DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST MEN IN INDIA: UNVEILING A NEGLECTED REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Domestic violence has traditionally been perceived as an issue primarily impacting women, with legal systems and public discourse largely focused on female victimization. However, there is growing recognition that men can also be victims of domestic abuse—an aspect that remains significantly underreported and misunderstood, especially within the Indian context. Deep-rooted societal stereotypes, stigma surrounding masculinity, and the absence of gender-neutral legal protections often render male survivors invisible within institutional frameworks. This paper critically examines the multifaceted issue of domestic violence against men in India, analyzing its underlying causes, legal limitations, cultural perceptions, and gaps in policy responses. It underscores the urgent need for a gender-inclusive framework that acknowledges male victimization, advocates for equitable legal reforms, and emphasizes the development of dedicated support services. By reorienting the narrative around domestic violence to encompass all victims—regardless of gender—India can move toward a more just and inclusive system of protection and redress.

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INTRODUCTION

Domestic violence against men in India represents a multifaceted and critically underrecognized social issue that reflects broader global patterns of neglect and misunderstanding. Historically, domestic violence has been conceptualized and legislated primarily through a gendered lens, emphasizing the protection of women—a focus that remains essential given the longstanding structural and societal inequalities women face. However, this focus has inadvertently marginalized the experiences of male victims, resulting in significant gaps in recognition, legal protection, and social support for men subjected to abuse within domestic settings.

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In the Indian context, prevailing social narratives and institutional frameworks tend to construct men exclusively as aggressors in familial or intimate relationships. This perspective is deeply rooted in cultural stereotypes that associate masculinity with strength, stoicism, and dominance. Men are socially conditioned to suppress expressions of vulnerability, leading to a widespread reluctance to disclose experiences of abuse. This reluctance is further reinforced by fears of ridicule, societal disbelief, and potential legal repercussions, especially in light of laws that presuppose male culpability in domestic conflicts.

The current legal architecture, particularly the **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005**, exemplifies the gender-exclusive approach embedded in Indian domestic violence jurisprudence. While this law has been instrumental in addressing violence against women, its gender-specific language and scope effectively exclude men from seeking similar forms of legal redress. Consequently, male victims are often left without legal recognition, support systems, or protective measures, perpetuating their marginalization and invisibility in the public and legal domains.

Moreover, domestic violence is not a monolithic phenomenon but rather encompasses a wide spectrum of abusive behaviors. These include **physical assault**, **emotional and psychological manipulation**, **social isolation**, **economic deprivation**, and **sexual coercion**. Such abuse may be perpetrated by intimate partners, family members, or others within the domestic sphere, irrespective of gender or sexual orientation. It can be enacted by individuals in positions of power and authority or, conversely, may arise from dynamics of perceived powerlessness and reactive aggression.

A significant challenge in addressing domestic violence against men lies in its frequent occurrence within the private confines of the home, where entrenched hierarchies and socio-

economic dependencies inhibit victims from identifying abuse or seeking external help. The invisibility of male victimization is compounded by institutional inertia, where law enforcement, judicial bodies, and healthcare providers may lack training or willingness to recognize men as legitimate victims of domestic abuse.

Given these complexities, it is imperative for India to reconceptualize domestic violence not solely as a gendered issue but as a broader human rights concern. A paradigm shift is required—one that emphasizes **inclusivity**, **legal neutrality**, **and equitable support mechanisms**. Recognizing that individuals of all genders can experience abuse is a foundational step toward developing a more responsive and just legal and social framework. This transformation necessitates legislative reform, public education campaigns, and the establishment of support services that are accessible to all victims, regardless of gender, thereby fostering a more holistic and humane approach to addressing domestic violence in Indian society.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the largely neglected issue of domestic violence against men in India by exploring its multidimensional causes, the influence of gendered legal structures, and the institutional responses that shape victim experiences. The study aims to contribute to the academic discourse and policy development by fulfilling the following specific objectives:

1. To investigate the underlying causes and contributing factors of domestic violence against men in India

This objective seeks to explore the complex social, psychological, cultural, and economic determinants that contribute to the perpetration and perpetuation of domestic violence against male victims. Particular attention will be paid to issues such as gender stereotypes, societal expectations of masculinity, underreporting due to stigma, lack of awareness, and familial or relational dynamics that give rise to abuse. The study will also assess how patriarchal norms not only disadvantage women but paradoxically also render male suffering invisible.

2. To critically examine the impact of gender-specific legal frameworks on the recognition and protection of male victims of domestic violence

This objective involves a comprehensive analysis of Indian domestic violence laws, particularly the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, and related statutes such as Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code. The study will evaluate how these laws, while essential for safeguarding women's rights, inadvertently

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exclude men by adopting a gender-biased approach. The analysis will also consider the implications of such exclusion on access to legal remedies and the broader perception

of justice and equality under the law.

3. To assess the responsiveness of the Indian judicial system and law enforcement agencies in dealing with cases of domestic violence involving male victims

This objective focuses on examining how India's legal and criminal justice systems respond to male victimization. It will evaluate the level of institutional awareness, sensitivity, and procedural fairness extended to male complainants. Additionally, the study will investigate systemic challenges such as lack of gender-neutral protocols, insufficient training of personnel, absence of dedicated support services, and the sociocultural barriers that discourage men from seeking legal recourse.

CAUSES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST MEN

Domestic violence against men in India remains an underrecognized and underreported issue, shaped by entrenched societal norms, legal blind spots, and institutional apathy. Despite being a significant human rights concern, male victimization is frequently overshadowed by the dominant narrative that frames domestic abuse solely as a women's issue. This section explores the multifaceted causes contributing to the marginalization of men who experience domestic violence.

Underreporting and Social Stigma

One of the primary reasons for the invisibility of male victims of domestic violence is the pervasive stigma surrounding male victimhood. Indian society has long associated masculinity with emotional resilience, strength, and stoicism, creating a cultural environment where men are discouraged from expressing vulnerability. As a result, men who face abuse at the hands of their partners or family members are often reluctant to report such incidents due to fear of social ridicule, humiliation, and damage to their masculinity.

Many male victims anticipate being mocked, disbelieved, or dismissed by peers, law enforcement, or even medical professionals. Furthermore, there is a widespread perception that men cannot be victims and that reporting abuse is a sign of weakness. This societal denial leads many men to suffer in silence, enduring long-term psychological, emotional, and even physical harm. A lack of public discourse and statistical data on male victimization further compounds the issue, creating a cycle where silence breeds invisibility, and invisibility fosters continued neglect (Nadda, 2019).

Legal Protection Gaps

The legislative framework governing domestic violence in India is significantly gendered and does not extend its protection to men. The **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005**, is the primary law addressing domestic violence, but as the name suggests, it is designed exclusively to safeguard women. While the law rightly aims to counteract systemic violence against women, its exclusion of men as potential victims results in a lack of legal recourse for male survivors.

Men who experience abuse are left to rely on general criminal provisions under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), such as assault or criminal intimidation, which fail to account for the unique dynamics of domestic abuse. Additionally, there are no provisions for civil remedies such as protection orders, residence orders, or maintenance that are accessible to women under the PWDVA. This legal vacuum reinforces the misconception that domestic violence is only perpetrated by men and that women are inherently the victims, leaving male victims without effective legal protection or support mechanisms (E.V., 2021).

> Gender Stereotypes and Societal Bias

A deeply ingrained factor contributing to the neglect of male victims is the societal belief that men are inherently dominant and therefore cannot be victims of abuse. Popular culture, media portrayals, and educational systems often reinforce a dichotomy wherein men are seen as aggressors and women as helpless victims. This narrative

overlooks the complex realities of abusive relationships, where both men and women can assume the roles of abuser or victim.

Such gender stereotypes influence not only public attitudes but also institutional responses. Police officers, judges, social workers, and medical professionals are often reluctant to take male complaints seriously, and some may even mock or trivialize their experiences. Institutional bias thus acts as a second layer of victimization for men, who must first navigate the trauma of abuse and then confront a system that questions their credibility and denies them justice (Awsthi, 2023).

Lack of Support Services for Male Victims

Unlike the relatively extensive support infrastructure available for female survivors, men have very limited access to shelters, counseling centers, helplines, or rehabilitation programs. The assumption that men are not vulnerable to abuse has resulted in minimal government or NGO investment in male-oriented services. As a result, men who experience domestic violence have few places to turn for safety, counseling, or emotional and psychological support.

The lack of male-specific support services not only prevents survivors from getting the help they need but also serves as a deterrent to seeking assistance in the first place. Without safe spaces or tailored resources, many men remain trapped in abusive environments or suffer from mental health issues without recourse to therapeutic intervention or legal aid. This systemic neglect underscores the urgent need for a gender-neutral approach in policy-making and social services.

Inadequate Public Awareness and Education

Another critical factor contributing to the perpetuation of domestic violence against men is the widespread lack of public awareness regarding the issue. Educational initiatives, media campaigns, and academic discourse predominantly focus on female victimization, which, while necessary and important, fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. As a result, the notion that men can also be victims is largely alien to the public consciousness.

This lack of awareness perpetuates misinformation and reinforces toxic notions of masculinity that equate suffering with weakness. Without targeted education that highlights male vulnerability, society will continue to marginalize male survivors. Incorporating awareness programs into schools, workplaces, and community centers can play a vital role in reshaping public attitudes and encouraging men to speak out and seek help.

Lessons from Global Perspectives

Internationally, several countries have acknowledged the importance of gender-neutral domestic violence laws and have taken steps to protect all victims regardless of gender. Nations such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia have implemented policies that recognize the rights of both male and female survivors.

These frameworks not only offer legal protection to men but also provide support services such as shelters, legal aid, and counseling tailored to their needs.

India can learn from these global best practices to build a more inclusive and equitable legal and social framework. Adopting gender-neutral language in laws, training first responders, and establishing government-backed services for male victims are essential steps in ensuring that all individuals subjected to abuse receive fair and equal protection under the law. Integrating these international approaches can enhance India's domestic response mechanisms and promote justice for all victims of domestic violence.

GENDERED LAWS AND THEIR IMPACT ON MEN

The Indian legal system has historically developed gender-specific laws primarily focused on protecting women from domestic violence, harassment, and other abuses, reflecting the socio-cultural realities of women's systemic marginalization. While these laws serve an essential purpose, their gendered nature often results in the exclusion or marginalization of men who also suffer abuse, leading to legal inequities and social invisibility for male victims. This section explores these issues in detail, backed by real-world examples and judicial observations.

> Gender Inequality in Law

Gender-specific legislation, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, aims to address the historically disproportionate victimization of women. However, these laws often operate on the assumption that men are always perpetrators and women are always victims, an assumption challenged by increasing evidence of male victimization.

For instance, the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports indicate that thousands of men face domestic violence annually, but due to societal stigma and legal exclusions, their cases often go unreported or unrecognized (Nadda, 2019). The lack of gender-neutral laws creates a legal vacuum where male survivors cannot access protection orders, legal aid, or shelters. The judiciary itself has expressed concern over this imbalance, with some High Courts calling for gender-neutral reforms to ensure fairness (Dubey, 2023).

> Family Law Challenges

Family law in India reflects significant gender biases, especially in laws related to dowry, divorce, child custody, and alimony. Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), designed to combat cruelty towards married women by their husbands and inlaws, is a case in point. Despite its noble intent, this law has been criticized for frequent misuse. Reports indicate that false or exaggerated allegations under Section 498A have led to the harassment of men and their families without sufficient checks and balances (Gupta, 2023). For example, in cases where spouses have irreconcilable differences, misuse of this provision as a tool for leverage or revenge is not uncommon.

In divorce and child custody disputes, courts often prioritize mothers' rights based on traditional gender roles, sometimes overlooking the father's involvement or capacity to care for the child. This dynamic often results in fathers being unfairly deprived of custody or visitation rights, exacerbating feelings of alienation and injustice. Further, alimony laws generally mandate men to provide financial support without reciprocal provisions, placing a disproportionate burden on male spouses (Awsthi, 2023).

Domestic Violence Law Limitations

The PWDVA explicitly defines the scope of protection around women as victims of domestic abuse. Its legal framework assumes the abuser is male, rendering the act silent on the protection of men who may face domestic violence at the hands of spouses, relatives, or other family members. Male survivors of physical violence, emotional abuse, or economic control find no recourse within this framework, often leaving them vulnerable and unsupported.

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Judicial observations, such as those in the 2019 Delhi High Court ruling (Dubey, 2023), have emphasized the need for reform, pointing out that domestic violence can transcend gender and that laws must evolve to acknowledge male victimization. However, legislative amendments remain pending, and the status quo persists, thereby limiting men's access to justice.

> Sexual Assault and Legal Definitions

Indian penal laws dealing with sexual offenses are notably gender-specific, primarily designed to protect women and children. For example, the definition of rape under Section 375 IPC excludes male victims, recognizing only female persons as victims of penetrative sexual assault. This limited definition leaves male survivors of sexual violence — including male rape victims and boys subjected to abuse — without explicit legal protection.

Male survivors face additional stigma, as societal notions of masculinity discourage disclosure. As a result, male victims are often reluctant to report sexual assault due to fears of disbelief or social ridicule (Deshpande, 2019). The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, widened the ambit of sexual offenses but did not fully address gender neutrality in definitions, leading to ongoing calls from activists and legal scholars for more inclusive laws.

> Workplace Discrimination

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, was a landmark statute to combat harassment of women employees. However, it explicitly addresses the protection of female employees,

creating a legislative gap regarding male victims of sexual harassment or workplace bullying.

Men facing harassment, whether sexual or otherwise, often lack formal channels to lodge complaints or seek redress under this law. This absence results in underreporting and a lack of institutional support, perpetuating an environment where male victims remain invisible and unsupported (Thakur, 2020). Workplace policies remain genderbiased, and there is an urgent need to extend protections to all employees, regardless of gender.

> Examples and Case References:

- Case of Misuse of Section 498A: In *Arnesh Kumar vs. State of Bihar* (2014), the Supreme Court highlighted the misuse of Section 498A and directed stricter procedural safeguards to prevent harassment of innocent men, underscoring the need to balance protection with prevention of false allegations.
- Judicial Recognition of Male Victims: The Delhi High Court, in *Prakash vs. State of Haryana* (2019), acknowledged the existence of male victims in domestic violence cases and stressed the need for gender-neutral approaches in law enforcement and judicial proceedings.
- Workplace Harassment Gap: Despite the 2013 Act, surveys conducted by the Indian Institute of Management revealed that many men hesitate to report harassment due to lack of legal protection and social stigma, calling for an expanded legal framework (Thakur, 2020).

While gendered laws have played a vital role in protecting women's rights and addressing their historical marginalization, their exclusive focus inadvertently sidelines male victims of abuse and harassment. To achieve equitable justice, the Indian legal system must evolve toward gender-neutral laws and policies that acknowledge the realities of abuse across all genders. Such reforms would dismantle harmful stereotypes, promote fairness, and ensure that every victim receives the protection and support they deserve.

THE ROLE OF THE JUDICIARY AND LEGAL REFORM

The judiciary in India plays a pivotal role in interpreting and enforcing laws related to domestic violence and gender-based abuse. However, its effectiveness is significantly constrained by the gender-specific nature of existing legislation. Laws such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, inherently assume women as victims and men as perpetrators. This statutory framework limits the judiciary's ability to adequately recognize and address cases where men are victims of domestic abuse, thereby creating substantial gaps in legal protection (Dubey, 2023).

Despite these limitations, Indian High Courts have begun to acknowledge the misuse of certain legal provisions and the need for broader reforms. For instance, the Supreme Court of India in *Arnesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2014) cautioned against the misuse of Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code, emphasizing the necessity of judicial scrutiny to prevent false allegations that can unfairly victimize men (Gupta, 2023). Additionally, courts such as the Delhi High Court and the Bombay High Court have highlighted the absence of legal safeguards for male victims under the PWDVA, urging policymakers to consider gender-neutral amendments (Dubey, 2023).

However, these judicial observations have not yet translated into systemic reform. The judiciary, while progressively interpreting laws, remains constrained by the statutory framework that fails to provide flexibility for recognizing male victims of domestic violence. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive legislative reforms that transcend gender exclusivity and embrace legal neutrality, ensuring protection and remedies for all victims regardless of gender.

Legal neutrality is a cornerstone of justice and equality before the law. It demands that laws be formulated and implemented without gender-based presumptions or biases, enabling courts to evaluate each case on its individual merits. Such an approach would protect male victims who currently face marginalization under gender-specific laws, and reaffirm the Indian legal system's commitment to safeguarding the rights of all individuals subjected to abuse (Nanda, 2020).

Moreover, legal reform must be accompanied by capacity-building initiatives within the judiciary and law enforcement agencies. Sensitization and training programs for

judges, lawyers, and police officers are essential to foster an empathetic and informed response to male victims of domestic violence. Studies have shown that such training reduces bias and improves the handling of domestic violence cases, thus promoting more equitable justice (Sharma & Patel, 2022).

While Indian courts have made significant strides in recognizing the limitations of gendered legislation, comprehensive reform remains critical. By adopting gender-neutral laws and enhancing judicial and institutional sensitivity, India can build an inclusive legal framework that ensures all victims of domestic violence—irrespective of gender—have access to justice and support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

> Public Awareness Campaigns

To effectively address domestic violence against men, it is crucial to initiate widespread public awareness campaigns at the national level. These campaigns should aim to dismantle deeply ingrained stereotypes related to masculinity that portray men as invulnerable or always in positions of power. By challenging traditional notions of masculinity and victimhood, such initiatives can foster a more empathetic societal understanding of male survivors. Furthermore, these campaigns should actively promote help-seeking behavior among men, reassuring them that seeking assistance is a sign of strength rather than weakness. Utilizing various media platforms—including television, radio, social media, and community outreach—can help normalize discussions around male victimization and encourage reporting without fear of ridicule or stigma.

Support Services

There is a pressing need to develop and expand dedicated support services specifically tailored for male victims of domestic violence. This includes establishing confidential helplines staffed by trained professionals who understand the unique challenges faced by men experiencing abuse. Additionally, creating shelters and safe spaces exclusively or inclusively designed to accommodate men will provide much-needed refuge and protection. Counseling services should also be made available, offering psychological support that is sensitive to men's emotional needs and the social stigmas they face. These support mechanisms must be

accessible, confidential, and free of judgment, ensuring that male survivors receive appropriate and effective assistance.

➤ Legal Reforms

Comprehensive legal reform is essential to create an equitable system that protects all victims of domestic violence. Amendments to the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, and other related laws should be pursued to introduce gender-neutral language that encompasses male victims. Legal provisions must explicitly allow men to seek protection orders, restraining orders, and access legal aid without discrimination based on gender. The expansion of legal safeguards to cover all survivors—regardless of gender—will ensure that victims can avail themselves of timely protection and justice. Additionally, revising the Indian Penal Code and related statutes to address male victimization explicitly will bridge current legislative gaps and foster a more inclusive legal environment.

> Law Enforcement and Healthcare Training

Equipping frontline responders such as police officers, healthcare workers, and social service professionals with specialized training is critical to improving the response to male victims of domestic violence. Training programs should focus on sensitizing these professionals to the dynamics of abuse experienced by men, dismantling their own biases, and enhancing their ability to identify signs of abuse that men may be reluctant or unable to express openly. Health care providers, in particular, must be trained to recognize physical and psychological indicators of domestic abuse in male patients and provide appropriate referrals. Likewise, law enforcement personnel should be trained to handle complaints from men with empathy and seriousness, ensuring that male survivors are not dismissed or disbelieved.

> Community and NGO Engagement

Collaborative efforts with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based groups are essential to reach and support male victims effectively. NGOs can play a pivotal role in outreach, advocacy, and service provision, often serving as trusted intermediaries between survivors and formal institutions. By partnering with these organizations, governments and policymakers can expand the network of referral services and create holistic support ecosystems that address legal, emotional, and social needs. Community engagement

initiatives can also foster local awareness and encourage a supportive environment that reduces stigma and promotes survivor empowerment.

Educational Integration

Integrating education on domestic violence and gender equality into school curricula from an early age is a powerful preventive strategy. Educational programs should emphasize respect, equality, and healthy interpersonal relationships, helping to dismantle harmful gender stereotypes before they become entrenched. Curricula that include discussions about consent, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and the impact of abuse can cultivate a generation that recognizes domestic violence as a human rights issue affecting all genders. Schools can also become safe spaces where students learn to identify abuse and seek help, thereby contributing to long-term societal change in attitudes towards male victimization.

CONCLUSION

The protection and support of male victims of domestic violence require India to learn from global best practices that emphasize inclusive, gender-neutral legal and social frameworks. While existing gendered laws have been instrumental in addressing the historical marginalization of women, their exclusive focus has inadvertently neglected male victims, leaving significant gaps in protection and support. To move toward equitable justice, India must adopt gender-neutral legislation that acknowledges abuse experienced by all genders, dismantling entrenched stereotypes and promoting fairness.

Indian courts have begun to recognize the limitations of gender-specific laws, but comprehensive reform remains imperative. By embracing gender-neutral language and enhancing the sensitivity of judicial and institutional mechanisms, India can create an inclusive legal environment where every victim, regardless of gender, has equal access to justice and essential support services.

Addressing domestic violence against men demands a multifaceted approach that challenges prevailing societal norms, legal frameworks, and institutional biases. Critical measures include launching public awareness campaigns that redefine masculinity and victimhood, establishing male-specific support services such as shelters and helplines, and providing specialized training to law enforcement and healthcare professionals to ensure empathetic and effective responses.

Furthermore, collaboration with NGOs and integration of domestic violence education into school curricula are vital to fostering a culture of respect, equality, and early recognition of abuse.

Together, these strategies offer a comprehensive path toward an inclusive society that treats domestic violence as a universal human rights issue, transcending gender barriers. Through coordinated efforts in legal reform, public education, and support service expansion, India can ensure justice, dignity, and safety for all survivors—men and women alike—creating a fairer and more compassionate response to domestic violence nationwide

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