

Forum: United Nations Women

Issue: Methods to reduce domestic violence against women in rural areas

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Introduction

Domestic violence against women is a neglected, widespread public health problem. Women who are meant to be safe in their homes often experience violence by their trusted family members, most commonly by their husbands. Often, it is overlooked in its seriousness and goes undermined or unreported. In rural areas, domestic violence occurs behind closed doors, far away from the eyes of people and the government. This seclusion worsens the issue of domestic violence in rural areas. World Health Organization (WHO) reports indicate that nearly 1 in 3, or 30% of women have reported being physically assaulted by an intimate male partner at some point in their lives. Intimate partner violence causes serious physical, mental, sexual, and health problems among survivors and their children. Freedom of gender-based violence is a fundamental human right.

Violence affects all groups of women, but people in rural areas are particularly vulnerable. Studies indicate that rural women are exposed to more domestic violence than their urban counterparts; rural communities can facilitate abuse which can last, on average, 25% longer than in urban areas. This suggests that rural women experience physical abuse at a greater frequency and severity. Survivor safety is of greatest importance in domestic violence cases. Victims from rural communities often have needs and concerns, but their ability to seek help is limited due to isolation and lack of resources. The close-knit environment of the rural areas can create a silent and secretive community. Victims may also have difficulties in finding legal assistance or shelters, which can allow the continuation of domestic violence in households without the

awareness of authorities. Indeed, violence reduces rural women's well-being and can reduce a rural woman's ability to care for her family and contribute to society.

Rural domestic violence needs to be addressed for reasons of both social justice and peace. Domestic abuse is a widespread issue that is pervasive in rural areas. Understanding the issues that rural communities face is crucial, as is taking proactive measures to end domestic violence. By raising awareness, providing support services, and implementing effective policies, we can fight to stop the cycle of abuse and make all rural regions safer.

Definition of Key Terms

DV

Domestic violence. A pattern of abusive behavior toward an intimate partner in a relationship, where the abuser exerts power and control over the victim.

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for international public health.

Physical Assault

Illegal act of causing physical harm or unwanted physical contact to another person.

Rural Community

Geographical regions are characterized by a low population density, limited access to urban resources and services, and often a strong sense of community.

Survivor Safety

Survivor safety refers to the well-being and security of individuals who have experienced trauma, abuse, and violence. The sense of isolation can be overwhelming, with survivors feeling trapped in their situations and lacking a support network, the limited availability of transportation options can make it difficult for survivors to escape their abusive partners or access support services.

Legal Assistance

Providing assistance to a person or people in need.

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Abuse or violence that occurs within an intimate relationship, which can include spouses or cohabiting individuals.

Support Services

Resources such as counseling, therapy, and support groups for both survivors and perpetrators to address the root causes of domestic violence.

Community Awareness

Efforts to educate rural communities about the prevalence of domestic violence and how to recognize and respond to it.

Cultural Sensitivity

An awareness of and respect for the cultural and social norms of rural communities when implementing domestic violence prevention and support programs.

Key Issues

Lack of available services

Geographic barriers have had a direct impact on women experiencing DV in rural environments as it greatly increases victim vulnerability. Physically accessing service providers that are more urbanally located poses a problem for women; both distance and access to transportation are barriers to service provision for rural women. Research examining rural women's access to healthcare services found that rural women had to travel three times farther for services than urban women, making it difficult for survivors to access help and escape abusive situations.

Social Stigma

Victims often experience feelings of shame, guilt, and depression related to being DV victims. In some cultures and societies, DV may be viewed as a private matter that should not be discussed openly. Abuse can reinforce these standards, which makes it harder for survivors to seek assistance and prevents the community from intervening. The tight-knit character of rural communities can contribute to a culture of silence and secrecy surrounding domestic violence, as survivors may worry about social stigma and repercussions from their abusers. Victims commonly experience anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and complex trauma as a result of their abuse. Social stigma surrounding domestic violence (DV) is a significant and complex issue in rural areas. In these regions, traditional norms and values often play a more dominant role, and the close-knit nature of rural communities can exacerbate the challenges associated with addressing DV.

Economic Dependence

In a situation where the victim is financially dependent on the abuser, it becomes difficult for them to leave the relationship or seek help. Rural areas having low employment rates and few job opportunities limit the victims' access to money, making it

difficult for them to be independent. Survivors in rural areas may fear retaliation from their abusers if they attempt to secure employment or financial independence. Limited access to education in some rural areas can affect survivors' employability and financial independence. Economic empowerment can play a crucial role in helping survivors achieve economic independence and escape abusive relationships.

Legal Reforms

Rural areas have less access to legal assistance, making it difficult for them to fight their cases in court, and the geographical isolation further creates a barrier on seeking legal protection. Rural communities often face resource constraints, including limited funding, which can hinder their ability to provide legal services to victims. In some rural communities, there may be a lack of awareness about legal protections for DV survivors, leaving victims unaware of their rights. Legal reforms should consider the unique challenges and needs of survivors in rural settings to ensure that they have access to effective legal protections and support services.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

India

In the Indian rural background, instances of domestic violence are so normalized that women inherently have accepted that it is a husband's right to abuse them. Women in rural settings are more likely than those in urban areas to experience domestic violence. Given that 68% of India's population lives in rural regions, addressing domestic violence in villages becomes even more important. Victims of DV in India rarely seek help. According to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), the number of DV cases rose during the lockdown phase where the lack of accessibility of resources and the fear of the epidemic and increased household responsibilities on women created an environment of conflict. The All India Council of Human Rights, Liberties and Social Justice (AICHLS)

has petitioned the Delhi High Court to ensure the adoption and execution of immediate and effective measures to assist victims of domestic violence and child abuse during the lockdown. India has adopted acts and laws like ‘Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005’ which empowers women to seek protection orders against perpetrators of domestic violence. This act applies to women of all ages and to women in both urban and rural areas. ‘The Indian Penal Code (IPC)’ deals with cruelty by husbands and in-laws against married women. It provides for criminal punishment in cases of cruelty and harassment. These legal provisions implemented have helped both urban and rural populations of India to seek help on domestic violence.

Sweden

One country which is recognized to have strong systems for violence against women is Sweden. Sweden has implemented a comprehensive approach to address domestic violence and support survivors. They have strong legal provisions to address domestic violence and established a network of specialized support centers known as Women's Shelters, to provide emergency accommodation and support to women fleeing domestic violence. Sweden has easily accessible helplines and online resources, enabling survivors to seek assistance discreetly. The National Women's Helpline is available 24/7 for support and guidance, Kvinnofridslinjen is a national women’s helpline that is available 24/7, free to call, and offers help in multiple languages.

Sweden has approved international agreements and conventions such as the Istanbul Convention, which obliges the country to take measures to prevent and combat violence against women, including domestic violence. Sweden places a strong emphasis on preventative measures, including public awareness campaigns, education programs, and initiatives to challenge gender norms and stereotypes. These efforts aim to promote respectful relationships and prevent domestic violence. Sweden's comprehensive approach to protecting women from domestic violence serves as a model for other countries seeking to strengthen their systems and support structures for survivors.

South Africa

Domestic violence is a pervasive issue in South Africa, affecting both the urban and rural population. Traditional practices and gender roles perpetuate DV in rural areas. Studies report that up to 60% of women and girls in South Africa have been victims of physical and sexual abuse as a result of IPV. Intimate partner violence in South Africa is attributed to various factors including, patriarchy, poverty, unemployment, and cultural norms. Many women and girls in South Africa, especially in rural areas, are victims of harmful practices, including child marriage, abduction for marriage (“ukuthwala”) and polygamy, that often give rise to domestic violence. South Africa’s low levels of prosecution in domestic violence cases and failures by the police to enforce protection orders, exposed survivors to repeated abuses and resulted in the violation of women’s fundamental rights.

According to official figures, out of 143,824 requests for protection orders in 2018-2019, only 22,211 were granted – and in many of these cases, the protection order just instructed the abuser to sleep in another room in the same house. South Africa has a legal framework that criminalizes domestic violence, with the Domestic Violence Act of 1998 providing protection orders for survivors, The Sexual Offenses Act, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act which strengthen legal provisions to address sexual violence and abuse. Despite these, challenges persist especially in rural areas. This requires ongoing collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, community leaders, and international organizations to ensure that support services are accessible and culturally relevant and are integral to the long-term prevention of domestic violence in rural South Africa.

Development of Issue/Timeline

Date	Event	Outcome
20th century.	DV was practiced openly	Domestic violence was often considered a private matter with limited legal protections in rural areas.
1970s	Emergence of feminist movements on DV	Feminist movements brought attention to DV as a social problem. Initial establishment of shelters and support services, mainly in urban areas.
1980s	DV hotlines were established	Beginning of awareness campaigns like the ‘Silent Witness Campaign’, ‘National Coalition Against Domestic Violence’ and movements like ‘Child Protective Services (CPS)’ and ‘Battered Women's Movement’, although rural areas had limited access to such services.
1994	Passing of Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in the United States.	VAWA recognized domestic violence as a national issue, and provided funding for rural programs.
2000s	Growth of awareness campaigns	Community organizations and rural shelters addressing DV emerge. Efforts such as increased access to internet and healthcare, availability of outreach programs to bridge the

		urban-rural divide in service provision.
2010s	Expansion of online resources	Technology facilitated access to resources like hotlines and support websites for the rural victims.
2018	Reauthorization of VAWA	Need to address DV in rural areas, recognizing challenges and support requirements.
2020s	COVID-19 pandemic highlighted importance of addressing DV	Intensified efforts to support survivors, particularly in rural areas during the pandemic.
Ongoing	Continuous efforts to reduce DV in rural areas.	Organizations and agencies continue to expand access to services, increase awareness, and advocate for policy changes to address domestic violence in rural areas more effectively.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)

VAWA came in the form of policy reform and implementation. This act recognized DV as a federal crime and provided a basis for the investigation and prosecution of these crimes. VAWA has been reauthorized four times since its original enactment to enhance protections for victims. VAWA grant programs largely address the criminal justice system and community response to these crimes, it also addresses prevention of these crimes. In the 1960s, the violent crime rate rose steadily - it more than doubled from 1960 to 1969,

igniting concern of domestic violence in households from both the public and the federal government. Adding to this was the concern about violent crimes committed against women. VAWA allocates federal funding to support a range of services for victims, including shelters, crisis hotlines, legal assistance, and counseling. It supports community-based organizations and coalitions working to combat domestic violence and sexual assault.

Family Violence Prevention and Services Act

FVPSA is a law that provides funding and support for programs and services aimed at preventing DV and promoting safe and supportive environments for individuals affected by domestic violence. FVPSA was originally enacted in 1984 and has been reauthorized several times since. It became the first federal funding source dedicated to providing DV prevention services. The legislation was meant to help survivors by supporting assistance through a 24-hour confidential hotline, emergency shelters, and counseling. The legislation provided funding towards domestic violence shelters and programs. Over 1,500 local domestic violence programs rely on FVPSA funding to keep more than 1.3 million victims seeking safety each year. FVPSA has provided support to DV victims and provided safe and supportive environments for the affected individuals.

Possible Solutions

Community Engagement

To address the issue of domestic violence (DV), a comprehensive approach involves collaborating with local community leaders and religious institutions to challenge any cultural or religious practices that perpetuate DV. This includes actively engaging with community members to educate them about the signs of DV and intimate partner violence (IPV). Raising awareness through public campaigns and various communication channels is crucial, and it's essential to involve key stakeholders such as law enforcement, healthcare professionals, and social workers in providing support and

care to DV victims. To amplify prevention efforts, partnerships with public figures like community leaders, religious leaders, influencers, and celebrities can be invaluable.

Community-based organizations dedicated to DV prevention and supporting survivors play a pivotal role in this initiative. Establishing or promoting easily accessible crisis helplines within the community ensures that those in need can receive immediate assistance. Initiatives to prevent domestic violence must encompass community education and outreach initiatives to spread awareness about the issue at hand. Support services and safe houses should be provided to the victims and stronger laws should be introduced to ensure quick and effective responses. Furthermore, engaging male community members in supporting DV prevention efforts is essential to fostering a more inclusive approach. Finally, it's important to regularly assess the effectiveness of these community engagement efforts and gather feedback from community members to continually improve and adapt the strategies for addressing DV.

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