

Ten Steps Forward and Three Steps Backward: A Journey toward Creating a Gender-Just and Violence-Free World

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Abstract

This paper explores the prevalence, patterns, and responses to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in India, with a particular focus on the work of Swayam, a feminist organization based in Kolkata. Drawing from national crime statistics and field experiences, it highlights the rising incidence of gender-based violence, and the systemic challenges survivors face in seeking justice. The paper identifies evolving patterns of backlash—ranging from economic retaliation, legal manipulation, and cyber abuse, to extreme physical violence—faced by women when they challenge patriarchal norms or assert their rights. Through detailed case studies, it illustrates how abusers exploit legal and institutional gaps to further victimize women. In response, Swayam employs a holistic, multi-level intervention strategy that includes direct survivor support, institutional advocacy, community engagement, awareness generation, and capacity building. Special emphasis is placed on engaging men and boys, and using innovative mediums for awareness generation such as public art, mobile awareness units, and short films. The paper argues that ending VAWG requires sustained efforts to dismantle patriarchal structures at individual, institutional, and societal levels, and presents Swayam’s model as a replicable framework for feminist intervention in other contexts.

Keywords: addressing gender-based violence, breaking gender stereotypes, fostering gender-justice, engaging men and boys within a feminist lens, changing patriarchal mindsets

Prevalence of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) in India

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) has consistently been increasing worldwide, and India is no exception. What we see is just the tip of the iceberg since many cases go unreported due to the shame and stigma associated with reporting and backlash from individuals, communities, and institutions (ESCAP, 2021), and also with ineffective implementation of laws and policies (Hughes, 2017). According to the latest statistics published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in India, prevalence of VAW in 2022 saw a rise of 4.0% compared to 2021 - from 428,278 cases in 2021 to 4,45,256 cases in 2022 (NCRB, 2022). Furthermore, in the year 2022, India recorded the highest number of crimes against

women ever, most of which included domestic violence, kidnappings and abduction, assaults, rapes and dowry deaths, while others included acid attacks, human trafficking, and cybercrimes.

Swayam, a Feminist Women's Rights Organization

Established in 1995 in Kolkata, India, Swayam has been working for the past 28 years to end discrimination and violence against women and their children, advance women's rights and facilitate women's empowerment with the vision of a non-discriminatory, violence free and equal society (Swayam, n.d.). On one hand, Swayam directly supports women survivors of violence, their children and families, empowering them and making them aware of their rights so they can lead violence-free lives. On the other hand, Swayam actively addresses gender inequality and patriarchal norms that are prevalent in our society through preventive strategies such as trainings and capacity building, research and publication, awareness programs, and networking and liaising with stakeholders.

Swayam takes a multi-pronged approach to addressing inequality and violence against women and their children and works at three broad levels: the individual, the institutional and the societal. This holistic approach is based on the understanding that discrimination and violence against women is a structural problem that has its roots in patriarchal ideology and cannot be resolved unless we work with institutions and structures that perpetuate this ideology. At the same time, individual women need support at multiple levels to overcome the issues that they face. We therefore need to work both within and outside the home to create an environment where violence against women is unacceptable.

Working at the individual level with survivors is important not only to provide them support to move out of situations of violence, but also to help them recognize that the abuse they face is part of a larger patriarchal structure that perpetrates violence against women. Our work at the individual level empowers women to question these attitudes and fight for their rights. Also, Swayam provides survivors of violence a variety of tailor-made support services to facilitate recovery, mitigate the impact of the violence, and foster self-dependence. For instance, a comprehensive and integrated mental health and legal intervention provides women the holistic support they require.

Working at the institutional level is essential to change overarching patriarchal attitudes. It is necessary to ensure that laws and policies are fair to create gender-just and violence-free societies where women participate fully in social, economic, and public life. Swayam engages at the institutional level with the legislative and legal systems, the police, other state agencies, and like-minded groups to build capacity and to push for socio-legal and policy changes.

Social condemnation and community support are essential if we want to end violence against women. Work at the community level includes influencing public opinion and action through education and awareness; producing and sharing information and expertise; and motivating women, men, and youth in rural and urban communities to address violence against women in their own spaces.

Nature and Patterns of VAWG

Global feminist efforts have resulted in positive changes worldwide. VAWG is being recognized globally; there has been increased reporting by women survivors, pro-women laws are being set up, stakeholders are now more sensitized and aware and support services for women are being instituted. However, these positive changes, which are resulting in more and more women speaking up against the violence and discrimination they are facing, are

posing a threat to the patriarchal status-quo within families, institutions, and societies. Consequently, this has resulted in a surge of backlash against the feminist movement at both the individual and the institutional level. This paper examines the ever-changing patterns of violence and backlash, in India, that Swayam has recognized over the years while working directly with survivors. It also sheds light on how Swayam, as a feminist organization, attempts to counter all forms of backlash. Some common patterns that we have identified through our work include the following:

- Informal and formal sources have recorded an increase in incidents of sexual harassment of women at work. This increase is linked to more women directly engaging in formal work, becoming economically empowered and challenging patriarchal norms. Exerting control over women in the workplace is a direct example of violence being practiced on women who are becoming economically empowered. In many instances, if women take action and file a complaint, they are cornered at their workplace and face hostility from the abuser as well as other co-workers. As a result, their job performance is adversely affected and the backlash becomes even more amplified if the abuser is in a powerful position within the hierarchy of the institution. While facing the complaints committee, women often experience character assassination and immense pressure to withdraw the case.
- In situations of intimate partner violence, we have observed that the abuser often uses the child to harass the woman, the moment she decides to take action against him. In one such instance, when the woman filed for maintenance, the husband absconded with his 14-year-old daughter to a different state. In another case, where the woman was non-working and the husband earned well, he bought his daughter expensive gifts to manipulate her into thinking that he loved her more than her mother did.
- Over the years, while providing holistic support to women, we have been working closely with law-enforcement agents such as the police, protection officers, and the judiciary. This has resulted in a working partnership with various state agencies to which we can turn for support or follow-up in different cases. However, this is only true for most of the urban geography that we work in. When women want to take action in peri-urban and rural areas, there is immense resistance and non-cooperation from law-enforcers, who refuse to accept complaints, disbelieve the women, and often pressure them to succumb to the abusive situation. In terms of the judiciary, for example, in one case where the woman filed for maintenance and the husband was not paying, an arrest warrant was issued in his name. However, the order had a condition that if the perpetrator is arrested, he can be released after paying just a mere Rs. 1000. Thus, the police were not motivated to arrest the perpetrator as the penalty was meagre.
- A very common form of backlash on women taking action is that the moment they file a case for maintenance or relief from domestic violence, the abuser files fake counter cases against her family members or loved ones to blackmail her and pressure her to withdraw her case. For example, a woman filed a court case against her husband under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (a quasi-civil law in India, passed in 2005); consequently, he filed a criminal case against her younger brother and parents, falsely claiming they had physically assaulted him.
- Another trend that we are recently facing is that when a woman files a legal case and the court passes an order that the abuser has to pay her a monthly maintenance or a one-time compensation, the abuser refuses to pay. Oftentimes, despite an arrest warrant being issued in his name for not complying with the court's order, the abuser tells

the woman that he prefers getting arrested than paying compensation to the woman. In a particular scenario, the woman had filed both a criminal case as well as a civil case against her abusive husband. The court ruled in her favour and ordered the husband to pay her a monthly maintenance. When he failed to comply, he was arrested. However, even after being arrested, he claimed that he would rather be in judicial custody than give her a single penny.

- During the COVID-19 lockdown, as the usage of the virtual space increased tenfold, we noticed technology being misused to abuse women in the form of cyber-crimes, including revenge porn, online tracking, morphing of images, character assassination on social media, etc. We have been experiencing an increasing number of women approaching us due to cyber-crimes where the perpetrator is either an intimate partner or a family member. In one such instance, after the women filed for a domestic violence case, the husband circulated their intimate videos among the survivor's family and friends via WhatsApp.
- Trying to prove that women survivors are mentally ill is a very common form of violence and backlash used to control women. We have had so many women whose partners have tried to prove in court that they are of unsound mind by creating false psychiatric documents or bringing up the woman's history of seeking mental health counselling or therapy. In one case, where a young girl was gang-raped, the defence lawyer tried to establish in court that she has a history of mental illness and that the incident of rape never really occurred and was merely a hallucination on her part. In another instance, when a survivor of domestic abuse filed a court case against her husband, he bribed a psychiatrist to create a fake medical prescription for his wife stating that she is mentally ill and requires immediate medical care. Fortunately, she managed to get in touch with Swayam and another mental health organization and was rescued from that situation.
- Denying women their property rights is another very common form of violence. After a woman gets married, she faces violence in her marital home, and whenever she wants to return to her natal home, she is often unwelcome and abused, and is sometimes even asked by her brothers or other male members to leave the house. In addition, husbands often take advantage of women's weak status in patriarchal societies to deny their wives residential rights in their marital home.
- A major form of violence that has been emerging across the nation is the severity, gruesomeness and heinousness of sexual crimes as well as other forms of violence on women. Rapes and gang-rapes, filming the assault or rape and circulating it and brutally murdering the woman so that she can never speak up, and/or to teach her and other women a lesson, have become common. In a case that came to us a few years ago, a group of boys had tried to rape a girl who was 14 years old. However, for some reason they were unable to do so. As such, the boys threw her on the railway tracks and beat her so mercilessly that her spine was severely damaged. After a few years of struggle, she was unable to survive the incident and passed away. In another incident, a 23-year-old woman approached us for support. She had received an offer letter for a government job. Since she would be earning more than her husband, he felt threatened and, in retaliation, he chopped off her right hand while she was asleep so that she would never be able to work again. However, her resilience prevailed and with the help of our organization, she not only earned the job, but worked to improve her mental health, accessed state support for a prosthetic hand and is currently following up her legal case in court against her husband and the other perpetrators.

- When survivors decide to speak up against the abuse they are facing, abusers often try to threaten or intimidate them into silence and defame them using various social media platforms. In many cases, we have seen abusers defaming and harassing women in their workplace. Taking advantage of the social shame and stigma women are constantly faced with, spreading rumours about her character among neighbours and the community are also very common tactics used by abusers to try and stop women from taking action.
- A type of violence that we as an organization have been facing in our rural community is from community members and local political parties while intervening in cases of child marriage. In many cases, when we directly try to intervene in a case of child marriage, there is the possibility of facing hostility and violence from the families involved as well as from other community members. Such instances sometimes become a life threat for our community workers, and we are often faced with the dilemma of how to tackle these social evils while also ensuring the safety of staff members.
- Over the years, backlash against the women's rights movement from men's groups across the nation have become more frequently visible. When the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act came into being in 2005, men's groups came into existence to talk about protecting men's rights and the impact that the misuse of women centric laws can have on Indian families. Such groups often claim to protect the values of the traditional family. This brings us directly to the rolling back of women centric laws and amendments made to existing laws as classic examples of backlash against the feminist movement. Many of our laws such as the Prevention of Child Sexual Offences Act and the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act have clauses that specify severe penalties for false complaints. This deters many women from coming forward with incidents of abuse as they are scared of not being able to prove their claims. Recently, there has been a lot of debate and questions around women misusing laws. As a result of this, the law on cruelty by husband and marital family members was weakened and no longer has the compulsory arrest clause as a pre-requisite. The veracity of the complaint now must be checked first before any arrest can be made. As a result, there have been serious implications for women seeking justice through the legal route.

An Interventionist Approach to Countering Violence Against Women and Anti-Feminist Backlash

Over the years, Swayam has adopted certain strategies to counter the multi-levels of violence and backlash against gender-rights. As seen above, since the patterns of violence and backlash keep changing, we are constantly learning from them and adapting our interventions to meet the needs of survivors. Most of these strategies also feed into the preventive work that we do around the year. Our primary strategy involves countering violence and anti-feminist backlash in a holistic manner. This section will elaborate upon the different interventions we have adopted to enable women survivors to seek justice.

Capacity Development and Sensitization

Swayam has always believed that knowledge shared is knowledge amplified. Hence, a major component of our preventive work is capacity development. We share our expertise with stakeholders like the police, other state/ institutional actors, community members, civil society representatives, students, youth, educational institutions, and corporates – through workshops, trainings, and other awareness sessions. This will ensure that women survivors receive appropriate support when they fight for their rights, by facilitating violence-free and gender-equal environments in all social institutions.

Networking and Liaising with Stakeholders

The power of the collective is necessary in fighting violence and backlash. Swayam collaborates with like-minded organizations and networks and engages with state agencies at the local and global levels to advance women's empowerment and ensure effective implementation of gender-just laws, policies, and services. For example, as a result of networking and advocacy, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005) came into being in our country, which is a single Act that provides five kinds of relief (protection, maintenance, compensation, right to residence and interim custody of child) to women seeking justice from domestic abuse. Networks that we are part of at the state and national levels include a women's rights network at the state level, a network against child-marriage, a national network working on domestic violence prevention and awareness, a network on anti-child sexual abuse and harm, and a South Asian feminist network. Very recently, Swayam along with Breakthrough in India and Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW) in Malaysia have formed a Pan Asia Network on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) prevention and response. Participation in and collaboration with networks that tackle VAWG in different spaces ensures that no stone is left unturned in our fight against GBV.

Publication and Research

Creation and dissemination of information that increases awareness on VAWG is crucial in countering violence and backlash. Swayam develops and produces information in the form of annual reports, quarterly magazines, calendars, brochures, leaflets, and posters on relevant issues for public consumption. These help in shaping public opinion on VAWG. We also occasionally engage in action-based research which is very important for us to be able to analyse the changing trends of gender-based violence in the society. Over time, we have realized that any publication material has to be visually appealing, non-threatening, and thought-provoking in order to be able to speak to the masses. Any messaging that is directive and tells an individual what to do or not to do is often faced with a lot of resistance. Hence, the content not only needs to be positively framed but should also appeal to the audience in an interesting and creative way. Short films on relevant issues have been a great way for us to be able to reach out to a wider audience base.

Awareness Generation

Swayam strongly believes that educating society on the adverse impact of patriarchy is key to changing mindsets and enabling violence-free spaces. In light of this, we conduct regular public awareness programmes to promote women's rights, prevent discrimination and violence against women and girls, and motivate public action. Once again, over the years, we have realized that innovation is key. We have started using public art to showcase and highlight the voices of survivors of violence and to generate public discussion on social issues. For example, groups of men and women have come together to conceptualize and create wall art designs around issues of sexual violence, dowry, child marriage, etc. We have also been traveling across the city with our mobile van that features various pro-gender equality messaging on it, that travels around the city and the districts spreading awareness among the common masses. These awareness initiatives aim to provide knowledge to individuals across all social groups, as a way to tackle violence and backlash faced by women survivors of violence.

Working with Communities

In our rural and peri-urban communities, we work with both women and girls, and men and boys to build their leadership skills and equip them with the tools to challenge patriarchal social norms, promote gender equality, and prevent VAWG to build gender-just and violence-free communities. Swayam has been working intensively with men and boys in

communities since the last eight years because we believe that the problem of violence and inequality cannot be resolved unless we change their mindsets. Initially, the work had begun hoping to engage men and boys to become allies of the women's rights movement. However, over time we realized that patriarchy also has a negative impact on their lives and we must work toward the overall betterment of communities as a whole. With this in mind, we engage groups of men and boys to play an active role in creating gender-equal and violence and discrimination-free communities by providing them with information, building their capacities, and ensuring their ownership and agency in the cause. Men and boys' group members whom we have been working with consistently over the years have not only been able to bring about changes in the stereotypical gender roles and power dynamics of their own households, but are also actively intervening in cases of violence and discrimination in their localities and taking active measures to generate more awareness among other community members. The biggest example of men taking leadership was during COVID-19, when our community leaders went above and beyond to ensure the wellbeing of their community members.

Conclusion

Swayam has been one of the pioneers in addressing VAWG in Kolkata, the surrounding districts of West Bengal, and even at the national and international levels. The vision of achieving a violence-free world can be fulfilled by not only providing holistic support to women survivors, their children and families, but by also changing patriarchal mindsets and creating spaces and communities that foster gender-equal practices. First, this paper brought to light some common patterns of violence and backlash that women face when seeking justice, often hindering access to their rights and entitlements. Second, it presented some of the good practices and innovative strategies that organizations like Swayam have adopted over the years to counter violence and backlash and empower women and communities in India.

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