

Research Article



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# People's Perception of Domestic Violence: An Inquiry in Kerala

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Domestic violence (DV) is everyday terrorism within the home context across cultures. The universal portrayals of female victims and male perpetrators are still prevalent. With the emergence of a pandemic-specific lifestyle, DV surged at an alarming rate worldwide. Although the conformist patriarchal notions in our society persistently try to normalize DV, people are getting aware of this social evil with governmental and non-governmental initiatives. In this context, this qualitative study was framed to explore the DV perceptions and experiences of people in Kerala. Ten couples (N=20) were interviewed in-depth to elicit data. A thematic analysis of data revealed the meaning that participants attached to DV, its causes, effects, and their experiences of DV. In addition, this study garnered participants' opinions on preventive measures for DV. The codes, subthemes, and themes answered the research questions. The result revealed that men are less likely to experience DV; therefore, women empowerment, gender sensitization, and attainment of gender equality can abolish DV.

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the horror and severity of domestic violence (DV), the simplistic stories attached to it often keep this complex social issue out of mainstream discourse (Barocas *et al.*, 2016). The normalization of this everyday terrorism (Pain, 2014) contributes to a cycle of violence. Therefore, a rationalized narrative for DV is needed to ensure the protection of victims and the punishment of perpetrators. Moving away from the traditional partner violence framework, DV requires a broader approach to scientific research, criminal justice, and policymaking. Moreover, society must change culturally entrenched patriarchal perceptions of DV.

DV occurs in the context of the family or home and affects both victims and witnesses. It includes physical violence, intimidation, and controlling behaviours (Barocas *et al.*, 2016). Apart from intimate partner violence (IPV) (Miller and McCaw, 2019), Parent-child abuse, adolescent-to-parent abuse (APA) (Holt, 2016), gender-based violence, including same-sex violence (Stiles-Shields and Carroll, 2015) within the family come under the domain of DV. DV occurs in different forms, whether physical, emotional, economic, or sexual. Physical forms of DV may range

from grabbing and slapping to even withholding physical needs such as food or sleep or withholding help when a victim is sick or injured. Emotional abuse involves using words or actions that embarrass or depress another person's self-esteem, ultimately affecting their sense of well-being. An example of financial abuse is when an abuser exercises control over another person's assets or limits prospects using power and control (Postmus *et al.*, 2020). Sexual assault is an underreported aspect of DV but is nonetheless prevalent. Abuse can be sexual as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion. It also includes obligatory inspections for virginity and female genital mutilation. Incest, or sexual contact between a related adult and a child, is one form of familial sexual violence.

The finding, based on several studies from several countries around the world, shows that DV incidents increased in response to Covid-19 stay-at-home/lockdown orders (Kourti *et al.*, 2021; Piquero *et al.*, 2021; Usta *et al.*, 2021). India's DV cases also soured at an alarming rate during the pandemic (Maji *et al.*, 2021). When alcohol and unemployment motivated the perpetrator, women's lower

inertia and availability made women target for DV; further, the travel restrictions and shortage of police force denied guardians for the victims (Krishnakumar and Verma, 2021).

Studies in India validated the universal portrayal of women as victims and men as perpetrators of DV, stating the gender-power dynamics of India's patriarchal system as core to DV (Maji *et al.*, 2021). India, with its patriarchal family system and unequal gender expectations, bears a disproportionate burden of global DV (Krishnakumar and Verma, 2021; Maji *et al.*, 2021). In addition to the patriarchal culture that subordinates women, a lack of programs to rehabilitate female victims contribute to the increasing incidence of DV in India. A lack of economic independence, culturally entrenched belief in extended marriage, and the societal pressure against divorce force Indian women to remain in abusive relationships (Ahmad *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, social stigma and limited access to housing and employment limit women's opportunities outside abusive relationships (Roychowdhury, 2020).

National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) 2019-2021 by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MHFW) revealed that 31.6% of urban women and 24.2% of rural women in India experienced spousal violence (MHFW, 2020; MHFW, 2021). Figure 1 shows the state-wise data on spousal violence against women in India (Data source: NFHS-5).

In most states, DV is more predominant in urban than rural households. DV in the urban households in Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Bihar, and Assam is higher than the national average. The alarmingly increasing incidence of DV prompted sociologists and psychologists to investigate the causes of DV and ways to combat it. Several survey studies have been conducted in DV; however, such reports provide minimal information and are mostly limited to statistics. A phenomenon like DV needs to be explored from a qualitative perspective. People's awareness and understanding of its causes and ways to prevent it can provide rich information to devise preventive measures and practical solutions. Against this backdrop, this qualitative inquiry explored the perceptions of married couples on domestic violence in Kerala. It tried finding answers to the research questions, a) what is the meaning attached to DV by the people of Kerala? b) How did people in Kerala experience DV? c) What are the causes of DV in Kerala? d) What are the effects of DV? and e) What are the possible measures to prevent DV in Kerala?

## METHOD

The study meant to understand people's perception of DV, experiences of DV, its leading causes, and methods to manage it effectively. It followed a qualitative case study design. In-depth interviews with the listed participants were used to collect data for the study. A semi-structured interview schedule with ten open-ended questions related to critical areas of DV was used for data collection. The investigators developed the questions based on a review of existing literature and consultation with experts in the field. The researchers reached a consensus before finalizing the items on the schedule.

The participants of this study included ten married couples (N=20), i.e., ten males and ten females from different parts of Kerala. They were selected through convenience sampling. They were asked if they would share their opinions and experiences related to DV. Volunteers were informed that an interview would be conducted by telephone to elicit their views and experiences on DV. Before the interview, a time slot was fixed for conducting the interview. Participants chose time slots according to their convenience.

Signed informed consent for participation, data recording, and publication was obtained from the participants. Confidentiality was ensured so that no one but the researchers could listen to the audio notes. The tapes were sure to be deleted after the investigation. Participants were asked open-ended questions, and responses were recorded. Interview sessions lasted an average of 1 hour. All participants were interviewed individually, and this took approximately one month. The responses received from the participants were then transcribed and translated into English with the help of language experts.

The translated transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. The initial coding was done by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Codes were generated and clubbed into subthemes and five major themes.

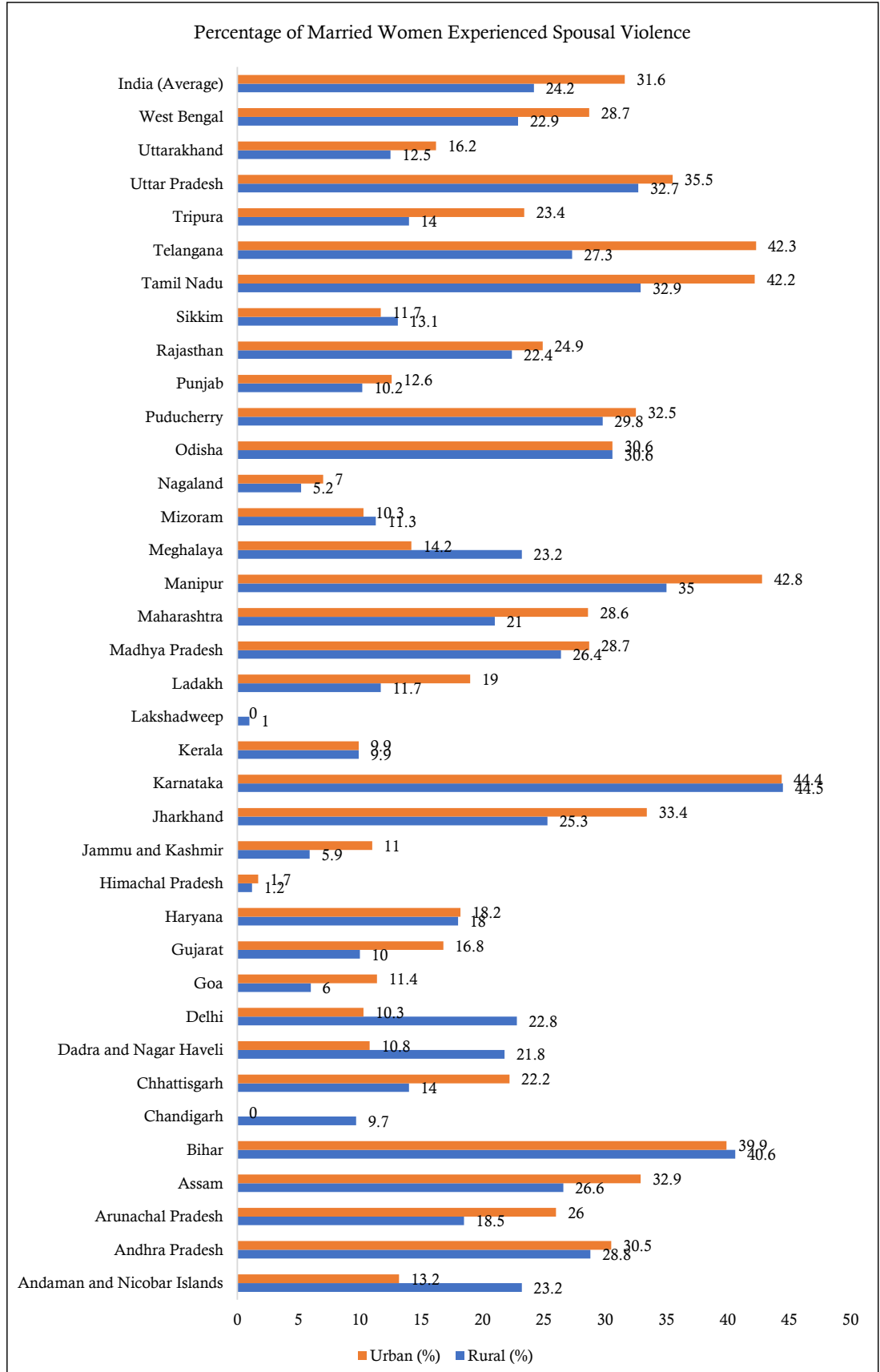
## RESULTS

### Socio-demographic Characteristics of participants

Table 1 shows the Socio-demographic Characteristics of participants.

The participants were between 21 and 51 years and belonged to different religious groups. Their education also ranged from secondary to postgraduate level.

**Figure 1. State-wise Distribution of Spousal Violence in India**



**Table 1. Socio-demographic Characteristics of participants**

| Characteristics | Descriptions     | Frequency |
|-----------------|------------------|-----------|
| Age range       | 21-31 years      | 8         |
|                 | 31-41 years      | 8         |
|                 | 41-51 years      | 4         |
| Gender          | Males            | 10        |
|                 | Females          | 10        |
| Religion        | Christians       | 3         |
|                 | Hindus           | 12        |
|                 | Muslims          | 5         |
| Education       | Secondary        | 4         |
|                 | Higher Secondary | 4         |
|                 | Graduation       | 11        |
|                 | Post Graduation  | 1         |

**Themes**

Table 2 shows the themes, subthemes, and code that evolved from the data analysis. Data in brackets indicate the number of excerpts contributed to the code and its percentage.

**Meaning of Domestic Violence**

Participants perceived DV as a physical, mental, sexual, or financial hurt. It physically injures the victims and leaves them with emotional scars. DV sexually exploits them and withholds their financial resources. When considering violence, people tend to see extreme forms of violence as significant while ignoring other subtle but impactful forms of violence. However, torturing by assigning heavy workloads with multiple tasks and without

**Table 2**

| Themes     | Subthemes                          | Codes   |
|------------|------------------------------------|---|
| Meaning    | Hurting                            | Hurting someone in the family physically (20, 100%), emotionally (16, 80%), sexually (8, 40%), financially (2, 10%).            |
|            | Torturing                          | Exploitation by assigning multiple consecutive tasks (12, 60%), denying needs (8, 40%), ignoring problems and opinions (8, 40%) |
|            | Exercising power                   | Subjugating women (6, 30%), disrespecting (4, 20%), devaluing (4, 20%)  |
|            | Violence against family members    | Spouse (20, 100%), Cohabitant (2, 10%), children (12, 60%), elderly (10, 50%)   |
|            | Cutting across the social strata   | DV is present in all levels of society (20, 100%)   |
| Experience | Female victims                     | Men are less likely to experience DV (20, 100%)   |
|            | Demoralizing                       | Comments that hurt self-esteem (10, 50%), treated as a housemaid (9, 45%), treated as a home nurse (8, 40%)                     |
|            | Burdening                          | Imposing additional workload (10, 50%), unrealistic expectations (9, 45%)   |
|            | Physical harm                      | Slapping (5, 25%), kicking (4, 20%)   |
|            | Financial abuse                    | Limiting access to money for personal use (6, 30%)  |
|            | Sexual abuse                       | Forcing for sex (8, 40%), sex without consent (10, 50%)   |
|            | Body shaming                       | Establish beauty standards and blame women for not meeting them (8, 40%)  |
|            | Imposing religious practices       | Compelled to practice rituals (4, 20%)  |
| Cause      | Controlling by in-laws             | Treating as an outsider by in-laws (10, 50%), decision-making by in-laws on personal matters (10, 50%)                          |
|            | Dowry                              | Greed to get more money and property from the woman's family (20, 100%), Unwilling to sustain wife (6, 30%)                     |
|            | Gender inequality & male dominance | The unequal status of women in society (15, 75%)  |
|            | Alcoholism                         | Alcohol misuse (15, 75%)  |
|            | Gender stereotypes                 | The belief that women are to be kept under men's control (18, 90%)  |

Table 2 contd...

| Themes     | Subthemes                      | Codes   |
|------------|--------------------------------|---|
| Effect     | Ego and inferiority complex    | An inferiority complex arises if the spouse is from a higher stratum (9, 45%).  |
|            | Personality traits             | Psychological problems (5, 25%)   |
|            | Family disturbance             | Hatred in families (20, 100%), fearful atmosphere (15, 75%), insecurity feelings (15, 75%), loveless relationships (10, 50%), uninvolved parenting (12, 60%), Tensions at home (14, 70%), Unhappiness (18, 90%) |
|            | Trauma for women               | Emotional breakdowns (6, 30%), hopelessness (10, 50%), depression (12, 60%)   |
|            | Trauma for children            | Fear of violence (10, 50%), unhappiness (5, 25%), hopelessness (5, 25%)   |
| Prevention | Cycle of violence              | Children copy violence into their life (4, 20%)   |
|            | Women's financial independence | Encourage women's employment (12, 60%)  |
|            | Access to legal support        | Helplines for DV victims (5, 25%), easy complaint registration (4, 20%), speedy redressal of complaints (4, 20%)  |
|            | Break up toxic marriage        | Support women to move out of toxic relationships (10, 50%), social acceptance to divorcees (8, 40%), rehabilitation of divorcees (6, 30%)   |
|            | Uproot misogyny                | Eliminate culturally entrenched misconceptions about women (7, 35%)   |
|            | Gender sensitization           | Awareness of gender equality (10, 50%), behavior modification to respect all genders (6, 30%), Eliminating gender roles 10, 50%), and teaching children to treat men and women equally (12, 60%).               |

rest at home, denying their needs, and neglecting their concerns, opinions, and problems, are also viewed as DV in this study.

*Excerpt: The word irritating doesn't do justice to that torture... Making her exhausted every day can also be considered domestic violence...*

Moreover, exercising power over women, disrespecting them, and treating them as subordinates are forms of DV. DV occurs against spouses, cohabitants, children, and the elderly at home. Therefore, it includes all forms of family violence, such as elder abuse, child abuse, and marital rape. According to participants, DV cuts across all social strata and affects families regardless of socioeconomic status.

### **Experience with Domestic Violence**

It was reported in the study that men are less likely to experience DV. However, all the female participants in this inquiry elucidated their experiences with DV. They range from devaluing comments to physical harassment. Lowering women's self-esteem through blaming and treating them as housemaids or home nurses is a common experience among females. Most women were sometimes

burdened with multiple tasks and unrealistic expectations.

*Excerpt: After marriage, I was seen as a housemaid who would do all the chores or a home nurse who would take care of the people at home. My dreams, wishes, and preferences were not considered. I was treated like a slave and under the control of my in-laws.*

All female participants were forced to have sex, and their consent was often not sought. For some, financial resources were withheld, and in-laws controlled household expenses. They demanded more money as dowry from women's natal families. Some faced body shaming as the in-laws set beauty standards, and some were forced to practice religious rituals regularly. Apart from the emotional breakdown, women faced brutal physical harassment such as kicking and slapping.

### **Causes of Domestic Violence**

All participants cited dowry as the underlying cause of DV. Although women dedicate their labour to affinal homes, people demand more money from women's parents in the context of the dowry system. In our male-dominated society, the unequal status associated with women leads to the mistreatment of women. Culturally ingrained ideas of

superiority in men exerting power over women end up in DV. Stereotypical gender roles keep women in control of men. Indian men believe that women are subordinate to them and should be submissive to men.

*Excerpt: Incidents of violence occur when women disobey and disrespect their husbands.*

According to the participants, alcoholism is another leading reason for DV. Also, an inferiority complex arises if the couple belongs to the extreme strata of society, which causes DV that degrades the higher strata. Moreover, the perpetrator's personality or mental health problems are reasons for DV.

### **Effects of Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence disturbs the family as a whole. It creates a fearful situation casting a shadow of insecurity among all family members. Moreover, it spreads hatred among the victims and witnesses toward the perpetrator. Creating tension at home, DV kills all happiness and makes the relationships loveless. Women face emotional trauma as DV victimizes them. Depressed and emotionally shattered mothers fail to carry out their parenting roles, leading to uninvolved parenting.

*Excerpt: If the mother in the family is hurt, it will affect her mental health, so she won't be able to perform tasks typically; also, she can't be responsive to her child's questions, and her way of thinking will be affected.*

Children in the family, either victims or witnesses, experience trauma. The fear of violence makes them unhappy and hopeless. Moreover, they internalize the violence and make it part of their personality. As adults, they will exercise the same violence they internalized, contributing to the cycle of violence.

### **Prevention of Domestic Violence**

The prominent preventive measure to DV that the participants suggested was women's financial independence. Financial dependence is the primary factor that contributes to female subjugation. Participants opined that DV could be effectively tackled by promoting education and employment among girls and women. Besides, access to legal help can save the victims. By providing helplines, making complaint registration easy, and the redressal fast, the repercussions of DV can be reduced.

According to the study participants, women should be provided with support to break up and come out of

toxic marriages. Taboos against divorce have to be abolished, and divorcees must get social acceptance and support for making livelihoods. Moreover, society must uproot misogyny to make women equal to men. Finally, gender sensitization to create awareness of gender equality to promote equal respect among genders, eliminate gender roles, and teach the younger generation to treat all genders equally will help society prevent DV.

### **CONCLUSION**

This qualitative research explored participants' perspectives and experiences. In Kerala, women and children are victims of domestic violence, and men are generally the perpetrators. Centuries-old customs and beliefs still subjugate women. Even in the 21st century, women hold the status of the second sex. Men demand complete submission from women and control them in every way. Demoralization of women adversely affects their daily activities, leading to inappropriate parenting. Psychological trauma coupled with poor parenting can raise children to become abusers, and the cycle of violence follows them.

Economic empowerment of women was seen as a solution to domestic violence. Therefore, it can be concluded that financial stability and independence help women to leave toxic relationships. Social attitudes must change to accept and rehabilitate divorced women and their children. Existing beliefs must be changed to establish gender equality and mutual respect between spouses as determinants of a good marriage. Moreover, gender sensitization in society, especially in schools, can reduce domestic violence in Kerala.

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