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Mayank Shriniwas

Law Student,

Amity Law School, Amity University, Lucknow

Dr. Arvind Kumar Singh

Assistant Professor

Amity Law School, Amity University, Lucknow

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The Relationship Between Domestic Violence and Criminal Law in India: A Critical Analysis

ABSTRACT

In India, domestic violence has changed from being seen as a private family conflict to being acknowledged as a constitutional and human rights violation that calls for legal action. The intricate relationship between punishing criminal laws and civil protective procedures is reflected in the legal structure controlling domestic violence. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and important sections of the Indian Penal Code, such as Section 498A (cruelty), Section 304B (dowry death), and Section 306 (abetment of suicide), are the main topics of this paper's critical analysis of the relationship between domestic violence and criminal law in India. Criminal law serves as a deterrent by imposing penalties for serious wrongdoing, but the Domestic Violence Act offers prompt civil remedies such protection orders, residence rights, and financial redress. The paper analyses judicial trends, particularly the Supreme Court's evolving stance on arrest procedures and misuse allegations and evaluates the constitutional foundations of criminalizing domestic abuse under Articles 14, 15(3), and 21 of the Constitution. It argues that although criminal law plays a vital symbolic and deterrent role in addressing domestic violence, a purely punitive approach remains insufficient in the absence of structural reform, effective enforcement, and victim-centered implementation. The study concludes that a balanced and integrated model combining civil protection, criminal accountability, and socio-legal support mechanisms is essential for achieving substantive gender justice in India. The report also highlights the necessity of institutional sensitivity, unified judicial interpretation, and policy changes to guarantee that criminal law remedies successfully result in victims' actual protection and empowerment.

KEYWORDS

Gender Justice, 498A IPC, PWDVA 2005, Criminal Law, Domestic Violence, and Constitutional Protection

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, domestic abuse is one of the most prevalent and deeply ingrained types of gender-based violence. While violence in general is frequently denounced in public discourse, history has normalized, hidden, or trivialized abuse that takes place in the private realm of marriage and family. Economic dependence, cultural expectations of female endurance, and patriarchal societal systems all played a part in making domestic abuse invisible. For many years, the concept that domestic violence was essentially a "private" issue was reinforced by the judicial system's refusal to get in unless there was severe harm or death.

This transformation of domestic violence as a public law issue and a matter of criminal culpability is a significant development in Indian jurisprudence. This development is a result of feminist activism, constitutionalism, judicial activism, and legislative intervention. The introduction of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA), is a watershed moment in this development as it recognized various aspects of domestic violence rather than just physical assault. At the same time, the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC), continues to offer a deterrent through various sections such as 498A, 304B, and 306.

This paper aims to explore the interrelation between domestic violence and criminal law from a doctrinal as well as a constitutional perspective. It suggests that the role of criminal law is to deter as well as symbolically condemn domestic violence.

II. CONCEPTUAL EVOLUTION: FROM PRIVATE WRONG TO PUBLIC CRIME

Traditionally, domestic violence was not subjected to legal scrutiny through the lens of marital privacy and patriarchal family structures that placed a strong emphasis on the importance of the family home. The private realm was perceived as being off-limits to state intervention on the premise that family life was regulated by personal morality rather than public law. In the colonial era, the husband was considered the head of the family and had considerable authority over his wife.

This reluctance to intervene in domestic violence was a reflection of the general social attitudes of the day that placed a strong emphasis on maintaining family cohesion at all costs, including individual suffering. The judicial discourse was geared towards promoting family reunification rather than prosecution of domestic violence perpetrators, thus reinforcing the normalization of coercion and violence within marriage. Domestic cruelty was watered down as a "matrimonial dispute," and women were

advised to suffer abuse for the sake of social cohesion.

This conceptual shift was initiated by the acknowledgment that violence within the household was not merely a personal concern but a transgression of the principles of equality, dignity, and autonomy provided by the constitution. “The acknowledgment of the role of violence within the household as a perpetuation of structural gender inequality was a catalyst for legislative and interpretative change.”

The passing of the “*Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*” (PWDVA) was a paradigmatic shift. Section 3 of the Act provides a comprehensive definition of “domestic violence” which includes “physical, sexual, verbal, and economic abuse.” This comprehensive definition of “domestic violence” marks a shift from the conventional criminal law perspective that focused primarily on bodily harm.

The inclusion of “economic abuse” marks a paradigmatic shift. Financial deprivation, denial of maintenance, denial of access to economic resources, and economic dependence were all powerful tools of coercion. “The acknowledgment of economic abuse recognizes the interrelated nature of economic resources and gender inequality.”

Furthermore, the acknowledgment of emotional and mental abuse is also consistent with the latest human rights case law. Domestic violence is no longer perceived as isolated incidents of physical assault. Rather, it is the sustained pattern of coercive control.

Therefore, the transformation from a private law tort to a public law crime marks more than a simple change in legislative style; it marks a broader moral shift. Domestic violence has been perceived as a product of gender inequality, rather than as an isolated act between individuals.

III. CRIMINAL LAW FRAMEWORK ADDRESSING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

A. Section 498A IPC: Cruelty and Criminal Accountability

The inclusion of Section 498A in the Indian Penal Code was a result of the growing national problem of dowry deaths and bride burning in India, which prompted the legislature to enact the Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Act, 1983. The 1970s and 1980s saw a rise in the number of young married women dying under suspicious circumstances, often within a few years of marriage.

The section specifically criminalizes cruelty practiced by a

husband or his relatives, which is likely to drive a woman to suicide or cause grave injury or danger to her life, limb, or mental or physical health. The definition of cruelty under the section is as follows:

1. Any willful conduct which is likely to drive a woman to suicide or cause grave injury; and
2. Harassment with a view to coercing her or her relatives to meet unlawful demands for property or valuable security.

The insertion of Section 498A signified a significant change in the Indian criminal law. Historically, criminal liability in marital relationships has been confined only to offenses involving physical injury. However, the insertion of Section 498A extended the criminal law into the sphere of mental cruelty and harassment. This section acknowledged the fact that marital violence does not always result in physical injury; mental degradation, constant humiliation, and intimidation with regard to dowry can be equally damaging.

B. Dowry Death and Section 304B IPC

Section 304B of the IPC deals with the issue of dowry death. It provides severe punishment in cases of the death of women under unusual circumstances within seven years of marriage if the woman has suffered cruelty “soon before her death” in the context of demands for dowry.

The presumption under Section 113B of the Evidence Act enhances the power of the prosecution by requiring the accused to prove the facts. This is an acknowledgement by the legislature of the evidentiary problems associated with domestic violence cases, which often occur in the absence of third-party witnesses.

In the case of *Satbir Singh v. State of Haryana*, the Supreme Court made it clear that the term “soon before death” has to be construed realistically. The court held that if the term is construed too literally, the purpose of the law would be defeated.

Dowry death provisions show the most extreme overlap between domestic violence and criminal law. Here, it can be seen how domestic violence can be the cause of death. The severity of the punishment shows the State’s determination to deal with the problem of dowry-related violence.

C. Abetment of Suicide under Section 306 IPC

Family cruelty is often one of the contributing factors in the suicide of married women. The abetment of suicide under Section 306 of the IPC is punishable. To constitute abetment of suicide,

the involvement of instigation or participation is necessary.

There is an emphasis on establishing proximate cause between harassment and the act of suicide. Merely having marital problems is not enough. The involvement of intentional provocation or cruelty is necessary.

Although the evidentiary requirements are high, the relevance of Section 306 is undeniable in dealing with extreme forms of mental torture. The provision recognizes the fact that extreme mental torture can lead an individual to commit suicide.

IV. THE CIVIL-CRIMINAL INTERFACE UNDER THE PWDVA

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA), is a civil law that includes some criminal consequences for a breach of a protection order. The rationale for this is the recognition of the need for victims of domestic violence to obtain immediate relief as well as long-term consequences for a breach of a protection order. Unlike traditional criminal laws that emphasize punishment for a crime after it is committed, the PWDVA takes a preventive and rights-based approach to addressing domestic violence.

Evidence of the civil nature of the Act is found in the remedial approach of the Act. The main features of the Act are:

- Protection orders restraining further acts of violence or harassment;
- Residence rights, which provide that a woman shall not be dispossessed of the shared household irrespective of any claim or title to the house;
- Monetary relief and compensation for mental torture;
- Custody orders regarding children;
- Appointment of Protection Officers and service providers to help women access justice.

These provisions indicate a paradigm shift from reactive criminalization to proactive protection. The Act allows a woman to approach the Magistrate directly without necessarily filing a First Information Report under the Indian Penal Code. This reduces the adversarial high drama associated with criminal cases and allows victims to approach the courts for immediate relief without resulting in the incarceration of the accused party.

On the other hand, the Act provides criminal teeth to the provisions by making a breach of protection orders punishable under the Act. Under Section 31 of the Act, a breach of protection orders amounts to a cognizable and non-bailable offense. This

provides teeth to civil remedies.

The PWDVA is not an alternative remedy to criminal cases but an additional remedy. A woman can simultaneously file cases under Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code and protection orders under the PWDVA. However, this would result in procedural overlaps and lead to multiple litigations. This would place an additional burden on the victims of domestic violence.

The judicial coordination, streamlined processes, and sensitivity in case handling are therefore critical. To achieve this, there is a need for harmonization between civil redress and criminal liability, while avoiding duplication and delay. The civil/criminal interface in the PWDVA is a product of an integrated jurisprudence. The recognition of domestic violence as a violation of individual rights that needs immediate protection and, at the same time, a criminal act that needs deterrent punishment, enhances the effectiveness of the law in combating domestic violence.

V. CONSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF CRIMINALIZING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The constitutional legitimacy for criminal intervention in the case of domestic violence can be traced back to Articles 14, 15(3), and 21 of the Constitution of India. Articles 14, 15(3), and 21, together, provide a framework for substantive equality, discriminatory practices, and dignified existence, which would include the criminalization of domestic violence.

Article 14 ensures that individuals enjoy equality before the law and equal protection under the law. However, it has been contended that constitutional equality does not only mean equal treatment, which would be the formal approach, but also ensures substantive equality, which seeks to address inequality.

Domestic violence promotes systemic inequality between the sexes, which has been embedded in the dynamics of domination and subordination. Therefore, criminalization seeks to address the inequality that has been embedded in the dynamics of domination and subordination, which has denied women equal participation, autonomy, and agency in the family. By criminalizing domestic violence, the State seeks to address the inequality that has been embedded in the dynamics of domination and subordination, which has denied women equal participation, autonomy, and agency in the family.

Article 15(3) empowers the State to make special provisions for women and children. This clause acknowledges past

discrimination and allows protective legislation. Gender-specific laws, such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, draw their constitutional sanction from this enabling clause. Such laws, far from violating the principle of equality, fulfill substantive equality by protecting gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Article 21 safeguards the right to life and personal liberty. The scope of this right has been interpreted to include dignity, bodily integrity, privacy, mental health, and decisional autonomy. Domestic violence affects each of these fundamental rights. Physical violence violates the right to bodily integrity; emotional abuse compromises mental health; economic coercion compromises autonomy; and pressure on personal liberty. The constitutional notion of life under Article 21 is incompatible with life in domestic violence. In the landmark case of *Vishaka vs. State of Rajasthan*, the Supreme Court has held gender-based violence violative of Articles 14, 15, and 21. While the case deals specifically with workplace harassment, the reasoning can equally be applied to the issue of domestic violence. The court has held the importance of gender equality and dignity as the bedrock of the Constitution.

The criminalization of domestic violence can therefore be seen as an affirmation of the Constitution's morality. It challenges the idea of the private sphere of the home being outside the Constitution's remit.

VI. THE MISUSE DEBATE: JUDICIAL BALANCING AND SOCIAL REALITY

Allegations of Misuse of Section 498A IPC: The issue of the misuse of the 498A IPC has had a considerable impact on the judicial discourse of the past two decades. The argument is that the section being cognizable and non-bailable has sometimes led to a situation where not only the husband is implicated, but the entire family is being subjected to the ordeal of being arrested or prosecuted on false charges. The issue of the misuse of this section was reflected in the case of *Rajesh Sharma v State of Uttar Pradesh*, wherein the Supreme Court issued a set of guidelines that included the preliminary scrutiny of the complaint prior to the arrest of the accused and the formation of Family Welfare Committees to assess the complaints made against the accused. The intention of the Court was to prevent arbitrary arrests and the potential for coercive action against the accused.

Nevertheless, the ruling has come under fire for overstepping the judiciary and the potential for the erosion of legislative protections established by Parliament. The Supreme Court revisited the issue

in the case of *Social Action Forum for Manav Adhikar v. Union of India* and made it clear that the judiciary cannot undermine legislative provisions under the guise of issuing procedural guidelines. While the court acknowledged the potential for misuse, it emphasized the existence of safeguards under the Code of Criminal Procedure and the need not to undermine the substantive rights of victims.

The issue of potential misuse has to be viewed in the context of empirical realities. The data suggests that the underreporting of domestic violence is far more prevalent than the false reporting of the same. Women are often dissuaded by social pressure, economic dependence, and the potential for retaliation against reporting domestic violence. The issue of misuse has the potential to perpetuate the dominant patriarchal narrative of women being vindictive and exaggerating the nature of the abuse.

In addition, the jurisprudence of criminal law recognizes the fact that the threat of misuse should not be allowed to undermine the effectiveness of a valid and otherwise reasonable protective provision. Every law has the threat of abuse, and the answer to abuse lies in ensuring procedural correctness and proper investigation.

Therefore, the judicial balancing act has to be achieved on two levels. On the one hand, it has to ensure a proper procedure and safeguard against arbitrary arrest, thereby protecting the constitutional safeguard of personal liberty under Article 21 of the constitution. At the same time, it has to ensure the effectiveness of Section 498A in deterring abuse, thereby protecting the rights of actual victims.

The entire jurisprudence of abuse, in fact, represents a larger constitutional dilemma of gender justice versus due process, and any principled approach to the subject must address both concerns without letting one concern dominate the other. The legitimacy of Section 498A is not in diluting the law, but in enforcing it in a manner that is sensitive, careful, and constitutional.

VII. ENFORCEMENT GAPS AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The lack of effective implementation is further seen in the low percentage of convictions in dowry-related offenses. Delays in investigation and trials also contribute to a lack of deterrence.

The attitude of the police, too, is often patriarchal, treating

violence in the family as a family matter rather than a criminal act. The role of the Protection Officers has also not been very effective, and shelter homes and counseling facilities are inadequate, particularly in rural areas.

The criminal law, however, is only a part of a solution that seeks to address gender inequality. The criminal law must be accompanied by institutional responses that include legal aid, psychosocial support, economic rehabilitation, and community awareness initiatives.

VIII. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Further, the comparative analysis of the laws shows different approaches to dealing with the issue of domestic violence. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which is applicable in the United Kingdom, has an extensive definition of abuse. It recognizes coercive control, manipulation, and non-physical abuse. The Act has also provided for Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders. These are meant to offer quick remedies with consequences. However, the most notable aspect of the laws is the response systems. The laws have provided for the use of coordinated response systems. These systems include the police, social services, health services, and victim advocacy organizations.

In the United States, some jurisdictions have the mandatory pro-arrest policies. This is based on the assumption that an arrest deters the abusers. It shows zero tolerance. However, empirical research has shown mixed results. The pro-arrest policies have raised some concerns. The policies have shown some negative consequences. However, some jurisdictions are now implementing the use of batterer programs.

The Indian PWDVA is progressive in addressing economic and emotional abuse, which is consistent with global standards of human rights protection. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this legislation needs to be enhanced by capacity building and better coordination amongst stakeholders towards the establishment of specialized courts for domestic violence cases.

The international scene emphasizes the need for a balanced approach towards addressing domestic violence by not only relying on punitive measures but also on preventive, rehabilitative, and restorative strategies. A comprehensive approach that encompasses criminal justice with welfare-oriented strategies would be more effective towards achieving a sustained decrease in domestic violence cases.

IX. CRITICAL EVALUATION: LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF CRIMINALIZATION

The criminal law has an expressive function in denouncing domestic violence as morally wrong. Besides its coercive effect, the criminalization of domestic violence has an expressive function in denouncing the practice as morally wrong. By imposing criminal sanctions, the State is sending an express message that violence in marriages is not only wrong but also against the values enshrined in the Constitution. This is particularly important in societies where domestic violence has become the status quo. The criminalization of domestic violence is not only meant to punish but also affirm the rights of the victims.

Despite the need for the criminal law to denounce domestic violence, criminal sanctions are not adequate in eliminating the patriarchal attitudes that perpetuate the practice. This is because the criminal law is reactive in nature. It is often imposed after the damage has already taken place. Besides, the criminal approach has some negative consequences, such as the perpetuation of litigation, animosity, and economic hardship for the victims who are dependent on the perpetrator for economic support. The victims might not wish to have the perpetrator incarcerated if they are likely to suffer economically.

Therefore, the domestic violence jurisprudence has to strike the right balance between criminalization and restorative and preventive approaches. Mediation, counselling, behavioral interventions, and economic empowerment are the need of the hour. The preventive education and awareness campaigns can help change the cultural attitudes.

The areas of reform include gender-sensitive policing, the establishment of domestic violence courts, strengthening the witness protection laws, improving coordination between civil and criminal courts, and enhancing legal literacy among women. A proper framework has to strike the right balance so that the criminal law is not seen as an instrument of punishment alone but as part of the broader approach towards gender justice.

X. CONCLUSION

The interface between domestic violence and criminal law in India marks a paradigm shift in the consciousness of the law. What was previously hidden from the gaze of the law, protected by the cloak of marital privacy and family autonomy, has been firmly embedded in the sphere of constitutional accountability. Domestic violence has been perceived not just as a personal grievance, but as a form of structural injustice that violates

constitutional rights.

The structure of the criminal law, including Section 498A of the IPC, Section 304B of the IPC, and Section 306 of the IPC, reflects the commitment of the State to deterrence and denunciation. Simultaneously, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, provides a civil rights approach, focusing on protection, residential security, monetary relief, and rehabilitation. Therefore, there is a deliberate attempt to provide a hybrid approach, combining punishment and protection, accountability and relief.

However, the jurisprudence on domestic violence cases reveals an ongoing tension in constitutional law. The debate on the misuse of Section 498A illustrates the difficulty of striking an appropriate balance between gender justice and proceduralism. The imperative of protecting personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution requires measures to prevent arbitrary arrest, but an overemphasis on the risk of misuse threatens to undermine substantive equality and perpetuate patriarchal attitudes. The courts have attempted to find a middle ground between protecting legal provisions and insisting on procedural compliance. This is an example of the evolutionary nature of constitutional law in a heterogeneous and unequal society. Furthermore, the utility of criminal law must be considered with reference to the structural dimensions of social reality. Domestic violence is perpetuated not just by individuals but by socio-cultural hierarchies, economic dependency, and gender inequality. While punitive measures are necessary, they are insufficient to break the cycle of violence. Without sensitivity to the institutional dimensions of legal aid, Protection Officers, courts, and victim support, legal provisions risk being purely declaratory.

This can be further substantiated by the comparative jurisprudence, which shows that for sustainable development, it is essential that there are integrated approaches which incorporate criminal justice with preventive, restorative, and welfare measures. International developments show that for dealing with the issue of domestic violence, it is essential that there are coordinated efforts, victim-centered approaches, and community engagement along with criminal justice measures.

Ultimately, the criminalization of domestic violence is an affirmation of constitutional morality. It affirms that marriage is not a sphere that can be isolated from the larger sphere of constitutional rights. It affirms that dignity, equality, and integrity do not cease at the threshold of the marital home. The Indian model, though imperfect, affirms this as a norm.

Thus, the path forward in the development of domestic violence

law as a part of criminal law in India is one of harmonization, between civil and criminal approaches, between deterrence and empowerment, and between due process and gender justice. A mature constitutional system demands that protective laws be robust, and that enforcement be fair and informed. Enhanced institutional capabilities, legal literacy, and socio-economic empowerment are essential accompaniments to criminal sanction.

The interrelation between domestic violence and criminal law in India is not static but dynamic. It is an evolving interplay between law and society, between the traditional and the modern, and between personal autonomy and public responsibility. The success of the legal system in India ultimately turns not on the severity of the sanction but on the strength of its commitment to gender equality and human dignity. The criminal law, as part of an overall strategy of gender justice, can be an effective tool for social change

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