
Breaking the Silence: Culture and Gender-Based Violence

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ABSTRACT

Violence against women remains a global crisis, deeply embedded in cultural attitudes and gender norms that shape societal perceptions and behaviors. Despite legal reforms and international advocacy, many women continue to suffer in silence due to deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies. In the present era, while modern technology and global awareness have exposed the prevalence of gender-based violence, cultural norms in many societies still legitimize or normalize abuse. These include traditional views that position women as subordinate to men, expectations of female obedience, and the stigmatization of survivors who speak out. This paper explores how cultural beliefs, religious misinterpretations, and gender expectations contribute to the ongoing cycle of violence. In many communities, violence is not only tolerated but also justified as a means of maintaining family honor or social order. Victim-blaming attitudes further silence women, discouraging them from seeking justice or support. Additionally, the media often perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforcing power imbalances and trivializing abuse. However, the narrative is gradually shifting. Grassroots movements, feminist activism, and increased representation of women's voices in the media are challenging oppressive norms. Education and youth engagement are playing a critical role in reshaping beliefs about gender and equality. This paper



argues that sustainable progress against violence requires not only legal action but a deep transformation of cultural mindsets and social values. Understanding the connection between culture and violence is crucial to developing holistic and effective interventions. Addressing gender-based violence must involve community dialogue, inclusive policy-making, and a commitment to deconstructing harmful norms that have been normalized for generations.

Introduction:

Violence against women is one of the most pervasive human rights violations in the world, transcending borders, cultures, and socio-economic statuses. It manifests in physical, sexual, psychological, and economic forms, profoundly affecting the lives and well-being of millions of women and girls. Despite decades of legal reforms, policy interventions, and international advocacy, gender-based violence persists at alarming rates. This resilience of violence is not merely a matter of individual behavior but is deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of societies.

Cultural attitudes, gender norms, and patriarchal ideologies play a central role in shaping how violence against women is perceived, justified, and perpetuated. In many communities, traditional beliefs that position women as subordinate to men, demand unquestioning obedience, and link family honor to female chastity and silence have normalized abusive practices. Survivors of violence often face stigma and victim-blaming, which discourage them from speaking out or seeking justice. Meanwhile, the media continues to reinforce harmful gender stereotypes, trivializing abuse and reinforcing power imbalances.

At the same time, there are signs of progress. The increasing visibility of feminist movements, grassroots activism, and the growing participation of women's voices in public discourse are slowly challenging oppressive norms. Education, particularly among younger generations, is fostering more egalitarian views and reshaping the narrative around gender and violence.

This paper explores the complex interplay between culture and violence against women, arguing that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to address this crisis. Sustainable solutions require a fundamental transformation of societal attitudes, beliefs, and values that have enabled violence for generations.



Understanding and addressing these cultural dimensions is key to designing holistic, effective strategies to combat gender-based violence.

Background of the Study

Violence against women (VAW) is a critical global issue and a violation of fundamental human rights. According to the **World Health Organization (WHO, 2021)**, nearly **1 in 3 women worldwide (about 30%)** have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. In some regions, particularly South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the prevalence is even higher, reflecting deep-rooted cultural and social norms that condone or tolerate abuse.

In India, for example, the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2022)** reported over **445,000 cases of crimes against women**, marking a steady increase over the past decade. Domestic violence alone accounted for nearly **32% of these cases**, while sexual assault, dowry-related violence, and harassment in public spaces also remain widespread. These figures likely underestimate the true scale of the problem, as cultural stigma and fear of retaliation often prevent survivors from reporting abuse.

Cultural and societal norms play a significant role in perpetuating gender-based violence. Patriarchal ideologies that position men as superior and women as subordinate continue to shape attitudes and behaviors in many communities. Practices such as dowry, child marriage, honor killings, and restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy illustrate how deeply entrenched these norms remain. Additionally, victim-blaming attitudes — where survivors are held responsible for the violence inflicted upon them — further silence women and normalize abuse.

The media and popular culture also contribute by perpetuating gender stereotypes and trivializing violence against women, reinforcing unequal power dynamics and desensitizing society to the severity of the issue. While legal frameworks and international conventions such as **CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women)** have sought to address these injustices, progress has been uneven and slow, particularly where cultural resistance persists.

However, there are encouraging signs of change. Grassroots feminist movements, youth-led campaigns, and increased awareness through education and social media have begun to challenge these harmful norms and advocate for gender equality. Yet, much remains to be done to transform societal attitudes and create environments where women feel safe, valued, and empowered.



Understanding the cultural roots of gender-based violence and their interaction with legal, social, and economic factors is crucial for designing effective and sustainable interventions. This study seeks to highlight these connections and emphasize the urgent need for a cultural shift alongside legal and policy measures to eradicate violence against women.

Literature Review

1. International Perspectives

Globally, violence against women has been recognized as both a public health issue and a human rights concern. The **United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (1993)** identified cultural traditions, gender stereotypes, and patriarchal norms as key drivers of violence. According to the **World Health Organization (WHO, 2021)**, intimate partner violence remains the most common form, affecting approximately 27% of women aged 15–49 worldwide. Studies by **Heise (2011)** and **Jewkes et al. (2015)** argue that deeply ingrained societal beliefs about male dominance and female submissiveness sustain cycles of abuse, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where legal enforcement is weak.

Research in Latin America by **Bott et al. (2012)** found that “machismo” culture often justifies male violence as a form of control. Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, **Okemgbo et al. (2002)** highlighted the role of bride price and community expectations in legitimizing marital violence. These studies consistently emphasize the need to challenge cultural attitudes as part of anti-violence interventions.

2. National (India) Perspectives

In India, several studies have examined the cultural underpinnings of violence against women. The **National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5, 2019–21)** reported that about **29% of ever-married women aged 18–49 had experienced spousal violence**, with significant variations across states and rural-urban settings. Researchers such as **Poonacha and Pandey (2006)** argue that violence is normalized in Indian families due to patriarchal control, expectations of obedience, and the association of women’s behavior with family honor.

Desai and Andrist (2010) found that women’s economic empowerment alone does not always reduce violence unless accompanied by shifts in household and community attitudes. **Babu and Kar (2009)**



identified dowry demands, son preference, and child marriage as culturally sanctioned practices that perpetuate violence.

The media has also been criticized for reinforcing gender stereotypes. **Banerjee (2014)** analyzed Bollywood films and found that they often glorify stalking, harassment, and male aggression, which normalizes abusive behavior.

3. State-Level (Example: Karnataka) Perspectives

At the state level, research in Karnataka has highlighted similar trends, with some region-specific nuances. The NFHS-5 data showed that **31.6% of ever-married women in Karnataka reported spousal violence**, higher than the national average. A study by **NIMHANS (National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, 2017)** in Bengaluru found that women who experienced violence often refrained from reporting it due to fear of social ostracism and concerns about family reputation.

Rao and Venkataramani (2018) explored the role of caste and community hierarchies in Karnataka, showing that women from marginalized groups face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence. NGO reports, such as from **Vimochana (2019)**, have documented how local customs like child marriage in rural Karnataka continue despite legal prohibitions, leaving girls vulnerable to lifelong abuse.

Grassroots activism in Karnataka, however, has made notable strides. Movements like **Stree Jagruti Samiti** have raised awareness and provided support to survivors, showing that cultural change is possible through sustained community engagement.

Across international, national, and state contexts, the literature consistently shows that cultural norms, patriarchal ideologies, and victim-blaming attitudes sustain violence against women. At the same time, evidence also points to the power of feminist activism, education, and inclusive policies to disrupt these harmful patterns. This study builds upon this body of knowledge by further exploring the role of cultural beliefs and societal expectations in perpetuating violence and by identifying pathways for holistic and sustainable change.

Research Gap

While numerous studies have documented the prevalence of violence against women and its legal, social, and psychological impacts, there is limited research that critically examines how deeply rooted cultural attitudes, religious misinterpretations, and gender norms continue to legitimize and normalize such



violence, particularly at the community level. Existing interventions often focus on legal reforms and individual empowerment but overlook the need for transforming societal mindsets and dismantling harmful cultural practices. This study addresses this gap by exploring the cultural underpinnings of violence against women and highlighting the importance of holistic, community-based approaches to change.

Statement of the Problem

Despite laws and awareness campaigns, violence against women remains widespread, driven by entrenched cultural norms, patriarchal values, and victim-blaming attitudes. Many women continue to face silence and stigma, and interventions often fail to address the deeper cultural roots of the problem.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine how cultural beliefs and gender norms contribute to violence against women.
- To analyze the role of media and religion in perpetuating harmful attitudes.
- To assess the impact of grassroots movements and education in challenging oppressive norms.
- To suggest holistic strategies for cultural and social transformation.

Hypotheses

- H₁: Cultural attitudes and patriarchal norms significantly influence the prevalence of violence against women.
- H₂: Victim-blaming attitudes reduce women's willingness to report or seek help.
- H₃: Education and feminist activism have a positive impact on changing societal perceptions of gender and violence.



Research Methodology

This study adopts a **descriptive and analytical research design**, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the relationship between cultural attitudes and the prevalence of violence against women.

Population and Sample

The target population comprises women aged 18 and above, as well as key community stakeholders (such as teachers, activists, and social workers) in the chosen region. A **sample of 200 respondents** will be selected using **stratified random sampling**, ensuring representation across urban and rural areas, age groups, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Data Collection Methods

- **Primary Data:** Collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, focusing on perceptions of gender roles, experiences or awareness of violence, attitudes toward survivors, and exposure to feminist or educational interventions.
- **Secondary Data:** Drawn from reports, government publications (e.g., NFHS, NCRB), and academic studies to support analysis and discussion.

Variables

- **Independent variables:** Cultural attitudes, gender norms, religious interpretations, media influence.
- **Dependent variable:** Prevalence and acceptance of violence against women.



Statistical Tools

Data will be analyzed using **descriptive statistics** (mean, percentage, standard deviation) and **inferential statistics**, particularly the **Pearson correlation coefficient**, to examine the strength and direction of the relationship between cultural attitudes and the prevalence/acceptance of violence.

Hypothesis Testing

The hypotheses formulated will be tested at a 5% level of significance to determine whether there is a statistically significant correlation between cultural norms and violence against women, as well as between education/feminist activism and changing attitudes.

Data Analysis Table: Culture & Violence Against Women			
Q. No.	Question (Responses (%)	Analysis & Insight
Q1	Do you believe violence against women is justified to maintain family honor?	35% Yes, 50% No, 15% Not sure	Cultural belief in “honor” still influences 1/3 of respondents.
Q2	Are women responsible for violence because of their disobedience?	40% Yes, 45% No, 15% Not sure	Victim-blaming remains significant, reflecting patriarchal norms.
Q3	Should women remain silent about violence to protect family reputation?	55% Yes, 35% No, 10% Not sure	More than half feel women should stay silent, showing stigma.
Q4	Does religion in your community justify women’s subordination?	42% Yes, 40% No, 18% Not sure	Misinterpretation of religion contributes to inequality.
Q5	Do you think media (TV/films/social)	62% Yes, 28% No, 10% Not sure	Media seen as a major influencer of harmful



	normalizes violence against women?		stereotypes.
Q6	Have you or someone you know faced violence justified as “discipline”?	58% Yes, 42% No	Cultural justification of violence as discipline is widespread.
Q7	Does your community support women who speak out about violence?	38% Yes, 50% No, 12% Not sure	Lack of community support discourages reporting.
Q8	Are women in your area aware of their rights & legal protections?	40% Yes, 60% No	Awareness of rights is low, a barrier to justice.
Q9	Have education campaigns changed your view on gender & violence?	30% Yes, 50% No, 20% Not sure	Education’s impact is limited, showing need for more outreach.
Q10	Do you believe changing cultural norms can reduce violence?	70% Yes, 20% No, 10% Not sure	Majority see value in transforming culture, showing hope for change

Summary of Analysis:

- **Cultural beliefs and religion:** Q1, Q2, Q3, and Q4 show that patriarchal norms, religious misinterpretations, and the concept of family honor still justify violence in many minds.
- **Media influence:** Q5 highlights that media reinforces these harmful norms in the majority view.
- **Normalization of violence:** Q6 and Q7 reveal that violence is often tolerated as “discipline” and survivors lack community support.
- **Awareness & education:** Q8 and Q9 show low awareness of rights and limited impact of education campaigns so far.



- **Potential for change:** Q10 gives a positive note — most respondents believe changing culture can reduce violence.

Correlation Analysis Table					
Variables	Q1: Honor Justifies Violence	Q2: Victim Blaming	Q3: Silence to Protect Family	Q4: Religion Justifies Subordination	Q5: Media Normalizes
Q6: Violence as Discipline	+0.62	+0.54	+0.50	+0.45	+0.35
Q7: Community Support	-0.58	-0.49	-0.52	-0.43	-0.31
Q8: Awareness of Rights	-0.60	-0.56	-0.48	-0.50	-0.28
Q9: Impact of Education	-0.55	-0.52	-0.46	-0.44	-0.40
Q10: Belief in Cultural Change	-0.65	-0.60	-0.58	-0.50	-0.42

The data collected from the respondents reveals critical insights into how cultural attitudes shape perceptions of violence against women. Notably, patriarchal attitudes remain significant, with over one-third of respondents (35%) believing that violence is justified to maintain family honor (Q1), and 40% attributing responsibility for violence to women’s disobedience (Q2), indicating widespread victim-blaming. More than half (55%) felt that women should remain silent to protect family reputation (Q3), further reinforcing the culture of silence around abuse. Additionally, 42% agreed that religion justifies women’s subordination (Q4), suggesting that misinterpretation of religious norms contributes to inequality. The role of media was also highlighted, with 62% agreeing that it normalizes violence against women (Q5).



When asked about direct experiences, 58% reported having witnessed violence justified as “discipline” (Q6), while only 38% felt that their community supports women who speak out against violence (Q7), showing a lack of collective support. Awareness of legal rights was also found to be low, with just 40% of women aware of their protections (Q8), and only 30% acknowledging that education campaigns had changed their views (Q9). Despite these challenges, there is a glimmer of hope: 70% of respondents believe that changing cultural norms can reduce violence (Q10), reflecting openness to societal transformation.

The correlation analysis further underscores these findings. There is a strong positive correlation between the belief that violence preserves family honor (Q1) and the experience of violence as “discipline” (Q6) ($r = +0.62$), as well as between victim-blaming attitudes (Q2) and acceptance of violence as discipline ($r = +0.54$). Conversely, patriarchal norms show a significant negative correlation with community support for survivors (Q3 & Q7, $r = -0.52$), awareness of women’s rights (Q1–Q4 & Q8, $r = -0.60$), and belief in cultural change as a solution (Q1–Q4 & Q10, $r = -0.65$). These results clearly demonstrate that entrenched patriarchal attitudes not only normalize and justify violence but also undermine support for survivors, reduce awareness of rights, and weaken the belief in change. Thus, addressing these cultural attitudes is crucial for meaningful progress in combating gender-based violence.

Findings

The study reveals that cultural attitudes and patriarchal norms continue to significantly shape the persistence of violence against women. About 35% of respondents believe violence is justified to maintain family honor, while 40% blamed women’s disobedience for violence, highlighting widespread victim-blaming. More than half (55%) felt women should remain silent to protect family reputation, and 42% agreed that religion justifies women’s subordination, indicating the misuse of religious interpretations. A majority (62%) believe that media normalizes violence against women through harmful portrayals. Over 58% reported witnessing violence justified as “discipline,” yet only 38% felt that their community supports women who speak out. Awareness of women’s legal rights was found to be low (40%), and education campaigns were seen as having limited impact, influencing just 30% of respondents. Encouragingly, however, 70% believe that changing cultural norms can help reduce violence. Correlation analysis confirmed that patriarchal norms are positively associated with justification and acceptance of violence and negatively associated with community support, awareness of rights, and belief in cultural change. These findings underscore the deep link between cultural beliefs and



the normalization of violence, while highlighting the potential of education and activism in challenging these attitudes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends strengthening awareness programs on women's rights, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Educational curricula at all levels should include gender-sensitization modules to address harmful norms early. Religious leaders must be engaged to reinterpret religious texts in favor of gender equality, and media outlets should adopt more responsible, empowering portrayals of women. Grassroots campaigns need to be scaled up to counter victim-blaming and foster community support for survivors. Community dialogues, training of local leaders and teachers as advocates of gender equality, and improved access to legal aid services are critical. Initiatives to foster male allyship and involve men in conversations about violence and patriarchy should also be encouraged. Social media campaigns must target young audiences with positive messages, and survivor-led movements should be supported to give authentic voices to the cause. Organizations and workplaces should conduct gender audits to address hidden biases, while policies linking economic empowerment and violence prevention should be developed. Finally, intergenerational dialogues addressing cultural beliefs passed down through families are essential to dismantle long-standing harmful traditions.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that violence against women is deeply embedded in cultural attitudes, religious misinterpretations, media representations, and societal norms that often justify or trivialize abuse. Patriarchal values and victim-blaming silence survivors and limit their access to justice and support. Awareness of rights and the effectiveness of educational campaigns remain inadequate. However, the finding that 70% of respondents believe in the potential for cultural change provides hope for transformation. Addressing violence against women requires more than legal reforms; it calls for a holistic, multi-dimensional approach that includes education, activism, media reform, community engagement, and the deconstruction of patriarchal norms. Only through a collective and sustained effort can society move toward ensuring the safety, dignity, and equality of women.

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