



# WOMEN – THE SILENT VICTIMS OF AMBIENT ABUSE

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## Abstract

*Abuse as every one knows, is not only wife-beating or bride burning, it can take many forms. It is not confined to lower socioeconomic levels of society. Women suffer emotional abuse at every level, even in so called educated, "cultured" houses. Psychological and emotional abuse is more common here. What is worse is that many times the victims themselves are not aware that they are being abused. Among the various types of psychological abuse, I wish to concentrate on "Ambient Abuse" – a very subtle form of abuse, where the victim is hardly aware that she is being abused. She believes that everything is normal and that it is her thoughts and behavior that are at fault. In the words of Sam Vaknin, who introduced the concept, "Ambient abuse is the stealthy, subtle, underground currents of maltreatment that sometimes go unnoticed even by the victims themselves, until it is too late. Ambient abuse penetrates and permeates everything but is difficult to pinpoint and identify. It is ambiguous, atmospheric, and diffuse. Hence its insidious and pernicious effects. It is by far the most dangerous kind of abuse there is". Ambient abuse, therefore, is the fostering, propagation, and*

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enhancement of an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, instability, unpredictability and irritation. There are no acts of traceable explicit abuse, nor any manipulative settings of control. Yet, the irksome feeling remains, a disagreeable foreboding, a premonition, a bad omen. In the long term, such an environment erodes the victim's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Self-confidence is shaken badly. Often, the victim adopts a paranoid or schizoid stance and thus renders himself or herself exposed even more to criticism and judgment. The roles are thus reversed: the victim is considered mentally deranged and the abuser - the suffering soul. There are five categories of ambient abuse and they are often combined in the conduct of a single abuser: I. Inducing Disorientation, II. Incapacitating, III. Shared Psychosis, IV. Abuse of Information, V. Control by Proxy. The current paper explores the extent of awareness about ambient abuse prevalent in our society. A survey conducted in this area revealed the lack of knowledge about ambient abuse among women belonging to different walks of life.

**Problem:** To study the awareness of the existence of ambient abuse among women.

**Sample:** Women ranging in age between 20–50 years, belonging to different walks of life.

**Method:** A list of hypothetical situations representing the five categories of ambient abuse was given to each respondent. The respondent was asked to rate each as to whether the situation was abusive, and if so, to what degree. The respondents marked the degree of abuse on a Five-point rating scale.

**Analysis:** The average rating for each hypothetical situation was calculated, and the level of awareness of each type of abuse estimated.

**Discussion:** Results reveal that most respondents considered many of these situations acceptable and a part of life. They were not considered abusive.

Could this be because of the gender role into which women are expected to fit, no matter what their social, economic or professional standing is?

The woman is often expected to 'adjust', 'manage', 'comply', 'take it easy' – etc. and perhaps these expectations are the ones that make them feel abuse is an acceptable, unchangeable part of life.

What can we do about it? Is it possible to sensitize men about this, and most importantly – women? Will women breathe easier when their husbands are at

home, and have a normal, healthy, relaxed relationship? These are some important questions that could be addressed.

Strange as it sounds, many perfectly normal people get trapped in the cycle of abuse. We see it in the Stockholm Syndrome, named from an incident in which hostages took the side of their captors and clung to them! Since the Middle Ages, inquisitors and torturers have known and capitalized on this bizarre phenomenon in the hapless victims at their mercy. The KGB's famed method of breaking people deliberately brought it about to establish mind control.

In 1993, the *World Development Report* of the World Bank estimated that "women aged 15 to 44 lose more Discounted Health Years of Life (DHYLs) to rape and domestic violence than to breast cancer, cervical cancer, obstructed labor, heart disease, AIDS, respiratory infections, motor vehicle accidents or war." Abuse as every one knows, is not only wife-beating or bride burning, it can take many forms. It is not confined to lower socioeconomic levels. Women suffer abuse at every level, even in so called educated, "cultured" houses.

Psychological and emotional abuse is more common here. What is worse is that many times the victims themselves are not aware that they are being abused. Among the various types of psychological abuse, I wish to concentrate on "Ambient Abuse" – a very subtle form of abuse, where the victim is hardly aware that she is being abused. She believes that every thing is normal and that it is her thoughts and behavior that are at fault.

The concept of "Ambient Abuse" was introduced by Sam Vaknin (1997). According to him, "Ambient abuse is the stealthy, subtle, underground currents of maltreatment that sometimes go unnoticed even by the victims themselves, until it is too late. Ambient abuse penetrates and permeates everything but is difficult to pinpoint and identify. It is ambiguous, atmospheric, and diffuse. Hence its insidious and pernicious effects. It is by far the most dangerous kind of abuse there is".

Ambient abuse, therefore, is the fostering, propagation, and enhancement of an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, instability, unpredictability and irritation. There are no acts of traceable explicit abuse, nor any manipulative settings of control. Yet, the irksome feeling remains, a disagreeable foreboding, a premonition, a bad omen.

In the long term, such an environment erodes the victim's sense of self-worth and self-esteem. Self-confidence is shaken badly. Often, the victim adopts a paranoid or schizoid stance and thus renders himself or herself exposed even more to criticism

and judgment. The roles are thus reversed: the victim is considered mentally deranged and the abuser - the suffering soul.

There are five categories of ambient abuse and they are often combined in the conduct of a single abuser:

## I. Inducing Disorientation

The abuser causes the victim to lose faith in her ability to manage and to cope with the world and its demands. She no longer trusts her senses, her skills, her strengths, her friends, her family, and the predictability and benevolence of her environment. The abuser subverts the target's focus by disagreeing with her way of perceiving the world, her judgment, the facts of her existence, by criticizing her incessantly and by offering plausible but specious alternatives. By constantly lying, he blurs the line between reality and nightmare. By recurrently disapproving of her choices and actions the abuser shreds the victim's self-confidence and shatters her self-esteem. By reacting disproportionately to the slightest "mistake" he intimidates her to the point of paralysis.

## II. Incapacitating

The abuser gradually and surreptitiously takes over functions and chores previously adequately and skillfully performed by the victim. The prey finds itself isolated from the outer world, a hostage to the goodwill or, more often, ill-will of her captor. She is crippled by his encroachment and by the inexorable dissolution of her boundaries and ends up totally dependent on her tormentor's whims and desires, plans and stratagems. Moreover, the abuser engineers impossible, dangerous, unpredictable, unprecedented, or highly specific situations in which he is sorely needed. The abuser makes sure that his knowledge, his skills, his connections, or his traits are the only ones applicable and the most useful in the situations that he, himself, wrought. The abuser generates his own indispensability.

## III. Shared Psychosis

The abuser creates a fantasy world, inhabited by the victim and himself, and besieged by imaginary enemies. He allocates to the abused the role of defending this invented and unreal Universe. She must swear to secrecy, stand by her abuser no matter what, lie, fight, pretend, obfuscate and do whatever else it takes to preserve this

oasis of inanity. Her membership in the abuser's "kingdom" is cast as a privilege and a prize. But it is not to be taken for granted. She has to work hard to earn her continued affiliation. She is constantly being tested and evaluated. Inevitably, this interminable stress reduces the victim's resistance and her ability to "see straight".

## IV. Abuse of Information

From the first moments of an encounter with another person, the abuser is on the prowl. He collects information. The more he knows about his potential victim the better able he is to coerce, manipulate, charm, extort or convert it "to the cause". The abuser does not hesitate to misuse the information he gleans, regardless of its intimate nature or the circumstances in which he obtained it. This is a powerful tool in his armory.

## V. Control by Proxy

If all else fails, the abuser recruits friends, colleagues, mates, family members, the authorities, institutions, neighbors, the media, teachers in short, third parties to do his bidding. He uses them to cajole, coerce, threaten, stalk, offer, retreat, tempt, convince, harass, communicate and otherwise manipulate his target. He controls these unaware instruments exactly as he plans to control his ultimate prey. He employs the same mechanisms and devices. And he dumps his props unceremoniously when the job is done. Another form of control by proxy is to engineer situations in which abuse is inflicted upon another person. Such carefully crafted scenarios of embarrassment and humiliation provoke social sanctions (condemnation, opprobrium, or even physical punishment) against the victim. Society or a social group becomes the instrument of the abuser. The current paper explores the extent of awareness about ambient abuse prevalent in our society.

Not much research has been done in this area, especially in our country. In fact, many people are ignorant of the term "Ambient Abuse". In my experience I have seen a lot of women, who are in "envious positions" in society, who have "wonderful, caring husbands and families", living with a constant feeling of foreboding, wondering, what crisis will erupt in the family at what time, and always on tenterhooks when the husband is around, trying their level best not to "upset him". Hence this exploratory survey. If we are at least aware of what Ambient Abuse is, we can develop means of coping with it.

## Method

**Goal:** To study the extent of awareness of Ambient Abuse in Indian women.

**Problem:** To study the awareness of the existence of ambient abuse, and the judged severity of such abuse among married and single women.

**Participants:** The sample was a "convenience sample" and consisted of ninety six women ranging in age between 20 and 50 years, belonging to different walks of life. Of these, thirty two respondents were married and sixty four single. Of the married respondents, two were divorced.

**Procedure:** This was an exploratory survey conducted with the help of hypothetical situations rated on a five-point-scale. A list of hypothetical situations representing the five categories of ambient abuse was given to each respondent. In each category, three hypothetical situations were given, making a total of fifteen situations. The situations were based on experiences of women reported on various sites of the internet, experiences related by women who suffered such situations and news paper reports. The respondent was asked to rate each as to whether the situation was abusive, and if so, to what degree. The respondents marked the degree of abuse on a Five-point rating scale – Extremely Abusive, Highly Abusive, Mildly Abusive, Not Abusive and Normal Behavior.

Each point was scored as follows –

»	Extremely abusive	–	5 points
»	Highly abusive	–	4 points
»	Mildly abusive	–	3 points
»	Not abusive	–	2 points
»	Normal behavior	–	1 point

The total rating any one type of abuse could get was 15 points. This included a rating of "extremely abusive" to all three situations in one category. The minimum was three points.

## Analysis:

The judgment given for each type of abuse was calculated. This was done by computing the total rating given by each respondent to each type of abuse, and converting this into a percentage.

Comparisons were made among different types of abuse for the whole group. Next, the judgment given by the respondents for each type of abuse was compared, on the basis of the marital status.

## Results:

When the ratings given by the whole group were analyzed, it was found that Types I, II and III of abuse were considered mild by a high percentage of the respondents. Type – IV was considered extremely abusive by 36.56% and highly abusive by 51.61% of the respondents. It is interesting to note that the situations were not considered as normal behavior by the respondents, except for a small minority. Table – I and Figure – I show these findings.

**Table – I- Ratings given by the whole group for each of the five kinds of abuse.**

	NO. & PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE JUDGING EACH KIND OF ABUSE- WHOLE GROUP											
	EXTREME		HIGH		MILDLY		NOT ABUSIVE		NORMAL			
	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%	NO.	%
TYPE I	8.00	8.60	24.00	25.81	46.00	49.46	15.00	16.13	0.00	0.00		
TYPE II	5.00	5.38	31.00	33.33	50.00	53.76	9.00	9.68	1.00	1.08		
TYPE III	8.00	8.60	32.00	34.41	43.00	46.24	12.00	12.90	1.00	1.08		
TYPE IV	34.00	36.56	48.00	51.61	13.00	13.98	1.00	1.08	0.00	0.00		
TYPE V	14.00	15.05	50.00	53.76	28.00	30.11	3.00	3.23	0.00	0.00		

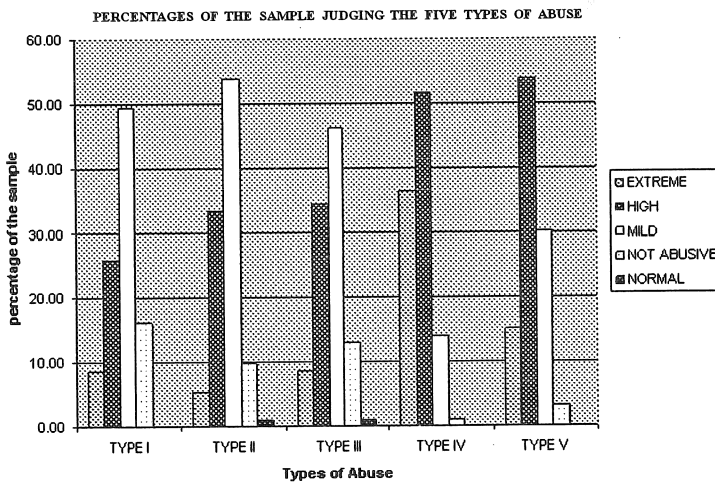
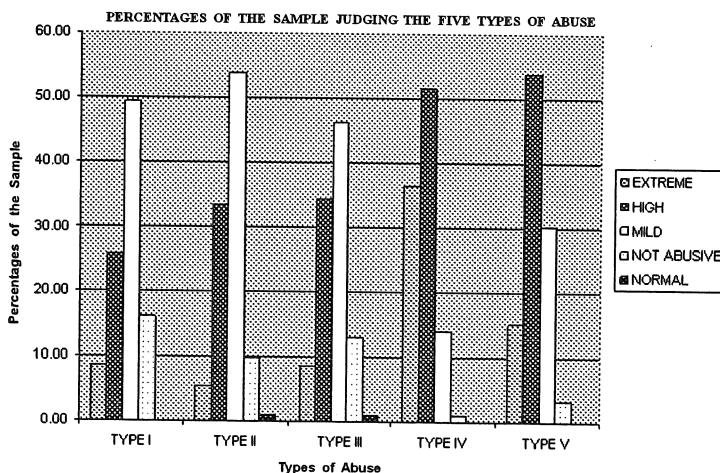


Figure I

When severity of abuse was compared, it was found that Type – IV was rated as extreme by 36.56% of individuals; Types IV and V were rated as highly abusive by majority of respondents, and Types I and II rated as mildly abusive. These are shown in Table- II and Figure – II.

**Table – II – Comparison of judgments regarding severity among different types of abuse (in percentages)**

	Type I	Type II	Type III	Type IV	Type V
Extreme	8.60	5.38	8.60	36.56	15.05
High	25.81	33.33	34.41	51.61	53.76
Mild	49.46	53.76	46.24	13.98	30.11
Not Abusive	16.13	9.68	12.90	1.08	3.23
Normal	0.00	1.08	1.08	0.00	0.00



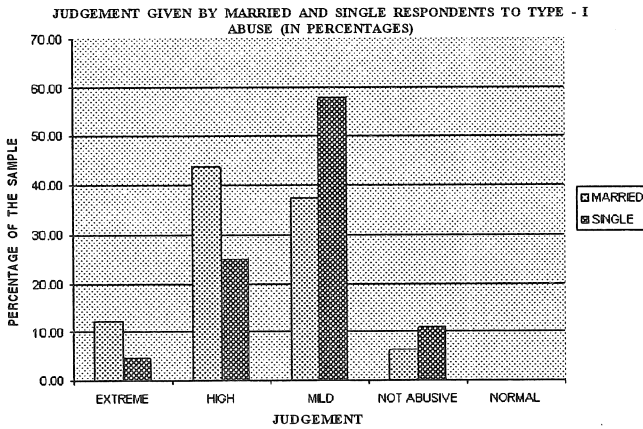
**Figure II**

When comparisons were made between married and single respondents, some interesting opinions came to light. Type I was given ratings of extreme and high abuse by more married respondents than by single respondents. It was considered mild or not abusive by more single respondents than by married respondents. (Table III a and Figure – III a)

**Table – III a – Comparison of judgments given by respondents on the basis of marital status for Type – I abuse**

		EXTREME	HIGH	MILD	NOT ABUSIVE	NORMAL
TYPE - I	MARRIED	12.50	43.75	37.50	6.25	0.00
	SINGLE	4.69	25.00	57.81	10.94	0.00





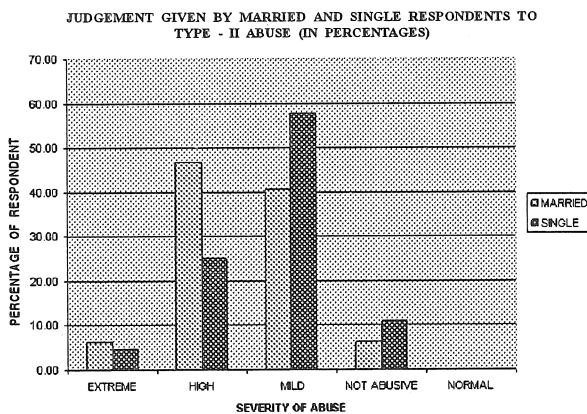
**Figure III a**

Type – II was also considered to be extremely and highly abusive by more married respondents than by single respondents. It was considered mild or not abusive by more single respondents than by married respondents. (Table III b and Figure – III b)

Table – III b – Comparison of judgments given by respondents on the basis of marital status for Type – II abuse

**Table III b**

		EXTREME	HIGH	MILD	NOT ABUSIVE	NORMAL
TYPE - II	MARRIED	6.25	46.88	40.63	6.25	0.00
	SINGLE	4.69	25.00	57.81	10.94	0.00



**Figure III b**

Judgments given to Type – III abuse were also similar to the first two kinds of abuse. (Table III c and Figure – III c)

Table – III c – Comparison of judgments given by respondents on the basis of marital status for Type – III abuse

TYPE - III		EXTREME HIGH		MILD	NOT ABUSIVE	NORMAL
		MARRIED	6.25	43.75	40.63	6.25
SINGLE		9.38	26.56	45.31	15.63	0.00

JUDGEMENT GIVEN BY MARRIED AND SINGLE RESPONDENTS TO TYPE - III ABUSE (IN PERCENTAGES)

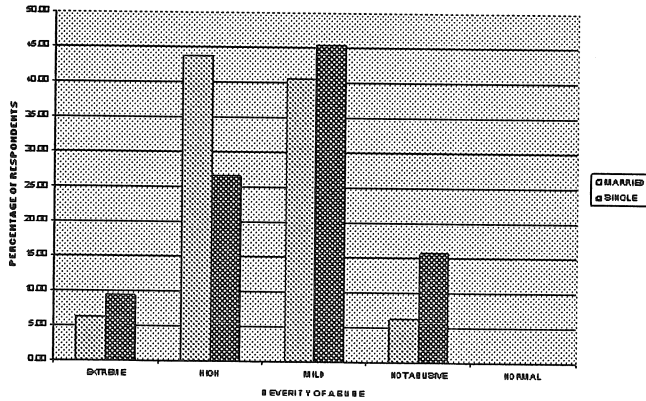
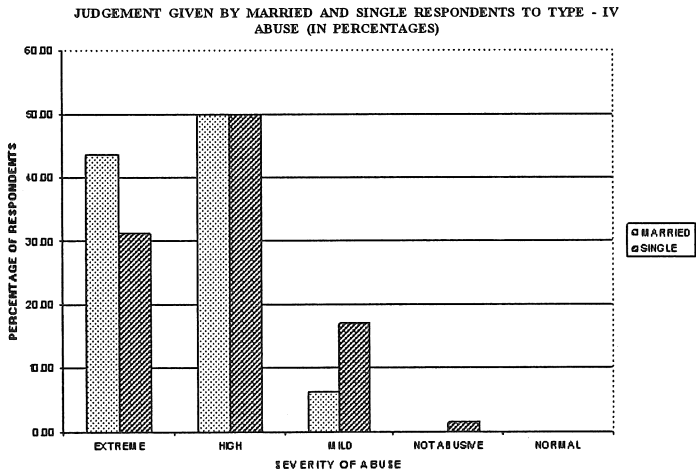


Figure III c

Type – IV abuse was considered to be extremely abusive by more married respondents. A rating of it being highly abusive was given by equal percentage of married and single respondents. None of the married respondents rated it as not abusive. (Table III d and Figure – III d)

Table – III d – Comparison of judgments given by respondents on the basis of marital status for Type – IV abuse

TYPE - IV		EXTREME HIGH		MILD	NOT ABUSIVE	NORMAL
		MARRIED	43.75	50.00	6.25	0.00
SINGLE		31.25	50.00	17.19	1.56	0.00

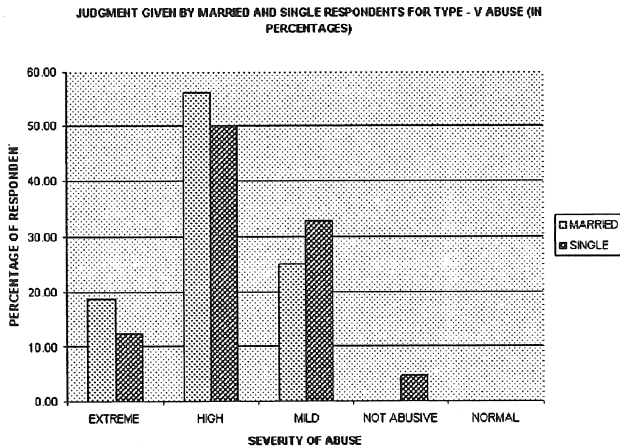


**Figure III d**

Type – V abuse too was considered as extremely or highly abusive by more married respondents than by single respondents. ( Table III e and Figure – III e)

**Table – III e – Comparison of judgments given by respondents on the basis of marital status for Type – V abuse**

TYPE - IV		EXTREME	HIGH	MILD	NOT ABUSIVE	NORMAL
MARRIED		43.75	50.00	6.25	0.00	0.00
SINGLE		31.25	50.00	17.19	1.56	0.00



**Figure III e**

## Discussion

When the survey was thought of, it was expected that majority of the respondents would be unaware that the situations given for rating were abusive. But the results did not support this expectation. The comparison of ratings given for various types of abuse showed that the respondents judged all the five types of abuse described by Vaknin as either extremely abusive, highly abusive or mildly abusive. Only Types II and III were considered as normal situations by a small percentage of respondents. This is at least a cheering thought, because women in India are aware that abuse need not be overtly visible and physical.

Type – IV, where the abuser misuses information about the victim was considered extremely abusive by 36.56 % of the respondents and highly abusive by 51.61% of the respondents. Type –V rated by far the highest form of abuse, where the abuse by proxy is used.

Again, what is heartening is the fact very few respondents considered the situations as normal or not abusive. Individual types of abuse were compared with regard to ratings given by married and single respondents. As stated earlier, Types I, II, IV and V were rated as extremely or highly abusive by more married women than by single women.

Type – I was considered as mildly abusive, or not abusive by single respondents. Similarly, the percentage of single women who rated Type – II abuse as mild was greater.

With reference to Type – III abuse, it is interesting to note that though lesser than the percentage of married women, a large percentage of single women considered it as highly abusive. Yet, the percentage of single women considering it as mildly abusive was greater.

As far as Type – IV abuse was concerned, the percentage of single respondents who judged it as extremely abusive was high, and those judging it as highly abusive, was equal to the percentage of married women.

These results throw up certain questions – are single women less sensitive to the subtle abuse reflected in these different forms of abuse?

Does it take a few years of marriage to experience these situations as abusive?

In the words of Tina de Benedictis, et.al.(2004) "In some cultures, control of women by men is accepted as the norm. .... Today we see many cultures moving from the

subordination of women to increased equality of women within relationships". Perhaps Indian women are among these women who are moving towards more equality. .

Yet, reports in news papers about marital abuse do not allow us to believe this. An article by Mita Kapur – "Victims of Abuse"(2005) states that cross-border studies conducted by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Kerala, emphasizing that domestic violence cuts through caste, class, religion, age and education. These women are victims of physical, mental, sexual and emotional abuse regardless of their education and economic status.

Twenty per cent of the cases reported in Rajasthan are of working women. In Kerala, 30 per cent of women complained of physical abuse and 69 per cent of psychological torture. Two out of every five women in abusive relationships suffer silently because of shame and family honor. The lack of viable options keeps such women trapped in violent situations. Nearly one-third of the women experiencing abuse have thought of running away but the fear of leaving their children behind and having no place to go restrained them. Social and economic constraints further compound their sense of isolation. Lack of awareness and how to seek help renders these women more vulnerable to continuing and escalating abuse.

Devyani Srivastava,(as cited by Mita Kapur- 2005) who writes on gender issues said, "These women have been brain-washed into believing that they are responsible for the violence inflicted on them. They face so much brutality in the court, at the hands of their families and the police because gender violence is seen as a non-issue; a household affair at best." Domestic violence can't be stopped, she felt, but the women can seek help. Women have to refuse to become a mere statistic.

Few studies have been made of gender-based violence, partly because of the lack of accurate definitions, but also because it is so seldom reported to authorities. Women have many reasons for not reporting incidents of violence. Legal authorities often do not take appropriate action. Many women do not know their legal rights. Women have good reason to fear that they will be victimized again, either by insensitive, accusatory questions or by actual assault.

According to Meeta Rani Jha ( 2007) the western definition of domestic violence does not fit into the reality of women's lives in the context of India. Much of the violence that happens within the home (as private space) spills into public space depending upon the social group of the women. Women have very little ownership of any physical space they may inhabit, either private or public. For the majority of Indian women, violence crosses over into all spaces, not just designated private or public spaces.

Given the above results which show that there is an awareness in Indian women about Ambient Abuse, why is it that no one is talking about it?

Violence within the family has always remained hidden and even now, women hesitate to speak of it for a variety of reasons. Family violence or "family quarrel" is common to all classes, religions, and communities, all over India. In many families, particularly in the middle class, a woman's status is defined only in the context of a man's and the patriarchal family. Hence, it is difficult for women to give up their limited rights in an oppressive situation in order to break the pattern of abuse.

## Conclusion:

The survey showed greater awareness of violence than expected. These results are heartening, because Indian women are at least recognizing the different types of abuse to which they are being subjected. But now the question we face is what do we do about it? It is not natural for a person to take abuse. Our instincts prompt us to fight or flee. But society blocks this common sense in our genes by infesting our brains with the idea that divorce or fighting back is wrong. Especially when the abuser goes around putting on an act of how hurt he is. What choice does this idea leave the victim? She must choose whether to (a) be a bad person or (b) submit to abuse. Every person's most precious possession is her self-concept — the picture of herself she carries inside, the image of herself as a good person. People will do anything to preserve it. They would rather die than lose it or have it taken from them. So, she usually chooses to go against nature and be a good girl (put up with the abuse and keep turning the other cheek).

Merely building greater awareness among women about abuse is not sufficient. We need to sensitize the men in the society, and the "Social Rule Makers", who provide an image of the so called "Ideal Woman".

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