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# **STRONG LAWS, WEAK SAFETY: WOMEN'S EVERYDAY INSECURITY AND THE FAILURE OF ENFORCEMENT IN INDIA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

India has enacted several criminal and protective laws to ensure the safety and dignity of women. On paper, these laws appear strong and well-intentioned. However, in everyday life, many women continue to feel unsafe—inside their homes, in public spaces, at workplaces, and increasingly in online spaces. This clear gap between legal protection and lived safety raises a serious concern about how far the law actually works on the ground.

This paper examines women's safety in contemporary India (2026) by focusing on everyday realities rather than legal promises alone. It argues that the main problem is not the absence of law, but weak and uneven enforcement. Social factors such as patriarchy, gender conditioning, normalisation of male dominance, cultural expectations, and silence enforced through shame continue to affect how women's safety is viewed and addressed. These factors often discourage reporting and reduce the effectiveness of legal remedies even before the justice process begins.

At the institutional level, the paper identifies a recurring "women's safety failure chain," starting from under-reporting and moving through delayed police response, poor investigation, long trials, and lack of support after the case ends. The growing number of cyber crimes against women further shows how existing systems struggle to respond to new forms of abuse.

The paper concludes by suggesting practical and workable solutions, including stronger accountability in policing, time-bound investigations and trials, better cyber-crime enforcement, and continuous support for victims. It argues that women's safety cannot depend on laws alone; real safety requires effective enforcement supported by social responsibility, so that legal protection becomes a lived reality rather than a paper promise.

**KEYWORDS:** Women’s safety, enforcement gap, criminal justice system, patriarchy, cyber crime, victim protection

## **1. INTRODUCTION: WHY WOMEN STILL FEEL UNSAFE DESPITE STRONG LAWS**

India has a wide legal framework aimed at protecting women from violence and abuse. Criminal laws, special legislations, and procedural safeguards promise safety, dignity, and justice.<sup>1</sup> However, despite these protections, many women continue to experience fear and insecurity in their daily lives. This gap between legal promises and lived reality is the central concern of this paper.

Women’s safety is not only a legal issue but a lived social reality that directly affects freedom, mobility, and participation in public life. When safety is uncertain, rights remain largely theoretical.<sup>2</sup> This section highlights the importance of safety as a foundation for dignity, explains the contradiction between law and lived fear, and outlines the scope and purpose of the paper.

### **1.1 Safety as a Basic Condition for Dignity and Freedom**

Safety is a basic requirement for living with dignity and exercising freedom. For women, safety determines whether they can move freely, pursue education or employment, and participate in public life without fear. When women constantly assess risk—by altering their movements, choices, or behaviour—their freedom is already limited.

Legal equality and empowerment lose meaning if women do not feel safe in everyday spaces. Fear, whether at home, on the street, at work, or online, quietly restricts opportunities. Therefore, women’s safety must be understood as the foundation on which all other rights depend.<sup>3</sup>

### **1.2 The Contradiction Between Legal Protection and Lived Fear**

On paper, India’s laws addressing crimes against women appear strong and progressive. Criminal provisions and victim-oriented procedures reflect a commitment to protection.<sup>4</sup> Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> INDIA CONST. art. 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India*, (1978) 1 SCC 248.

<sup>3</sup> *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India*, (2017) 10 SCC 1.

<sup>4</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

the continued presence of fear in women's daily lives reveals a different reality.

This contradiction is evident in under-reporting of crimes, hesitation to approach the police, long legal processes, and lack of trust in institutions.<sup>5</sup> Many women choose silence not because the law is absent, but because enforcement often fails to provide timely and meaningful protection. As a result, legal safeguards remain symbolic, while fear becomes routine.

### **1.3 Scope and Purpose of the Paper**

This paper examines women's safety in contemporary India by focusing on lived experiences and enforcement outcomes rather than legal texts alone. It does not argue that the law is weak; instead, it explores why strong laws fail to ensure real safety.

The paper has three objectives. First, it highlights everyday realities of women's insecurity across different spaces. Second, it analyses enforcement gaps and the social and institutional factors behind them. Third, it proposes practical and realistic solutions to strengthen accountability and implementation. The paper argues that women's safety can become real only when strong laws are supported by effective enforcement and social responsibility.

## **2. WOMEN'S SAFETY IN REAL LIFE (2026): WHAT WOMEN ACTUALLY FACE**

Women's safety in India cannot be understood only through crime statistics or legal provisions. It is reflected in everyday behaviour—where women go, how they travel, what they avoid, and when they choose silence over action. In 2026, many women continue to live with a constant sense of caution that shapes daily decisions.<sup>6</sup> This section examines how insecurity is experienced across different spaces of life.

### **2.1 Inside Homes: Domestic Violence, Silence, and Dependence**

For many women, the home is not always a place of safety. Domestic violence, emotional abuse, and control often remain hidden behind closed doors.<sup>7</sup> Economic dependence, concern for children, fear of social stigma, and pressure to “adjust” discourage many women from reporting abuse.

Silence is frequently treated as endurance, and suffering is normalised as part of family life. Even when legal remedies exist, women hesitate to use them due to fear of retaliation, social

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<sup>5</sup> NAT'L CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, CRIME IN INDIA 2022.

<sup>6</sup> NAT'L FAM. HEALTH SURVEY (NFHS-5), 2019–21.

<sup>7</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.

isolation, or lack of support. As a result, violence within the home often continues unchecked, making safety uncertain even in private spaces.

## **2.2 Outside Homes: Streets, Transport, and Public Spaces**

Public spaces remain sites of constant vigilance for women. Street harassment, staring, stalking, and verbal abuse are common experiences that often go unreported because they are seen as “normal” or too minor to complain about.<sup>8</sup> Women routinely modify their routes, timing, clothing, and behaviour to reduce risk.

Public transport, though essential for education and work, is often associated with fear, especially during early mornings or late evenings. This everyday insecurity limits mobility and participation in public life, quietly shrinking the spaces where women feel comfortable and safe.

## **2.3 At Work: Harassment, Power Imbalance, and Fear of Reporting**

Workplaces, despite legal protections, are not always safe for women. Sexual harassment often occurs within unequal power structures, where seniority and job security discourage complaints.<sup>9</sup> Fear of retaliation, damaged reputation, or career setbacks leads many women to remain silent.

Internal complaint mechanisms exist but are not always accessible or effective. As a result, women may tolerate inappropriate behaviour to protect their employment, reinforcing a culture where safety depends on endurance rather than accountability.

## **2.4 Online Spaces: Stalking, Abuse, Threats, and Humiliation**

Digital spaces have become new sites of insecurity for women. Online stalking, harassment, threats, and misuse of personal images cause serious emotional distress.<sup>10</sup> The anonymity of the internet and slow response mechanisms often make victims feel helpless.

Many women limit their online presence or withdraw from digital platforms altogether to avoid abuse. This not only affects mental well-being but also restricts participation in education, work, and public discourse in an increasingly digital world.

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<sup>8</sup> Kavita Krishnan, Street Harassment and Women’s Right to Public Space, *ECON. & POL. WKLY.* (2016).

<sup>9</sup> Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> NAT’L CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, *CYBER CRIME IN INDIA* 2022.

### 3. THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT THE LAW PROMISES

India has developed a comprehensive legal framework to address violence and abuse against women. Over the years, criminal law provisions, special legislations, and procedural safeguards have been introduced to recognise women's rights, protect dignity, and provide remedies. On paper, this framework reflects serious intent and legal commitment towards women's safety.<sup>11</sup>

This section outlines the key legal protections available and explains why the law itself cannot be described as weak or inadequate.

#### 3.1 Criminal Law Provisions Protecting Women

Criminal law in India contains several provisions aimed at addressing offences against women, including sexual violence, cruelty, harassment, stalking, and intimidation. These provisions recognise both physical and psychological harm and provide for punishment, investigation, and prosecution.<sup>12</sup>

Recent legal reforms have further strengthened these protections by emphasising victim rights, stricter penalties for serious offences, and procedural clarity. The placement of offences against women as a distinct legal concern reflects an understanding that such crimes require focused legal attention.<sup>13</sup>

#### 3.2 Special Laws on Domestic Violence, Workplace Harassment, and Cyber Offences

In addition to general criminal law, India has enacted special legislations to deal with specific forms of abuse. Laws addressing domestic violence provide civil remedies such as protection orders, residence rights, and maintenance.<sup>14</sup> Workplace harassment laws recognise the power imbalance women face at work and require institutions to establish complaint mechanisms.<sup>15</sup>

Legal provisions dealing with cyber offences aim to address online harassment, misuse of personal data, and digital abuse.<sup>16</sup> Together, these laws acknowledge that violence against women occurs in different forms and spaces and requires tailored legal responses.

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<sup>11</sup> INDIA CONST. arts. 14, 15, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Indian Penal Code, 1860 §§ 354, 354A–D, 375, 498A (India).

<sup>13</sup> Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (India).

<sup>14</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (India).

<sup>15</sup> Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (India).

<sup>16</sup> Information Technology Act, 2000 §§ 66E, 67, 67A (India).

### **3.3 Procedural Safeguards and Victim Rights**

The legal framework also includes procedural safeguards to make the justice process more accessible to women. These include the right to file complaints without jurisdictional barriers, provisions for privacy during investigation and trial, access to legal aid, and medical and psychological support.<sup>17</sup>

Victim-oriented procedures seek to reduce re-traumatisation and encourage reporting. On paper, these safeguards are designed to create a system that is sensitive to women's experiences and needs.

### **3.4 Why the Legal Framework Appears Strong on Paper**

Taken together, criminal provisions, special laws, and procedural safeguards create a legal structure that appears comprehensive and progressive. The law recognises multiple forms of violence, provides remedies across different spaces, and acknowledges the need for victim-centric procedures.

Therefore, the problem of women's safety cannot be explained by the absence of law or lack of legal intent. The framework itself reflects careful drafting and reform. The challenge lies not in what the law promises, but in how these promises are carried out in practice.

## **4. REASONS BEHIND WOMEN'S SAFETY ISSUES: BEYOND LAW AND ENFORCEMENT**

Strong laws alone cannot ensure women's safety if the social environment in which those laws operate continues to resist change. Violence against women does not arise only from legal gaps or institutional failure; it is also shaped by long-standing social attitudes, power structures, and cultural practices.<sup>18</sup> These factors influence how women are treated, how violence is perceived, and how society responds when harm occurs.

This section examines the social and cultural reasons that allow insecurity to persist despite legal protection. These reasons do not excuse violence but help explain why enforcement often remains weak and why women hesitate to seek justice.

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<sup>17</sup> Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 §§ 154, 164, 357A (India).

<sup>18</sup> U.N. Women, *Ending Violence Against Women: From Words to Action* (2015).

#### **4.1 Patriarchy and Gender Power Structures**

Patriarchal structures continue to influence family life, social norms, and decision-making processes. In many households and communities, men are expected to hold authority, while women are expected to adjust. This imbalance of power often limits women's autonomy over their own lives.<sup>19</sup>

Control over women's mobility, choices, and behaviour is frequently justified as protection or tradition. However, such control restricts freedom and normalises the idea that women require supervision. When dominance is accepted as normal, violations of safety are more easily ignored or minimised.

#### **4.2 Social Conditioning and Gender Socialisation**

From an early age, boys and girls are often socialised differently. Boys may be encouraged to assert control, display dominance, or suppress emotional vulnerability. Girls, on the other hand, are frequently taught to remain quiet, adjust to circumstances, and avoid confrontation.<sup>20</sup>

This unequal social conditioning shapes expectations on both sides. It can create a sense of entitlement among men and reinforce fear and silence among women. Over time, these patterns make it harder for women to assert boundaries and for society to recognise everyday harm as unacceptable.

#### **4.3 Toxic Masculinity and the Normalisation of Aggression**

Certain social expectations link masculinity with aggression, control, and emotional hardness. Displays of dominance are often mistaken for strength, while empathy and restraint are undervalued.<sup>21</sup> This can normalise aggressive behaviour and discourage accountability.

At the same time, emotional suppression limits healthy expression and reinforces the belief that control over others is acceptable. When aggression is tolerated or excused, it creates conditions in which women's safety is easily compromised.

#### **4.4 Media, Entertainment, and Cultural Messaging**

Popular media and entertainment play a powerful role in shaping social attitudes. Item songs and repeated sexual objectification of women reduce women to visual appeal rather than agency.<sup>22</sup> Many films continue to romanticise stalking, persistence after refusal, and obsessive

<sup>19</sup> Bina Agarwal, *Gender and Social Relations: The Family and Beyond*, 34 *ECON. & POL. WKLY.* 25 (1999).

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF, *Gender Socialization in South Asia* (2017).

<sup>21</sup> R.W. Connell & James W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, 19 *GENDER & SOC'Y* 829 (2005).

<sup>22</sup> Shoma A. Chatterji, *Gender and Popular Cinema in India*, *ECON. & POL. WKLY.* (2013).

behaviour as signs of love.

Male-centred narratives often portray men as heroes whose actions go unquestioned, while women are shown as passive, submissive, or dependent. These portrayals, when repeated, can normalise disrespectful behaviour and blur the line between attraction and harassment.

#### **4.5 Religious and Cultural Interpretations**

Cultural and religious traditions are often complex and diverse, but selective or rigid interpretations are sometimes used to limit women's freedom. Ideas of honour, obedience, and sacrifice are frequently applied more strictly to women than to men.<sup>23</sup>

When tradition is used to justify restriction, women's safety becomes secondary to maintaining social norms. This discourages reporting and reinforces silence, especially when abuse is framed as a private or family matter.

#### **4.6 Family Structures and Male Headship**

In many families, men continue to be regarded as heads of households and primary decision-makers. Economic dependence on male members further strengthens this authority.<sup>24</sup> Women who lack financial independence often feel compelled to tolerate unsafe conditions.

This structure makes it difficult for women to speak out or seek help, as doing so may threaten housing, financial stability, or family relationships. Safety is therefore compromised by dependence rather than absence of law.

#### **4.7 Silence, Shame, and Victim-Blaming**

Social responses to violence often place the burden on women rather than perpetrators. Fear of shame, social judgement, and loss of reputation discourages reporting.<sup>25</sup> Women are frequently questioned about their behaviour, choices, or character instead of being supported.

Victim-blaming shifts attention away from the act of violence and weakens accountability. When silence is rewarded and reporting is punished socially, legal remedies lose effectiveness, and insecurity continues.

This section shows that women's safety is shaped by social realities as much as legal structures. These factors do not replace the need for enforcement but explain why laws often fail to operate effectively on the ground.

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<sup>23</sup> Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India* (Oxford Univ. Press 1999).

<sup>24</sup> NAT'L FAM. HEALTH SURVEY (NFHS-5), 2019–21.

<sup>25</sup> National Commission for Women, *Gender-Based Violence and Social Stigma Report* (2022).

## 5. THE ENFORCEMENT GAP: WHERE THE SYSTEM BREAKS

While the legal framework for women's safety appears strong, its effectiveness depends on how it is enforced. In practice, the justice process often breaks down at multiple stages. These failures weaken trust in institutions and discourage women from seeking legal remedies.<sup>26</sup> This section examines where and how enforcement fails, despite the existence of clear legal provisions.

### 5.1 Under-Reporting Due to Fear and Social Pressure

A large number of incidents involving women's safety are never reported. Fear of retaliation, social stigma, family pressure, and concern for reputation often discourage women from approaching the police. Many women also doubt whether reporting will lead to meaningful action.<sup>27</sup>

Social expectations to maintain family harmony or avoid public attention further reinforce silence. As a result, under-reporting remains one of the most significant barriers to effective enforcement, allowing violence and abuse to continue without accountability.

### 5.2 Police Response: Delay, Refusal, and Informal Settlements

When women do approach the police, the response is not always timely or supportive. Delays in registering complaints, refusal to record cases, or pressure to "settle" matters informally are common concerns.<sup>28</sup> Such practices weaken the seriousness of offences and shift responsibility back onto victims.

In some cases, complaints are treated as private or minor issues rather than legal violations. This discourages further action and reinforces the belief that seeking help will lead to little protection or resolution.

### 5.3 Investigation Failures and Weak Evidence Collection

Effective enforcement depends heavily on proper investigation. However, investigations are often delayed, poorly conducted, or incomplete. Weak evidence collection, lack of follow-up, and inadequate coordination between agencies reduce the strength of cases.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Law Comm'n of India, Report No. 277, Wrongful Prosecution (2018).

<sup>27</sup> NAT'L FAM. HEALTH SURVEY (NFHS-5), 2019–21.

<sup>28</sup> *Lalita Kumari v. Gov't of Uttar Pradesh*, (2014) 2 SCC 1.

<sup>29</sup> Law Comm'n of India, Report No. 154, CrPC Amendments (1996).

These shortcomings affect the outcome of trials and place additional burden on victims, who may be required to repeatedly relive their experiences without seeing progress in their case.

#### **5.4 Trial Delays and Low Conviction Rates**

Even when cases reach the courts, the process is often slow. Long trials, repeated adjournments, and heavy case loads contribute to delays that can last for years.<sup>30</sup> Such delays exhaust victims emotionally and financially.

Low conviction rates further reduce confidence in the justice system. When outcomes appear uncertain or distant, women may feel that the cost of pursuing legal action outweighs the potential benefit.

#### **5.5 Lack of Protection and Support After Reporting**

Reporting an offence often exposes women to new risks rather than immediate protection. Threats, social isolation, and pressure to withdraw complaints are common experiences. Support systems such as counseling, shelter, and long-term protection are unevenly available and not always accessible.<sup>31</sup>

Without continuous support, women may be forced to abandon legal proceedings or return to unsafe environments. This lack of aftercare weakens enforcement and undermines the purpose of legal protection.

### **6. THE WOMEN'S SAFETY FAILURE CHAIN**

Women's safety cannot be understood by looking at isolated failures within the legal system. It is better explained as a continuous process in which breakdown at any stage affects the entire outcome. This paper describes this process as the women's safety failure chain, beginning with the incident itself and extending beyond the courtroom.<sup>32</sup>

#### **6.1 From Incident to Reporting**

The chain begins at the moment harm occurs. At this stage, fear, shock, and uncertainty often prevent immediate reporting. Social pressure, family concerns, and the expectation of disbelief further discourage women from speaking out. When reporting does not happen, the legal system is never activated, and violence remains invisible.

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<sup>30</sup> NAT'L CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, PRISON STATISTICS INDIA 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, §§ 17–23 (India).

<sup>32</sup> Justice J.S. Verma Committee Report on Amendments to Criminal Law (2013).

## **6.2 From Reporting to Police Action**

Even when a complaint is made, the next link in the chain is often weak. Delayed registration, reluctance to take complaints seriously, or attempts to informally resolve matters interrupt the process. This sends a clear message that the system may not offer protection or urgency, weakening trust at an early stage.

## **6.3 From Police Action to Investigation**

Proper investigation is crucial for justice. However, poor evidence collection, delayed procedures, and lack of coordination often undermine this stage. When investigations fail to progress effectively, cases lose strength, and victims are left uncertain about outcomes.

## **6.4 From Investigation to Trial**

As cases move to trial, delays become more pronounced. Repeated adjournments, prolonged timelines, and procedural complexity create exhaustion. For many women, the trial process itself becomes a source of stress, discouraging continued participation.

## **6.5 From Trial to Aftercare**

The final stage of the chain is often the most neglected. After reporting or even after a trial, many women face ongoing risks, social pressure, or economic hardship. Support systems such as protection, counseling, or rehabilitation are limited or inconsistent.

Without aftercare, legal action can leave women more vulnerable than before, breaking trust in the justice process entirely.

## **6.6 How the Chain Breaks Trust and Participation**

When failure occurs at any stage, it affects all subsequent stages. Women observe these patterns through personal experience or shared stories, leading to widespread loss of faith in the system. Over time, this results in withdrawal from legal processes, preference for silence, and reliance on informal coping strategies.

The failure chain explains why women often stop engaging with the legal system—not because they reject the law, but because the system fails to respond consistently and safely.

This framework shows that improving women's safety requires strengthening every link in the chain. Addressing only one stage without reforming others cannot restore trust or ensure real protection.

## **7. CYBER SPACE: A NEW AND GROWING SITE OF INSECURITY**

Digital platforms have become an important part of everyday life for education, work, and communication. However, these spaces have also emerged as new sites of insecurity for women. Cyber crimes against women are increasing in frequency and complexity, while legal and institutional responses often remain slow or inadequate.<sup>33</sup>

### **7.1 Nature of Cyber Crimes Against Women**

Cyber crimes against women take many forms, including online stalking, harassment, threats, impersonation, and misuse of personal images. Such abuse may occur repeatedly and over long periods, causing emotional distress and fear.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike physical offences, digital abuse often follows women into private spaces, making it difficult to escape. The impact is not limited to mental health; it also affects women's willingness to participate in online education, professional opportunities, and public discussions.

### **7.2 Anonymity, Jurisdiction, and Enforcement Challenges**

Enforcing the law in digital spaces presents unique difficulties. Anonymity allows offenders to hide their identity, while platforms may operate across national or state boundaries. Jurisdictional issues delay investigation and complicate evidence collection.

Law enforcement agencies often lack specialised training and technical resources to handle cyber crimes efficiently. Delays in identifying offenders and securing digital evidence weaken cases and discourage victims from pursuing legal action.<sup>35</sup>

### **7.3 Why Digital Abuse Is Often Minimised or Ignored**

Digital abuse is frequently treated as less serious than physical violence. Complaints are sometimes dismissed as online disputes or personal matters rather than recognised as real harm. This minimisation reduces urgency in response and undermines trust in the system.

Social attitudes also play a role, with victims being advised to ignore abuse or withdraw from digital platforms. Such responses shift the burden onto women rather than addressing the wrongdoing. As a result, cyber space remains an area where legal protection exists, but

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<sup>33</sup> NAT'L CRIME RECORDS BUREAU, CYBER CRIME IN INDIA 2022.

<sup>34</sup> U.N. Women, Online and ICT-Facilitated Violence Against Women (2020).

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs, Cyber Crime Prevention Against Women & Children (CCPWC) Scheme (Govt. of India).

effective enforcement is often lacking.

## **8. WHY ENFORCEMENT FAILS EVEN WHEN LAWS ARE CLEAR**

The persistence of women's insecurity despite clear legal provisions points to deeper institutional issues. Laws can only be effective when supported by systems that are accountable, adequately resourced, and consistently implemented. This section examines why enforcement often falls short even when legal standards are well defined.<sup>36</sup>

### **8.1 Lack of Accountability Within Institutions**

One of the key reasons for weak enforcement is the absence of strong accountability mechanisms. When officials fail to act promptly or sensitively, consequences are rarely visible or consistent. This lack of accountability reduces the incentive to prioritise cases involving women's safety.

Without clear monitoring and responsibility at each stage of the process, delays and neglect become routine. Over time, this normalisation of inaction weakens trust in institutions meant to protect women.

### **8.2 Poor Training and Shortage of Resources**

Effective enforcement requires trained personnel and adequate resources. In many cases, law enforcement officers lack specialised training to handle crimes against women, particularly those involving trauma or digital abuse. Limited staffing and heavy workloads further affect the quality of response.<sup>37</sup>

Resource constraints, including insufficient forensic support and technical capacity, delay investigations and reduce case strength. These gaps make it difficult for institutions to respond efficiently, even when laws provide clear guidance.

### **8.3 Weak Consequences for Negligence**

Negligence or failure to follow legal procedures often carries little consequence. When delays, refusal to act, or poor investigation do not result in disciplinary action, enforcement loses seriousness.

The absence of clear penalties for institutional failure sends a message that lapses are acceptable. This weakens the authority of the law and discourages victims from relying on the

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<sup>36</sup> Justice J.S. Verma Committee Report on Amendments to Criminal Law (2013).

<sup>37</sup> Bureau of Police Research & Development, Gender Sensitization of Police Personnel (Govt. of India).

system for protection.

#### **8.4 Gap Between Policy Announcements and Actual Implementation**

Government policies and schemes frequently announce strong commitments to women's safety. However, implementation at the ground level is uneven. Differences across regions, lack of coordination, and limited oversight reduce the impact of these initiatives.<sup>38</sup>

As a result, policy intent does not always translate into effective action. The gap between announcement and implementation creates expectations that remain unfulfilled, further eroding confidence in enforcement mechanisms.

This section shows that enforcement failure is not due to unclear laws, but due to weaknesses in accountability, capacity, and implementation. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring that legal protections become meaningful in practice.

### **9. WHAT ACTUALLY WORKS: PRACTICAL AND EFFECTIVE SOLUTIONS**

Improving women's safety does not require new laws alone. It requires consistent enforcement, accountability, and support mechanisms that function in real conditions. This section outlines practical measures that can realistically strengthen enforcement and rebuild trust in the justice system.

#### **9.1 Mandatory FIR Registration with Penalties for Refusal**

Registration of complaints is the first and most critical step in accessing justice. Mandatory registration of FIRs must be strictly enforced, with clear consequences for refusal or delay.<sup>39</sup>

Internal departmental action and external oversight should be triggered when officers fail to register complaints without valid reasons.

Such enforcement sends a clear message that crimes against women are not negotiable or optional matters. It also reduces informal settlements that often pressure women to withdraw complaints.

<sup>38</sup> NITI Aayog, Strategy for New India @75 (2018).

<sup>39</sup> *Lalita Kumari v. Gov't of Uttar Pradesh*, (2014) 2 SCC 1.

## **9.2 Time-Bound Investigation and Trial Enforcement**

Delays weaken cases and exhaust victims. Investigations must follow fixed timelines, with regular monitoring to ensure progress. Courts handling offences against women should prioritise adherence to procedural timelines and limit unnecessary adjournments.

Time-bound enforcement does not compromise fairness; instead, it ensures that justice remains meaningful and accessible. Predictable timelines can significantly increase confidence in the legal process.

## **9.3 Dedicated Victim Liaison Officers at Police Stations**

Victims often struggle to navigate the legal system after reporting an offence. Appointing dedicated victim liaison officers at police stations can provide consistent guidance, updates, and support throughout the process.

These officers can act as a single point of contact, reducing confusion and emotional strain. Their role would be administrative and supportive, ensuring that victims remain informed and protected without interfering with investigation or trial.

## **9.4 Independent Oversight for Police Negligence**

Accountability mechanisms must operate independently of routine departmental control. Independent oversight bodies or review committees can examine complaints of negligence, delay, or misconduct in cases involving women's safety.

Visible consequences for lapses reinforce institutional responsibility. When accountability is transparent, trust in enforcement mechanisms improves.

## **9.5 Stronger and Faster Cyber-Crime Response Systems**

Cyber crimes require specialised response. Dedicated cyber units with trained personnel, technical tools, and clear protocols are essential. Faster coordination with digital platforms for content removal and evidence preservation must be prioritised.<sup>40</sup>

Clear timelines for action and better coordination across jurisdictions can reduce delays and prevent continued harm. Effective cyber enforcement is now a necessary part of women's safety.

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<sup>40</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs, Cyber Crime Prevention Against Women & Children (CCPWC) Scheme (Govt. of India).

## **9.6 Continuous Victim Protection Beyond the Courtroom**

Protection should not end with filing a complaint or concluding a trial. Many women face ongoing threats, social pressure, or economic hardship after engaging with the legal system.

Long-term protection measures, including counseling, shelter access, legal assistance, and financial support, are essential. Continuous support reduces the risk of retaliation and enables women to pursue justice without fear.

These measures focus on strengthening existing systems rather than creating new layers of law. When enforcement becomes consistent, accountable, and supportive, legal protections can move from paper to practice and create real safety for women.

## **10. CONCLUSION: FROM LEGAL PROTECTION TO REAL SAFETY**

India's legal framework for protecting women is detailed and well-developed. Criminal laws, special legislations, and procedural safeguards reflect serious effort and legal intent. However, as this paper has shown, strong laws by themselves are not enough to ensure women's safety. When enforcement is weak and social realities remain unchanged, legal protection remains largely symbolic.

Women's insecurity persists because social attitudes, institutional practices, and enforcement failures interact with each other. Patriarchal norms, silence enforced through stigma, and cultural expectations weaken the willingness to report harm. At the same time, delayed police response, poor investigation, long trials, and lack of aftercare reduce trust in the justice system. When these factors operate together, the law fails to deliver meaningful protection, even when it is well drafted.

For women's safety to improve, social change and enforcement must work together. Legal awareness alone cannot overcome fear or silence unless institutions respond consistently and sensitively. Likewise, enforcement reforms cannot succeed unless supported by shifts in social attitudes that respect women's autonomy and dignity.

Making safety real requires more than legal assurance. It requires accountability at every stage of the justice process, continuous institutional support, and a social environment that does not punish women for seeking protection. Only when law, enforcement, and social responsibility operate together can women's safety move from a legal promise to a lived reality.