



BILL & MELINDA  
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ROLE OF  
**WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES**  
IN ADDRESSING  
**INTIMATE PARTNER**  
**VIOLENCE IN INDIA**

A POLICY BRIEF



# EVIDENCE-BASED SYSTEMIC APPROACH TO ADDRESSING INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN INDIA: CREATING A NEW VISION

This is a study undertaken by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) to build evidence around three community-level platforms that offer the most potential as responsive points for addressing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) : namely, (a) Women's Collectives, (b) Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and (c) Health Systems/ Frontline Health Workers (FLHW).

This policy brief highlights the learnings and recommendations for how women's collectives, including self-help groups (SHGs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), can address IPV. IPV refers to violence in relationship shared with an 'intimate' partner, irrespective of marriage. In the context of the study on which this policy brief is based, IPV is examined as spousal violence, within the larger legal framework of domestic violence in India.

The findings and recommendations are based on secondary literature review of programs in South Asia, a background paper on the history and trajectory of women's collectives addressing IPV in India, primary review of large-scale state government programs like Kudumbashree in Kerala, Velugu in Andhra Pradesh, Shaurya Dal in Madhya Pradesh and Mahila Samakhya in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh as well as formative work with women survivors and representatives of women's collectives in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh.

The focus of the study was on unpacking the 'systemic responsiveness' of policies, programs and practices to intentionally address IPV, and on documenting the drivers and enablers. The evidence from the study shows that collectives, PRIs and health systems/FLHWs have understood 'addressing IPV' in various ways, ranging from recognition and voicing of the issue, mediation/<sup>i</sup> alternate dispute resolution, facilitating linkages with institutions and services for prevention of and response and creation of an enabling environment. The study finds that all these elements contribute toward 'addressing IPV', and each program and platform espouses the different elements to varying degrees. This framework of 'systemic responsiveness' and 'addressing IPV' was developed by the ICRW research team, based on the findings from the study, and seeks to build on the existing literature on 'prevention and response'.

## A FRAMEWORK FOR 'SYSTEMIC RESPONSIVENESS'

- Rooted in human rights norms and standards
- A matter of public policy, governance and/ or collective concern
- Intentional, not incidental in design

## ELEMENTS OF 'ADDRESSING IPV'

- Recognition and voicing of the issue
- Mediation/alternate dispute resolution
- Facilitating linkages with institutions and services for prevention of and response to IPV
- Creation of an enabling environment, including political will

<sup>i</sup>'Mediation' is defined by the Law Commission of India, as a negotiation carried out with the assistance of a third party. The mediator, in contrast to the arbitrator or judge, has no power to impose an outcome on disputing parties.

In the year 1996, the Arbitration and Conciliation Act, 1996 was passed and sec. 30 of that Act, which is in Part I, provides that an arbitral tribunal may try to have the dispute settled by use of 'mediation' or 'conciliation'. Sub-section (1) of sec. 30 permits the arbitral tribunal to 'use mediation, conciliation or other procedures', for the purpose of reaching settlement. [http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/adr\\_conf/concepts%20med%20rao%201.pdf](http://lawcommissionofindia.nic.in/adr_conf/concepts%20med%20rao%201.pdf)

## CONTEXT

It is estimated that one in three married women in India has experienced intimate-partner violence (IPV) at least once in their lifetime (WHO, 2013). The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005 was intended to protect women from violence in domestic relationships, alongside provisions in the Indian Penal Code that criminalizes acts of 'cruelty' by husband and other members of the marital family. While crimes data from the National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) capture reported

cases of IPV – presumably the 'tip of the iceberg' – other sources of data show that 78.6 percent of women who experienced IPV never reported to anybody and 9.1 percent told about the experience to someone and only 12.3 percent sought help from any source, while 52 percent of women themselves justify wife-beating in certain circumstances (IIPS & ICF, 2017). Moreover, there has been very little research on pathways women take at the community level to address IPV.

## WHAT ROLE CAN WOMEN'S COLLECTIVES PLAY IN ADDRESSING IPV?

Throughout India, community-based collectives play an important role in community and civic life, supported through government and non-governmental programs. These groups have different mandates and different names, but the predominant forms are the microcredit groups called SHGs and CBOs. The largest network of women's collectives in the form of SHGs and CBOs is promoted through the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM). The NRLM has set an ambitious target of reaching 100 million rural poor across 600,000 villages in rural India, with the SHG as its basic community platform at the community level. This flagship program has immense potential to transform lives and livelihoods, with a stated mandate for social inclusion and empowerment of women. Current policies and programs also promote the convergence of the work of women's collectives with the institutions of local self-governance, the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and is commonly known as PRI-CBO convergence.

Innovations and targeted interventions for gender equality and for addressing IPV through large-scale SHG and CBO programs are present in some states, but progress is slow and its sustainability uncertain (Vindhya, U., et al., 2018) (Parthasarthy, et al., 2018). A study of SHGs across 16 states also showed that the issue of violence was discussed in only 11 percent of groups (Dwivedi, 2007).

Nevertheless, various forms of collectives exist in the South Asia and have emerged as one of the most responsive platforms for women to get support as survivors of violence, especially in rural areas. The collective is considered a safe space for women to discuss their concerns and the collective strength, when leveraged through feminist training and with handholding from women's rights organizations, has emerged as one of the prominent platforms that helps in voicing and recognition of violence, and in connecting survivors to institutional services, even if the primary reason for organizing was to improve livelihoods alone (Nair, 2018) (Pande, et al., 2017).

# LARGE-SCALE PROGRAMS: UNPACKING SYSTEMIC RESPONSIVENESS IN ADDRESSING IPV

## Models of Women's Collectives

A review of the data points to four different kinds of models that have operated in India and South Asia, in which women's collectives have taken on the agenda of addressing IPV. The four models have operated on scale and over a period of many years. They are Grameen Bank (Pande, et al., 2017), Velugu (Vindhya, U., et al., 2018), Kudumbashree (Parthasarthy, et al., 2018) and Mahila Samakhya (ANANDI, 2016). The key elements of the four approaches reflected in the models are summarized in the table. These elements reflect whether the programs were part of systemic responsiveness to IPV or whether they were ad-hoc, and how the agenda was sustained over time.

	Grameen Bank	Velugu	Kudumbasree	Mahila Samakhya
Origin and Purpose	Poverty alleviation	Poverty alleviation	Decentralized governance for development planning	Education for feminist transformation
Is addressing Violence Against Women a stated mandate?	Not a mandate	Not a mandate but evolves organically	Not a mandate but evolves organically and becomes institutionalized	Is a mandate
Is addressing IPV an expected outcome of the program?	No; it is not envisioned	Somewhat; it is an ameliorative vision	Somewhat; it is an ameliorative vision	Yes; there is a vision for transformative change
Who shapes the agenda for gender equality and women's rights?	N/A	Individually driven	Individually driven but also embedded in government structures	Agenda-setting and directions provided by gender experts, women's rights organizations, and collectives organized at the grassroots
Key strategies to address violence	N/A	Feminist training to grassroots leaders as counselors/paralegals	Learning and reflection, linkage with existing government schemes and legitimization from local governance body	Learning, reflection and action on rights, alternate dispute resolution
When did they start working on violence?	N/A	4-5years into the program	11 years after the program started	From inception
Sustainability	N/A	Not sustainable because of not being institutionalized	Sustainable through state support	Program has not been sustained but the change has been sustained

## KEY LESSONS FROM THE FOUR PATHWAYS<sup>ii</sup>

### Addressing IPV became a legitimate public concern through a stated mandate

In each of the pathways and particularly from the model documentation of Kudumbashree (Parthasarthy, et al., 2018) and Velugu (Vindhya, U., et al., 2018), we find that the work on IPV began with a stated collective mandate for addressing the issue. For different groups this point came at different junctures in their journeys, but without a stated mandate, there were no investments or strategies in addressing IPV. These strategies, investments and mechanisms were rolled out over 10-20 years and were part of long-term government programs.

### Trained collectives play an important role in recognition of IPV

Training and capacity building across large-scale programs, such as the Mahila Samakhya, have played critical roles in strengthening responses to violence by collectives. For instance, the transformative approaches by which women learn through critical dialogues and experience sharing — reflecting on their own assumptions, beliefs or frames of reference — helped to build a shared understanding that IPV is a rights violation and not 'destiny' or 'prerogative of the husband.'

<sup>ii</sup>Based on the synthesis of secondary literature review of evaluated/documented programs in South Asia, a background paper on the history and trajectory of women's collectives addressing IPV in India, primary review of government programmes like Kudumbashree in Kerala, Velugu in Andhra Pradesh, Shaurya Dal in Madhya Pradesh and Mahila Samakhya in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh in India as well as formative work with women survivors and platform representatives conducted in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh.

## Addressing IPV is key to enhancing outcomes of women's economic participation

Whether or not the programs began with the objective of addressing IPV, the pathways show that IPV programs that collaborate with women's collectives have made IPV an important part of their agenda. The model documentation of Velugu points to the fact that the program on IPV began as response to an overwhelming demand from women entering the livelihoods program, to address their concerns of opportunity and mobility that were being restricted due to IPV.

## Collectives help make violence, including IPV, a public concern

Women's collectives have played an important role in helping to break the culture of silence around domestic violence, especially IPV. They have been successful in facilitating public acknowledgement of the issue across a range of stakeholders. For instance, under the Velugu program, members of the women's collectives were successful in making issues of violence an articulated focus of the poverty alleviation program for which programmatic investments were subsequently made (U.Vindhya, et al., 2018).

## Collectives provide mediation or alternate dispute resolution

Feminist women's collectives across the country have dealt with IPV through mediation and counseling, including through government programs such as the Mahila Samakhya, which supported women's courts called *Nari Adalat*<sup>iii</sup> as well as the Social Action Committees (SACs) of Velugu program. Women in these groups receive specific training on issues of violence, legal frameworks and mediation based on a human rights framework to enable them to arbitrate cases of IPV. Rights-based mediation has been an important function of collectives, especially considering the intrinsic limitations and biases within patriarchal institutions such as the police, legal and judicial systems and Panchayats.

## Panchayati Raj Institutions can be more responsive to IPV through pressure from collectives

Collectives play a role in sensitizing and ensuring gender-responsive engagement of PRIs on the question of IPV. For instance, in Dahod, in Panchiyasal village (ANANDI, 2016), a small tribal village, the women's collectives and their leaders often engage panchayat leaders and other governance bodies in the alternate dispute resolution mechanism. The women's collectives often draw up resolutions in the presence of the panchayat members and community elders to ensure their accountability towards the decision taken. Such conceptual and functional embedding within the Panchayati Raj system and participatory local development planning is a critical enabler for addressing violence at the grassroots level.

## Women's leadership in governance can help IPV to become PRI and government agenda

The experience of Kudumbashree illustrated that when women's collective members entered the formal spaces of politics and governance, the presence of a large number of elected women representatives was an opportunity to make violence against women a priority issue on the panchayat's agenda. The institutionalization of gender responsive interventions in Kudumbashree is seen exactly at this point in its history, where these women entered public office as elected leaders (Parthasarthy, et al., 2018).

## Collectives can facilitate access to services and entitlements for prevention of and response to IPV

With training, information and knowledge about schemes, services, and laws, collectives have managed to help women receive entitlements through a range of mechanisms. The Kudumbashree collective, for example, illustrates how collectives have facilitated linkages with Snehitha Centers, Jagrutha Centers and Gender Self-Learning Program; and allowed collectives to engage from a position of power to access a range of quality services and entitlements (Parthasarthy, et al., 2018). More mature collectives can also help strengthen the quality and outcomes of existing services and entitlements by monitoring them. This is a mutually advantageous situation for the collectives and their members, as well as for the government, which often struggles to reach the 'last mile'.

## Role of feminist organizations in supporting women's collectives

The push for training and capacity-building, recognition and voicing of IPV as a concern, facilitating institutional linkages, and creating an enabling environment for addressing IPV came about due to the work of women's rights organizations and gender equality advocates. Their constant presence as advisors, trainers and leaders in the programs enhanced the responsiveness to violence issues.

## Gaps remain in investments for women's collectives and relevant institutional mechanisms for addressing IPV

While governments have mobilized large sections of women, the commitment to support them with appropriate resources remains a critical gap. For instance, though Kudumbashree is envisaged to play an important role in gender-responsive planning and budgeting, there has been progressive reduction in both allocation and utilization of funds earmarked under successive plans. Further, following the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh (AP) in 2014, the Velugu/Indira Kranthi Pratham Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) was also bifurcated into AP SERP and Telengana (TG) SERP. In both states, the governments have diluted the program funding and the gender and development agenda of the previous years, and IPV interventions have suffered.

<sup>iii</sup>The Mahila Samakhya women's collectives had developed a self-organized mechanism at the block or cluster level to address issues of violence against women. These were called Nyay Samitis (Justice Committees)/Nari Adalats (Women's Courts) where there were specialized skills and facilitation for conflict resolution, accompanying survivors of violence for redressal, providing legal aid etc. and most importantly follow up on the survivors to ascertain that she was free from violence.

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

A review of current women's collectives' points to a number of key strategies that leverage the strength of women's collectives as an important platform for addressing IPV:

### **NRLM, with widest outreach of women's collectives, should address IPV as a stated mandate:**

The learning from the pathways is that livelihoods programs can integrate within their mandate the issue of addressing IPV. Moving forward, this would not only ensure violence-free lives for the millions of women members of SHGs and CBOs but would also enable their economic participation.

### **The PRI-CBO convergence should develop guidelines to ensure that SHG and CBO members can access government services and entitlements for the prevention of and response to IPV:**

Collectives and PRIs working together will not only legitimize the agenda of addressing IPV as a development and governance concern, but it can also support the government efforts to reach rights, entitlements and services to the 'last mile'.

### **National and state training institutes must dedicate resources for capacity-building on gender and violence issues:**

The government's National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD)<sup>iv</sup> and the State Institutes of Rural Development (SIRDs), along with other training academies must invest additional time and resources for building capacities of women's collectives, grassroots elected leaders and program functionaries on gender and violence. Women's rights organizations and gender experts, with experience in feminist training pedagogies, should be called upon by NIRD/SIRDs to support this endeavor. It is recommended that a roster of such experts/trainers be developed.

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<sup>iv</sup><http://www.nird.org.in/>