

Between Silence and Resilience: The Lived Realities of Domestic Violence Survivors and Institutional Response in North India

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Introduction

Violence against women in India remains an entrenched and complex social challenge perpetuated by deep rooted patriarchal norms that shape gendered power relations and mediate the access to justice. (Dandona, Singh, & Kumar, 2022). National Crime Record Bureau data reported more than 45,000 cases of crime against women including domestic violence, sexual assault, dowry related harassment and abduction reported in 2024. These figures likely underestimated the true prevalence due to pervasive underreporting driven by fears of social stigma, familial retaliation, and institutional mistrust (India Justice Report, 2025). This disjuncture between prevalence and reporting reveals the formidable socio-cultural barriers women confront in seeking justice.

Haryana is a land of agriculture and a predominantly patriarchal society, where the socio-cultural fabric significantly impacts the voice of women in society from birth to marriage. According to recent reports, Haryana accounted for approximately 9,000 registered domestic violence cases in 2025, ranking among the states with the highest incidence in India (India Data Map, 2025; NCW, 2025). To address these challenges, the Indian government has instituted all-women police stations (WPS) since the early 1970s, aimed at creating gender-sensitive, survivor-centered environments for women to lodge complaints and receive specialized attention (Amaral, Bhalotra, & Prakash, 2019). WPS are staffed predominantly by female officers trained to handle gender-based crimes with empathy and discretion (Natarajan, 2016). The Haryana government inaugurated all-women police stations across the state swiftly and systematically in 2015 to

provide a safer and more accessible environment for women survivors of violence (Jassal, 2020). With a purpose to create a women-friendly environment within law enforcement where survivors of violence can report crimes without fear of judgment, stigma, or maltreatment by male officers (Amaral, Bhalotra, & Prakash, 2019)

Despite their promise, women's police stations are constrained by institutional limitations reflective of broader systemic gender inequities. Women constitute roughly 8% of the national police workforce and only 12% within the Indian Police Service (IPS) cadre, a structural deficit that undermines gender-sensitive leadership and reform implementation (India Justice Report, 2025). Further impediments include insufficient trauma-informed training, inadequate infrastructure compromising victim privacy, and procedural delays that collectively hinder effective service delivery (Sharma & Rai, 2025). Despite the Availability of Women Police station across all major states and all districts of Haryana, institutional and structural gap persisting hindering the path of justice and living with dignity of women.

This study adopts a sociological approach to interrogate how women survivors navigate the intersecting patriarchal, institutional, and socio-cultural barriers embedded within the framework of all-women police stations. This paper synthesizes empirical data with qualitative insights from survivors lived experiences and inculcates secondary data for triangulation.

Objectives

To understand the lived experiences and narratives of women survivors of domestic violence in India focusing on the socio-cultural, familial, psychological, and institutional factors.

Issues and challenges faced by women survivors of domestic violence in seeking help from women police stations.

Methodology

This study uses a primary qualitative narrative research design and supported by triangulation with secondary data from national surveys and studies to deeply understand the experiences of women survivors of domestic violence in India and their interactions with institutional support systems. Participants were purposely selected survivors who have engaged with women police stations in Haryana from rural and urban area. Data collection was through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in safe settings Original identity of respondents kept secret to ensuring confidentiality and ethical sensitivity.

The data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, identifying key themes such as familial alienation, institutional challenges, psychological impacts, legal disengagement, and resilience.

Case Study: Mukesh – Navigating the Traumas of Domestic Violence in a Patriarchal Context

Background

Mukesh is a 33-year-old woman currently residing with her parents, brothers, and sister-in-law in her parental home. She suffers from severe mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, which remain untreated due to economic constraints and minimal family support. At the age of 15, she was married to a man employed in another city. Over the years, she gave birth to three children and residing in rural area. Her stable marital life was shattered upon learning that her husband had secretly married another woman in the city where he worked.

Traumatic Incident and Familial Response

The revelation was an unexpected and profound emotional rupture for Mukesh, deeply impacting her mental well-being. Instead of receiving empathy, her family advised her to relocate to live with her mother-in-law in rural village outskirts, an action emblematic of patriarchal socio-cultural norms that often isolate and silence women victims of abuse. Her husband, in retaliation for her complaint against him at the local police station, forcibly took the children with him to another city, compounding her sense of loss and abandonment.

“Mnne Mere balak de do ak baar” (Please, Give me my children back at once)

This heartbreaking plea captures the profound psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by women like Mukesh facing forced separation from their children due to domestic violence and family fragmentation. This maternal bond, an essential aspect of a woman’s identity and emotional life, when severed, precipitates intense grief, anxiety, and depression.

Institutional Interaction

With support from her mother and brother, Mukesh attempted legal recourse by filing a First Information Report (FIR) at a women’s police station. However, the anticipated sanctuary

transformed into a site of secondary victimization; police officers expressed skepticism, posed intrusive questions, and implicitly blamed Mukesh for her separation from her husband. This institutional insensitivity magnified her emotional distress, leaving her fearful, reluctant, and leading to her withdrawal from the formal legal process.

Psychosocial Consequences

The lack of emotional and procedural support resulted in Mukesh's profound sense of isolation and deterioration in mental health. Presently, residing with her mother and brothers, she struggles with daily functioning and is reported to be emotionally withdrawn, exhibiting symptoms of severe depression and anxiety. Her case underscores the critical need to incorporate mental health interventions within domestic violence response frameworks, especially for women from economically marginalized backgrounds.

Case Study: Punam – A Qualitative Exploration of Domestic Violence, Institutional Response, and Survivor Disempowerment in India

Introduction and Background Context

Punam is a 28-year-old woman who approached the nearest women police station to file a complaint against her husband and his family members for repeated domestic violence. She reported that her husband engaged in regular abusive behavior, including physical assault occurring nearly every second day. The marriage, categorized by Punam as a love marriage, was expedited due to her pregnancy prior to formal ceremony—a factor that later influenced the police's perception of her credibility and character.

Punam identified her husband's habitual alcohol consumption as a primary precipitant of domestic violence, acknowledging his near-daily intoxication as a source of conflict and abuse. This qualitative exploration surfaces complex socio-cultural dynamics surrounding alcohol use and marital expectations which frequently underlie intimate partner violence cases in India (Sabri et al., 2022).

Institutional Interaction and Survivor Experience

Upon lodging her complaint, Punam encountered skepticism and victim-blaming from police officers who inquired repeatedly about the premarital pregnancy and implied responsibility for the marital discord. Such interactions manifested deeply ingrained socio-cultural biases reflecting patriarchal attitudes within policing institutions, which have been documented as barriers to justice for survivors of gendered violence (Amaral, Bhalotra, & Prakash, 2019).

Moreover, counseling sessions offered by the women police station revealed severe deficiencies in trauma-informed care. Punam reported that counseling personnel were inattentive and failed to provide an empathetic, safe space for her to articulate her multifaceted distress. This inadequacy reflects a critical gap in institutional support, where procedural justice is compromised by the absence of emotional and psychological support systems essential for survivor recovery

Thematic Insights from Survivor Narrative.

Patriarchy, Familial Alienation, and Cultural Norms

Both Mukesh and Punam experienced the pervasive influence of patriarchal family structures that prioritized familial honor and social conformity over individual safety and dignity. Mukesh's enforced relocation to her mother-in-law's home in a rural setting, despite her emotional turmoil, exemplifies how survivors are often silenced or sidelined to protect family "izzat" (honor), a deeply entrenched social value in Indian collectivist society (Sabri et al., 2022; NFHS-5 Report, IIPS & ICF, 2020). Similarly, Punam's stigmatization concerning her premarital pregnancy reflects gendered moral policing that exacerbates isolation and vulnerability. These familial pressures align with regional qualitative studies showing that societal expectations often trap women in abusive environments, deterring help-seeking by framing resistance as dishonor or failure (Das & Lakshmana, 2025; Bajwa, 2023).

Institutional Response: Secondary Victimization and Procedural Barriers

Narrative evidence from both survivors highlights critical institutional failings—in particular, the failure of women police stations to provide trauma-sensitive, empowered spaces for disclosure and redress. Punam's experience with accusatory police interrogations about her character and Mukesh's constrained opportunity for emotional ventilation underline systemic insensitivity

reinforced by gender biases (Amaral, Bhalotra, & Prakash, 2019). These findings are consistent with national crime data analyses where police officers' attitudes and procedural insensitivities contribute to under-reporting, attrition of cases, and survivors' mistrust of justice mechanisms (NCRB, 2023; Rahman et al., 2020). Research from Mumbai women's cells, for instance, has documented that institutional victim-blaming remains pervasive despite increased specialization (Dave & Solanki, 1999).

Psychological Burden and the Need for Integrated Care

The profound psychological impact—manifested in depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal in both cases—is well documented in epidemiological and qualitative investigations. The World Health Organization (2013) estimates that women experiencing intimate partner violence are significantly more likely to suffer from mental health disorders. Indian public health surveys corroborate these findings, especially emphasizing the compounded risk among women facing economic hardship and social marginalization (Sabri et al., 2022; Das & Lakshmana, 2025). Mukesh's and Punam's narratives poignantly illustrate the absence of accessible and sensitive mental health interventions within support systems, indicating a critical gap in holistic survivor care.

Disengagement from Legal Systems due to Distrust and Retribution Fear

The survivors' hesitancy and eventual withdrawal from legal proceedings reflect a widespread phenomenon documented across multiple Indian states. Studies attribute this disengagement to survivors' fear of social stigma, retaliatory violence, and unsupportive institutional actors (Bajwa, 2023; Sabri et al., 2022). Qualitative examinations reveal that the police focus on isolated incidents rather than the systemic nature of abuse, alienating survivors who seek comprehensive justice and support (Rahman et al., 2020). This distrust undermines formal justice's legitimacy and efficacy in protecting vulnerable women.

Resilience and Empowerment Amidst Structural Constraints

Despite considerable adversity, both Mukesh and Punam exhibit resilience and agency by navigating complex socio-cultural and institutional constraints to seek help. Their actions affirm survivor-centered perspectives in feminist qualitative literature that view coping and help-seeking as dynamic strategies embedded within oppressive contexts (Sabri et al., 2022; Yusof et al.,

2021). Recognizing and bolstering this resilience is crucial for informed, empathetic intervention design.

Discussion and Conclusion

This case study advocates for comprehensive police training in gender sensitivity and trauma-informed care, incorporation of survivor-centered counseling within women police stations, and mechanisms to counter socio-cultural biases within judicial processes. Qualitative insights from cases like Punam's offer essential evidence to inform policy reforms aimed at enhancing institutional responsiveness and improving psychosocial support services. Integrating rich survivor narratives with national and regional empirical evidence underscores the intricate interplay of gendered social norms, systemic institutional failures, and psychological vulnerability in shaping domestic violence experiences in India. The findings call for urgent reforms focusing on trauma-informed policing, comprehensive psychosocial support, and culturally sensitive interventions to dismantle patriarchal victimization mechanisms. This integrated qualitative analysis contributes theoretically and empirically to global feminist criminology and holds substantial implications for policy and practice aimed at enhancing survivor dignity, safety, and justice.

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