

# Adolescent Girls' perspective on Gender-based Violence

RESEARCH BRIEF



## What is the problem?

Gender based-violence remains devastatingly pervasive in the 21st century. Across their lifetime, 1 in 3 women, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner - a number that has remained largely unchanged over the past decade (WHO & partners, 2023). Further, the evidence indicates that the violence starts early; 1 in 4 young women (aged 15-24 years) will have already experienced violence by an intimate partner by the time they reach their mid-twenties (Ibid). Violence against women and girls, is therefore realised as a significant public health concern worldwide.

Literature documents (Landry, et al 2020) that adolescent girls, especially from low and middle-income countries face a number of challenges i.e., having limited access to quality education, basic sexual and reproductive health care, support for mental health issues, and protection or redressal mechanisms to different forms of gender-based violence.

In the Indian context, adolescent girls particularly face a potent threat of gender-based violence due to a high tolerance towards these acts of violence and the absence of social sanctions for men that resort to violence (Coast et. al., 2012). The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) for Karnataka estimates that 44% of ever-married women aged 18-49 years in Karnataka have experienced physical or sexual violence. This is a percentage that has doubled since NFHS-4, which was at 20.6%. Child marriages persist with almost 21% girls in age group of 20-24 years

married before the age of 18 years (NFHS-5) and 23% of girls drop out of school before reaching puberty (Dasra, 2015). NFHS-5 also establishes that women who have not completed secondary education, have married below 18 years and have witnessed their mothers endure violence by their fathers during childhood, have a much higher chance of experiencing violence.

Furthermore, conflicting and yet disturbing evidence alludes that as Indian women are becoming more liberated and have greater access to social and economic opportunities, they are more prone to violence - as a likely male response to increasingly "modern" attitudes among Indian women and loss of control in the public sphere (Coast et.al, 2012; Krishnan 2005).

Moreover, the norms of this study area - i.e. Northern Karnataka, stem from an amalgamation of geographic, historical and socio-cultural factors. These districts are steadily amongst the hottest in the country that are prone to severe famine, low and erratic rainfall, and where people were displaced from their land due to the construction of a large scale irrigation project. The Devadasi system, caste-based habitation, mass migration to sex work sites in adjacent Maharashtra are historically prevalent, which has led to a contemporary phenomenon of periodic and seasonal migration. All of these factors have contributed to systemic poverty and patriarchy, which remain triggers for violence against girls and women in this region.

## Why this brief?

- ♦ The primary objective of this research was to understand the varied community perspectives on violence, and then determine what programmatic interventions could be designed and implemented to eliminate Gender-based Violence (GBV).
- ♦ This research brief particularly examines the attitudes, experiences and behaviours of the adolescent girls and young women in rural Karnataka with respect to GBV.

## Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used to conduct this research, however, for the purpose of this brief – the focus shall be on the extensive qualitative research that was conducted to understand the attitudes, experiences, and behaviors among young girls, women, and other community members concerning GBV. This qualitative research was derived using the following methods:

- ♦ Ethnographic Study - carried out for 3-4 months by three female community researchers, with the guidance of the KHPT staff to understand the different terminologies used for violence, its different forms and its prevalence;
- ♦ Card-sorting - a set of unlabeled concept cards with illustrations that depict everyday instances of women's lives as determined by the ethnographic study, to depict 'violence' or 'not violence' 'tolerable' or 'intolerable' were used to map out a range of behaviors and the severity.
- ♦ In-depth Interviews - were conducted with adolescent girls and married young women from both Samata<sup>1</sup> and Non-Samata villages in two phases. A purposive sample of 24 participants (13 married, 11 unmarried adolescent girls and young women from 12 villages) were selected based on varying rates of child marriages and domestic violence. The interview guide was structured around the following themes – understanding relationships and decision-making, the meaning of violence, the perpetuation and responses to violence and possible solutions or modes of redressal.

## Understanding GBV from the perspectives of Adolescent Girls

It is vital to highlight an underpinning aspect when interpreting any act of violence - how violence is experienced, framed and resisted is shaped by culture.

This is evident in the responses gathered and documented perspectives of the adolescent girls and young women who participated in this study. These findings can be broadly summarized as the following:

### Internalized Gender Norms and Power Imbalances

Although most of the girls and women who participated in this study opined that boys and girls should be treated equally and aspired to become independent to support themselves and their parents' in the future, the study also revealed that several forms of discrimination based on gender were internalized as a norm, along with a visible power imbalance, within their family and the community.

Boys are seen as 'providers' therefore, befitting the attention, education and opportunities afforded to them. Girls are perceived as 'outsiders'; who will leave their natal homes and never belong.

*"The daughter always belongs to another family, but the son is not like that. In the case of my daughter, she will never be mine. She will always belong to others, hence."*

**-Usha, 27, Married, Bolegaon village, Non-Samata**

The girls acknowledged that they are the ones who provide emotional support to their parents – yet are subject to various forms of violence and discrimination.

<sup>1</sup>Project Samata was an intervention, by the Karnataka Health Promotion Trust (KHPT), from 2012-2017 that aimed at reducing vulnerability to HIV by improving the quality of life among adolescent SC/ST girls in Northern Karnataka. The project reached 3600 adolescent girls from 1800 families in 119 villages and 69 high schools in Vijayapura and Bagalkote districts.

Being male was associated with having certain privileges especially an unrestricted access to mobility and a familial/community tolerance for transgressions such as alcohol abuse and extramarital affairs. Being female implies several restrictions - on mobility, phone usage, clothing, studies, jobs and familial expectations. Such restrictions are justified as necessary for girls' safety as there are many 'dangers' in the outside world. Furthermore, power imbalances were also acknowledged and accepted - men being the locus of power in both natal and marital relations.

*"To scold, to complain, to ask for sex. Men cannot be questioned. They are men. They can do."*

**-Mehaboobi, 29, Married, Yakkundi village, Non-Samata**

Within marital relations - violence in form of psychological abuse, which may include suspicion, inquisition, control, manipulative behaviour, sexual coercion and physical abuse are deemed acceptable.

## Responses to Violence

### What is 'acceptable'?

Acceptance and responses to violence are strongly conditioned by a sense of 'right' and 'wrong' that is premised on internalised patriarchal values of a women's safety and chastity.

Ideas of what constitute 'good' behaviour for women and girls cover aspects such as dress (sleeveless clothing or showing skin) and appearance (including hairstyles), behaviours and comportment such as laughing or showing one's teeth in public and behaving as per family expectations, including expectations for gendered work within and outside the family.

*"We should teach girls to be good' means they have to adjust with everyone in her husband's home and they should take everyone along, they have to listen to parents. They should not use their brain do whatever they like to do".*

**- Ashlesha, 26, Married, Konkanagaon village, Non-Samata**

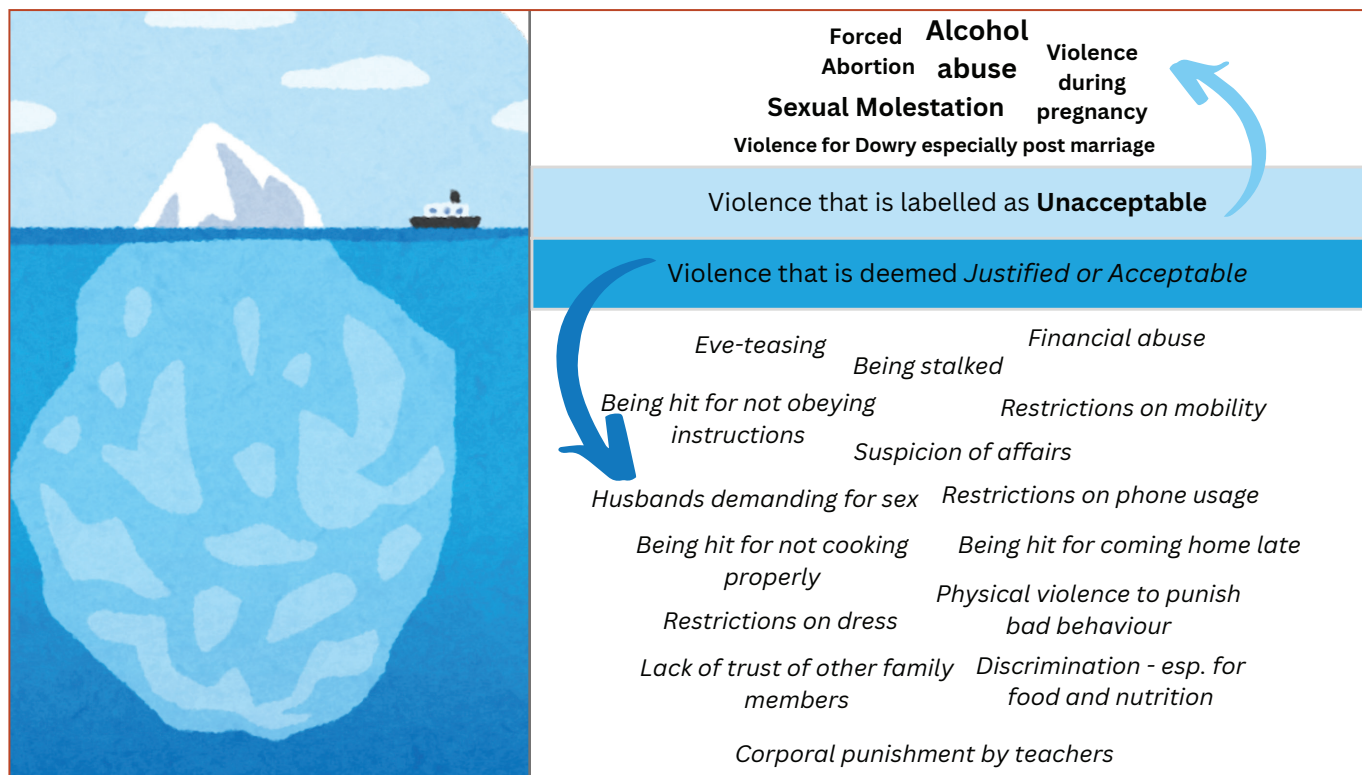


Fig: Perspectives of Adolescent Girls on acts of violence

## How a 'good' woman manages violence?

The interviews with the study participants explored a nuance in the narratives of the adolescent girls in how they responded to various situations of violence – whether justified or unjustified as per their understanding.

Silence and obeying the elders is the pinnacle of expected behaviour in how an ideal or good woman should behave. As one of the participants observed “women are easy targets” and maintaining silence is seen as the ideal way to dodge any undesirable situation.

*“Few women are good; few are not. It is good if we behave well. Some women eye other men. Women should not do this. If we, women are good then men will be good. They bother us only when we are not good. We should listen to them; we should not go to other people’s house to watch TV when men leave the house. If we do that, definitely they will torture us. We have to be in our home to do our work.”*

**-Mehaboobi, 29 years, Married,  
Yakkundi village, Non-Samata**

Silence and non-confrontation is the most accepted form of managing violence in the family as that could prevent a further escalation of violence. The expectation for a woman is also that she should be ‘strong’ and resilient - herein lies a dichotomy – that a woman is weak, which is why she is abused, but in order to bear the violence, she needs to be ‘strong’, embodying an endurance for it. The acceptance of violence and silence being a redressal mechanism is also measured against the effects of violence on not just girls in their marital homes, but also the effects it may percolate to their natal families.

*“Girls should be taught/prepared to live life in the spousal home. Violence is hard on parents. Family has to support as well as face gossips from the community. Violence is sustained due to feeling of helplessness and inability to survive outside the house. Philosophy of fate leads to acceptance of violence. Woman’s life is equal to pain/difficulty”*

**-Shanta, 25 years, Married,  
Konkanagaon village, Non-Samata**

## Barriers to Redressal

The present study findings are in line with past studies which says systemic services need to be expanded for those in immediate danger and particularly for rural areas, where prevalence of marital violence is highest and support is weakest. Given the pervasiveness of the attitude that spousal violence should be accepted, and the fact that these have remained largely unchanged in India for decades, large scale community and social change efforts are needed (Raj A, 2019).

Additionally, when it comes to other forms of violence like teasing, sexual abuse, work place harassment, the communities need to be prepared to listen to girl’s voices and not subjugate them further. Some challenges faced by women in the process of seeking redressal are:

☀ There is choice of raising voice, to question, but there is also fear of consequences. In the absence of support systems, this fear is overpowering. The immediate support system that exists for the girl/woman is her parents and brothers (family).

☀ Neighbors, local area community/ locality/caste leader (oni hiriyaru), respected/ influential elders representing larger community (hiriyaru), caste panchayats can play a role in addressing these issues. However, these are often male dominated structures with patriarchal modes of thinking, that are often partial towards men.

☀ Mahila Sangha (women’s group) have also been mentioned to be working at the village in a couple of narratives and functional in rare instances.

☀ At the structural level, one can approach the police, but seeking redressal from police is complex (when it comes to spousal violence) because of cultural factors like dignity, shame, etc.

☀ Political dynamics in the village level play a role in expediting or delaying justice to woman. Most often these dynamics are against women, especially adolescent girls due to the reinforcement of patriarchal narratives onto them.

# Labelling an act of Violence

Adolescent girls and young women are socialized to conform to patriarchal norms and practices, which dictates their ways of experiencing, framing and responding to violence.

Whether women justify violence and how they respond to these is linked to the type or form of violence that is meted out to them, the stigma and shame associated with it, and if they will receive support from the community, among others. This means that some forms of violence such as teasing and stalking are considered as carriers of patriarchal practices by both families and girls- and some girls consider it as a 'rite of passage' that girls have to learn to deal with and hence do not warrant serious action or redressal; while physical abuse and domestic violence are condoned if these are not accompanied with alcohol abuse.

Similarly, suspicion by men, especially when it is related to women's phone usage and mobility, are considered acceptable by adolescent girls and are ways of ensuring that a woman does not invite 'harm'. Participants pointed out that a girl not being asked for her opinion in terms of marriage and partner selection is considered as violence. Participants have narrated their experience of child marriage as a total lack of control over decisions of their life and thus is an act of violence. But, if violence is inflicted on grounds of it being correctional, it is generally accepted. Therefore, this study reveals that an understanding of violence was clearly culturally defined and communally agreed upon.

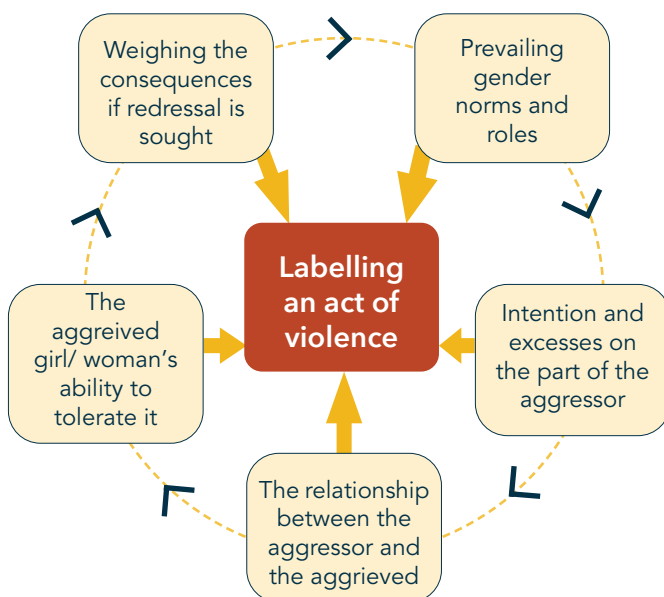


Fig: The cyclical nature of considerations that go into labelling an act of violence  
{Revelations from the Card-sorting data exercise}

The various factors that go into labelling an act of violence is therefore a cyclical pattern that considers prevailing gender norms, the nature of the relationship between the parties involved and a calculated weighing of the consequences of their decisions if any act of redressal is sought.

## Way Forward

While current state-led programmes for improving adolescent gender-related health, education and empowerment outcomes exist, they have been unable to address structural causes such as inequitable gender norms and social practices that protract gender-based violence consistently. More importantly, as seen in other developing contexts, India's response to GBV has mostly focused on responses and services for survivors that are clinical or legal in nature, and has also focused mainly on adult women.

Studies from the developed country contexts have shown that initiating violence prevention in the early years, by educating and working with young boys and girls would result in changing gender attitudes and perceptions during adolescence, which can improve health outcomes for girls and boys. (Landry et al., 2020).

In the absence of literature within developing country contexts with respect to the efficacy of such models, we propose to undertake an evaluation of the long-term impacts of a Life Skill Education(LSE) -based approach introduced during early adolescence for girls in India. LSE refers to a set of psychosocial abilities for the development of positive and adaptive behaviours to deal with the challenges of everyday life (WHO, 1993). They have been increasingly advocated by international organisations such as the WHO, UNICEF, and national governments, for children and adolescents, to empower young people, make them responsible for making healthy choices, and improve their mental and physical health (PAHO, 2000; UN Women, 2013).

Drawing upon the Integrated Empower Approach, KHPT has developed a peer-led social transformative model called Sphoorthi to work with adolescent girls, and other critical stakeholders in the community, to increase adolescent girls' self-esteem, and confidence, and build a supportive environment to address gendered barriers to health. It is hoped that the predictable, but long-term outcome of the LSE will also be that adolescent girls are able to challenge and question structured gender norms, and mitigate the fear and stigma associated for seeking redressal against gender-based violence.

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