



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY TRIPURA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EXPERIENCES AND LEGAL RESPONSES IN GOMATI DISTRICT

Dr. Janata Sadhan Jamatia¹, Dr. Pradip Molsom²

¹Assistant Professor of Sociology, Mata Tripura Sundari Open University, Tripura

²Assistant Professor of English, Mata Tripura Sundari Open University, Tripura

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra30955>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra30955

ABSTRACT

Domestic violence against women has escalated markedly in recent decades, yet in India the issue remained largely outside statutory law until the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA). Previously, cruelty within marriage was recognised only as a ground for divorce, with no mechanism for immediate relief. This study examines the lived experiences of women subjected to domestic violence in Amarpur sub-division, Gomati district, Tripura, and evaluates the legal responses available under the PWDVA, 2005. Adopting a qualitative case-study design, it draws on in-depth interviews with thirty women survivors, discussions with protection officers, lawyers, and community organisations, and analysis of one case adjudicated under the Act. Findings show domestic violence manifesting through physical, psychological, economic, social, and sexual abuse, closely linked to dowry, alcoholism, and entrenched patriarchal norms that persist even within tribal communities historically regarded as comparatively egalitarian. While the PWDVA, 2005 has expanded women's access to legal remedy, its effectiveness remains constrained by social stigma, low legal literacy, and weak institutional follow-through, underscoring that legal reform must be accompanied by sustained social transformation.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Violence, Tripura, Gomati District, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, Gender-Based Violence, Tribal Women, Patriarchy, Amarpur

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is one of the most pervasive yet historically under-acknowledged dimensions of women's marginalisation. Although physical assault, sexual coercion, economic deprivation, and psychological subjugation have existed across societies for centuries, domestic violence has only become an object of systematic academic and policy attention within the past four decades, having previously been treated as a private family matter outside the scope of public concern.

Early scholarship on family violence, both globally and in India, concentrated on child abuse before turning to wife abuse, a category once used interchangeably with "domestic violence." Over the past two decades the field has expanded to acknowledge dating violence, violence against male partners, and violence within same-sex relationships, alongside a growing recognition that domestic violence cannot be understood apart from the structural conditions (patriarchal kinship systems, economic dependency, customary practice, and weak institutional enforcement) that sustain it.

Understanding domestic violence requires first clarifying "violence" in the social sense and situating "domestic violence" within it, and then examining how the term has been codified in Indian law, most significantly through the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which for the first time gave statutory recognition to continual violence in the home, extending beyond physical injury to psychological, economic, and social abuse.

The PWDVA, 2005 is rightly regarded as a landmark in Indian legal history: for the first time the law acknowledged continual domestic violence and offered redress beyond divorce on grounds of cruelty. Yet its implementation has revealed gaps between legislative intent and social reality. Critics note the Act rests on broad assumptions (for instance, that violence by male family members is a near-universal occurrence) that create as many difficulties as they resolve, and that its process is at times procedurally lopsided and undermined by the very social norms it seeks to counter. This is not to deny that domestic violence exists or that women need legal protection; rather, statutory rights alone cannot remedy deep-rooted social evils unless accompanied by social reform.

The present study is concerned with Amarpur sub-division of Gomati district, a predominantly rural, tribal-inhabited part of Tripura. Tripura is a distinctive case for several reasons. First, its population combines indigenous tribal communities (Tripuri, Jamatia, Reang, Molsom, and others) with a substantial Bengali-origin population, each with distinct customary practices around marriage, kinship, and gender. Second, certain tribal marital systems historically exhibited relative female autonomy compared with caste Hindu Bengali households, yet this has not insulated tribal women from the recent diffusion of dowry-related practices and other violence. Third, Tripura Commission for Women data indicate domestic violence consistently constitutes the largest category of registered crime against women in the state.



The research problem, then, is that despite the PWDVA, 2005 and institutional mechanisms such as the Tripura Commission for Women and Protection Officers, domestic violence remains widely under-reported, normalised, and inadequately redressed at the community level in districts such as Gomati. This study seeks to understand, through the direct testimony of affected women, the forms domestic violence takes in this setting, the pathways (legal, familial, and community-based) through which women seek relief, and how effectively the legal framework functions at the grassroots.

The study's scope is deliberately bounded: it does not attempt a comprehensive account of domestic violence across Tripura, nor a quantitative prevalence estimate. Instead it adopts a focused, qualitative case-study approach centred on Amarpur, drawing on accounts of thirty women, supplemented by discussions with legal practitioners, protection officers, and community organisations, and by analysis of one case adjudicated under the PWDVA, 2005.

Its objectives are threefold: first, to study the forms of domestic violence experienced by women in the study area; second, to understand the legal responses available under the Act and how women experience and evaluate them; and third, to analyse, through case-study material, the Act's actual functioning in one instance of adjudication in Amarpur.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship first reveals considerable definitional variation: terms such as gender-based violence, battered women, sexual harassment, and domestic violence are often used interchangeably despite differing connotations. The Encyclopedia of Crime and Justice broadly defines violence as threatened or actual behaviour causing damage, injury, or death (Misra, 2006), a framing that risks diluting the specificity legal and policy application requires.

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) offers a more targeted definition: any act of gender-based violence resulting in, or likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm, including threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, in public or private life. This definition shaped India's PWDVA, 2005 precisely because it moves beyond a narrow physical conception of harm. As the International Centre for Research on Women (1999) notes, how violence is defined shapes the nature of the response: informal family matter or criminal violation. Legal dictionaries such as Curzon's similarly extend "violence" to conduct against property (Misra, 2006).

Sociological definitions situate violence within structures of power rather than as a discrete physical act. The Encyclopedia of Social Science defines it as illegal physical coercion for personal or group ends (Misra, 2006); building on this, Misra (2006) frames social violence as force, or threat of force, exercised by patriarchal structures (typically men) to subjugate women physically, socially, and psychologically, framing domestic violence as systemic rather than aberrant, a framing that resonates with Gomati district.

Ahuja's (2009) foundational work situates domestic violence within a long historical continuum of ill-treatment, humiliation, and exploitation of women, cataloguing wife-battering, rape, abduction, intra-familial murder, dowry-death, and molestation as forms requiring sociological, structurally attentive analysis.

Domestic violence is further distinguished from other violence against women. Black's Law Dictionary defines it as violence between household members, usually spouses (as cited in Misra, 2006). Scholars disaggregate it into physical assault; psychological, emotional, or verbal abuse; social abuse (isolation from family, friends, and community); economic abuse (control of shared resources); and sexual assault. This multi-dimensional conception is directly reflected in the PWDVA, 2005's statutory definition, which explicitly includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1996) frame domestic violence in power-analytic terms: an abuse of power through which a partner controls and dominates another via violence, its threat, or manipulation of shared finances, situating it within feminist theorisations of patriarchy as structured gender inequality.

Cross-nationally, Amnesty International (2004) estimates domestic violence affects roughly one in three women worldwide (about one billion women), a figure reproduced in Jackson's (2007) Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence. While not directly extrapolable to Gomati district, this situates the present study within a recognised global pattern.

Within Indian sociology, Karlekar (1998) observes that some violence (for instance practices around spirit possession) is culturally sanctioned in ways that obscure its violent character, and conceptualises violence as an act of aggression that may also be self-directed, as in suicide or complicity in sex-selective practices. Uberoi (1995) explains why domestic violence remains under-studied in Indian sociology: where data exist, they typically come from NGOs, the women's movement, and police rather than academic sociology, because the family functions as a cultural ideal that scholars have hesitated to scrutinise, an insight directly relevant to the present study's attention to tribal and ethnic identity, where family and clan operate as sites of both belonging and, at times, gendered harm.

Literature on North-East India provides the most directly relevant comparative context. Sudhir and Hajarimayum's (2005) edited volume challenges any presumption that customary tribal organisation in the region is uniformly protective of women. Within it, Gupta (2005) disaggregates violence into that occurring within the family (battering, dowry-related violence, harmful traditional practices) and within the wider community (rape, harassment, trafficking), also noting region-specific forms connected to insurgency and extremism. Bandyopadhyay's chapter documents Tripura Commission for Women (TCW) crime data from 1994–2003: cases rose from 32–53 annually (1994–98) to 495 in 1999, before a partial decline to 465 in 2002 (a fluctuating but generally elevated trajectory) and observes that much domestic violence in Tripura goes unregistered because police have historically regarded it as "trivial" or "private," a pattern directly relevant to under-reporting in Amarpur. Saha's



chapter, drawing on NFHS-2 (1998–99) data, finds that only 37.5 per cent of Tripura respondents justified wife-beating under standard survey conditions (lower than India as a whole and most north-eastern states) but cautions against reading this as evidence of an absence of violence, since violence in Tripura, as elsewhere, begins before birth through female foeticide and continues across the life course.

The literature also documents dowry-related violence specific to the tribal context. Ahuja (2009) traces the escalation of dowry demands and deaths despite the Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, illustrating the gap between legal prohibition and social reform. Saha's chapter documents the surprising spread of dowry into Tripura's tribal communities, whose customary marital systems (including arrangements such as "Jamaikhata") had not traditionally incorporated it and had conferred comparatively greater autonomy on women than caste Hindu Bengali norms. This diffusion represents an erosion of protective ethnic-customary structures under dominant caste-Hindu social norms, directly relevant to domestic violence among Jamatia, Tripuri, and other tribal households in Gomati district.

Theoretically, the study draws on three traditions: feminist theories of patriarchy, structural-functionalist accounts of family, and theories of tribal ethnic identity. Radical and materialist feminist theory (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1996) treats domestic violence as an instrument through which patriarchal control over women's labour, sexuality, and mobility is exercised, directly applicable to Gomati, where economic abuse emerged as intertwined with physical and psychological abuse. Structural-functionalist perspectives explain institutional reluctance to intervene in family matters (Uberoi, 1995) and the resistance encountered when the PWDVA, 2005 attempts to penetrate the private domain; where functionalism emphasises stability, feminist critique emphasises that this stability is purchased at the cost of women's subordination. Finally, ethnic identity theory complicates any uniform "Indian" patriarchal template: tribal identity in Tripura is constituted through distinctive kinship, marriage practice, and customary law, so gendered violence must be understood as emerging from the shifting intersection of tribal gender norms, the diffusion of dowry, and the uneven penetration of statutory law, consistent with the observed spread of dowry into communities that had not historically practised it.

Taken together, the literature establishes three propositions informing this study: domestic violence is best conceptualised multi-dimensionally, now reflected in the PWDVA, 2005; Tripura's domestic violence cannot be read as generic Indian patriarchy but must be situated within ethnic and tribal dynamics; and a persistent gap exists between legal protection and effective enforcement, attributed to stigma, institutional apathy, and the framing of domestic violence as "private" or "trivial." This gap, as it manifests in Amarapur, is what the present fieldwork seeks to document.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive, case-study design. A qualitative approach centred on in-depth interviewing was judged better suited than a quantitative survey

to capturing the texture of lived experience, the sequencing of abusive relationships, and women's reasoning in seeking, delaying, or forgoing legal recourse.

Study Area

Amarpur sub-division was selected because it is predominantly rural with a substantial tribal population, suitable for examining the intersection of tribal custom and domestic violence, and because it has functioning institutional infrastructure (a court adjudicating PWDVA, 2005 cases and a Protection Officer mandated to receive domestic incident reports), allowing the study to examine both private experience and formal legal engagement.

Sampling

The study population comprised women in Amarapur who had experienced, or were experiencing, domestic violence within a marital or intimate relationship. Given the sensitivity of the subject and the impracticality of a random sampling frame for a frequently concealed experience, the study used purposive sampling supplemented by snowball referral, with initial contact through the Protection Officer's office, women's counselling centres, and community organisations. Thirty women were interviewed in depth.

Tools and Techniques of Data Collection

The primary instrument was a semi-structured in-depth interview schedule eliciting narrative accounts of the forms of abuse experienced, perceived causes, responses of family and community, and engagement with formal mechanisms: police, Protection Officer, courts, and NGOs. Interviews were conducted in the local language, at times extended to family members with appropriate permission. Key-informant discussions were held with the Protection Officer's office, practising lawyers, and NGOs/counselling centres, to triangulate survivor testimony with an institutional perspective. A further component was detailed analysis of one successful case adjudicated under the PWDVA, 2005 in the Amarapur court, reconstructed from case records with institutional permission, illustrating the procedural pathway and its evidentiary, procedural, and social challenges. The study also drew on secondary Tripura Commission for Women data (2007–2013) to situate the qualitative fieldwork within the broader trend of reported domestic violence.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed thematically, organised around forms of violence, perceived causes, patterns of disclosure, pathways to (or barriers against) legal redress, and respondents' evaluation of institutional response, presented below around violence in the natal home, violence in the conjugal home, situational trends, legal response, the case study, and barriers to redress.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from each respondent, with an explanation of the research's purpose and voluntary nature and



the right to decline or withdraw. Parental or guardian permission was sought where minors or family discussion was involved. Confidentiality was maintained; identifying details were withheld or altered, and the case study is presented using surnames only, consistent with the anonymisation available in the underlying record.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Forms of Domestic Violence in the Study Area

Respondents reported violence across several overlapping categories. Physical violence (slapping, pushing, kicking, and, in severe cases, assault with implements) was the most commonly and directly reported form, often precipitated by disputes over household finances, alcohol, or dowry demands. Psychological and verbal abuse, including sustained insult and degradation, was reported by nearly all respondents, frequently alongside physical violence; several described threats against their children as a distinct mechanism of control. Economic abuse (withholding household income, restricting access to resources, or destroying a woman's own earnings or property) emerged as significant and under-recognised, in several cases preceding and enabling subsequent physical violence by entrenching financial dependency. Social abuse, through restricted mobility and isolation from natal family and community, was reported particularly among women who had migrated to their husband's village and possessed weaker independent networks. Sexual violence within marriage, reported by fewer respondents directly, emerged more through indirect testimony and key-informant accounts, consistent with its being the most stigmatised and least disclosed category.

Violence in the Natal Home

Gendered violence in this region cannot be fully understood without attention to the natal home. Sex-selective discrimination (female foeticide, or under-allocation of food, medical care, and education to female children relative to brothers, a pattern documented in Kishor's (1995) district-level analysis) establishes a foundational devaluation that shapes women's later expectations of their own worth and tolerance of mistreatment within marriage. Several respondents explicitly linked their reluctance to seek legal redress to an internalised sense, cultivated since childhood, that a woman's value lies in accommodation and endurance rather than the assertion of rights.

Violence in the Conjugal Home: Dowry and Related Practices

Dowry-related conflict was the single most frequently cited proximate cause of violence. This is significant given the historically recent spread of dowry into tribal communities whose customary systems (such as "Jamaikhata" arrangements) had not traditionally incorporated it and had conferred comparatively greater bargaining power on women than caste Hindu Bengali norms. Respondents experienced this erosion not as an abstract process but as a concrete, escalating source of conflict, with dowry demands often renewed or intensified well after marriage, dowry functioning less as a one-time transaction than an ongoing site of extraction. Alcoholism, extramarital relationships, and

bigamy were also frequently cited triggers, as were disputes over inheritance, including brothers refusing sisters their entitled share of family property. Child marriage, reported by fewer respondents, was associated with heightened subsequent vulnerability, consistent with the wider literature linking early marriage to reduced bargaining power.

Situational Trends: Tripura Commission for Women Data, 2007–2013

TCW data show registered domestic violence and matrimonial disputes rising sharply in 2008–09, declining somewhat in 2009–10 (466 and 429 cases in successive years), declining further in 2011–12 as awareness programmes and women's police stations expanded, before rising again to 337 cases, still high relative to other states. This fluctuating trend admits two, not mutually exclusive, readings: that awareness and institutional strengthening have had some genuine, if inconsistent, dampening effect; and, more cautiously, that fluctuations may reflect changes in reporting behaviour and institutional capacity as much as true incidence, given the well-documented under-reporting driven by domestic violence being perceived as "trivial" or "private."

Legal Response to Domestic Violence in Amarpur

Lawyers and respondents understand the PWDVA, 2005 primarily as an instrument securing a woman's right to safety and to act with independence not always available within the customary marital household. Its effective operation depends on sustained awareness programmes, since many rural women remain only partially informed of available remedies: protection, residence, monetary relief, and custody orders. Respondents who had engaged with the Act generally felt it could meaningfully improve women's circumstances if properly and consistently applied; however, its benefit is frequently undermined by institutional delay, social pressure to withdraw complaints to preserve family unity, and the limited number of Protection Officers serving a large, dispersed rural population.

Case Study: A Successful Proceeding under the PWDVA, 2005

A case from the Amarpur court illustrates the Act's operation. It was instituted on a domestic incident report and petition forwarded through the Protection Officer, Amarpur, alleging violence in connection with a dowry demand of Rs. 25,000, alongside verbal and emotional abuse. The respondent appeared before the court but filed no written objection. The petitioner examined three witnesses and exhibited two supporting documents before disposal. The case demonstrates the Protection Officer's centrality as institutional intermediary, a role constrained by the limited number of officers relative to the population served; shows that even in largely uncontested cases, the evidentiary burden on the aggrieved woman remains non-trivial; and, in contrast to the broader pattern of under-reporting and non-pursuit, suggests that sustained engagement with the process can deliver a concrete, legally recognised remedy.



Analysis of Institutional and Community Response

Beyond the formal legal process, NGOs and statutory bodies (the Tripura Commission for Women, women's counselling centres, and Protection Officers) pursue interventions addressing women's isolation and vulnerability, ranging from immediate relief such as short-stay homes to longer-term goals including monitoring ongoing cases, economic self-reliance, and community mobilisation. These responses fall broadly into preventive strategies, compensation orders, and direct relief from violence, exemplified by the case above. Their effectiveness depends on consistent, properly guided application, an outcome the fieldwork suggests remains only partially and unevenly realised, shaped by a woman's access to information, to a functioning Protection Officer's office, and to sustained community and family support.

Barriers to Disclosure and the Cycle of Return

A recurring theme was the substantial social barriers to disclosure and to sustaining engagement with legal remedies once initiated. Several respondents described secondary victimisation (being blamed by family or community for failing to prevent or avoid abuse, or for not leaving sooner) which compounds psychological harm and discourages further help-seeking. Consistent with the wider literature, women frequently returned to abusive relationships multiple times, driven by psychological attachment, economic dependency, fear of stigma, and the practical absence of independent living arrangements, before eventually accumulating sufficient resources to leave for good or pursue formal legal recourse.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the forms taken by domestic violence in Amarpur sub-division, Gomati district, and the legal and institutional responses available under the PWDVA, 2005. Drawing on interviews with thirty women, discussions with lawyers, Protection Officers, and community organisations, and a case study of a proceeding under the Act, it finds domestic violence to be a multi-dimensional phenomenon (physical, psychological, economic, social, and sexual) closely intertwined with dowry conflict, alcoholism, and entrenched patriarchal norms of household authority. These patterns persist, and dowry-related violence has in some respects intensified, even within tribal communities historically associated with a comparatively more favourable position for women, indicating active normative erosion rather than static continuity of either tribal or caste-Hindu gender relations.

The ever-present reality of overt and covert coercion shapes women's sense of their own worth, agency, and entitlement to legal protection well before any specific episode of violence. The PWDVA, 2005 represents a genuinely important legal development, offering statutory recourse (through the Protection Officer and orders for protection, residence, monetary relief, and custody) that did not previously exist under Indian matrimonial law. Yet its practical efficacy in Amarpur remains constrained by social stigma, the limited reach of legal awareness programmes, institutional strain on a small number of Protection Officers, and

the persistent tendency, at the level of local policing especially, to treat domestic violence as "trivial" or "private" rather than a serious criminal and social concern.

The study has several limitations. Its qualitative, purposively and snowball-sampled design does not permit statistical generalisation beyond Amarpur, and women entirely outside the reach of support organisations may differ in ways this study cannot capture. Reliance on retrospective self-report is subject to the ordinary limitations of memory and willingness to disclose. The case-study component is confined to a single successfully adjudicated proceeding and does not capture the potentially more numerous cases in which engagement with the legal process is discontinued or unsuccessful.

These limitations point to clear directions for future research: qualitative and comparative studies extending beyond Amarpur to other districts and across tribal and non-tribal households, to test more rigorously the hypothesis that dowry-related violence has diffused unevenly across ethnic communities; and longitudinal research tracking women's engagement with the PWDVA, 2005 from disclosure to final disposal or discontinuation.

For policy and institutional practice, the findings support sustained legal awareness programmes in rural Gomati district; strengthened Protection Officer capacity through additional appointments and logistical support; and targeted gender-sensitisation for police personnel, given the persistent framing of domestic violence as trivial or private. Most fundamentally, the findings reaffirm that domestic violence is a social phenomenon that prevails in every society, and that a lasting solution requires the combined growth of awareness among society, its institutions, and the public, legal reform, however necessary, cannot by itself substitute for sustained social transformation.

REFERENCES

1. Ahuja, R. (2009). *Violence against women*. Rawat Publications.
2. Amnesty International. (2004). *It's in our hands: Stop violence against women* (AI Index: ACT 77/001/2004). Amnesty International Publications.
3. Bandyopadhyay. (2005). *Violence against women in Tripura: A statistical profile*. In H. Sudhir & J. Hajarimayum (Eds.), *Violence against women in Northeast India, with special reference to Assam, Manipur and Tripura* (pp. 98-125). Akansha Publishing House.
4. DeKeseredy, W. S., & Schwartz, M. D. (1996). *Contemporary criminology*. Wadsworth.
5. Gupta, V. (2005). *Violence against women: Concepts and forms*. In H. Sudhir & J. Hajarimayum (Eds.), *Violence against women in Northeast India, with special reference to Assam, Manipur and Tripura* (pp. 1-20). Akansha Publishing House.
6. International Centre for Research on Women. (1999). *Domestic violence in India: A summary report of three studies*. ICRW.
7. Jackson, N. A. (Ed.). (2007). *Encyclopedia of domestic violence*. Routledge.
8. Karlekar, M. (1998). *Domestic violence*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(27), 1741-1751.
9. Kishor, S. (1995). *Gender differentials in child mortality: A review of the evidence*. In M. Das Gupta, L. C. Chen, & T. N.



- Krishnan (Eds.), *Women's health in India: Risk and vulnerability* (pp. 19–54). Oxford University Press.
10. Misra, P. (2006). *Domestic violence against women: Legal control and judicial response*. Deep & Deep Publications.
 11. *Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, No. 43 of 2005, India Code* (2005).
 12. Saha, P. (2005). *Violence against women in Tripura: A life-course perspective*. In H. Sudhir & J. Hajarimayum (Eds.), *Violence against women in Northeast India, with special reference to Assam, Manipur and Tripura* (pp. 126–133). Akansha Publishing House.
 13. Sudhir, H., & Hajarimayum, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Violence against women in Northeast India, with special reference to Assam, Manipur and Tripura*. Akansha Publishing House.
 14. *Tripura Commission for Women*. (2013). *Annual report on crimes against women, 2007–2013*. Government of Tripura.
 15. Uberoi, P. (1995). *Problems with patriarchy: Conceptual issues in anthropology and feminism*. *Sociological Bulletin*, 44(2), 195–221.
 16. *United Nations General Assembly*. (1993). *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women (A/RES/48/104)*.