was the first to identify the issue of physical abuse of wives by husbands, and bring it to public attention (Schechter, 1982, Tierney, 1982). As a result "wife abuse" has been transformed from a private, largely invisible, matter to one viewed as a social problem for which appropriate remedies should be sought. Researchers and social scientists have played a critical role in making it a social issue. The most frequently cited researchers are Straus Gelles and Steinmetz. Frequently cited is their belief that "a marriage license is a hitting license".¹³

There are two major social science perspectives on the study of physical abuse of husbands and wives: (a) family

¹³ Bart Pauline. B. and Moran Eileen Geil, *Violence against Women - The Bloody Footprints*, Sage Publications, Newberry Park, London, New Delhi (1993).

violence approach and (b) the feminist approach.¹⁴ In the family violence approach, violence between husbands and wives, which they call "spouse abuse", is viewed as part of a pattern of violence occurring among all family members (Gelles 1974, 1979, 1983, 1985; Gelles and Straus 1988; Straus 1980 a, 1980 b, 1980 c; Straus et al 1980). On the other hand in the feminist approach the male-female relations are placed at the centre of such analysis and the inequality between men and women is considered a key factor in violence (Bowker 1986; Dobash and Dobash 1979; Pagelow 1987; Russell 1982; Stanko 1985; Stark, Flitcraft and Frazier 1979; Yllo, 1988).

Although both perspectives emphasize the importance of women's subordinate position in allowing for violence, family violence researchers believe it is only one of several contributing factors. For feminist-approach writers, women's subordination is central in their analyses of violence. After comparing the two perspectives, Demie Kurz argues that the feminist perspective portrays the realities of battering more accurately.

Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz collected data on "spouse abuse", using the CTS (Conflict Tactics Scale). This survey instrument asks about conflicts between husbands and wives in the previous year, and measures conflict resolution on a continuum from non-violent tactics (calm discussion) to the most violent tactics (use of a knife or gun). These researchers found that the most common situation was that in which both the husband and wife used violence. A comparison of the number of couples in which only the husband was violent to those of which only the wife was violent shows the numbers to be very close: 27% of the husbands committed violent

¹⁴ Bart. Pauline B. and Moran E.G., op. cit, p. 253.

acts compared with 24% of the wives.¹⁵ However, feminist researchers have criticised this study for its failure to measure how much of women's violence was in self-defense and who was injured by the violent act.

In a survey conducted in Sri Lanka by Women in Need¹⁶ (a non-governmental organization assisting all types of abused women), of the 200 urban low-income women interviewed, 60% had been subjected to domestic violence during the period of their marriage / cohabitation. Ninety eight per cent of these women who experienced violence had been beaten more than once during this period.

Many women are confused as to whether the situations they find themselves in are abusive or not, because the abusive male (particularly in domestic violence) is so "understanding" and "loving" at other times. This is explained by Lenore Walker using the cycle theory of violence:

The battering cycle appears to have three distinct phases, which vary in both time and intensity for the same couple and between different couples. These are: the tension-building phase; the explosion or acute battering incident; and the calm loving respite. So far, I have been unable to estimate how long a couple will remain in any one phase, nor can I predict how long a couple will take to complete a cycle. There is evidence that situational events can influence the timing. The examination of some relationships that have lasted twenty or more years indicates that several

¹⁵ Bart. Pauline B. and Moran. E.G., op. ci, p. 254.

¹⁶ Deraniyagala S., op. cit, p. 9.

different cycle patterns can occur. These patterns tend to correspond to different stages of life".¹⁷

In the USA, there are many groups and organizations involved in educating people, especially women, on the issue of "abuse" and also running intervention and crisis-handling programmes. Since most victims find it difficult to talk of their abusive situations, such educational literature is often very helpful to victims of violence.

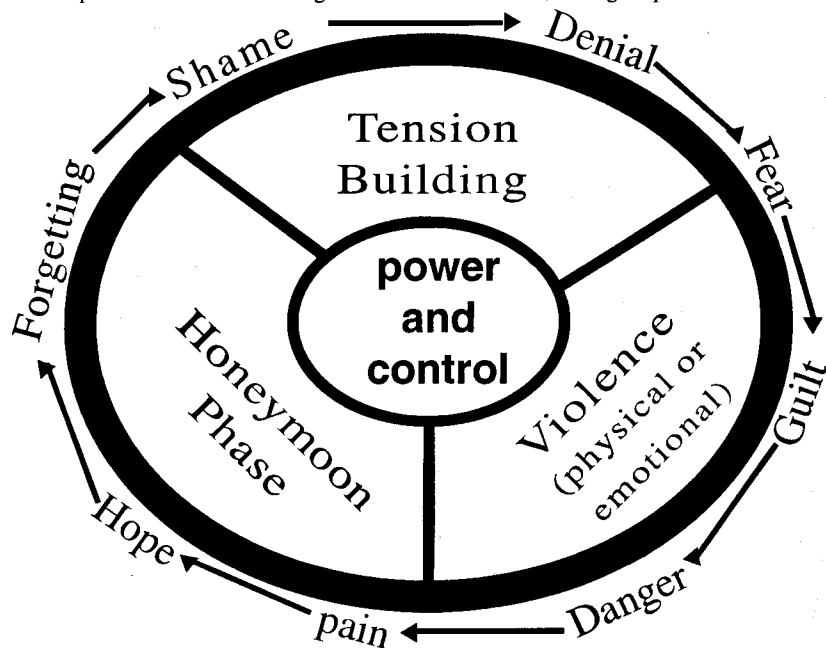
Below is a diagram further clarifying the stages in the cycle of violence with specific focus on the victim's emotional frame of reference at each stage:¹⁸

¹⁷ Walker. Lenore. E., *The Battered Woman*, Harper Perennial (Division of Harper Collins Publishers) Inc. N.Y. (1980), p. 55.

¹⁸ *Educator / Advocate Program*, Every Woman's Center, UMASS, Amherst.

Cycle of Violence

Violence in an intimate relationship is cyclical. The battering cycle has three distinct phases which vary in both time and intensity. They are: the tension building phase: the explosion or acute battering incident: and the calm, loving respite.



Power & control : In the cycle violence the abuser uses emotional, physical, economic and / or sexual abuse to control and dominate his partner. Over time, abuse usually increases in frequency and intensity, often following this pattern:

- 1) **Tension building :** A gradual escalation of behaviors such as name - calling , constant criticism, verbal harassment, and psychological humiliation. The abuser's expression of his hostility leads inevitably to the acute battering phase.
- 2) **Violence:** A physically, sexually or emotionally violent assault, almost always including severe verbal abuse.
- 3) **Honeymoon phase:** A period of apology, guilt, promises; the batterer is on his best behavior.

Manipulation : In light of the often overwhelming obstacles to leaving an abusive relationship (self-blame, social pressure, lack of economic resources, social isolation, threats and fear of death, etc.) a battered woman may rely on hope that the abuse will end by focusing on the honeymoon phase instead of the abuse. Their loving behaving may reinforce her hope that he can change, and encourages her to stay in the relationship.

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As depicted in this diagram, the pivotal point of this whole phenomenon is power and control. The abuser uses emotional, physical, economic and / or sexual abuse to control and dominate his partner. Over time, abuse usually increases in frequency and intensity, often following the cyclical pattern of tension building, violence, and calm respite stages.

From a psychological point of view, the abuser is often very weak, which is why he needs the sense of power and control over others in his immediate environment. Since he is unable to "control" non-family members (such as his boss), the controlling tactics are all the more severe where the family, particularly the spouse, is concerned. The psychological dimension will be discussed further in the next section of this paper.

To solve or attempt to solve any problem, it is first necessary to identify that 1) there is a problem and 2) the nature of the problem. Delay in such identification by abused women (particularly in the case of domestic violence) is often the cause of increased violence. The abuser feels he can "get away with it". At the same time, from the victim's perspective, she is so confused, especially at the stage of loving respite, that she begins to doubt her own assessment of the situation, which in turn leads to the delay in identification of "abuse".

Every woman should be aware that "abuse" is possible in any relationship and at any stage in a relationship. Hence it is important to realise when things are "not quite right" and respond to alerting signals such as constant criticism, humiliation etc. which occur in the tension building stage. Appropriate responses by the victim at this stage are crucial to stopping or reducing violence. Unfortunately most women realise that they are in an "abusive relationship" only after experiencing the acute violence stage.

Thus information and knowledge about "abuse" or "violence" against women is the first important tool every woman should have if any headway is to be made in erradicating or at least reducing violence against women.

III

The Psychological Dimension

As stated in the preceding section, "abuse" may be physical, sexual, or psychological. These are not mutually exclusive forms of "abuse" but are highly interlinked and overlapping. Abuse "attacks" the victim's personhood, the core of which is the psyche. How the victim views the physical and sexual self is largely dependent on the individual's psychological functioning. Conversely, "damage" to sexual or physical self has its repercussions on the psyche. Once psychological functioning is adversely affected, the individual's very personhood is threatened, leading to confusion and internal disequilibrium.

An individual has different planes or dimensions of self: spiritual, psychological and physical. Although all three are important and inter-related, the impact that each of these has on the individual's "stability" differs.

Spiritual	- Sense of Personhood / Self
Psychological	- Emotional/ Cognitive functioning - Perceptual functioning
Physical	- Bodily/Sexual functioning

As depicted in the diagram above, damage to the psyche has the greatest impact since it affects both the physical and spiritual dimensions. Whether the damage to the psyche is greater due to physical/sexual abuse (battering, rape, incest) or psychological abuse (humiliating, criticising, suppressing)

per se will differ among individuals and depend on the particular situation in question. The immediate impact and damage of physical abuse is certainly greater than psychological abuse. However, the long term effects of the latter tend to be seen in unstable psyches wherein the very foundations of positive self-worth are eroded bit by bit, often without even the victim being aware of it. Thus, such damage is more difficult to assess.

In the case of domestic violence an often asked question is why do so many financially independent women tolerate abuse in their lives? If one assumes that all women's psyches are the same it may be worthwhile trying to answer such a question. However, since obviously such an assumption does not hold true, it is important that we delve a little deeper into the psyches of women if we are to understand why some women "tolerate" abusive relationships while others do not. Studies by Bowlby (1973, 1979, 1988) focus on the area of attachment and separation in children. The physical and/or emotional unavailability of an attachment figure can result in development of fear in a child, who becomes preoccupied with abandonment and tends to cling to attachment figures. This pattern of anxious attachment continues, so that some adults fear abandonment and develop anxious attachment patterns that involve clinging behaviors, much like a frightened child. Many emotionally abused women describe anxious attachment to the abusive partner (Loring 1994).

It should be reiterated that a deeper look at the psyches of abused women is only for the purpose of hopefully understanding why some women remain in such relationships, and not in anyway aimed at apportioning intrapsychic liability for such abuse to the victim. As explained by Rita Agarwal:

This psychiatric labelling or attribution of blame reflected and reinforced the societal myths that

wife abuse was an isolated problem in unusually disturbed couples in which the violence was viewed as "fulfilling masochistic needs of the wife and necessary for the wife's (and couple's) equilibrium". (Snell, Rosenwald and Robey, 1964)¹⁹

Unfortunately this attitude of blaming the victim is very pronounced in patriarchal societies like that of Sri Lanka. The "reasoning" may not be in terms of the victim's masochistic needs, but the emphasis on societal interpretation discrediting to the victim is of crucial relevance.

The reader may query as to what relevance societal norms have to women's psyches! Through the process of "socialization" a child is moulded into what society expects of him / her as an adult. The individual's psyche has thus internalized societal norms which, once internalized, form a frame of reference for acceptable behaviour.

Sigmund Freud in his psycho-dynamic theory of personality²⁰ states that an individual's psyche is made up of the Superego, the Ego and the Id. The Superego is that part of the psyche containing the norms and values that guide the individual. Societal and parental or authoritative norms are thus internalized from a very early age, and the superego or conscience is "the guide" of behaviour in adulthood. Thus, how a victim handles an abusive situation is to a large extent determined by the Superego.

¹⁹ Agarwal, Rita, "Wife-Battering: A Controlled Study of Clinical and Psychosocial Factors", M.Phil Dissertation, Univ. of Bombay (1987), p. 3.

²⁰ Hall, C.S. and Lindzey, G. "Theories of Personality" (3rd. Ed.), Wiley Eastern Ltd. New Delhi.

In the Sri Lankan context the "societal shame" factor in revealing or challenging abusive relationships is important. The victim often speaks of shame for her parents and siblings. As stated by an abused woman:

the question of leaving him does not arise, because my parents will not be able to bear the shame of it. Even I have been brought up to believe that come what may a woman should stick by her husband. I only want to know how best to deal with him.

Hence, abiding by societal norms and expectations is what is important, irrespective of the damage to self. The victim has to weigh the pain of ostracism by society, if she leaves the abusive situation, against the pain of the abusive situation itself. Since the "loving respite" stage of the battering cycle cushions the blows of the "acute battering" stage the victim often finds it "better" to remain in the relationship.

This "weighing" and finally deciding as to whether to remain in the relationship or not is handled by the ego of the psyche, according to Sigmund Freud's theory of personality. The more flexible and developed the ego is, the greater the ability to handle the pressures of the superego, on the one hand, and the id (which functions on the pleasure principle wanting to avoid pain in any form) on the other. Thus wanting to make the marriage/relationship work and wanting to leave the relationship are conflicting motivational forces within the victim. Psychologists refer to this as an example of approach-avoidance conflict which is reflected in vacillating behaviour on the part of the victim when trying to take a decision. The ego which functions on the "reality principle" and is considered the "executive" of the psyche, if strong, can help the victim

take a balanced decision based on an objective/realistic perspective of her individual situation.

Leaving any relationship is not easy, whether it be husband-wife, parent-child, or boyfriend-girlfriend. The psychological "pull" towards trying to "make the relationship work" is greater than the want to move away. Moving away is often viewed as "failure" by the victim, which again is a reflection of societal norms. Hence a victim will keep trying to prevent abusive situations by not acting in ways that she feels upset the abuser.

The more she keeps "psychologically tiptoeing" around the abuser, the more she suppresses her own personal growth and development of the psyche. This in turn reduces her self confidence and internal strength which is very much needed in order to handle the abusive situation. Since she is thus psychologically weakened, the abusive situation becomes all the more difficult to handle, and this leads to a cyclical downward spiralling with the abusive situation getting worse and worse and the abuser getting more forceful with the battering.

Thus it is crucial that any victim of violence, particularly domestic violence, recognise the beginning of such downward cyclical spiralling. How does one recognise this? As stated earlier, many victims "know that things are not quite right" but feel that the problem lies with them. It is at this point that the individual should look within and objectively assess whether in fact this is so. Often, even if the female victim feels that she is not to blame, she maintains a docile low-profile in the relationship, thinking that this is the best way of handling the situation.

However, from a psychological perspective this is probably the least effective way of handling the situation, since the abuser keeps increasing the level of abuse, knowing that it is being tolerated.

Research has shown that certain psychological characteristics are common to most victims of violence and abuse. As Lenore Walker states "The sample of women interviewed for this study represented all ages, races, religions (including no religion), educational levels, cultures and socioeconomic groups ..." The battered woman in this study commonly:

1. Has low self-esteem.
2. Believes all the myths about battering relationships. Is a traditionalist about the home, strongly believes in family unity and the prescribed feminine sex-role stereotype.
3. Accepts responsibility for the batterer's actions.
4. Suffers from guilt, yet denies the terror and anger she feels.
5. Presents a passive face to the world but has the strength to manipulate her environment enough to prevent further violence and being killed.
6. Has severe stress reactions, with psycho-physiological complaints.
7. Uses sex as a way to establish intimacy.
8. Believes that no one will be able to help her resolve her predicament except herself.²¹

Based on case studies in the therapeutic setting, the author believes that of the above characteristics, the most applicable in the Sri Lankan context are having low self-esteem/ self-

²¹ Walker, L. E., op.cit ., p. 31

worth and being a traditionalist. The latter characteristic is so deeply ingrained in the psyches of Sri Lankan women that not only does the victim herself feel her very personhood threatened if she leaves the relationship, but also the women in her social network (whether it be family or friends) reinforce the traditionalist perspective by pushing the victim to remain in the relationship at whatever cost. It is interesting to note that more often female victims of spouse abuse get more support from their fathers than their mothers to leave the abusive relationship. This aspect will be discussed further in the section pertaining to the role of women in prevention.

Addressing the question of why some women tolerate abuse, while others do not, we have discussed research findings of characteristics common to victims of abuse. Let us now turn to a discussion of the psychological characteristics of those who leave such situations or are alert to abusive signals and prevent themselves getting involved in abusive relationships in the first place.

In the next section, the different approaches to handling abusive situations which have proven to be practically useful will be discussed. The focus of these approaches will be on the victim herself and how she could empower herself to meet the situation rather than trying to correct the abusive situation. Once the abuser realises that he is not in a position of power the relationship will tend to fall into non-abusive or at least less abusive patterns. Failing this, the two concerned individuals may decide to end the relationship.

IV

Empowerment

As stated earlier, for a victim of abuse to help herself she has to first and foremost recognise the problem in its initial stages. It is easy enough to know that you are being abused if you are being beaten and battered in various ways, but abusive relationships don't usually start out like that. An abuser (speaking of domestic violence) generally assesses the victim's psychological strength to determine how much he can get away with. Hence, it is imperative for the victim to be alert for such assessment at the beginning of a relationship.

This does not mean that a woman should be suspicious of any intimate relationship she has with a male and keep looking for abusive patterns. However, it is the popular belief that these things happen to others and not to oneself that often leads to a victim situation. Many women have experienced a sense of fear before entering a permanent relationship and have not given their feelings due consideration but rather brushed them aside as being unreasonable, only to face abuse later on. In the words of a client:

It was after our engagement, we had gone out alone and for some strange reason I felt very frightened of him - almost like a panic reaction - but I didn't tell my family. What could I tell them? Even I couldn't quite put a finger on what was wrong, so I just went along with the marriage. It didn't take me long to realise that my gut was right. Abuse was the norm rather than the exception.

From criticism to insults it went on to beatings, and finally rape.

This brings us to the question of why it is that some women do not listen to their "inner voice". To have confidence in one's assessment, whether intellectual or intuitive, one must have high self confidence, self-esteem and a sense of self-worth. If a high value is placed on self the abusive behaviour afflicted will be in contradiction to one's self-worth making the victim realise a sense of incongruence. What an individual does or does not do at this stage is crucial. Either the image of self is lowered to tally with the abuse the victim begins to feel she "deserves", or the victim takes measures to withdraw from such a relationship.

This brings us to the question of empowerment. Loring, Clark and Frost have developed a model of therapy for emotionally abused women, which, when researched for effectiveness, showed fairly positive results. "The components of this therapeutic model are validation, detachment, and reintegration. There is a need to affirm and validate the abusive pattern for the woman, including his abusive behaviors and her response patterns. Detachment from the abusive process is explored. Strategies are then developed to achieve internal and external reintegration for the woman to end the fragmentation and disintegration characteristic of emotionally abused women."²²

In the Sri Lankan context, where such a high value is placed on a married status, the victim feels that the first option of lowering the image of self is better. This fear of social ostracism is further complicated by women's innate fear of

²² Loring.M.T., Clark.S., and Frost. C., op. cit. p. 9.

independence. As Collette Dowling explains in her famous book *The Cinderella Complex*:

We have only one real shot at 'liberation' and that is to emancipate ourselves from within. It is the thesis of this book that personal, psychological dependency - the deep wish to be taken care of by others - is the chief force holding women down today. I call this 'The Cinderella Complex' - a network of largely repressed attitudes and fears that keeps women in a kind of half-light retreating from the full use of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives.²³

In most cultures, the passive role of women is taught and reinforced by authority (whether they be individuals e.g. parents, social norms or religious beliefs), from childhood. Hence the boy-child and girl-child learn and adapt to these respective roles. Especially in eastern societies, a girl-child is considered a responsibility (more difficult to "protect"), a burden (in terms of dowry expenses etc.) and a being who "belongs to" and has "to be looked after" by first the father and later by the husband or brother. Hence most women (there certainly are exceptions) tend to feel insecure unless they have a "stronger" male on whom to depend. Thus this conflict between the pain of abuse versus the pain of insecurity and social isolation makes the victim vacillate in her decision to leave or not.

²³ Dowling, Colette, *The Cinderella Complex - Women's Hidden Fear of Independence*, Pocket Books, a division of Simon and Schuster Inc. New York, 1982, p.21.

Usually it is only when the victim feels totally fragmented and disintegrated psychologically that she seeks help. For victims of domestic violence the first step towards helping themselves regain control of their lives is to assess the situation in objective and subjective terms, with specific emphasis on their own strengths and weaknesses. Since a victim's self-esteem is often damaged as a result of remaining in an abusive situation the help of a positive-minded friend or relative should be sought for a realistic assessment.

Ideally, the individual should work on the problem with a qualified psychotherapist to achieve long lasting positive results in the shortest possible time. However, since in Sri Lanka, there still is a social stigma attached to consulting a psychologist or a psychiatrist, the individual may prefer to work on the problem with the help of "significant" others. Unfortunately most victims "bottle up" the emotions out of a sense of "shame" and "guilt" at "letting the family down", little realising that the burden of this only erodes whatever psychological strength the victim is left with.

Secondly, the victim should focus on her strengths and attempt to raise the level of self-esteem. In order for this to be effective all critical, judgmental and derogatory statements by the abuser and his or her accomplices (e.g. a mother in-law's abuse towards the daughter in-law) should not be given any notice by the victim. Even if the victim feels that there may be some "truth" to the negative comments constantly thrown at her, she shouldn't attempt to "assess" or be "fair" while in the abusive situation since this will only weaken her further. This in fact is what the abuser wants to achieve - a sense of power and control over the victim who is seen as "stronger" and therefore a "threat" to the abuser who is inwardly weak and insecure.

After assessing the abusive situation, if the victim feels that she wants to still try to resolve the situation by "dealing more assertively" with the abuser, then the following are important decisions that need to be made:

- (a) what is the maximum time limit she wants to give herself to try to resolve the situation;
- (b) what are the "new" approaches she intends adopting, since it is unlikely that the strategies of the past which were of no help will turn out to be beneficial;
- (c) how can she strengthen herself and her circumstances within the set time-frame so that in the event she decides to leave the abusive relationship she will be that much stronger, not weaker. Strengthening could be in various ways, e.g. gaining financial independence, continuing education etc. depending on what the victim feels are her weak areas of functioning;
- (d) in the case of spouse abuse what stringent family planning methods need to be adopted;
- (e) what background information does she need (e.g. legal requirements, time frames, procedures) prior to taking any permanent decision to leave if the situation cannot be resolved;
- (f) all personal official documents (e.g. birth certificate, identity cards and academic certificates etc) should be kept by the victim in a safe place;
- (g) what is the psycho-social and financial buffering or "fall back" situation the victim has if she leaves the situation.?

Thinking about the above questions and chalking out a course of action makes the victim feel more in control of her life. This in turn brings about an upward positive spiral in the victim's psyche. A strong psyche is about the best tool a victim could have to deal with abuse. Usually the high self-esteem created is incongruent with the abuse received, and the victim finds it easier to leave the situation particularly since she feels that she has tried all the "possible solutions".

In spite of all these considerations the final decision to leave is not an easy one to make. This is where having a time frame makes it easier. Further, the systematic strengthening of oneself makes the thought of being "alone again" less fearful.

Any victim should realise that it is "normal" to feel frightened when making such an important life-decision. Such fear occurs not only in so called "negative" decisions but also in socially "positive" situations, -eg. getting married, being promoted at work. A client who was about to get married had this to say:

There must be something wrong with me - other girls would be thrilled to be getting married but I feel frightened. We love each other very much and there is no problem as such but I don't know why I feel frightened.

This client today has a very happy marriage. It was only the major decision or step in life that she felt unsure about taking which created a sense of fear.

Often the victim of abuse is bombarded with varying and often contradicting advice from well-meaning others. This tends to confuse the victim all the more. This is where the value of professional help cannot be overstated. Through the process of psychotherapy the individual reclaims herself, her

psyche and her life, creating a stable balance crucial to facing any adversity. The victim learns to put herself first, not the relationship, nor the children, nor society nor any other institution or individual. In the words of Beverly Engel:

Because of all your prior conditioning, you may believe that taking care of yourself is a very selfish act. But your highest responsibility is to yourself. When you take care of your own needs first you will be able to be a genuinely caring, giving person, not a martyr thinking everyone owes her, or a victim begrudging all that she gives. Although it will be uncomfortable at first, and you may be afraid that others won't like you unless you are giving to them or giving in to them, keep trying. Eventually, you will find that nothing bad happens to you just because you think of yourself first or because you do what you want to do".

As a therapist, the author has often heard statements such as "I feel sorry for him", "How can I leave him, after all he is the father of my children", "If I leave, there will be no one for him" etc. These and similar statements imply that the victim is responsible for "sorting it out", and feels that she has to "rescue" the abuser. It may sound absurd but this is in fact what happens. In the words of a 33-year old mother of three:

I am tired of repaying his gambling debts. There is hardly anything left for the children. He just sits around at home the whole day and drinks and after I come home from work he becomes abusive.

²⁴ Engel, Beverley MFCC *The Emotionally Abused Women*, - Ballantine Books, USA 1992, p.157.

Actually not abusive as such, just threatens to use the kitchen knife on me. What can I do? If I leave him, he will just go from bad to worse because his parents, brothers and sister have given up on him.

When she was asked why she felt that she had to "rescue" him, she couldn't find a plausible reply because being an Asian woman, "covering up for the husband at all costs" is the accepted norm. As Engel says "emotionally abused women rescue people who are quite capable of taking care of themselves. They rescue people from their responsibilities by taking care of their responsibilities for them".²⁵

Thus, if a victim is to seriously help herself she should give priority to herself and her well-being rather than the relationship.

²⁵ Engel, Beverley, op.cit., p. 157

Role of Women in Prevention

In what way can one contribute towards preventing abuse of women is a question every woman should ask herself. It may appear that a single individual contribution could not significantly affect a problem of this magnitude; however this is in fact not so.

To start with, every woman should pay attention to her own psychological and spiritual growth because only if an individual is content within can he/she "give" to others. Assisting in prevention of abuse requires a certain amount of self-awareness and growth of the individual. One needs to understand the gravity of abuse in today's context; empathy towards the victims is essential. This is where the importance of psychological growth comes in because it takes a certain level of introspection and awareness to be able to perceive things non-judgementally and feel for another.

An average woman in today's context is handling more than the twenty-four hour job of housewife and mother which her counterpart of the past handled. Many women are finding it difficult to cope with their dual roles of career woman/breadwinner and housewife/mother. Hence the general tendency is to think that there is enough on "ones own plate" to cope with and let "them" try to find a solution to this question of abuse.

Who does the term "them" refer to? It is anyone's guess! The abused women continues struggling, while the non-abused are just allowing themselves to be carried along on the current of their daily lives.

It will be enlightening for the so called "non-abused" women to take a closer look at their own lives. Are they doing whatever they are doing because they choose to do so, or is it because society dictates it? Isn't it a matter of giving up all freedom of choice to stereotyped role expectations?

This brings us to the question of societal norms and the parameters of the role of women. Who determines them? Who, as it stands, is more responsible for moulding the young minds? Women! Then why are these roles and norms not being modified to give women an equal status to men?

As mothers, women have a crucial note to play in "educating" the young minors. Societal values will not change overnight, but if today's children are taught respect for self and others (whether they be men or women) a gradual change in attitudes towards women is bound to occur. Also, insecure adults have usually had insecure childhoods, and here again women's role of mothers in providing that psychological sustenance is obvious.

Unfortunately, most women today are grappling with their own psychological issues, little realising the spill-over effect on their children. No situation is perfect, but it is time that the secondary place given to women is changed to one of equality. Such change has to be internalised and form a core part of individual thinking if it is to be long lasting and effective. As mentioned earlier, in most cases an abused woman gets more support from her father than her mother to leave the abusive relationship. This is a clear indicator of how much the secondary role of women has been ingrained into their psyches.

Many of those fighting for the cause of women have achieved a lot in terms of changing external controls, e.g., laws against dowry in India; however the internal controls

unfortunately have not kept pace. What are these internal controls? One's individual perspective of what constitutes abuse of women (a woman who sees her sister-in-law being hit) will dictate how much she does not want to "interfere" although she "interferes" on other issues. Why is this so? The tendency is stronger to group with blood-family and secure the "protection" of the male (in this case the brother), rather than to group with the "weaker side" of womankind.

Here, the author requests women to assess principles of abuse and non-abuse before internalising them into their super-egos or consciences. If these internal controls are based on sound assessment and introspective evaluation it will be impossible for a woman to stand by and watch another woman being abused without "interfering".

Each woman should identify herself as part of womankind and establish a sense of equality with men even if it be in terms of little things. Resistance to being dictated an inferior status, though difficult at first, finally yields results. In the words of an Indian woman:

My mother-in-law handles all the food-related decisions in the house, and it annoyed me when the tiniest piece of something tasty and the largest portion of leftovers were generally on my plate. In the beginning for the sake of peace I kept quiet, but when I started falling sick I confronted her, to which her logic was that if she can eat spoilt and leftover food why can't I because after all I was a woman. Ours was an arranged marriage so I didn't have too much of a rapport with my husband. Not knowing what to do I ate something in office before coming home, and gradually she got the message. I realised that I had to learn to

respect myself before I could expect respect from her. It has taken me almost 15 years to establish an equal status for women in my household. She too has learnt to respect herself more though the old ideas of women being inferior still exist in her mind

It has been said that "the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world", so women are not "mere housewives and mothers" but rather architects of future society. Let prevention of abuse of women be an integral part of such architecture.

Conclusion

Writing this paper has certainly been thought-provoking for the author who hopes it has been similarly perceived by the reader. In the therapeutic setting it is the micro-picture that emerges of each individual case of abuse. However, all these micro-pictures have a common pattern indicating where the weak spots are in the macro-picture. It is clear that for abuse of women to be wiped out, systematic empowerment of women, especially psychological empowerment, is the key.

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