
UNIT 5 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence is a universal phenomenon. In elementary sense, it suggests the assertion of power, control and dominance in relationships. All this can be exerted through means of violence and abuse. Domestic violence is not merely limited to physical violence and torture. It extends to psychological, financial, sexual and social abuse as well (Kaur and Garg, 2010). Social scientists have researched on the extensive prevalence of domestic violence across societies in the world. Numerous reports point towards the pervasive culture of violence and intimidation against women in their households. In order to combat this menace in every society, it is essential to understand the cultural biases, their origin and their manifestation in everyday lives of women. Patterns of patriarchal behaviour and socialization experiences contribute to this menace in ways more than one. They are intricately linked to the understanding of social as well as legal discourse on the issue of domestic violence. In this unit, we will learn about what is the meaning of domestic violence. It will also discuss the various dimensions of domestic violence.

5.2 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this Unit, you are able to:

- Learn about domestic violence;

- Know the history of domestic violence law in India;
- Understand about the international context of law.

5.3 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

In India, domestic violence is a very deep rooted and strongly embedded cultural phenomenon. Within domestic relationships, the violence against women takes many forms. It ranges from beatings and psychological torture to regulation of autonomy and control over sexuality. Such forms of violence have found a separate place in the Indian society to the extent that physical beatings and rowdy behaviour by partners of women is considered normal and a part of matrimonial relationships. All of this has become integral to the “commonplace” experiences of women that there is hardly any reportage on such issues (ICRW, 2000). The reasons for violence against women are manifold. Caste, class, religion, social norms etc. play an incredibly significant role in the determination of power dynamics within the families in India. The intersection of identities of women only further entrenches the violence and dominance over women in domestic relationships. According to the National Crime Records Bureau’s report in 2019, more than 30 percent of the crimes against women were that of domestic violence with more than 1.25 lakh reported cases (NCRB, 2019). In 2020 itself, during the coronavirus lockdown the number of reported cases was at a 10-year high, as reported by *The Hindu* newspaper. Violence against women in relationships is arguably the most prevalent harm perpetuated across societies. Despite its universal nature and cultural roots, it is treated as an individualized phenomenon. In a very illuminating piece published by the Women’s Studies International Forum, Evelyn Rose argues that domestic violence can be understood as a crime which is perpetuated by the state through its agents of patriarchy. This is to say that the state facilitates the perpetuation of violence against and subjugation of women through the established structures in the society. Thus, the partner violence becomes institutionalized and legitimized in the societal discourses (Rose, 2015). There has also been documentation of the violence against women in asylums and the persecution that women face therein. There, hence, seems to be a growing trend in recognising gender as a transnational political identity. (Mckinnon, 2016). Such an approach is unique in shifting the localized understanding of domestic violence to a more broad and universal appeal. It needs to be emphasized that institutional support makes domestic violence more lethal and also subverts the attempts that are sought to be made through law. In India itself, this can be seen in the behaviour of police, courts and other enforcement machinery which is charged with the protection of women and prevention of domestic violence. The patronizing attitude of law towards women has led to rigid characterization of women in the Indian society which is reflective of gender stereotypes and societal biases.

The implications of domestic violence are not only limited to the immediate primary victim, rather the traumatizing effect extends to family, friends and children (UNICEF, 2006). The multitude of ways in which women suffer in

the households creates victimhood at multiple levels. Depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, seclusion, child abuse and mental trauma accompany violence that is perpetuated in households. It is a recurring phenomenon directed against women which impacts their basic right to live peacefully and happily. Notwithstanding the fact that countries across the world have sought to take concrete action against this social issue, the fact that remains is that there are always limitations to what law can and cannot achieve. This chapter is, hence, aimed to take the discourse ahead of law and analyze how we have reached to where we are and what all we need to strive for.

5.4 THE HISTORY OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LAW IN INDIA

In India, the legal framework dealing with issues of violence against women in matrimonial homes includes both civil and criminal/penal remedies. Section 498-A of the Indian Penal Code of 1860 (hereinafter “IPC”) provides for criminal sanction in case a woman is subjected to cruelty by her husband or the relatives of the husband. At the same time, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 (hereinafter “PAWDVA”) offers civil remedies like compensation, residential rights etc. to a woman who is a victim of domestic violence. However, before delving into the intricate aspects of these laws, it will be appropriate to, first, understand the history and trajectory of the feminist and rights movements in making the state to intervene in the families of the Indian citizenry.

5.4.1 Penal Laws

All laws aimed at prohibiting violence against women and affording protection to them are a consequence of sustained campaigns spanning over many decades by various rights and feminist groups across the country (Jaising, 2009). As early as 1970s there were widespread protest and information programs which sought to bring the discourse of dowry into the public arena. Although the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 was already in place, there were intense demands for a more stringent law prohibiting dowry and consequent punishment to the in-laws. Thus, the agenda was to not only impose prohibition on dowry demands but also penalize the erring in-laws of a woman (Nagpal, 2017). There was, therefore, a challenge to the established norms of marriage in the Indian society. However, at the same time the feminist icons had to face severe criticism across sections of the patriarchal Indian society. Not only this, in a liberal democracy like India, it was an uphill task for the feminist voices to make the state to engage with the institution of marriage and barge into the family affairs which were considered important and integral to the traditional culture.

The demand for strict laws against dowry related offences also found intersection with various issues of caste and class. Dowry demands were construed as a means to assert control over women financially as well as sexually. Rajni Parliwala(1989) argues that the anti-dowry protests in 1970s and onwards were not merely aimed at striking at the historical oppression of

women in the Indian society. Rather they were also aimed to challenge the economic dynamics of marriage that were inspired by commercialization of marital relationships in a feudal and capitalist Indian society. Dowry had become a way of acquiring the necessities of life. It had become a business investment for the in-laws of a woman.

The culmination of these voices finally led to the enactment of section 498A and 304B of IPC in 1983 and 1986 respectively. While 498A was broad in its scope insofar as, it made cruelty to a wife by her husband or his relatives an offence, section 304B specifically dealt with death due to dowry demands. Hence, the Indian civil society now endeavoured to fight battles in the court rooms.

5.4.2 The Limitations of Penal Law and the Subsequent realization for a more inclusive law

The enactment of penal laws did not mean an end to the issues of domestic violence. The sections of IPC were aimed to target specific problems in marriage. The aim was to deter the husband and his relatives from subjecting a woman to cruelty or dowry demands. Given the fact that criminal law requires higher burden of proof and operates in very strict domains of interpretative framework, it was not possible to include many forms of violence like financial or sexual abuse against women within the contours of the penal provisions. The patriarchal underpinnings of the enforcement machinery, the lack of sensitization programs and reluctance of women to report crime meant that there was needed a wholly different approach which catered to the everyday needs and requirements of a women in a marital household in terms of money, residence and the like. As the lawyer Indra Jaising argues, the role of the state was not merely limited to the prevention or deterrence for crimes against women in households. Rather, the state also owed responsibility towards victims of domestic violence and offer them concrete remedies and measures to make their living in a peaceful and conducive atmosphere (Jaising, 2009).

Such realizations led to a nation-wide debate on the issues of domestic violence and the loopholes and inadequacies of the existing criminal law on the same. The National Commission for Women together with various activist groups, lawyers and members of the civil society campaigned for the need for a more empowering law for women which would enable them to live a dignified life and avoid destitution. At the same time, such a law should also be helpful in curbing and preventing the menace of domestic violence. The Law Commission of India was tasked with framing a draft bill on domestic violence in 1993 which was then discussed across academic and activist circles.

Later on, the legislature sprang into action due to pressure from the feminist groups both inside and outside the country (Abeyratne and Jain, 2012). Within the country, as we have seen, there were ever increasing demands for a comprehensive legal framework which would afford protection to women from domestic violence and at the same time provide for sustenance measures. Outside, the country, India was a party to international treaties,

agreements and conventions like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979 (CEDAW), the Mexican Plan of Action in 1975, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies in 1985, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995, the Vienna Accord of 1994 and reports by the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. International lobbying, thus, also played its part in pressurising the Indian government to enact a law for prevention of domestic violence. In 2002, a bill was introduced in the parliament for the protection of women from domestic violence. Due to certain shortcomings, it couldn't be enacted as a law. Finally, in 2005, the PWDVA saw light of the day and India ushered into a regime of legal framework to combat the menace of domestic violence.

Check your progress-1

- 1) *What is domestic violence? Explain.*
- 2) *What are penal laws?*

5.5 THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE LAW IN INDIA

As noted above the law relating to domestic violence in India spreads across both the criminal and the civil domains. As a facet of criminal law, it aims at prevention, punishment and deterrence. In the realm of civil law, it aims to offer opportunities and support to the aggrieved women and her family. In this section, it shall be the aim to get an understanding of the law and remedies associated therein.

PWDVA, 2005

The Constitution of India guarantees the right to equality of laws and equal protection of laws to everyone and the right against discrimination solely on the basis of sex. In this light, the Domestic Violence Act of 2005 aims to provide for “more effective protection of the rights of women guaranteed under the Constitution who are victims of violence of any kind occurring within the family.” A striking aspect of this statute is that it provides a broad definition to domestic violence and tries to capture the multi-faceted forms of violence and discrimination that is meted to the women in their households.

Domestic Violence is defined in section 4 of the statute as

“any act, omission or commission or conduct of the respondent shall constitute domestic violence in case it— (a) harms or injures or endangers the health, safety, life, limb or well-being, whether mental or physical, of the aggrieved person or tends to do so and includes causing physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal and emotional abuse and economic abuse; or (b) harasses, harms, injures or endangers the aggrieved person with a view to coerce her or any other person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any dowry or other property or valuable security; or (c) has the effect of

threatening the aggrieved person or any person related to her by any conduct mentioned in clause (a) or clause (b); or (d) otherwise injures or causes harm, whether physical or mental, to the aggrieved person.”

Source: <https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/wdvact.pdf>

In such a background, it is important to note that the legal rights under this act are created in favour of every woman who is in a domestic relationship which need not necessarily be limited to a marital relationship. A domestic relationship can be through consanguinity, marriage, a relationship in the nature of a marriage, adoption, joint family. In *D Veluswamy v D Patchaiammal*(2010), the Supreme Court of India held that for a relationship to be in the nature of a marriage certain conditions are important to be met. These include; the couple must hold themselves out to the society as being akin to spouses, the couple must be of a legal age to marry, they must be qualified to be in a legal marriage and lastly, they must have voluntarily cohabited and held themselves out to the world as being akin to spouses for a significant period of time.

5.6 RIGHTS AND REMEDIES UNDER THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT OF 2005(PWDVA)

Keeping this framework in mind, the next step is to recognise the rights and remedies available to the women under this act. It is pertinent to note the fact that the PWDVA fundamentally aims at offering opportunities and avenues to the aggrieved women to take charge of her life and come out of the shackles of oppression. As such, the act provides right to compensation, shared household and remedies like monetary relief, protection order, residence order and custody order.

An aggrieved woman or a protection officer (an officer appointed under the act) or any person on behalf of the aggrieved can file an application before the magistrate seeking any one or more reliefs prescribed under the act. Under section 18 of the Act, the magistrate may pass a protection order against the respondent. Thereupon, the magistrate can prohibit the respondent from establishing any contact with the aggrieved woman. This may include, prohibition on entering into the workplace of the women, prohibition on the alienation of the assets of the women including her *stridhan* and prohibition on causing any violence to the dependants or relatives of the aggrieved women. Likewise, a magistrate may pass a residence order under section 19 of the act, to restrain the respondent and his relatives from entering into the shared household of the couple where now the aggrieved women reside. Alternatively, the respondent can be asked to make arrangements for the residence of the aggrieved women including payment of rent, if any. The respondent can even be asked to remove himself from the household.

Furthermore, the aggrieved woman is also entitled to claim monetary relief under section 20 of the Act for herself and her children for any losses that

they may have been suffered due to acts of domestic violence. This relief can include medical expenses, loss of earnings, and maintenance for the woman as well as the child. Compensation can also be claimed for any emotional distress or mental torture caused due to domestic violence. In addition, custody of the children can also be sought under section 21 of the act by the aggrieved women or anyone who is acting on her behalf.

An important right available to the women under the PWDVA is the right to the shared household under section 17 of the Act irrespective of whether she has any right, title, or interest in the same. Earlier, the Supreme Court in *SR Batra v Taruna Batra* (2007) held that a shared household would only mean the house belonging to or taken on rent by the husband, or the house which belongs to the joint family of which the husband is a member. However, recently in the judgement of *Satish Chander Ahuja v Sneha Ahuja* (2020) the Supreme Court overruled *SR Batra* to hold that a respondent under the DV act is not only a husband but it can also be the father-in-law of the women. As such, shared household would not only mean the house belonging to or rented by the husband but it would include any house either owned/co-owned or rented by a 'respondent' in a complaint under the DV Act and that the aggrieved person has resided in the said house at any stage of her domestic relationship. Hence, the right of the women also extends over the house of the in-laws where she may have resided during a domestic relationship.

5.6.1 Section 498-A and 304-B IPC

Considerable women population in India experiences severe physical, emotional and sexual violence in their marital homes (Sabarwal, Santhya and Jejeebhoy, 2013). As noted in the preceding sections, the pervasiveness of such violence forced the state to intervene into the family. Prior to civil law remedies aimed at welfare, the state opted for penalizing measures with the enactment of the section on cruelty to a married woman in a matrimonial household. Section 498A of the IPC provides:

Whoever, being the husband or the relative of the husband of a woman, subjects such woman to cruelty shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation. —For the purpose of this section, “cruelty” means—

a) any wilful conduct which is of such a nature as is likely to drive the woman to commit suicide or to cause grave injury or danger to life, limb or health (whether mental or physical) of the woman; or

b) harassment of the woman where such harassment is with a view to coercing her or any person related to her to meet any unlawful demand for any property or valuable security or is on account of failure by her or any person related to her to meet such demand.

Source: https://www.indiacode.nic.in/show-data?actid=AC_CEN_5_23_00037_186045_1523266765688&orderno=562

A few points here are necessary to be made note of. This section offers protection only in case of a marriage. Hence, only married women can take recourse to this section. Secondly, as held in *State of West Bengal v Orilal Jaiswal* (1994) in a criminal trial, the charges made against the accused must be proved beyond all reasonable doubts. This requirement does not stand altered in case of Section 498-A IPC.

Section 304B relates to the death of a married woman within seven years of her marriage in unnatural circumstances or due to burns or bodily injury. However, in order to invoke this section, it is important to be proved that the death of the woman should have been preceded by cruelty, harassment for dowry demands. The relevant portion of Section 304B reads as;

- 1) Where the death of a woman is caused by any burns or bodily injury or occurs otherwise than under normal circumstances within seven years of her marriage and it is shown that soon before her death she was subjected to cruelty or harassment by her husband or any relative of her husband for, or in connection with, any demand for dowry, such death shall be called “dowry death”, and such husband or relative shall be deemed to have caused her death.

5.6.2 Interpretation by the Supreme Court

A reference to few of the landmark judgements of the Supreme Court merit attention here so as to clear some basic concepts underlying section 498-A. In *U Suvetha v State* (2009), the Supreme Court held that for commission of an offence under Section 498-A, following necessary ingredients require to be satisfied: (a) The woman must be married; (b) She must be subjected to cruelty or harassment; and (c) Such cruelty or harassment must have been shown either by husband of the woman or by the relative of her husband. Furthermore, in *Reema Aggarwal v Anupam* (2004), the Supreme Court observed that the expression “husband” in section 498-A covers a person who enters into a marital relationship and under the colour of such proclaimed or feigned status of husband subjects the woman concerned to cruelty in the manner provided under Section 498-A, whatever be the legitimacy of the marriage itself for the limited purpose of Section 498-A. In *Vijeta Gajra v. State (NCT of Delhi)* (2010) it was held by the Supreme Court that in order to be covered under the “relative of the husband” one has to be a “relative” of the husband by blood, marriage or adoption. As noted in *U Suvetha*, the “girlfriend or concubine” of a husband is not his relative by marriage, blood or adoption and is, hence, not covered by section 498-A of IPC.

As far as the concept of “cruelty” under section 498A of IPC is concerned it was held in *G.V. Siddaramesh v. State of Karnataka* (2010) that cruelty can either be mental or physical. It is difficult to straitjacket the term cruelty by means of a definition because cruelty is a relative term. What constitutes cruelty for one person may not constitute cruelty for another person.

It is also important to remember the fact that the proceedings under the IPC and PWDVA are disjunct. Therefore, even if a case is being tried under

section 498A of IPC, that does not preclude the aggrieved women from initiating proceedings against the respondent under the PWDVA. The same view has been affirmed by the Supreme Court in *G.V. Siddaramesh*.

5.7 A REFLECTION ON THE PRACTICAL REALITIES

While the law has endeavoured to usher into a constitutional regime of equality and non-discrimination, the reality on the ground is very different. Research points towards the distrust in legal procedure and consequent out of court settlements. Additionally, for women, the lack of access to the courts in itself is a hurdle which is very difficult to cross. Numerous criminal cases are filed in the police stations. However, a significant number of them do not even reach their logical conclusion in the court rooms. Ethnographic research points towards large number of settlements and the inability of the enforcement machinery in catering to the protection of the rights of women (Roychowdhury, 2019). This is not only due to the prolonged legal procedure. It is also due to the fact that the enforcement machinery is heavily dominated by men.

The cross-section of state power and patriarchal social norms push the women into settling out of the courts where they do not have much bargaining power and are made to succumb to the pressure of the family and the society. Speaking of the law, it is in itself insufficient and incapable to deal with issues that women face. Consider the example of section 498A. It is fundamentally under-inclusive as it only applies in cases of married women. It excludes a whole range of other women. The lack of a definite standard or metric to determine cruelty leaves things to the discretion of the police officer to register a case under 498A. Even where a case is registered, the requirement of proof beyond reasonable doubt places an onerous burden on the aggrieved women to get the culprits punished. It is nearly impossible to prove everyday acts of physical and mental cruelty that have taken place within the four walls of the home (Kothari, 2005).

Feminist and social science scholars argue that women compromise and settle because they are surrounded by sexist cultures of “reconciliation” (Lazarus-Black 2007). In India, women who make legal claims against domestic violence face social sanction both from friends and family. They also discrimination within the criminal justice system (Jaising 2007). Even where the court passes orders in cases of domestic violence, there is still a prevalent tendency to look for alternate ways to settle the dispute in question.

The aforementioned problems have also been compounded by the patriarchal approach of the higher judiciary. For example, in *Rajesh Sharma v State of UP* (2017) the Supreme Court issued directions to prevent-what it called- the misuse of section 498A by women. Instead of adopting an adjudicatory approach, it suggested, among other things, that the lower judiciary should aim at promoting settlements between the families. While these observations were later modified in *Social Action Forum for Manav Adhikar v Union of India Ministry of Law and Justice* (2018), the impact of such observations

coming from the highest echelons of justice waters down to the behaviour and conduct of police officers and adjudicators on the ground. What this also reflects is the unsuitability of current state of Indian justice system to deal with the violence and discrimination faced by women in their matrimonial life.

A long path is to be traversed by the civil society, legislature and the judiciary in plugging the loopholes in the current state of affairs. A structural reform with a bottom-up approach is required to be undertaken. Law alone cannot ensure justice. A sustained large-scale effort at combating the violence against women is the need of the hour. Social reform is the way to social justice. Women need to be facilitated in taking action. Strong emphasis on sensitisation programmes among police officials and adjudicators is needed to be conducted on a large scale. Till that is done, one can only hope that things get better and the rule of law prevails.

5.8 LET US SUM UP

Thus, in this unit we studied about domestic violence as a universal phenomenon. How domestic violence is a crime against humanity. Further we learn about the history of domestic violence law in India emerged. What are the limitations of penal law. At the same time, the detailed understanding about the domestic violence law in India, PWDVA, 2005. What kinds of rights and remedies under the PWDVA and how the interpretation by the Supreme Court of India done on it. The unit also suggests a reflection on the practical realities related to domestic violence related laws and case laws.

5.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Write an essay on the history of domestic violence law in India.
- 2) Discuss about penal laws and its limitations that are related to domestic violence.

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