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From Law to Reality: Examining Violence Against Women, Underreporting, and Institutional Challenges in India

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Abstract: Violence against women (VAW) is a global human rights crisis that acts as a structural barrier to sustainable development. This paper employs a qualitative document analysis methodology, synthesizing data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), and academic literature to examine the landscape of gender-based violence in India. The analysis reveals a 15.3% rise in registered crimes against women in 2021, though systemic factors like the “Principal Offence Rule” and the “culture of silence” lead to significant underreporting. Findings highlight a “gender paradox” where high empowerment indicators, such as literacy in Kerala, do not always correlate with reduced violence. The study also identifies emerging threats, including technology-facilitated abuse on dating apps and heightened vulnerability during natural disasters. Ultimately, the research argues that while legal frameworks have modernized, true progress requires a fundamental socio-cultural transformation to dismantle patriarchal norms.

Keywords: *Violence against women, Gender-based violence, Underreporting, Patriarchy and Technology-facilitated abuse*

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Gender equality and women’s safety are foundational to the social, economic, and cultural well-being of any society. Despite global commitments like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), violence against women (VAW) persists as a pervasive challenge that undermines inclusive growth and violates fundamental human rights. This issue is a global one, transcending national and cultural boundaries, yet its manifestations are often deeply rooted in specific local power dynamics. In the Indian context, VAW is viewed through an all-pervasive mindset of patriarchy, where traditional gender roles often frame women as subordinate and subject to male dominance throughout their life cycle.

According to recent official records, crime against women in India rose by 15.3 percent in 2021. While these figures represent registered cases, the actual prevalence is likely far higher due to socio-cultural stigmas that discourage reporting. India’s standing in international safety indices remains troubling; it ranks 128th out of 177 countries in the Women, Peace, and Security Index (2023), placing it in a category of “high discrimination” regarding safety and bodily autonomy. The economic and social costs are staggering, as violence disrupts women’s participation in education, employment, and civic life, thereby straining justice systems and healthcare providers. For many women, the female body becomes a battlefield where conflict, natural disasters, and domestic tensions converge.

Indian Commissions and Government Initiatives

The Indian government and various commissions have implemented a robust set of initiatives and legal frameworks to address these challenges:

- **Key Commissions and Data Engines:**

The National Commission for Women (NCW) and the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) serve as the primary bodies for policy guidance and crime tracking. Additionally, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) provides critical self-reported data that uncovers “hidden” prevalence not captured by police records.

- **Legislative Framework:**

- The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005): Provides civil remedies and protection orders for victims.
- The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act (2013): Enacted after the 'Nirbhaya' case, it introduced specific sections for acid attacks, stalking, and voyeurism.
- IPC Section 498-A: Criminalizes cruelty by a husband or his relatives.
- New Criminal Laws (2024): The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) recently replaced the IPC, aiming to modernize the justice system, though critics note a lack of significant reform in VAW procedures.

- **Government Initiatives:**

- Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP): Launched to address the declining child sex ratio and promote female education.
- One-Stop Centres (Sakhi): Provide integrated support, including legal aid and medical care, under one roof.
- Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM): While primarily a sanitation initiative, its rush to build toilets has faced criticism for not always considering the safety and privacy needs of women in flood-prone zones.

- **Specialized Police Units:**

Initiatives like “She Teams” in Telangana and the “Gudiya” helpline in various states aim to provide immediate intervention.

Even though the government has continuously strived for the suppression of violence against women but still there are certain loopholes in the process and implementation of the same.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Rahme et al. (2025) examined the relationship between childhood trauma, maladaptive schemas, and intimate partner violence against women. Their study found that early exposure to abuse significantly increases the likelihood of both perpetrating and tolerating violence in adulthood. The authors emphasize the intergenerational transmission of violence and advocate for early psychological interventions as a preventive strategy.

Rajan (2025) reviewed literature on technology-facilitated violence against women in India, with a particular focus on dating applications. The study documents emerging forms of abuse such as catfishing, sextortion, doxing, and image-based sexual exploitation. Rajan argues that digital platforms have extended patriarchal control into virtual spaces, creating new vulnerabilities for women that existing legal frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

Kumari et al. (2025) conducted a spatio-temporal analysis of crime against women across Indian states, identifying regional clusters with persistently high crime intensity. Their study highlights significant

interstate disparities and underscores the influence of socio-economic conditions, urbanization, and governance quality on the spatial distribution of violence. The authors stress the need for region-specific interventions rather than uniform national strategies.

Das and Wani (2025) investigated women's lived experiences of violence during flood disasters in Assam, emphasizing how environmental crises exacerbate existing gender inequalities. Their findings indicate increased risks of sexual harassment, domestic violence, and psychological abuse in relief camps due to inadequate infrastructure and institutional neglect. The study demonstrates that disasters function as amplifiers of gender-based violence rather than neutral events.

Gram et al. (2024) further highlighted that alcohol abuse and economic stressors often intersect with patriarchal norms to intensify domestic violence. Their findings suggest that community-level interventions are most effective when they address substance abuse, gender norms, and institutional accountability simultaneously.

Košir and Lakshminarayanan (2024) explored the relationship between female literacy and crime against women in India through a longitudinal and spatial analysis. Their findings reveal a complex and non-linear association between women's educational attainment and reported violence, identifying instances where higher literacy rates coincide with increased crime reporting. The study introduces the notion of paradoxical empowerment, suggesting that education may initially provoke backlash in deeply patriarchal contexts.

Chandra et al. (2023) examined the socio-demographic characteristics of married men associated with intimate partner violence in India using nationally representative data. Their study found that lower educational attainment, alcohol consumption, exposure to violence during childhood, and adherence to patriarchal gender norms significantly increase the likelihood of perpetrating violence against women. The authors emphasize the importance of shifting analytical focus from victim-centric narratives to perpetrator behavior, highlighting the structural and intergenerational nature of violence.

Chinkin and Gormley (2022) conceptualized violence against women as a systemic violation of human rights rooted in unequal gender power relations. Their work situates VAW within international legal frameworks, particularly under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The authors argue that legal reforms alone are insufficient unless accompanied by broader socio-cultural transformation aimed at dismantling patriarchal norms that normalize violence.

Research Gap

Although existing literature provides extensive insights into the prevalence, forms, and consequences of violence against women in India, several gaps remain evident. Most studies prioritize victimization patterns, with comparatively limited empirical attention to perpetrator profiles and behavioral pathways. Additionally, the interaction between environmental crises, digital spaces, and traditional forms of violence remains underexplored. There is also a lack of integrative research combining official crime statistics with self-reported survey data to address systemic underreporting and methodological limitations such as the Principal Offence Rule. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing comprehensive, context-sensitive strategies to combat violence against women in India.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite legal safeguards, violence against women remains widespread and underreported in India due to statistical limitations, distrust in law enforcement, and judicial delays.

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the spatio-temporal trends of crime against women across Indian states from 2012 to 2021.
2. To identify the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of perpetrators of intimate partner violence.

3. To examine the impact of female literacy and identify states where the “gender paradox” is most prevalent.
4. To evaluate the effectiveness of government initiatives and community-level responses to violence against women.

V. DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a **qualitative document analysis (QDA)** approach, focusing on secondary data from 2012 to 2021. Data sources include:

- **NCRB “Crime in India” reports** for official statistics.
- **NFHS-5 survey data** for self-reported experiences of violence.
- **SNEHA program reports** to analyze community mobilization in urban slums. Crimes are categorized into **Sexual Crimes, Domestic/Dowry Related Crimes, and Others** (Trafficking/Kidnapping).

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

6.1 Results

Regional Hotspot:

The analysis identifies pronounced regional variations in crime against women across India. Assam recorded a 26.91% increase in crime intensity, reflecting both heightened vulnerability in disaster-prone regions and persistent structural inequalities. Delhi emerged as the most critical hotspot for sexual offenses, accounting for over 35% of total reported crimes within the capital. High reporting rates, dense urbanization, population mobility, and greater awareness may partly explain this concentration, though they do not diminish the severity of the underlying risk environment for women.

Domestic Violence:

Among all categories of crime, cruelty by husbands or relatives remains the most prevalent form of violence against women. The findings indicate a strong association between domestic violence and alcohol consumption, with husbands who abuse alcohol being more than twice as likely to perpetrate physical and psychological abuse. This underscores the intersection of substance abuse with patriarchal entitlement and economic stress, making domestic spaces a primary site of gendered violence.

The Literacy Link:

While female literacy rates (FLR) generally demonstrate a positive association with increased reporting and awareness of crime against women (CAW), notable anomalies persist. States such as Kerala and West Bengal continue to exhibit rising levels of reported violence despite high literacy and human development indicators. These patterns suggest that education alone does not automatically translate into reduced violence and may, in some contexts, coexist with resistance to changing gender norms.

Cyber-crime and Dating Apps:

The study also documents a significant rise in technology-facilitated violence, with cybercrime against women increasing by 11% in 2022. Women reported experiences of unsolicited explicit images, online harassment, and coercive behavior on dating applications, often accompanied by fear of offline stalking or physical escalation. These findings indicate that digital platforms have become an extension of existing gender power asymmetries, introducing new forms of vulnerability that transcend physical boundaries.

6.2 Discussion

The analysis confirms that violence against women functions as a strategic instrument for maintaining patriarchal control, rather than as an impulsive or aberrant act. Within many communities, the prevailing

“logic of reconciliation” prioritizes family cohesion and social stability over women’s safety, resulting in informal pressures on survivors to tolerate abuse and manage male aggression. Such norms effectively shift responsibility onto women, reinforcing silence, normalization of violence, and continued impunity for perpetrators. In contexts characterized by low state capacity but strong social networks, community members often distrust formal institutions and perceive law enforcement agencies as corrupt, unresponsive, or hostile to survivors. As a result, alternative forms of justice emerge, including radical or vigilante interventions, exemplified by groups such as the Gulabi Gang. While these responses may offer immediate deterrence, they also reflect deeper institutional failures and raise concerns regarding due process and long-term sustainability.

The findings further indicate that perpetrator-focused interventions are essential for meaningful reductions in intimate partner violence. Men’s education—particularly education that challenges rigid gender norms—alongside effective substance abuse control, plays a critical role in disrupting cycles of violence. Alcohol abuse, in particular, acts as a catalytic factor that intensifies aggression within already unequal power relations. These insights underscore that victim support mechanisms, while indispensable, must be complemented by interventions targeting male behavior and accountability to achieve durable change.

VII. IMPLICATIONS

Policymakers must adopt a holistic, intersectoral model that recognizes violence against women as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by social, technological, environmental, and institutional factors rather than as an isolated law-and-order issue. Such a model requires systematic coordination across sectors, including law enforcement, education, public health, disaster management authorities, digital governance bodies, and local self-governments. Fragmented interventions, implemented in silos, are insufficient to address the complex and intersecting risks that women face across different contexts. Integrating gender-inclusive disaster management is particularly critical in a country highly vulnerable to climate-induced disasters. Disaster preparedness and response frameworks must explicitly account for women’s safety by ensuring gender-segregated sanitation facilities, secure shelter designs, adequate lighting, and trained female personnel in relief camps. Protocols should include mechanisms for preventing and responding to sexual and domestic violence during displacement, along with accessible reporting channels and psychological support services. Treating women’s security as a core component of disaster resilience, rather than an auxiliary concern, is essential for mitigating heightened vulnerabilities during crises.

Similarly, the rapid expansion of digital spaces necessitates robust digital safety protocols tailored to the specific risks faced by women. Policymakers must strengthen cybercrime legislation, improve the capacity of cyber cells, and establish fast-track grievance redressal mechanisms for technology-facilitated violence such as cyberstalking, image-based abuse, and sextortion. Collaboration with technology platforms is essential to ensure responsive content moderation, data privacy protections, and user-friendly reporting systems. Equally important is digital literacy programming that empowers women to navigate online spaces safely and assert their rights without fear of retaliation or surveillance. At the community level, community policing models must be strengthened to rebuild trust between citizens and law enforcement agencies. Gender-sensitive training for police personnel, increased recruitment of women officers, and the institutionalization of victim-centered protocols can significantly reduce barriers to reporting. Community-based initiatives that involve local leaders, civil society organizations, and women’s collectives can foster early intervention, challenge the normalization of domestic violence, and promote collective accountability. When communities perceive the justice system as accessible and responsive, reliance on informal or extra-legal responses diminishes. Education emerges as a foundational pillar in this intersectoral approach. Curriculum reform must move beyond biological or legalistic discussions of gender to incorporate age-appropriate consent education, emotional literacy, and critical engagement with gender norms from early childhood. Schools should actively challenge stereotypes that associate masculinity with dominance and femininity with submissiveness, replacing them with values of mutual respect, empathy, and equality. Teacher training programs must be equipped to address these themes sensitively and inclusively, ensuring that classrooms function as spaces of social transformation rather than reproduction of inequality.

In sum, a holistic, intersectoral policy framework that integrates disaster preparedness, digital governance, community policing, and transformative education offers a sustainable pathway for preventing violence against women. By addressing both immediate risks and the structural roots of gender inequality, such an approach moves beyond reactive responses toward long-term social change.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Ending violence against women in India requires far more than periodic legal amendments or the expansion of institutional mechanisms; it demands a fundamental transformation of the socio-cultural psyche that continues to normalize gender inequality and male dominance. This study demonstrates that despite the strengthening of legislative frameworks and the introduction of specialized support systems, violence against women remains deeply embedded within everyday social relations, family structures, and community norms. Laws can deter and punish, but they cannot, in isolation, dismantle patriarchal belief systems that legitimize control over women's bodies, labour, and choices. The analysis further reveals that government initiatives such as One-Stop Centres (Sakhi) and specialized policing units like She Teams are indispensable in providing immediate relief, legal aid, and psychological support to survivors. However, their effectiveness is constrained when survivors face social stigma, pressure to reconcile, and distrust in formal institutions. Without sustained community engagement and awareness, these initiatives risk functioning as reactive mechanisms rather than transformative interventions. A critical finding of this study is the persistence of intergenerational cycles of violence, wherein exposure to abuse during childhood normalizes violence in adulthood—either as perpetration or silent acceptance. Breaking this cycle requires early interventions that go beyond victim support to include men and boys as central stakeholders in prevention strategies. Educational systems, community organizations, and media narratives must actively challenge harmful constructions of masculinity, promote consent-based relationships, and normalize non-violent conflict resolution. Moreover, the study underscores that rising female literacy and legal awareness, while necessary, are insufficient without corresponding shifts in social attitudes. The observed “gender paradox” illustrates that empowerment without cultural renegotiation can provoke backlash, reinforcing the need for context-sensitive, intersectional approaches that account for regional, cultural, and socio-economic diversity across India. In conclusion, addressing violence against women in India requires a holistic, multi-level response that integrates legal reform, institutional accountability, community mobilization, and transformative education. Sustainable progress will be achieved not when violence is merely prosecuted, but when it is socially delegitimized when silence is replaced with solidarity, fear with agency, and patriarchal control with gender justice. Only through such comprehensive socio-cultural transformation can the promise of safety, dignity, and equality for women be realized.

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