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## **UNDERSTANDING THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF CRIME AGAINST WOMEN IN PRE & POST COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified pre-existing gender inequalities, leading to a global surge in violence against women. While the immediate impact of lockdowns on women's safety has been widely discussed, limited attention has been paid to the post-COVID phase, where the consequences of the pandemic continue to shape patterns of violence. This study aims to map and analyse post-COVID trends in violence against women in India, with a focus on understanding whether pandemic-induced vulnerabilities have translated into persistent or evolving forms of gender-based violations. The primary objective of the study is to examine changes in the nature, frequency, and reporting of crimes against women in the post-COVID period, and to identify emerging patterns across different categories of offences. The study also seeks to assess the broader socio-legal implications of these trends in the context of recovery, access to justice, and institutional response mechanisms. Methodologically, the study adopts a doctrinal research approach, analysing existing legal frameworks, judicial interpretations, and policy responses relating to crimes against women in India. This is supplemented by secondary data analysis, drawing primarily from National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics for the years following the pandemic. Also IPC has been taken as in 2023, BNS was not came in to operation. Comparative analysis is undertaken to highlight shifts between pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic phases. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of how crises such as COVID-19 produce long-term gendered impacts, and to highlight the need for targeted legal and policy interventions addressing violence against women in post-pandemic India.

**Keywords: COVID-19, Gender-Based Violence, Post-COVID India, NCRB Data, Violence Against Women**

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## Introduction:

As the late Indian activist Kamla Bhasin once noted, "The crisis didn't create the fire of violence; it simply blew the wind that made the pre-existing flames grow higher."

This perspective is essential for understanding the state of women's safety in post-COVID India. The pandemic was more than a health emergency; it was a catalyst that trapped many women with their abusers, creating what the UN termed the "Shadow Pandemic." While the health crisis has receded, the fire of violence has not gone out. Instead, the "wind" of the pandemic marked by economic loss, isolation, and social shifts has caused these flames to spread into new and more complex forms.

Crimes against women have always been and remain a pressing societal and policy concern in India, cutting across domestic, public, and digital spaces. Despite legislative reforms and institutional mechanisms, women continue to face violence in multiple forms domestic abuse, sexual assault, trafficking, cyber harassment, and workplace exploitation shaped by structural inequalities and gaps in enforcement. As per the Women Peace and Security Index 2023 released by Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, India ranks 128 out of 177 countries in terms of women's inclusion, justice, and security.

Current data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows a worrying trend: crimes against women have not returned to pre-pandemic levels but have instead increased. This suggests that the pandemic-induced vulnerabilities were not temporary; they have become a long-term reality. As Amartya Sen famously observed, "Measuring violence is not just about counting bruises; it is about counting the many ways a woman is told she does not matter." Today, this loss of "mattering" is seen in the struggle to access justice and the rising frequency of reported offences in a post-lockdown society.

This study analyses how the nature and reporting of crimes against women have shifted from the pre-pandemic era to the present day. By examining legal frameworks and crime statistics, this research argues that for many women, "going back to normal" has not meant going back to safety. It highlights an urgent need for the Indian legal system to move beyond emergency responses and develop permanent, targeted interventions to address the evolving landscape of gender-based violence.

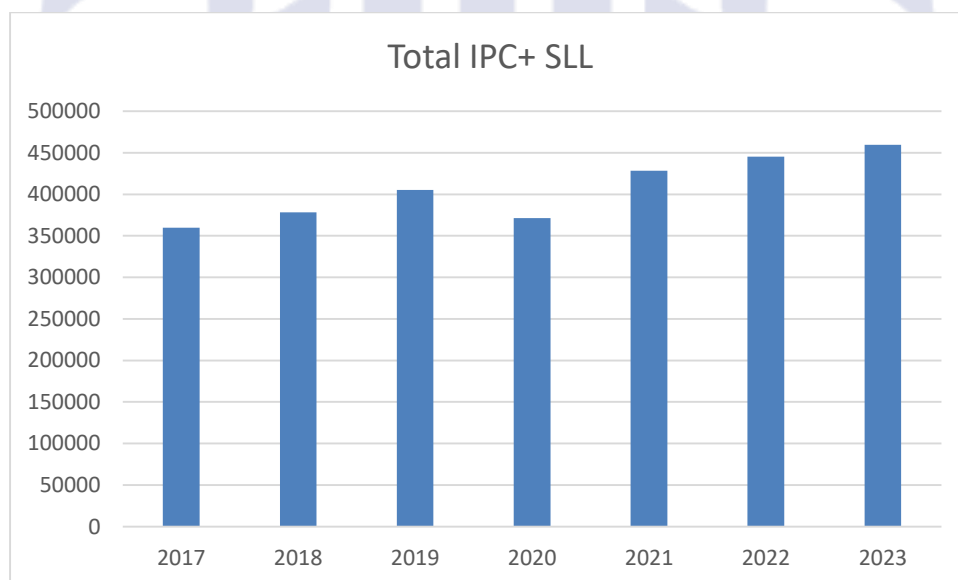
### Research Objectives

- To examine changes in reported crimes against women from pre-pandemic (2017–2019) to pandemic (2020–2021) and post-pandemic years (2022–2023).
- To identify emerging or intensified categories of gender-based violence post-COVID.
- To assess whether increased reporting reflects greater violence or improved access to justice.

### Methodology:

This study adopts a *doctrinal research* methodology, supplemented by secondary data analysis. Doctrinal Component involves analysis of research articles, journal and statutory frameworks under IPC, BNS, Special and Local Laws (SLL) like Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, POCSO Act, 2012, Information Technology Act, 2000. Judicial interpretations and policy measures post-COVID were also reviewed. *Quantitative analysis* of NCRB data (2017–2023) is divided into Pre-Pandemic: 2017–2019, Pandemic(2020–2021), Post-Pandemic(2022–2023). Comparative trend analysis was undertaken across major offence categories.

### Results of the Study:



A longitudinal reading of data from the **National Crime Records Bureau** (2017–2023) reveals a three-phase pattern:

**Pre-Pandemic Escalation (2017–2019)**

Crimes increased steadily from 359,849 in 2017, 378,236 in 2018 to 405,326 in 2019 (approximately 12.6% growth). This reflects both rising reporting and persistent structural violence.

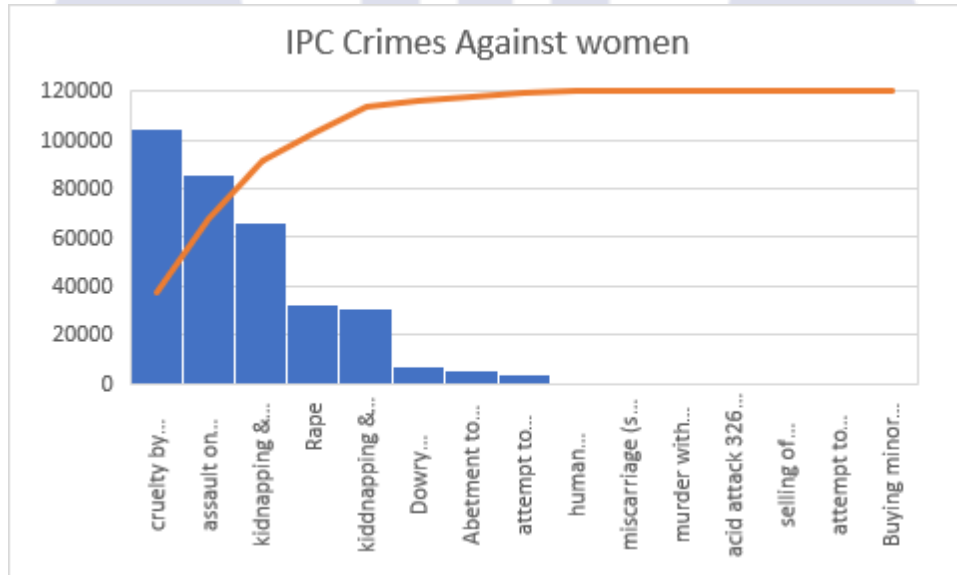
**Pandemic Dip (2020)**

Total cases fell to 371,503 in 2020 (an 8.3% decline from 2019). However, this decline is widely interpreted as Restricted mobility, Closure of courts and police stations, Limited access to NGOs and shelter homes, Underreporting due to confinement with abusers. Thus, the fall does not indicate reduced violence but reduced reporting.

**Post-Pandemic Surge (2021–2023)**

From 2021 onwards, cases surged dramatically as 2021: 428,278 (15% increase from 2020), 2022: 445,256, 2023: 459,657 (highest in the 7-year dataset) The 2023 figure represents a 27.7% increase from 2017, suggesting long-term structural intensification.

**Category-Wise Results (IPC/BNS):**



**1. Cruelty by Husband or Relatives (Sec 498A IPC)**

The above data shows 125,298 cases in 2019, 111,549 in 2020, 136,234 in 2021, 144,593 in 2022 and 135,375 in 2023. This category consistently accounts for the largest share of crimes. The sharp increase post-2020 (22% rise from 2020 to 2022) indicates Economic strain during recovery, Mental health stress, Reinforcement of

patriarchal domestic structures during lockdown. Despite a slight decline in 2023, numbers remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic averages.

## **2. Kidnapping and Abduction of Women**

The 26.6% increase from 2019 to 2023 signals alarming vulnerability in public and social spaces post-lockdown. Notably, kidnapping to compel marriage (Sec 366 IPC) rose from 27,552 (2021) to 30,725 (2023). This suggests the Rise in forced marriages, Honour-based coercion, Increased targeting of young women.

## **3. Human Trafficking (Sec 370 IPC)**

The 218% increase between 2020 and 2023 is one of the most dramatic findings. Possible explanations: Job loss and migration distress, Increased vulnerability of informal sector workers, Weak rehabilitation mechanisms post-pandemic. Trafficking emerges as a distinctly post-COVID structural crime expansion.

## **4. Rape and Attempt to Rape**

Rape cases dipped during lockdown but did not return to pre-pandemic highs. However, attempt to rape cases declined steadily (4,154 in 2017 to 2,806 in 2023), possibly indicating: Reclassification into aggravated offences, Improved policing categorisation, Underreporting in rural regions

## **5. Dowry Death (Sec 304B IPC)**

A consistent decline from 7,466 (2017) to 6,211 (2023) reflects gradual impact of awareness campaigns and stricter monitoring. However, the numbers remain significant.

## **6. Other Offences:**

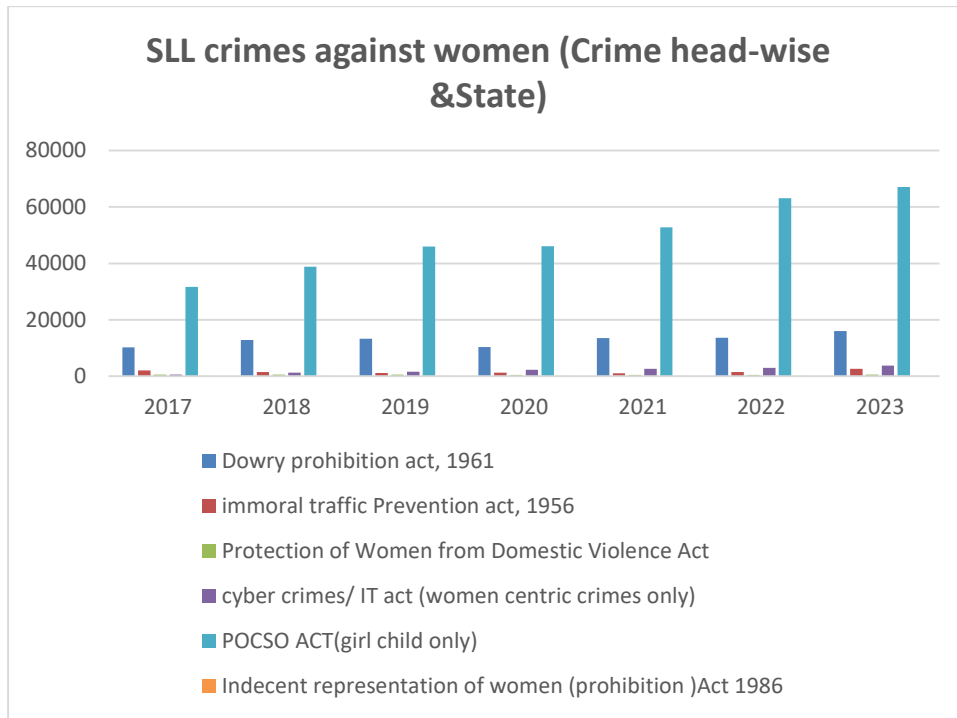
Post-COVID trends in serious IPC offences against women, as reflected in data from the National Crime Records Bureau (2017–2023), reveal a complex pattern of fluctuation followed by resurgence. Cases of murder with rape/gang rape, which stood at 223 in 2017, rose to 294 in 2018 and remain persistently high in the post-pandemic years (233 in 2023), indicating continued extreme sexual brutality. Abetment to suicide of women has remained consistently above 5,000 cases annually, reflecting sustained psychological and domestic pressures. Miscarriage offences (Sections 313–314 IPC) increased to 313 in 2023, suggesting reproductive coercion concerns. Acid attacks and attempts show relative stability but continue as serious gendered crimes, with 122 acid attack cases and 42 attempts recorded in 2023. Kidnapping and abduction of women witnessed a sharp post-pandemic rise, reaching 92,114 cases in 2023, including increasing instances of abduction to compel marriage. Human trafficking shows one of

the most dramatic increases, rising from 646 cases in 2020 to 2,060 in 2023, highlighting economic vulnerability in the recovery phase. Selling and buying of minor girls remain numerically low but deeply concerning due to their exploitative nature. Rape cases, though dipping during lockdown (28,046 in 2020), remain alarmingly high at 29,909 in 2023, while attempt to rape cases have gradually declined. Assault on women with intent to outrage modesty continues to constitute one of the largest categories, crossing 86,000 cases in 2023, reflecting the persistence of everyday public and private sexual aggression. Collectively, these trends suggest that while certain categories fluctuated during lockdown restrictions, the post-COVID period reflects sustained or rising levels of serious gender-based violence rather than a return to pre-pandemic safety levels.

<b>IPC Crimes against Women (Crime Head-wise &amp; State/UT-wise) -</b>							
<b>offence</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
murder with Rape/Gang Rape	223	294	283	219	284	250	233
Dowry death(304B IPC)	7466	7166	7115	6966	6753	6516	6211
Abetment to suicide of women(305/306 IPC)	5282	5037	5009	5040	5292	5107	4959
miscarriage (s 313&314 IPC)	266	213	221	239	196	240	313
acid attack 326 A	148	131	150	105	102	140	122
attempt to acid attack 326B	35	37	42	33	48	38	42
cruelty by husband or relative(sec 498A IPC)	104551	103272	125298	111549	136234	144593	135375
kidnapping & abduction of women	66333	72751	72780	62300	75369	88273	92114
kiddnapping & Abduction of women to compel her for marriage(s.366)	30614	33354	32260	24745	27552	28847	30725
human trafficking(370& 370A IPC)	662	854	966	646	914	1153	2060
selling of Minor girl(372)	80	40	22	12	12	10	11
Buying minor girl	4	8	8	1	2	4	4

Rape	32556	33356	32033	28046	31677	31982	29909
attempt to commit rape	4154	4097	3944	3741	3800	3447	2806
assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty	86001	89097	6939	85392	89200	85300	86173

### Special & Local Laws (SLL) Trends



#### 1. Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

Cases registered under the Dowry Prohibition Act increased from 10,189 in 2017 to 16,066 in 2023, marking nearly a 58% rise and indicating that while dowry deaths show gradual decline, dowry-related harassment and economic coercion have intensified in the post-pandemic recovery phase, likely linked to financial distress and heightened household instability.

#### 2. Immoral traffic Prevention act, 1956

Similarly, offences under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, which had declined between 2017 and 2021, rose sharply to 2,648 in 2023, more than doubling from 1,071 in 2021, suggesting that economic vulnerability, migration disruption, and informal labour collapse during and after COVID-19 expanded conditions conducive to commercial sexual exploitation.

#### 3. Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act

In contrast, cases under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act remain

comparatively low 628 in 2023 despite consistently high figures under Section 498A IPC, revealing a continued preference for criminal prosecution over civil protective remedies and highlighting implementation gaps in protection officer systems, shelter access, and counselling infrastructure.

**4. Cyber Crimes Against Women (IT Act)**

A 531% increase from 2017 to 2023 marks cyber violence as the fastest growing category. This reflects: Increased smartphone penetration, Social media abuse, Revenge pornography, Cyberstalking. Digitalisation during COVID permanently altered crime patterns.

**5. POCSO Act (Girl Child)**

Cases more than doubled in six years. School closures during COVID likely to Increased exposure to intra-family abuse, Reduced detection by teachers, Delayed reporting mechanisms, Post-pandemic, backlog reporting and continued vulnerability contributed to rising numbers.

**6. Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986**

Meanwhile, the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act shows only marginal numerical growth (32 cases in 2023), which, when juxtaposed with the exponential rise in cyber crimes against women, underscores the relative obsolescence and underutilisation of this legislation in addressing digital objectification and online image-based abuse.

Taken together, these trends demonstrate that the post-COVID period has not merely restored pre-pandemic patterns of violence but has reconfigured them, shifting the landscape toward intensified economic coercion, trafficking expansion, digital exploitation, and continued domestic abuse, thereby revealing structural weaknesses in both preventive and rehabilitative legal mechanisms and underscoring the urgent need for gender-responsive reforms within India’s evolving justice framework.

SLL crimes against women (Crime head-wise & State)							
Offence	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Dowry prohibition act, 1961	10189	12826	13297	10366	13568	13641	16066
immoral traffic Prevention act, 1956	2127	1459	1185	1294	1071	1544	2648

Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act	616	579	553	446	502	473	628
cyber crimes/ IT act (women centric crimes only)	600	1244	1621	2334	2597	3001	3787
POCSO ACT(girl child only)	31668	38802	46005	46123	52836	63116	67086
Indecent representation of women (prohibition )Act 1986	25	22	23	12	28	31	32

## Detailed Analysis

### Structural Persistence of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence continues to remain one of the most persistent forms of violence against women in India. Cases registered under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code consistently constitute the largest proportion of reported offences against women. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing domestic inequalities by reinforcing unpaid care responsibilities for women, increasing alcohol consumption and related household conflicts, and further reducing women's financial independence due to job losses and economic instability. Lockdown restrictions also confined many women within abusive domestic environments, limiting their access to support services, legal assistance, and safe reporting mechanisms. Importantly, the post-COVID recovery phase has not substantially dismantled these structural conditions. Instead, the persistence of high numbers of domestic violence cases indicates that patriarchal household dynamics and economic dependence continue to sustain this form of abuse within Indian society.

### Digital Transformation of Gender-Based Violence

The post-pandemic period has also witnessed a significant transformation in the nature of gender-based violence through the rapid expansion of cyber crimes against women. Increased digital connectivity during the pandemic, including greater reliance on social media, online communication platforms, and remote work environments, expanded the scope for online harassment and abuse. Prior to COVID-19, physical and domestic violence dominated crime patterns; however, the post-pandemic landscape reflects a hybrid form of violence where online harassment, cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse, and digital intimidation coexist with traditional forms of violence. This transformation highlights the growing importance of digital security in protecting women's rights and safety. Addressing such crimes requires stronger

cyber policing mechanisms, enhanced digital forensic capacity, and more effective implementation of legal provisions under the Information Technology Act, 2000.

### **Economic Recovery and the Trafficking Nexus**

Another significant trend emerging from the post-pandemic period is the sharp rise in human trafficking cases. The increase in trafficking appears closely linked to the socio-economic disruptions caused by COVID-19, particularly the collapse of informal sector employment, rising rural indebtedness, and large-scale migration disruptions. These economic pressures disproportionately affected women from economically weaker and marginalised communities, making them more vulnerable to labour exploitation and sexual trafficking networks. Data reflecting rising cases under Section 370 of the Indian Penal Code indicates that economic distress and social vulnerability can directly translate into increased exploitation. The trend suggests that post-pandemic recovery policies have not adequately incorporated gender-responsive safeguards to protect vulnerable women, thereby highlighting the need for stronger socio-economic and legal interventions to address trafficking and related forms of exploitation.

### **Reporting vs Real Increase Debate**

The post-2021 surge may reflect in Improved online FIR systems, Greater media visibility and awareness campaigns. However, the scale and concentration of increase in specific categories (cyber crime, trafficking, POCSO) indicate genuine escalation beyond reporting effects.

### **Child Protection Crisis**

POCSO trends show systemic failure in School-based reporting systems, Childline outreach and Social welfare monitoring. The pandemic disrupted protective ecosystems.

### **Major Findings of the Study**

1. Post-pandemic crimes against women have reached historic highs (2023).
2. Domestic violence remains structurally entrenched despite awareness laws.
3. Cyber violence is the fastest growing category, marking digital transformation of abuse.
4. Human trafficking increased over 200% post-pandemic, linking violence to economic vulnerability.
5. Child sexual offences doubled since 2017, reflecting long-term institutional breakdown.
6. The pandemic created not temporary but structural gender insecurity.

### **Final Reflection:**

The findings of this study demonstrate that COVID-19 was not merely a temporary disruption but a transformative crisis that reshaped the architecture of violence against women in India.

Four core conclusions emerge:

#### **1. Violence Has Intensified, Not Normalised**

The 2023 NCRB figure of 459,657 cases represents the highest recorded number in recent history. The upward trajectory since 2021 confirms that violence did not recede with the virus.

#### **2. The Nature of Violence Has Evolved**

The pandemic accelerated digitalisation, leading to Online harassment, Image-based sexual abuse, Cross-border cyber exploitation. Simultaneously, trafficking and domestic abuse remain deeply embedded.

#### **3. Institutional Response Has Been Reactive, Not Structural**

While laws exist, enforcement gaps persist in Delayed trials, Under-resourced cyber cells, Limited shelter homes, Weak survivor compensation mechanisms

#### **4. Gendered Economic Recovery Was Ignored**

Post-pandemic economic policies did not adequately address, Women's job loss, Informal labour exploitation and Rural vulnerability. Without gender-responsive recovery planning, violence risks further escalation.

The so-called "Shadow Pandemic" has not disappeared; it has institutionalised itself into India's post-COVID social structure. The data suggests that recovery planning must move beyond health and economy to include gendered security reform. Unless India strengthens its Digital policing capacity, Victim-centric justice systems, Child protection networks and Economic safeguards for vulnerable women. The post-pandemic decade may witness further normalisation of high-intensity gender violence.

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