

CHANGING FORMS OF VIOLENCE: VIOLENCE WITHIN NON-COHABITING, NON-MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

A study of the experiences of intervention at the Special Cells in Mumbai

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Introduction

Intimate partner relationships which are self-arranged, non-marital and non-cohabiting have rarely been a part of the Violence Against Women (VAW) discourse. Such violence comes into the limelight especially when the aggression takes an extremely grievous physical form, such as acid attacks. The overpowering influence of movies and television, especially in a country like India, also impacts notions of heterosexual love and romance. Acts of harassing women under the pretext of 'love' or tricking a woman into falling in love; though violent in nature; are how people fantasize about love. The depiction of women as 'accommodating', inferior, and only seeking to please men, seeps into the cultural imagination and furthers the violence in narratives of love around us. The Special Cell for Women and Children is a psycho-socio-legal service made available at the police stations for survivors of violence. In the last 31 years of Special Cell work, there were several cases of violence faced by women in intimate, non-cohabiting relationships. The Special Cell workers referred to the 'love' that existed between the client and the respondent while talking about such relationships. Thus, the best way to describe these relationships would be to call them 'love relationships' for the purpose of this study.

Research question

At the Special Cell although the majority of cases registered are of violence within marriage, the workers observed an increasing number of survivors of intimate relationships which are non-cohabiting or non-marital approaching them. Clients had stated that after a long period of intimacy and in many cases, after promise of marriage, their male partner had refused to get married to them. Several Cell workers also discussed that the survivors are articulating their experience of violence within the legal framework of 'rape' as according to them, they engaged in sexual intercourse with the promise of marriage and their trust was breached when the man refused to get married to her. It is only in the recent past that women have started to speak of violence within intimate relationships in the public domain.

The discussion of such cases led to thinking about intimate relationships which are non-cohabiting and non-marital; marriage; commitment; and the law (or the absence of it) protecting women from such violence. What kind of violence, apart from sexual violence, were women facing; what are the strategies and skills necessary to intervene in such cases; what are the factors which aid and hinder during intervention- were a few of the questions which arose while discussing these cases.

Methodology

Registers of the Special Cells located at V.T., Dadar, Kandivali, CBD Belapur, Kurla and Vikhroli were sieved through to find cases of intimate partner violence. The process of data collection was revealing as well as a range of cases which did not fit into the research completely were also present. For example, there were cases wherein the couple had met through parents for marriage and after getting engaged (during the courtship period) the woman faced violence from her fiancé or there were cases in which the woman had forged a friendship with a man and eventually got violated by him. 58 relevant cases were identified, copies of the application and the intake registers were made and analysed through SPSS. Interview schedules for semi-structured interviews of Cell workers and survivors were designed and a total of 7 Cell workers and 1 survivor were interviewed.

Findings

- According to Special Cell workers, although all the survivors of intimate partner violence have come with a complaint of ‘harassment’, and ‘trouble’, they are usually not fully aware of the extent of violence that has been inflicted upon them.
- Even after facing violence in a relationship which is not bound legally, most of the survivors want to get married to the perpetrator. In spite of facing violence, according to the Special Cell data, 20.7% of the registered survivors of violence in love relationships, at the time of registration, have said that they would like to marry their perpetrator.
- While articulating and asserting their rights and talking about their experiences of violence, women survivors of violence in love relationships have used sexual relations to explain and/or legitimize the existence of the said relationship.
- 75% of the cases of violence in “love” relationships, women have complained of sexual violence at the time of registration of their case.
- Women in “love relationships” face more financial exploitation as compared to women in marriages. This may also be due to the fact that because there is no legally or socially acceptable shared belongings.
- The fact that the man and the woman have met outside their physical communities, also means that most of these relationships might be developing clandestinely, which alienates the woman from the family as a support structure.

Strategies and Skills

- Writing as a cathartic process: Each and every survivor who comes to the Special Cell to register her case is asked to give in writing an application in which she writes the history of violence and her expectation from the Special Cell.
- Building self-determination: To provide

emotional support and to facilitate the woman's process of self-determination.

- Building support system- While some natal family members are and may have become in due course of time supportive of the woman by the time she reaches a service such as the Special Cell, not all families are supportive. The Cell workers seek to build a strong support system by getting in touch with her natal family and/or friends.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that self-arranged marriages exist and if they do, then non-cohabiting and non-marital intimate relationships also exist; and if violence in any relationships- marital or natal- exists, then violence in non-cohabiting and non-marital intimate relationships also exists. Thus, there is no denying of the existence of intimate relationships. Unfortunately, because of the perception of self-arranged relationships, most of the time, non-marital and non-cohabiting intimate relationships are clandestine. Hence, an interventionist should refrain from thinking of an intimate, self arranged, non-marital and non-cohabiting relationship similar to a marital relationship and should in no way demean the relationship. Interventionists, especially in their language (verbal and body), should not give the survivor that impression that her relationship or the violence she has experienced in it is not justified because it is not a marital relationship.

