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SOCIO-LEGAL DIMENSIONS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: A HURDLE TO WOMEN-LED DEVELOPMENT AND EQUITABLE GROWTH

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Abstract
Domestic violence is not merely a private wrong or an isolated criminal incident. It is a continuing restriction on women's bodily integrity, economic choices, mobility and participation in public life. This paper investigates the socio-legal dimensions of domestic violence in India and asks why formal legal protection has not reliably translated into substantive freedom. Using a doctrinal and analytical method, it examines constitutional equality, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, judicial decisions and publicly available survey evidence. It argues that violence operates as an institutional barrier to women-led development by diverting women's time and earnings, interrupting education and employment, and reproducing unequal household bargaining power. The analysis locates enforcement gaps in fragmented services, social pressures against disclosure, delayed monetary relief and uneven access to secure housing. It proposes coordinated, survivor-centred remedies that connect safety with property, livelihood, healthcare and accountability. Ending domestic violence is therefore a condition of equitable growth, not a social objective to be postponed until growth occurs.

Keywords: domestic violence; women-led development; economic abuse; substantive equality; PWDVA; equitable growth; India

1. INTRODUCTION

A development strategy cannot be genuinely women-led if a woman needs permission to leave her home, retain her earnings or refuse sexual contact. These restrictions may be imposed through blows, threats, humiliation, confiscation of wages or constant surveillance. Each produces a different injury, yet all diminish the ability to make decisions. India's contemporary emphasis on women-led development makes the household a necessary site of legal and economic inquiry. Where the family is assumed to be naturally protective, abuse can be dismissed as a dispute that neighbours should not notice and courts should settle privately. The assumption deserves scrutiny: domestic life contains care and solidarity, but it can also concentrate power without scrutiny.

The World Health Organization reports that approximately 31.6 per cent of women and girls worldwide have experienced physical or sexual intimate-partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence, during their lifetime. That composite global measure is not identical to India's national survey measure. It does, however, demonstrate the scale of the underlying human-rights challenge.[1] India's NFHS-5 recorded that 29.3 per cent of ever-married women aged 18–49 had experienced physical or sexual spousal violence, compared with 31.2 per cent in NFHS-4.[2] The decline is relevant, but the remaining prevalence makes celebration premature.

This paper addresses three connected questions. How do family structures and material inequalities shape domestic violence? How far do Indian law and courts recognise its non-physical forms? What must change if protection is to support women's capacity to earn, lead and exercise citizenship? The central argument is that legal responses built mainly around individual complaints are inadequate unless housing, income and access to institutions are treated as part of the remedy. Violence is not external to development. It changes who can participate in it, on what terms, and at what personal cost.

2. RESEARCH APPROACH AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopts doctrinal legal research, supplemented by socio-legal interpretation of secondary evidence. It examines statutory text, reported Supreme Court judgments, Indian national survey material, official programme information and international human-rights standards. It does not claim to present interviews, a field survey or causal estimates derived from primary data. National survey estimates describe experiences within defined populations, while police records count registered cases; the two are not interchangeable. Their differences expose what is visible to institutions and what may remain unreported.

Domestic violence is understood here as a pattern of conduct that can limit freedom through physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic means. Section 3 of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (PWDVA) expressly recognises these forms.[3] The idea of coercive control provides a useful interpretive lens: repeated restrictions on money, social connections, reproductive choices and daily movement can make a household unsafe without leaving an easily documented injury on every occasion. This lens does not replace the statutory test in any individual case. It helps explain why apparently minor acts may become oppressive when considered together.

Women-led development is equally broader than labour-force participation. It implies meaningful authority over resources and decisions, opportunities to establish enterprises, participation in institutions and the ability to reject abuse without falling into destitution. Equitable growth concerns both aggregate prosperity and its distribution, including the security and bargaining power of people whose work is unpaid or informally paid. Sustainable Development Goal 5 links eliminating violence, recognising unpaid care

[1] World Health Organization, "Violence against women" (Fact Sheet, 18 June 2026) <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women> accessed 14 October 2026.
[2] Ministry of Women and Child Development, Press Information Bureau, "Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005" (2025) <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2116557> accessed 14 October 2026.
[3] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, s 3 and Explanation I (physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic abuse).

and ensuring women's leadership as distinct but related targets.[4] The paper evaluates Indian law against that integrated conception of equality.

3. PREVALENCE, REPORTING AND THE EVIDENCE GAP

A careful reading of available data reveals a serious but unevenly measured problem. NFHS-5's spousal-violence figure concerns ever-married women in a specified age group, including women who never reported an incident to the police. It should not be presented as the percentage of all Indian women who experience every form of domestic violence. The survey evidence nevertheless undercuts the convenient view that violence is confined to exceptional households.[5]

Administrative statistics tell a different story. An analysis of the National Crime Records Bureau's Crime in India 2024 report identified 4,41,534 registered crimes against women in 2024; cruelty by a husband or his relatives constituted the largest registered category, exceeding one-quarter of cases.[6] Registration may rise because offending increases, because reporting improves or because recording practices change. A single trend cannot resolve these possibilities. Similarly, the number of applications made under the PWDVA does not reveal how many women needed protection but had no way to approach a court.

Silence often has understandable material origins. Reporting may provoke retaliation, withdrawal of financial support, threatened loss of children, or exclusion from the marital home. Some women encounter pressure to protect family reputation or to reconcile even when the underlying threat remains. In rural locations, travel distance and limited privacy may obstruct access; in affluent households, social standing may disguise control. Research and policy should therefore triangulate surveys, service records and outcome measures, while preserving confidentiality. The key question is not how many complaints can be counted, but how many women receive timely, enforceable and safe relief.

4. THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence emerges within unequal social relations, not simply from the temperament of an individual perpetrator. Norms that invest one spouse with final authority over household spending, friendships, work or sexuality create space for force to appear legitimate. Dowry-related expectations can convert marriage into a continuing financial claim against a woman and her family. Where obedience is celebrated as marital harmony, resistance can be reclassified as misconduct. The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961 prohibits giving, taking and demanding dowry, but criminal prohibition alone does not dissolve the social transactions that support it.[7]

Power operates through dependence as well as direct threats. An employed woman may be required to deposit her salary, justify every purchase or abandon work after marriage. A woman working without a

[4] UN General Assembly, Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UN Doc A/RES/70/1 (21 October 2015), Goals 5.2, 5.4, 5.5 <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> accessed 14 October 2026.
[5] International Institute for Population Sciences and ICF, National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India (IIPS 2022) <https://iipsindia.ac.in/content/national-family-health-survey-nfhs-5-india-report> accessed 14 October 2026.
[6] Centre for Economic Data and Analysis, Ashoka University, "What India's 2024 crime statistics reveal (and miss) about violence against women" (22 June 2026), analysing NCRB, Crime in India 2024 <https://ceda.ashoka.edu.in/what-indias-2024-crime-statistics-reveal-and-miss-about-violence-against-women/> accessed 14 October 2026.
[7] Dowry Prohibition Act 1961, ss 3–4.

wage on family land may be treated as economically inactive despite contributing to production. Others confront the opposite demand: they must earn income and remain responsible for virtually all unpaid care. Scholarship on women's work in India shows how gender norms and unrecognised household labour constrain entry into remunerative employment.[8] In such settings, financial abuse is not ancillary to physical violence. It can make violence difficult to escape.

Community responses may compound the harm. Advice to tolerate abuse for the sake of children, demands for proof before offering refuge and mediation directed toward preserving marriage at any price transfer the cost of social stability to the woman at risk. The same social networks can, of course, protect survivors when relatives, neighbours and community organisations take threats seriously. The decisive difference is whether they treat a woman as an independent rights-holder. A policy that merely encourages reporting, without addressing the price of disclosure, overlooks the central socio-legal difficulty.

5. FROM PRIVATE INJURY TO LOST DEVELOPMENT CAPACITY

The relationship between violence and equitable growth is visible at several levels. At the individual level, injuries and psychological distress can interrupt attendance, training and concentration. A worker who misses a shift, changes jobs to avoid surveillance or refuses a promotion because travel will trigger violence loses earning capacity. A self-employed woman whose stock, mobile phone or bank account is controlled cannot negotiate with suppliers or receive digital payments freely. These are not only private losses; they affect enterprise survival and the local economy.

At the household level, violence can redirect money from food, healthcare and education toward crisis management. Children may witness repeated intimidation, lose study time or absorb the expectation that authority is exercised through fear. The paper does not assume that every child exposed to violence will reproduce it. Rather, a household that lacks security cannot provide equal developmental opportunities to its members. Women's reduced bargaining power may also limit decisions about contraception, medical visits and the allocation of family resources. UNFPA's India programme explicitly treats gender-based violence and reproductive choice as related development concerns.[9]

At the economy-wide level, participation figures can conceal the quality of participation. India's official Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2025 reported substantial rural female labour-force engagement, but participation alone cannot reveal whether women control their wages, are free from coercion or work in decent conditions.[10] In the unpaid-care economy, gendered obligations further limit the time available for

[8] Ashwini Deshpande and Naila Kabeer, "Norms that matter: Exploring the distribution of women's work between income generation, expenditure-saving and unpaid domestic responsibilities in India" (2024) 169 World Development 106435 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106435>.

[9] United Nations Population Fund India, Annual Report 2023 (2024) <https://india.unfpa.org/en/publications/unfpa-india-annual-report-2023> accessed 14 October 2026.

[10] Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Periodic Labour Force Survey Annual Report 2025 (Press Information Bureau, 27 March 2026) <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2246009> accessed 14 October 2026.

public leadership and economic activity. Research has documented the structural invisibility of substantial care contributions.[11]

No defensible Indian GDP loss can be calculated from these observations without a defined causal model. The more restrained claim is also compelling: violence undermines human capital, disrupts productive work and changes who benefits from growth. The ILO's Convention No 190 recognises that domestic violence can affect the world of work and envisages measures to mitigate that impact. The Convention supplies a comparative policy standard, not a statement that it has been ratified by India.[12] An economic policy that ignores household violence mismeasures the constraints under which women are asked to lead.

6. CONSTITUTIONAL EQUALITY AND INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

The Constitution provides the normative foundation for protection against domestic violence. Articles 14 and 15 express commitments to equality and non-discrimination; article 15(3) permits special provisions for women and children. Article 21 protects life and personal liberty, a guarantee that cannot be reduced to mere physical survival. Article 19(1)(g) protects the freedom to pursue an occupation, while directive principles concerning livelihood and fair conditions of work reinforce the broader constitutional commitment to social justice.[13]

Domestic violence commonly occurs between private persons, and constitutional remedies do not automatically convert every injury into a direct claim against the State. The State nonetheless bears responsibilities through legislation, effective institutions, legal aid and protection against foreseeable rights violations. This distinction matters: the argument for state action is not that marriage becomes a constitutional court, but that public institutions must not abandon rights at the door of a shared household. India's commitment under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women informs that approach. The CEDAW Committee's General Recommendation No 35 treats gender-based violence as a social, political and economic mechanism that perpetuates women's subordinate position, and calls for prevention, protection, effective remedies and due diligence.[14] In Vishaka, the Supreme Court used constitutional guarantees and international commitments to explain why gender-specific violence obstructs equality in employment.[15] Although that case concerned workplace sexual harassment, the underlying insight travels: formal permission to work means little when violence restricts the ability to use that freedom. A constitutional reading of domestic-violence law should therefore connect personal security with material independence rather than draw an artificial boundary between them.

[11] Balwant Singh Mehta and Aasha Kapur Mehta, "Paid and Unpaid Care Work: Gender Inequities and Policy Pathways" (2025) 19 Indian Journal of Human Development 50 <https://doi.org/10.1177/09737030251357106>.

[12] International Labour Organization, Violence and Harassment Convention 2019 (No 190), art 10(f) (work-related impact of domestic violence); this reference is to an international standard, not a claim that India has ratified it.

[13] Constitution of India 1950, arts 14, 15(1), 15(3), 19(1)(g), 21, 39(a), 39(d), 42 and 51A(e).

[14] Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, General Recommendation No 35 on gender-based violence against women, UN Doc CEDAW/C/GC/35 (26 July 2017), paras 9–10, 24–29 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1305057> accessed 14 October 2026.

[15] Vishaka v State of Rajasthan (1997) 6 SCC 241 (SC) <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/1031794/> accessed 14 October 2026.

7. THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT 2005

The PWDVA was a major shift because it treats domestic violence as more than conduct warranting criminal punishment. It creates a framework for immediate and continuing civil relief while preserving consequences for breach of protection orders. Its definition covers physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic abuse, including deprivation of financial resources and property to which the aggrieved person is entitled.[16] This breadth makes the statute particularly relevant to women-led development: a woman may need protection from assault, but she may also need the documents, wages and residence necessary to act independently.

Section 17 recognises a right to reside in a shared household regardless of proprietary title; section 19 allows residence orders. Section 18 provides protection orders, section 20 monetary relief, section 21 temporary custody and section 22 compensation; section 23 empowers courts to provide interim and ex parte relief where the requirements are met.[17] These powers can be combined to prevent a false choice between safety and homelessness. An order restraining harassment may be inadequate if the survivor must still return to a financially controlled environment to obtain food or medicines. Equally, a maintenance direction may fail if enforcement is slow and threatened eviction remains unresolved.

The statute also anticipates a support network. Protection Officers, registered service providers, medical facilities, shelter homes, police and magistrates carry distinct responsibilities. Section 12 permits an application for relief, and section 26 allows relief under the Act to be sought in other legal proceedings.[18] Such design recognises that survivors rarely experience problems in neatly separated legal categories. Its practical success, however, depends on coordination, staffing and accessible procedures. A right delivered after prolonged litigation can be a hollow remedy for a woman who cannot pay rent this week. The statutory architecture is therefore relatively ambitious; the administrative arrangements that give it life require equal attention.

8. CRIMINAL LAW, MAINTENANCE AND THE LIMITS OF PENAL RESPONSES

The criminal-law dimension remains significant. Sections 85 and 86 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, in force from 1 July 2024, address cruelty by a husband or his relatives and define the relevant forms of serious wilful conduct and harassment connected with unlawful property demands. These provisions substantially continue the function historically performed by section 498A of the Indian Penal Code.[19] The distinction between the civil protections of the PWDVA and the penal requirements of the BNS matters. A woman need not satisfy the criminal definition of cruelty before her allegations can be assessed under the PWDVA's different statutory scheme.

Financial maintenance is another essential legal bridge between safety and autonomy. Section 144 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita 2023 provides a summary maintenance mechanism for qualifying

[16] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005 (Act 43 of 2005), ss 2(a), 2(f), 2(s), 3, 12, 17–23, 26 and 31 <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/handle/123456789/2021> accessed 14 October 2026.
[17] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, ss 17–23 and 26.
[18] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, ss 5–11, 12 and 23.
[19] Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 (Act 45 of 2023), ss 85–86 <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/20062/1/a2023-45.pdf> accessed 14 October 2026.

wives, children and parents.[20] Depending on the facts, it may operate alongside matrimonial legislation and monetary relief under the PWDVA. Overlapping forums should not produce duplicative recovery, contradictory orders or endless procedural delay.

An unresolved normative tension concerns sexual autonomy within marriage. Section 3 of the PWDVA includes sexual abuse, yet Exception 2 to section 63 of the BNS retains a marital exception to the general rape offence where the wife is not under eighteen. The existence of a civil remedy must not be confused with comprehensive criminal recognition of non-consensual sex in marriage.[21] The precise scope of any proposed reform requires constitutional, evidentiary and criminal-law analysis. This paper's narrower point is that women's bodily autonomy cannot be assumed to disappear upon marriage. Equally, due process, careful investigation and proportionate responses must remain central to the administration of every criminal allegation.

9. JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION: AUTONOMY, HOME AND RESOURCES

Judicial interpretation has expanded the practical meaning of protection. In Hiral P Harsora v Kusum Narottamdas Harsora, the Supreme Court struck down the words "adult male" from the definition of respondent in section 2(q). The Court recognised that limiting proceedings to adult men failed to reflect the forms domestic abuse can take within families.[22] The decision prevents the identity of the alleged perpetrator from overriding the protective purpose of the law.

Residence has generated particularly important litigation. In Satish Chander Ahuja v Sneha Ahuja, the Court rejected a narrow conception of the shared household that had unduly tied the right to a particular proprietary arrangement.[23] In Prabha Tyagi v Kamlesh Devi, it explained that protection need not depend on the aggrieved woman living with the respondent at the precise moment of the alleged violence or filing.[24] These decisions matter beyond doctrinal precision. A right to occupy a home, or to seek an alternative arrangement, can affect whether a woman can pursue proceedings without exposing herself and her children to immediate deprivation.

Economic abuse has also received substantive recognition. Krishna Bhattacharjee v Sarathi Choudhury treated continued withholding of stridhan as a serious concern under the PWDVA, resisting a formalistic approach that would have defeated the claimant's access to relief.[25] Rajnesh v Neha supplied directions

[20] Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita 2023 (Act 46 of 2023), s 144 <https://bprd.nic.in/uploads/pdf/Final_BNSS.pdf> accessed 14 October 2026.
[21] Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023, s 63, Exception 2 <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/20062/1/a2023-45.pdf> accessed 14 October 2026.
[22] Hiral P Harsora v Kusum Narottamdas Harsora (2016) 10 SCC 165 (SC), judgment dated 6 October 2016 <https://api.sci.gov.in/jonew/judis/44159.pdf> accessed 14 October 2026.
[23] Satish Chander Ahuja v Sneha Ahuja (2021) 1 SCC 414 (SC), judgment dated 15 October 2020 <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/62368827/> accessed 14 October 2026.
[24] Prabha Tyagi v Kamlesh Devi (2022) 8 SCC 90 (SC), judgment dated 12 May 2022 <https://ndl.iitkgp.ac.in/lw_document/supreme_court_india/supreme_court/30123> accessed 14 October 2026.
[25] Krishna Bhattacharjee v Sarathi Choudhury (2016) 2 SCC 705 (SC), judgment dated 20 November 2015 <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/124775488/> accessed 14 October 2026.

addressing financial disclosure, overlapping maintenance proceedings and the need for timely support.[26] Together these judgments show why a credible protective system must address assets, residence and regular income as legal questions, rather than leave them to family negotiation.

There are, nevertheless, limits to a judicial solution. Courts decide disputes placed before them. They cannot ensure that a rural applicant receives transport, that a Protection Officer has adequate time or that an employer permits paid leave for a hearing. Doctrine provides authority; administrative capacity determines much of its effect.

10. INTERSECTIONAL BARRIERS AND THE COST OF ACCESS

Neither "Indian women" nor "the family" describes a uniform social experience. Caste and community status, disability, age, geography, educational attainment, migration and household wealth can shape the likelihood of disclosure and the feasibility of escape. A woman without independent identification documents may struggle to establish access to welfare or a bank account. A disabled survivor may depend on the very person who controls her movement or communication. A migrant worker can lack a local support network, while an older woman may face dispossession by adult relatives. Treating all these cases as identical risks giving formally equal but practically unequal assistance.

The law's scope also requires care. Section 2(f) of the PWDVA includes certain relationships in the nature of marriage, but eligibility is legally conditioned rather than automatic. In Indra Sarma v VKV Sarma, the Supreme Court examined relevant characteristics of such a relationship and cautioned against assuming that every intimate arrangement falls within the statutory category.[27] A survivor's need for safety may therefore be wider than eligibility for a particular remedy. Referral systems should not abandon a person merely because one statutory route proves unavailable.

Access costs are cumulative. A complainant may have to travel repeatedly, arrange childcare, miss work, narrate traumatic incidents to multiple officials and secure proof of expenditure or abuse. Documents, language, inaccessible buildings and digital-only procedures can compound these burdens. Under the Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, women are among the categories eligible for legal services, yet formal eligibility is not the same as effective representation.[28] Legal assistance should be measured not only by the number of consultations offered, but by whether claimants understand available choices and obtain usable orders without avoidable harm.

11. INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE: FROM REFERRAL TO RELIEF

The Mission Shakti framework recognises a connection between women's security and empowerment. Its Sambal component includes One Stop Centres and Women Helplines, while Samarthya addresses other

[26] Rajnesh v Neha (2021) 2 SCC 324 (SC), judgment dated 4 November 2020 <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/117541087/> accessed 14 October 2026.
[27] Indra Sarma v VKV Sarma (2013) 15 SCC 755 (SC), judgment dated 26 November 2013 <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/192421140/> accessed 14 October 2026.
[28] Legal Services Authorities Act 1987, ss 12(c) and 13 (eligibility and provision of legal services).

forms of support and opportunity.[29] One Stop Centres are designed to bring police facilitation, medical support, counselling, legal assistance and temporary shelter within a coordinated service setting. Government dashboard figures updated to 30 June 2025 listed 841 operational centres and 11,94,826 women assisted since inception.[30] These are service-use figures, not evidence that all survivors were protected or that every district has adequate capacity.

The central implementation problem is continuity. A helpline can enable first contact but cannot independently secure long-term accommodation. A protection order can restrain conduct but cannot replace trauma-informed healthcare. Counselling can be valuable when chosen freely, yet a service that makes reconciliation the default outcome can silence the woman it is supposed to help. Case management should be survivor-centred, with consent-based referral, confidential records and a realistic assessment of retaliation risk. The stated preference of the survivor should guide the process within applicable legal and safeguarding obligations.

Institutional accountability also needs practical indicators: time to interim orders, actual payment of monetary relief, safe housing referrals, enforcement of protection orders, repeat complaints and satisfaction with legal information. Aggregated public reporting, with strong safeguards against identification, would permit comparison across districts. Domestic-violence statistics must move beyond registrations to the outcomes of protection. Without such measurement, governments can demonstrate activity while remaining uncertain about safety.

12. A DEVELOPMENT-ORIENTED REFORM AGENDA

First, law enforcement and courts should treat immediate material security as an integral part of protection. Magistrates need workable processes for urgent interim relief, clear assessment of shared-household claims and practical mechanisms for securing monetary awards. Courts should apply existing statutory powers promptly rather than regard economic abuse as a secondary issue. Plain-language orders, reliable service of notices and enforcement follow-up would reduce the gap between judgment and lived reality.

Second, public services should be organised around one coordinated safety and recovery pathway. Police, Protection Officers, One Stop Centres, district legal services authorities, healthcare institutions and shelter providers need referral protocols that are understandable to complainants. Each institution should know who is responsible for the next action. Survivors should not be made to repeat their accounts unnecessarily, and information sharing should respect privacy and informed consent. Rural and remote locations require mobile legal assistance, safe transport and offline access alongside digital facilities.

Third, income restoration must form part of rehabilitation. Access to skills programmes, formal bank accounts, identity documents, social protection and suitable childcare can expand the options available to women who wish to leave abusive conditions. Employers can support continuity through confidential leave arrangements, flexible scheduling for court and medical visits, and safeguards against harassment

[29] Ministry of Women and Child Development, "Mission Shakti" <https://www.wcd.gov.in/women/mission-shakti> accessed 14 October 2026.

[30] Ministry of Women and Child Development, Mission Shakti Dashboard (data updated 30 June 2025, 841 operational One Stop Centres and 11,94,826 women assisted) <https://wcd.gov.in/home-dashboard> accessed 14 October 2026.

spilling into the workplace. Any such arrangement should avoid forcing disclosure to supervisors without adequate privacy protections. Economic empowerment programmes must address coercion over earnings, not merely provide loans in a woman's name.

Fourth, prevention requires sustained engagement with social norms. School curricula, community programmes and professional training should challenge the assumption that obedience proves marital commitment or that demands for dowry are normal family exchanges. Men and boys have a role in changing expectations about unpaid care, consent and conflict. Such initiatives are complementary to law; they cannot substitute for sanctions or immediate protection. Prevention is credible only when institutions respond effectively to the violence that has already occurred.

Fifth, reform must remain evidence-led and legally proportionate. Governments should publish comparable measures of applications, interim orders, enforcement and service outcomes, disaggregated where feasible without compromising confidentiality. Independent evaluation should ask whether programmes reduce repeated harm and preserve autonomy, rather than measure success solely through withdrawal of complaints or reunification. Criminal investigation requires procedural fairness and individualised evidence. At the same time, formal neutrality must not ignore the unequal bargaining conditions that shape whether women can participate in legal proceedings at all.

Finally, development planning should expressly connect domestic-violence prevention with women's property rights, care infrastructure, educational continuity and entrepreneurship. An initiative that celebrates female leadership while leaving recipients exposed to surveillance and appropriation of earnings is incomplete. The appropriate measure is women's effective control over decisions, assets, time and personal security. Integrating these outcomes into growth policy would make the promise of women-led development more concrete.

13. CONCLUSION

Domestic violence limits more than physical safety. It can determine whether women study, work, travel, own property, raise children without intimidation and contribute to public decisions. Indian law now recognises many of its non-physical manifestations, and Supreme Court decisions have strengthened access to residence, resources and relief. Yet the effectiveness of these rights depends on the conditions in which women seek them: income, housing, legal representation, institutional sensitivity and the ability to resist retaliation.

The socio-legal challenge is therefore not solved by demanding that survivors complain more often. The State must make disclosure safer, remedies quicker and protection financially sustainable. Family and community structures must support, rather than override, a woman's independent choices. Courts must retain procedural fairness while recognising unequal bargaining power. Development policy must treat a violence-free domestic environment as part of the infrastructure of opportunity. A society cannot claim equitable growth while leaving women to exchange dignity and security for the chance to participate in it.

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