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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN STATISTICS AND THE REAL PICTURE IN RURAL INDIA.

AUTHORED BY - SANA PERWEEN

Abstract

Domestic violence in rural India is often underreported due to cultural and systemic barriers. Factors like illiteracy, patriarchal norms, and economic dependence contribute to its prevalence. Many women lack awareness of legal protections and fear retaliation if they report abuse. Community-based initiatives, such as integrating support services into healthcare systems, have shown promise. However, more needs to be done to bridge the gap between reported statistics and reality. Addressing this requires improving literacy, raising awareness, and expanding access to support services. Empowering rural women through education and legal knowledge is crucial to combating domestic violence effectively.

Introduction

Domestic violence¹ is a pervasive issue that transcends geographical, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries. In India, the prevalence of domestic violence, particularly in rural areas, remains a deeply entrenched² problem, shaped by traditional norms, gender inequalities, and the underreporting of incidents. Statistics available through various governmental and non-governmental surveys often present a grim picture of the scope of domestic violence in the country. However, these figures rarely reflect the real experiences of women and marginalized groups in rural India. Understanding the gap between statistics and the real picture of domestic violence in rural communities requires a nuanced exploration of the complex factors that influence the reporting, recognition, and experience of domestic violence.

At a national level, India has made substantial strides in acknowledging and addressing

¹ The definition of domestic violence under the Domestic Violence Act is broad and inclusive. It encompasses various forms of abuse, including physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic. Physical abuse involves any act that causes bodily harm or poses a threat to life, while sexual abuse encompasses non-consensual sexual acts and marital rape. Verbal and emotional abuse target a victim's self-esteem and mental well-being, often through threats, insults, or manipulation. Economic abuse, on the other hand, involves controlling or withholding financial resources, thereby exerting control over the victim's economic autonomy.

² Entrenched: firmly or solidly established; placed in a position of strength

domestic violence through legal frameworks such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005. However, rural India, with its unique socio-economic and cultural characteristics, remains largely disconnected from these efforts. In rural areas, traditional power structures and patriarchal norms often dictate the roles and behaviours of women, limiting their agency in both private and public spheres. Women in rural areas may face multiple forms of violence, including physical, emotional, psychological, and economic abuse, with little recourse to legal or institutional support. Despite the existence of laws and policies, rural women remain hesitant or unaware of their rights and options, which compounds the invisibility of domestic violence in these communities.

A key challenge in studying domestic violence in rural India is the gap between official statistics and the lived experiences of victims. National surveys, such as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), and reports by organizations like the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), provide valuable data on the incidence of domestic violence. These statistics often paint a dire³ picture, indicating that a significant proportion of Indian women experience some form of abuse in their lifetime. Yet, these numbers fail to capture the full scope of the problem in rural settings where the definition of domestic violence, the awareness of available resources, and the willingness to report incidents differ vastly from urban areas.

One of the primary reasons for this discrepancy⁴ is the underreporting of incidents of violence. In rural areas, domestic violence is often seen as a private matter that should remain within the family. Women may fear societal judgment, retaliation from their abusers, or the stigma associated with breaking the silence surrounding domestic abuse. Moreover, rural communities are often governed by tight-knit social structures where the opinion of extended family, local elders, and community leaders carries significant weight. In such an environment, women may feel pressured to maintain the façade⁵ of a happy family despite the abuse they endure. This social pressure, combined with a lack of access to confidential support services, results in a situation where many instances of domestic violence go unreported and, therefore, remain invisible in national statistics.

In rural India, domestic violence often takes on forms that are not captured by conventional

³ Dire: causing or involving great fear or suffering; dreadful; terrible

⁴ Discrepancy: a causing or involving great fear or suffering; dreadful; terrible

⁵ Façade: an outward appearance which is deliberately false and gives you a wrong impression about someone or something.

definitions. For instance, economic abuse, such as the control of a woman's financial resources or her inability to own property, can be just as harmful as physical violence but may not be recognized or reported as abuse. Similarly, psychological abuse, which is harder to quantify, can take a significant toll on a woman's mental health but may not be included in official statistics. In many rural areas, the cultural normalization of such behaviours makes them difficult to distinguish from acceptable marital dynamics, further complicating the identification and reporting of domestic violence.

The intersection of domestic violence with other socio-economic issues in rural India adds another layer of complexity to the situation. Factors such as poverty, illiteracy, and limited access to healthcare and legal resources exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women in rural areas. Women who are economically dependent on their husbands or families may find it difficult to leave abusive relationships. Additionally, the lack of transportation, infrastructure, and legal aid in rural regions limits women's ability to seek help. Legal and judicial systems are often distant and underfunded, with police and court personnel being ill-equipped to address cases of domestic violence effectively. In some instances, law enforcement may be complicit in perpetuating the violence due to ingrained biases or cultural attitudes that dismiss the severity of domestic abuse.

The role of caste, class, and religion also plays a significant part in shaping the experiences of domestic violence in rural India. Women from marginalized communities, such as Dalits⁶ and Adivasis⁷, face additional layers of discrimination and violence. The intersectionality of caste, class, and gender creates compounded vulnerabilities, where domestic violence is often normalized and hidden under the guise of social hierarchy or cultural practices. This further complicates the task of capturing accurate statistics and understanding the true extent of the problem.

Despite these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need to address domestic violence in rural India. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots women's groups, and social activists are working tirelessly to create awareness, provide support services, and challenge the deep-seated cultural norms that enable domestic violence to persist. These

⁶ Dalit: (in the traditional Indian caste system) a person who belongs to one of the lowest castes, outside the four main castes in the varna system; a member of the Scheduled Castes.

⁷ Adivasis: a member or descendant of any of the indigenous peoples of South Asia.

organizations emphasize the importance of providing accessible legal and psychological support to women in rural areas, as well as raising awareness about their rights under Indian law. However, the reach of these initiatives remains limited, and their impact is often constrained by the structural and cultural barriers present in rural communities.

To bridge the gap between statistics and reality, it is essential to adopt a more comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to understanding domestic violence in rural India. This involves recognizing the diverse forms of violence women experience, the complexities surrounding reporting, and the socio-cultural factors that shape these experiences. The key to a more accurate picture of domestic violence lies in conducting research that goes beyond quantitative surveys and delves into the qualitative aspects of women's lives. This includes in-depth interviews, case studies, and participatory research methods that allow women to share their experiences in their own voices and contexts.

The efforts must be made to strengthen local support systems, provide education on legal rights, and build capacity at the community level to respond to cases of domestic violence. These initiatives should be rooted in a deep understanding of local cultures and traditions, recognizing the importance of community engagement in addressing this issue. Only through a holistic approach that combines legal reform, awareness-raising, and grassroots mobilization can the real picture of domestic violence in rural India be uncovered, and meaningful progress be made toward its eradication.

In conclusion, while statistics on domestic violence in India provide a starting point for understanding the scope of the problem, they do not fully reflect the reality faced by women in rural areas. The gap between these statistics and the lived experiences of victims can be attributed to underreporting, cultural normalization of abuse, and the complex socio-economic factors that affect rural communities. Bridging this gap requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that takes into account the diverse forms of violence, the challenges of reporting, and the need for greater awareness and support in rural areas. Only then can the true extent of domestic violence in rural India be understood, and effective solutions be implemented.

Domestic violence

In the recent times, violence against women is an emerging problem both in the developed and developing countries. Domestic violence against women is a critical issue that transcends

geographical boundaries, affecting over one-third of women globally, as highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), which has labelled it a “public health epidemic.” In India, falls in the higher end of this range with the third round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) reveals a striking prevalence of 37% among ever-married women in reproductive age. A lifetime prevalence of violence ranging from 10% to 69% from different population surveys.

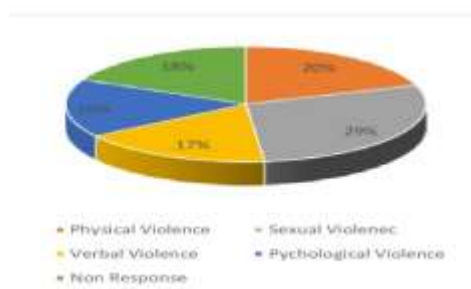
The consequences of domestic violence are severe, impacting both physical and mental health—victims often experience chronic pain, injuries, and psychological issues such as depression and anxiety. The economic ramifications are significant, leading to increased healthcare costs and loss of productivity among women. Traditionally viewed as a legal matter, there is now a growing consensus that the health sector must play an active role in addressing this issue. Many women do not report incidents of violence due to stigma and fear, and the prevalence varies widely based on local social norms and literacy levels. Therefore, it is essential to conduct localized studies to understand the specific factors contributing to domestic violence in different regions. A comprehensive approach that includes healthcare provider training, community awareness programs, robust policy implementation, and targeted data collection is necessary to combat this pervasive issue effectively and promote gender equality.

Statistics on Domestic Violence in Rural Areas

1. **Prevalence:** Studies indicate that the prevalence of domestic violence is higher in rural areas compared to urban areas. For example, one study found that 22.5% of women in small rural areas and 17.9% in isolated areas experienced intimate partner violence, compared to 15.5% in urban areas. Another study in Nigeria showed that 96.8% of rural women experienced domestic violence, significantly higher than the 80.9% in urban areas.
2. **Types of Violence:** Rural women often experience more severe forms of physical violence⁸. In isolated rural areas, over 30% reported severe to very severe physical violence, compared to 10% in urban areas. However, psychological and sexual violence⁹ rates do not differ significantly between rural and urban areas.

⁸ Physical violence; Physical violence is any intentional act causing bodily harm or injury through contact. This includes hitting, slapping, pushing, kicking, biting, burning, and using objects or weapons. It's a form of aggression intended to inflict pain or control another person.

⁹ Sexual violence; Sexual violence is any sexual act against a person's will, without their consent. It encompasses a range of abuses including rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, and exploitation.



Rural women often experience more severe forms of physical violence. In isolated rural areas, over 30% reported severe to very severe physical violence, compared to 10% in urban areas. However, psychological¹⁰ and sexual violence rates do not differ significantly between rural and urban areas.

3. **Perception and Reporting:** In rural communities, there is a higher perception that domestic violence is excusable, which can lead to underreporting. The stigma and fear of community gossip also deter women from disclosing violence.

Real Picture of Domestic Violence in Rural Areas

1. **Access to Resources:** Rural areas face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, social services, and legal support. Women often live far from the nearest domestic violence shelters, making it difficult to seek help. Public transportation is scarce, and economic dependence on the abuser complicates leaving violent situations.
2. **Cultural and Social Factors:** The close-knit nature of rural communities can silence victims due to fear of stigma and shame. The lack of privacy and familiarity with service providers can further inhibit reporting.
3. **Economic Challenges:** Poverty and limited job opportunities exacerbate¹¹ stress in relationships, contributing to higher rates of violence. Survivors often lack affordable housing and employment options, making it harder to leave abusive situations.

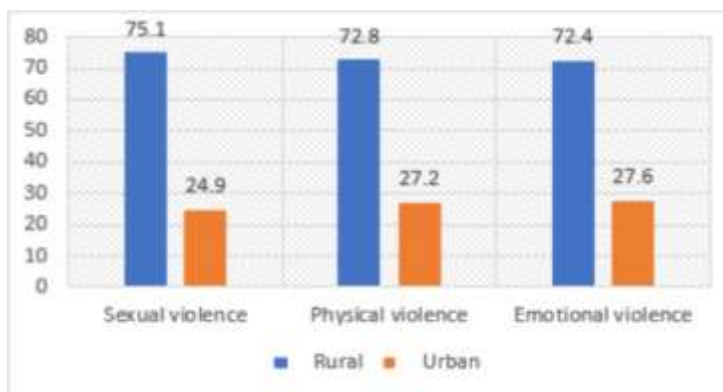
Statistic Analysis

1. Graph 1 shows the rural-urban gap in women who have ever experienced all three kinds of domestic violence – (i) physical violence, (ii) sexual violence, and (iii) emotional violence¹².

¹⁰ Psychological violence involves behaviours intended to harm someone emotionally or mentally. It is about control, degradation, isolation, and fear, often used by abusers to dominate their partners without laying a hand on them.

¹¹ Exacerbate: to make something that is already bad even worse

¹² Emotional Violence: includes non-physical behaviours that are meant to control, isolate, or frighten you

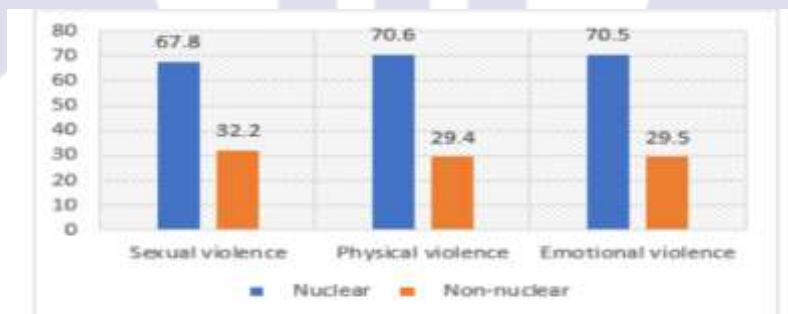


Source: NFHS, round 5 (2020-21)

2. Graph 2 shows the cases of domestic violence between nuclear and large households.

Graph 2: Domestic violence between nuclear and large households.

The data reveals a stark and troubling disparity in domestic violence rates between rural and urban India. A significantly higher percentage of women in rural areas report experiencing sexual (75% vs. 24.9%), physical (72.8% vs. 27.2%), and emotional (72.4% vs. 27.6%) violence compared to their urban counterparts. This paints a concerning picture of the heightened vulnerability faced by women in rural area.



Source: NFHS, round 5 (2020-21)

3. Graph 3: Domestic violence across caste Source: NFHS, round 5 (2020-21)

Caste wise, an interesting pattern of domestic violence is observed.

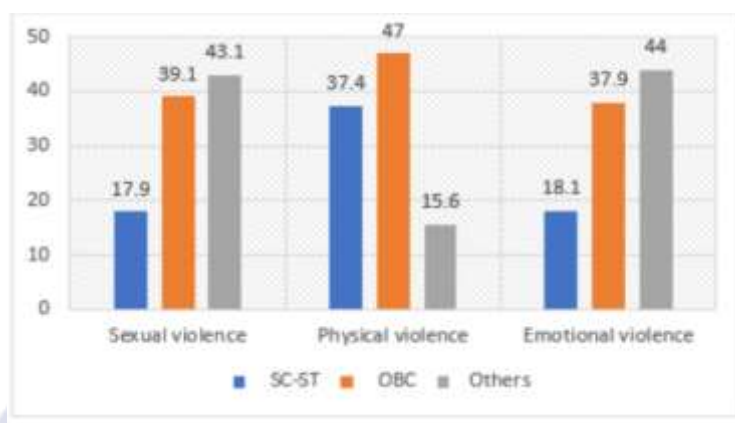
the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC-ST) report the lowest incidence of sexual violence, with less than one in five (17.9%) experiencing it. In stark contrast, women categorized as "others" face the highest rates of sexual violence (43.1%), closely followed by those from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) at 39.1%.

The picture shifts when considering physical violence. Here, women from the OBC group report the highest prevalence (47%), followed by the SC-ST group (37.4%). Interestingly,

women in the "others" category report the lowest rate of physical violence (15.6%).

Emotional violence follows yet another trend, with women in the "others" category reporting the highest levels (44%), followed by the OBC group (37.9%), and the SC-ST group reporting the lowest incidence (18.1%).

Overall, it is concluded that women from the SC-ST and OBC groups largely experience physical violence while women from other groups largely experience both emotional and sexual violence.



National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Data

The 2021 report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) documented 4,28,278 cases of crimes against women in India. A significant portion of these reported cases was related to domestic violence. The report's data might suggest a decrease in such incidents in recent years. However, it is crucial to understand the limitations of this data.

Limitations of NCRB Data:

- **Underreporting:** The NCRB data only reflects the cases that are formally reported to the police. A vast number of incidents, particularly domestic violence, go unreported. This is especially true in rural areas due to various factors.
- **Limited Access to Law Enforcement:** In rural settings, access to police stations and formal reporting mechanisms can be limited due to geographical distance, lack of transportation, and communication barriers.
- **Social Stigma and Fear:** Women in rural areas might be hesitant to report domestic violence due to the prevailing social stigma associated with it. There could be fear of retaliation from the abuser, pressure from family or community to maintain family honour, and a lack of awareness about their rights and available legal recourse.

- **Lack of Awareness and Education:** Lower levels of education and awareness about what constitutes domestic violence and the available legal protections can also contribute to underreporting. Women might not recognize certain behaviours as criminal offenses or know how to seek help.
- **Economic Dependence:** In many rural households, women may be economically dependent on their abusers, making it difficult for them to leave the situation or report the violence.
- **Traditional Gender Norms:** Deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes and traditional gender roles in rural communities can normalize domestic violence, leading victims and their families to believe it is a private matter or a normal part of marriage.
- **Lack of Support Systems:** Rural areas often have fewer support services available for victims of domestic violence, such as shelters, counselling centres, and legal aid, which can further discourage reporting.
- **Mistrust of the System:** There might be a lack of trust in the police and the judicial system, with victims fearing that their complaints will not be taken seriously or that they will not receive justice.

Additional point

- **National Family Health Survey (NFHS) Data:** While NCRB data focuses on reported crimes, surveys like the National Family Health Survey provide a broader picture of the prevalence of domestic violence, including unreported cases. The NFHS-5 (2019-2021) indicated that a significant percentage of ever-married women in India have experienced spousal violence¹³.
- **Increase in Reporting:** It's also important to note that an increase in reported cases in some years might not necessarily indicate an increase in the actual incidence of crime. It could also be due to increased awareness, improved access to reporting mechanisms (like women's helplines and e-FIR facilities), and a greater willingness of women to come forward.
- **Government Initiatives:** The government has taken several steps to address crimes against women, including strengthening laws, setting up helplines, and establishing Fast Track Special Courts. However, the challenges in rural areas require targeted interventions that consider the specific socio-cultural context and address the barriers to reporting.

¹³ Spousal Violence: occurs when one spouse in the marriage uses physical or non-physical means to control and instil fear in their partner.

Limitation of Official Data

Underreporting: Underreporting occurs when incidents go unrecorded in official data sources. This is a widespread issue in cases of abuse, violence, and discrimination, and it is driven by a range of social and structural barriers:

Cultural Taboos and Social Stigma: In many communities, individuals who experience abuse may feel ashamed or guilty, especially when societal norms discourage open discussion of such topics. Victims are often pressured to remain silent to protect family honour, avoid public judgment, or prevent community backlash.

Fear of Retaliation: A common deterrent to reporting abuse is the fear of consequences. Victims may face further harm or harassment from their abuser, especially when the perpetrator holds power or authority over them. In some cases, reporting can lead to isolation, economic hardship, or even expulsion from the family or community.

Distrust in Institutions: Where justice systems are perceived as inefficient, corrupt, or biased, victims may not feel safe coming forward. A lack of confidentiality, slow legal proceedings, or prior negative experiences with law enforcement can discourage individuals from seeking help.

Limited Accessibility: In remote or underserved areas, there may be no accessible services for reporting abuse. Individuals without internet, transportation, or knowledge of their rights may find it nearly impossible to report their experiences.

Methodological Bias

Even when data is collected, the tools and methods used can introduce significant bias, limiting the accuracy and inclusiveness of findings.

Flawed Survey Design; Many data collection instruments are standardized in ways that do not account for diverse experiences or contexts. Questions may be framed in narrow terms that fail to capture the complexity of abuse, or may use terminology unfamiliar to certain populations.

Exclusion of Vulnerable Populations; Official surveys often overlook groups such as undocumented migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. These populations may face additional barriers to participation due to language, legal status, or mistrust of government agencies.

Neglect of Non-Physical Abuse; Most official statistics focus heavily on physical or sexual violence, ignoring forms of abuse such as psychological manipulation, emotional coercion, and economic control. These forms of abuse are more difficult to measure but equally harmful and

pervasive.

Lack of Longitudinal Perspective; Data is often collected through one-time surveys, which fail to capture the ongoing or cyclical nature of abuse. Without follow-up or long-term tracking, recurring patterns and long-term effects remain undocumented.

Case study & Field Reports

In Bihar During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In 2021, ActionAid released a revealing report on the rise of domestic violence in Bihar, one of India's most economically challenged states, during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The pandemic intensified existing social and economic inequalities, especially for women already living with limited access to support systems and justice.

The report found that 65% of women surveyed experienced an increase in domestic abuse during the lockdown. This wasn't limited to physical violence—it also included verbal, emotional, and financial abuse, all exacerbated by job losses, food shortages, and the stress of confinement. For many, the home became a site of fear, not safety, with no way to seek help privately or safely.

Despite this surge in abuse, official records showed only a slight increase in reported cases. The gap between reality and recorded data reveals how mobility restrictions, stigma, and fear of social judgment prevented women from accessing help. Many were unable to reach police stations, legal aid, or even speak to someone they trusted.

Women in rural Bihar were hit even harder. With poor internet connectivity, little access to urban-based NGOs or shelters, and control over mobile phones often in male hands, these women were cut off from crucial support. Many didn't even know help existed.

The report underscores a vital truth: gender-based violence doesn't stop in a crisis—it worsens. Addressing it requires not only legal action but community outreach, rural inclusion, and strengthened support systems, especially for those most at risk.

In Rural Rajasthan

In 2022, **The Srijan Foundation** carried out a powerful investigation into the issue of domestic violence in rural Rajasthan, and what they uncovered was both heartbreaking and deeply concerning. Out of all the women they spoke to, a staggering 78% shared that they had faced

domestic violence at some point in their lives. Yet, despite the widespread nature of the problem, only 12% had reported it. This silence wasn't due to a lack of suffering—it was driven by fear, vulnerability, and a lack of faith in the systems meant to protect them.

For nearly half of these women (45%), the biggest reason they stayed quiet was the fear of retaliation—the very real risk of facing further violence or rejection from their families or communities if they spoke out. Another 30% felt trapped because of financial dependence, relying entirely on their husbands or in-laws for basic needs like food, shelter, and the wellbeing of their children. In situations like these, the thought of leaving or even challenging abuse felt impossible. Additionally, 25% of women said they didn't trust the police or legal authorities. Many felt that going to the police wouldn't lead to justice, and might even bring shame, blame, or more harm.

The investigation also looked at the role of panchayats, the local village councils that are often the first-place people turn to in rural disputes. While these bodies are deeply rooted in community life, the study found that their approach to domestic violence was often more about keeping families together at all costs than protecting the woman. In many cases, rather than seeking justice, the focus was on reconciliation—even when the abuse was severe. These informal settlements, though common, often pressured women into silence and allowed the abuse to continue behind closed doors.

What this case clearly shows is that domestic violence in rural Rajasthan isn't just a personal issue—it's a deeply systemic one. Social expectations, financial dependence, and a lack of supportive institutions all work together to keep women from speaking out. Real change will take more than laws on paper. We need to start with awareness at the community level, where harmful gender norms can be challenged. At the same time, it's crucial to support women's economic independence, so they are not forced to choose between safety and survival. Panchayat leaders must be trained to understand and uphold legal protections for women, and efforts must be made to build trust between survivors and law enforcement, so that every woman knows she has somewhere safe to turn.

In Rural Maharashtra

In 2021, a survey conducted across rural areas of Maharashtra revealed the often hidden and heartbreaking realities many women face within their own homes. Behind closed doors, far

from public view, women are living with violence that wears many faces—physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological.

In just the past year, 13% of women reported enduring physical domestic violence, while 4% had faced sexual violence, and a staggering 19% experienced emotional abuse. Among ever-married women, 13% had faced either physical or sexual intimate partner violence. These numbers, though stark on their own, only scratch the surface of the daily fear and control many women live under.

What stands out sharply is that the vast majority of this violence was perpetrated by intimate partners—87% of physical and 99% of sexual violence cases. However, when it came to emotional abuse, it wasn't just the partner. Marital family members, such as in-laws, were equally responsible, indicating the pervasive nature of control within joint family systems.

The data also showed that certain women were disproportionately at risk. Violence was more common among younger women, those with lower economic status, or those living with disabilities—groups that already face social and financial vulnerability.

Perhaps most tellingly, 35% of women reported experiencing coercive control—being monitored, manipulated, or restricted in their choices. Even more distressing, one in three women said they were afraid of someone in their home. These were not isolated incidents, but a pattern of living in fear. 10% of women also faced neglect of basic needs—being denied food, rest, healthcare, or attention to their children's wellbeing.

This data paints a sobering picture of life for many women in rural Maharashtra. It's not just about overt violence—it's about systemic control, emotional trauma, and everyday neglect. These forms of abuse often go unnoticed, unspoken, and unreported, yet they shape the lives and futures of countless women.

To truly address domestic violence, there must be greater awareness, community support, legal accessibility, and economic empowerment—especially for those most at risk. Because for too many women, the most dangerous place remains their own home.

Domestic Violence in Rural Area

In **Kaniyambadi block, Tamil Nadu**, a striking 77.5% of women aged 15–49 reported experiencing some form of domestic violence. Among them:

- 65.8% were subjected to physical violence, often normalized within family structures.
- 17.5% reported sexual abuse, a figure that likely underrepresents the true extent due to stigma and underreporting.
- 54.2% endured emotional abuse, including verbal humiliation, threats, and controlling behaviour.

This data indicates that most women in this region face multiple, overlapping forms of violence, often without access to help or safe spaces.

In **Puducherry**, another rural area, a study among married women in their reproductive years found that 56.7% had experienced domestic violence. Within this group:

- 51.3% faced psychological violence, such as intimidation, insults, or threats.
- 40% endured physical violence, including slapping, hitting, or forced confinement.
- 13.5% suffered sexual violence, a form of abuse that is deeply taboo and rarely disclosed.

These figures demonstrate that emotional and mental forms of abuse are just as prevalent—and damaging—as physical assault.

In **Saharanpur district, Uttar Pradesh**, a study found a 21% prevalence of domestic violence among married women, with a different distribution:

- 18% reported physical abuse, making it the most common form.
- 12.8% experienced psychological abuse.
- 5.5% faced financial violence, where access to money or resources was restricted.
- 2.3% suffered sexual abuse.

While the overall percentage in Saharanpur is lower than in Tamil Nadu or Puducherry, it still represents over one in five women—and reflects how deeply entrenched this issue is even in regions with varying cultural or economic profiles.

The Real Picture:

Behind the closed doors of mud-brick homes and sun-scorched courtyards in rural India lies a silence that speaks volumes. It is the silence of women who live with violence, not as a momentary crisis, but as a part of everyday life. This violence is not random or sudden—it is deeply woven into the social fabric, where culture, poverty, and broken systems hold hands to keep women in the shadows. What makes this epidemic so devastating is not only how

widespread it is, but how invisible it remains.

Cultural and Social Norms: Where Silence Is Tradition

In many villages, a woman's identity is shaped by expectations she never agreed to. She is told to be obedient, to serve, to endure. From a young age, girls learn that being born female means living under rules made by men—for men.

For example, a 17-year-old bride in a village in Uttar Pradesh. Married off before she understood what marriage meant, she cooks, cleans, and absorbs slaps like they're part of her dowry. Her neighbours know. Her mother-in-law knows. But they all tell her the same thing: "This is how marriage works. Just be patient."

Cultural norms like **dowry**, **child marriage**, and **son preference** aren't just traditions—they are tools of control. They reduce women to property, traded and trained to be silent. If she speaks up, she's blamed for bringing shame. If she stays silent, she suffers—quietly, endlessly.

Economic Dependence: No Money, No Exit

For many women, the idea of leaving an abusive home is not even a dream—it's a luxury they can't afford. Most have never earned their own money. Many haven't finished school. Their labour—whether in the fields or inside the home—is unpaid and unrecognized.

For Example, Geeta, a mother of three from a village in Bihar, wanted to leave her husband after he broke her arm during an argument. But where would she go? Her parents told her they couldn't feed another mouth. She had no job, no savings, no land in her name. "If I walk out," she whispered, "I walk into nothing."

Economic dependence keeps women trapped—not just physically, but psychologically. Poverty becomes another form of violence, one that convinces them they are powerless, undeserving of more.

Lack of Awareness: Rights That Don't Reach

The laws meant to protect women often exist only on paper for those living in rural India. Shelters, hotlines, legal aid—they might as well be stories from another world. Many women don't know their rights, and those who do often don't know how to claim them.

Kamala, a 40-year-old from Madhya Pradesh, had heard about something called the "Domestic

Violence Act” on the radio. But she didn’t know what it meant, or who to ask. The nearest legal aid centre was three hours away, and she couldn’t speak the language used in court documents. “It’s not for people like me,” she said. “Those things are for city women.”

Without education, without information, and without local support, women like Kamala live in legal deserts—places where help exists, but never arrives.

Social Stigma: When Victims Become the Guilty

In small villages, everyone knows everything—but some things are not meant to be talked about. Reporting abuse is seen not as an act of courage, but of betrayal. A woman who speaks out risks being branded as shameless, blamed for disrupting the peace of her family.

Sarla, from a village in Rajasthan, was told by the village council that going to the police would “bring dishonour.” Her in-laws warned her that she’d ruin her children’s future. Her own brother begged her not to speak up. “If people know,” he said, “no one will marry your daughter.”

This fear of isolation, judgment, and social death silences thousands of women. They weigh their pain against their family’s reputation—and almost always, they choose silence.

Systemic Failure: Justice That Never Comes

Even when a woman gathers the courage to seek help, the system often meets her with indifference—or worse, hostility.

At the local police station, the officer barely looks up. He asks, “Did he break any bones?” When she says no, he shrugs. “Just a family matter,” he says, handing her a glass of water instead of a legal form. If she insists, she might wait months for a court date—only to be told to “reconcile” and “think of the children.”

There are too few trained officers, even fewer female ones. Many rural police forces lack the sensitivity—or will—to treat domestic violence as a serious crime. Bribes, delays, and outright dismissal are common. Justice moves slowly, if at all.

For women like Shanta from Odisha, this means returning home to the very hands she tried to escape. “The law doesn’t live here,” she said quietly. “Only fear does.”

Conclusion

This study brings into sharp focus a grim but necessary reality: domestic violence remains deeply entrenched in the social fabric of rural India. Despite legal reforms, national campaigns, and growing awareness in urban centers, countless women in villages continue to suffer in silence—trapped by cultural norms, economic dependence, social stigma, and systemic neglect. Domestic violence in rural India is a deeply rooted and often hidden problem influenced by complex social, cultural, economic, and systemic factors. Although laws like the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005 exist, many rural women face significant obstacles such as entrenched patriarchal norms, illiteracy, economic dependence, and limited access to healthcare and legal resources, which prevent them from seeking help or reporting abuse. This leads to a substantial gap between official statistics and the actual experiences of victims, as many cases remain unreported due to fear, stigma, and the normalization of violence within communities. Furthermore, domestic violence in rural areas frequently includes less visible forms such as economic control and psychological abuse, which are not adequately captured in data. To address this pervasive issue effectively, a comprehensive and culturally sensitive approach is necessary—one that combines legal reforms, education, community engagement, and the strengthening of local support systems. Only through such multifaceted efforts can the true extent of domestic violence in rural India be revealed, enabling the implementation of effective solutions to empower women, challenge harmful norms, and promote their safety and equality. This holistic strategy is crucial to bridging the divide between statistics and reality and fostering meaningful change in rural communities.

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