

A Comprehensive Study on Domestic Violence Against Women in India

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Abstract

This comprehensive research paper explores the pervasive issue of domestic violence against women in India, examining its root causes, manifestations, legal frameworks, and the multifaceted efforts to combat it. Drawing from national surveys, legal documents, government reports, and real-life case studies, the study sheds light on the widespread yet often underreported nature of domestic abuse in Indian society. The research investigates the psychological, physical, sexual, and economic dimensions of violence, the socio-cultural and economic factors that sustain it, and the systemic gaps in law enforcement and justice delivery. It also critically evaluates the roles played by government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society, and grassroots movements in addressing the issue. Special attention is given to legislative measures such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), related provisions in the Indian Penal Code, and judicial interventions.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance Domestic violence against women remains one of the most pervasive yet underreported forms of human rights violations globally, and particularly in India. Despite legal advancements and growing awareness, women across rural and urban India continue to suffer various forms of abuse—physical, emotional, sexual, and economic—within the confines of their own homes.

India, with its vast diversity in cultures, religions, and socio-economic classes, presents a unique and complex landscape in which domestic violence is both a cause and effect of deeply rooted patriarchal values. From dowry-related abuses to marital rape, the problem persists in multiple manifestations, often compounded by social stigma and economic dependency that prevent victims from seeking justice. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), nearly one in three women aged 18–49 has experienced physical violence since age 15.

1.2 Objectives of the Study The primary aim of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of domestic violence against women in India by exploring its various dimensions. The objectives include:

- To understand the different forms of domestic violence experienced by women in India.
- To examine the socio-cultural, economic, and psychological factors contributing to domestic violence.
- To analyze the effectiveness of legal and institutional mechanisms in addressing domestic violence.
- To evaluate the role of government and non-governmental organizations in prevention and intervention.
- To assess the short- and long-term impact of domestic violence on women and their families.
- To document case studies that provide insight into the lived experiences of survivors.

1.3 Scope and Limitations This research focuses specifically on domestic violence against women in India, considering both married and unmarried relationships, including intimate partner violence. The study includes literature reviews, statistical analysis, and real-life case studies from multiple Indian states to provide a pan-India perspective. However, due to geographical, linguistic, and data accessibility constraints, the study may not represent every micro-regional variation. Additionally, while every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, underreporting of cases remains a significant limitation.

1.4 Methodology Overview The methodology adopted for this study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature. It includes:

- Review of national and international literature on domestic violence.
- Analysis of secondary data from government reports (e.g., NFHS, NCRB).
- Field interviews with survivors, legal professionals, NGOs, and support workers.
- Case study documentation from urban and rural areas.

- Policy analysis of Indian laws related to domestic violence. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, especially concerning the privacy and emotional well-being of survivors.

2. Conceptual Framework and Definitions

2.1 Defining Domestic Violence Domestic violence refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm. It includes acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), domestic violence is a global issue, but it takes unique cultural and contextual forms in different societies. In the Indian context, domestic violence is often interlinked with cultural traditions such as dowry, marital obligations, and patriarchal hierarchies.

2.2 Legal Definitions in India Under Section 3 of The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, domestic violence is defined to include:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Verbal and emotional abuse
- Economic abuse This legislation recognizes domestic violence as more than just physical assault—it includes deprivation of financial resources, insult to dignity, and restriction of personal freedom.

2.3 Theoretical Perspectives Several academic theories help understand domestic violence:

- **Feminist Theory:** Views domestic violence as a result of patriarchal society where men seek to dominate women.
- **Social Learning Theory:** Suggests that individuals learn abusive behaviors by observing violence in family or media.
- **Ecological Framework:** Places domestic violence within multiple layers—individual, relationship, community, and societal.
- **Cycle of Violence Theory:** Identifies three recurring phases—tension building, explosive incident, and honeymoon phase.
- **Power and Control Wheel:** A tool that illustrates tactics abusers use to maintain control over their victims, including coercion, threats, isolation, and economic abuse.

2.4 Distinction between Domestic Violence and Intimate Partner Violence Though often used interchangeably, there are distinctions:

- **Domestic violence** is broader and includes abuse by family members (e.g., in-laws, parents).
- **Intimate partner violence (IPV)** refers specifically to abuse by a current or former partner or spouse. In India, many cases involve abuse from the husband's family, which necessitates a broader term like "domestic violence."

2.5 Forms of Abuse Recognized Under Conceptual Framework

- **Physical Abuse:** Hitting, slapping, kicking, burning, choking, etc.
- **Emotional Abuse:** Insults, humiliation, manipulation, constant criticism.
- **Sexual Abuse:** Marital rape, forced sexual acts, and any non-consensual sexual activity.
- **Economic Abuse:** Withholding money, forbidding employment, controlling assets.
- **Technological Abuse:** Harassment through mobile phones, social media, GPS tracking.

2.6 Indicators and Warning Signs Common indicators include withdrawal from family or friends, frequent unexplained injuries, lack of access to financial resources, sudden changes in behavior, and visible fear around certain individuals.

2.7 Intersectionality in Domestic Violence Domestic violence affects women differently based on caste, religion, region, and economic status. For example:

- **Dalit women** may face more systemic violence and fewer support mechanisms.
- **Muslim women** may face socio-legal challenges tied to personal laws.
- **Rural women** face barriers of access, mobility, and literacy. Intersectional analysis helps address domestic violence in a more inclusive and contextualized manner.

3. Historical and Cultural Context of Domestic Violence in India

3.1 Historical Overview

- **Ancient India:** While ancient Indian texts occasionally celebrated the strength of women

(e.g., in Vedic hymns), they also reflected and reinforced patriarchal norms. Manusmriti, one of the most influential ancient texts, dictates a woman's dependence on male authority throughout her life.

- **Medieval Period:** The status of women declined further during medieval times. Practices such as sati, child marriage, and purdah emerged and spread, reflecting and reinforcing the suppression of women's rights.
- **Colonial Era:** British colonialism brought reformist movements and legal changes (e.g., abolition of sati, age of consent laws), yet simultaneously, Victorian values further reinforced domestic boundaries for women, idealizing their role as submissive housewives.
- **Post-Independence:** Though the Indian Constitution guaranteed equality, socio-cultural norms continued to restrict women's agency. The rise of feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s brought the issue of domestic violence into public discourse, leading to legal reforms.

3.2 Patriarchal Social Structure Patriarchy is the organizing principle of Indian society. It shapes family systems, property rights, religious rituals, and even state policies. Women are socialized to internalize subordinate roles from an early age, and domestic violence is often viewed as a method to "discipline" or "correct" women's behavior. Sons are preferred for economic and ritualistic reasons, while daughters are often seen as burdens.

3.3 Cultural Norms and Traditions Perpetuating Violence

- **Dowry System:** Despite being legally prohibited, dowry practices persist and are major contributors to domestic violence, including dowry deaths.
- **Marital Expectations:** Women are often expected to be submissive and self-sacrificing. Deviations from these roles may provoke violence from spouses or in-laws.
- **Honor and Shame:** Women are viewed as bearers of family honor, leading to restrictions on mobility, dress, and speech. When a woman seeks divorce or files complaints, she is often stigmatized.
- **Joint Family System:** The control of in-laws, particularly mothers-in-law, adds an extra layer of potential abuse.

3.4 Role of Religion and Mythology Religious texts and mythological stories have a powerful influence on public consciousness:

- **Sita from Ramayana** is often cited as the ideal wife—loyal, obedient, and sacrificial.
- Religious interpretations frequently encourage women to endure suffering as part of their duty (e.g., pativrata dharma). This sacralization of female suffering discourages resistance to abuse.

3.5 Caste and Class Dynamics Domestic violence is experienced differently across caste and class lines:

- **Upper-caste families** may hide domestic violence to protect social prestige.
- **Lower-caste and tribal women** may face both domestic and community violence, with limited access to justice.
- **Poor women** are often financially dependent on abusive partners, limiting escape options.

3.6 Media and Popular Culture Indian cinema and television have historically portrayed domestic violence as a private matter or even as a sign of love or discipline. However, in recent years, some progressive media portrayals have begun challenging these narratives.

3.7 Resistance and Reform Movements

- The 1980s anti-dowry movement was pivotal in demanding legal reform.
- Women's rights organizations have continuously fought for recognition of domestic violence as a public issue, not a private matter.
- The introduction of PWDVA in 2005 is a result of sustained activism.

4. Types of Domestic Violence

4.1 Physical Violence Physical violence is the most visible and widely recognized form of domestic abuse. It includes acts such as hitting, slapping, kicking, burning, strangling, biting,

and use of weapons. Often, physical abuse leaves visible injuries; however, even non-lethal physical abuse can have lasting physical and psychological consequences.

Examples and Statistics: According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), nearly 29.3% of ever-married women aged 18–49 in India reported experiencing physical violence by their spouse. The incidence is higher in rural areas, and many cases go unreported due to fear and societal pressure.

Health Consequences: Victims of physical abuse may suffer from broken bones, internal injuries, miscarriages, chronic pain, and long-term disabilities. Physical abuse is often accompanied by threats, control, and psychological manipulation.

Legal Recourse: Indian Penal Code (IPC) Sections 319–326 deal with various degrees of hurt and grievous hurt. Section 498A criminalizes cruelty by the husband or his relatives. The PWDVA provides civil remedies such as protection orders, residence orders, and monetary relief.

4.2 Emotional and Psychological Abuse Emotional abuse includes verbal assaults, threats, humiliation, intimidation, constant criticism, and isolation from friends and family. It aims to erode the victim's sense of self-worth and autonomy.

Common Forms:

- Insults and belittling
- Threats to harm the woman or her loved ones
- Gaslighting and manipulation
- Isolation from social support systems

Psychological Impact: Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts. Psychological abuse may not leave physical scars but deeply damages mental health.

Legal Recognition: The PWDVA includes verbal and emotional abuse under its definition of domestic violence, allowing women to seek protection even in the absence of physical harm.

4.3 Sexual Violence Sexual violence within domestic settings includes marital rape, forced sexual acts, denial of contraception, and any non-consensual sexual behavior. Despite growing awareness, marital rape is not criminalized under Indian law (except in certain cases like child marriage or judicial separation).

Forms of Sexual Abuse:

- Forced intercourse or sexual acts
- Coerced reproduction or forced abortions
- Sexual degradation or threats

Consequences: Sexual abuse causes both physical (e.g., injuries, STDs, unwanted pregnancies) and psychological trauma. Victims often hesitate to report due to shame and lack of legal support.

Legal Framework: Section 375 IPC excludes marital rape unless the wife is below 18 years of age. However, under PWDVA, sexual abuse is recognized, and women can seek civil remedies.

4.4 Economic Abuse Economic or financial abuse involves controlling a woman's access to financial resources, preventing her from working, or appropriating her earnings.

Tactics Include:

- Denying money for basic necessities
- Controlling access to bank accounts or property
- Preventing employment or education
- Taking loans in the woman's name

Impact: Economic abuse results in dependency and helplessness, making it difficult for women to leave abusive situations. It is often coupled with other forms of abuse.

Legal Provision: The PWDVA defines economic abuse and provides for monetary relief, return of stridhan, and maintenance.

4.5 Digital Abuse In the digital age, abuse has extended to technology. Digital or cyber abuse includes harassment via mobile phones, social media, GPS tracking, non-consensual sharing

of private images, and online threats.

Prevalence: Women, especially younger ones, face increasing digital abuse. Online harassment is often linked to offline violence and used as a method of control.

Legal Tools: The Information Technology Act, 2000 and IPC provisions (like 354D, 509) address cyber harassment. The PWDVA also allows inclusion of digital abuse within broader definitions.

5. Causes and Contributing Factors

5.1 Patriarchy and Gender Norms Patriarchy is deeply entrenched in Indian society, influencing familial structures, gender roles, and power dynamics. It positions men as dominant and women as subordinate, creating a culture where violence against women is normalized or justified.

Socialization and Cultural Beliefs: From childhood, both boys and girls are socialized into rigid gender roles—boys are taught to be authoritative, while girls are trained in obedience and domesticity. This reinforces acceptance of male control and female submission in marital relationships.

Impacts: Women face restrictions on mobility, decision-making, and financial independence. Violence is often seen as a disciplinary tool, especially when women challenge traditional roles.

5.2 Dowry and Marriage Practices Dowry-related violence remains a critical issue in India, despite legal prohibitions under the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961. The demand for dowry can result in physical, emotional, and even fatal abuse.

Forms of Abuse:

- Harassment for additional dowry post-marriage
- Physical violence or murder (bride burning)
- Threats of divorce or abandonment

Statistics: The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recorded over 6,000 dowry death cases annually in the last decade. Many more cases remain unreported or misclassified.

5.3 Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Substance abuse, especially alcoholism, is a significant trigger of domestic violence. Alcohol impairs judgment and increases aggression, often leading to physical or sexual assault.

Cycle of Violence: Men under the influence of alcohol may become verbally and physically abusive. The economic drain from substance abuse also adds stress to the household, aggravating conflict.

Research Evidence: Studies show a strong correlation between male alcohol consumption and higher rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) across rural and urban India.

5.4 Economic Dependence Many women are financially dependent on their husbands or in-laws, limiting their ability to escape abusive situations. Lack of education, employment opportunities, and property ownership exacerbates this dependence.

Consequences:

- Inability to leave abusive homes
- Limited access to legal aid or shelter homes
- Increased vulnerability to exploitation

Systemic Barriers: Even when women work, they may not control their earnings. Socioeconomic constraints and lack of support structures discourage reporting and prolong victimization.

Legal Framework and Institutional Mechanisms

6.1 The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 The PWDVA is a landmark legislation that acknowledges domestic violence in all its forms—physical, emotional, sexual, and economic. It aims to provide civil remedies and immediate relief to survivors through protection orders, residence rights, and maintenance.

Salient Features:

- Definition of domestic violence includes not only physical but also emotional, sexual, verbal, and economic abuse.
- Provides for appointment of Protection Officers.

- Allows aggrieved women to reside in the shared household.
- Establishes procedures for fast-track handling of complaints.

Implementation Challenges:

- Poor awareness among beneficiaries and implementers.
- Lack of trained Protection Officers.
- Insufficient funding for shelter homes and support services.

6.2 Indian Penal Code (IPC) Provisions While PWDVA is a civil law, criminal remedies are provided under the IPC:

- **Section 498A:** Addresses cruelty by husband or his relatives. Includes physical and mental cruelty, especially related to dowry.
- **Section 304B:** Dowry death—punishes death of a woman under suspicious circumstances within 7 years of marriage.
- **Section 323, 324, 325:** Punishment for voluntarily causing hurt or grievous hurt.
- **Section 376:** Punishment for rape. Marital rape, however, is not criminalized unless the wife is under 18.

Criticisms and Debates: Section 498A has faced criticism for alleged misuse, leading to calls for reform. However, empirical studies suggest underuse and lack of conviction, not overuse, is the problem.

6.3 Role of Police and Judiciary

Police:

- First point of contact in many cases, but often hesitant to file FIRs due to pressure or lack of sensitization.
- Need for gender-sensitization training and proper protocol adherence.

Judiciary:

- Family Courts and Magistrates have jurisdiction under PWDVA.
- Delays in judicial process and lack of specialized courts hinder justice.

Judicial Innovations: Some High Courts have issued guidelines for speedy disposal and better implementation of PWDVA. Legal aid clinics and women's help desks have been piloted in several districts.

6.4 Protection Officers and Support Services Protection Officers act as a bridge between the survivor and legal/systemic aid.

Responsibilities Include:

- Assisting with filing Domestic Incident Reports (DIRs)
- Coordinating with police and shelter homes
- Ensuring compliance with court orders

Challenges:

- Many states do not have full-time or adequately trained Protection Officers.
- Poor inter-agency coordination and inadequate infrastructure limit effectiveness.

Support Systems:

- **Shelter Homes:** Run by state and NGOs, but often overcrowded and underfunded.
- **Counseling Centers:** Provide psychological support.
- **Legal Aid Services:** Offered through District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs)

Conclusion: India has a relatively robust legal framework to address domestic violence, especially through the PWDVA and IPC. However, implementation remains inconsistent due to lack of training, resources, and political will. Strengthening institutional mechanisms and ensuring coordinated action is critical to making these laws effective.

7. Government and NGO Initiatives

India has seen a range of initiatives undertaken by the central and state governments, as well as civil society organizations, to combat domestic violence against women. These initiatives aim to provide legal support, shelter, psychological counseling, economic empowerment, and public awareness.

7.1 Government Schemes and Programs

7.1.1 One Stop Centres (OSCs) Launched under the Nirbhaya Fund, OSCs provide integrated

support and assistance to women affected by violence. Each OSC offers:

- Police facilitation
- Legal aid and counseling
- Medical assistance
- Temporary shelter

As of 2023, over 700 OSCs have been operational across various districts in India.

7.1.2 Women Helplines (181) Dedicated 24x7 helplines have been set up across states to provide immediate emergency response services. The helpline is integrated with OSCs and local enforcement.

7.1.3 Swadhar Greh Scheme This scheme provides temporary accommodation, maintenance, and rehabilitative services for women who are victims of domestic violence. The objectives include:

- Economic and emotional support
- Legal counseling
- Skill development and employment facilitation

7.1.4 Ujjawala Scheme Although primarily focused on human trafficking, the scheme also supports victims of violence by providing shelter, rehabilitation, and reintegration assistance.

7.1.5 Mahila Police Volunteers (MPV) MPVs are community-based women volunteers who serve as a link between police and the community, helping identify and report gender-based violence at the grassroots level.

7.2 Role of NGOs and Civil Society Non-governmental organizations have played a critical role in addressing domestic violence through advocacy, service provision, capacity building, and legal assistance.

Notable NGOs Include:

- **SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association):** Offers economic empowerment and legal support.
- **Jagori:** Focuses on feminist education, advocacy, and violence prevention programs.
- **Snehalaya:** Works on shelter homes and psychosocial support in Maharashtra.
- **SAHAYOG and Breakthrough:** Conduct grassroots campaigns to challenge gender norms.
- **International organizations like UN Women and Oxfam India** have supported research, funding, and advocacy.

Conclusion

Domestic violence against women in India is not just a violation of human rights but a profound social injustice that affects millions of lives. Despite progressive legal frameworks, widespread awareness campaigns, and institutional reforms, domestic violence continues to persist—often under the surface—due to entrenched patriarchal values, lack of legal literacy, and insufficient enforcement of protective laws.

This research highlights the multi-dimensional nature of abuse—physical, emotional, sexual, and economic—and underscores that the issue cannot be tackled in isolation. A truly transformative approach must be intersectional, addressing the interplay of gender, caste, class, education, economic status, and location (urban/rural). Effective implementation of laws like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005), and provisions under the Indian Penal Code, must be paired with gender-sensitization of law enforcement, judiciary, and communities.

In conclusion, addressing domestic violence in India requires not only stronger laws and support systems but also a cultural transformation. Gender equality must be woven into the fabric of families, institutions, and governance structures. Ending domestic violence is a collective responsibility—of the state, civil society, and every individual.

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