



## Statistical Decline, Lived Fear: The Paradox of Women's Safety in Assam

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### ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the persistent and multifaceted crisis of violence against women in India, with a regional focus on Assam. Despite official reports indicating a decline in cases of violence against women in Assam, this decrease masks ongoing challenges related to underreporting, irregularities, and systemic failures in investigation and justice delivery. Through an analysis of recent data and significant incidents, the study reveals how gender based violence permeates both urban and rural areas, underscoring deep rooted failures including inadequate policing, delayed judicial processes and fragmented support services. The discussion highlights persistent gaps in victim assistance, law enforcement, and judicial responsiveness, advocating for survivor centered approaches, increased political representation for marginalized women, and comprehensive legal reforms. Addressing this crisis requires sustained, multi-tiered interventions that challenge patriarchal structures and strengthen institutional accountability to ensure justice and safety for women in Assam.

### Introduction

In India, violence against women is not an aberration but an everyday reality, normalised, minimised, and frequently endured in silence. Despite an expanding legal framework, women continue to experience systemic neglect and social indifference. Globally, gender based violence remains one of the most



pervasive yet least adequately addressed human rights violations, affecting not only individuals but entire communities.

National crime data underscores this crisis. Crimes against women in India have steadily increased over the past three years, with the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) recording over 4.45 lakh cases in 2022, rising from 4.28 lakh in 2021 and 3.71 lakh in 2020 (The Economic Times, 2023). While this increase is often attributed to improved reporting and awareness, the data reveals enduring patterns: domestic cruelty constitutes the largest share of reported offences, followed by kidnapping, assault, and rape. These figures point to the persistence of violence across both private and public spaces.

Urban centres have drawn particular attention. In 2024, metropolitan cities such as Mumbai recorded a significant rise in crimes against women and children (Vijay Kumar Yadav, 2024), while Delhi continued to rank among the most unsafe cities for women (The Hindu, 2024). High profile cases such as the murder of Shraddha Walkar in 2022 (The Indian Express, 2024) and the rape and killing of a female doctor in Kolkata in 2024 (The Hindu, 2025) have triggered public outrage and episodic policy responses. Yet such moments of attention often obscure the routine, less visible forms of violence that rarely enter media discourse.

Beyond urban India, gendered violence assumes even more brutal forms. The 2023 incident in Manipur, where two Kuki-Zo women were stripped and paraded naked during ethnic violence (Sukriti Baruah, 2023), exposed how women's bodies are weaponised in contexts of conflict. The delayed institutional response to the incident highlighted not only the brutality of the act but also the structural indifference embedded within state mechanisms. This national landscape of impunity finds a sharp and troubling expression in Assam.

## **Materials and Methods**

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, drawing primarily on secondary sources data to understand the type and patterns of violence against women in Assam. The secondary data sources include NCRB reports, Government reports, judicial reports, journal articles, book chapters, articles published by Human Rights Commission, civil society organisations, newspaper reports, etc. Rather than treating crime data as neutral indicators, the study critically interprets them to assess state response, governance practices, and policy effectiveness in Assam.

## **Results**



The findings reveal that there exists a distinct and persistence pattern of violence against women in Assam. Even in the absence of a pronounced increase in NCRB data, the persistence of routine and varied forms of violence against women underscores the inadequacy of interpreting statistical stability as safety. Recent reports suggest an increase in human trafficking and domestic violence cases in Assam, highlighting ongoing vulnerabilities faced by women in the state. Media visibility often determines the urgency of state and legal responses, with high profile cases treated as exemplars of action. In contrast, cases involving women from vulnerable social locations that do not attract media attention are seldom addressed with similar seriousness, resulting in a persistent gap between institutional response and lived realities. Women remain markedly underrepresented in Assam's legislative and policing institutions. Greater inclusion of women in these spaces has the potential to improve representation and ensure more gender sensitive engagement with women victims.

### **Beyond the Statistics: Assam's Deepening Gender Crisis**

Assam has increasingly emerged as a hotspot of gender based violence, marked by rising cases of rape, domestic abuse, trafficking, kidnapping, and dowry related deaths. In the first two months of 2025 alone, the state reported 121 rape cases (The Assam Tribune, 2025), continuing a trend that saw incidents nearly double between 2020 and 2021. Domestic violence remains the most frequently reported crime against women (Parag Barman, 2016); approximately 37% of ever-married women between the ages of 18 and 49 in Assam have faced physical or sexual violence (NFHS-5, 2021).

Human trafficking presents a more covert yet deeply systemic form of violence. In Assam, trafficking cases rose sharply from 151 cases recorded in 2023 to 70 in 2024 (Tina Choudhury, 2024), reflecting the intersection of gendered vulnerability, porous borders, and organised criminal networks. Women from marginalised and economically precarious communities particularly in tea garden areas and border districts remain disproportionately affected. The concurrent rise in kidnappings and dowry deaths further illustrates the precarious conditions under which women live, especially in regions where access to justice and institutional protection remains fragile.

While the NCRB's 2022 report indicates a statistical decline in reported crimes against women in Assam, such figures offer only a superficial sense of progress. When juxtaposed with ground realities, they obscure more than they reveal. Incidents such as the acid attack on a mother in Cachar (The Sentinel, 2025) and the fatal stabbing of a woman in a busy Guwahati locality, Assam (The Assam Tribune, 2024) are not anomalies; they are symptomatic of a deeper failure to ensure women's safety in both public and



private spaces. These acts of public and excessive violence underscore how women's bodies continue to function as sites of control and impunity.

### **Gaps in Power, Cracks in Protection: Marginalised Women and the Gendered State**

Gender based violence in Assam reflects not isolated institutional lapses but enduring failures within governance structures. With conviction rates hovering below 5% (Mukut Das, 2023), the criminal justice system operates less as a deterrent and more as an obstacle to justice particularly for Adivasi, tribal, and minority women. Delayed investigations, prolonged trials, and inadequate victim protection expose an institutional indifference that extends beyond administrative inefficiency.

These failures are closely linked to women's underrepresentation within political and policing institutions. Women occupy less than 5% of seats in the Assam Legislative Assembly (Pal Deka, P. K. Chakravartty & K. Borah, 2022), while female police personnel constitute only 7.59% of the state police force (GPlus News, 2022). This profound gender imbalance reinforces a policing culture that remains masculine in both form and function. Although women police stations exist, their reach remains limited; Guwahati hosts the only such facility in the state. As documented by the North East Network (CHRI & NEN, 2016), these structural deficits contribute to mistrust and discourage women from reporting violence.

In regions where formal state mechanisms are weak, violence assumes extreme and culturally mediated forms, such as witch hunting. Far from being relics of superstition, these acts emerge at the intersection of patriarchy, land disputes, caste hierarchies, and community power structures (Baruah, 2025). Legal responses remain inconsistent, with justice often mediated through village elders whose authority supersedes formal procedures. Such practices expose the state's inability to translate constitutional equality into lived protection.

When Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) asked, "*Can the subaltern speak?*", she drew attention to those whose voices are structurally excluded from dominant systems of power. In Assam, the subaltern is embodied by Adivasi, tribal, minority, migrant, and rural women who experience violence at the intersection of gender, class, and community. These women do speak through police complaints, testimonies, and everyday negotiations, but their voices are routinely rendered inaudible by masculinised policing, bureaucratic delay, etc. There have been accounts indicating that some Adivasi women who approached the police regarding domestic violence were encouraged to resolve the matter informally rather than pursue legal action (Boruah, 2024a). The problem, therefore, lies not in articulation, but in the



state's persistent failure to listen. Allegations of abuse by police personnel within detention centres in Assam raise concerns about the treatment of women detainees and the broader conditions under which state custody may generate gendered harm (Choudhary, 2022).

### **Fragmented Delivery and Institutional Invisibility**

While Assam's legal and bureaucratic frameworks nominally endorse gender justice, implementation remains uneven (Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 2023). Besides, gains achieved in urban centres with regard to issues like domestic violence are rarely replicated in remote and marginalised districts, where infrastructural deficits and administrative understaffing weaken enforcement (NEN, 2015). Initiatives such as Standard Operating Procedures and women's cells exist, but lack the institutional depth and budgetary support required for sustained impact (Kumar, 2025). The fragmentation of service delivery further compounds these failures. In many districts, survivor support services, legal aid, counselling, shelter, and medical care, are primarily NGO-led and chronically understaffed. Survivors are often forced to navigate police, healthcare, and judicial systems independently, placing the burden of recovery on individuals rather than institutions. This absence of coordinated, survivor-centric mechanisms disproportionately affects rural, migrant, and economically marginalised women.

Reluctance to seek support is frequently misinterpreted as personal hesitation, but at times it is produced by systemic forces. Stigma, fear of disbelief, retraumatisation by insensitive officials, limited legal literacy, and the complexity of legal procedures collectively suppress reporting (Sahay, 2024). For many women, particularly from Adivasi and rural communities (Boruah, 2024b), institutional invisibility becomes a condition of everyday life.

### **Why Law Is Not Enough: State Responses to Gendered Violence in Assam**

The Assam government's response to violence against women continues to rely heavily on symbolic interventions and reactive legalism. While legislative measures and procedural reforms are periodically introduced, they remain disconnected from the structural realities documented across districts (The Assam Tribune, 2024). Addressing violence requires moving beyond surface level initiatives towards sustained, well-resourced institutional reform.

The routine use of NCRB data as evidence of administrative success exemplifies this disconnect. Crime statistics must function as diagnostic tools for prevention and policy innovation, not merely as records of incidence. In Assam, district wise trends should inform targeted interventions, resource allocation, and monitoring mechanisms. Equally, state response must not be contingent upon media visibility. Violence



against Adivasi, tea garden, migrant, and minority women demands the same immediacy and seriousness as high profile cases.

Crucially, the state must shift its focus from punitive expansion towards understanding everyday violence within homes, workplaces, and community spaces. Without engaging these routine and often invisible forms of harm, legal reforms will remain reactive, offering spectacle rather than security.

## Conclusion

The persistence of violence against women in Assam reflects entrenched structural inequalities and institutional fragmentation. Addressing violence against women requires sustained financial and institutional commitment. Adequate funding must be allocated to strengthen rehabilitation centres, helpline services, and non-governmental organisations providing legal, medical, and psychosocial support to survivors.

Community based awareness programmes, conducted in collaboration with local civil society organisations, are essential to challenge patriarchal attitudes that normalise violence within families and communities. Such initiatives should include education on gender equality and gender identities to foster more inclusive social norms.

Policies must also prioritise empowering women to break the silence surrounding gender based violence by addressing fear, stigma, and hesitation in reporting. Finally, an intersectional approach is crucial, recognising that women's experiences of violence vary across caste, class, ethnicity, and location, and that effective interventions must account for these overlapping lived realities.

Meaningful reform requires centring marginalised women's voices in policymaking, strengthening gender sensitive policing and judicial processes, and ensuring coordinated, survivor-centric service delivery. Justice cannot remain a rhetorical commitment. It must be realised through sustained political will, robust accountability, and institutional practices that recognise violence against women as a structural crisis rather than an episodic disruption.

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