

## **WEAVING CIRCLES OF SUPPORT: AN EXPLORATION OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE MITIGATION IN THE LOCALIZED INDIAN CONTEXT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender based violence is on the rise throughout the world, despite national legislation and international efforts to address the issue. Policy makers and those attempting to understand future efforts, must take cognisance of the fact that gender based violence relies heavily upon cultural norms and societal attitudes that validate, encourage or condone violence. This in turn contributes to a lack of documentation like reporting, providing medical and emotional assistance to survivors, therefore internalising the violence that occurs. Due to this it is imperative that interventions combating gender based violence focus not only on penalization, but through community based intervention and informal social networking that allow the issue to be addressed from a grassroot level. This paper will examine gender based violence in India, and the benefits of existing community based interventions whilst arguing that there must be a combination of state support and non-institutional support to effectively monitor, evaluate, and address the issue of gender based violence in a culturally sensitive manner.

### **Introduction**

Gender based violence is a societal issue plaguing India and countries across the world. Especially in light of the global lockdowns imposed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, statistics have shown that gender based domestic violence has increased drastically. According to recent statistics, 1 in 3 women worldwide have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime (Zafar, 2020), keeping women in the risk zone not only outdoors, but inside their homes as well. Globally, as many as 38% of female murders are committed by a male partner. Furthermore, over 200 million women and girls have experienced female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) (Zafar, 2020), which clearly questions the archaic values embedded into modern day humanity. Each year, 15 million girls are married before the age of 18. That is 28 girls every minute. While child sexual abuse and domestic violence may be deep rooted

societal issues, a taboo in literate and rural communities, they are painfully planted into societies via archaic traditions stemming from myths and fables.. Domestic violence is an issue that affects around 35% of women world wide (Zafar, 2020). In some countries, violence against women is estimated to cost countries up to 3.7 percent of their GDP – more than double what most governments spend on education (Chauhan, 2019).

Particularly in the Indian subcontinent, The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4) suggests that 30 percent women in India in the age group of 15-49 have experienced physical violence since the age of 15. The report further revealed that 6 percent women in the same age group have experienced sexual violence at least once in their lifetime (Chauhan, 2019). According to the World Health Organization, cultural and social norms are highly influential in shaping individual behaviour, including the use of violence as a method of asserting power, and highlight the patriarchy embedded in a male-dominant society. While some societal norms can protect women against violence, they can also encourage the use of it (WHO, 2009). It is important to understand gender based violence from the lens of different cultural contexts, in particular to understand the methods of mitigating the same and measures that can be taken to most effectively engage in community building and engender a sense of kinship.

This paper will examine gender based violence in the Indian cultural context, and the theoretical foundations of cultural diversities in the manifestation and mitigation of gender based violence, whilst examining the existing methods of prevention and redressal, and focusing on the building of informal and non-institutional support systems, networks, and pose policy recommendations for future strategies.

## **Background**

The Indian legal framework categorises and codifies several types of gender based violence against women and children, such as dowry deaths, abetment of female suicide, miscarriage, domestic violence and abuse, female infanticide or foeticide, honor killings, interpersonal violence, kidnapping, rape, acid attacks, societal violence such as human trafficking, transmitting non consensual information of a sexual nature over the medium of the internet, etc (Babu, 2019). Each offence against women carries a separate definition under the Indian Penal Code, with separate ingredients that constitute the offence as well as penalties (Babu, 2019). Although women can be victims of all types of crimes like theft, murder etc., the National Crimes Record Bureau in India recognizes the gendered context of certain offences and have set up a chapter on crimes against women to provide for both extreme forms of gender abuses like rape or domestic violence and accounts subtler forms of gendered crimes like voyeurism, eve teasing etc (Babu, 2019). The legal trend in India has been to frame stricter laws on sexual assault and violence.

Despite legal provisions, there exists only a growing amount of gender based violence in the country. Unfortunately, cases of violence against women and girls in India continue to rise. They are supported by the persistence of patriarchal gender and social norms. The indicators of violence against women are a reflection of the structural and institutional inequality that is a reality for most women in India (Chauhan, 2019). In addition, there remains a large problem of under-reporting the crime due to deep rooted social and cultural stigma of women seeking support and justice versus the societal protection provided to perpetrators of violence. According to a recent report by Livemint, about 99 percent cases of sexual violence go unreported. The extent of under-reporting tends to be higher on average in states with a low literacy (Chauhan, 2019).

Therefore, despite a large number of laws and schemes to protect women and children against gender based violence, there is a dire need for informal non-institutional support systems and existing theory regarding the role of interpersonal and inter community networks in helping victims. Such networks are crucial in challenging and changing the deep rooted cultural attitudes behind the validation of gender based violence, and can work better with local communities to protect women and understand their needs in a more fundamental fashion. Cultural diversities in the manifestation of gender-based violence can only be addressed most effectively, if targeted at the level of the community itself, rather than only focus on the penalisation of gender based violence. There are several access barriers that are met at the community level in responding to sexual violence (IS Global, 2014). Community attitudes and strategies to stop sexual violence at the community level are often challenged by beliefs and gender norms that tolerate and legitimize male violence (IS Global, 2014). These determinants in turn lead to the isolation of survivors, a lack of social support and affected help seeking behaviour which leads to limited reporting and service uptake (IS Global, 2014). There are different ways in which community based interventions can take place, to improve the level of non-institutional support for victims of gender based violence, as will be discussed in the following section.

## **Discussion**

When considering the improvement of methods of gender-based violence prevention and mitigation, there is a need for a dual-pronged prevention and penalization approach. In this regard, rural and urban support systems are particularly important in victim rehabilitation as well as sensitization of gender based violence mitigation strategies in India. Community-based interventions broadly fall into two categories. The first consists largely of training to enable survivor rehabilitation and perpetrators to stop perpetrating it via education (Nair et al, 2020). The second involves wider community mobilisation to challenge norms and practices that perpetuate gender inequities and abet violence (Nair et al, 2020). Most community interventions

to prevent violence against women and girls tested in India have used group training and/or been conducted in peri-urban or urban settings with NGO facilitators (Nair et al, 2020).

A promising model developed by Mumbai non-government organisation SNEHA (Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action) involves combining legal and counselling services for survivors, training to sensitise health providers and the police, and community mobilisation to shift norms and practices related to violence (Nair et al, 2020). A study has found that Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) that work with rural communities in India have found positive effects in mobilising communities to work together to address the issue of gender based violence and changing cultural norms. What is crucial is the creation of a balance wherein non-institutional structures are provided institutional backing. There is broad agreement that interventions should operate at multiple levels, from individual to societal (Daruwalla et al, 2019). Interventional discourse has also moved from a concentration on the needs of survivors to an acknowledgment that intervention should aim to “transform the relations, norms, and systems that sustain gender inequality and violence” (Daruwalla et al, 2019). For example, Another noteworthy stream of intervention is emerging beyond the health sector, through the National Rural Livelihood Mission’s Social Action Committees (SAC) (Lingam, 2019). SAC were initially developed as part of long-term poverty-alleviation programmes with self-help groups in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (Lingam, 2019). They provide informal counselling to women who face violence, offer mediation using principles of restorative justice, and refer cases to the police or formal justice system when violence is severe or mediation is impossible (Lingam, 2019). At the same time, studies have found that an increased number of women police stations and women police personnel facilitated more women to report crimes that are committed against them. It was also found that empowerment of women through increased human development and education could have also positively impacted the reporting (Babu, 2019). Countries where women are hesitant to report crimes committed against them, will have gender sanitized measures such as women police stations and employing more women in law enforcement (Babu, 2019).

Therefore, a hybrid of state mandated and community based interventions may be the key for incentivising the creation and establishment of informal social networks that can make change at the grassroots level in India. Creating change within a formal structure like a police station along with interventions like SNEHA as mentioned above are important to establish the dual pronged approach of prevention and penalisation.

## **Conclusion**

As observed, there is a strong and pressing need for state support in incentivizing the existence of informal social networks in India, and the significance of context and culture-specific

approaches to mitigation of gender based violence. In order to implement the same, more rigorous evaluations addressing social norms are needed. Studies that evaluate the effectiveness of interventions that challenge norms supportive of violence are rare (WHO, 2009). Rigorous evaluations of such interventions are feasible, but they face a number of challenges, including clearly isolating the effects of the interventions from possible confounding factors and poor understanding of the mechanism underlying changes in cultural and social norms (WHO, 2009).

There is a need for bridging the gap between GBV laws and its correlated areas such as legal rights to property, land, inheritance, employment and income, that allows a woman to walk out of an abusive relationship and specific emphasis on political and economic participation of women (Chauhan, 2019). Policy requires reclaiming the spaces for women to increase their visibility through political and economic participation and diversifying their engagement in nontraditional sectors and the use of technology and emerging concepts such as Smart City in urban policy for ensuring safer and gender friendly infrastructures and spaces that prevents gender based violence (Chauhan, 2019).

A comprehensive understanding of GBV demands investigating the long term trends, pattern and nature of such crimes. While the culture of patriarchy creates a basis for tolerance towards gendered violence, changing forms of the society create newer crime opportunities making women vulnerable targets of gendered crime. Gender Based Violence can be prevented by addressing both patriarchal culture and the opportunity structure at different levels of intervention. While a comprehensive cultural and social change may take a long time to transpire, it is crucial to bring about immediate practical solutions to crimes against women through situational crime prevention at different levels (Babu, 2019). Systematic reviews of interventions to prevent violence against women and girls suggest that community mobilisation is a promising population-based intervention (Daruwalla, 2019). A combination of public led initiatives and advocacy, as well as state sanctioned support are important to develop robust social networks that provide support at the most grassroots levels, and rural areas where literacy levels do not level with urban areas. Along with conceptualising community based interventions and informal social networks, it is pertinent to ensure that there are appropriate guidelines in place across all sectors and that a collaborative and multi-sectoral approach is undertaken in order to curtail gender based violence in a culturally sensitive manner that does not alienate the communities and women themselves (IS Global, 2014). It is also recommended that an emphasis is placed on monitoring impact and evaluation of community based interventions. This should allow for identifiable measures, so that the strengths and weaknesses of interventions are identified and can be translated into planning and research (IS Global, 2014).

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