

TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED ABUSE IN DOMESTIC RELATIONSHIP 'A GROWING THREAT TO WOMEN'

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Abstract

Trend to use digital and communication technology for controlling and abusing life partner in domestic relationship is rampant. Promotion of the ideas of patriarchy and gender stereotyping leads to violence against women in a family setup. Domestic violence against women is a serious issue worldwide. It is globally prevailing, deeply rooted and leaves serious impacts on women's health and well-being. Domestic violence, in its broadest sense, refers to abuse- physical, emotional, sexual, or financial of one living partner by the other, often living in the same household. Abuse of networking platforms, applications meant for surveillance, spy-ware and other tracking devices are few examples of digital abuse. Such type of abuse of technological means can be referred as 'technology-facilitated' abuse.

Keywords: Technology, Digital Networking, Domestic Violence, Abuse

1. Introduction

The words "Technology is useful servant but a dangerous master" used by Christian Lous Lange highlights the importance of technology as a tool for progress and a source of societal challenges. On the one hand technology provides numerous benefits, while on the other its unchecked advancement also lead to serious threats, including erosion of privacy, misinformation, control on the partner in domestic relationship and violence.

Domestic violence is a world wide social issue effecting multiple sections of the society. Domestic violence creates serious impacts on women's health and well-being. The World Health Organization has published estimates suggesting that approx. 1/3rd women all over the world have suffered from- physical or sexual 'intimate partner violence' or 'non-partner' sexual violence duringr lifetime.¹ According to the 'Global and Regional Estimates of Violence against Women², over a quarter of women - 'aged 15–49 years' in domestic relationship have been subjected to physical, or sexual violence by their partner in domestic relationship at least once in lifetime. The prevalence estimate of 'lifetime intimate partner violence' is 20% in the Western Pacific. It is 22% in high income group of countries. This estimate is 25% in WHO Region of the 'Americas', 33% in WHO Region of 'Africa', 31% in WHO 'Eastern Mediterranean Region' and 33% in WHO 'South-

1 *Violence against women Prevalence Estimates, 2018. Global, regional and national prevalence estimates for intimate partner violence against women and global and regional prevalence estimates for non-partner sexual violence against women. WHO: Geneva, 2021.* Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women> (last visited May 12, 2025).

2 *Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2018.* Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240022256> (last visited May 12, 2025).

East Asia Region'. Intimate partners are responsible for about 38% of murders of women all over the world. Domestic violence- a social and legal concept- in its broadest sense, it implies any kind of abuse- 'either physical, financial, sexual, emotional or financial' between intimate partners, often living in the domestic relationship.

A perpetrator may exercise control over the victim by engaging in such behaviors- that confine or restrain the victim, or monopolize the victim's skills and resources, or assert exclusive possession over the victim, or prevent the victim from keeping in touch with social networks, or escaping the abusive relationship, or seeking help and support.³

The United Nations is considering 'domestic abuse' alike other forms of gender based violence, such as 'rape and sexual assault', 'child sexual abuse' and 'harm through prostitution'. Abuse in domestic relationship is set with-in theoretical framework that acknowledges the influence of 'gender' on the lives of men and women, freedoms granted to them and relationship between them.

Abuse of technology in controlling behaviour and exert pressure on the intimate partner has become a common phenomenon. In the modern era, use of digital and communication technology in order to control and abuse partners in domestic relationship is rampant. Technology may be used to commit physical, emotional, mental and even sexual abuse in domestic relationship. Availability and use of multiple surveillance mobile applications, spyware and other tracking devices, as well as Artificial Intelligence Application/Software, social media and networking platforms is a growing threat to a woman in domestic relationship.

2. Theories of Domestic-Violence

A Man's involvement in 'intimate partner violence' can easily be realized by understanding several theories on domestic violence and there are mainly three categories of such theories- 'Socio-Political Critiques', 'Psycho-Analytical' and 'Social Learning'.

'Socio-Political Critique Theories'

Such theories argue that - 'Domestic violence serves as a mechanism to uphold and protect society's patriarchal and hierarchical social structure.' The role of power dynamics, gender-inequality and the norms of society in perpetuating domestic violence is highlighted and stressed in these theories. The families wherein - women are employed and husbands' earning is less - it has been noticed that the husbands are more likely to engage in 'domestic violence' - presumably to have an upper hand in the power dynamics of the household and control over the female partner.⁴

'Psycho-Analytical Theories'

Such theories revolve around the impact of 'anxiety, anger, guilt and stress' experienced in a married life. These theories emphasize that men can show 'hyper-masculine-behavior' to compensate for their emotional insecurities and stress. The factors, like aggression, poor negotiation skills, impulsive nature, toxic masculinity, controlling tendencies, anti-social behavior, and insecurity are associated with the men who are more prone to subjecting their partners to domestic violence.⁵

'Social Learning Theories'

These theories emphasize the inter-generational transmission of violence with-in families.⁶ These theories suggest that men acquire violent behavior after observing it within their family environment.⁷ The exposure of children to their "parents' aggression" vis-a-vis "intimate partner

3 Bagshaw Dale, Chung Donna, Et al. (2020, April). *Reshaping Responses To Domestic Violence:Final Report*. University of South Australia. Retrieved from <https://wesnet.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/PADV-Reshaping-responses.pdf> (last visited February 14, 2025).

4 Weitzman A (2014). Women's and Men's Relative Status and Intimate Partner Violence in India. *Population and Development Review* 40(1), 55–75.

5 Naeem Farooq, Et al. (2008). Angry wives, abusive husbands: relationship between domestic violence and psychosocial Variables. *Womens Health Issues*. 18, 453–462.

6 Bandura A, Walters RH (1977). Social learning theory. *Englewood cliffs Prentice Hall*.

7 Heise LL. (1998). Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework. *Violence Women*. 4, 262–290

violence” contributes to the ‘generational social learning’ of such a behavior. It remains associated with an increased tendency for justifying - “intimate partner violence” by such children. Moreso, such theories give a clear suggestion that male children learn aggression from their ‘disputing parents’ and they hold a similar tendency to copy such a behavior in their own relationships.

3. Few Global Statistics

‘Population-level surveys’ on the basis of reports from the ‘survivors’ provide a most accurate estimates relating to the prevalence of - ‘intimate partner violence’ and ‘sexual violence’. ‘The prevailing data w.e.f the year 2000 to 2018’ from ‘161’ countries and areas was analyzed by ‘WHO’ on behalf of ‘UN Interagency Working Group on Violence against Women’. It was observed that nearly 1 out of 3 of women -worldwide - are subjected to ‘physical, and/or sexual violence’ by ‘intimate partner’ or ‘non-partner’.⁸

‘The Violence Against Women Prevalence Estimates’ of 2018⁹, published by ‘World Health Organization’, on basis of an analysis of available data came out from surveys and studies conducted between 2000 and 2018 concludes as under:

- I. “Over a quarter of women aged 15–49 years, who have been in a relationship, have been subjected to - physical and/or sexual violence - by their intimate partner at least once in their lifetime”
- II. “The prevalence estimates of lifetime intimate partner violence is 20% in the Western Pacific, 22% in high-income countries and Europe, 25% in the ‘WHO Regions of the Americas’, 33% in the ‘WHO African Region’, 31% in the ‘WHO Eastern Mediter-ranean Region’ and 33% in the ‘WHO South-East Asia Region’.”
- III. “As many as 38% of all murders of women globally are committed by intimate partners.
- IV. “In addition to intimate partner violence, 6% of women globally reported having been sexually assaulted by someone other than a partner”

A study¹⁰ revealed as follow:

- I. ‘Physical or sexual violence’ against women - by ‘male intimate partners’ - is prevailing through out the world.
- II. At least one in life time, approx. 27% ever ‘partnered women’ (Aged 15–49 years) experienced - ‘physical or sexual violence’ from a ‘current’ or ‘former intimate partner.’
- III. Up to 492 million ever - ‘partnered women’ (aged 15 to 49 years) were subjected such violence by ‘intimate partner’ during the year 2018.

The latest facts and figures suggest as under:¹¹

- I. An estimated ‘736 million women’ are subjected to ‘physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence’, ‘non-partner sexual violence’, at least once in their lifetime. This figure is excluding - ‘sexual harassment’.
- II. The violence against women in most of the cases is committed by ‘current or former husband’ or ‘intimate partner’.

III. More than ‘640 million women’ (Aged 15 and older) have been subjected to ‘in world wide intimate partner violence’.

8 *Supra*. Note 3.

9 *Ssupra*. Note 4.

10 Sardinha Lynnmarie Et el. (2022). Global, regional, and national prevalence estimates of physical or sexual, or both, intimate partner violence against women in 2018. *Lancet*, 399(10327), 803–13. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(21)02664-7.-DOI-PMC-PubMed, Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8885817/#:~:text=Almost%20one%20ever,4%25;%203%E2%80%937%25> (last visited February 16, 2025).

11 Facts and figures: Ending violence against women (2024). Retrieved from https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-ending-violence-against-women#_edn8 (last visited February 16, 2025).

IV. Around '51,100 women and girls' were killed in 2023 by their 'intimate partners or other family members'. 140 women or girls are killed - on an average- every day by someone in their family. 'Where 60% of all female homicides are committed by 'intimate partners or other family members', only 12% of all male homicides are perpetrated in the private sphere.

V. Women who suffer multiple forms of discrimination face a higher risk of violence and are more vulnerable to its consequences.

VI. Adolescent girls are more at risk of 'intimate-partner violence' than adult women. By the time they are 19 years old, approx. 24% adolescent girls who have been in a relationship have already been physically, sexually, or psychologically' abused by a 'partner'.

A research on 'Global estimates of intimate partner/ family members Femicides in 2023' published by office on 'Drugs and Crime', United Nations¹² revealed as under:

I. Approx. 85000 'women and girls' were globally intentionally killed in 2023 and 60 percent of these were committed by 'intimate-partner or a family member'. As such, '140 women and girls -on an average- lost their lives 'throughout world' on each day at the hands of their own 'partner or a close relative'.

II. The maximum number was in 'Africa' and the figure was 21700. It was followed by 'Asia' with 18500. This figure was 8300 in the 'Americas' and 2300 in 'Europe'. It was least in number as 300 in 'Oceania'.

III. Around 1.3 'women' per 100000 'female population' are 'estimated' to have been murdered by an 'intimate partner or another family member' in 2023. In terms of regional differences - it is estimated that the 'highest' rate of 'intimate partner/ family member femicide' in 'Africa' was - 2.9 per 100,000 female population. The same was followed by the 'Americas' with a figure of 1.6. It was 1.5 in 'Oceania', 0.8 in 'Asia' and 0.6 in 'Europe'.

A report published during 2023¹³ suggested as under:

I. Approx. 48800 'women and girls' were globally killed by - 'intimate partner or a family member' during the year 2022.

II. More than 133 'women or girls', on an average, were killed on each day by someone in their family.

III. Africa recorded the largest number of 'female intimate-partner/ family' related killings in 2022 with an estimated 20000 victims. An estimated 18400 women and girls in Asia were killed. This figure was 7,900 in the Americas, 2,300 in Europe and Oceania recorded around 200 such killings.

IV. The female 'intimate partner/family related homicide rate' in 'Africa' was estimated as 2.8 per 100000 "female population". It was 1.5 in the 'Americas', 1.1 in 'Oceania', 0.8 in 'Asia' and 0.6 in 'Europe'.

According to a similar report published in 2022¹⁴:

I. An estimated 81100 'women and girls' were killed -worldwide - intentionally in the year 2021.

12 UNODC and UN Women, Femicides in 2023: Global Estimates of Intimate Partner/Family Member Femicides (United Nations publication, 2024). Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/11/femicides-in-2023-global-estimates-of-intimate-partner-family-member-femicides> (last visited February 17, 2025).

13 UNODC and UN Women. (2023). *Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide)* (United Nations publication). Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/11/gender-related-killings-of-women-and-girls-femicide-feminicide-global-estimates-2022> (last visited February 17, 2025).

14 UNODC and UN Women. (2022). *Gender-related killings of women and girls (femicide/feminicide)* (United Nations publication). Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/11/gender-related-killings-of-women-and-girls-improving-data-to-improve-responses-to-femicide-feminicide> (last visited February 20, 2025).

II. Around 45000 ‘women and girls’ worldwide were - murdered by their ‘intimate partners or other family members’. More than ‘five women or girls’ on an average were murdered on each day by someone in their ‘own family’.

III. With an estimated 17800 such victims, Asia remained first amongst all. It was followed by Africa with a figure of 17,200. An estimated 7500 ‘women and girls’ were killed by their ‘intimate partners or other family members’ in the ‘Americas’. ‘Europe’ recorded a figure of 2500 and ‘Oceania’ recorded 300 such killings.

IV. In 2021, the ‘female intimate partner/ family-related homicide rate’ in ‘Africa’ was estimated as 2.5 per 100000 female population. It was 1.4 in the ‘Americas’, 1.2 in ‘Oceania’, 0.8 in ‘Asia’ and 0.6 in ‘Europe’.

Another report¹⁵ for the year 2020 suggested as under:

I. Around 47000 ‘women and girls’ worldwide were murdered by their ‘intimate partners or- other family members’ during the year 2020. On an average, a woman or girl was killed by ‘someone in her own family’ every after 11 minutes.

II. With an estimated 18600 victims, ‘Asia’ accounted for the highest number of ‘female intimate partner/ family -related killings’ in 2020. The figure remained 18100 in ‘Africa’, 7,300 in ‘Americas’ and 2600 in ‘Europe’. ‘Oceania’ recorded the lowest number with a number of 300.

III. It is estimated that out of every 100000 ‘women and girls’ worldwide, 1.2 were killed by their ‘intimate- partners or other family members’ during the year 2020.

IV. Asia accounted for the highest absolute number of such ‘female victims’. However, the ‘female intimate partner/family- related homicide rate’ in ‘Africa’ was estimated at 2.7 per 100,000 female population. It remained 1.6 in Oceania, 1.4 in the ‘Americas’, 0.8 in ‘Asia’ and, 0.7 in ‘Europe’.

4. Tech-Based Domestic and Family Violence

When we think about gender-based violence what often comes to our mind is direct contact violence, such as physical and sexual abuse. However, with the emergence of technology new mechanisms have been developed to target victims. The digital technology makes our life easier by bringing multiple benefits to our daily lives. However, the devices, apps and system softwares also bring risks, especially for women experiencing domestic and family violence. Studies show that a majority of women struggling with domestic and family violence experience violence through online or digital technology. This often includes technological based coercive control as well as cyber stalking. The abuser normally remains partner, ex-partner or someone the woman is sharing a home with.

Technology-Facilitated abuse in domestic relationship can also be in well-known traditional forms i.e. physical, sexual, economic and psychological. Due to breach of personal information and data, psychological harm can manifest in form of depression or suicidal thoughts. Physical and sexual abuse can be in form of spreading personal information or explicit images. Economic abuse can occur by sharing personal data, such as explicit imagery which make it hard for the people to find work. This method can also manifest by withholding money through e-transfer or sending abusive messages.

The devices, like tablets, smartphones etc., may be used to - impersonate, harass, stalk and threaten the partners in domestic relationship. We may also raise a concern that rampant use of ‘internet-connected home devices’ may also provide more sophisticated range of tools to perpetrators for harming their life partners. ‘Smart home devices’ as well as ‘Software installed on the victim’s mobile’ can be used to record their ‘location and conversations’.

Most of the people, now a days, rely on technology to manage their funds. Online accounts and software applications make it easier for perpetrators to monitor, control and misuse funds and

15 Killings of women and girls by their intimate partner or other family members (Global estimates 2020), Retrieved from https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/statistics/crime/UN_BriefFem_251121.pdf (last visited February 20, 2025).

resources of the victim. A perpetrator by accessing victim's online bank account or statement can use it for monitoring financial activities. A perpetrators can demand access to the victim's online account. Software applications may be used to track the victim's spending activities even without knowledge. An effected partner may have access to his/her bank account restricted or conditions can be set for spending. In addition, economic exploitation can be by following means:

An effected partner's wages may directly be deposited into the perpetrator's bank account or the same can be controlled in a joint account by online means; An effected partner can be forced to take on the perpetrator's debt online; A perpetrators can have access the effected partner's account and misappropriate the funds; A perpetrator may lock the effected partner out of own or joint bank account to sabotage access to money.

There are also instances of Sexual violence using technology. Common instances include sharing of intimate videos and photos, sextortion i.e blackmailing using sexual contents and cyber stalking. Creating fake and manipulated images to portray a partner in a negative or compromising position is also an example of misuse of technology. Abusing tools of artificial intelligence, instances of rapes are reported. As such, instances of marital rape through misuse of technology can also not be ruled out.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

Domestic Violence against Women represents un-equal power relationships between 'men and women'. The instances of abuse of technology for committing domestic violence are required to be considered at the individual as well as the structural level. Such abuse is needed to be curbed and eliminated.

Everyone can become role model by observing misuse of technology. People working in legal, education, advertising and other public sectors can play an important role and help to disseminate information related to abuse of technology. Women would only be able to live a life free of violence, thereafter

The people who witness domestic violence in neighborhood must directly or secretly contact appropriate law enforcement agencies and ensure support to the victims. Social awareness is required to change mindset of the people about gender roles. The government agencies and NGOs must come forward for this purpose. It may lead to better environment for women in family.

Any entertainment format exhibiting gender discrimination must be criticized. It would help to interrupt the perpetuation of misogynist values.

Government agencies and the officers associated with Legal Services Institutions must take this onerous task to curb menace of domestic violence against women.

Last, but not least, mass awareness is also desired at individual and organizational level. The technology is required to be used for betterment of life and not to use as a tool for harassing the life partner.