

Domestic Violence against Women: A Qualitative Study in Assam

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Abstract: Domestic violence (DV) against women, married as well as unmarried, is widely prevalent across India. Various socio-cultural factors are associated with perpetuation of domestic violence. This study aims at understanding the context of DV in Assam, a state from India's North-East region. The study is a qualitative one and conducted using primary data. Interviews with victims are conducted and observations have been done in shelter homes to gather necessary information. The finding reveals the different forms that domestic violence takes in Assam and how the issue is perceived by the victims. The issue of domestic violence is being attempted to understand in its socio-cultural context. The patriarchal social structure is found to provide the hotbed for emergence of DV against women.

Keywords: DV, Dowry, Perpetrators, Power, Patriarchy, Hierarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a major social problem. It is universal, occurring in all cultures and countries. It refers to violent acts that are primarily committed against women, affecting them physically, psychologically, sexually and economically. Such violence includes physical, psychological and sexual attacks and threats of such acts are meant to exercise control over the victim (1). Violence against women takes many forms and the most prevalent one is the violence that occurs within the domestic sphere, or the so-called private sphere.

Domestic violence refers to 'the violence that takes place in the domestic sphere and among the members related through blood, intimacy or law' (2). Domestic violence occurs between partners who, by all accounts, share or shared an intimate relationship. The occurrence of domestic violence reveals that the family is not the safest place as it is thought to be; rather it is also a site of violence and exploitation (3) and 'the place of greatest risk where the victim is locked in with the danger' (4). Despite its long presence as a tool of patriarchy, it was only from the 1970s onwards that domestic violence has been questioned and explained in an organised manner (5). Domestic violence was not recognised as a serious problem till the long international campaign by women's rights groups to raise consciousness about women's issues (6). In India, too, the silence around the issue of domestic violence broke 'due to the activities of NGOs, women's movements and the police' (7). Protests by feminist groups and campaigns for women's rights brought the issue of domestic violence out of the purview of a private matter, and this led to the necessity to pay attention to the violence of everyday life (8; 9).

Feminists have established a clear relationship between patriarchal domination and violence against women, such violence being reinforced by various forms of institutional support (10). VAW is the result of a hierarchical relation between a male and a female, and the secondary status of women in a patriarchal society contributes to various violent acts against them. Women are murdered, assaulted, sexually abused, threatened and humiliated, both in public and private spheres, and this behaviour 'does not seem to be considered unusual or uncommon' (11). This indicates existing cultural and societal sanctions behind such acts, which normalises violence against women. Various studies have also found that the overwhelming victims of domestic violence are often women compared with the percentage of men being violated, especially by women (12). Malavika Karlekar (1998) writes, 'at every stage there is discrimination and violence,

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particularly against girl children and later women within the household, either natal or conjugal' (7). In this backdrop, the existence of domestic violence throughout the lives of women and how they respond to it is studied with specific emphasis on the socio-cultural condition of Assam.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Domestic violence is present all over the world irrespective of any kind of boundaries. However, the contexts of violence are different based on culture, class, caste, race and so on. These differences necessitate studying violence with emphasis on the cultural context of its occurrence. This study is conducted in Assam, a state different from mainland India with specific culture, ethnicity, traditions and customs. Many studies have already done in Indian context, but very few studies have been conducted to study the domestic violence situation in Assam. Therefore, this study is conducted and this will concentrate on various forms of domestic violence, and the influence of the socio-cultural context of Assam on domestic violence against women and their reaction to domestic violence.

III. DATA COLLECTION

For collecting data personal interview technique was adopted. Open ended questions were asked to the victims. To locate the victims I have taken help from lawyers and Service provider NGO's. During the interviews the victims were given full scope to speak up about their victimisation and recordings were done as per their permission. The collected data were analysed with axial coding; and by doing a thematic analysis of the codes relevant to the objective, this paper has been developed. The identity and names are kept secret considering the ethical requirement of research.

IV. FINDINGS

The findings of the study revealed that domestic violence exist in Assam in all forms and often caused by various factors. The prevailing patriarchal social structure provides the ground for easy occurrence of domestic violence. Women have explained how different factors coupled with gendered social norms have led to occurrence of violence.

Contrary to the popular claim that domestic violence is almost non-existent in Assam, this study shows the acute presence of domestic violence, taking varied forms across communities. It highlights that given the prevalence of gendered social norms and hierarchies in all communities of Assam, domestic violence is normalised in everyday discourse, making women's struggles to escape and rebuild their lives an impossible task. The familial, community and legal institutions, given their patriarchal nature, often act as barriers to women's attempts to escape domestic violence, rather than providing support, as believed.

Domestic violence found across all stages of life

The presence of domestic violence across the lifespan of women in Assam is brought forth in the data collected. The following responses and cases reflect the prevalence of violence at different stages of women's lives:

The youngest of my sample was a 14-year-old girl who was a victim of child marriage who returned to her natal home as she could not tolerate abuse by her husband.

Swapnali, aged 44 years, has reported being a victim of marital rape and physical abuse for resisting her husband's excessive sexual demands.

Brinda, 52 years, was pressurised by her brother and sister-in-law to transfer the piece of land registered in her name over to them. When verbal abuse did not work they inflicted physical torture upon her.

Above accounts of women's victimisation, the fact that domestic violence can occur at any time or any stage of life becomes clear. The respondents are of different ages and have faced different forms of domestic violence. The women's accounts of domestic violence reflect their victimisation at different points of life, starting from infancy and going on to old age. Such data questions the notion of limiting domestic violence to the marital phase of women's lives and proves its prevalence all throughout the lives of women.

The data includes the occurrence of various forms of domestic violence, including forced abortion, abuse due to the birth of a girl child, negligence towards the female child, early marriage, wife-battering, dowry harassment, forced sex, marital rape, economic abuse, etc. All these occur in different stages and affect women's lives in many ways. Occurrence of domestic violence cannot be restricted to a particular time or age, and 'at every stage in the life cycle, the female body is both the objects of desire and of control' (7).

Respondent's perceptions about domestic violence

While getting into the types and forms that domestic violence takes in Assam, I tried to understand how the issue of domestic violence is conceptualised by respondents.

As a normal part of life

The data reveals a kind of tolerant attitude towards domestic violence and a silent acceptance of it among women who have faced domestic violence. For them the occurrence of domestic violence is an integral aspect of domestic life and not much can be done about it. The following responses will demonstrate this:

Bhanita, a survivor, said: Couples do quarrel. It's not a big thing. What can we women do about it?

Mamon, another survivor, said: When you keep utensils together they make a noise. The same way, when people stay together differences are obvious or slapping once or twice is normal.

Not only victims of domestic violence, but also police personnel, too, perceive domestic violence as a normal part of marriage. Their reluctance to take up cases or convince victims to go for a compromise shows indirect support towards normalisation of domestic violence instead of criminalising it.

Adjusted to the idea of wife-battering, women largely normalise and accept domestic violence. Gender socialisation and moral teachings about marriage and femininity make women accept domestic violence and support its revelation only under critical circumstances which carry a threat to women's lives (13). Due to impact of socialisation, initially women are unable to see domestic violence as a violation and keep the family before themselves; when they understand it, they lack the courage to go against those social teachings or overthrow them. The impact of social teaching or the feminine values inculcated in the minds of women often influence their responses to violence. A few cases are given to show it:

Swapnali said: I thought that since I am married to him it's my duty to satisfy him, and so I tried to keep him satisfied.

As misuse of power

Domestic violence was also perceived as misuse of power by respondents. Respondents argued that domestic violence is clearly an act of misuse of power. This act of misuse of power occurs by those who are in a powerful position and upon women who are generally powerless in society. A few responses are given below where respondents have claimed domestic violence as an issue of power abuse:

Trishna, a survivor, said: It's a clear misuse of power against women, and it affects every aspect of women's life. Domestic violence can ruin the whole life of women.

Kusum, a survivor, said: I have faced a lot of violence from my husband. So for me domestic violence is just a reflection of dominance of men over women. Men's need for power and domination results in domestic violence.

From the responses, the gender power hierarchy in society becomes apparent, where women are placed in a powerless position. Respondents blamed the social system for allotting more power and authority to men. Emphasising on this hierarchy, respondents argued that abuse of power in the form of various violent acts serves certain goals. Mostly it is to ensure domination of the powerful over the powerless. They also argued that domestic violence is also committed to show masculinity and male power. The prevailing gendered perception of violent-aggressive men and fragile-submissive women contributes to men's aggressive nature towards women and also justifies it.

As a violation of rights

Against the prevailing acceptance of violence upon women by men, a section of women who are educated, aware and financially independent have considered domestic violence as a violation of one's rights. These respondents believe that a husband does not have any right to abuse his wife.

Rita, a survivor, said: Domestic violence is clearly a violation of women's rights. It is a violation of rights in any form it occurs. My husband deprived me of sexual intimacy, which I must get being his wife. He concealed his sexual orientation, which is also a crime. Finally, he gave me wrong medicine that was harmful to my health and life. His actions have carried a threat to my life and violate my basic rights to a safe life.

Some survivor respondents responded to domestic violence as a violation of their rights and stressed on the need to fight back.

Nitu, a survivor respondent, said: Domestic violence is clearly an abuse of power and a violation of women's rights. Marriage should be an affair between two persons with equal rights and responsibilities. Nobody should be above and beneath. Both should equally contribute towards their conjugal life. Nobody has a right over anybody.

For them, a domestic relationship should not be about hierarchy; rather it must be a relationship based on equality.

As an advantage of being the bread-earner

Contrary to the claim of financially independent women, another perception has also been put forward as domestic violence being men's privilege for being economically independent and providers of the family. A few responses are given here to show it.

Gita said: Due to the day's hard work he gets tired and angry. Out of anger sometimes he slaps me once or twice.

Urmila said: He is working hard to earn money for us. We are living on that money. Since we are living on his earnings, so if he slaps or abuses me I don't say anything.

Violence is seen as an accepted way of releasing stress and therefore is tolerated by the wives. Their economic dependence adds to the vulnerability, and they accept abuse. Lack of financial resources and dependence upon the abuser curtail women's options to fight domestic violence (14).

Above discussions brought forth the different perceptions about domestic violence and revealed how it is a crime rooted in a patriarchal system supporting gender inequality. They see the prevailing gender inequality and power hierarchy which allots men a superior position as the contributing factor towards domestic violence. However, many survivors see domestic violence in terms of its direct forms and causes. They consider only the visible manifestation of it but cannot see the underlying patterns of gender subordination as its real cause. They fail to recognise the hidden gendered nature of domestic violence.

Forms of domestic violence

Domestic violence takes different forms in Assam. Similar to research around the world this study, too, brings forth that domestic violence is not just limited to physical violence and only to wife abuse. In Assam, it takes physical, psychological, sexual and economic forms. Here is a narration of the forms that domestic violence takes in Assam.

Physical violence

The data shows a high prevalence of physical violence in Assam. Respondents' accounts revealed a variety of forms of domestic violence which are physical in nature. The acts of physical violence found are physical battering, setting on fire, attempt at drowning, attacking with a sharp weapon, forcing to do tough and laborious works, forcing to drink alcohol, slapping, pulling hair, punching, strangulating, banging the head on a wall, kicking in the stomach during pregnancy, throwing utensils on the victim, beating incessantly, burning on various parts of the body, etc. Use of weapons, knife, belt, broomsticks is common in domestic violence incidents.

Smriti said: My husband beat me with a wooden stick, slapped me, punched me in the stomach, strangled me and banged my head on the wall.

The majority of women experiencing domestic violence reported isolation and restriction as two most frequent forms of physical violence.

Ranjit did not allow Anima to talk to anybody or keep any contact or communication with anybody. She was forced to withdraw all kinds of social connections. Anima could not continue her marriage with Ranjit because of his suspicious nature.

Isolation has been studied in two prominent works on domestic violence by Martin (1976) and Walker (1984), where they argued that actions to control and isolate women have a great impact on women's independence and coping capacity (15). Isolation reflects treatment of a woman as a man's possession, and he will decide and control all her social behaviours and communications. Men also justify their controlling acts of isolating women as loving and possessive behaviour towards the women. The abusers try to portray jealousy and controlling behaviour as a sign of love and concern for the women. Jealousy and a desire for control make men accuse women of acts which they have not done. These false accusations create stress and a complicated situation for women (16).

Consequences of physical violence:

Data shows that abuse often leads to injuries, both major and minor. While committing violence the abusers do not seem to consider the risk to the lives or health of women. The consequences of domestic violence are not limited to injuries and that not all women can escape such violence. Other than sustaining physical injuries, there were women who were killed as a result of domestic violence. Some of such incidents collected from the field are discussed next.

As stated by Rehna's father: Her husband was demanding money and other items in the name of dowry after their marriage. Once, he demanded 20,000 rupees which I could not give. A few days later, he assaulted her and set her on fire. Her dead body was found with burn injuries.

Anita's father stated: My daughter had informed me about the torture meted upon her. One night I heard my daughter's cry for help and went to her home. There I peeped through the closed door and saw her husband was trying to suppress her voice with a cloth. Then I kicked the door to open it and found my daughter in a half-burnt state, who later succumbed to her injuries.

Such severe violence is often considered a 'normal interaction among intimate couple' (17). But the death of the victims disproves this popular notion of considering domestic violence as a normal part of daily life and shows its severity. It is a serious criminal act and data shows that the demand for dowry is the prime cause in those cases where victims had died.

Physical violence related to pregnancy:

Respondents also affirmed experiencing physical violence during their pregnancy stage. Women are harassed and threatened to fulfill certain demands by marital families during pregnancy. The families found it easy to put pressure on women, as pregnancy limits a woman's physical movement and also adds additional responsibility of the unborn child. Abusers are found to take advantage of women's helpless condition to torture them more. This is illustrated in the following case:

Sarbani stated that she was tortured by her husband and marital family members to bring dowry from her mother. She refused to ask for money from her mother, and that made them aggressive, and they assaulted her severely. At that time she was pregnant, and her husband and in-laws tortured her both physically and mentally. When informed, her mother and sister came to her marital home and fulfilled their demands.

Violence during pregnancy is often used as a convenient way to compel a woman to do what the abuser wants, or inflict abuse without much resistance. Women's delicate physical condition and immobility during pregnancy compel them to tolerate abuse. The question of paternity and future expenses also makes it difficult for women to leave their abusive husbands. Pregnancy helps in reinforcing the patriarchal power hierarchy.

Again, unintended pregnancies have been found to be a cause of domestic violence.

Premada got pregnant due to a physical relationship with Dhiren. She then asked Dhiren to marry her. But he avoided her and kept away from marrying her. Later with the help of the village court she was married to him but had to face violence in the marital home.

Physical violence accompanied by other forms of violence:

Further, data shows that physical violence does not occur alone. It is often accompanied by other forms of violence such as psychological, sexual and economic violence. Respondents have narrated overlapping of different forms of violence in one single episode. Various studies have also confirmed the association between physical and other forms of violence (18; 19). In many instances verbal aggression is the pre-history of physical abuse, which ends with physical aggression (19). Similar findings are seen in this study, too, regarding association of different forms of domestic violence. A few respondents are quoted here:

Binita, a survivor, said: You can't think of physical violence alone. Verbal violence, sexual violence or some other kind of violence will definitely be associated with physical violence.

Nitu said: Chronic physical violence cannot occur suddenly without any kind of verbal or emotional abuse. Verbal abuse often ends up in physical attacks. Severe physical beating was always preceded by severe verbal abuse.

The above responses make it clear that one violent episode includes more than one form of domestic violence. It is often one form of violence which leads to another, or many times different forms get associated together.

Psychological violence

The data shows a high prevalence of psychological violence in Assam. Some of the forms, as mentioned by the survivor respondents, which psychological violence takes are scolding verbally, ignoring and avoiding the wife; accusing her of being of immoral character, casting doubts on her purity and disallowing her from kitchen and other sacred spaces of the house, shunning her and not speaking to her; branding her as careless, barren and a liar; questioning the legitimacy of her child; insulting and mocking her economic status, physical features, educational qualification and amount of dowry she brought; denying her access to her own child; not allowing her to wear vermilion, which is a sign of married status; threatening to throw acid on her, harm her family members and marry another girl; comparing her with ex-girlfriends and lovers; and making her feel sexually inadequate.

Diverse forms and more painful:

Respondents said that more than physical violence, it is the psychological violence that pained them more. According to them, physical wounds get healed quickly, but psychological pain hurts for a longer time. They reported that apart from pain caused due to violence, the fact of being abused by someone intimate adds to the pain.

Preceding factor to other forms of violence:

This study found overlapping of psychological and other forms of violence and that initiation of verbal abuse often leads to violent and severe physical or sexual attacks. Physical violence is often preceded by psychological violence. Respondents confirmed that they have suffered emotional abuse before physical or other forms of violence.

Sarmata's husband was a gambler. He pressured her to bring money from her parents so that he could spend it on gambling. Her refusal often made him angry, which finally resulted in verbal abuse and physical battering.

A woman is particularly vulnerable to violence when she is married into a comparatively rich family compared to her natal family. In this study, women from a poor background were found to face a lot more complicated situation after their marriage because of their economic status. Their poor background creates conditions for their victimisation. Being poor itself is a weak aspect for women as they are financially dependent; attacks on this very point by someone intimate make things even more painful and reinforces self-doubt. Insult and humiliating behaviour may cause extreme damage to a woman's image and confidence. Women are affected badly when their husbands blame them for being sexually inadequate or not beautiful and accomplished enough.

Moumita said: My husband insulted me for my sexual performance and said that I could not satisfy him sexually, whereas the other lady with whom he shared an illegal relationship is good at satisfying him. I could not tell anybody that my husband is not sexually satisfied with me and wants to be with the other woman. I feel ashamed of my husband's behaviour and try my best to hide his affair as well as his dissatisfaction with me from other's knowledge. It's both insulting as well as depressing.

Psychological violence related to reproduction and sex of the child:

Respondents reported being harassed and violated in relation to matters of childbirth and sex of the child. Not having a male child or being infertile was the basis of severe scolding, humiliation and other forms of abuse. The following cases show this:

Lakhima informed me that she was mentally, physically and economically harassed by her husband and in-laws after five years of marriage. Her husband abandoned her for four months in the year 2012 and always insulted her for not bearing a male child.

In a patriarchal society, motherhood is one of the most important determinants of womanhood. The most important function of a wife is to legitimately reproduce. Abuse in such a situation, when the woman is already under severe stress for infertility, increases her psychological suffering and vulnerability. The use of non-physical techniques like insults and scoldings generate pressure and guilt in the minds of women (20). The following cases will reflect the pain of infertility, combined and how infertility results in domestic violence.

Trishna said: Baji (barren) is the word used to describe an infertile woman and her inability to reproduce. The single word is enough to cause harm, pain, worthlessness or feeling of being an outcaste.

Sumi said: My husband was involved with another woman after marriage. When I came to know, taking help from my mother-in-law I forced him to stop all contact with her. Till then things were OK. But off late another problem has emerged. We are trying to have our first baby, but I am unable to conceive till now. This becomes a problematic issue between me and my husband. He is abusing me mentally for not getting pregnant and also does not accompany me to the doctor. Above all he is again getting close to the other lady. I informed my mother-in-law, but this time she took a different stand. She is accusing me for not getting pregnant and trying to defend my husband's involvement with the other lady.

The above responses show how painful the situation is for infertile women, and infertility becomes a justification for inflicting violence upon them. Along with the psychological pain of not having children, women also have to deal with the blame for infertility (21; 22).

False accusations:

Respondents have reported false accusations to be of immense psychological torture. A few cases are given here:

Dipti's husband accused her of having an illicit relationship with his own father and began assaulting her physically. She wanted the matter to be discussed with other members of the family. But he did not allow her to disclose such an accusation to anyone.

Farida stated that her husband doubted her character. He thought that Farida was having an illegal relationship with some other man, and making that issue he used to beat her severely. He restricted her visits to her natal home and did not allow her parents to visit her, which caused mental pain.

False accusations, or blaming wives for imaginary relations with other men, have been used as a technique by abusers to make women feel morally guilty and to have psychological control over them. This technique of false accusations is not just limited to itself but often results in physical and other kinds of violence upon the victims.

Keeping close contact with previous girlfriends and frequent mention about them and has been reported by respondents to be emotionally very painful.

Women reported that abusers have used different kinds of threats exert control over women. Women reported having been threatened with divorce, separation from children, murder and burning. Threatening to set the house on fire or killing the woman's family members are other strategies that have been proved to be effective. A few women reported that husbands used self-beating or self-hurting as a way to create panic in their minds. This behaviour made the women extremely scared and worried.

Pari reported: He used to beat me, then say sorry and start hurting himself for beating me. After battering me he behaved like a possessed man, hurting himself and getting emotional. This scared me the most, and I had to put all efforts to stop him from hurting himself.

Women are vulnerable to different forms of psychological abuse across their lifespan. Mental torture harms women deeply and stops them from standing firmly against their abusers. It creates fear in their minds to leave their abusers and thus forces them to stay in abusive relationships and tolerate violence. Through the use of psychological violence men aim to break down the confidence of women and to minimise their strength to retaliate. Psychological harassment increases insecurity in the minds of women, and it becomes easy to dominate them. Psychological violence destroys the will power of the victim, and full control over victim is gained (23).

Sexual violence

The data collected reveals the prevalence of sexual violence in Assam. Women reported a range of sexual violence which they have faced. Acts of sexual violence reported by women include rape, forced sex, violence for refusing to have sex, forced sex with cousins, forced pre-marital sex, pressure to join prostitution and marital rape. In this study respondents reported their experiences of facing various forms of sexual violence.

Marital rape:

Marital rape by husbands has been the most common form of sexual violence faced by women. The following cases show the presence of marital rape in society.

Priyalata's husband used to force her to have sex with him many times in a day. His family supported him in all his merciless acts. She got frequent infection in her vagina because of excessive forced sexual intercourse. This made her ill and weak.

Sangeeta said: Pradip did not listen to me when I reminded him about the doctor's advice to not have sex for a few months after my operation. He did not listen to me and forcefully had sex just after the operation, and that affected my health badly.

Providing sex to a husband on demand is considered a key component of a woman's role as a wife (24). This inevitably forces a woman to submit to her husband's sexual demands. Women are compelled to have sex, even when they do not want to, as a result of marital obligations throughout their lives. In such conditions, where women are bound to provide sexual pleasure to men following marital obligations, marriage can be called a "licence to rape" (25). Thus, under the shadow of wifely duties, women face rape, which in India is still not legally recognised as violence. Rather, it is suppressed by being labelled as a woman's failure to perform her wifely duties. Two of my respondents are quoted here:

Swapnali said: Being a businessman my husband spends most of the time outside home. But whenever he is at home, it seems as if I have nothing else to do except sleeping with him. As long as he stays at home, I have to be in bed. Thus, I was raped for 22 years as I kept on fulfilling his demands without protest.

Selima said: My husband often abuses me verbally. But sometimes when he becomes angry, especially at night, he forces me to have sex for a long time. He even forces me to have anal sex. I don't like it, and it is painful. I don't protest as he is my husband and I am afraid of him.

It is seen that women generally do not raise their voice against their husbands' sexual violence. The study also reflected that husbands use sex as a tool to show aggression and dominate women. Toleration of such abuse reflects the accepted norm of a husband's absolute right over his wife's sexuality and unlimited access to her, due to which women hesitate to protest.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are often trivialised as being carried out only by strangers. But in reality sexual assaults are often carried out by persons known to the victims. The data from my field work shows that women have been raped by their husbands several times in their lives. Physical proximity between married couples makes married women easily accessible for sexual assault by their husbands. Also the burden of socialisation makes women tolerate sexual abuse by their husbands, and marriage vows restrict women from saying no. It is also found that women find it hard to name marital rape as violence because of the socio-cultural construction of 'wifely duty to submit to sexual relations, regardless of their own desires' (26).

The fact that marital rape occurs within marriage makes it somewhat complicated for women to understand it as a form of violence. The nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator actually blurs the line between violence and duty.

Pre-marital sexual abuse:

The data shows that sexual violence starts even before the marriage is solemnised. It is found that women face sexual violence before marriage, which continues after marriage as well. Survivor respondents have reported experiences of pre-marital forced sex by their current husbands. To quote one:

Dulu said: I was repeatedly raped by my husband before marriage. He blackmailed me and forced me to have sex with him. I had to submit to his demands many times, and later when he came to know about my pregnancy he started avoiding me.

In this case Dulu was blackmailed by her current husband to have sex with him. She could not avoid but had to follow his demands. Later, when she got pregnant and asked him to marry her, he started avoiding her. Then she went to his home and disclosed everything to his parents and forced him to accept her. A village meeting was called, and accordingly they were asked to get married. But it was not enough as she had to face several other incidents of violence in her married life.

Premada informed me that before marriage, she and her current husband were in a relationship for some years. He asked her to get involved in physical intimacy before marriage. With the promise of marriage, he acquired her consent. She became pregnant but was not worried about her pregnancy as she believed that he would marry her. However, when he got news of her pregnancy, he started avoiding her.

The above cases show that due to non-acceptance of pre-marital sex in society, women have to face a lot of complexities as abusers often want to get rid of the responsibility of pregnancies resulting from pre-marital sex. Pre-marital sex not only creates a stigmatic life for women but has other violent implications, too. Pre-marital sex results in unwedded pregnancies and following complexities like abandonment by the family to save the family honour, loss of support, mental torture, etc.

One woman reported that she was sexually exploited and got pregnant by her neighbour, who fled after hearing her about her pregnancy. Later, due to the stigma of an unwed pregnancy, she was thrown out of her home by her family, and she ended up staying in a shelter home.

In the above case the victim needed family support to deal with her stigma. Instead of helping her, however, her own family threw her out to save the family honour. She ended up landing in a shelter home with economic difficulties and other emotional traumas.

Sexual violence by another male member of the marital family:

The data also shows sexual abuse of women by male members of the marital family, other than the husbands. The following case will show how:

Dulu, a survivor woman, was staying in her sister-in-law's place. There, her sister-in-law's husband tried to exploit her sexually. He tried to force himself on her many times.

In such cases, reporting the violence becomes risky as the victim is not believed by the marital family, and often violence is inflicted upon her for trying to put a false blame upon a marital family member.

Economic violence

Respondents described the financial abuse they experienced in matters of maintenance of the household, job and workplace, child and health care, etc. The various forms of financial abuse reported by respondents are taking away the wife's money without informing her, putting restrictions on her to not do her job, not giving her money for daily expenses, etc.

The majority of women reported forceful taking away of their money by husbands as the most common form of economic violence they have experienced. Following cases will demonstrate it:

One survivor respondent said that whenever she brought money from her natal family, her husband used to waste it on drinking instead of investing it in business.

Sarmata said that every evening, her husband drinks and asks her for money; and if she refuses to give him money, he tortures her. Beating and verbal abuse are regular incidents in her home.

Husbands consider that they have full right over their wives' money. They find it justified to take the money from their wives by using force and violence. Abusive husbands are found to use the money forcefully taken away from their wives for gambling, drinking or personal pleasure. Women also reported that refusal to give their husbands the money often leads to physical violence. The link between economic violence and physical violence becomes clear from their responses.

Restriction on doing jobs:

A few women reported that they were restricted from going out for jobs. Husbands not only restricted their wives from doing jobs but also created trouble in their workplace. Being embarrassed, these women had to leave their jobs.

Sunu informed me that she was not even provided with adequate financial assistance by her husband to bring up her child. She had to undergo tremendous economic hardship, which made her look for a job. She got herself engaged as an

ASHA worker in her area. Though she got a job, her husband was the main barrier in doing her duties as he used to abuse her publicly on her way to work.

Rima informed me that she established a beauty parlour, but she could not work peacefully there. Her husband used to drink and go to her parlour and start fighting with her. He used to spoil the environment of her parlour and used to beat her if she earned less money.

Thus data shows the negative impact of domestic violence on women's work and economic self-sufficiency.

Burden of the household on women:

A few women reported that they were forced to look after their marital families without financial help from their husbands. Without money it is difficult for women to run a home, and it puts them into hardships, making her vulnerable to violence.

Rumi said: My husband did not provide money even for children's food. Moreover I have been forced to look after his ailing parents without any financial help from him.

Moumita informed that she had to work and take the responsibility of their lives as her husband had no job. He neither worked nor supported her; instead he spent her money on alcohol. Later he got a job. But still he did not want to take the responsibility of the household. She had to fight to get financial help from him. Whenever he had to take some responsibility, he became violent and tortured her.

Economic violence against women forces them to live on a strict allowance or to beg for money for themselves.

It is seen that in Assam, women face domestic violence to a large extent, irrespective of their educational, socio-economic-religious and other background. Though victims range from children to elderly women, married women are found to be more common victims of domestic violence. Physical violence and psychological violence have been found to be more common and diverse than sexual and financial violence. Perpetuation of violence often reflects the impact of the socialisation process and prevailing patriarchal notions, norms and values.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study thus reflect the serious picture of domestic violence in Assam. It revealed how different forms of domestic violence are perpetuated in Assam and how the perceptions of domestic violence differ from respondents to respondents. Domestic violence has been perceived in different ways and the perceptions are influenced by gendered social norms and gendered socialization. Society of Assam is patriarchal in nature and governed by gendered social norms. Therefore like other societies, in Assam too, domestic violence is normalised, trivialised and minimised. Men being the bread-earner and head of the family enjoy the social sanctions to inflict violence upon their wives. Infliction of violence upon women is ensured by socialisation process which teaches women that god wives don't raise voice against their husbands. However, some women found to be educated and a bit aware about their rights, consider domestic violence as violation of rights and took help of various agencies to counter violence in their lives. Domestic violence occurs in all forms. Physical violence is the most prevalent one occurs in myriad forms. From infancy to old age—women face violence in each stage of life. Violence during pregnancy period is found to be very high. Pregnancy is a period where the risk and responsibility of the unborn child restricts women's movement, limits their resistance to violence. It proves to be a convenient stage for the abuser to fulfill undue wishes by pressurising the women as well as their natal families. Outcome of physical violence results in injuries to deaths as well. The easy use of violence upon women reflects men's sense of ownership of women. Men consider women as their property. Abusers do not care about the severity and probable

consequences of the violent acts inflicted upon the victims, because they believe that they can do anything to them. This happens due to the superiority over women granted to men by the patriarchal system, which allows men to abuse women violently (17). Men being in a higher position in the power hierarchy use violence to show their powerful position. They also use violence to control and dominate women to ensure their superiority both at home and in society (27). Psychological form of domestic violence found to occur in higher rate and has been reported to be very painful. Psychological violence often acts as the preceding factor for physical violence. Often violence starts with verbal abuse ends up in physical abuse. Psychological abuse provides the context for violence and sexual aggression. In psychological abuse for infertility, for giving birth to girl child is very frequent. Indian society, where a son is preferred intrinsically almost everywhere, violence against wives through humiliation, scolding, stigmatising and abandonment for not reproducing or not reproducing a son is seen as normal (28). A woman's identity, status and position are influenced by her status of motherhood. Motherhood gives meaning to and upgrades a woman's position and life in a patriarchal society (29). Women are socialised to find their existence worthy through childbirth. Gendered expectations of motherhood make it intrinsically linked to the very idea of femininity (22). Failing to reproduce creates severe negative complexities for women as their identity, social status and security depend on the ability to produce offspring (21; 30). Infertile and childless women, who cannot become mothers, have to go through severe social stigmatisation. Women's infertility is linked with social stigma, relationship problems, diminishing well-being and domestic violence. Infertility becomes a source of stress, anxiety, depression and marital difficulties and results in psychological distress. Women are mostly blamed for being infertile, whereas men are rarely blamed for infertility. The cultural construction of femininity linked with motherhood and the feeling of failure, grief and the emotional impact of the inability to fulfil the expectations of motherhood make women weak. In such conditions violence by their partners or other marital family members increases their vulnerability and pain. The effect of verbal abuse upon the psychology of women is intense, and abusers use verbal abuse to delimit women into 'nothing' and harm their self-worth (31). Abusers treat victims as if they are not human. Through verbal abuse one is minimised to nothing –women's existence and worth is denied. Constant verbal abuse forces the victim to question her self-worth and existence, signifying decreased self-confidence, mental instability, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), etc. Sexual violence is one of the hardest aspects of domestic violence to talk about and found to be very rampant. Sexual violence encompasses wide range of unwanted and humiliating range of acts. Marital rape is a common occurrence that pushes women into traumatic situation where she has to live with her rapist. However, many women fail to realize it as violence and misunderstood it to be their wifely duty to satisfy their husbands. Patriarchal system given men the full access and rights over women's body and it blurs the line between violence and wifely' duty. Marital rape occurs at a much higher rate than reported. Legal non-recognition, marital insecurity and a conservative societal view on sex and marriage make the situation tough for women to come forward and reveal marital rape and take steps against it. Pre-marital sex is considered a taboo across various societies in India, including most communities of Assam. Women often approach village court to help them to get married to their abusers to avoid the stigma of unwedded pregnancies resulting from pre-marital sexual involvement. In such cases of pre-marital sex and unwedded pregnancies, arranging a marriage between the victim and the abuser stands out as the most convenient and obvious solution by village courts. The intention behind this solution is to avoid social stigma and to keep the family name and honour intact. Surprisingly, here the societal attitude seemed to be somewhat considerate to this issue. What was found that instead of punishing the people involving in this socially banned act, society tried to recognise their relationship by arranging a marriage between them. This kind of arrangement is made to solve the problem of lost virginity, legitimize the pregnancies and thus ensure honour of family. Thus, societal sanctions and values attached to the legitimacy of a child, the stigma of an unwedded pregnancy, etc., have compelled women to demand marriage with their abusers. While doing so they have to ignore their mental and physical pain and the trauma of rape. Society, too, finds it easy to uphold the values of marriage and family through marriage between the victim and the abuser. Thus, in matters of sexual violence against girls and unwedded pregnancies, women face multi-layered victimisation and deprivation. Firstly, they are exploited and their rights are violated, and secondly to be accepted in

society, they have to marry their abusers, forgetting about the deception and the rejection that they faced. In this process, due to societal norms, honour gets priority over women's sufferings. Such a marriage can save the girl from public perceptions of complicity in her own downfall but can't give her justice against the violence she faced. This idea to 'domesticate rape' on the basis of a patriarchal-gendered norm supporting monogamous marriage makes it often socially acceptable and tolerable (32).

Restricting wives from doing jobs keeps them dependent on the husbands and, ensures the husbands' control over the wives. Women's economic independence and financial self-sufficiency increase their decision-making power and strength. Economic independence gives women confidence to decide and do whatever is best for them. Greater financial independence empowers them with better outside options, lowering the barriers to leaving the abusers and not tolerating abuse inside marriage (33). Therefore to cut down women's power, restrictions are imposed upon their jobs and economic activities which results in Economic dependence results in women's powerlessness and vulnerability. Along with economic exploitation and hindrance to career development of women, such abuse also serves to trap women in abusive relationships. Socio-cultural gender roles govern marital relationships in society. Due to the paid nature of men's work, men have more bargaining power in the home. This unquestioned authority and privileged position of men is challenged when women become economically independent (34). A wife's independence 'signifies a challenge to a culturally prescribed norm of male dominance and female dependence' (35). To stop women from challenging the sanctioned gender role by being economically independent, and to reinstate men's authority, violence is used as an important means. This study found that abused women with fewer resources are less likely to leave the abusive relationship and to seek outside intervention for the ongoing violence. Their financial dependency restricts them from going out of the violent marriage. They remain entrapped in the violent relationship. Abusers hamper women's economic activities with the aim to disturb their productivity and progress in the workplace. Neither providing any financial assistance nor allowing women to do jobs peacefully are men's attempts to curtail women's economic freedom as well as maintain their own economic domination over women. The prevalent notion that good women and women from respected families restrict themselves to a 'private' sphere also prevents women from getting employed. Furthermore, traditional patriarchal norms attach a stigma to married women who relinquish their primary identity as housewives and join the paid workforce. Thus, the above discussion throws light on how women of Assam are facing all types of domestic violence and the patriarchal society is providing the platform for emergence of this evil act.

VI. CONCLUSION

Based on qualitative analysis of data, collected from six different districts of Assam, including women from all age group, irrespective of any economic, educational, religious and community background, this study found the prevalence of domestic violence across the state of Assam. This study nullifies the popular claim that women of Assam enjoy higher status than their counterparts from rest of India. Here too, domestic violence is emerging and has reached a serious height. The patriarchal social structure provides the hotbed for emergence and rapid growth of this social evil. The prevailing gender norms, customary practices and traditions, socialisation process and other factors force women to remain in the secondary position and offer men the higher status. Patriarchal system by all means ensures men's privileged position in the power-hierarchy and naturalises and normalises oppression, suppression and exploitation of women.

VII. REFERENCES

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