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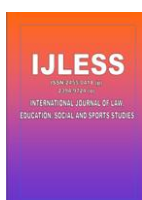
## **Domestic Violence, Legal Aid, and Social Work Practice: Barriers to Justice among Rural Women**

**Kummari Surekha**

Research scholar, Department of Sociology, Acharya Nagarjuna university  
Email:surekhakummari1988@gmail.com

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### **Abstract**

Domestic violence remains a pervasive violation of human rights, so far rural women in India face persistent barriers in accessing legal remedies. Drawing on a qualitative case study conducted in rural Andhra Pradesh during 2022–2023, this article examines the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural obstacles that impede justice-seeking among women experiencing intimate partner violence. The study employed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 45 rural women, 10 paralegal workers, and 8 social work practitioners across three districts. Findings reveal that formal legal mechanisms remain largely inaccessible due to intersecting barriers: patriarchal norms that normalise violence and stigmatise disclosure, economic dependency that forecloses exit options, inadequate awareness of legal provisions such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005, and institutional failures including police reluctance and geographical distance from courts. Social work interventions, where present, played critical brokerage roles but remained under-resourced and predominantly focused on crisis management rather than systemic advocacy. The article advances a feminist ecological framework to theorise how barriers at micro, meso, and macro levels interact to produce sustained legal exclusion. It concludes with policy recommendations centred on community-based legal literacy, integration of social work into rural legal aid delivery, and strengthening of women’s collectives as sites of legal empowerment.

**Keywords:** Domestic violence; legal aid; rural women; social work practice; access to justice; feminist legal theory; Andhra Pradesh; India

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### **1. Introduction**

Violence against women within intimate relationships is one of the most widespread yet underreported human rights violations globally. The World Health Organization (2021) estimates that about one in three women worldwide experiences physical or sexual intimate partner violence in her lifetime. In India, the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–2021) reported that nearly 30% of ever-married women aged 18–49 have experienced spousal violence, with rates varying across states.

Andhra Pradesh, the focus of this study, has recorded prevalence rates between 35% and 43% across districts (International Institute for Population Sciences, 2022) – figures that likely underestimate actual incidence because of chronic underreporting.

Rural women occupy a particularly precarious position. Patriarchal structures in rural India remain more entrenched than in urban centres. Women's economic dependence on male family members is more acute, and geographical isolation compounds institutional exclusion. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005 was intended to provide comprehensive civil remedies, including protection orders, residence rights, and access to shelter and legal aid. Yet implementation research consistently documents a large gap between law on the books and law in action (Anamika Das & C M Lakshmana, 2020; Solotaroff & Pande, 2020). Legal aid mechanisms – the Legal Services Authorities Act 1987 and National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) schemes – have established district-level legal aid clinics and paralegal volunteers. However, rural women's access to these services remains severely constrained.

Social work as a profession has historically positioned itself at the intersection of individual suffering and structural inequality. In the domain of domestic violence, social workers operate in shelters, crisis intervention centres, legal aid cells, and community outreach programmes. Yet scholarship on social work's actual role in facilitating legal access for rural survivors remains limited, with existing studies focusing predominantly on urban contexts or shelter-based services (Daruwalla et al., 2019; Sabri et al., 2022). Moreover, the specific barriers that rural women encounter – from initial reporting to obtaining protection orders – have received fragmented attention across disciplines.

This article addresses a research gap: the absence of an integrated analysis that examines how socio-cultural, economic, institutional, and legal barriers converge to produce justice deficits, and the potential role of social work practice in disrupting those barriers. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork in rural Andhra Pradesh during 2022–2023, the study asks: (a) What barriers do rural women face in accessing legal remedies for domestic violence? (b) How do these barriers operate at individual, relational, community, and institutional levels? (c) What role do social workers currently play, and what role might they play, in facilitating access to justice?

The study's significance is threefold. Theoretically, it advances a feminist ecological framework that integrates legal, social, and psychological dimensions of justice-seeking. Practically, it provides grounded evidence on legal aid mechanisms in resource-poor rural settings. Policy-wise, it offers specific recommendations for strengthening community-based legal empowerment interventions that leverage social work expertise.

## **2. Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Domestic Violence and Gender Inequality**

Feminist scholarship has established domestic violence not as a private pathology but as a systematic manifestation of gender-based power asymmetries (Dobash & Dobash, 2015; Walby, 2018). In the Indian context, structural inequalities intersect with patrilocal residence, dowry practices, son preference, and women's exclusion from property inheritance to produce sustained vulnerability (Kelkar, Gaikwad, & Mandal, 2015). While the PWDVA 2005 represented a paradigm shift by defining domestic violence expansively – including physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and economic abuse – its progressive provisions have been diluted through conservative judicial interpretation and weak enforcement (Ambast & Sen, 2006).

### **2.2 Rural Women and Legal Exclusion**

Research consistently shows that rural women experience domestic violence at rates comparable to or higher than urban women, yet access legal remedies much less often (Kar et al., 2018). Explanations

include higher tolerance of violence as normative in rural communities, lower educational attainment, absence of confidential reporting mechanisms, police attitudes that trivialise domestic violence as a “family matter”, and the distance from courts located in district headquarters. Agarwal (2003) further argues that rural women’s lack of independent land rights constrains their bargaining power within marriage, making legal exit prohibitively costly.

### **2.3 Legal Aid Mechanisms in India**

India’s legal aid framework (Article 39A, Legal Services Authorities Act 1987) mandates free legal assistance for scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, women, children, and other marginalised groups. The system includes NALSA, State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs), District Legal Services Authorities (DLSAs), and Taluk Legal Services Committees. The paralegal volunteer (PLV) scheme recruits’ community members as first-contact intermediaries. However, evaluative research shows that less than 15% of eligible rural women access legal aid services, due to lack of awareness, inconvenient locations, and quality concerns (Mansuri, 2024). Even when women approach legal aid clinics, they often receive perfunctory advice rather than sustained representation (Government of India, Ministry of Law and Justice, Department of Justice, 2024).

### **2.4 Community-Based Social Work Responses**

Social work has evolved from shelter-based crisis intervention toward more integrated, community-level approaches. In rural contexts, social workers have experimented with legal literacy camps, self-help group (SHG) mobilisation, paralegal training, and coordination with police and judiciary (Khandagale, 2024). The “community social work” approach emphasises strengthening local institutional capacity (Ife, 2016). Yet systematic evaluations of such models in rural India remain rare.

Four gaps emerge. First, studies often examine barriers in isolation rather than their intersectional compounding effects. Second, legal aid scholarship rarely engages with social work literature. Third, rural women’s own narratives of navigating legal systems are underrepresented. Fourth, there is little research specifically focused on Andhra Pradesh, a state with high domestic violence prevalence and a decentralised legal aid infrastructure whose effectiveness remains unexamined.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

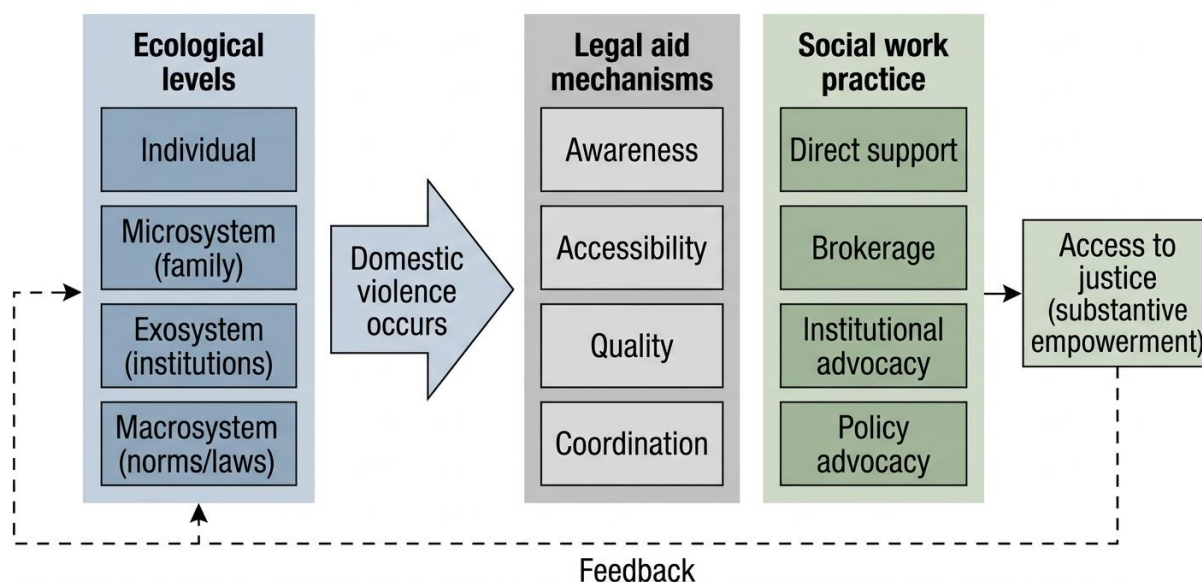
The study is informed by four interconnected perspectives.

**Feminist Legal Theory** (MacKinnon, 1989) critiques law’s claim to neutrality. Key concepts: the public/private distinction, formal versus substantive equality, and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), which reveals how gender, caste, class, and rural location produce distinct experiences of legal exclusion.

**Empowerment Theory** (Zimmerman, 2000) conceptualises empowerment as a multilevel process – psychological, organisational, and community/political. Legal empowerment refers to the process through which marginalised groups acquire knowledge, confidence, and resources to claim legal rights.

**Ecological Systems Theory** (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Heise, 1998) conceptualises intimate partner violence as produced by interacting factors across individual, microsystem (family), exosystem (community institutions), and macrosystem (cultural norms, laws). Barriers operate at each level.

**Rights-Based Social Work Approach** (IFSW, 2018) positions human rights as the normative foundation for practice. Social workers have obligations not only to provide supportive services but to advocate for systemic changes that enable rights realisation.



**Figure 1:** conceptual framework linking domestic violence, legal aid, and social work practice.

The framework (Figure 1) integrates feminist legal theory, empowerment theory, ecological systems theory, and the rights-based social work approach. It shows domestic violence occurring within an ecology of individual, micro, exo, and macro factors. Legal aid mechanisms are an exosystemic resource, but their effectiveness is mediated by women’s awareness, accessibility, quality of representation, and service coordination. Social work practice operates at multiple levels: direct support, brokerage, institutional advocacy, and policy advocacy. The ultimate outcome is access to justice – not merely a legal order but substantive empowerment.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

We used a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018), appropriate for investigating complex social phenomena within real-world contexts.

### 4.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in three districts of Andhra Pradesh: Anantapur (Rayalaseema), Vizianagaram (North Coastal), and West Godavari (Coastal Delta). These districts were purposively selected to capture variation in domestic violence prevalence (28% to 44% according to NFHS-5), legal aid infrastructure, and NGO presence. Within each district, two villages (population under 5,000) were selected.

### 4.3 Participant Selection

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria for women survivors: self-identified experience of domestic violence within the past five years; age 18 years or older; residence in study village; willingness to discuss help-seeking. Exclusion criteria included acute mental health crisis or active violence that would make participation unsafe.

Total sample: 45 women survivors (15 per district), 10 paralegal volunteers (PLVs), and 8 social work practitioners (4 from government One Stop Centres, 4 from NGOs). Participant ages ranged from 22 to 58 years, with representation across marital status and caste groups.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics of participants (n=45 women survivors)

Characteristic	Category	Number	Percentage
Age group	18-30 years	12	26.7
	31-45 years	21	46.7
	46-60 years	12	26.7
Marital status	Married and cohabiting	28	62.2
	Separated	9	20.0
	Divorced	5	11.1
	Widowed	3	6.7
Education	No formal schooling	24	53.3
	Primary (1-5 years)	12	26.7
	Middle (6-8 years)	6	13.3
	Secondary and above	3	6.7
Caste	Scheduled Caste	14	31.1
	Scheduled Tribe	10	22.2
	Backward Class	16	35.6
	Other Caste	5	11.1
Household income	Below poverty line	34	75.6
	Above poverty line	11	24.4
Children	None	8	17.8
	1-2 children	24	53.3
	3 or more	13	28.9

#### 4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected between March 2022 and February 2023. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews (60-90 minutes) with women survivors, four focus group discussions (two with women survivors, one with PLVs, one with social workers), and participant observation at two legal aid clinics, one family court, and three NGO drop-in centres. Interviews were in Telugu, audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

**Ethical Considerations:** Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board. Special protocols included private, safe interview locations; confidentiality; pseudonyms; distress protocols; and transport reimbursement.

**Data Analysis:** We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) with NVivo 12, combining inductive and deductive coding. Inter-coder reliability was established through double-coding of 20% of transcripts.

Table 2. Forms of Domestic Violence Reported in Previous Studies (synthesised from NFHS-5 and NCRB data)

Form of Violence	National (%)	Andhra Pradesh (%)	Most common among rural women?
Physical (pushing, slapping, beating)	28.8	38.5	Yes
Sexual (forced intercourse, unwanted touching)	6.1	8.2	Mixed (underreported)
Emotional/psychological (insults, humiliation, threats)	26.4	34.1	Yes
Economic (withholding money, preventing employment)	21.3	29.7	Yes

## 5. Findings and Discussion

Five interconnected themes emerged.

**Social and Cultural Barriers to Reporting Violence:** The most pervasive barrier was the normalisation of violence within marriage and the stigma attached to disclosure. Women across all three districts described violence as an expected part of marital life.

*“When my husband first hit me, my mother told me that all husbands get angry sometimes. She said adjust, this is your life now.”* (Lakshmi, 34, Anantapur)

Women who reported faced severe social sanctions. One woman said:

*“When I went to the police, the whole village found out. People said I was a bad woman who couldn’t keep her husband happy. My own sister stopped talking to me.”* (Meena, 41, Vizianagaram)

This “chilling effect” means improving legal aid is necessary but insufficient without community norm change.

**Economic Dependency and Legal Vulnerability:** Economic dependency was the most frequently cited reason for remaining in violent relationships and for discontinuing legal proceedings.

*“I wanted to leave. I even went to the legal aid clinic. But where would I go? I have no money, no house in my name, no job. My husband controls everything.”* (Sarala, 38, West Godavari)

Women who had successfully exited often had support from SHGs. One woman explained:

*“The SHG gave me a loan to start a small poultry business. Once I had my own income, I could afford to file a case. Without that money, I would still be there, being beaten.”* (Radha, 45, Anantapur)

This suggests that combining legal aid with economic empowerment is more effective, but such integrated models are rare.

**Awareness of Legal Rights:** Only eight of 45 women had heard of the PWDVA, and understanding was often incorrect.

*“Someone told me there is a law that can send my husband to jail. But I don’t want him to go to jail, I just want him to stop beating me. So, I didn’t pursue it.”* (Anita, 29, Vizianagaram)

Even women who were aware did not know how to access services. Geographical distance was a major barrier:

*“I heard about One Stop Centres on television. But I don’t know where the nearest one is. The village head said it’s in the district headquarters, two hours away. I cannot afford that bus fare.”* (Sunita, 52, West Godavari)

**Table 3. Major barriers to accessing justice (emerging from participant narratives, n=45)**

Barrier Category	Specific Barrier	Number mentioning	Level (Ecological)
<b>Social/Cultural</b>	Normalisation of violence	41	Micro/Macro
	Stigma of disclosure	38	Micro
	Family pressure to reconcile	35	Micro
	Fear of community ostracism	30	Exo
<b>Economic</b>	Financial dependency on abuser	43	Micro
	Lack of independent income	40	Micro/Exo
	Transport costs to legal services	37	Exo
	Unofficial payments to lawyers	22	Exo/Macro
<b>Legal/Institutional</b>	Lack of awareness of PWDVA	37	Individual
	Police reluctance to register FIR	28	Exo
	Court delays	25	Macro
	Absence of legal aid in villages	34	Exo
<b>Psychological</b>	Fear of escalation of violence	39	Individual
	Low self-efficacy	32	Individual
	Depression/trauma	26	Individual

#### 5.4 Challenges in Accessing Legal Aid

Only 12 of 45 women had ever approached any legal aid service. Of these, only 3 obtained a protection order. Police reluctance was a common experience:

*“When I went to the police station, the officer said, ‘This is a family matter. Go home and sort it out.’ He didn’t even write down my complaint.” (Padma, 36, Anantapur)*

Court delays added further burden. One woman recounted:

*“The lawyer from legal aid told me to come to court on the next date. I went three times, and each time the judge was not there, or the case was postponed. I spent money on bus fare and lost wages. I could not keep doing that.” (Jayamma, 47, Vizianagaram)*

Paralegal volunteers had limited capacity. A participant said:

*“The PLV in our village is a nice woman, but she doesn’t know much about the law. She can tell us where to go, but she cannot come with us to court.” (Rani, 33, West Godavari)*

**Table 4. Social Work Interventions and Their Outcomes (as reported by practitioners)**

Intervention Type	Providers	Target Level	Reported Outcomes	Barriers to Effectiveness
Crisis counselling	One Stop Centre counsellors	Individual	Emotional support, safety planning	Limited follow-up, no legal integration

Legal referral	PLVs, NGO workers	Individual/Exo	Increased awareness of legal options	Women do not follow through (costs/fear)
Legal literacy camps	DLSA, NGOs	Community	Improved basic legal knowledge	One-off events, no sustained engagement
Medical-legal coordination	One Stop Centres	Institutional	Some reduction in evidence loss	Only in district hospitals, not village-level
SHG-based legal empowerment	NGOs (rare)	Community/Exo	Increased collective efficacy	Scalability challenges, funding dependence

**Role of Social Workers in Facilitating Justice:** Social workers played four roles: crisis interveners, referral brokers, emotional supporters, and (rarely) systemic advocates. Crisis intervention was most common but insufficient. One social worker admitted:

*“I referred a woman to the legal aid clinic, but the lawyer was not available for three weeks. By then, her husband had convinced her to withdraw. The system is not responsive.”*

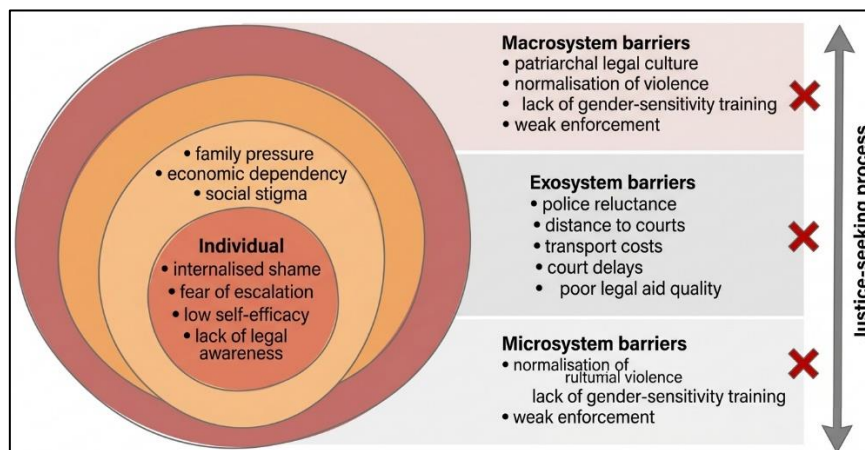
Emotional support was valued by women:

*“The social worker did not solve my legal problem. But she listened to me. She did not judge me. That gave me courage to keep trying.”* (Lalitha, 40, West Godavari)

Systemic advocacy was rarely observed. A senior practitioner explained:

*“We are so busy putting out fires that we have no time to ask why the fires keep starting. Our funding requires us to report numbers of women served, not numbers of policies changed.”*

**Figure 2** illustrates the multi-level barriers. This figure synthesises barriers across the four ecological levels. Individual level: internalised shame, fear of escalation, low self-efficacy, lack of legal awareness. Microsystem level: family pressure to reconcile, economic dependency on abuser, social stigma. Exosystem level: police reluctance, geographical distance to courts/legal aid, transport costs, court delays, poor legal aid quality. Macrosystem level: patriarchal legal culture, normalisation of violence, lack of gender-sensitivity training, weak enforcement. The figure shows that women must overcome obstacles at each level sequentially; failure at any level terminates the justice-seeking process.



**Figure 2:** Multi-level barriers to justice among rural women.

## 6. Policy Implications

**Legal Literacy as Community Infrastructure:** Shift from periodic camps to continuous legal literacy delivered through SHGs. Train SHG leaders as legal resource persons with refresher training every six months.

**Village-Level Legal Aid Clinics:** Establish village-level clinics staffed by trained community paralegals (paid, not volunteers) operating out of panchayat buildings. Use a hub-and-spoke model with district clinics supervising 10–15 village clinics.

**Strengthening SHGs as Legal Empowerment Collectives:** Provide SHGs with training on the PWDVA, legal procedures, and advocacy skills, plus a small fund for legal expenses (transport, documentation). SHGs would serve as first responders.

**NGO-Government Partnerships for Integrated Services:** Formal partnership agreements at district level with joint protocols for referral, case tracking, and information sharing. Restructure funding to support integrated services.

**Community Social Work Programmes Targeting Norms:** Scale community programmes that engage entire villages in dialogue about gender, violence, and legal rights. Adapt models like “SASA!” for Andhra Pradesh.

**Table 5. Policy recommendations for improving legal access**

Recommendation	Target Level	Implementing Actors	Feasibility	Estimated Timeframe
Embedded legal literacy through SHGs	Community/Exo	DWCDA, SHG federations	High	6–12 months
Village-level paralegal clinics	Exo	DLSAs, panchayats	Medium	12–24 months
Legal expense funds for SHGs	Micro/Community	NGOs, CSR funding	Medium	6 months (pilot)
Integrated case tracking system	Exo/Macro	NALSA, DWCDA	Low	24–36 months
Community norm-change programmes	Macro	NGOs, social work colleges	Medium	18–36 months
Gender-sensitisation for rural police	Exo	Police training academies	Medium	Ongoing

## 7. Conclusion

This study examined barriers to justice for rural women experiencing domestic violence in Andhra Pradesh. Formal legal remedies remain largely inaccessible due to intersecting socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. Social work practice is currently under-resourced and oriented toward crisis management rather than systemic advocacy. The feminist ecological framework reveals that barriers operate at multiple levels and compound each other.

The study integrates feminist legal theory with ecological systems theory, extends empowerment theory by showing the mutual constitution of legal, economic, and psychological empowerment, and specifies what a rights-based social work approach requires in rural Indian contexts.

We provide a detailed mapping of barriers, identification of failure points in current social work interventions, and five concrete policy recommendations with feasibility assessments.

## 7.1 Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include the qualitative design (limited generalisability), cross-sectional data, and the absence of male perpetrators or judicial officers. Future research should use mixed methods, intervention designs, comparative state-level analysis, and focus on intersectionally marginalised groups (SC/ST/disabled women).

The gap between legal promise and lived reality is not an accident of implementation. It is produced by the same patriarchal structures that produce domestic violence itself. Legal empowerment as community infrastructure, social work as systemic advocacy, and justice as substantive equality – these are the tasks ahead.

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