

Women Abuse in the Family Context: An Ethological Approach

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1 Introduction

Sex discrimination kills women daily. When combined with race, class and other forms of oppression it constitutes a deadly denial as women's right to life and liberty on a large scale throughout the world. The most pervasive violation of gender is violence against women in all manifestations, from wife battery, incest and rape to dowry deaths, genital mutilation and female sexual slavery. These abuses occur in every country and are found in the home and at the work place, on streets, on campuses and in prisons. They cross class, race, age, culture and national lines (Bunch, 1992:73)

Women abuse is a global problem and is more prevalent within the family. Women abuse in the family context is a very serious global problem that cannot be explained by one factor only but a variety of factors and interactions. As a result this discussion will focus mainly on the socialization process, where it is expected that women and men should behave differently from one another. The cultural and traditional beliefs in the treatment of women by men, the patriarchal control or the culture of masculinity over women as objects and lastly economic dependence leading to inequality between men and women.

Kemp (1998:244) argues that within the theoretical framework called pro feminism, it is believed that broad social and cultural attitudes contribute to the problem of women abuse. The male batterer, socialized into the male role and position of dominance, feels entitled to control his female partner and uses battering, sex, psychological abuse and economic resources to coerce and control her.

2 Socialization process

The socialization process between men and women seem to be basically the same in every racial group. That is, women are socialized differently from men, for example women should not fight as fighting is associated with aggressive behavior which is not believed to be part of women behavior. They are told to be respectful and not to argue with men. Russell (1984:162) stated that many women particularly those from the middle class background have not had the opportunity to develop their strength or even to know it. She goes on to say that women are not taught to fight and they are usually discouraged throughout their lives from learning how to fight.

The socialization process is internalized during childhood stages and practiced throughout life and in this regard men tend to take advantage of this state of affairs focusing on women. As a result they treat them

differently from other human species. For example, by being aggressive towards women, a man proves that he is strong and able to prove his manhood. By analogy it means that one should be aggressive to succeed and get what he want, even sex. On this matter Russell (1984:119) supports that males are trained from childhood to separate sexual desire from caring, respecting, liking or loving. One of the consequences of this training is that many men regard women as sexual objects rather than as complete human beings. Box (1979:148) asserts that the idealization of femininity involves the notion of passivity, dependence, submissive and mindlessness. Women are taught to be emotionally and economically dependent upon men, and look to them for protection in a harsh and brutal world of male predators. These notions are taught within institutions like family, school and therefore reinforced through the mass media, particularly in the numerous magazines devoted to female concerns. Family relations between men and women also play a significant role in promoting and encouraging physical and sexual abuse of women. Stacey (1993:16) supports that social conditioning has become an umbrella for how and why women's oppression is reproduced. According to this model, women learn their subordination through familial relations, media representations of masculinity and femininity or at school through books and praise or punishment for appropriately gendered behavior by teachers. Social role has been the most obvious challenge to biological explanations of the differences between men and women.

Socialization is simultaneously very much about inculcating the prescription of participation in the socio-reproductive dialect. Most fundamentally, it is taught that appropriate intimate relationships are among society's most honored social arrangements, as are all customs that mirror or dispose people toward them (Makepeace, 1997:45).

The socialization process alone cannot explain abuse of women in the family context but culture as well plays an influential role in encouraging this particular behavior.

3 Cultural and Traditional Perceptions

Culture is part of socialization just as socialization is part of culture. Reciprocally it means that one cannot be studied without referring to the other. There are various cultural perceptions about how women should be treated and how they should respond to the treatment. In most cultures women are taught to adhere to their husbands' dominance to show respect. For example in the African culture, some cultural beliefs generally expects women not to talk back to their husbands and must always listen to them because they are believed to be heads of families. Coward (1997, August 5) supports that one man once said "I am educated but I beat my wife if she makes a mistake. This is the only way of running the house. If we do not beat them they will not maintain the house well". It was also reported that the very same man stayed in Europe for two years and had to go back to his country of origin, as he was unable to control the wife due to foreign influence. That is due to a number of laws against women abuse, he felt that the best route to take was go back home so that he can treat his wife anyway he wanted.

Dobash and Dobash (1979:24) state that men who assault their wives are actually living up to cultural prescriptions that are cherished in Western society namely aggressiveness, male dominance and female subordination; and they are using physical force as a means to enforce their dominance. Box (1983:45) argues that for one to be called a man they should be strong, powerful and independent. One should be prepared to be tough in order to deal with any difficulty coming their way to use power or force and never be regarded as a coward. Because of cultural and traditional perceptions and/or beliefs men are expected to constantly strive for others if necessary, to be competitive and determined to get what they want even though they are not succeeding. They are not expected to act like girls for example, they are not supposed to cry even when they get hurt amongst others. This basically proves that socialization, tradition and culture encourages and promotes abuse of women in the home in the sense that men are expected to fight even if they are aware of failure.

Another important aspect is that women learn at an early age that men are their protectors. Even though things seem to be changing for women globally, some still regard their husbands as protectors. They claim to believe that their husbands are protecting them from being/getting harmed by strangers without realizing the wrong done by those husbands. For example, rape within marriage. There are still women who do not believe that it exists because they are afraid of getting divorced and because some depend on their husbands for a living/survival. Some men also believe that sex in marriage is a right not a privilege. Mahoney and Williams (1998:114) indicated that the long standing tradition of failing to recognize wife rape as a problem reflects cultural beliefs about men, women and sexuality that have interfered with the acknowledgment of and societal response to wife rape.

Traditional beliefs play a role in women abuse in the family context in the sense that most rural women believe that for the sake of protection and care, they should adhere to everything their husbands say. They are therefore not supposed to ask about their husbands' whereabouts. By so doing, it means that they do not have respect for them. Failure to respect and take care of one's husband in most cases, lead to lashing out. But then the ironic part in this belief is that men want to know where their wives have been, whom they were with and what were they doing. Pagelow (1984:309-310) states that husbands monitor their wives' movements and they must account for any extra time spent away. The general fear women have is, they have been socialized not to divorce, that they will be labeled divorcees, failures in life and that what is taking place in their homes is private and need not be discussed with anyone outside the family.

Female culture seems to be playing a role in their own abuse in that most of the time women blame themselves for whatever type of abuse e.g. physical, sexual and emotional/psychological. Women are socialized to be completely dependent upon men for emotional, economic support as well as physical protection. Nevid, Rathus and Greene (1997:540) support that many women who are abused in most cases lack economic means to establish an independent household of their own. Consequently, many are afraid of becoming poor if they leave the abusers. This is also supported by the traditional beliefs men have about

women. Mahoney and Williams (1998:127) assert that similar to women who are physically abused by their husbands, women who are raped by their husbands often accept responsibility for their attacks, blaming themselves for doing or saying something they should have known would make the husbands lash out at them. This female culture often encourages men to exercise control over women.

4 Patriarchal control

Men abusing women either physically, psychologically, sexually or economically believe that they have control over them and that women should adhere to any control imposed upon them. Due to their socialization processes men still believe that they are heads of families where their wives should depend on them for everything. For instance, there are women who still believe that they are not supposed to defy their family customs and marital oaths. Radford and Stanko (1996:65) argue that sexual violence is used by men as a way of securing and maintaining the relations of male dominance and female subordination, which are central to the patriarchal social order.

Patriarchy according to Russell (1990:3) is "a form of social organization in which the father is recognized as the head of the family".

Control of women by their husbands is a complex aspect that cannot be regarded as a sole contributory factor to physical, psychological and sexual abuse. The cultural and socialization processes men and women are subjected to, also contribute significantly to the process. For instance, husbands are regarded as breadwinners for their families whereas wives are allocated the role of homemakers and taking care of children. This is a mentality many men have which contributes to wife abuse. They misunderstand the role of women in the family context. They believe that all household tasks are the responsibility of a woman and at the same time satisfy her husband's sexual needs. This inequality regarding the division of labor encourages men to abuse women with the notion that women are responsible for taking care of children and other household duties. Some men even expect women also to contribute as breadwinners. Russell (1990:3) argues that the key elements of the contemporary patriarchal family involve the husband-father as the primary breadwinner and the wife as being responsible for children and household duties. Subsequently whether or not the wife also has paid employment does not play any significant role and/or does not bring any change between the husband and the wife. That is, the wife still remains jack-of-all-trades while the husband still retains power in the family.

In addition women are still controlled by men irrespective of their employment status. Edwards (1987:24) states that patriarchy or the gender order as a social system concerned with the control of women has at its disposal a whole range of techniques and mechanisms of control. Among these are forces, psychological torture and physical violence.

Control of women within the family context is one of the crucial factors encouraging violence against women ultimately resulting into abuse in the sense that men have the notion that marriage is a license to behave as they please and control their wives as they feel necessary. Most men abuse their wives with the notion that they do not have anywhere to go, no one to take of them and that they are married to them therefore they own them. Pagelow (1984: 306) suggests that wives stay in abusive relationships due to external factors such as material and physical resources available or not. The other reason is due to internal factors such as subservient, supportive, loyal, self sacrificing and the general belief that women are inferior to men. The socialization processes most women go through promote these factors. To add to that some tradition, family customs and beliefs encourage such kind of behavior and ultimately most women are left without protection from other family members who do not want to defy their family customs.

5 Lack of resources

As breadwinners, men believe that women should depend on them for financial needs, shelter, etc. In this case, they treat them as they wish. Looking at most women from rural areas, they depend on their husbands for a whole lot of things. For example, they depend on them for food, shelter and safety. The other reason might be that most of these women are not educated/learned enough to understand what the difference is between abusive and nonabusive character/behavior and where to go for assistance, however, this does not rule out the fact that even educated women depend on their husbands for survival. It simply implies that uneducated women suffer more than the educated ones as they cannot read and write. Lack of knowledge on how to read and write plays a significant role in most women's lives. They cannot get out of their marriages, they are unable to seek for assistance form outside their families and self sacrificing (i.e. they believe that men are more powerful than women). Pagelow (1984:309) argues that battered women are frequently isolated, that is, they are cut off from others who might give attention. They often lack freedom of movement. For many women who lack economic resources, social support and job skills that would enable them to leave their relationships, acknowledging rape by a partner would only add to an already painful situation (Mahoney and Williams, 1998:124-125). According to Box (1983:150) economic inequality between men and women, and between men is a contributory factor to rape. Without other factors, such as sex role socialization, a library of cultural excuses and the relative lack of deterrence, economic inequality would not necessarily lead to rape or sexual assault but in combination with them it becomes dangerously potent.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the various socialization processes should be restructured. Parents should socialize their children in a way that will be beneficial to all. In a more sensible way male children should treat their female counterparts as human beings and not as objects to be tossed around in every available direction. Of importance also is that men's cultural perceptions about women should be changed. For example, perceptions such as when a woman misbehaves she should be beaten, men are heads of the family and as such women

should always listen to them, general perception that women should be treated like children. Men should erase the notion that they have a specific treatment for women. Outdated socialization processes such as, as kids boys are supposed to use force or fight to get what they want, boys and girls are not supposed to play certain games together and/or not supposed to play with certain toys (for example, guns are meant for boys and dolls are meant for girls); cultural and traditional beliefs should not cloud men's minds because they fail to reason and behave properly.

The notion that men are family heads should also be eradicated because it leads to various aspects influencing men to behave badly, for example, women's economic dependence on men. To solve this headship problem between men and women, there should be some equality within the family. Men and women should share all the household chores. There should not be any specific task(s) for males or females. For example, cooking and taking care of children and so on. In addition, there should be respect between the two parties. Men should bear in mind that women are also human beings who have the same brains as they do and therefore should be treated with respect.

Another important aspect is that women, particularly those from the rural settings who still depend on their husbands for everything due to the learning process they went through as young women, should be educated on how to deal with abusive relationships. The helplessness that they feel should first be dealt with and empowerment encouraged. Miller (2001:1) describes learned helplessness as an expression that is normally associated with women trapped in abusive relationships. Women should learn that they can get rid of this problem (abuse) by erasing the idea that they would not have anyone to take care of them, that they will be labeled divorcees, that they do not want to defy their family customs and marital vows, etc. They should not support men's belief that marriage is a license to abuse and/or assault as well as owning them. Women should also forget about putting blame on themselves for their husband's wrongful, unacceptable behavior and fear of stigmatization, as they are the ones suffering the consequences of their husband's erroneous acts.

7 Recommendations

To alleviate the mistreatment and/or violence against women, the following should be considered:

- a. Firstly, there should be an awareness campaign by victims of abuse (young and old) with the assistance of professionals (social workers, units dealing with abused women, etc.) with the notion of making women aware that this problem exists, that they can break the silence and that it will be to their advantage to talk and get involved in the campaign.
- b. Relationships between men and women should change in order to ensure that there is equality between men and women.

- c. Women should be made aware of their rights as victims of violence by conducting workshops on the rights of women. These workshops should not target women only but should encompass men as well. They (men) should also be encouraged to partake in all activities to be dealt with in those particular workshops as a learning tool.
- d. Be educated and enlightened about the ways and/or means of reporting the abuse committed against them for example, non governmental organizations, victim empowerment units, and/or any other available resource(s).
- e. Alternative programs for counseling such as narrative counseling on how to deal with various types of abuse.
- f. If women are afraid of talking to their husbands to stop these disturbing actions, let them talk to any professional person such as social workers, psychologists and so on that can be of assistance to them or any other person they trust or feel comfortable with.
- g. Vacant rooms should be made available for victims of abuse in each and every police station, hospital, court, school and churches.
- h. Police officers should be trained to deal with those abused victims. These police officers should not only be women but men as well in the sense that they could also become aware of some men's ill behavior.

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