



## Concepts and Theories of Spousal Violence Against Women: Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

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**Abstract:** *This research paper analyses the concepts and theories of Spousal Violence (SV) against ageing women. Spousal Violence uses power and control that causes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. A spouse is a married person by social and cultural norms accepted by the law of a particular society. Individuals become significant others through the wedding. Develop an association with intimate relationships to keep themselves as the better half of each other. The violence inflicted against women by their husbands is called spousal violence against women. Under the same roof of the house, women are harmed with injuries, intensely disturbed with vehement feelings, expressions and language. Modesty is damaged by forced sex. There is a need to understand spousal violence as a familial phenomenon in the Indian context of society and culture. The base to discuss concepts and theories of Spousal Violence applied with a broad review of related etiology, methodology and topology. The subject matter of Social Work methods implied bringing theories and concepts into the fieldwork practices to address the problem of Spousal Violence against women. Complexity encompassed to study the knowledge of this research phenomenon attempts to bring integration of subject matter for the welfare and development of Women.*

### **Key Words**

*Spousal Violence, Intimate Partner Violence, Spousal Abuse, Social Work Practice*

### **Introduction**

Nature gifted birth of women and men with gender balance. The world populations of women are equal to men. Throughout ages and spaces, women's human rights have been violated time and again. There is no particular society around the globe exceptional in treating women on par with men. Globally women are under matched in providing equality and justice. The constitutional rights

guaranteed to the women just bound in papers and books could not bring expected change to improve women's rights and respect. The global women's action movements brought a meagre impact than expected acceleration in implementing women's rights worldwide.

The family is a basic unit of society to meet the minimum needs of the individual and provide food, cloth, shelter, especially safety and security for



the growth of an individual. Unfortunately, the family only becomes the centre of violence against women in all cultures and societies. The gender-based violence is predominantly experienced by women and perpetrated by men (United Nations, 1992). Spousal violence against women is a common phenomenon, only the frequency of violence differs from family to family. Most women in the families are affected either by emotional or physical violence by using power and control of spousal domination of males. At any given point, women are perpetuated and suffered in all population groups (McFeely et al., 2013) by their spouses.

### **Conceptual Frame Work of Spousal Violence Against Women**

Understanding violence is necessary prior to know the conceptual and theoretical basis of Spousal Violence. The World Report on Violence and Health (Krug, 2002) defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation”. The act of committing violence is generally divided into three broad categories: self-directed, interpersonal, and collective.

The first category is self-directed violence, an act of self-perpetration and victimisation caused by self-abuse and suicide. The second category, interpersonal violence, includes family, intimate partner, and community violence. The third category refers to acts of violence caused by a larger population group and consists of social, economic and political violence (Krug, 2002).

Based on the information available in the literary sources from

Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, The Spousal Violence Against Women is defined as the typical victimisation of an individual with whom the abuser has an intimate, marital or romantic relationship (CDC, 2021) that includes emotional aggression, an act of coercion, stalking, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Martin, 2022) causes the vulnerability against wives by their husbands or intimate partners. The concept of spousal violence against women is summarised as a kind of interpersonal violence caused by a husband or intimate partner, which happens within the domestic boundaries.

### **Theories of Spousal Violence Against Women**

A varied number of theories were developed to identify the causes of spousal violence. The characteristics and aspects of the theoretical basis of spousal violence are broadly classified into four categories. They are psychological theories of SV, sociological theories of SV, human behavioural theories of SV and family and system theories of SV. All theories construct the framework with the orientation of power and control used by the abusers or perpetrators.

#### **I. Psychological Theories of Spousal Violence**

The psychological theories of spousal violence are subdivided into three categories.

##### **a) Object Relations Theory of SV:**

The theory of Object Relations explains human being's relationships with significant others. An individual's childhood experiences carried to later life (Fairbairn, 1952) in the process of personality development. Parents being primary caregivers of the children have a significant impact on the growth and development of the child. The emotional experiences in infancy and childhood



become the basis of interpersonal relationships between the individual and significant ones, peers, family and the community. Conflicts between parents and family members influence a person's psychic development in later life. An individual learnt behaviour of spousal violence enrooted from the child's primary caregiver. The evidence-based research studies recommend that few men who commit spousal violence had inappropriate nurturing and fostering in the early stages of child development (Zosky, 1999). Adulthood relationships are developed based on the life experience of infancy, childhood and adolescence. Men affected by parental rejections, neglect, unstable relationships, and strained intimate relationships most likely cause Spousal Violence against their wives.

#### **b) Attachment Theory of SV:**

The attachment theory explains the feeling of security ensured by the primary caregivers of the children. The parents of their children directly experience the power of protection and a sense of life security. Persons who had experiences of avoidance, ambivalence, disorientation and disorganised attachment with parents lead to an insecure environment. Stressful and anxious relationships attached to child growth and developments within the family have adverse effects on the shape of self-development. The researcher on family welfare recommended that family bondage and emotional attachments (Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989) guarantee security in marital relationships. Insecure attachments strain the relationship between wife and husband, resulting in spousal violence. A healthy family system based on positive relational attachments establishes constructive spousal relationships.

#### **c) Violence as Trauma Theory of SV:**

Brain functioning of a victim affected by an abuser. This theory explains catastrophic psychological events cause severe traumas to the neurological functioning of an individual. As a result, sensory stimuli stop functioning to give signals to process the traumatic events. Coding, storing, and sequencing transactions processed sensory organs. The flow of information gets disturbed in the nervous system. The victims are frequently prone to repeated trauma and high stress levels due to the brain's limbic system (Brown, 1991). Spousal violence repeatedly occurs against women in this kind of traumatic condition. The victims of abuse due to SV experience chemical reactions in the neuroendocrine systems (Vander Kolk, 1990), which override the brain to develop coping abilities to fight against the vulnerability of interpersonal violence.

#### **II. Sociological Theories of Spousal Violence**

The sociological theories are categorised into four types, mainly focusing on the individual's interaction capacities with other people surrounding in family, community and the society.

##### **a) Control Theory of SV:**

Almost all the families in the communities of the entire world are patriarchal. The fathers or the husbands of the families' exercise power and control to maintain relationships with other family members like wives, children, etc. (Bostock et al., 2002). The wives in the family are victimised by engrossing the power and control mechanisms. The abusers who cause spousal violence against women exercise different types of intimidation like physical abuse, emotional abuse and



economic abuse. The control theory of SV explains that men who have an emotional attachment with the family are less likely to use power and control over their wives. Male who don't have psychological connections or bondage with wives fail to express love and affection and intimidate various forms of spousal violence with power and control.

**b) Resource Theory of SV:**

The resource theory describes that the economic conditions, wealth, income, properties, and assets significantly impact controlling human behaviour. Men with optimum wealth try to control their wives with economic and social status. Abuse and victimisation of women have correlated factors of the availability of resources (Goode, 1971). Therefore, husbands with limited resources of wealth choose the ways of violence, perpetration and abuse against their wives, causing spousal violence against women.

**c) Exosystem Factor Theory of SV:**

The disturbances, pressures and stressors in the life events are the prime factors of spousal violence against women. Intergenerational violence percolates into the family from childhood to adulthood as a resultant behavioural factor in accepting and justification (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2014) spousal violence. Men who are in life circle of job loss, failure of love, extramarital relationship, lack of trust and infidelity, discomforts in physical needs, low marital satisfaction, unmet psychological and sexual desires, loss of property, over expectations from significant ones and low self-esteem are involved in the intimidation of spousal violence.

**d) Social Isolation Theory of SV:**

This social networking system provides adequate social support systems (Garbarion & Kostelny, 1992), social

service and resource utilisation to address the problem of Spousal Violence. The theory of social isolation recognises the importance of the association between individual and family, family and community and community and societies. Human beings should not be isolated from family and community and have adverse effects on life. The women in the families who are isolated from the family members and do not gain support from the community are vulnerable to experiencing severe spousal violence and abuse by their husbands.

**III. Human Behavioural Theory of SV**

The behaviour of human being influenced by genetical factors, interactions, learnings and experiences perceived from the family, peer group and the society. The human behavioural theories of SV are sub classified into four categories as Social Learning Theory of SV, Behavioural Genetics Theory of SV, Reactive Aggression Theory of SV and Learned Helplessness Theory of SV.

**a) Social Learning Theory of SV:**

Individual growth and development depend on adopting cultural systems, social value systems, language and life skills in the socialisation process. The individual imitates social learnings through social roles. The aggressive behaviours and intergenerational transmission of violence in the family and society are results of negative reinforcement of operant conditioning (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2014) in the social learning system. The abusive behaviour is learnt from the family and community. The individuals nourished in violent families become a negatively disorganised human beings, causing spousal violence against women. Harsh and violent experiences are learnt from



society and become the practice of victimisation.

**b) Behavioural Genetics Theory of SV:**

Human genetic factors have a significant influence on an individual's behaviour. Biologically, behavioural characteristics of a person are transferred from parents to children. Mother and father, who have the traits of aggression, abuse, perpetration, and violence traits, may transmit similar genetic factors (Hines & Saudino, 2002) to their progeny. Men, descendants from the families of spousal violence, tend to behave like their fathers and expect their wives to accept and justify violence similarly to their mothers.

**c) Reactive Aggression Theory of SV:**

The reactive aggression theory of SV explains the urge to hurt their significant one because of negative behavioural attitudes and adverse feelings. Men get anger and rage against women with the hatred feelings of rejection, isolation and abandonment (Douglas & Dutton, 2001). An abusive and aggressive emotion causes the victimisation of loved ones. The painful moments and unpleasant violent conditions disturb interpersonal relationships between intimate partners. Negative stimulus in the brain constructs terrible responses that lead to aggressive reactions against wives.

**d) Learned Helplessness Theory of SV:**

According to the theory of learned helplessness of SV, women stop reacting to overcome the violent situations repeated in their lives by their intimate partners. The victims lack the hope of optimism to face the controlling factors and the power inserted on them again and again in their daily routine.

Women learned to depend on men due to socio-cultural barriers. They learn to accept their vulnerability in helpless situations (Seligman, 1975). The stigma associated with separated women, sacrosanct feelings about the marital partner, respect in the society, the life of children, and economic dependence keep the situations helpless and make the wives behave in an identical manner against repeated victimisation.

**IV. Family and Systems Theories of Spousal Violence**

The family directly influences an individual's growth, heredity, development, and behavioural characteristics formed within the family systems and environment. Frequent spousal violence in the family strains the interpersonal relationships among family members.

**a) Family Systems Theory of SV:**

Family is the basic unit of society, and it is considered a subsystem of the community (Nicholas & Schwartz, 2004). The group of families forms a community that practices the same social norms and cultural practices. There is strong interconnectivity between individuals, family and society. The functioning of an individual depends on the systems established in a particular culture. Focus interventions can prevent spousal violence at the family level. Help-seeking behaviour from the community safeguards the women against SV.

**b) Family Life Cycle Theory of SV:**

The family groups include members belonging to different lifecycle stages, such as old, adults, adolescents and children. Various life events like birth, education, occupation, marriage, parenthood, separation, and death occur within the family (McBride, 2003). The cultural practices are adopted by family members inherently. Male domination,





spousal violence and low treatment of girl children, wives learnt from family members. Violence occurs against women at various stages of life in the family. As a result, families would reorganise and disintegrate during marital separation.

**c) Microsystem Factor Theories of SV:**

Microsystems exist within the social structure. A family is an institution with close connections with other institutions like marriage, education, welfare, community development, social security etc., conceptualised model in an ecological system (Heise, 1998). The close interactions among the microsystems protect women against spousal violence. The barriers and inherent factors causing spousal violence are addressed by immediate interactive support endorsed from other social settings.

**d) Interfamilial Stress Theory of SV:**

According to the theory of interfamilial stress, the caretakers of the family, mother and father, face stress factors like the family having more children (Malley-Morrison & Hines, 2014), crowded with relatives and friends, physically challenged, sickness and lack of financial strength. Such stressors involve men in spousal violence, scolding, and beating their marital partners (Crouch & Behl, 2001). The abusers victimise and make vulnerable their significant ones because of the unmet needs of the family.

**e) Dependency Relations Theory of SV:**

Several types of dependency are the causative factor of spousal abuse against women. The children, elderly and sick people in the family are care-dependent (Finkelhor & Dziuba-Leatherman, 1994). Women who look after the family and act as caretakers'

role dependent on men due to a lack of economic sources to run the family. Men unable to manage stressful situations abuse their dependants and wives become more vulnerable.

**Implications for Social Work Education and Practice**

The subject of social work practice mainly focuses on fieldwork interventions and aims to render professional services for helping individuals, families, groups and communities (NASW, 2022). The professional application of social work methods, values, and principles helps to resolve spousal violence through integrated approaches of social casework, social group work, community organisation, social action, social welfare and administration. The social work implications would prevent spousal violence in the family settings (An, 2014).

No single theory is sufficient to understand the very complex subject of spousal violence. Broad areas of theoretical background describe the phenomena of spousal violence imply the theoretical aspects of psychoanalytic and behavioural dynamics of individuals, sociological contexts of families and groups adopt theories of social learnings and social roles, the theories of family systems and ecological systems provide a strong basis for the development of social work intervention to help people of various social settings. The practice social work profession simplifies the problems and helps the social functioning by implying the techniques of study, assessment, intervention and evaluation.

The intervention of social work practice to address issues associated with spousal violence is possible with three levels of intervention: micro, mezzo, and macro (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006). The micro-level practice deal with individual



clients intervening with the support of self and psychic centred theories. Enable the individuals affected by spousal violence by establishing a client relationship, case management and counselling skills. The clients are consistently screened to optimise the available resources, coping mechanisms, interactions and interpersonal relationships, knowledge enhancement, and tackle spousal violence by their strengths and self-help methods.

At the mezzo level, the social workers make use of intervention strategies and skills pertaining to the family groups, informal groups, medium-size agencies and organisations to help the spouse through group activities, group dynamics and group intervention methods. The group member is convened to discuss the challenges connected with spousal violence. The goal is set through focus group interactions, training and delivery of the services to the people affected by spousal violence.

Macro-level social work practice deals with large organisations, communities, institutions and social environments. The problem of spousal violence may be related to individual clients, but the magnitude of the problem is massive. According to (WHO, 2018), one in every three women is affected by spousal violence. This global gender-related issue needs to be addressed through worldwide conferences, active involvement of national and international agencies. The social worker's intervention at a larger scale needs to advocate for the prevention of spousal violence worldwide.

Social peace and order are achieved through the implication of social work interventions at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. Social policies for gender equality are initiated, and robust

social welfare systems and administrations are developed to reach the global mission of gender justice, parity and balance between men and women. These efforts still need to give the expected level of results. Spousal violence problem looks to be at the family level, but the majority of families of all cultures of the world are turbulently affected.

### Conclusion

The field-based social work, which has a theoretical basis on spousal violence phenomena, may positively affect women's lives. The theories are developed on psychological, human behavioural, sociological and ecological constructs and factors of spousal violence. The implication of social work interventions at the level of individual, family, social groups and communities prevent violence and victimisation against women.

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