

Addressing Domestic Violence against Women in India: A Socio-Economic Approach

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Abstract

Cruelty against women is rising alarmingly in the society. It is observed that India is experiencing an alarming increase in the rate and volume of violence against women. The common forms of violence against women in India include domestic abuse, sexual assault and even murder. Domestic and public violence against women can be physical, emotional, or mental and it is often in the hands of their near and dear family members, mostly men. The present study wants to describe different forms of domestic violence in India in relation to the socio-economic status of women. The study points out to the existence of rural-urban differential in case of gender based violence in India as rural women suffer more in the hands of their husbands and in-laws than urban women. Thus, the degree of urbanization can inversely affect the incidence of domestic violence in India. The study finds that women from marginalized section of the society report higher rates of physical and sexual violence compared to upper-caste women. The study reveals that despite the significant improvement in women's socio-economic status over the years the goal to achieve gender equality is still a distant dream. Illiteracy, early marriage, high total fertility rate, lower participation of women in active labour force all these factors have summed up as the reason why Indian women are still lagging behind as far as women empowerment is concerned. Stringent laws, skill-based education, more and more work force participation by women and equal pay for equal work can reduce the extent of domestic violence in India.

Key words: Domestic violence, NFHS, NCRB, women empowerment, urbanization, marginalized section, socio-economic status.

Introduction

Since the beginning of human civilization and family life, women are subjected to exploitation, humiliation, and cruelty by patriarch society in every sphere of their lives. In India, where on the one hand, female deities are worshipped and women are referred to someone who can start and sustain life, Domestic violence (DV) against women constitutes one of the most prevalent violations of human rights and remains a serious public health and developmental challenge. Defined broadly, domestic violence comprises physical assault, sexual coercion, psychological abuse, and controlling behaviors perpetrated by intimate partners or close family members. Despite legislative protections such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA), the magnitude of the problem is evidenced by both survey and crime-record data. It is reported (NFHS-5, 2019-21) that nearly one in three ever-married women in India has experienced some form of spousal violence, ranging from physical assault to emotional abuse.

Domestic violence in India cannot be understood in isolation from its socio-economic determinants. Studies consistently show that factors such as low household income, educational disparities, unemployment, caste and community hierarchies, and rural–urban divides influence both the occurrence and the persistence of violence. By combining evidence from national surveys, administrative crime data, and existing scholarly literature, the study follows a socio-economic approach to find out the extent of domestic violence in India. Particular importance is given to find out how economic conditions, social stratification, and institutional responses intersect to perpetuate violence. The ultimate aim is to suggest a more holistic policy interventions that address not only the immediate protection of women but also the structural inequalities that sustain domestic violence over time.

With this purpose, we have divided our study into five sections. Section II discusses the objective of the study while Section III describes the data and sources used for this work. In Section IV, we have explained in detail the incidence of gender-based violence in India and its types. Section V analyses the socio-economic indicators describing the status of married women in India in relation to domestic violence. Finally, Section VI draws the

conclusion and discusses some policy issues and a wide variety of strategies that can be employed to tackle domestic violence in India.

II Survey of Selected Literature

Mahapatro, Gupta M. and Gupta V. (2012) in their study comprising 14,507 women respondents, showed that women who have a lower household income, illiterate, belonging to lower caste, and have a partner who drinks/bets, etc. found to be important risk factors in experiencing domestic violence. A research programme (2016) conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) on domestic violence in India mentioned that even if the status of women has improved a lot over the last few decades, the women remain the primary victims of family violence and issues are not addressed properly due to sensitivities and stigma associated with it. Das and Basu Roy (2020) in their study addressed the factors associated with spousal violence against women concluded that other than individual issues, the prevalence of unemployment, poverty and illiteracy are the factors leading to domestic violence in India. A study by Pandey, S., & Lin, Y. (2013) based on NFHS data identifies key socio-economic determinants including partner's alcohol use, wealth, and education influencing gender-based violence in India.

Study by Sabri, Rai and Ramesh Kumar (2022) revealed that while women's empowerment, financial independence and informal sources of support were proactive correlates and facilitators of domestic violence in India, the risk factors and societal norms that promote violence against women needed to be addressed to establish safe and healthy environment for women in the society. Sikdar, Singha, Sen et.al. (2023) in their study based on NFHS-5 reveals that the women in the age group of more than 30, who lived in rural communities, had no educational background, and belonged to the poorest household wealth quintile were more likely to suffer from domestic violence. Factors such as the husband's academic level are significantly related to domestic violence. Employed women experienced more violence than unemployed women. Scheduled caste women were more exposed to domestic violence than those from other castes. A study by Roy et. al (2024) investigated the relationship between the socio-economic status of the

family and domestic violence in West Bengal, India during the period 2005-06 to 2020-21 with the cross-sectional survey consisted of 160 women both from rural and urban area, based on non-probability purposive sampling. The result shows a significant negative correlation between family income and both domestic physical and mental violence during the study period.

From the literature surveyed it is found that very few studies are there to examine the extent of violence against women and analyse the nature of domestic violence from socio-economic perspective, that integrates poverty, gender norms, and institutional capacity. By drawing attention to intersectional vulnerabilities and the reporting/enforcement gap, the study highlights the significance of women empowerment in India in relation to domestic violence.

III. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of our study is to find out the determinants of domestic violence faced by women in reference to their socio-economic status in India. For this purpose, the study wants to investigate the following issues:

- a. **To analyze the prevalence and forms of domestic violence** (physical, sexual, and emotional) against women in India using national data sources such as NFHS-5 and NCRB reports.
- b. **To identify the socio-economic determinants** of domestic violence, with particular focus on factors such as poverty, education, household wealth, employment status, caste/community identity, and partner characteristics (e.g., alcohol use).
- c. **To examine rural–urban differential** in domestic violence across different states and socio-cultural contexts, highlighting patterns of intersectional vulnerability.
- d. **To correlate the incidence of Domestic Violence with women empowerment** and assessing how indicators such as decision-making power, education,

economic independence, and mobility influence women's vulnerability or resilience to violence.

- e. **To recommend policy measures and interventions** aimed at reducing domestic violence and addressing its socio-economic roots, with emphasis on prevention, protection, and rehabilitation.

IV. Data and Sources

This is a secondary data analysis. For the purpose of our study, we have collected data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for the last few years to obtain the data of various forms of crimes committed against women in India as well as the incidence of domestic violence faced by women by their husbands or his relatives including emotional, physical and sexual violence. To analyse the socio-economic status of women in India, we have identified four different factors, namely -Education level of the women (measured by the percentage of women having 10 or more years of schooling), Social status (represented by percentage of married women usually participated in three household decisions), Early marriage(percentage of women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years) and Financial status of the women(given by percentage of women having bank or savings accounts that they themselves operate) the data for which is collected from National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-3, NFHS-4 and NFHS-5).

V. Domestic Violence against Women in India

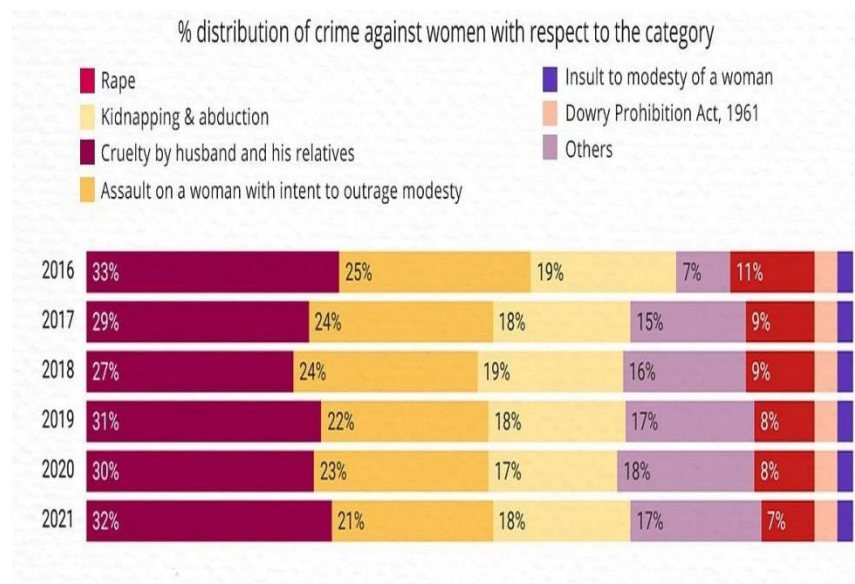
This section wants to discuss different forms of domestic violence suffered by women in India. NCRB data reveals that Domestic violence is the most significant form of violence against women in India. From figure-1 it is evident that 28 percent of total crime committed against women in the age group 15-49, is by their husband and his relatives. Thus, it is also called domestic abuse or intimate partner violence. It is any pattern of behavior used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. It includes all types of physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological actions or threats that adversely affect the partner.

A. Types of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence can include the following: -

- (a) Economic violence involves making or attempting to make a person financially dependent by maintaining total control over financial resources, denying access to money, and/or forbidding attendance at school or workplace.
- (b) Psychological violence refers causing fear by intimidation; threatening physical harm to self, partner, or children; destruction of property or forcing isolation from friends, family, school and/or work.
- (c) Emotional violence includes undermining a person's sense of self-worth through constant criticism; underestimating one's abilities; humiliation, verbal abuse; damaging a partner's relationship with the children; or not letting a partner see friends and family.

Fig-1



Source: MOSP, Women and Men in India, NCRB, 2022

(d) Physical violence involves hurting or trying to hurt a partner physically and denying medical care or forcing alcohol and/or drug use, or using other kinds of physical force.

(e) Sexual violence involves forcing a partner to take part in a sexual act without her consent.

B. Honor killing is the murder of a family member, usually a woman or girl, for the purported reason that the person has brought dishonor or shame upon the family.

C. Forms of Domestic Violence in a Marriage

According to the latest report published by National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) during the period 2019-21, 29.3 percent of married Indian women between the ages of 18-49 years have faced domestic violence and/or sexual violence whereas 3.1 percent of pregnant women between the ages of 18-49 have experienced physical violence during their pregnancy. There are some early signs of violence in marriage manifested itself by the controlling behaviour of husband and his immediate family members. Controlling behaviour such as being told what to wear, where to go, whom to meet, monitoring whereabouts, and controlling finances, baseless accusations of being unfaithful, isolating and limiting contact with family, etc. are all warning signs that indicate violence may take place in the future.

Table 1: Percentage of Ever-married Women age 18-49 who have experienced Violence Committed by their Husband

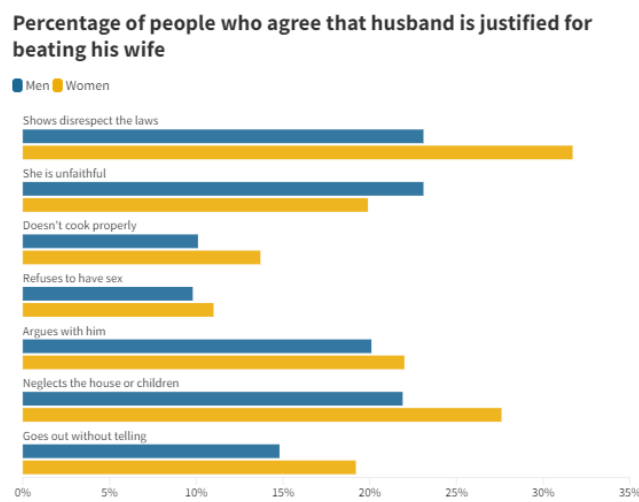
Types of Violence	Percentage of reported violence
Emotional	14.0
Physical	28.5
Sexual	6.3
Physical & Sexual	29.2
Emotional & Physical or Sexual	31.9

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2022

Table 1 exhibits that 29.2 percent of married women in India in the age group 18-49 face physical and sexual abuse in the hands of their husband or his family. On the other hand, 31.9 percent of women suffers emotional, physical and sexual violence in their married lives.

Another worrying figure is the percentage of men and women who agree that a husband is justified in beating his wife for a specified reason as revealed by Figure 2.

Fig-2



Source: Reasons given to justify domestic abuse: NFHS-5 Survey

As per the survey, 44 percent of men believe that they can beat their wives if they do not fulfill their 'duties' while 45 percent of women too support wife beating (NFHS-5).

It appears from Figure 2 that showing disrespect to the in-laws stands out to be the top most reason of domestic abuse and more women than men justify the very incidents of domestic violence in India.

D. Domestic Violence and Rural-Urban Differential

This sub-section explains rural -urban differential in the context of domestic violence in India. From table 2 it appears that domestic violence is more prevalent in rural India compared to urban India. While in urban India 24.2 percent ever married women in the age group 18-49 experience spousal violence, for rural women the percentage of women suffering spousal violence is 31.6. Same trend is observed in case of married women experiencing physical violence during their pregnancy in urban and rural areas.

Table-2:Gender Based Violence in India (age 18-49 years)

Ever Married women age 18-49	Urban	Rural	Total
i) who have ever experienced spousal violence (%)	24.2	31.6	29.3
ii) who have ever experienced physical violence during any pregnancy (%)	2.5	3.4	3.1
iii) young women who experience sexual violence by age 18(%)	1.1	1.6	1.5

Source: NFHS-5

So, from the above table it can be inferred that rural urban differential is quite prominent in case of gender-based violence in India and rural women suffer more than their urban counterparts as far as domestic violence is concerned. It can also be opined that urbanization decreases the rate of domestic violence in India.

E. Caste based Domestic Violence

Caste based domestic violence becomes a serious problem in India as women from marginalized social section report higher rates of physical and sexual violence compared to upper-caste women as observed from Table-3. It is evident that women from lower caste, especially Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes experience not only social discrimination and inhuman behaviour outside but this kind of intimate partner violence in their own home.

Table-3:Caste based Domestic Violence in India

Caste/Tribe	% of women aged 18-49 who have ever been experienced DV since age 15 during the 12 months preceding the survey
SC	33.9
ST	31.0
OBC	30.0

Other	22.3
Don't know	23.5

Source: NFHS-5

Thus, it is evident from the above table that Women from marginalized section of the society face double discrimination: oppression due to gender within households, and caste-based exclusion in society. This intersectionality intensifies their vulnerability to domestic violence, limits access to justice, and weakens their socio-economic empowerment.

VI. Domestic Violence and Socio-Economic Status of women in India

This section wants to analyse the socio-economic status of women in India in recent years by examining the following indices in connection with rising gender violence. Table- 4 displays the four indices selected to emphasize the status of women in India in the last few years, the data of which are obtained from National Family Health Survey. To examine the socio-economic status of women in India over the years we have taken five variables as specified in NFHS data, namely Total Fertility Rate (TFR), Women with 10 or more years of schooling, women married before the age of 18, married women who usually take part in three household decisions and women having bank or savings accounts.

i) Education level of the women

The education level of the women has a positive influence on their socio-economic status. The years of schooling of female not only indicates the social and economic upliftment of women but also the overall prosperity of the society and improvement in quality of life. Compulsory schooling is necessary to ensure that one gain the basic skills and competence required for participation in labour markets and society. It is clear from the Table-4 that the percentage of women with ten or more years of schooling has increased considerably in India over recent years. Higher literacy rate among women places them in a decision-making position regarding their consumption behaviour and preference. Thus,

we can conclude that women's education can play an important role in improving their position in the society which can reduce the problem of domestic violence in the society.

Table 4: Women's Socio-Economic Status Indicators

Women's Socio-economic status Indices	NFHS-5 (2019-21)	NFHS-4 (2015-16)	NFHS-3 (2005-06)
TFR	2.0	2.2	2.7
Women with 10 or more years of schooling (%)	41	35.7	22.3
Women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years (%)	23.3	26.8	47.4
Married women who usually participate in 3 household decisions (%)	88.7	84	76.5
Women having bank or savings account that they themselves use (%)	78.6	33	15.1

Source: NFHS data for various years

ii) Early Marriage

Child marriage has a negative impact on women empowerment process. It is observed from the above table that though the percentage of women married before 18 years of age has decreased considerably over the years, still more than 23 percent of the women in the age group 20-24 years are married off below the age of 18. India is home to over 216.6 million child brides i.e., 1 in every 4 young women were married before entering the age of 18. Thus, it can be said that child brides who are often isolated are subjected to various forms of domestic abuse and neglect. So, early marriage can lead to increase in domestic abuse and is a hindrance on the way of women empowerment.

iii) Social Status of Women

To examine the social status of women in India we have chosen the percentage of married women who have participated in at least three family decision making process as an

indicator. Table 3 shows that over the years i.e., starting from 2005-06 to 2019-21 the percentage of married women participating in at least three household decision making process has increased. This points out that there is significant improvement in the social status of women during the last 15 years. Though it may act as a positive catalyst in the women empowerment movement in India but it fails to tackle gender-based violence in Indian society which shows a steady increase in recent years.

iv) Financial Status of Women in India

According to CMIE data, as of December 2021, while the male labour force participation ratio was 67.4 percent, the female labour force participation rate was as low as 9.4 percent. This means less than one in every 10 working-age women in India are even demanding work. This clearly points out male dominance in economic decision-making process in India. To analyse the financial status of women we have selected the percentage of women having savings accounts in the banks which they operate themselves, as an index. According to the NFHS data it is obvious that there is a phenomenal rise in the percentage of women operating their own savings accounts by themselves over the years. From 15.1 percent in 2005-06, it has increased to 78.6 percent during 2019-21.

But if we look at the data of women who worked in last 12 months and paid in cash the picture is diametrically opposite. According to the excerpts from NFHS over the last few years it is observed that only 24.9 percent of women are working and paid in cash. On the other hand, women owning a land or house alone or jointly has declined during the period 2015-2021. It Indicates that poor financial status of women weakens their positions in society which may be one of the main reasons behind rising incidents of domestic abuse in India.

VII. Conclusion and Policy Prescriptions

The study wants to examine the incidence of domestic violence against women in India and investigate the role of socio-economic status of women in this context. It is observed that 32 percent of total crime reported against women is committed by her husband and his family members. Another worrying figure is the percentage of men and women who justified the beating of wife for a specified reason. It is observed that showing disrespect

to the in-laws stands out to be the top most reason of domestic abuse and more women than men justify the very incidents of domestic violence in India. The rural urban differential of domestic violence shows that rural women suffer more in the hands of their husbands and in-laws than urban women. Thus, the degree of urbanization can inversely affect the incidence of domestic violence in India. The study finds that women from marginalized section of the society report higher rates of physical and sexual violence compared to upper-caste women.

To analyse the socio-economic status of women and its relation with incidence of domestic violence against married women in the age group 18-49 years in India, we have identified four key factors, namely -Education level of the women (measured by the percentage of women having 10 or more years of schooling), Social status (represented by percentage of married women usually participated in three household decisions), Early marriage(percentage of women age 20-24 years married before age 18 years) and Financial status of the women(given by percentage of women having bank or savings accounts that they themselves operate) the data for which is collected from National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-3, NFHS-4 and NFHS-5). The study reveals that despite the significant improvement in women's socio-economic status over the years the goal to achieve gender equality is still a distant dream. Illiteracy, early marriage, high total fertility rate, lower participation of women in active labour force all these factors have summed up as the reason why Indian women are still lagging behind as far as women empowerment is concerned.

Domestic violence against women in India remains an obstacle to achieve the goals of gender equality and social justice. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach—strengthening legal enforcement, ensuring economic upliftment, creating gender-sensitive institutions, promoting awareness at the grassroots level, and empowering women across social and economic domains. Stringent laws on the part of our government ensuring zero tolerance towards gender-based violence and enough measures should be taken to ascertain safety, rehabilitation, skill development and financial security for the victims. India needs a strong national effort to raise awareness about domestic violence, led by state governments and civil society. NGOs must be encouraged and given adequate

funding so that they can function efficiently and provide medical and legal assistance, counselling, etc. to the victims. Women, enhancing their capability to join the decision-making process through skill-based education and the right to have equal pay for equal work can make them free from the shackles of gender disparity and violence which they face in household or in workplace.

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