



# POLICY BRIEF

The Role of Gender Bias  
in Gender-based Violence  
in India



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# THE POLICY CHALLENGE

**This Policy Brief** is drawn from qualitative research with survivors and perpetrators of violence against women carried out in 2018 in Mumbai, by the None in Three Research Centre India ([www.noneinthree.org/india/](http://www.noneinthree.org/india/)). The research involved in-depth interviews with 42 women and focus group discussions with 47 men. Participants were drawn from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds to ensure diverse perspectives on gender-based violence (GBV) were captured.

Executive Summary and full research report are available here: [www.noneinthree.org/india/resources/](http://www.noneinthree.org/india/resources/)

Information about the broader policy context available here: [www.noneinthree.org/india1/policy-hub/](http://www.noneinthree.org/india1/policy-hub/)

**Gender discrimination** persists within Indian society, manifesting not only in unequal resource distribution and son preference, but also in physical, sexual, emotional and economic violence against women. It is perpetuated due to social and cultural factors that encourage and normalise

it in communities and society at large. We see from our research how social norms and patriarchal traditions leading to prescribed gender roles translate into gender bias. This is then transmitted intergenerationally, leading to acceptance of gender bias and the normalisation of GBV.

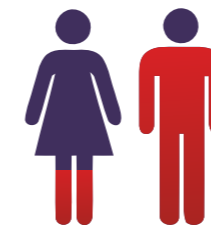
## According to the Global Rankings Report 2020:



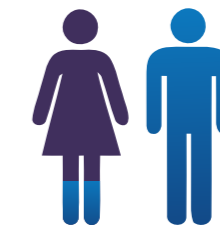
India ranked **150 out of 153** countries for women's health and survival



**66%** of women in India were literate, compared with **82%** of men



**One-quarter** of Indian women are working or looking for work, compared with **82%** of men



Estimated female earned income is **one-fifth** of male income

A community-based study on **domestic violence** among 450 women from Gujarat, Western India indicated that 42% of participating women experienced physical beatings and sexual abuse, 23% experienced abusive language, belittlement, and threats, and 56% believed that wife beating is justified (Nambi, 2011).

**Intergenerational cycle of violence** that perpetuates inequality and prevents women from full and meaningful participation in society. A multifaceted approach is needed which reduces the prevalence of GBV, including domestic abuse, and which provides support to victims/survivors.

Deep-rooted societal norms that fuel GBV must be addressed, to end the

**These policy recommendations aim to support the Government in achieving these objectives.**

# INDIA

# HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR FINDINGS

## Gender Bias

Gendered double standards, through which men and boys are given preference over women and girls, was a key theme throughout the research. Family and marriage were found to be closely allied in sustaining prescriptive gender roles through the everyday repetition of patriarchal traditions and belief systems. Women were often prevented from accessing work or education due to family or community pressure to conform to the specified gender roles. Some key points to note:

- While men are **given opportunities to succeed**, women are not given the same, mainly because of discriminatory gender bias.
- **Biased beliefs** passed from person to person and permeated systems and institutions. This was the case even amongst organisations that aimed to address GBV.
- **Implicit assumptions and explicit expectations** about marriage and family life negatively affected the daily lives of women and undermined any attempts to live independently.
- Men and women see themselves as **very different** from each other.
- **Silencing women's voices** (their opinions and beliefs) contributes to the everyday invalidation of women's lives.
- The **demand for equal rights** and ending discrimination against women was viewed by men as preferential treatment for women; this was a popularly held view and meant that men often dismissed, negated or actively spoke up against women's rights.
- Women's agency is undermined by **disallowing them to be purposeful** outside of the domestic space.
- There are **few opportunities** for men and women to converse and to mutually identify solutions.
- Many women **faced multiple burdens** as they were required to earn a living, execute household activities with little or no help and care for children (some of whom had special needs).

*Gender role expectations affected women and men over time, often placing women at a disadvantage, or making them vulnerable to abuse. Most women live and work in the domestic sphere and very early on are made aware of the costs of role transgression, which can include verbal and physical abuse.*

## Gender-based Violence

The various ways women were controlled emerged from the simple, yet unfounded belief held by both men and women, that women are “weaker” than men. The prevalence of violence in intimate relationships had several causes but almost always was underpinned by gender inequality. Some key points to note:

- **Cultural transmission** of values and biases which promote gender inequality increases the risks of GBV
- Women from different locations experience **different types of abuse**. For example, women in inter-caste marriages were particularly vulnerable to abuse due to transgressing caste-based norms.
  - Just as physical, psychological and sexual abuse are effects of gender bias and its relation to power, so **caste-based violence is a manifestation of GBV** within hierarchical caste divisions.
- Abuse and neglect were often **subtle and difficult to detect**; women described being controlled in ways that were hidden from view.
- Women's opinions were **regularly and routinely disregarded**; this enabled family members to dismiss or minimise acts of violence against them.
- Women themselves sometimes held beliefs that **supported covert forms** of control and violence.
- The reasons why women **remain in violent relationships** are complex.
- From a young age, women are **kept dependent on families**, so that in older age they are left without support and in precarious living conditions.
- Preventing GBV will not be possible if **men are not aware of women's realities** and the reasons for their demands for violence prevention.
- Younger women may be **more at risk of violence** due to their reluctance to conform to prescribed gender roles, instead envisioning a different future.
- **Son preference of family members** led women to have unsafe or forced abortions, or to endure complicated and repeated pregnancies.

*Violence and abuse were understood differently by men and women. We found this to be a result of the way rights are interpreted and understood. It is important to understand men's perspectives on violence and harassment, and to help men understand why women's right to a life free from violence is an important goal.*

## The Role of Children

Motherhood was experienced as both a liberating and a restraining force for women. Some key points to note:

*Children had a **profound effect** on women's lives and decision-making.*

- Children could be **beacons of hope** to women who faced abuse regularly, or they might become **reasons for women to remain in abusive situations**.
- Children, as well as their mothers, were **vulnerable to violence and subjugation**.
- Young people were often at **risk of facing violence** even when they were not transgressing their gender roles.
- Violence was **regarded as a common aspect of life** and when young people see pervasive and persistent violence around them it becomes difficult to guard them from learning it.
- Children's general wellbeing was **primarily the duty of mothers**; fathers were not considered as caregivers.
- Daughter aversion was the outcome of **socio-cultural norms** accepted not only by men, but by women too.

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risk of facing violence

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primarily the duty of mothers

mothers afraid for daughters' futures

## Agency Responses

Dissatisfaction with systems, professionals and agencies was a recurring issue, however women believed that they had the right to expect better support from the Government, tailored to their specific needs. Some key points to note:

*Some highly advertised schemes and laws by the Government had been noted by some of the participants, but for the most part these were seen as **unsuccessful, tedious to access or simply too difficult to comprehend**.*

- Most **women had almost no information** about government programmes or services designed to benefit them as they did not **generally go out or know about their rights**.
- **Women did not feel comfortable reaching out to authorities** even when they knew how to get support.
- Very few women chose to take a formal stand **against the abuse they faced or to seek help**, as the police often either scared them or gave them bad advice.
- Women found non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to be **largely unhelpful**.
- **Fear of loss of respectability or being judged immoral** were important reasons why women did not feel able to seek legal help.

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## Resilience

All the women in the study demonstrated agency and resilience in their own ways and through everyday acts of subversion. They often made a stand against abuse, rebelled against authority, and resisted gender norms. However, in the absence of support from formal systems, these efforts were difficult to sustain. Some key points to note:

- None of the women to whom this applied, felt they **could challenge marriage decisions** made for them and most were unable even to voice their opinions.
- Women who were **deprived of education had more controls and constraints imposed on them** and thus were unable to make independent decisions about whether to work or get married, how many children to have, or, whether to have children.
- A major way in which women's activism was constrained was through **'punishments' for being transgressive** and the 'glorification' of women who comply with prescribed gender roles.
- Women saw themselves as **'victims' of circumstances and fate** which increased their acceptance of GBV.
- Family members, especially mothers, played a **crucial role in enabling women to actively resist** GBV and gender bias.

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*Restrictions on women's freedom can be seen as a spiral of control that reduces women's defences against GBV.*

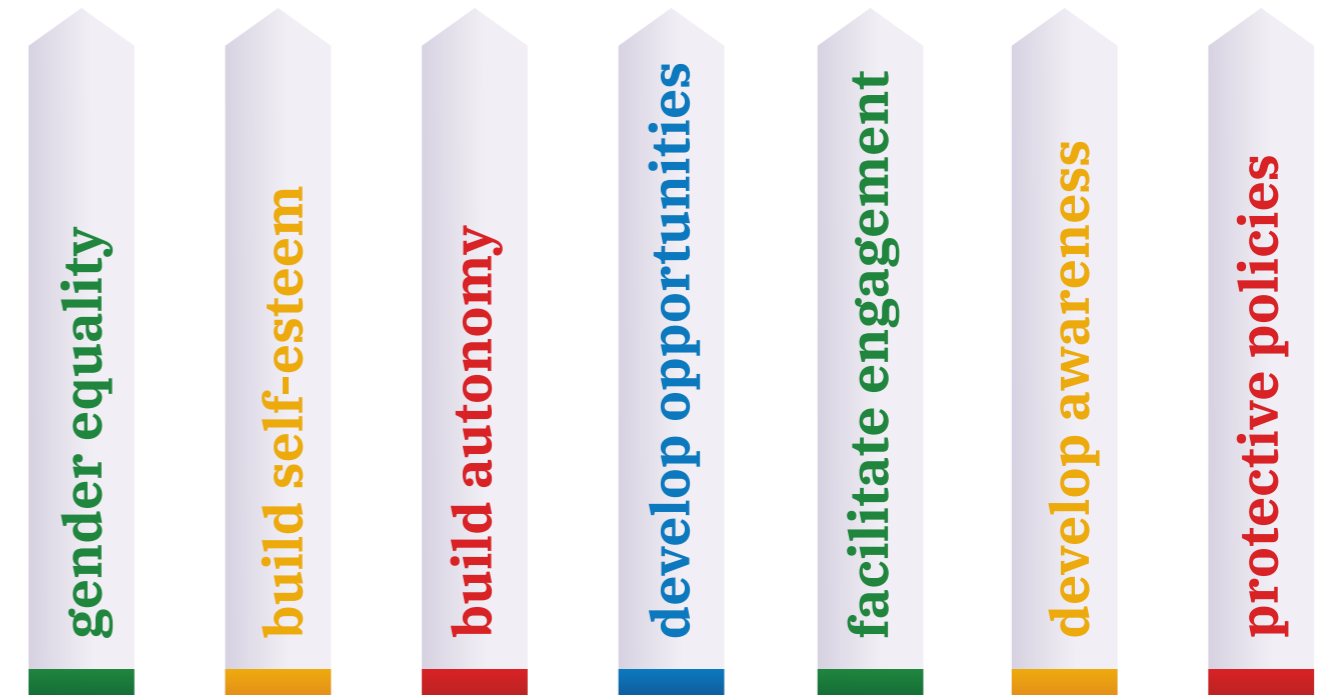
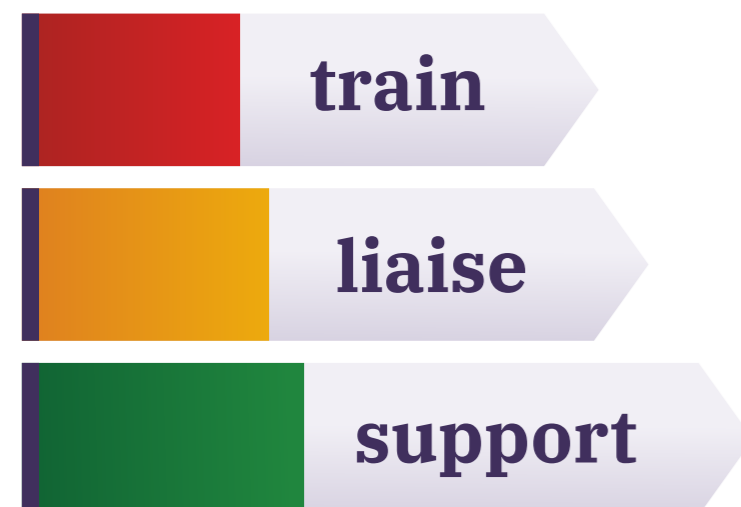
*As a woman accepts these deprivations as norms for herself and future generations, the spiral is further fuelled by intergenerational influences within family spaces.*

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Develop the Role of Schools and Education

Schools have a vital role in promoting gender equity and should create equitable learning environments in which violence or discrimination against females is not tolerated.

- Enable girls and boys to **speak up** against gender inequalities.
- **Practice gender equality** in the learning opportunities offered to boys and girls, such as the subjects taught and encouragement to pursue higher education.
- **Build girls' self-esteem and sense of autonomy** by offering the same opportunities as boys in areas such as science and sports training.
- **Training for teachers** should incorporate awareness of the adverse effects of double standards on the lives of young girls.
- From an early age, girls **should be educated** to understand that childbirth is not an inevitable eventuality, that choosing whether to have children is their fundamental right.
- **Students should be taught** about GBV and how to prevent transmission of violence.
- Provide honest, open, age-appropriate **sex and relationships education**.
- **Encourage young girls to learn** about earning and saving, investing in land and housing, so that later in their lives they are not restricted.
- **Ensure (through central governments)** that young women who wish to pursue higher studies are given support to do so.



## 2. Public Education

There is a need for government and third sector organisations to promote and build awareness of gender bias within society, through public awareness campaigns that specifically address the double standards against which females are judged and that challenge support for violence against women and girls. These programmes should:

- Educate men and women about the **need to develop opportunities** for women in economy and society.
- **Counter the belief** that women's empowerment would mean women becoming more powerful than men.
- **Facilitate men's engagement with**, and support of, policies that protect and promote women's rights.
- **Engage with mass media** as a means of sharing women's stories about the abuse they have faced and the obstacles they have encountered, to oppose the normalised narrative of GBV.
- **Increase public awareness** of the more covert kinds of violence occurring in women's lives and the contribution of bystander apathy in perpetuating the problem.
- **Develop public awareness** about the negative impacts of patriarchal traditions.

### 3. Government Agencies and Professionals

There is a clear need for a shift in attitude by state agencies, from a protectionist approach to one that takes account of women's rights. Policymakers should ensure that their policy directives and regulations on GBV address specific cultural issues and promote community-centred services in partnership with NGOs. Government approaches should:

- **Ensure effective, reliable, and consistent prevalence data capture systems** to record and categorise all forms of abuse against women.
- **Conduct resource mapping of areas** to design community-specific interventions that address the immediate concerns.
- **Strengthen anti-dowry or child marriage laws**, whilst recognising the grassroots nature of these practices, and develop specific strategies targeted towards areas resistant to change.
- **Provide support to help unmarried women** access opportunities to improve their living conditions, for example, through partnering with movements like Ekal Nari Shakti Sanghtan<sup>1</sup> (ENSS).
- **Focus on interventions** specifically targeting bystander attitudes, in public as well as private spaces.
- **Investigate the interconnectedness of violence** against both women and children and provide cohesive policies and joint solutions.
- **Undertake research on children** who are affected by domestic violence and provide targeted services to help them process their experiences to ameliorate the potential long-term effects.
- **Empower grassroots health workers** (ASHA and Anganwadi) to promote gender egalitarian beliefs and to provide necessary information around GBV.

<sup>1</sup>This is a movement which collectivised "single" women (including never married, divorced, separated) to demand separate rights and privileges for themselves. The movement began in Rajasthan and has found support in Himachal Pradesh, North Bengal and Sikkim. ENSS builds leadership among single women and addresses social marginalisation associated to singlehood.

### 4. The Role of NGOs

Governments should collaborate with relevant NGOs to develop rights-based programmes that promote the safety and wellbeing of women. Such programmes should:

- **Provide family-centred interventions** to address specific issues such as problematic relationships between mothers- and daughters-in-law.
- **Be effectively monitored and evaluated.**
- **Model their interventions in accordance with the needs of women and abuse survivors**, understanding the complexities of women's lives and circumstances.
- **Involve training for community leaders** to help them safely intervene and mediate in domestic disputes.
- **Encourage open conversation** between genders, inviting both men and women to take part in interventions to reduce GBV.
- **Train staff and volunteers about the ways in which gender bias can affect service delivery** and how negative impacts on women can be reduced.
- **Provide help** concerning the interconnectedness of violence against both women and children.
- **Provide community-based interventions** that encourage bystander responsibility.
- **Generate alliances with other NGOs and activists** to increase the impact of activism in initiating and sustaining change.

## 5. Empowering Survivors of Abuse

Kept away from the public sphere, women have few opportunities for sharing their stories. There is a clear need for women-centred spaces which provide support for women to develop their resources (emotional and economic) and enable them to share their narratives. Women should be informed about empowerment-based government and NGO schemes that are available. This could be done with the help of government employees working in banks, post offices, or other positions. Empowering abuse survivors requires that:

- **Women are listened to** without judgement and are given the help that they want, at the time when they need it most.
- **Governments work with NGOs** to offer women in violent situations, alternative or temporary housing arrangements.
- **Governments implement schemes** for expectant mothers, who do not have family support to start a life with their children, away from an abusive partner.
- **Banks make information more freely (and safely) available** to women escaping violence and who wish to start their own businesses.
- **Offices make workplaces safe** by implementing anti-GBV policies and closing the gender pay gap. Women's participation in the workforce should be encouraged by both private and public sector companies.
- **Widespread screening processes** for women who are at risk of abuse are implemented in clinical settings, so health professionals can offer the help that is needed at the right time.
- **Government policies that give protection** from forms of GBV such as dowry, forced marriages, and early marriages are supplemented by wider cultural changes.
- **Governments make special provisions** for older women who do not have family support, such as having functional and safe liveable spaces.
- **Opportunities are provided** for men to learn about GBV and to facilitate men's engagement in challenging other men concerning patriarchal attitudes and values.

*Empowerment-based schemes, educational and health programmes need to address barriers to the recognition of women's citizenship and agency. They also need to address patriarchal traditions that prevent women making choices about such programmes independently of the family.*





India  
**NONE**  
in three



None in Three is a global research centre which develops and evaluates prosocial games to prevent gender-based violence. It is based at the University of Huddersfield; the project which produced this work was funded by the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund through UK Research and Innovation, in an international partnership including Idealists Consulting, India.

The Centre takes its name from the fact that, according to the World Health Organisation, one in three women and girls are subject to physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. We aim to make this none in three.

