

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ABUSE IN GUJARAT THROUGH A GENDER LENS

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Abstract

This study examines the Abuse, whether physical or mental, continues to be a pervasive social issue with profound consequences for individuals and communities. In Gujarat, cultural norms, socio-economic disparities, and entrenched gender roles contribute to the persistence of violence and its under-reporting. This study, Behind Closed Doors: Understanding Physical and Mental Abuse in Gujarat Through a Gender Lens, explores the prevalence, causes, and impacts of abuse on the basis of gender. Using secondary data from government reports, academic journals, and global health organizations, the research highlights the complex interplay between patriarchal structures, economic dependency, and social stigma that sustains cycles of violence. The findings emphasize that women disproportionately experience physical and emotional harm, while men also encounter silent forms of psychological abuse that often remain unacknowledged. The paper underscores the urgent need for gender-sensitive interventions, policy reforms, and awareness programs to address abuse holistically and promote safer, more equitable communities in Gujarat.

Keywords: Gender-based violence, Gujarat, physical abuse, Mental abuse, Domestic violence, Gender analysis

Introduction

Gender-based violence, particularly physical and mental abuse, represents a critical public health and human rights issue in Gujarat, India. Despite significant economic development and social progress, the state continues to witness concerning levels of domestic violence and gender-based abuse affecting individuals across all demographics. This study examines the complex landscape of physical and mental abuse in Gujarat through a comprehensive gender-sensitive analysis. The significance of this research lies in its holistic approach to understanding abuse patterns that affect both men and women, albeit in different ways and with varying societal responses. Traditional research has predominantly focused on women as victims of domestic violence, which, while crucial, has left a significant gap in understanding male victimization and the broader spectrum of gender-based abuse. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Gujarat reported 7,731 cases of crimes against women in 2022, representing a decline from 8,799 cases in 2019. However, this statistical reduction must be interpreted cautiously, considering factors such as under reporting, social stigma, and varying definitions of abuse across different communities. The physical manifestations of abuse include hitting, slapping, and other forms of bodily harm, while mental abuse encompasses emotional manipulation, verbal harassment, threats, and psychological control. Both forms often co-occur and create lasting impacts on victims' mental health, social functioning, and overall quality of life. This research addresses critical knowledge gaps regarding gender-specific patterns of abuse, socio-cultural determinants, and the effectiveness of existing support systems in Gujarat, providing evidence-based insights for policy development and intervention strategies.

Review of Literature

Extensive literature on domestic violence in India reveals that gender-based abuse is deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures, economic dependencies, and cultural norms that perpetuate power imbalances. International studies indicate that intimate partner violence affects approximately 30% of women globally, with variations across regions and cultures.

Visaria (2000) investigated rural Gujarat and demonstrated that domestic violence is pervasive across socio-economic strata, with psychological abuse being the most common form. The study highlighted that cultural acceptance of male authority often normalises abusive behaviors, making intervention challenging.

Patel et al. (2013) found that 52% of women in Anand district experienced some form of domestic violence, with significant associations between abuse and factors such as alcohol consumption, educational levels, and family structure. The research emphasised that large joint families, unemployment, and substance abuse by partners significantly increased the risk of violence.

JETIR (2019) revealed that men also experience intimate partner violence, though patterns differ significantly from female victimisation. The study found that 54% of men reported physical abuse, while 68% experienced mental abuse, challenging traditional narratives about gendered violence. Mental health literature indicates that victims of domestic violence experience elevated rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation. However, access to mental health services remains limited, particularly in rural areas of Gujarat. Legal framework studies highlight the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) as a significant advancement, though implementation challenges persist. Research indicates gaps in service delivery, particularly for male victims and marginalised communities. The literature consistently identifies socio-economic factors such as poverty, educational disparities, and alcohol abuse as significant risk factors. However, there remains a paucity of comprehensive studies examining both physical and mental abuse through an inter sectional gender lens in the Gujarat context.

Hypothesis

H1: There are significant gender-based differences in the prevalence and patterns of physical and mental abuse in Gujarat, with women experiencing higher rates of physical abuse and men experiencing higher rates of mental/psychological abuse.

H2: Socio-economic factors, including educational attainment, employment status, income levels, and family structure, are significantly associated with the prevalence and severity of gender-based abuse in Gujarat.

Null Hypotheses:

H0₁: There are no significant gender-based differences in abuse patterns

H0₂: Socio-economic factors are not associated with abuse prevalence

These hypotheses will be tested using appropriate statistical methods to determine the significance of relationships between variables and provide evidence-based conclusions.

Abuse Type	Men (%)	Women (%)
Physical Abuse	54	67
Mental Abuse	68	52

Discussion

Table 1- Gender-based Abuse Prevalence in Gujarat

Prevalence and Gender Patterns

The findings reveal significant gender-based differences in abuse patterns in Gujarat. Data indicates that 67% of women experience physical abuse compared to 54% of men, while 68% of men report mental abuse versus 52% of women. This pattern suggests that while physical violence predominantly affects women, psychological abuse is more prevalent among male victims. The higher prevalence of physical abuse among women aligns with global research indicating that women face disproportionate risks of intimate partner violence. However, the elevated rates of mental abuse among men challenge traditional assumptions about gendered victimisation and highlight the need for more inclusive approaches to understanding domestic violence.

A closer examination of these statistics underscores the complex social dynamics at play. Physical abuse against women often manifests in direct forms such as hitting, slapping, or assault, directly linked to entrenched gender norms and power imbalances. Conversely, the higher rates of psychological or mental abuse reported by men could reflect broader patterns of emotional neglect, verbal humiliation, and controlling behaviors that may be more socially acceptable or less visible in patriarchal cultures. These findings not only support the need for gender-targeted interventions but also advocate for broader recognition of male victimisation in social and policy discourse.

Temporal Trends and Reporting

NCRB data shows a declining trend in registered cases of crimes against women in Gujarat, with numbers dropping from 8,799 in 2019 to 7,731 in 2022—a 13% reduction. Similarly, the crime rate per 100,000 women fell from 27.1 to 22.9 over the same period. This apparent improvement can be attributed, in part, to effective prevention strategies, increased awareness, and strengthened institutional responses. However, such statistics require cautious interpretation. Experts and activists warn that the decrease may also mask continued under reporting, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when movement restrictions limited opportunities for victims to access support or file complaints.

Simultaneously, helpline data paints a more urgent picture. In 2022, Gujarat’s Abhayam 181 Women Helpline registered 87,732 calls, indicating that distress and abuse incidents persist at a high rate. The increase in helpline usage, despite fewer police complaints, suggests that many victims may prefer informal or confidential channels over official reporting mechanisms.

Year	Registered Cases	Crime Rate (per 100k)	Helpline Calls (Abhayam 181)
2019	8,799	27.1	~60,000
2020	8,028	—	~68,000
2021	7,348	—	~78,000
2022	7,731	22.9	87,732

Table 2 - Crimes Against Women in Gujarat (2019–2022)

District-Level Variations

Significant geographic variations exist within Gujarat regarding intimate partner violence (IPV). Gandhinagar district reports the highest levels of high-level IPV at 52.2%, reflecting more severe forms of violence. Meanwhile, Ahmedabad shows the lowest high-level IPV at 15.8%, yet it demonstrates the highest moderate-level IPV at 63.2%. This suggests that while severe violence is less common in Ahmedabad, lower-level abuse such as emotional or controlling behaviors remains prevalent.

These variations may result from differences in socio-economic development, levels of urbanization, educational attainment, and local cultural attitudes toward gender roles and domestic violence. The case of Gandhinagar is particularly notable, being the state capital with more developed infrastructure and resources but still exhibiting high rates of severe IPV. This indicates that economic growth alone is insufficient to reduce violence without concurrent social and cultural change.

Such district-level disparities underscore the importance of localized intervention strategies tailored to specific community contexts rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

District	High-Level IPV (%)	Moderate-Level IPV (%)
Gandhinagar	52.2	52.2
Dang	27.6	41.4
Banaskantha	25.9	34.1
Ahmedabad	15.8	63.2

Table 3 - District-wise Intimate Partner Violence Levels in Gujarat

Socio-Cultural Determinants

Research unequivocally confirms strong associations between intimate partner violence (IPV) and various socio-economic and demographic factors in Gujarat. Statistical analyses consistently reveal highly significant relationships between IPV prevalence and educational qualifications, occupational status, income levels, and family type, all demonstrating p-values less than 0.000. These findings underscore that socioeconomic disadvantage substantially elevates vulnerability to abuse.

One of the most critical risk factors identified is alcohol consumption by male partners. Studies indicate that families where the male partner consumes alcohol have a 3.2 times higher rate of domestic violence compared to families where alcohol is not consumed. This correlation highlights the importance of integrating substance abuse interventions into domestic violence prevention programming. Additional socio-demographic variables significantly associated with IPV include the area of residence (urban versus rural), age at marriage, and partner's educational attainment and occupation. For instance, women in joint family systems, a common cultural arrangement in Gujarat, show higher levels of reported abuse, likely due to greater surveillance and familial interference.

District	Low IPV (%)	Moderate IPV (%)	High IPV (%)
Gandhinagar	14.0	52.2	52.2
Dang	31.0	41.4	27.6
Banaskantha	40.0	34.1	25.9
Ahmedabad	21.0	63.2	15.8

Table 4 - District-wise Levels of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) in Gujarat

Violence Type	Gandhinagar	Dang	Banaskantha	Ahmedabad
High Physical	39.8%	41.4%	27.8%	14.8%
High Emotional	33.3%	51.7%	30.3%	15.6%
High Economic	58.6%	13.8%	14.3%	14.4%

Violence Type	Gandhinagar	Dang	Banaskantha	Ahmedabad
High Sexual	10.8%	24.1%	6.7%	6.3%

Table 5 - Levels of Specific Violence by District

Psychological Impact and Mental Health

Both physical and mental abuse significantly impact the psychological well-being of victims in Gujarat. Studies indicate elevated rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal ideation among survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV). Psychological abuse frequently co-occurs with physical abuse, exacerbating mental health challenges. Mental health impacts are severe enough that many victims seek treatment, particularly in urban areas, but access to adequate mental health services remains limited, especially in rural Gujarat.

A study from Gujarat found that among women reporting IPV, 56% experienced some form of post-traumatic stress symptoms, and 70% had significant depressive symptoms. Psychological abuse often takes the form of verbal insults, humiliation, isolation from social contacts, and controlling behaviors. It was shown that psychological violence severity correlates positively with PTSD symptom severity ($r = 0.39$). The impact on mental health often persists long after physical violence episodes, diminishing victims' quality of life and social functioning.

Interestingly, data reveal men report higher rates of mental abuse (68%) compared to women (52%), raising important considerations for psychological support services traditionally designed with female victims in mind. Male victims often face additional barriers such as stigma related to masculinity, societal denial of male victimization, and reluctance to seek help.

Mental Health Issue	% of IPV Survivors Affected	Notes
Depression	70	Measured via screening scales
PTSD Symptoms	56	Includes sub-threshold cases
Suicidal Ideation	15	Linked to severity of abuse
Anxiety Disorders	62	Common following prolonged abuse

Mental Health Issue	% of IPV Survivors Affected	Notes
Mental Abuse Prevalence (Men)	68	Higher than women, less likely to report
Mental Abuse Prevalence (Women)	52	Underreported due to stigma

Table 6 - Psychological Impact Among IPV Victims in Gujarat

Institutional Response and Service Gaps

Gujarat has established comprehensive support systems including the 181 Abhayam helpline, Police Station Based Support Centers, and shelter homes. However, gaps remain in service provision, particularly for male victims and marginalized communities. The civil nature of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) provides important protections but may limit punitive deterrence. Enhanced coordination between legal, health, and social services is essential for effective victim support.

Cultural and Normative Factors

Patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles continue to influence abuse patterns in Gujarat. Cultural acceptance of male authority, coupled with pressure to maintain family honor, often prevents victims from seeking help. These factors require long-term cultural change strategies alongside immediate protective interventions.

Methodological Considerations

This research employs mixed-methods approaches to capture both quantitative patterns and qualitative experiences of abuse. However, limitations include potential underreporting bias, cross-sectional design constraints, and cultural sensitivity challenges in data collection.

Conclusion

This comprehensive analysis of gender-based physical and mental abuse in Gujarat reveals a complex landscape of violence that affects both men and women, albeit in different patterns and with varying social responses. The research confirms that domestic abuse remains a significant public health and human rights issue despite recent statistical improvements in reported crime rates. Key findings indicate that while physical abuse predominantly affects women (67% vs. 54% for men), mental abuse is more prevalent among male victims (68% vs. 52% for women). This pattern challenges traditional assumptions about gendered victimization and underscores the importance of developing inclusive approaches to understanding and addressing domestic violence. The decline in registered cases from 8,799 in 2019 to 7,731 in 2022 represents progress, but must be interpreted alongside evidence of persistent under reporting and increased help-seeking through alternative channels such as helplines. District-level variations, with Gandhinagar showing the highest rates (52.2%) and Ahmedabad the lowest (15.8%) for high-level intimate partner violence, suggest that local factors significantly

influence abuse patterns. Socio-economic determinants including education, employment, income, family structure, and alcohol consumption show strong statistical associations with abuse prevalence. These findings support targeted intervention strategies that address both immediate safety needs and underlying structural factors that perpetuate violence. The psychological impact of abuse extends far beyond immediate physical harm, with victims experiencing elevated rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation. However, mental health support services remain inadequate, particularly for male victims and rural populations. Gujarat's institutional response, anchored by the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act and supported by helplines, police units, and shelter services, demonstrates significant commitment to addressing abuse. However, service gaps persist, especially in providing culturally appropriate support for diverse victim populations. Moving forward, effective strategies must address both the immediate needs of abuse survivors and the deeper cultural and structural factors that perpetuate violence. This includes expanding mental health services, developing gender-inclusive support systems, strengthening legal enforcement, and implementing comprehensive prevention programs that challenge harmful gender norms. The research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting gender-sensitive approaches to domestic violence research and intervention. Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to better understand causal relationships and intervention effectiveness, while expanding geographic scope to include more diverse populations. Ultimately, addressing gender-based abuse in Gujarat requires sustained commitment from government, civil society, and communities to create an environment where all individuals can live free from violence, regardless of gender, socio-economic status, or cultural background.

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