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Domestic Violence Induced Social Exclusion of Dalit Women: Evidence from Puducherry

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Domestic violence is a principal factor responsible for social exclusion among women, particularly among marginalised groups. Being a woman from a socially excluded groups, the risk factors are severe than other victims of domestic violence from mainstream communities. Most of the studies on dalit women deal with the violent experiences faced by them from non-dalit social groups, however, this study deals with the violent experience of dalit women within the families with special reference to dalit women in Puducherry, India This study examines the relationship between domestic violence against Dalit women and how it excludes them from the mainstream society. The result indicates that Dalit women victims of domestic violence are exceedingly vulnerable to the impact of domestic violence and it makes them socially exclusion from the mainstream of the society. It reduces the possibilities of Dalit women's participation in social life. Thus, domestic violence induced social exclusion works as a process which blocks the Dalit women's contribution into the society as well as the nation.

Keywords: domestic violence, social exclusion, dalit women, gender, caste discrimination

1. Introduction

Domestic violence is one of the most prevalent and moderately hidden and silenced form of violence against women. The term domestic violence refers that any form of violence, coercion or threat from an intimate partner which occurs within the domestic sphere. The impact of domestic violence is myriad and often women and children are the worst victims of this violence. They are supposed to be protected by their family, hence, as a male dominated social institution, family works as a 'torture camp' and their women are battered, raped and killed by their own family members. UNICEF (2006) study explained that, the victims of domestic violence "are unable to make their own decisions, voice their own opinions or protect themselves and their children for fear of further repercussions. Their human rights are denied and their lives are stolen from them by the ever-present threat of violence". Thus, domestic violence creates poor individuality, loss of confidence and poor contribution to the development themselves and to the nation. Therefore, the victims of domestic violence are socially excluded from the participation of socio-cultural, political and economic life.

Domestic violence is a global issue which cuts across the boundaries of culture, class, caste and ethnicity. Therefore, women's experience to violent familial environment is not symmetrical. According to Cathy Young (2005) "low income and low educational levels are major risk factors for domestic abuse". The economical frustration among the family members can create violent and dissatisfactory life among the low income families. This paper attempts to discuss the complex relation between domestic violence induced social exclusion, family and socioeconomic status of Dalitwomen in Puducherry. Women who belong to Dalit communities are differentially and severely experiencing the impact of domestic violence. Batsleer et al., (2004) studied about the impact of domestic violence among socially excluded communities. He states that "the line of reasoning, paradoxically, obscures the plight of those women at risk of abuse, including women from minority groups; thus potentially influencing priority needs relating to access to services". This study attempts to explore the dissimilarity and severance of domestic violence among married women who belongs to Dalit community in Puducherry. Indeed, it is difficult to measure the magnitude of domestic violence due to the high secretive nature of this violence. However, the social exclusion of Dalit women is a reality and the impact of domestic violence reinforces the process of social exclusion among them.

United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women has reported the nature and magnitude of atrocities are vulnerable and punitive and barbaric practices are common against Dalit women. The report (National Human Rights Commission, (2004, p.161) says that

“Dalit women face targeted violence, even rape and death from state actors and powerful members of dominant castes, used to inflict political lesions and crush dissent within the community, or the women are used as pawns to capture their men folk. These women are gang raped, forced into prostitution, stripped, paraded around naked, made to eat excrement or even murdered or even murdered for no crime of theirs... Young Dalit girls are married off at an early age mainly as protection against sexual assault from dominant caste men”.

In view of this, Dalit women are stringently undergoing various forms of atrocities in their day today life. The Government of India has considered the empowerment of women from disadvantaged group as Dalit and women from other marginalised communities and attempted to implement it through National Policy for the Empowerment of Women, 2001. Elimination of violence against women and development of Dalit women was the prime agenda. It states (DWCD, 2001) “All forms of violence against women, physical and mental, whether at domestic or societal levels, including those arising from customs, traditions or accepted practices, shall be dealt with effectively with a view to eliminate its incidence “The extreme kind of crimes against Dalit women and practices of un-touch ability needs to be documented and studied in detail. Ruth Manorama’s ‘Dalit Women: Downtrodden among the Downtrodden’ is a remarkable work. The present study examines the extremeness of domestic violence among Dalit women and how it excludes them from the mainstream society.

2. Dalit Women and Family

The family has considered as a central social institution. Hence, in India, studies on family have received inadequate attention from the social sciences academicians. By 1980’s Anthropologists and Sociologists had studied about kinship, marriage, and the structures of family in India. Feminist scholars had critically studied about the patterns of division of labour and gender roles within the family. The studies on women-headed household have been largely researched by L. Gulati (1993) and Chant (1992). Accordingly, all these discourse have widely discussed about the ‘popular culture on family’. It has explained about the existing family life pattern of people who belongs to none other than Dalit family.

Relatively, the condition of women in Dalit family is having diverse nature than women in other families in the society. Mary Grey (2005) explained about a range of discriminating factors towards Dalit women. “All sources express the painful truth that Dalit women suffer from multiple discriminations of class, caste, gender and cultural traditions, at every level of society—village, district, state and nationally as well as in their own homes and most intimate relations”. Anyhow, there is a need to read the caste, violence against Dalit women and social exclusion from a socio-cultural and caste based background of Indian society. The mode of operation of patriarchy and the perpetuation of violence against Dalit women particularly in the domestic sphere is moderately different from other communities. Henry Maine’s celebrated work *Ancient law* (1861) described the concept of patriarchal family as “a group of men and women, children and slaves, of animate and inanimate property, all connected together by common subjection to the Paternal Power of the chief of the household”. Accordingly, the senior male member employs the authority or power over other family members, especially above women. This domination over Dalit women leads to discrimination and violence against them.

All these discourse on family studies shows that studies on intimate relationship between men and women, shifts in family structure, wife and husband, are very limited. Similarly, the studies on changes of family structure in Dalit life, the nature intimate relationship among Dalit family members, domestic violence towards Dalit women and Dalit violence and social exclusion of women have studied moderately few in India.

Irudayam, A. et al. highlighted that “The insecurity generated through structural violence against Dalit women in both the general community and within the family acts as a form of coercive control over them. This ensures that Dalit women continue to be disempowered, socially suppressed, and physically, sexually, economically, and politically exploited” (Irudayam, A. et.al. 2011, p.56). The magnitude of the violence towards Dalit women is visible in the report of National Family Health Survey (IIP,2001). The evidence shows that, “41.7 per cent of scheduled caste women aged 15-49 years have experienced physical violence since the age of 15 years as compared to 30.8 per cent of non-scheduled caste/ scheduled tribe (SC/ST) women; 11.0 per cent of women in this age group have experienced sexual violence as compared to 7.6 per cent of non-SC/ST women”. It reveals, it is essential to study the situation of Dalit families, intimate relations between husband and wife, and violence against Dalitwomen from domestic sphere.

3. Cultural Dimensions of Domestic Violence among Dalits

Culture consists of belief, values, habits and practices. Culture is the learned aspects in human life. Edward Tylor, defines the most influential concept of culture in this celebrated work *Primitive Culture*. This definition points to several essential aspects of culture. “First, culture is learned and it implies that culture is not genetically inherited”. The term culture has different meanings in contemporary world. Because, culture has interlinked with the identity of any individuals in any societies as important as national, ethnic and religious identity. The cultural dimensions of Dali have widely misinterpreted and refined by the social scientists. Infact, Ambedkar has outlined the need of improvisation of the way of life among the Dalits at the Depressed Classes Conference on August 8th, 1980.

“We must shape our course ourselves and by ourselves.... Political power cannot be a panacea for the ills of the depressed classes. Their salvation lies in their social elevation. They must cleanse their bad habits. They must improve their bad ways of living...”

Here, Ambedkar’s anxious about the life pattern and bad ways of living of Dalit members in Indian society. Mostly, Dalit women are humiliated by multiple ways of oppression as the patriarchal oppression by the social system and similarly the male domination from their own family members. There the nature of domestic violence becomes more differently effects among the married Dalit women. In many societies Dalit couples are ‘branded’ in creates violence in domestic sphere against their intimate partners. The caste based

society misread the domestic violence in Dalit families as a cultural practice that exists among the Dalit. The precipitating factors behind the domestic violence may varies other communities. Mary Grey (2005) mentioned “All sources express the painful truth that Dalit women suffer from multiple discriminations of class, caste, gender and cultural traditions, at every level of society—village, district, state and nationally— as well as in their own homes and most intimate relations”. It shows the lived experience and humiliation towards Dalit within a four walls of domestic sphere. Ruth Manorama has emphasised that Dalit women are discriminated against thrice times as they are poor, they are women and they are Dalit. She states that (Manorama, R. 2000, p.2) Dalit women are subjected to unique and greater vulnerability of violence as “extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, being forced to drink urine and eat faeces, branding, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails, and violence including murder after proclaiming witchcraft, are only experienced by Dalit women”.

4. Plight of Dalit Women and Domestic Violence

In India, autonomous women’s movement has addressed the issues of Dalit, tribals and landless labourers by the late seventies and early eighties. Moreover, the movement was able to create a Dalit consciousness among the civilians of India. Kaviraj (as cited in Surinder S. Jodhka. (2010, p.15) explained that a common identity of the Scheduled Castes or ex-untouchable communities was ‘a constructed, modern identity’ which was mobilized by a new leadership which arose from within the Dalit groups and used the language of equality and democratic representation and simultaneously fore-grounded the communitarian dimension of their deprivation, which invariably resulted from the structural realities of Indian society, the caste-based discrimination”. Several political parties have taken up women’s issues as their political agenda and made attempt to tackle several gender issues.

According to Ghanshyam Shah (Shah, G. 2006, p.134) The official records of crimes against Dalits indicates that in the year of 1999-2000, there are total 285,871 crimes has registered against Dalit women in countrywide. Out of 285,871 cases 14,030 cases are under the Anti-Un-touchability Act and 81,796 cases are under the Prevention of Atrocities Act. The social and cultural vulnerabilities of caste system and violent marital life makes different lived experience among Dalit women from other women victims of domestic violence. They are undergoing several risk factors entire their life cycle. They are the victims of the wide spread exploitation and discrimination. Undoubtedly, domestic violence cutting across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity and age. Hence, the nature of violence, causes and consequences varies from person to person. Domestic violence against Dalit women reinforces the caste based norms and their subordination in the society. Moreover, that leads them to undergo severe social dishonour and social exclusion.

5. Methods

This study has conducted among Dalit families in Puducherry Union Territory, specifically in the area of Muthyalpet and Muthaliyarpet. The researcher has used interview method and conducted in-depth interview among forty-three (43) Dalit married women who are the victims of severe domestic violence.

6. Findings and Discussions

6.1. Domestic violence: Extremeness of Sexual Violence against Dalit Women

The result shows that domestic violence among Dalit married women are undergoing several issues that leads them into social exclusion. Among the 43 Dalit married women 78 percentage of the Dalit women are married with Dalit partner and all of them are undergoing regular incidents of severe domestic violence. The victims are undergoing minor and major forms of violence regularly in their familial life. Out of 43 respondents 24 members (56%) has agreed that they have experienced marital rape more than one times. 13 respondents (30%) has revealed that they faced forced sexual relation from the male members or relatives of the conjugal family. Out of 43 respondents 33 of them (73%) has agreed that they face verbal abuse from their husband as well as their in-laws about their doubt towards extra-marital relationship of the respondent. 23 respondents (53%) replied that they experienced sexually coloured comments from other Dalit and other caste members from their village. 8 respondents revealed that (18%) they faced child sexual abuse before their marriage from neighbours, family relatives and even from strangers. 11 percentages (5 members) of respondents revealed that their spouses have forced them for prostitution. This result shows that Dalit women are prone to multiple forms sexual violence from a wide range of sources which includes from their own Dalit community and members from other caste. The result shows that 28 respondents (65%) are responded that they faced sexual violence from the period of pregnancy and out of 28 members. The sexuality of Dalit women is not valuing in the caste-based society. As Aloysius Irudayam rightly pointed out “given their untouchability status and characterization as women of ‘loose morals’, irrespective of age and marital status, they are perceived as available for male exploitation and control” (Aloysius Irudayam, A 2011, p.56). The sexual exploitation over Dalit women is tactically justified, sanctioned, and established by dominant caste.

6.2. Caste, Patriarchy and Domestic Violence: Hierarchical power over Dalit Women

Dalit women’s vulnerability and atrocities can be examined through two different ways: as violence from within the families (conjugal and natal) and violence from other communities or castes. The casteist and patriarchal norms subjected to exploit Dalit women and it ruins the entire Dalit women and their families. The result shows that out of 43 respondents 31 (72 %) of them are the principal breadwinner of their family. They are daily wage earners spent their money for household goods and childcare necessities. Their husbands are working and earning though their daily wages, hence, the earnings is not spent for familial expenses by male partners.

Another way, along with Dalit women, their partners also subjected to patriarchal suppressions and casteist discriminations from their dominant caste men employers.

The poor economic conditions and lack of resources makes Dalit families to undergo social and familial insecure conditions. Out of 43 respondents, 38 members (88%) of them had given dowry at the time of their marriage. Most of the Dalit husbands are receiving dowry at the time of marriage and as a quick resource it may spent without any savings. Landlessness, lack of ownership in the land, and lack of property ownership are other complications faces by Dalit family members, which may lead to conflict between family members of the couples. Therefore, the family members never attempt to involve or solve the domestic violence among them. It makes severity of violence in the day today life of Dalit married women. Lack or resources and poor capital force them to undergo poor social, political and economic status in the society. Political relations of Dalit families are relatively minus and the conflicts between husband and wife have been make complex and severe situations in the family. It amplifies the untouchability and caste based practices against the Dalit families.

6.3. Branded/Labelled Dalit Couples

The socio-cultural notions towards Dalit families are inevitable in the discussions of domestic violence. The caste-oriented society is biased about the concept of Dalit and they treat them as 'uncivilised' and 'impure'. The social dishonoured life of Dalit members reflects in their familial life too. Out of 43 respondents 38 (88 %) married women responded that they themselves feel worthless to continue their life along with their partner. They reflect the public opinion about their familial life. One of the respondent recollected the incident that when she has undergone severe violence from her husband. The neighbours (belongs to dominant caste) said, "Dalit familial life is like dogs...always barking, biting and quarrelling". This comment reveals that public has branding the Dalit families are inbuilt with violence culture. They never give any supportive hands towards the victims of domestic violence. Therefore, the process of solving or intervening of domestic violence issues among Dalit families is very slow. It makes less possibility to the attention towards domestic violence among Dalit families, when it considered as a part or nature of their life.

6.4. Space and Domestic Violence

The spaces of the domestic sphere have a role in domestic violence in the Dalit families. Because most of the respondents are having small and congested domestic space that makes meagre possibilities to escape from the violent attack from their male partner. Out of 43 respondents 34 (79 %) revealed that, their husbands publically beaten them and used filthy language against them. It makes dishonour and deep wound in the dignity of Dalit women. 26 respondents (60 %) agreed that they have publically beaten by their husband at different public places as market, bus stand, work place etc. The dimensions of space in domestic violence can be reflect from the incidents of domestic violence which happened in the public spheres like bus stop, main road, middle of the journey, inside the public transport, and public functions like marriage, other rituals and so on. One respondent revealed her bitter experience as 'husband is an alcoholic addict and used to beat her and children severely. One nightshe run away from the home along with her five-year-old boy and 6-monthgirl child towards the bus stand and the entire night she spends them in the bus stand'. All these violent incidents make a unique and vulnerable nature of domestic violence among Dalit women than other communities.

The extension of domestic violence into the public places demolishes the dignity of Dalit women, her personality, and it question the reputation her family as well as their community. Out of 43 respondents 27 (62%) of them responded that due to congested domestic space they were blocked to escape from the violence. It caused to make several severe harms as physical wounds and sexual violence by their husbands. 7 respondents (16%) replied that due to humiliation by their husbands they were unable to continue their livelihood in the previous working place, and they shifted to another workplace. Because, the village member's contempt and blame the victims of domestic violence and branded them as so-called 'bad women'. It forces them undergo frenetic situation that leads to emotional and psychological disturbances in their life. Moreover, it seriously disturbs their socio-economic rights to survive their life with dignity and it violates their right to livelihood.

7. Conclusion

Domestic violence is a global issue that is still perceived as 'private affair' and unimportant. The universality and socio-cultural factors are prohibiting to report the violence and it reinforce again towards women. Though there are legal mechanisms to protect and prevent domestic violence, many of the Dalit women victims are unable to access it. Moreover, they have limited tie-up with any of the social and political association and that create crisis to report the violence they faced from their intimate partner. The irony is that in the productive age of the husband and wife they unable to contribute, achieve and preserve to them as well as their next generations too. Children's are the worst victims of domestic violence and may undergo several social and emotions issues within the family, society and from their self. Domestic violence is one of the major reason to exclude the Dalit families from the mainstream of the society. Many of the women who under goes the humiliate practices in domestic sphere by their husbands and the violence is denying and their dignity to leave as a woman, as human being and as a Dalit. The development process will not be completed without the participation and the representation of Dalit. It is highly necessary to voice out the domestic violence issues among Dalit families, which helps them to integrate with the progression of social development as well as national development.

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