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## **Domestic Violence in Rural Areas**

*Shaila Lohia*

Women in India have been facing violence in all spheres of life for thousands of years. They face domestic, political and social violence also, making it a multi-faceted and complicated issue.

Before the advent of the Aryans, women had a high status in the family and in society under the matriarchal system that was then practised. With the patriarchal system, men were given a god-like status which led to the subordination of women and the beginning of domestic violence.

In order to understand the nature of domestic violence in rural areas, we must study the life-style of the rural population. The Indian rural economy is based on agriculture. Most of the farmers are marginal farmers, owning even less than ten acres of land. Most of them cultivate only one crop. They cannot look after their land properly. When they face economic problems like a daughter's marriage or a death in the family, they are forced to sell their land.

Marginal farmers, landless labourers, scheduled caste communities, self-employed workers whose occupation is connected with agriculture, form more than 90% of the population in rural areas. Every member of the family, whether old or young, male or female, has to work hard for his/her living. Although some changes have occurred in their work habits with the use of fertilisers, chemicals, machines and modern communication systems, these are merely superficial.

The society continues to be a traditional one, characterized by a relatively slow rate of social change. Child marriages are common. People are aware of the law against polygamy, but they find the loopholes in it. They do not consider women to be human beings, but to be pieces of wood in the fire-place.

Women in rural areas have faith in the traditional way of life. They do not have self-respect or self-confidence. Patience and tolerance are supposed to be inherent qualities of women. All these factors contribute to the domestic violence in rural areas.

The dowry system is prevalent among the higher castes and rich families in rural areas. The middle and lower middle class also follow them to establish their status in society. In the poor class, the dowry amounts to a few hundred rupees, wedding clothes for the bridegroom and some utensils. However, this amount is also too much for the bride's father who earns his bread on daily wages. If the bride's father cannot keep the promises made to the bridegroom's father before the ceremony, this creates problems for the daughter with her husband's family. She faces domestic violence. She cannot disclose her problems to her parents. The parents also believe that a married daughter should not complain about her in-laws or her husband.

In one case a newly-married pregnant daughter sent a letter to her father requesting him to send the promised dowry amount of Rs. 15,000/- which had not been given and gifts for her first pregnancy. Her father could not manage the amount and one day the girl was found dead in the garbage tank behind the house. Her elder sister who is married, came to register the case in our centre. She told us that her sister's husband and other members of his family had tied her hands, legs and mouth, had given her electric shocks and had thrown her body into the tank. Her father registered a complaint with the police, saying that their daughter had been murdered by her husband for money. But the police registered the case as a suicide.

Even if it were a suicide, which it clearly cannot be since her hands were tied, who is responsible for the death of a young innocent and pregnant girl? Her parents? Her in-laws? Or she herself Or Society? We have observed many cases of women facing violence, being driven away from home with their children, or committing suicide, simply because their parents could not fulfil the promises given to the bridegroom's parents.

In many cases, girls are punished either by the husband or his family. The nature of these punishments is beyond the imagination of human beings. One husband forced his wife to stand on one leg. When she could not, he beat her brutally. Locking up of girls in a room without food or water is very common. In one case, a father-in-law said his daughter-in-law was dead, when she had actually been locked up in a dark lumber room at the top of the house. At midnight, her mother-in-law would give her a small piece of bread and a cup of water. One day, a cricket ball fell into the room and the children trying to retrieve it saw the dreadful figure of the woman. They told their parents that they had seen a female goblin. Their parents complained about it at the police-station. A young police officer attacked the house suddenly and released the young girl. She stayed at Manaswini shelter home for a year. She earns her living now, but is very weak and has very poor eyesight due to continuous weeping. Punishments

like thrusting hands into boiling water or oil, forcing women to stand for hours together with a mill-stone on the head, are very common.

The average age at which girls are married in rural areas is 13-14 years. According to tradition, a daughter must be married before puberty. Usually, a newly-married girl knows nothing of sexual relations. She cannot co-operate with her husband and is harassed by him. A disgust towards sexual relations develops, in turn leading to her husband's second marriage. In many cases, the newly-married girls escape to their parents' home. There they receive no sympathy and are forced to return. Faced with constant nagging and violence, many girls commit suicide.

In rural areas, a man does not go by personal factors in his choice of a wife. He is attracted to easy money which he can get with his bride's dowry. Within two or three years of marriage, he no longer likes his wife: He beats her, harasses her. She is not given enough food, or is given leavings on others' plates. Finally, she is driven out of the house with her girl child. In many cases, the husband takes written permission from his wife for a second marriage - through violent methods. Legally, it has no value.

Women in rural areas accept polygamy as a natural phenomenon of man's personality and do not object to a second marriage. But both wives cannot live together peacefully. One of them suffers all her life. Very few women file suits in court against their husbands. They live separately all their lives wearing the symbols of married women. If the husband dies, the funeral is attended by both wives and all the rituals of widowhood are followed.

Drinking of liquor is one of the main causes of domestic violence. Women in villages say that liquor is their rival. Intoxication makes a man brutal and savage, and he behaves inhumanly toward his wife. Some men behave badly only under intoxication, which makes it very painful for the wife to file a suit against her husband. She faces the violence silently.

In rural areas, 70% of the married women have to earn their daily wages, but they do not have the right to spend their money. Their drunkard husbands seize the money.

In Manaswini's 'Dilasa' home, more than 30% of the women who come for shelter are those whose husbands are living with another woman or have married a second time. We provide financial assistance to them to file suits in court against their husbands. But they have to wait for years for justice. The proof of the second marriage is to be provided by the complainant. How is this possible for a poor deserted woman?

Very often a woman does not find shelter in her parents' home. Her brother and his wife refuse to shelter her. Though a woman has a legal right to her parents' property, they feel this action will create misunderstandings in their parents' minds. Due to lack of awareness and because of being bogged down by tradition, villagers think that a daughter loses all financial rights to her parents' home after marriage. Among the higher castes, the daughter used to be given "stridhan" at the Kanyadan ceremony. This 'stridhan' was considered a woman's individual property over which she had absolute right. Stridhan traditionally passed from mother to daughter and did not concern male members of the family. But this tradition has been converted to dowry.

In some cases, a deserted woman faces violence in the parents' home, too. She does not get enough food, neither do her children. She works hard to pay for her keep. In a few cases, sexual violence has also been observed in the parents' home. A woman becomes a victim of the physical passion of an uncle, a brother and in very few cases, of a father too.

Since all the property - land, house, furniture, utensils, etc. are in the name of the husband, it is very easy to drive the wife out of the marital house. There are 60 million deserted women in Maharashtra alone, according to some estimates.

This then is the nature of domestic violence in rural areas. A proverb in Maharashtra says, "Dear daughter, go to your husband's house on foot, but come out only on a stretcher (dead)."

After 1975, the feminist movement spread fast in the big cities. On the basis of specific issues like scarcity of drinking water, dowry, rape, the movement has spread in districts and tehsils also. After 1980, many activists and voluntary organisations working in remote places have raised the issue of deserted women. For women who are driven out of their husband's home with their children, there is no way except to commit suicide or beg on the streets or sell the children or accept prostitution as a profession. The feminist movement has entered the rural areas to take action on this dreadful issue. To lessen domestic violence in rural areas gender sensitisation among the males is essential.

The Manaswini Women's Project run by Manavlok has been working efficiently for the last ten years in Beed district, which is one of the most backward areas of Maharashtra. The main focus of Manavlok's work is on sustainable farming of which the beneficiaries are marginal farmers, landless labourers, women, children, village artisans etc. Manavlok has formed Krishak Panchayats in each of the 143 villages where it works. The Krishak Panchayat is a group of small farmers, landless labourers, women, etc. who come together every month to

discuss the development of their village and the type of help they need from Manavlok.

Manavlok believes that no radical change will take place without the active participation of women. Active women's groups meet once a week in 45 villages. They discuss what is going on in their village and sing traditional and modern songs. Social workers from Manaswini attend the meeting and give information on many current social and political issues. The Krishak Panchayats and the Bhoomikanya Mandals have created a good deal of social awareness among villagers. This helps Manaswini to work against domestic violence in rural areas.

### **Discussion**

During the discussion, Ms. Lohia informed us that the Bhoomi Kanya Mandal has 200 full time workers and receives funds from Oxfam, NABARD and the Government of India. The Mandal has 6 centres, each of which handles 30 villages. Volunteers, midwives, anganwadi workers and teachers also assist the Mandal workers.

Weekly meetings of the Mandal are held, attended mainly by women agricultural workers. Social workers address the group and elicit their problems, even approaching mothers-in-law and reminding them of the need for women's solidarity.

Six-monthly meetings are held of all the Mandal's members where interest-free loans, fertilisers and seeds are distributed. Loans are given only to those families who treat their women well. The Mandal also arbitrates to solve disputes, obviating recourse to law courts.

Ms. Lohia stressed the improvement in the situation of women that has been brought about as a result of ten years of work by the Mandal.