

CLASSIC

CONTEMPORARY

CROSS-CULTURAL

# 43 Domestic Violence: A Cross-Cultural View

ELAINE LEEDER

*Domestic violence is a global problem and occurs in both industrialized and developing countries. Elaine Leeder discusses why women and children, especially girls, experience physical abuse in nations as diverse as India, Japan, Vietnam, and Africa. This dark side of family life reflects structural inequality and cultural attitudes about gender.*

## FAMILY VIOLENCE IN INDIA

The Indian government and feminist organizations are concerned about wife battering, child abuse and neglect, and infanticide, which occur quite regularly there. [Earlier] I mentioned bride burnings in India, called “dowry deaths,” which occur as a result of rising demands for the dowry given from the bride’s side to the groom’s family. I also briefly mentioned female infanticide. Those are extreme forms of gender violence. However, in this [reading] we focus on the regular and daily patterns of domestic violence that take place in India.

Many forms of domestic violence in India occur as a result of rising industrialization and modernization. Families have rising economic expectations, and the problems are acted out at home. Wife battering is a fairly common occurrence (Rao, 1997). Mild forms of wife beating are commonplace, and many men and women

admit freely in interviews that it is justified if the woman does not “behave herself.” Interestingly, though, in one study only 22 percent of the women admitted on surveys to having been beaten; it is unacceptable to admit abuse, yet it seems to be such a common practice that it is not considered worthy of mention. Only women for whom abuse is a serious or chronic problem are willing to admit it. Otherwise it is such an everyday affair that it is not considered a problem.

In rural India, women believe that alcohol and inadequate dowries provoke the abuse. Some drunken husbands beat their wives without provocation, and women who are beaten complain that the problem is exacerbated by the drunken fits of their husbands. Alcohol is widely available, as it is in the United States, and many of the men say that their drinking is due to a feeling of hopelessness caused by poverty. Their lack of options for breaking out of poverty leads them to drink to “forget their troubles.”

Also, as dowry demands have escalated in the past 20 years, many parents have been unable to keep up with the inflation. Some girls are kept

Source: *The Family in Global Perspective: A Gendered Journey* by Elaine Leeder. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2004, pp. 244–48, 251–54.

hostage by their inlaws in an attempt to extract larger amounts of money from the girls' parents. When those demands are not met, the young bride is beaten, often living in terror of what might become of her. Her power is also diminished in the home after she has been beaten. Sometimes "family resources are transferred away from the wife and her children to other members of the household . . . and the husband and wife are unable to construct a strong marital bond."

It appears that if women have male children they are less likely to be beaten. Having fulfilled societal expectations seems to provide a deterrent to abuse. A rural woman is more likely to be beaten if she has been sterilized. Sterilization is a major form of birth control in rural India; after bearing enough children, a woman often chooses it as contraception. It appears that a man feels freer to beat a woman who has been sterilized, perhaps out of fear of her infidelity.

In rural India, abuse is tolerated under certain circumstances, which include dowry problems, a wife's infidelity, her neglect of household duties, or her disobedience to her husband's dictates. Abuse is also tolerated if a husband beats his wife when he is drunk but is otherwise a good husband. But if a man batters his wife beyond levels considered tolerable for the village, or if he beats her for reasons not considered legitimate by the village, then a village elder or a local monk will intervene to stop the violence.

Finally, we should mention that living outside of marriage is not an option for an Indian woman. There are no alternatives to marriage for Indian women at this time. Although many women work outside of the home, the types of jobs available are limited, pay is quite low, and marriage is considered the norm.

Clearly, wife battering is a prevalent and "normal" family dynamic in India. It is part of the social fabric, so much so that it is not even commented on unless it is extreme. So too is child abuse.

Child abuse has occurred since time immemorial and exists across cultures. Usually it is the

poorer classes who get the attention of public health and welfare services. But middle-class practices are more reflective of whether or not abuse is common in a society. In India middle-class families have experienced a greater amount of stress as the country modernizes and industrializes. India is becoming more urban, and this points to a rise in child abuse among Indian families (Segal, 1995). There is intense competition and effort at upward mobility. This also puts stress on the family. In addition, there is a well-established pattern of corporal punishment in raising children. Children are socialized to obey their parents, and there is strict discipline, even though infants are highly indulged. The family is highly hierarchical, and now that families are moving away from the joint family, there is less support for raising children and sharing household tasks. All these factors create an environment that's ripe for an increase in child abuse rates.

The use of corporal punishment is so well entrenched in Indian society that even the middle and upper classes admit to using it. In one study of 319 highly educated, college-graduate parents in three cities in India, a full 56.9 percent reported having used "acceptable" forms of violence, while 41.9 percent engaged in "abusive" violence, and 2.9 percent admitted using "extreme" violence on their children. Unfortunately we have no specific studies of middle- and upper-class parents in the United States with which to compare this data. Suffice it to say that in the United States we have comparably high rates of child abuse, too (Gelles & Straus, 1986). Remember that in the United States *at least* a million children are abused a year.

Female infanticide and child neglect are also major child abuse issues in India, particularly in rural villages. Barbara Miller (1987) has spent years studying abuse in rural north India and has found significant discrimination against girl children there. There is a strong preference for sons. Boys are needed as economic assets, for farming, and for the money they send home if they move away. They are more likely to stay with

their families after marriage and maintain their parents in old age. Girls move away when they marry and cannot contribute to the family upkeep. Sons bring dowries and perform rituals among the Hindus when the father dies; therefore boys are important to the maintenance of family life, while girls are seen as a drain economically. This strong preference for sons has led to disappointment when a girl is born, withholding of medical care for girls, and preferential feeding of boy children.

*Infanticide* is the killing of a child under one year old, and is the most extreme form of child abuse. *Neonaticide* is the killing of an infant up to 24 hours old, and *feticide* is the abortion of a baby in utero, particularly when it is done as sex selection. After a child is 12 months old, the killing is considered a homicide. In north India, the killing of female infants is quite an old phenomenon. The British discovered it as early as 1789 and outlawed it by 1870. In some parts of India during that time, the sex ratio was 118 men to 100 women. Nowadays, systematic, indirect female infanticide still exists. Girls are not actively killed; they are just neglected so badly that they die from lack of care. The numbers seem to cross class and caste, with even wealthier families preferring sons. This is also true for well-educated families.

In India there is also sex-selective abortion. Although there is a lack of definitive data, anecdotal evidence indicates that it is quite widespread. One study found that in one hospital, of the 700 amniocenteses done, 250 were male and 450 were female. A full 430 of the 450 females were aborted, while all the male fetuses were brought to full term.

Now that I have presented this data, I urge a suspension of any ethnocentric value judgments. It is true that these figures are disturbing and certainly are contrary to Western-based humanistic values. Let's try to keep a view that is culturally relative, to understand why people would engage in such behavior. Understanding why it is done, and being aware of one's own bias, might lead us

to think of what can be done about it. There are groups working in India and through the United Nations who have declared this problem a public health issue and are trying to prevent or reduce the incidence of these practices.

## WIFE BATTERING IN JAPAN

Now let's focus our lens on another part of Asia, this time Japan. In previous chapters we talked about the way the Japanese family is organized, and how unlike it is to families in the United States, even though both countries are highly industrialized. In Japan the incidence of wife battering is quite high. In one study (Yoshihama & Sorenson, 1994), a survey was done of 796 married women, in which more than three-fourths reported at least one type of violence perpetrated by a male intimate partner. This ranged from a slap to an assault with a deadly weapon, from verbal ridicule to restriction of social activities, and from incomppliance with contraception to forced, violent sex. About two-thirds of the most serious physically violent incidents resulted in injury.

Unlike the United States, Japan has no specific laws against wife battering as a crime, and there is no governmental funding for services that address the problem. Often, if women get help, it is through services intended for other purposes, like homes established under child welfare laws. Fully one-third of the women who use other services, like shelters that protect prostitutes, were actually battered women seeking protection from their abusers. A husband's violence is one of the primary reasons women list when they are seeking divorce, and contrary to the myths of the quiet, passive Japanese man, violence is an integral part of family life in Japanese society.

Often, when a woman seeks to end a violent marriage, the violence does not end. This is true in the United States as well as Japan. Violence often escalates during the process of separation and divorce. It is as if the man does not want to let go of his property, holding tighter and becoming more abusive as he fears the loss. Male violence

in Japan seems to cross all socioeconomic strata and can lead to serious consequences. Women report broken bones, lacerations requiring stitches, ruptured eardrums, and other injuries requiring medical care.

Domestic violence in Japan is still an unrecognized problem. There is not even a word for it in Japanese; language has been adapted from the English to refer to it. An increasing level of media attention is being focused on the problem at the time of the publication of this book, but the level is far below that with which we are familiar in the West. This is a problem that bears watching closely, to see how well Japan deals with a problem that many countries are starting to grapple with. . . .

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN VIETNAM

. . . The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is rich in culture, deep in religion, and ancient yet modern. It is beautiful, with pristine beaches, huge rivers, and rice paddies galore. Eighty percent of the population lives in the rural areas, and it has a 94 percent literacy rate. We in the United States think that Vietnam is a place of war, and it was, in fact, for most of the past century. In 1945 Vietnam became independent of France, fought for its freedom, and then fought against the Americans, who established their presence there after the French pulled out.

The war has had a significant impact on family life in Vietnam. With the revolution in 1945 came the first attempts to change the inferior position of women there. Laws were passed to equalize the rights, positions, and interests of women. Unfortunately, today the vestiges of Confucian ideology still linger. Men act as kings in their homes even while the women in the workforce make more money than their husbands (Quy, 1996). Women are employed in the labor market in great numbers, but still do the “second shift” that’s common in the United States. After work at the factory, Vietnamese women spend five to six hours a night on housework at home. This has been called

the “invisible violence” of Vietnam, because while there may not be physical violence between men and women, intimidation and fear drive the relationships. This inequity occurs for both urban educated and rural poor women. Many women feel that their situation is predestined, in accordance with Confucian ideology.

Then there is the “visible violence” that recently has led to a large number of divorces in Vietnam. One report indicates that as many as 87.5 percent of the divorces in 1992 were a result of violence or violence-related causes. There are numerous injuries and deaths related to violence in the home, although exact numbers are not available. What is known is that 17.5 percent of the deaths in Vietnam in 1992 were caused by family violence.

One of the reasons given for this problem is low socioeconomic status. Poor men, in particular, feel that it is permissible to take out their frustration and anger on their wives and children. Another reason given is the “feudal attitude”: the old Confucian ideas of “thinking highly of men and slightly of women” seem to inform beliefs about hitting one’s wife. Sometimes men take lovers, or even concubines, who come to live in the home with the wife, against the wife’s will.

Other reasons for violence are drinking, gambling, adultery, and jealousy. Although there are no numbers available on this, the researcher conducted interviews with battered wives who attributed the abusive behavior to a few of these factors. Another reason given was what we would call the “intra-individual theory”: that there is “mad blood” in the perpetrator. In Vietnam this means that there are people who always feel anxious and angry and tend to shift the blame onto others, especially their next of kin.

In Vietnamese law, men and women are considered equal. Violence toward wives and children is specifically prohibited and is considered a violation of human rights, and the government has established a series of local and state programs for intervention. There are also laws against the preference for male children, although as we

will see, these have certainly not had much of an impact. Interestingly, however, the incidence of rape in Vietnam seems to be low, specifically as compared with the United States (Goodstein, 1996). The Vietnamese Women's Union plays a role at the local level, watching out for the rights of women (Johnson, 1996).

As in many parts of the world, preference for a son remains strong in Vietnam, especially in light of the family planning policy there, which recommends only two children per family (Haughton & Haughton, 1995). Payments must be made to the government should a family have more than two children, although the sanctions are not as strict as they are in neighboring China. Following the Confucian model, in Vietnam there is still the belief that a son will care for you in old age and that a son is an investment, while a daughter will leave. Even though women in Vietnam are well educated (remember, the literacy rate is 94 percent) and well integrated into the workforce, the Vietnamese still prefer male children.

Another problem related to violence in Vietnam is the trafficking in women (Barry, 1996). Vietnam's traditional values, like fate and filial piety, shape the culture and make it ripe for exploitation by the "sex work" industry. Other countries in the region, like Japan, Thailand, and Australia, have well-established sex industries that have begun moving into Vietnam as the country moves toward economic development. Vietnam has a history of sexual exploitation of women, most notably during the Vietnam War, when more than 500,000 women served as prostitutes to the U.S. troops. Many were rape victims or war widows needing to earn a living. Now many women are being forced into prostitution as part of the growing sex trade industry. Because prostitution provides immediate cash incentives for the women when other work is not available, it is becoming an increasingly viable option as the country moves toward a more westernized model of economics.

Vietnam, although a socialist country with some new elements of capitalism, seems to have

similar domestic violence problems as other parts of the world: violence against wives, son sex preference, and a growing sex trade. It appears that not many places in the world are free of domestic violence.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AFRICA

... In Uganda, violence against one's wife is accepted as legitimate; when it is mentioned, most men just shrug and say, "It's our culture" (Doro, 1999). If a woman attacks her husband, the violence is considered criminal. The U.S. Department of State Uganda Report on Human Rights Practices for 1998 says that violence against women, including rape, is quite common. There are no specific laws against wife battering, although a law passed in 1997 provides protection for families, including wives and children. But it is hard to implement the law since law enforcement officials view the problem the way the public does, as not a problem.

Families in Uganda endure violence in silence, and violence is worse in the countryside than it is in the city. According to the Human Rights Report, the pattern is similar in other African countries, too. Women have few rights, neighbors don't want to get involved, and the women lie about their injuries if asked about them at medical facilities.

Several women's organizations in coalition are actively pursuing reform and holding public workshops to lobby for a revision of the Domestic Relations Act. Most of the trouble in getting anything done is related to lack of funding. Many of the countries in Africa do not have adequate funds to handle the many social problems they have, like AIDS, and they have put domestic violence issues on the back burner, because they think, after all, "It is our culture."

Other studies done in Africa are also not comprehensive. One study of domestic violence in Nigeria found that polygamy lends itself more to wife battering than do monogamous marriages (Efoghe, 1990). In this study, more polygamous

marriages were violent than were monogamous marriages. Another study, of child sexual abuse in Zimbabwe, found that sexual abuse of children is not as prevalent there as it is internationally, with only about 10 percent of the population being victims of this kind of abuse (Khan, 1995). The authors of the study wonder whether this discrepancy reflects underreporting, or if sexual abuse of children is really not a big problem in Zimbabwe.

Finally, let's remember that Africa and parts of Southwest Asia perform ritual circumcision of girls. In Somalia, Kenya, the Sudan, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Egypt, Uganda, Chad, Mali, Senegal, Cameroon, Zaire, Nigeria, to name just a few, girls are cut and scraped to make their bodies more attractive and marriageable. This practice has been framed as a human rights abuse, as well as a form of child abuse that is being taken up as a problem by the United Nations and the World Health Organization.

### CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. How is domestic violence similar in India, Japan, Vietnam, and Africa? How does it differ? Also, Leeder notes that rising industrialization and modernization increase the likelihood of family violence. Why, then, is wife battering also common in industrialized countries such as Japan and the United States?
2. Why do most of the women in these countries never complain about domestic violence? What individual, legal, historical, and cultural factors help explain their silence?
3. Leeder urges the reader to suspend "any ethnocentric value judgments" about family violence. What does she mean? And, if we do so, does this

mean that the global community shouldn't interfere with a country's violent practices against women and children?

### REFERENCES

- BARRY, K. 1996. Industrialization and economic development: The costs to women. In *Vietnam women in transition*, ed. K. Barry. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- DORO, M. 1999, August 4. Available on the World Wide Web at End Violence@edc-cit.org.
- EFOGHE, G. B. 1990. Nature and type of marriage as predictors of aggressiveness among married men in Ekpoma, Bendel State of Nigeria. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 20 (Spring): 67–78.
- GELLES, R., and M. STRAUS. 1986. Societal change and change in family violence from 1975–1985 as revealed in two national surveys. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48 (3): 465–80.
- GOODSTEIN, L. 1996. Sexual assessment in the U.S. and Vietnam: Some thoughts and questions. In *Vietnam women in transition*, ed. K. Barry, 275–86. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- HAUGHTON, J., and D. HAUGHTON. 1995. Son preference in Vietnam. *Studies in Family Planning*, 26, 6 (Nov/Dec): 325–38.
- JOHNSON, M. 1996. Violence against women in the family: The U.S. and Vietnam. In *Vietnam women in transition*, ed. K. Barry. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- KHAN, N. 1995. Patterns of child sexual abuse in Zimbabwe: An overview. *Zimbabwe Journal of Educational Research*, 7, 2 (July): 181–208.
- MILLER, B. 1987. Female infanticide and child neglect in rural North India. In *Child survival*, ed. N. Scheper-Hughes, 95–112. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co.
- QUY, L. 1996. Domestic violence in Vietnam. In *Vietnam women in transition*, ed. K. Barry, 263–74. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- RAO, V. 1997. Wife beating in rural south India: A qualitative and econometric analysis. *Social Science and Medicine*, 44 (8): 1169–1180.
- SEGAL, U. 1995. Child abuse by the middle class: A study of professionals in India. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 19 (2): 217–31.
- YOSHIHAMA, M., and S. SORENSON. 1994. Physical, sexual and emotional abuse by male intimates: Experiences of women in Japan. *Violence and Victims*, 9 (1): 63–77.