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Shattering the Myth: Men Can be the Victims of Domestic Violence

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Domestic violence victims are predominantly women, while male victims are left behind. Societal stereotypes of the man as strong, tough, powerful, and dominant put men off getting help, and fuel their doubt about their victimhood. Research indicates that many men are victims of intimate partner violence, but their voices are silenced by stigma, mockery, and structural discrimination. Men who are victims are met with distrust and ill-equipped support, with many undocumented and untreated. The solution to this is multiple – raising awareness, creating inclusive support networks, and encouraging society to accept male victimhood. This requires various steps to tackle, such as increasing public awareness, creating inclusive networks of support, and increasing the social acceptance of male victimhood. All-inclusive laws, helplines, and training programs for police and healthcare workers are needed to ensure the conditions are welcoming. Most importantly, breaking through internalized stereotypes and accepting that men can be victims too is a crucial part of reaching equity and justice. Identifying and solving the silent trauma of male victims is the first critical step toward ending domestic violence for all.

Keywords: *domestic violence, male victims, stigma, societal acceptance, public awareness, unreported cases, inclusive laws.*

INTRODUCTION

When we think about the phrase ‘domestic violence’ we usually think of women and children as its primary victims. This belief has seeped into the conscience of my society and has been simmering for decades, eventually becoming the basis of the campaigns that framed them to be vulnerable. But an under-discussed reality also exists: Men potentially are victims of domestic violence too. They suffer, but stereotypes, societal expectations, etc. drown them out.

Men who endure abuse often do so in silence, their suffering hidden by harmful beliefs about masculinity that link it with power and control. The trend in society is to see men as the aggressors, never also as victims. This stigma not only isolates them; it silences them. Stereotyped as weak or an easy target, such male victims are afraid of being either ridiculed or not believed, and thus choose not to seek help, which leads to them suffering in isolation through their trauma.

Recognizing male victimhood is not only to raise awareness. It is about encouraging empathy and justice. ‘Domestic violence is a human problem, not just a gendered one.’ Legal frameworks need to be reformed to ensure the protection of all victims equally, and awareness-raising should also incorporate narratives that cover the diverse realities of abuse victims.

STEREOTYPES AND SILENT SUFFERINGS OF MEN

Expectations around masculinity dictate that men be strong, dominant, and invulnerable. This same narrative marks these men as abusers, not the abused. True, far more women are victims of domestic abuse, and the ratio tends to mask an uncomfortable truth though: men can, indeed, be victims of intimate partner violence too – just like women.

Think of a man living in a toxic relationship, enduring ongoing emotional abuse. His partner attacks his self-esteem daily with words like ‘weak’ or ‘worthless,’ while his attempts to gain validation are criticized. Or picture a husband who quietly endures physical abuse – slaps, scratches, or worse – because he thinks that owning up to the truth may invite ridicule or disbelief. These men live in a world where their pain is seen as implausible, making the thought of seeking help inconceivable.

The stereotype that men are always the perpetrators of domestic violence is deep-set. It continues to promote the dangerous myth that men cannot be victims, subsuming their experiences and silencing their voices. And even if men find the courage to speak out, they are often met with skepticism not just from their communities, but from the systems supposed to protect them. A banged-up arm is a mark of ‘clumsy behaviour,’ and emotional scars are an overreaction.

This disbelief is not restricted to friends and family; even police officers or healthcare professionals often require excessive proof before accepting a man’s claims. The treatment of male and female victims is unequal, leaving us with a broken system. They believe they are alone and helpless and do not deserve help which continues their pain and the spirals of abuse. What we need is the empathy and understanding to sort this out. We need to understand that pain does not have a gender. By breaking down these stereotypes and giving inclusive support systems, all victims of domestic violence—regardless of gender—must seek, validation, and justice. And only then, we can truly work towards addressing the silent suffering of men and working towards equity and fairness for all survivors.

UNVEILING STATISTICS OF SOCIAL STIGMA AND MALE VICTIMS

In the context of domestic abuse, it is easy to see why there is a dominant perception that views males as aggressors and females as victims. Although it can be accepted that women are the greatest number of domestic abuse victims, this version of events overlooks one pertinent fact: men might be victims of intimate partner violence as well. Male victims go through trauma, beatings, and mental abuse but don’t speak out because they are afraid of being mocked. People expect men to be tough and emotionless so any form of vulnerability puts them in a weaker position making it worse for them.

There is increasing evidence of the occurrence of domestic violence perpetrated against men. It was reported that of 1000 men, 51.5% were battered by their wives/intimate partner at least once during their lifetime, while 10.5% reported such experience during the past 12 months. The violence perpetrated by the spouse that most stood out was emotional (51.6%) and this was followed by a physical assault which was violence in 6% of the cases. Severe forms of physical

assault occurred in only a tenth of the cases. There are increasing reports from different countries of the high prevalence of spouse violence against men, including India.¹

The pattern of male victimization is not solely an Indian challenge. The figures might come as a worry to many. UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) published in its 2022/23 report that 1 out of every 3 domestic abuse victims was a male, which was 751,000 men against 1.38 million women. Out of these, 483,000 men reported partner abuse.² Also, there were considerable male victims of stalking: 540 000 men (which constitutes 35% of all stalking victims) in 2023/24, 42 000 men were stalked by family members in 2023/24 (0.2% of all men – one in five hundred men – 30% of all victims) with 180,000 cases involving cyberstalking (0.8% of men – One in 125 men – 28% of all the victims).³ 21% of male victims (2022/23) do not disclose any instances of their being a partner abuse victim – which is an improvement as it was 49% previously in 2017/18 6.5% of male victims (2.8% women) have attempted suicide because of partner abuse in 2022/23. The organization has reported a rise in calls regarding suicidal thoughts during the pandemic and even after. (ONS 2022/23).⁴ These statistics show that although some women bear the brunt of domestic violence, it is not the case that men are completely unaffected.

Yet these circumstances provide a very sobering picture when we turn to the male victims of domestic violence and the help-seeking that they do. Domestic violence in India most people say is low across the board and can be described as an iceberg in which only the tip shows and the bulk of cases is hidden.⁵ For men, underreporting is even stronger, mainly caused by characteristics of male gender constructs. The prevalence of such domestic violence is high but

¹ Jagbir Singh Malik and Anuradha Nadda, 'A Cross-sectional Study of Gender-Based Violence against Men in the Rural Area of Haryana, India' (2019) 44 (1) Indian Journal of Community Medicine <<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6437789/>> accessed 13 December 2024

² 'Statistics on Male Victims of Domestic Abuse' (*Mankind Initiative*)

<<https://mankind.org.uk/statistics/statistics-on-male-victims-of-domestic-abuse/>> accessed 13 December 2024

³ 'Stalking: Findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales' (*Office for National Statistics*, 26 September 2024) <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/stalkingfindingsfromthecrimesurveyforenglandandwales>> accessed 13 December 2024

⁴ 'Domestic Abuse in England and Wales: Overview, November 2023' (*Office for National Statistics*)

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2023>> accessed 13 December 2024

⁵ Portia Bajwa et. al., 'Exploring the Low Rates of Reporting Domestic Violence in Bihar, India' (*University of Chicago*) <<https://crownschool.uchicago.edu/student-life/advocates-forum/exploring-low-rates-reporting-domestic-violence-bihar-india>> accessed 14 December 2024

marginalized or unreported in societies that appreciate male and male principles and view being weak as unwanted. This stigma prevents many men from escaping domestic violence, as they refuse to speak out on the violence out of shame and fear of ridicule.⁶

NGOs working with male victims in India have pointed out the magnitude of the problem. One such NGO reported that it received 113 calls daily from distressed.⁷ These figures represent a silent cry for help that is often negated or ignored by society and its legal systems. The impact here is not only physical but also emotional and psychological. In 2022/23, an estimated 6.5% of male victims of partner abuse in the UK reported having felt suicidal as a result of their experiences. Such a disturbing piece of data finds resonance in the increased calls related to suicidal ideation recorded during the pandemic and sustained thereafter.

The stigma attached to being a male victim is not a phenomenon restricted to India. However, numerous countries have moved further than India toward gender-neutral legal frameworks dealing with domestic violence. Several European countries have ratified the Istanbul Convention, which explicitly calls for protection for victims of domestic violence regardless of their gender.⁸ Such legal systems aim to deconstruct the stereotypes that portray men only as offenders and women only as victims.

These legal systems are supposed to break the preconceived notions that portray men only as perpetrators and women solely as victims. India is way behind in this aspect. It has an existing legal system that is biased toward women due to the disproportionate number of reported cases lodged against them. Laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 were set up to fill the gaping hole that was Violence Against Women. This law has indeed empowered several women to come out and seek justice, but at the same time, it inadvertently ignores the rising figure of male victims who suffer abuse from their wives or intimate partners.

⁶ Malik (n 1)

⁷ Jagpreet Singh Sandhu, 'Chandigarh: 1,774 men called helpline in April, alleged domestic violence, says NGO' *The Indian Express* (29 April 2020) <<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/chandigarh-1774-men-called-helpline-in-april-allegeddomestic-violence-says-ngo/>> accessed 14 December 2024

⁸ Els Leye et. al., 'The Added Value of and Resistance to the Istanbul Convention: A Comparative Study in 27 European Member States and Turkey' (2021) 3 *Frontiers in Human Dynamics* <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2021.697331>> accessed 15 December 2024

The absence of gender-neutral legal protections keeps men victimized. The failure to provide legal redress to male victims makes the complaints irrelevant or trivialized. Male victims of abuse are often abandoned in silence over their trauma without social support, legal protection, or proper access to mental health resources. It creates a vicious cycle in which abuse is not reported, the perpetrator is not punished, and the victim is silenced.⁹

India's reluctance to embrace gender-neutral domestic violence legislation originates from historical and cultural factors. Laws regarding domestic violence were first formulated with the women demographic in focus because they were found to be disproportionately vulnerable in a patriarchy. However, legal provisions must evolve with changes in societal dynamics. The neglect of male victims defeats the very essence of equality and perpetuates further dastard stereotypes concerning gender roles.

This gap in the legal framework needs to be filled. India requires a gender-neutral domestic approach to violence recognizing all victims' suffering, irrespective of their gender. The reform would include provisions where male victims can report abuse without being ashamed, access to counselling and support services, and legal protection against abusive partners. This would in no way diminish the struggles confronted by women but rather expand the horizon of justice for everyone who needs it.

EMBRACING ACCEPTANCE AS A PATH TO EQUITY:

We do have many ways to tackle this problem of domestic violence. To protect men from domestic violence, the first step should be creating awareness and also setting up support systems like helplines, counselling services, and training programs for police and healthcare providers in India, for example, all our legal laws are written keeping women in mind as a victim this kind of discrepancy can lead the male victims with no or not much laws to protect them legally from the household atrocities they face. so making laws which protect both genders on equal footing is very important such system help lines and counselling centres help the male victims of domestic violence to gain resources (both human and non-human) to get over their

⁹ 'Tackling Violence against Women' (*bharatiyastreeshakti*) <<https://www.bharatiyastreeshakti.org/tackling-violence-against-women/>> accessed 15 December 2024

problems legally as well emotionally. Conducting workshops for police and Healthcare providers so they understand related issues of abuse reporting more sensitively NGOs and community organizations also will need campaigns to raise awareness against domestic violence specifically targeting men.

However, the actual solution is acceptance in the first place. The real fixing starts with 'Acceptance' and that's what we need to understand that men are human as well, the social stigma for powerful men and expectations of societal masculinity don't make them less of victims. The similar way women experience Repeated Domestic Violence doesn't mean all men are perpetrators and never victims. When people start accepting this, it'll be the first step towards breaking the Stereotype Vulnerability of Men and Equality for All spirits.

This Acceptance isn't only about considering Men as Victims of domestic violence but to questioning what Society has been taught for Decades to Centuries being engrained in our minds, by accepting Truth we start paving a road toward a Just Equitable Society where everyone irrespective of Gender gets Help and Respect they deserve. Mental mindset rewiring is most required towards achieving Real Equality and Justice eradicating suffering in silence of thousands as Men Victims of Domestic Violence.

LEGAL REMEDIES & SUGGESTIONS FOR MALE VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE:

Amendment of Existing Laws to Include Gender Neutral Provisions Ladies Only: the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) only awards legal protection to women, and the male victims of such violence are treated as non-entities. Hence, there is a need to do something about it and such a situation can be remedied by further pressing on the amendment of PWDVA¹⁰ To include gender-neutral clauses so that men also can avail of legal protection from such violence as is provided for in the law. In addition, the National Commission for Women (NCW) evolving as a response to the protectionist agenda towards women and children should also take a lead towards the protection of male victims of domestic violence. This amendment would make sure that every victim regardless of their gender would be backed by the law that ensures that such cases would be further heard in a court of law and

¹⁰ Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005

that legal action would follow. The provisions of domestic violence law are far too wide regarding the gender of the male hence this law must be removed and other qualities that provide provisions for males to be incorporated.

Establishment of Specialized Support Systems and Helplines for Male Victims: Currently, there is a significant lack of specialized support services available to male victims of domestic violence. The establishment of dedicated helplines, shelters, and counselling services, such as those offered by Men Welfare India¹¹, would provide male victims with the necessary resources and assistance. These services must be tailored to address the unique challenges that male survivors face, including the stigma associated with being a male victim. Public awareness campaigns should also be conducted to inform male victims about the availability of such services, ensuring they are aware of their rights and support options.

Public Awareness Campaigns and Education to Challenge Gender Norms: The pervasive social stigma surrounding male victimization often discourages men from reporting instances of domestic violence. To combat this, it is crucial to implement widespread public awareness campaigns aimed at dismantling harmful gender stereotypes. These campaigns should educate the public about the reality that men can, and do, experience domestic violence. It is essential to foster an environment where male victims feel safe and supported in seeking help without fear of shame or ridicule. Schools, media outlets, and community organizations must play an active role in normalizing conversations about male victimhood and encouraging men to come forward and report abuse.

By adopting these legal reforms and societal changes, the legal system and society as a whole will better serve all victims of domestic violence, irrespective of gender, and ensure they receive the protection and support they deserve.

CONCLUSION

In the context of abusive relationships, it isn't only women who are affected; men are also abused or abuse other people. Not all men are always the aggressors since men are also victims of

¹¹ Sandhu (n 7)

domestic violence; it shouldn't be a source of laughter or contempt. This can be done only if we take it seriously, ensure that assistance is delivered to the deserved, and let such individuals seek the truth and justice. It assists in establishing a social system where gender justice prevails on the basis that all male, female, or otherwise survivors of violence can be easily able to get justice and appropriate treatment. The trauma of men who have suffered domestic violence must be heard and acknowledged.