

Indian Women's Struggle Against Domestic Violence and the Challenges They Face

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Abstract. This research explores various issues of domestic violence faced by Indian women, which further discusses physical, emotional, and economic abuse. Physical violence remains one of the prevalent forms, in which patriarchal norms that normalize the control over women through force, and it is how it's perpetuated until now. Although legal reforms have been implemented, societal acceptance of such violence continues to oppress women across various social classes. Emotional abuse is less visible, but it is as equally harmful as the physical violence's harm, which will damage women's mental health and reinforce dependency on abusers. Economic violence is generally associated with traditional practices like dowry, that puts women in financial insecurity, and limits their ability to escape from abusive environments. Grassroots movements and public campaigns have played an important role in improving women's awareness and empowering them to resist violence. However, there are gaps in legal enforcement, especially in rural areas, that negatively impacts the effectiveness of progressive legislation like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA). Government initiatives have the potential, but they are underutilized because of systemic inefficiencies. The study concludes that Indian women still face significant obstacles in resisting domestic violence, that include societal stigma, limited awareness of rights, and insufficient social and economic support systems. To achieve change, the institutional support should be enhanced and have stronger attitudes in cultural shift toward gender-based violence.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, patriarchy, grassroots movements.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence remains a serious issue in India, that impacts millions of women across different regions and social classes. Although legal reforms have been conducted, people's awareness have been improved, Indian women still face abuses that are physical, emotional, and economical in their homes. The violence has generally been normalized due to the deeply rooted patriarchal values and cultural norms that retreated women as the subordination to men [1]. While movements and policies have made some progress in defending domestic violence, the effectiveness of these efforts has limited efforts due to social stigma, lack of legal enforcement, and insufficient support provided [2,3].

Previous research has extensively documented the prevalence of domestic violence in India and the legal framework for addressing the issue. For example, Srivastava et al. studies how cultural practices such as dowry contribute to economic abuse, while Agnes critically analyzes the limitations of legal reforms such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) [1,2]. However, existing studies generally focus on the legal or sociocultural aspects of domestic violence without fully exploring how these factors interact with grassroots resistance movements. In addition, although there is research on the challenges faced by women, it requires more attention on the practical solutions that can mitigate the gap between policy and practice.

The paper not only analyzes the current situation of Indian women in facing domestic abuse, which also examines their practices in resisting abuse, which tries to fill the gap. It critically examines the challenges women faces, while providing potential solutions to create meaningful change. By focusing on grassroot movements and public agency, the analysis is trying to seek potential solutions needed for meaningful change.

2. Current Situation of Domestic Violence Against Indian Women

2.1. Physical Violence

Physical violence is the most obvious and commonly seen form of domestic violence against Indian women. Based on the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), around 30% of Indian women aged between 15 and 49 have experienced physical violence at some point in their lives, and many incidents happened in their homes [4]. Many women experience the violence throughout longer period, which is mainly because of the traditional perspectives that consider the family unit as sacred and discourage external interference. Hence, women are forced to remain silent to avoid bringing “shame” to their families.

In India, patriarchal traditions that are deeply rooted in India’s cultural history have also contributed to the prevalence of violence against women. Women are often perceived as subordinates to men, with many communities uphold the hierarchical family structure, in which that not only justifies for the physical violence, but also uses it as means to maintain control over women. According to the research specific to the Indian context, patriarchal norms define a women’s primary role as a caregiver and homemaker in family, which limits their autonomy and makes them easier to be abused [1]. In such system, domestic violence becomes a tool of oppression, which enhances the existing gender hierarchies.

The concept of “symbolic violence” can be applied here, but within the Indian context, it takes the form of societal and familial pressure that perpetuates gender inequality. Women are used to internalize male dominance, which views physical abuse as an acceptable part of the social order. In this way, physical violence is not just an individual act of aggression, but also a common behavior of societal discrimination, that’s deeply embedded with India’s patriarchal structures [1].

2.2. Emotional Violence

Emotional or psychological abuse generally is less obvious than physical violence, but it’s as damaging as physical violence. Emotional abuse has long-term effects. This form of abuse includes behaviors such as humiliation, constant criticism, threats, isolation, and control over daily activities, all of which will seriously impact mental health of women. Emotional abuse can lead to anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as victims constantly feel that they are inferior or unworthy. According to research Chinnakali et al., around 51% Indian women reported psychological violence, often, they come with physical violence [5]. Emotional abuse usually undermines women’s self-esteem and sense of autonomy, which makes them more dependent on the abuser.

One of the major challenges in addressing emotional violence is its intangible nature. Different from physical abuse, emotional abuse does not leave visible scars, so that many women do not generally report this kind of abuse. Women may not even recognize that they are being emotionally abused because of the societal norms that normalize and accept the male dominance and control within the family structure. Many women believe that enduring such treatment is a part of their role as wives or daughters, especially in families that have conservative beliefs where patriarchal values are deeply rooted.

According to Bell Hooks, emotional violence is a mechanism of “psychological colonization,” in which, women are being forced to believe that their personal values and identities are dependent on their relationships with male [6]. This psychological conditioning not only undermines their self-esteem but also limit their ability to resist the abuse or seek help. By internalizing the idea that they are dependent on their male counterparts for recognition and security, women become easier to continuous emotional manipulation. In this way, emotional abuse not only damages women’s mental well-being, but also perpetuates and reinforces broader gender roles and societal expectations, which make women subordinates to man and less likely to challenge their abusers.

2.3. Economic Violence

Economic violence is a major form of control over women in Indian families. Many women, especially those from rural areas, they rely heavily on their husbands or male family members financially, which makes them easier to be abused in other forms. According to the research Kanougiya et al., it specified that women had greater chances of reporting physical, emotional, or sexual violence if they have reported economic abuse [7].

Economic violence generally is a way to keep women trapped in abusive situation, because financial dependence on their abusers makes them never had the chance to get away from the abusers. The cultural branding concepts introduced by Holt explains how traditional gender roles are branded within society, which connected the major responsibility of women with domestic roles, so that their opportunities of obtaining economic freedom is limited [8]. The social branding emphasizes the perspective that women should not have financial independence, so that the economic control is now a part of domestic life.

Also, the economic abuse in India generally exacerbated by social norms such as the dowry system, which still exists although its legally being prohibited. The financial burden from bride's family can lead to further exploitation and being abuse economically after marriage, because the dowry demands generally escalate, that cause huge pressure on women's family [1]. The combination of economic violence with traditional practices like dowry shows the consistent existence of how cultural norms led to abuse.

3. Indian Women's Practices in Resisting Domestic Violence

3.1. Anti-Domestic Violence Movements

The fight against domestic violence in India has greatly been driven by grassroots movements, women's organizations, and feminist activists. According to Makino, one of the earliest and most significant movements in this is the Anti-Dowry Movement that began in 1970s [9]. The movement seeks to fight against violence related to dowry. Over the decades, the movement evolved to address a wider range of issues including spousal abuse, marital rape, and other forms of violence based on gender.

One significant movement that gained international attention is the Gulabi Gang (Pink Gang), founded by Sampat Pal in 2006. The group is consisted of women who dressed in pink saris, it takes direct action against domestic violence and corruption in Uttar Pradesh [10]. By intervening physically and against abusers in cases of domestic violence, the Gulabi Gang shows a form of collective agency where marginalized women united to resist [11]. The movement highlights the importance of combating domestic violence by gathering women together, especially in rural areas where legal enforcement is weak.

Meanwhile, movements like #MeToo and #WhyLoiter amplified voices against domestic violence by focusing on the gender-based violence. The #MeToo movement in India have been paid great attention in 2018, that made women to share their abusive experiences, domestic violence included. The movement broke the silence surrounding domestic abuse, especially emotional and economic abuse that are generally being ignored. In these movements, women are not only seeking legal justice, but also demanding cultural change, that promotes the reassessment of women's rights, agency, and autonomy [12].

3.2. Public Policies Protecting Women's Rights

Rather than the movements, public policies and legal reformation have also played key role in resist domestic violence. One of the most important legal activities is the enactment of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) in 2005. The legislation provided definitions regarding physical violence, and emotional, sexual, and economic abuse. The act also introduces

protection orders and the right to reside for women, it makes sure that women can seek legal recourse without the immediate concern about homeless or financial pressure [13].

Although PWDVA made progress, but it has inconsistent implementation. Research shows that many women, especially those in rural communities, they are not aware of their rights under the law, or they have difficulties accessing legal assistance. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), although the reported number of domestic violence cases increases, convictions remain low due to social stigma, corruption, and lengthy legal process [3]. According to Agnes, she criticized the slow judicial process and the lack of support systems for women. She thinks while laws are essential, but their effectiveness depends on the structural changes in how justice is managed [2].

Also, the Indian government also introduced several schemes and policies targeted to support women who have experienced domestic violence. Nirbhaya Fund was established after the 2012 Delhi gang-rape case, that provides supports for enhancing women's safety, including providing shelters for domestic violence survivors, legal aid, and crisis centers [14]. However, an analysis by Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation found that the allocated Nirbhaya Fund are mostly unused because of bureaucratic delays and lack of coordination between different agencies [15].

Another key policy is the One Stop Centre Scheme, which provides medical care, legal assistance, psychological counseling, and police assistance to women experiencing violence. These centers are designed to provide access to these women to support them. However, research found that these centers generally have insufficient resources, such as staff storages and inadequate training, that could limit their abilities to provide support [16].

Regardless of these challenges, public policies have been critical for establishing a legal framework that admits and combats domestic violence in India. However, it remains a significant gap between policy and practice. The responsibility of evolvement is not only on legal reformation, but also on cultural transition and the establishment of stronger, and more accessible support systems for women.

4. Challenges Faced by Indian Women in Opposing Domestic Violence

4.1. Challenges Women Themselves Face

Although these movements obtained significant progress, they still face great challenges. Social and cultural resistance to these movements is still prevalent, especially in rural areas, where domestic violence is treated as a private matter. However, these movements are important in bringing the domestic violence issue onto the table and in challenging gender-based violence situation in India.

The major obstacles faced by Indian women in resisting domestic violence is the social and psychological impact of the abuse. Because of many factors such as fear of retaliation, societal stigma, and emotional attachment to the family, many women are trapped in abusive relationships. As Walby specified in theory of patriarchy, women rely on their male partners from both socially and economically, it makes them hard to leave the abusive situations [17]. It is especially true in India where marriage has been treated as a lifelong commitment, and divorce or separation is a strong social stigma.

Many women also experienced cycle of abuse, in which it's how periods of relative calm and affection between violent outbreaks can create a sense of hope or emotional attachments [12]. The cycle makes it difficult for women to break from abusive relationships, because they tend to believe the situation will improve and they cannot survive without their partners. Especially in the case of India, where women have limited job opportunities, it reinforces the barriers that prevent them from leaving the abusers.

Also, the lack of awareness and education regarding women's rights make it difficult to spontaneously fight against domestic violence. Many women don't know their legal rights and the resources available to them. Only 38% of Indian women are aware of the PWDVA [4]. Without access to the knowledge, women might not know how to seek help or may feel their situations are unchangeable.

4.2. Gender Discrimination in Social Culture

By defining men as, the heads of households and women as subordinate, it's a prevalent case in India, the power imbalance contributes to the normalization of domestic violence. It's often viewed as a means for men to gain control over their wives or female family members. The symbolic violence concept is relevant here, as it refers to ways in which dominant social groups impose their values and beliefs on subordinate groups, making them look natural or inevitable [18].

Additionally, social expectations regarding family honor and reputation are important in making women keep silence. In many Indian communities, women are expected to endure hardship to maintain family's honor, and behaviors like reporting domestic violence brings shame to the family [1]. The social pressure discourages women from speaking up or seeking help, as they fear isolation from their community or further violence from their abuser, or even being blamed for the abuse.

Moreover, domestic violence in Indian society is generally treated as a collective issue rather than individual issue. According to UNFPA, women face additional violence not only from their husbands but also from in-laws [19]. The collective pressure to conform to traditional gender roles perpetuates the cycle of violence, which makes it difficult for women to run from abusive situation.

4.3. Insufficient Social Security

Another challenge Indian women are facing is lack of sufficient social security and support systems. While there are policies and programs designed to assist survivors of domestic violence, but they are usually underfunded and poorly managed. Many women do not have accessibility to these programs. Also, there is a shortage of shelters and safe space for women who wish to escape abusive situations. According to Action India, Jagori and Nazariya, the shelter homes for women can accommodate are far fewer than the number of survivors who need shelter at any given day [20]. Many shelters are overcrowded, underfunded, and located far from rural areas, that make women difficult to access. Also, some shelters impose strict rules on residents, such as requiring them to go back to their abusers after a certain period, which further reduce the effectiveness.

Economic security is another major concern, as many women rely on their abuser financially. If the country does not have adequate financial support, they don't have options to sustain themselves or raise children. Although Nirbhaya Fund and other policies are established to provide support, a large portion of the fund remains unused because of bureaucratic inefficiencies and lack of coordination between government agencies [15].

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the research highlights the various factors of domestic violence that are being faced by Indian women, which reveals a complex interconnection of physical, emotional, and economic forms of abuse. Physical violence remains one of the most prevalent and visible issues, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal norms that uphold gender hierarchies and normalize such aggression within households. Despite legal reforms, the normalization of physical abuse as a tool of control with families continuous to oppress women across all social classes. Emotional violence is generally being overlooked, but it has equal damage as physical violence has, which undermines women's self-esteem and fosters dependence on their abusers. The lack of societal recognition and the internalization of male dominance exaggerated emotional abuse, which makes women harder to recognize and seek help for this form of violence. Economic violence further contributed to the women's difficult situation, especially in rural areas, where financial dependence on male family members leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and unable to escape from abusive situations. The continuous existence of practices like dowry adds another dimension of economic control, that enhances women's financial vulnerability and trapping them in cycles of abuse.

Grassroots movements and public policies have played key roles in challenging domestic violence, with organizations like Gulabi Gang demonstrates the power of collective resistance in marginalized communities. Legal frameworks, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act

(PWDVA) have provided necessary protection, they lack effectiveness in implementation and broader societal stigma, the effectiveness of such legal frameworks have been hampered. Additionally, women face a quite number of barriers in opposing domestic violence, that includes a lack of awareness about their rights, insufficient level of resources as well as insufficient support systems, all of which have significantly stopped them to escape from abusive situations and seek justice. Eventually, there is a need for a comprehensive legal reform, cultural change, and the strengthening of support networks for survivors to address these issues.

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