

Gender Violence & Crime against Women in India: A Feminist discourse

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Abstract: Present conversation would focus on few severe forms of violence against women. The discussion is central to Indian society. Few forms of crime like dowry death, honour killing and acid attack on women have been considered for the discussion. Further, within this gamut of domestic violence, rape, marital rapes, gendercide in few forms are included in the present discourse. A feminist interpretation on violence examining various broader spectrums of violence and crime against women would be the major thrust of the paper. Underpinning structural discrepancy for gender issues that result in violence would be the moot contention of present debate across all creed, community, class or age factors.

Keywords: Domestic violence, gender, violence, women, honour killing, dowry death, acid attack.

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Introduction: Violence against women - An overview

The discussion of violence and its gendered aspects indeed affects both men and women. But the ways it manifests with underlying causes may differ significantly due to societal structures like patriarchy and misogyny. These structures can normalize and even justify violence against women, making it a pervasive social issue. Normalization of violence in male dominated society is seen across the globe. For example, classical arts e.g., JJ Grandville's 'Cent Proverbs' (Watson 1997) illustration "Qui amie bien chatie bien" exemplifies historical rationalization of mistreatment of women. Historically, discussions on violence have often overlooked the specific ways in which women experience violence due to entrenched gender inequalities. Thus, discussing about violence without considering gender, often defaults to a perspective shaped by male experiences and norms, that can be incomplete or biased.

The mainstream feminist view asserts that violence is rooted in structural inequality of gender relation under patriarchy. Cockburn C(2004) argues "...Gender power shapes the dynamic of every interaction". Long-term relationships under patriarchy reinforce victim's perception of partner control. This way, gender norms are formed and shaped by power structures.

In India like any other patriarchal society, violence is intricately tied to gender relations. The social structure perpetuates various forms of violence against women. Media, has been making

headlines in visual and print news in reporting various gruesome cases of gender based crimes like sexual harassment, rape, physical abuse, honour killing, dowry death etc. which have unfortunately become normalized. The frightening narratives (collage enclosed) of these crimes, committed in the name of honor, revenge or greed talk about barbarity, primitive and misogynist mindset of the masses.

Central to this analysis is the recognition that these forms of violence are not just individual acts of cruelty but systemic issues that reflect broader spectrum of power dynamics and entrenched cultural attitudes. It also underscores the failure of societal structures to protect women and challenge prevailing gender norms. These norms not only reflect societal expectations but also contribute to maintaining unequal power relations between genders reinforcing gender violence.

Focus of the present discourse:

Present conversation delves into few severe forms of violence against women prevalent in Indian society, such as dowry deaths, honor killings, and acid attacks. It also encompasses broader issues like domestic violence, rape, marital rape, and gendercide. A feminist lens is engaged to highlight how these forms of violence are rooted in structural discrepancy and gender inequalities. The discussion spans across various creed, community, class, and age, emphasizing the urgent need to address and mend these pervasive issues driven by deep-rooted patriarchal and cultural beliefs.



Methodology:

The present paper is descriptive in nature. A secondary data base content analysis has been considered for the discourse. The discourse is substantiated by cases available from visual and print media, governmental reports, NGO documents and other relevant publications.

Discussion:

Gender-based violence remains a critical issue in India, with rape and dowry deaths being among the most prevalent forms. In 2021,

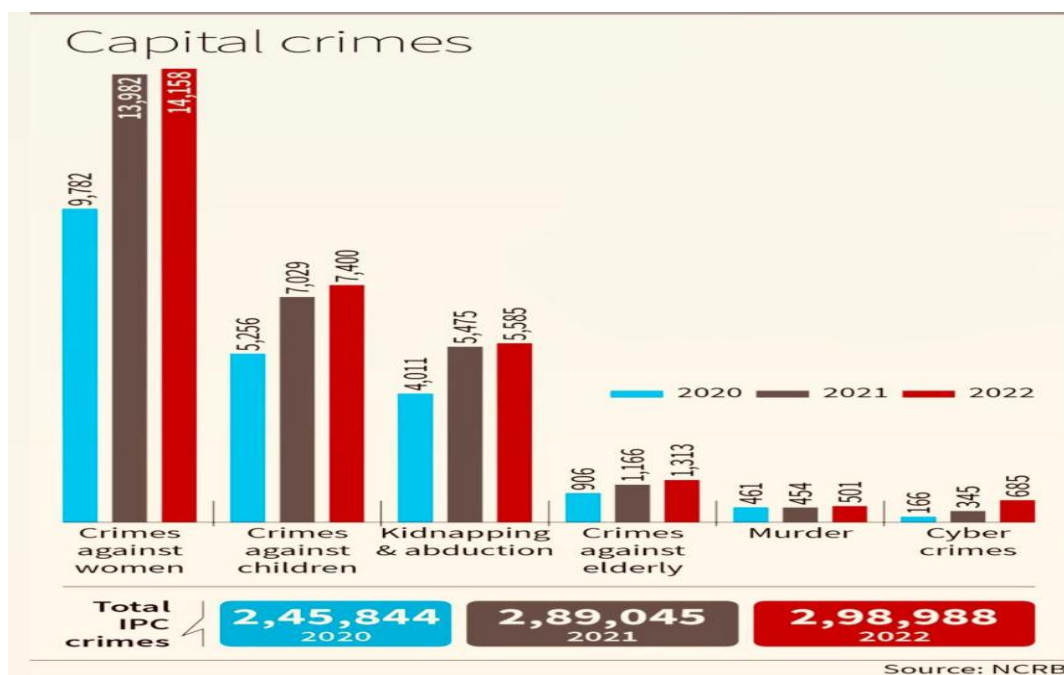
India recorded 31,677 rape cases, averaging 86 per day, reflecting a persistent crisis (NCRB). Crimes like molestation, eve-teasing, and kidnapping occur at alarming rates, making India one of the most unsafe places for women. A 2019 survey reported 400,000 rape cases in Delhi alone. Victims often face societal shame rather than perpetrators, exacerbating the trauma. Despite slight fluctuations in statistics, the overall trend highlights the urgent need for stronger legal measures and social reforms to protect women.



Figure no.1 Violence against Women in India 2022-2024

Victims of rape in India often face pressure from local police to withdraw complaints, while trials remain traumatic. In conflicts like communal riots or war, women are targeted as acts of revenge. For example, Manipur violence (NDTV, August 2023) highlights deep-rooted misogyny, reflecting a grave societal and systemic concern.

Following graph presents nature and extent of crime against women in India in past three years (2020-24)



Source, figure I., NCRB, 2022,

Following section would highlight three severe forms of violence and crimes against women in India:

1. **Domestic Violence:** The first known use of the term domestic violence in a modern context meaning violence in the home, was initially addressed to the parliament of UK by Asley, J(1973) The term used primarily during civil unrest. It stated that domestic violence from and within a country as opposed to international violence perpetrated by a foreign power.

Domestic violence (DV) in India extends beyond physical abuse to include sexual, psychological, and economic violence, often justified by patriarchal norms. Many offenders believe they have the right to control and punish female family members, reinforcing a culture of entitlement. Indian society largely normalizes DV, perpetuating an intergenerational cycle where violence becomes a learned and accepted behavior. This societal acceptance makes it difficult for victims to seek justice, further embedding misogynistic power structures. As the UN (September 23, 2023) emphasizes, addressing DV requires comprehensive legal and social interventions to challenge deep-rooted beliefs and break the cycle of abuse.

In many households, sons learn from fathers that coercion and violence against women are forms of discipline, normalized by society. Misogyny is so deeply ingrained that men often fail to see themselves as abusers, dismissing violence as mere family conflict. Acts like slapping, kicking, or beating are viewed as temporary expressions of frustration rather than chronic patterns of control. The UN (2023) redefined domestic violence post-COVID as intimate violence aimed at maintaining power over a partner, highlighting its systemic nature.

Abuse manifests in physical, sexual, emotional, economic, and psychological forms, often involving threats, intimidation, or manipulation. It affects individuals across all demographics, occurring in marriages, cohabitation, and dating relationships. Domestic violence is a pervasive societal issue, transcending socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Forms of violence such as intimate partner abuse, gendercide, marital rape, and economic deprivation fall under domestic violence. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this crisis, with complaints rising over 30%, from 23,700 in 2020 to 30,800 in 2021 (NCW, 2021). Violence within homes remains a pressing issue, demanding urgent legal, social, and policy interventions to protect victims.

Honor Killing: Honor killing, also known as shame killing, occurs when individuals reject arranged marriages or marry outside their caste or religion. Rooted in punitive patriarchal values, it thrives in societies with rigid socio-cultural norms, where defiance is met with deadly consequences to uphold perceived family honor.

Khap panchayats and kangaroo courts enforce rigid caste and religious norms, justifying honor killings to uphold group honor. Despite legal penalties, such killings persist, clashing with modern legal frameworks. In *Shakti Vahini vs Union of India* (2018), the Supreme Court directed authorities to take preventive and punitive measures, affirming that khap panchayats hold no authority beyond the Indian Penal Code.

Interfaith and lower-caste marriages are often condemned, leading to extreme measures. Men within families instigate such killings, enforcing rigid societal norms. Defined under IPC Section 299 as culpable homicide, honor killings remain a growing concern, contradicting India's democratic ideals. These crimes occur not just in rural areas but also in urban centers, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive legal and social reforms to combat this deep-rooted issue.

The National Crime Records Bureau reported 25 honor killing cases in 2020, though many go unregistered due to fear. An NGO revealed 195 cases in Tamil Nadu (2015–2019) (Frontline, 2020). Between 2017 and 2019, India recorded 145 incidents. Uttar Pradesh held the highest number of honor killings and love-affair-related murders in 2015. India recorded 192 honor killing cases, with 76.6% in Uttar Pradesh (TOI, 2016). DHRD.Net and NCWL documented caste-based honor killings in Haryana, Gujarat, Bihar, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh. Human rights groups and anti-caste NGOs documented rising honor killings in India, with no legislative or social remedies. Analyzing 24 cases (2012–2021), they found victims faced extreme violence—kidnapping, coercion, confinement, and assault—before being killed for defying family opposition to their consensual relationships or marriages.

A few cases could be exclusively cited as below:

Rajasthan, March 2021, 5th March, WIRE) – Caste-based violence continues to claim lives across India. In Dausa district, a father murdered his 19-year-old daughter for eloping with her Dalit partner. In Muzaffarpur, Bihar (July 2022), a 17-year-old Dalit boy was brutally beaten to death, with his genitals cut off, by the family of his Brahmin girlfriend. In Punjab (October 2021), a newlywed inter-caste couple was killed by the woman's relatives in Fazilka district. In Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh (November 2021), a 55-year-old man raped his daughter and killed her along with her six-month-old baby to avenge the “disgrace” of her inter-caste marriage. Similarly, in Aurangabad, Maharashtra (December 2021), a 17-year-old boy beheaded his 19-year-old sister for marrying a man of her choice.

In Uttar Pradesh's Sitapur (7th May, 2023, NDTV), a man allegedly murdered his niece for marrying outside her caste. Similarly, in Tamil Nadu June, 2022 (14th June, Times of India) a man's sister was killed as revenge for his inter-caste marriage. In Punjab's Barnala (21st May, 2023, Indian Express), two lovers were found dead under suspicious circumstances. In Madhya Pradesh's Morena district, (19th June, Hindustan Times, 2023), a father killed his daughter and her lover, disposing of their bodies in a crocodile-infested river. Ghaziabad witnessed (TOI, 3th November, 2022), the murder of a 20-year-old woman, allegedly by her father, over a love affair. In Karnataka (9th June, 2023 The Hindu), a 17-year-old tribal girl was strangled by her father for dating a lower-caste boy. Haryana's Rohtak (June, 2023, 20th The Hindu) saw a woman's honor killing disguised as a suicide. These cases highlight the persistence of caste and honor-based

violence, where families resort to extreme measures to uphold societal norms, often at the cost of their own kin's lives.

Note: These cases expose deep-rooted caste prejudices and patriarchal violence in India. Despite constitutional rights, honor crimes persist, lacking specific legislation. Stronger enforcement and cultural change are crucial to ending caste-based violence.

Dowry Death: The dowry system remains a misogynistic practice fueling gender-based violence in India. Despite legal prohibitions, around 7,000 women die annually due to dowry-related killings. This practice leads to harassment, humiliation, and suicides, highlighting deep-rooted patriarchy and materialism in marital expectations.

The dowry system, or *dahej pratha*, originated in the post-Vedic era as a voluntary gesture (*Varadakshina*) meant to provide security (*Shreedhan*) for daughters. Initially intended to support a woman's dignity in marriage, it later transformed into a mandatory financial burden. Over centuries, dowry became a tool for exploitation, where wealth and material possessions overshadowed familial customs. This shift reinforced gender inequality, making dowry a prerequisite for marriage and leading to the commodification of women. The societal expectation of dowry fuelled son preference, as grooms' families saw marriage as an income source. This distorted system perpetuates extortion, violence, and dowry deaths, highlighting entrenched patriarchal norms and the urgent need for cultural and legal reforms.

Addressing dowry deaths requires legal reforms, education, and cultural shifts toward gender equality. Initiatives like *The 50 Million Missing Campaign*, launched by Rita Banerjee in 2006, raise global awareness against gendercide and dowry deaths. Government and non-government organizations also run advocacy programs to combat this misogynistic practice. However, despite awareness efforts, dowry deaths persist as a deep-rooted cultural issue, threatening women's lives and highlighting the urgent need for stronger enforcement and societal transformation.

Few latest cases of dowry death cases in Indian News media provides gruesome nature of violence and dowry death as below:

1. Kerala, Kollam, 2022 (24th May, NDTV): Vismaya, a medical student who hanged herself at her home in Kerala's Kollam district. Kiran Kumar, husband of Vismaya was sentenced to jail, six years for abetting Vismaya's suicide; two years for dowry harassment; six years for taking dowry and one year for demanding dowry—"The sentences would run concurrently," the court said.
2. Rajasthan, Jaipur, 2022. (June 08th, Times of India): In a tragic incident near Jaipur, three sisters—Alu, Kamlesh, and Mamta—along with their children, were found dead in a well. They left a WhatsApp message (We don't wish to die but death is better than their abuse,"), blaming their in-laws for the deaths, citing ongoing abuse over dowry. Both Kamlesh and Mamta were pregnant.
3. Haryana, Noida, 2022 (3rd July, Times Now): In the Gharbara village in Greater Noida's Ecotech-1 area, Ravi, the accused, a resident of sector-36 Greater Noida, during a dispute between them

over dowry killed his wife. He had slit his wife Kajal's throat with an axe.

4. UP, Muzaffarnagar, 2022 (19th February, NDTV): In Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, a woman's body was exhumed due to allegations of dowry death. Gulista Begum's family accused her in-laws of beating her to death over a dowry demand of 22 lakh rupees and a motorcycle. Police have initiated a post-mortem and investigation into this tragic incident.

5. Maharashtra, Mumbai, 2023 (27th January, The Print): A 33-year-old former fireman in Mulund received a life sentence for setting his wife on fire after dowry harassment. The victim's mother testified that he demanded 1 lakh rupees as dowry during their marriage, which she could not fulfill.

6. Haryana, Panipat, 2023, (26th March, Times of India): A 28-year-old man has been given life imprisonment by the Panipat court in a 2019 case of dowry death. A woman had hanged herself to death within 15 months of her marriage due to constant harassment over dowry.

7. Haryana, Yamunanagar, 2023, (21st September, TOI): The police have registered a case of murder and dowry death against five persons of a family, after a woman, daughter of a Haryana police officer, died allegedly after consuming poisonous substance in Yamunanagar district on Wednesday.

8. Karnataka, Hyderabad, 2023, (7th July, The Hindu Bureau): Seetal, 31, died by suicide in Chandanagar, reportedly due to harassment by her husband and in-laws for more dowry. Her husband demanded 1 lakh rupees from her parents and restricted her from visiting them, despite receiving 2.5 lakh rupees and one tola gold during their arranged marriage.

9. Bihar, Patna, 2023 (4th August, Times of India): A 35-year-old woman was found dead in suspicious condition in her house at Bhikhachak locality under Gardanibagh police station in Patna on Wednesday night. The deceased was identified as Soni Kumari. Woman's brother Gorakh Kumar registered a case of murder against her husband, Lallu Ram and his family members for killing Soni for dowry over Rs 5 lakh.

The objectification of women, rooted in socio-cultural norms, continues to fuel dowry-related violence in India. Despite legal measures like the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and IPC Section 304B(2), dowry-related violence persists in India due to deep-rooted patriarchy. Dowry deaths highlight the gap between law and enforcement. Strengthening legal action, raising awareness, and challenging societal norms are crucial to eradicating this injustice. True change requires a cultural shift toward gender equality, ensuring women's safety and dignity in marriage.

2. **Acid attacks** on young women are a brutal form of gender-based violence, driven by male superiority and control. Attackers, often fuelled by rejection or vengeance, aim to disfigure and instil fear, leaving victims with lifelong physical and psychological scars. Despite legal provisions like Section 326A of the IPC, these crimes persist across all social classes in India. The normalization of such violence reflects deep-seated patriarchy. Combating this requires stricter enforcement, survivor rehabilitation, and societal re-education to challenge toxic masculinity. A cultural shift promoting gender respect and equality is essential to end acid attacks and ensure women's safety and security.

The National Commission for Women of India, through the Prevention of Offenders (by Acid) Act, 2008 (Section 3) and IPC Section 326B, defines acid as any substance with acidic, corrosive, or burning properties capable of causing bodily harm, scars, or disability. Acid attacks involve throwing or using acid with the intent or knowledge of causing permanent or partial damage, deformity, or disfigurement. These laws aim to criminalize acid attacks, ensuring stricter punishment and justice for victims while addressing this heinous gender-based violence.

Acid attacks are often acts of revenge by men against women who reject marriage proposals, relationships, or sexual advances. Rooted in a misogynistic, male-dominated culture, such attacks reflect deep-seated patriarchal conditioning. When denied control, some men resort to horrific violence, using acid to disfigure women as a means of punishment. The first recorded case in India occurred in 1982 in Assam, where a husband threw acid on his wife. These attacks are not limited to strangers—many are committed within families. Some men use acid as a tool of power and control, punishing women who defy societal norms. While the intent may not always be to kill, the goal is to leave the victim permanently scarred, forcing her to live in fear and isolation.

Acid attack victims in India are mostly young women aged 11-30, often targeted in public places like roads, schools, and colleges. Commonly used acids include sulphuric, nitric, and hydrochloric acid. Between 2014 and 2018, 1,483 cases were reported, with 386 more between 2018 and 2022. On average, 370 cases occur annually, with West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh accounting for nearly 50% of cases. Shockingly, 76% of offenders are known to victims. Despite complaints being filed, actual cases may be underreported, and convictions remain low, highlighting the need for stricter enforcement and better support for survivors.

Deepika Padukone's **Chhapaak** highlighted how easily acid can be purchased in India, with 24 bottles acquired in Mumbai alone. Weak regulations on acid sales and delayed justice worsen the crisis. NCRB data shows rising acid attack cases, with 773 scheduled for trial in 2021, up from 662 in 2020 and 530 in 2019. Strengthening laws and ensuring swift justice are crucial to curbing this heinous crime (Rai, India Today, 15th December 2022).

Few prominent recent cases as cited below:

1. A 17-year-old girl in Delhi's Dwarka was attacked with acid by two men on a motorbike while on her way to school. CCTV footage led to the arrest of Sachin Arora, Harshit Agrawal, and Virendra Singh. Sachin, the key accused, targeted her after their breakup. The acid was purchased from Flipkart, as per police reports.
- 2 Delhi, 2022, (16th Dec, Economic Times): Two bike-borne, masked men flung acid on the girl on Wednesday, minutes after she had left her west Delhi residence for school, leaving her with serious injuries. Police have arrested three men, including a neighbor of the victim, in connection with the incident. The girl was admitted to the Safdarjung Hospital's ICU (intensive care unit), the NHRC said in a statement.
3. Karnataka, 2023, (18th February Economic Times): Police in Karnataka's Ramnagar district have launched a hunt to nab a 22-

year-old man who attacked a minor girl with acid. The girl was admitted in Minto eye hospital in Bengaluru. Doctor has stated that she might lose an eye. The girl said no to his proposal. Cops file POCSO case.

Tamil Nadu, Coimbatore, 2023, (23rd March, Mirror Now): Man hurls acid on wife de court complex; 5 injured. Coimbatore on Thursday. The acid attack took place when court was set to hear a case filed by the woman against her husband. The woman was present in Coimbatore court before the commencement of the hearing. The woman, identified as Chitra, had filed a case against her husband, Sivakumar.

Hariyana, Hisar, 2023, (May 14th, Economic Times): Kafi, 15, from Budhana Village, Hisar, aims to be an IAS officer and loves Geography. At age 3, she suffered an acid attack by jealous neighbors, causing severe facial burns and eventual blindness. Despite this, she achieved 95.02% in Class 10 through Braille, demonstrating remarkable determination and academic excellence.

The incidence of acid attack remains consistent and has become another dominant gendered crime in India. Despite several amendments in the criminal laws and various measures taken by the authorities to ban the sale of acid or corrosive substances, other than for commercial or scientific purposes, it appears nothing much has changed in reality Offenders are easily getting acids, either through off- line or on-line. This also proves that there is a lack of a monitoring system in administration and in implementation of laws.

Conclusion:

The present discussion examines prevalent forms of violence against women in India: dowry deaths, honor killings, and acid attacks, highlighting their severe violation of human rights. Despite existing laws, these crimes persist due to entrenched misogyny and gender inequality. The normalization of such violence fosters a criminogenic environment, intensifying social problems and heightening women's vulnerability across age groups, communities, and socio-economic strata. While rape victimization spans all age groups, dowry deaths, honor killings, and acid attacks predominantly target young women. This underscores the urgent need for societal and legal reforms to address deep-rooted cultural attitudes and ensure the safety and rights of women in India.

Exhibiting disrespect or ill-treating women is scarcely criticized, rather considered a normalized part of male culture. Violence against women often is often used as a tool to strengthen and maintain gender roles against women who disobey patriarchic punitive norms. Women are often condemned by their own families and communities for speaking out against discrimination and abuse. In India, women face heightened victimization due to inadequate social and legal support and systemic failures in law enforcement. Seeking justice exposes them to further discrimination within the judicial system, often resulting in delayed or inconclusive verdicts. This delay not only diminishes the severity of the crimes over time but also emboldens criminals who exploit legal loopholes to escape punishment, particularly in cases of dowry deaths, murder, and rape. Immediate and efficient judicial procedures are essential to deter such crimes and ensure timely justice, thereby safeguarding women's rights and combating impunity in gender-based violence. Addressing entrenched patriarchy in social structures is crucial to reducing violence against women. Promoting equal gender roles through early

education on gender equality, human rights, and mutual respect is essential.

Promoting gender equality through early education, rights to inheritance, property, housing, and social security are also crucial to women safety and empowerment. Mutual respect is crucial to combating violence against women in India's patriarchal society. Implementing these values in families, schools, and communities can catalyze broader societal change, fostering a safer and more equitable environment. Such initiatives aim to reshape attitudes and behaviors from the grassroots level upwards, challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and reducing the prevalence of gender-based violence.

Male violence against women necessitates a proactive, multi-level strategy involving community, state, and national efforts. Implementing CCTV surveillance in public spaces and ensuring reliable public transportation are crucial. Establishing 24-hour helplines for reporting abuse, backed by NGOs and government support, is essential. Providing comprehensive support like trained counselors, medical professionals, trauma centres, and secure shelters is vital for victims/survivors. Additionally, forming self-help groups and neighborhood (mahalla) committees can help prevent violence at the community level.

Deep rooted connivance in medico-legal and judicial system, liability and frailties of police system, corruption and carelessness of bureaucracy are also responsible in increasing gender based violence. Thousands of medical practitioners commercially cater services for ultrasound, female infanticide practices that makes their profession more of cash machine than a respectable service provider of society. These are the challenging areas that need to be addressed with effective strategies and intervention .

Massive wide spread awareness is required to curb violence, cruelty and murder of women. The practice of misogyny that has been normalized needs to be a-normalized. Many young women can be saved from cruelty, harassment or being killed if a timely intervention is taken and they are shielded from the source of violence. Any single case of feticide, dowry death, and domestic violence shouldn't go unnoticed or silenced. Public protest should become normal voice against violence on women at large. when addressing violence against women, it's crucial to acknowledge and challenge these structural discrepancies and practices of misogyny. It requires a collective effort to create a society where all individuals, regardless of gender, can live free from violence and fear.

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