

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ... when you feel trapped

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What comes to your mind when you hear 'domestic violence'? A bloody nose or a broken bone? Domestic violence is a huge preventable public health problem. An individual can be a victim of domestic violence even in the absence of a physical injury.

Central to domestic violence is an attempt in a relationship to establish and maintain power and control over partner. According to the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, 'domestic violence is the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another.'

What used to be referred to as domestic violence in the past is now referred to as intimate partner violence (IPV). In this article the terms domestic violence and intimate partner violence are used interchangeably. Traditionally it referred to a scenario of husband and wife. IPV refers to a much broader range of relationships i.e. married couple, those living together and not married, dating, same sex partners, dating relationship and so on. The term domestic violence encompasses broader definition, to include elder abuse and child abuse. Because of the broader definition, domestic violence is also referred to as 'family violence.' Child abuse, intimate partner violence and elder abuse are all forms of family violence.



Kolkata: Hasin Jahan, wife of India pacer Mohammed Shami at West Bengal Assembly in Kolkata on March 23, 2018. Jahan accused her husband of domestic violence and extra marital affairs.

The focus of this article is intimate partner violence or IPV. The actual physical assault is often preceded by long periods, often years, of intimidation, harassment and control in secrecy behind closed doors. Friends and neighbors may have no clue for a long time about the abuse. In fact, abuser may project a very different image and impression of one's self in the public.

Besides physical abuse, domestic violence can be in the form psychological, economic, environmental, emotional and sexual abuse. The abusive behavior of the perpetrator is geared towards maintaining power and control over the partner. Intimidation and denigrating remarks are made to maintain a state of fear in the abused partner. Abusive behavior may involve throwing objects, slamming doors, punching walls, screaming, isolating the person from friends and family members, not allowing the person to go out, not allowing the person to make phone calls or monitoring and listening in on the calls made. These can be terrifying for the victim. The scars of emotional and psychological abuse can be deeper

and take much longer to heal.

Verbal threats, putting the partner down especially public, stalking, harassment, blackmail, threats to kidnap children e.g. threats to take children overseas are also forms of psychological abuse. When it involves same-sex partners, perpetrator may threaten to out the same-sex partner.

Economic abuse consists of preventing the victim from becoming self-sufficient – control access to bank account, ruining the victim's credit, underreporting one's own income, preventing the victim from keeping a job or pursuing education.

Abuser may withhold documents like passport and other important documents. They may threaten to deport the victim or the victim's family. More recently I have become aware of adult children withholding passport and immigration documents of their parents essentially holding them captive. This also amounts to domestic violence.

The physical abuse may take the form of pushing, slapping, punching, kicking, pulling hair, choking, hitting, spitting and even homicide. It also includes making threats with knives

or other weapons. Sometimes the abuse may take the form of forcing the partner to consume alcohol or drugs or withholding their medication, medical care and food.

Children, even if not abused physically directly, become casualties while helplessly witnessing the abuse of their parent. Children who have been exposed to domestic violence may go on to exhibit life long behavioral and mental health problems. These include problems at home, school and at work; their problems are related to aggression, depression, lower levels of social competence and self-esteem, poor academic performance and poor problem-solving skills. (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsn.org/content/children-and-domestic-violence>.)

Domestic violence is everyone's business. It affects people from any race, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and educational or professional background. In the United States, it is estimated that a woman is assaulted or beaten every nine seconds, primarily by an intimate domestic partner. It is further estimated that as many as 10 million children witness domestic violence each year. According to some sources, domestic violence occurs more frequently in the South Asian families than in the rest of the population in the U.S. Cultural practices and beliefs could possibly be contributing factors. Long standing oppression of women in South Asian cultures may make them more vulnerable to domestic violence.

Men commit most domestic violence. However, men also sometimes are victims of domestic violence, although this is significantly less common. Abused men are also less likely to file a report. Shame and fear may contribute to such underreporting.

The victim of domestic violence may feel trapped with little recourse. They may not have access to a phone. Even when there is access to a phone, they are afraid to call the police because of potential consequences and embarrassment. They may be afraid to send emails to inform others about their plight for fear that the abuser will find out since often their emails are

monitored also. The victims often may not even tell their own families e.g. parents and siblings, because of shame and embarrassment.

While nothing justifies abuse, mental illness and alcohol and drug abuse may make the situation worse. These should be addressed when solutions are sought. Of course victim's safety always comes first.

People are often critical of the victim for not leaving the abuser. The simplistic and conventional thinking is to blame the victim. Victim is accused of making the choice to stay with the abuser and may even be called masochistic in not leaving. The reality is that there may be many barriers that prevent the person from leaving an abusive relationship. These include economic, lack of financial resources, isolation from supportive people, loss of home, loss of custody of children, fear of retaliation. Retaliatory violence is a real risk for those who leave. Undocumented immigrant may fear facing deportation. Recent immigrants may face threat of losing their immigration status.

While a victim of abuse often feels very helpless, there are many steps victims can take during a potentially violent incident that occurs in the home or even in a public place. (Adopted from Burnet and Adler; Centers for Disease Control (2010). National Intimate Partner and Sexual violence Survey. http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/NISVS_Report2010-a.pdf).

Try to avoid arguments in small rooms, rooms with access to weapons (such as kitchens) or rooms without access to an outside door.

Be aware that alcohol and other drugs will increase the likelihood of impulsive and aggressive behavior in an abuser.

Be aware that alcohol and other drugs can decrease your ability to act quickly to protect yourself and children.

Know which doors, windows, or fire escapes you and your children would use if you must act quickly to escape. Know where you will go once you leave the house or immediate area. If possible, practice taking this route.

Safety plans involve some advance thought about

If you can, tell a friend or neighbor to call the police if they hear suspicious noises coming from your home or over the telephone.

Program your cell phone in a way that can quickly enlist the help of others (using 911 for police or fire, or a trusted friend).

Arrange the use of a code word with children, friends or family members so that they know when they should call for help.

Teach children how to use the telephone to contact police or fire agencies (911 if available).

Additional safety considerations are suggested for the individual who has already left an abuser. These include installing safety devices and smoke detectors in the new home, changing locks, and securing windows. Safety considerations on the job might include allowing someone to screen telephone calls and walk-in visitors.

And remember, there are legal recourses for victims who fear losing immigration status and face deportation. Contact an attorney or one of many organizations that assist victims of domestic violence. Below is a short list of resources. Visit www.samhin.org for an updated list. When seeing a physician for physical injuries, victim should request to see the physician without the presence of the abuser.

Resources:

National hotline for Domestic Violence
800-799-7233
SAKHI, 212-868-6741
www.sakhi.org
Women Rising: 201-333-5700
www.womenrising.org
Manavi, 732-435-1414
www.manavi.org
Or email at manavi@manavi.org
Daya (Houston) 713-981-7645
www.dayahouston.org
Maitri (California) 1-888-862-4874
www.maitri.org
Kiran Inc (North Carolina)
www.kiraninc.org
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