



Intersections of Religion and Gender: A case of Domestic Violence

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Why do women succumb to violence?

Why, when women are educated and abled enough, still choose to be in an abusive relationship?

We have explored various reasons to answer this, be it financial dependency, the child being the reason, societal judgmental attitude, lack of support from natal family or friends, lack of awareness of support, etc.

Women, making up the other half of the total population, are abstained from the basic human rights of “life free of violence” and “life with dignity and respect”. Why is that? Have we forgotten that women are humans?! We see women in the role of mothers, daughters, wives, mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, and in multiple other relations. It’s like an intersection of roles and responsibilities, and there she is, a woman, standing in the center, who, nobody considers a human being. Recently, at one of the events of Women’s Day, I asked the gathering, “Who are women?”, or “What are women?”. Not even a single person answered that a woman is a human being. Not even the women! This allows me to ponder on how we are cultivating minds. How indifferent and gendered a process of socialization is.



According to WHO (2017), global data indicates that every 1 in 3 women worldwide experiences physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime. National Family Health Survey V (2019-21) highlights that 70% of women from 11 major states in India faced domestic violence in silence. And the year 2021 amidst the pandemic recorded the highest number of domestic violence complaints with the National Commission for Women, India (Sen, 2021). Endeavoring to understand violence, it’s significant to view it from the lens of intersectionality to understand its aspects fully. The multiple identities of a person intersect with various social systems to create a social situation for a person including the experience of violence. That’s why it’s imperative to recognize the interplay of the systems with the identities.

It’s an attempt here, to discuss how the system of religion and gender function together to perpetuate the continuation of violence. Being a woman from a Christian religion (and not pointing fingers at any other religion for now), I intend to highlight how Christianity as a religion instills the acceptance of violence, especially domestic violence in women’s life. My reflection on this commenced from the time when I was assigned concurrent fieldwork in the Special Cell for Women and Children during my master’s degree at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Subsequently, when I joined the project full-time after my studies; while working there, talking to several survivors of domestic violence on a daily basis, I hardly remember encountering survivors belonging to the Christianity religion.

In my opinion, religion teaches us the ways to live a life, influencing the worldview and actions of a person. Somehow, when it intersects with gender, it gets problematic. In Christianity, marriage is considered a sacrament. It’s a holy union of a man and a woman by the will of God. There’s a chapter in the Bible, in which St. Paul talks about marriage and says “*Wives submit to your own husband, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body (Ephesians 5: 22-23).*”

Further, he says that “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for her. Husbands’ ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh, of His bones. For this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh (Ephesians 5:28-31).” There can be many interpretations of these verses as every individual perceives them differently or might have heard different interpretations (or similar) of these texts from a different preacher. If we go literally by the words that are mentioned here, we find instructions for both a man (husband) and a woman (wife).

How they must be towards each other in a marriage. But, in our society only the first half of the scripture is followed. Hardly, emphasis is given to the second half of the scripture, where a husband must love his wife. Even leave his father and mother and join his wife and become one flesh. It’s needless to mention who among husband and wife, leave their parents after marriage.



When a Christian woman suffers domestic violence and happens to share it with the priests or pastors or a preacher, they ask her to pray. Never do they call the husband and talk to him and remind him of what the scriptures say. The woman is reminded that she must submit herself to her husband. That she can’t stand against her husband. She must pray to God to end her suffering. This unfortunately reinforces violence. This is just one instance to reflect. There are many and prevail in other religions as well.

In Christianity, or in most religions, this is believed that prayers have answers to your sufferings. It has all the solutions. It’s all about faith. But it’s crucial here to understand that without any human actions or interventions, violent situations won’t change or come to an end. There are supports available to battered women. However, the interplay of religion and gender hinders women to access the provisions and settle for violence.

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About the Author



Sandhya Kerketta is a sociologist who graduated from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, India. Sandhya is currently a PhD candidate at University of Sussex, United Kingdom. Sandhya’s research interests are gender studies, intersectionality, domestic violence among many more. Prior to joining University of Sussex, Sandhya has worked as a Program Associate at Church’s Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), New Delhi. She handled important roles such as fund monitoring for welfare projects, planning and allocation of budgeting among others. Sandhya also has enormous field experience as a support worker and has worked extensively with domestic violence survivors.