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# **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN AGAINST WOMEN IN CHENNAI-A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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## **Abstract**

This article investigates the stubborn implementation gap between the progressive design of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) and what actually happens on the ground in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Using a mixed-method socio-legal analysis of judicial decisions, institutional practices, and survivor narratives, it shows that although the PWDVA is a landmark legislative step, its real-world impact is sharply curtailed by patriarchal institutional cultures, chronic resource shortages, and a persistent inability to take non-physical abuse seriously.<sup>1</sup> The central claim is that meaningful change won't come from minor legal tinkering, but from a deeper overhaul of support systems, police orientations, and courtroom processes so the ecosystem is genuinely survivor-centric.

## **Introduction**

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) was widely celebrated as a watershed in India's legal response to intimate partner violence. It widened the idea of "abuse" beyond physical harm to include emotional, economic, and sexual violence, and it leaned toward civil remedies rather than relying only on punishment. In theory, that shift should have ushered in a more survivor-centric model of justice. Nearly two decades on, though, the distance between what the law set out to do and what survivors experience is still uncomfortably large. And if you want a place where that gap is hard to miss, Chennai is right there. Chennai also spotlights what scholars call the "South Indian paradox." With female literacy above 84%, strong workforce participation, and a political culture shaped by the

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<sup>1</sup> The PWDVA drew significant inspiration from India's commitments under international human rights frameworks, particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which India ratified in 1993.

Dravidian movement's long-standing language of social reform, the city looks, on paper, like it should be a showcase for women's empowerment. Yet National Family Health Survey-5 reports that 23.5% of urban women in Tamil Nadu say they've experienced spousal violence, and employed women report it at even higher levels (32.3%) than non-working women. So what's going on. This article sits with that contradiction and asks why domestic violence persists, and in some ways morphs, in a context that seems primed for gender justice.<sup>2</sup>

### **Understanding the PWDVA**

The PWDVA is built on a relatively sophisticated view of domestic violence as coercive control, not just isolated episodes of physical assault<sup>3</sup>. Section 3 defines domestic violence broadly: it covers physical and sexual abuse, but also “verbal and emotional abuse” (insults, ridicule, threats) and “economic abuse” (blocking access to money, stopping employment, unlawfully disposing of household assets). That breadth maps closely onto what feminist scholars such as Evan Stark describe as “coercive control,” the patterned, cumulative stripping away of liberty that marks intimate partner violence. In other words, the Act isn't just looking for bruises; it's trying to name the machinery of domination. Its remedies are equally forward-looking. Section 17 gives women an enforceable right to reside in the “shared household” regardless of who owns it, cutting off the routine tactic of using homelessness as a threat. Section 18 allows magistrates to issue protection orders; Sections 19 and 20 provide residence orders and monetary relief. And Section 12(5) is explicit that cases should be disposed of within sixty days, a built-in recognition that delay itself can become a form of harm. The institutional design Protection Officers (Section 8), Service Providers (Section 10), and the Magistrate as adjudicator was meant to function like a coordinated support chain, not a maze.

### **Implementation Chasm**

In Chennai, however, the system breaks down at almost every link. Protection Officers, supposed to guide survivors through the process, are usually overstretched government staff from Social Welfare departments doing PWDVA work as an unwanted add-on to their existing portfolios. One Protection Officer may cover an entire revenue district, juggling hundreds of cases with thin resources, no dedicated office space, and near-zero enforcement muscle. The

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<sup>2</sup> National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-21), State Fact Sheet Tamil Nadu.

<sup>3</sup> Evan Stark's foundational work, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life* (2007), fundamentally reshaped global understanding of domestic violence by arguing that it should be understood not as discrete assaults but as a liberty crime involving micro-regulation of women's everyday lives.

fallout is hardly surprising: Domestic Incident Reports (DIRs) are delayed for months, emergency shelter referrals stall, and survivors find themselves facing not support, but one more layer of bureaucracy. Police response is also a major fault line. Tamil Nadu introduced All-Women Police Stations (AWPS) in 1992 with the stated aim of creating safer reporting environments, yet the on-the-ground pattern often looks very different. Frontline officers commonly discourage formal complaints and push women toward “compromise” and “family reconciliation” rather than registering FIRs. That kind of informal mediation often inside the intimidating space of the station and sometimes with the abuser present works as what one scholar calls “gatekeeping with a patriarchal key.” Even when FIRs are registered under Section 498A IPC or DIRs are initiated under the PWDVA, getting court orders enforced typically demands relentless follow-up by NGOs or lawyers; without that external push, protection orders too often become paper promises. Courts, which should be the final safeguard, frequently end up amplifying the harm. The sixty-day disposal requirement is more aspiration than reality; cases commonly drag on for two to three years, with adjournments granted on flimsy grounds. Each adjournment means the survivor has to miss work, arrange childcare, and repeatedly cross paths with her abuser in court corridors an almost routinized form of torment that wears down even determined litigants. Judicial attitudes can make it worse. Many magistrates, shaped by the same patriarchal common sense the PWDVA was meant to disrupt, lean toward “reconciliation” over protection, subtly nudging women back toward violent households. And when non-physical abuse is raised, it’s often brushed aside as “marital discord” rather than treated as the serious injury the Act clearly contemplates.

### **Cultural Architecture of Silence**

All of this runs inside a broader cultural frame that privatizes pain and muffles survivors. In Tamil society, the ideology of *karpu* (chastity/virtuous fidelity) places family honor heavily on women, so speaking out can feel like a betrayal not only of oneself but of one’s entire kin group. The praise of *sahana shakti* (endurance) turns suffering into moral achievement, which can discourage intervention and normalize staying silent.<sup>4</sup> Even among Chennai’s educated middle classes where overt physical violence may carry more stigma abuse often doesn’t vanish; it changes shape. Emotional manipulation, economic strangulation, and digital surveillance become preferred tools of control precisely because they’re harder for

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<sup>4</sup> The Tamil concept of *karpu* operates as what anthropologists term a “patriarchal bargain” women may derive social status and respect from embodying this ideal, but at the cost of accepting surveillance and control.

families, communities, and even legal systems to “see.” Intersectional vulnerability adds yet another layer. A Dalit woman in a resettlement colony may face not just gendered violence but caste-marked humiliation from officials who dismiss her complaint as “typical” of her community. A migrant domestic worker without local kin networks runs into language barriers and the dull thud of institutional indifference. A Muslim woman may be pressed toward religious arbitration rather than PWDVA remedies. Put simply, domestic violence isn’t a single, uniform experience; its texture and consequences shift depending on where a woman sits in the social order.

### **NGO Lifeline and Its Limitations**

In the middle of these systemic failures, Chennai’s NGO ecosystem organizations such as the International Foundation for Crime Prevention and Victim Care (PCVC), The Banyan, and SNEHA often provides the only dependable lifeline. They run 24/7 helplines, arrange emergency shelter, offer trauma-informed counseling, and accompany survivors through police stations and courtrooms. In practice, they translate between women and an unresponsive bureaucracy, making sure DIRs are filed, protection orders are pursued, and abusers are challenged. But the dependence on NGOs carries a bitter irony. When enforcement of state law hinges on perpetually underfunded civil society organizations, it doesn’t signal healthy partnership; it signals state abdication. NGOs operate with chronic funding stress, uneven geographic reach, and relationships with officials that are informal and personality-driven rather than built into the system.

### **Reimagining Justice**

First, the Protection Officer model needs a structural rebuild: full-time, dedicated POs with independent offices, vehicles for fieldwork, and caseloads that are actually manageable. Refusing to register FIRs or DIRs in domestic violence matters should have disciplinary consequences. Each station should have designated Domestic Violence Liaison Officers, and clear SOPs should govern coordination between AWPS and local stations. School curricula should include direct, age-appropriate conversations about consent, healthy relationships, and gender equality. Programs that engage men and boys as partners in change need to be scaled up rather than treated as side projects. Workplaces should provide paid leave for court dates and confidential support pathways. And a sustained multimedia public awareness campaign is essential to normalize help-seeking and make non-physical abuse legible to the public as abuse,

not “private family issues.”<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

Domestic violence in Chennai isn't an odd exception in an otherwise progressive setting; it is the predictable output of a society where patriarchal structures adapt to urban modernity while state institutions remain slowed by cultural inertia and resource deprivation. The PWDVA's real insight is its recognition that abuse is multidimensional and that survivors need protection, not only punishment. The road is long, yes. But for the thousands of women living through quiet suffering, and for generations still to come, there's no acceptable alternative.



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<sup>5</sup> The Madras High Court has played a progressively interventionist role in this regard, issuing suo motu directions for improved implementation of the PWDVA and interpreting "shared household" provisions expansively. Landmark judgments like *Indira Sarma v. V.K.V. Sarma* (2013) have extended protections to women in live-in relationships, recognizing that urban intimacy patterns require adaptive legal interpretations.