VIOLENCE IN PUBLIC PLACES: A CASE STUDY OF YOUNG WOMEN OF BANASTHALI VIDYAPITH IN INDIA

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Abstract

Some women in India have made progress and reached the highest positions in politics, sports, business and education. However the larger society remains patriarchal, feudal, traditional and male dominated and looks down upon women. Especially in north India men view women as commodities to be enjoyed and harassed at home as well as in public spaces. It is believed that almost every middle class and lower class woman in India has faced molestation and harassment at public places. Experiences of abusive and vulgar language and actions and indecent touching of sensitive areas of bodies in crowded buses, trains, markets, picture halls, roads, colleges are very common for young women living in north India. However most of these unpleasant experiences get unreported to the authorities and families as young women realize the bitter truth that if they will complain they will be blamed for wearing attractive dresses and makeup or going out all alone at odd hours etc and as a result their freedom to move around freely will be restricted by the family. However these unpleasant experiences become hurdles in the life of young women and create an atmosphere of fear among them. A study was conducted on 62 women students of M Phil studying at BanasthaliVidyapith, a university for women located in rural area of Rajasthan near Jaipur, to find out the reality in 2008.

Key Words: *violence, women, public space, harassment.*

Introduction

Most societies in the world have been and are patriarchal and in such societies women have a secondary position compared to men and face many inequalities. These inequalities were present in most ancient and medieval societies and are present even today in most societies although the degrees of inequalities vary from one place to another. The patriarchal world of today can be divided among three major groups on the basis of its treatment of women. In the first category are western, developed countries of Europe and America where women are given equal rights in law and women enjoy almost equal rights in practice although still major household and care responsibilities are shouldered by women. In the second category are countries like India where women are almost equal to men in law but in practice they are subordinate to men and in the third category are countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran where women are not equal to men in law and in practice. However it is quite true that in last hundred years situation of women has improved all over the world although it still needs to improve a lot further especially in the second and the third groups.(Tomasevski,2002:231) Although spread of liberal ideas and advancement in science and technology has ensured better deal for women however inequalities based on gender still pervade every aspect of social life and affect women's chances of survival and development in fundamental ways in countries like India. Although some individual women may outrank individual men but men as a group invariably wield more power and acquire greater prestige than women do. The power determinants range across societies from near equality to male tyranny.(Sridharan, 2000:92)

It is claimed that the position of women during Vedic period was considerably better than post Vedic, medieval and British period. However women did not enjoy equal status with men in any historical period in India. Patriarchy has ensured excessive subordination of women leading to practices like female infanticide, female illiteracy, child marriage, sati, polygamy, *jauhar, purdah*, permanent widowhood. However due to social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar and participation of women in the national movement women were given equal status in the constitution of independent India. And some women made progress and reached the highest positions in politics, sports, business and education. However the larger society remains patriarchal, feudal, traditional and male dominated and looks down upon women. Birth of a male child is celebrated but the birth of a female child is often regarded as a disaster and female feticide is common in parts of India.

Common women also face a number of challenges such as illiteracy, neglect, child marriage, dowry, domestic violence, honour killing, eve teasing, molestation, sexual exploitation, rape etc. The data on sex ratio, literacy rate, work participation, gender related development index etc clearly demonstrates the subordinate position of women in India. To illustrate as per census 2011 sex ratio is 940 females per 1000 males. Literacy rate is 75 percent for men and 53.7 percent for women. Work participation rate is 51.7 percent for men and 25.6 percent for women.AmartyaSen rightly says that women face survival inequality, natality inequality, unequal facilities, ownership inequality, unequal sharing of household benefits and chores and domestic violence and physical victimization in India. (Sen, 2005: 224)

Violence Against Women

Experts define violence against women as behavior that is violent, uses physical force or threat and is intimidating, coercive, damaging to women. It includes physical, visual, verbal or sexual acts that may be termed as threat, invasion or assault. It includes acts which are hurting and degrading to her and takes away her ability to control contact with another individual. (Levy, 2008: 4) Studies have shown that violence against women is widespread and common in every country and society. (Levy, 2008: 1) BishakhaDatta calls violence against women a multi headed hydra because women experience violence in private, public and virtual domain; from strangers, familiars and intimates; on streets, in workplaces, homes, war zones and in media. (Datta, 2010: 3) According to feminist theory the main factors that contribute to violence against women include historically male dominated social structures and socialization practices teaching men and women gender specific roles. It focuses on power, gender and the structure of relationships in a male dominated patriarchal culture. It explains that the institutionalization of violence against women in political, legal and economic systems make it invisible and acceptable. (Levy, 2008: 21) Carole Sheffield writes that the right to control the female body is the cornerstone of patriarchy as patriarchy is a system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. (Levy, 2008: 27) The conviction rates for major violent crimes against women – dowry deaths, rape, molestation and cruelty by husband and relatives are in the range of 18 percent to 33 percent in India. The reason being that the system is aggressively anti- feminist. (Naqvi, 2010: 29) There are very few feminist in Indian courtrooms to use the laws. (Naqvi, 2010: 44) Hence Mathura, RameezaBai, Kanchanbala, Bhanwari do not get justice from the system. (Naqvi, 2010: 31-32)

Violence on women at public spaces in India includes horrific crimes like gang rape, (The Times of India, 2010: 5) acid attack, branding and burning as witch (Saira, 2010: 9), abduction, murder, black mailing, naked parade(The Times of India,2009: 1), thrashing, sexual exploitation (The Hindu, 2009: 4)etc. However only some women go through these horrific crimes but almost every woman in India has faced molestation and harassment at public places. Experiences of getting unwanted calls on mobiles, abusive and vulgar language and actions and indecent touching of sensitive areas of bodies in crowded bus, train, market, picture hall, road, college are very common for young women living in Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Bihar and Rajasthan. However most of these unpleasant experiences get unreported to the authorities and families as young women realize the bitter truth that they will be blamed for wearing attractive dresses and makeup or going out all alone at odd hours etc and as a result their freedom to move around freely will be restricted by the family. However these unpleasant experiences become hurdles in the life of young women and create an atmosphere of fear among them.

Case Study

A study was conducted in 2008 at Banasthali Vidyapith, a university for women located in a rural area in Rajasthan, in which 62 M Phil students were involved to understand how much violence young women face in India and how it affects their lives. Questionnaire, interview and observation methods were used to the study 62 young women who were in between 22 to 28 years of age. 58 percent respondents were from general category, 32 percent from other backward class and ten percent from schedule caste and tribes. 89 percent respondents were Hindu, six percent Sikh, three percent Buddhist and two percent Jain. All women were post graduate.

All respondents knew about human rights and their source of information was newspaper, family and teachers. 39 percent respondents did not read newspaper. 27 percent had never discussed women's issues with anyone. They believed that status of women is affected by family and the woman herself and education and good laws are essential for empowerment of women. All felt empowered and believed that men and women are equal as per the constitution of India.

The respondents believed that the main problems before women in India today are: eve teasing, molestation, discrimination, kidnapping and rape. 42 percent respondents had faced violence at public places and 32 percent had resisted it by retaliating themselves and by taking help from family, friends and police. None of the respondents was aware of any law which can help them in case of violence at public places. 44 percent knew some other woman who had faced violence at public places. 82 percent believed that women are themselves responsible for violence against them along with factors like bad social atmosphere, lack of law and order, bad mentality of men, short dresses of women, vulgar magazines, lack of morality, lack of punishment and women projecting themselves as weak.

All feared violence at public places and felt insecure because of it and agreed that it restricts their lives and violates their human rights. All also believed that women face more violence than men. 61 percent believed that in India women face more violence than women in other countries. Only three percent respondents believed that police has a positive attitude towards victims and only five percent believed that family and society has appositive attitude towards the victim.

Interestingly such highly educated women blamed women and their dresses for violence against women. It shows the effect of societal thinking on women themselves. Moreover all women accepted that they were living in constant fear of violence and it was affecting their lives negatively.

Conclusion

Indian society is patriarchal and many men in north India do not believe that women have human rights and are equal to men. They think it is appropriate behavior to harass women and do not hesitate in taking advantage of women if they are sure that they will not be punished for it. Moreover if women dress and behave in a modern way and men think that they are available and looking for attention. Hence the first step is to make men understand that women are also human beings and must be treated with equality and with respect. Women can wear any type of dress and move about anywhere anytime if they need and wish to. It does not entitle men to harass women. Some men even think that women enjoy this harassment. They must be made aware that

women dislike or hate men who harass them. This can be achieved by including gender and human rights education in the curriculum at all levels as well as through wide publicity in mass media.

The second issue is that men who harass women think that they can get away with it. They think that the victim will be too ashamed or scared to report to the police and even if she will report no action will be taken against the aggressor. Hence the need is to strengthen the law and order situation and ensure punishment to those who commit such crime. For this policing and justice system needs to be strengthened and men in police and justice system must be made aware of concepts of human rights and gender equality. Reserving fifty percent posts in police and judiciary can also make them more sensitive towards women.

The third issue is that women have a tendency to blame the victim for instigating violence by wearing certain type of dress and makeup etc. That needs to be taken care of through intensive sensitization through
mass media and proper education.

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