



Community Response to Domestic Violence Survivors

ROLE OF GRAMIN MAHILA KENDRA

North East Network, Assam
2020



THE BEGINNING

Assam witnessed the highest rate of crimes against women in India in 2019¹. Among all the crimes committed against women, cruelty by husband or his relatives took the top spot. This explicitly finds mention in the publication, 'Crime in India- 2019' by National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). These cases reflect the violence women face within their households once again making it imperative to bring the issue of women's safety within private spaces to the fore.

Gramin Mahila Kendra (GMK) established by North East Network (NEN) in the districts of Golaghat, Darrang and Kamrup (rural) in Assam showed a similar trend with a high number of domestic violence (DV) cases reported at these Kendras. In 2018, NEN set up GMK. The GMKs headed by NEN trained women leaders have become safe spaces for survivors of DV as well as a creative learning space for women, youth and children in the community. It has also given NEN a distinct visibility at the grass root level through a wide outreach in 105 villages.

Way back in 2013, NEN had initiated the process of creating grassroots women leaders in select districts of Assam. The women were intensely trained on issues of gender and women's rights including violence against women and legal remedies. Soon afterwards, the trained women leaders conducted a district-level pilot survey to understand trends and patterns of DV on women in 14 districts of Assam. The study was conducted with 1200 respondents in abusive domestic relationships in their villages.

Based on this experience, the leaders led by NEN core team started work in their communities to address issues of DV. With the objective to equip them with skills and strategies to respond to violence against women (VAW) from a feminist perspective, NEN got them enrolled in a 2 week course on counselling and communication skills. Ever since then, they have been using counselling as a tool to create a community based support system for aggrieved women. Through the GMKs, our barefoot counsellors have been providing psycho-social counselling to aggrieved women in their villages. DV survivors are also linked to Saneki Weaves, an initiative of NEN to empower women economically through weaving.

GMKs have support groups of women at the village level in the districts. These groups regularly meet to discuss diverse issues of their lives and communities. They also actively take part in organising community meetings, campaigns and rallies to create awareness on DV and other forms of gender based violence on



"We are happy with the Kendra as it has provided a platform for women to make conversations about their lives. They feel free to discuss issues of violence. Young people have also started visiting the GMK. We are glad to have such an empowering Centre in our village. The work of the counsellors is commendable "
- Village Headman, Darrang District

.....
¹ Crime in India 2019, NCRB

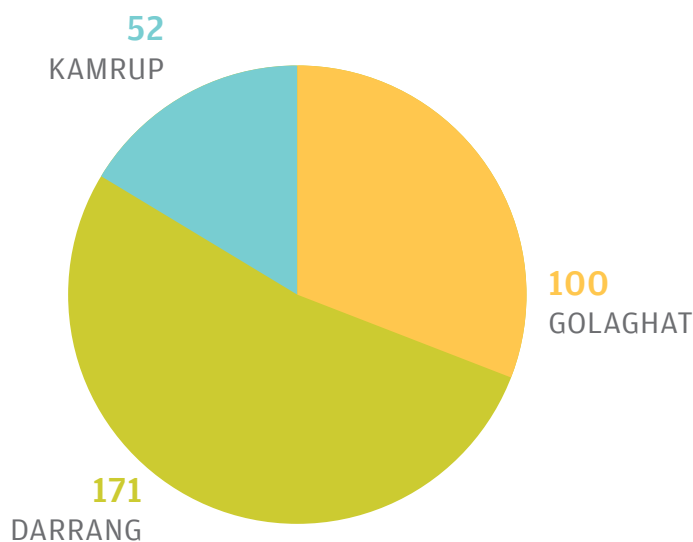
women. In the process, NEN has been able to create a pool of grassroots peer leaders and change agents in the districts. This has been envisioned to ensure sustainability of the work. The women peer leaders who are part of the eco-system bring about changes by liaising with various government departments and assist women to ensure access to state entitlements.

The GMKs have now expanded to reaching out to youth and adolescents. The Centres made headway in starting gender equality lessons in educational institutions with students and youth using creative medium such as theatre, puppetry, sports, slogan writing, poetry, poster-making, etc.

The GMKs are recognised as Service Providers by Social Welfare Department, Government of Assam under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005. Since October 2018, a total of 22 cases were referred by the District Social Welfare Officers who are also Protection Officers. Women's Helpline 181 also referred 6 cases to the Centres.



TOTAL GMK CASES 323



A total of 323 cases of domestic violence were reported to the GMKs in the last three years, i.e. from 1st January, 2018 to 30th November, 2020. This shows the acceptance of violence against women intertwined with the patriarchal nature of Assamese society. During the lockdown period, the GMKs witnessed and responded to rising DV on women and children in locked up homes.

Among the three GMKs, Darrang received the highest number of DV cases with 171 cases. This is indicative of the strategic location of the GMK at Darrang, which makes it more accessible for women from neighbouring districts.

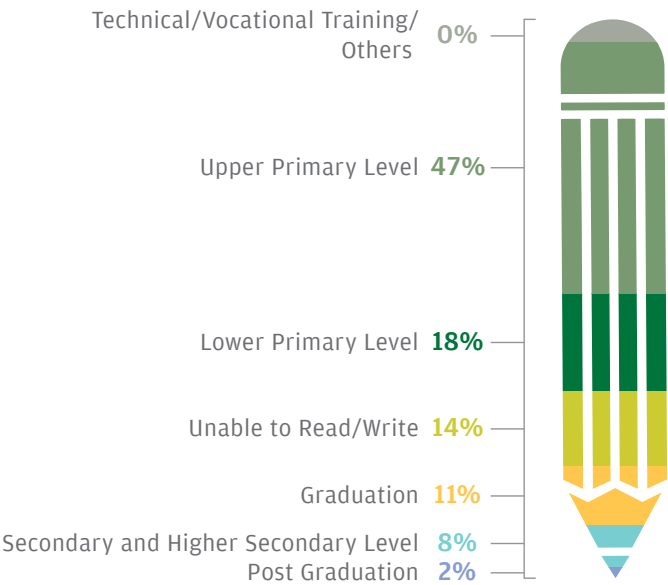
AGE



In cases of DV reported to GMK, 52% of the women were between the ages of 31 to 50 years. Women in different age groups faced different forms of domestic abuse indicating that no matter the age and the civil status, violence at the hands of family members was a constant for all women.

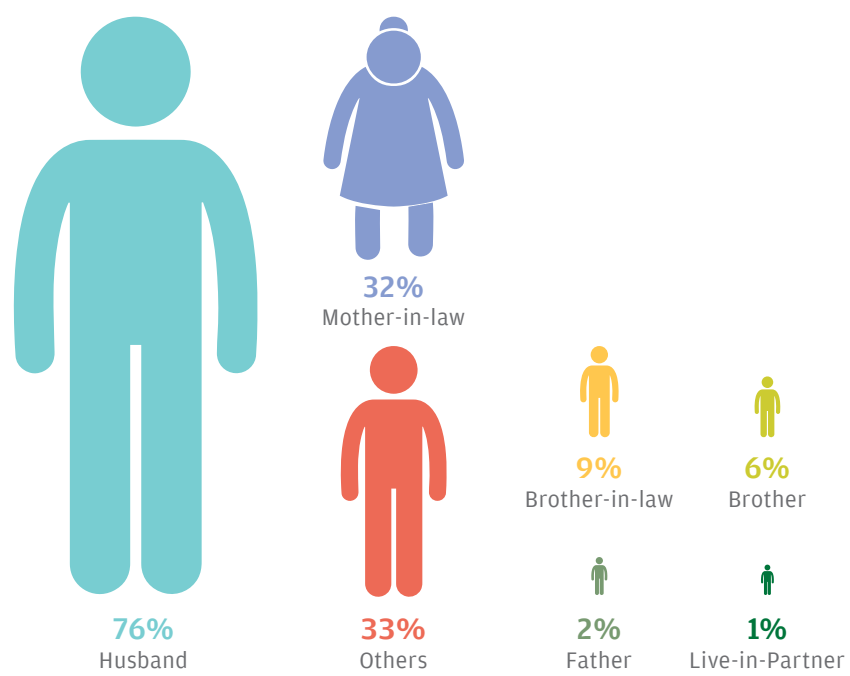
EDUCATION

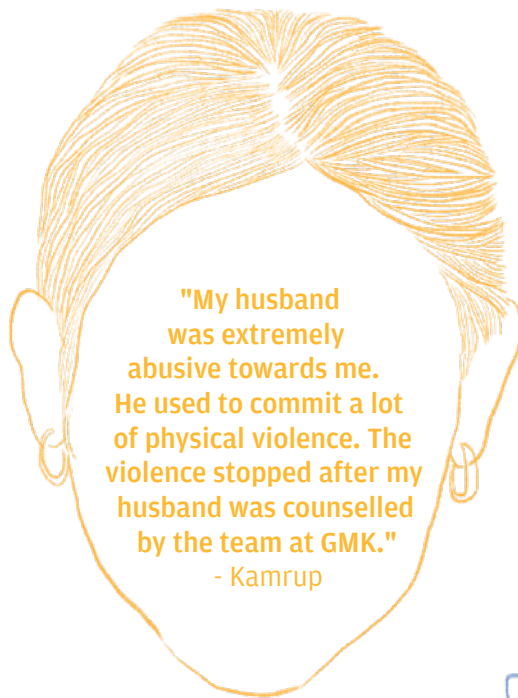
47% of the women who reported of DV to the GMKs had studied only till Upper Primary Level of elementary school, indicative of high drop-out rate of girls from formal education. This makes them more susceptible to early marriage and also different forms of violence. In addition, domestic violence of women were not limited to women who were uneducated but women with graduate and post graduate degrees also had to endure it.



PERPETRATOR

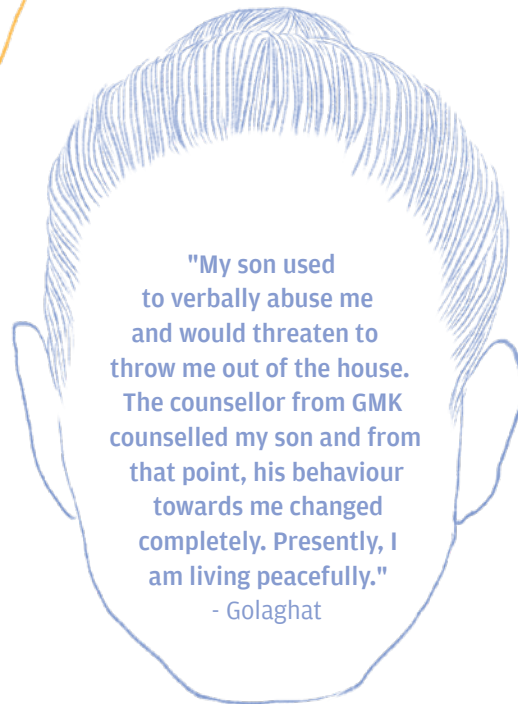
Violence against women in their natal homes to marital homes as well as at old age, is a common sight in the villages. 76% of the perpetrators inflicting violence on these aggrieved women were their own spouses. Other members of the family were equally involved such as aggrieved women’s mother-in-law, brother-in-law, live-in-partner, brother, father, son, daughter-in-law, father-in-law, nephew, niece, aunt and uncle.





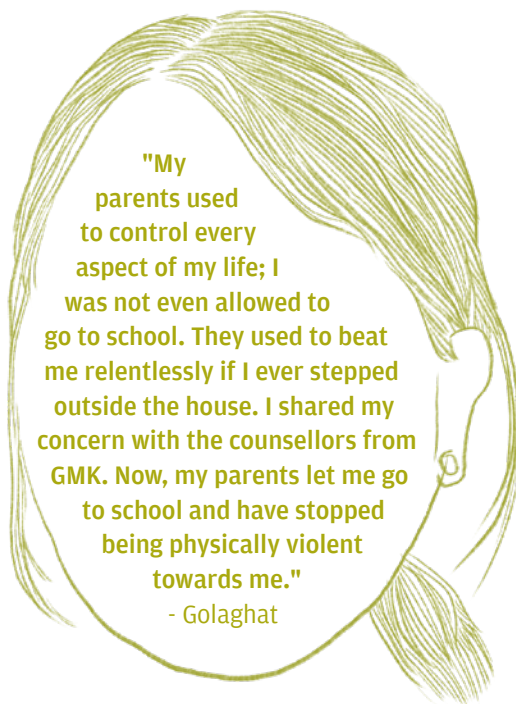
"My husband was extremely abusive towards me. He used to commit a lot of physical violence. The violence stopped after my husband was counselled by the team at GMK."

- Kamrup



"My son used to verbally abuse me and would threaten to throw me out of the house. The counsellor from GMK counselled my son and from that point, his behaviour towards me changed completely. Presently, I am living peacefully."

- Golaghat



"My parents used to control every aspect of my life; I was not even allowed to go to school. They used to beat me relentlessly if I ever stepped outside the house. I shared my concern with the counsellors from GMK. Now, my parents let me go to school and have stopped being physically violent towards me."

- Golaghat

FORMS OF ABUSE



85%
Physical Abuse



91%
Mental Abuse



19%
Sexual Abuse

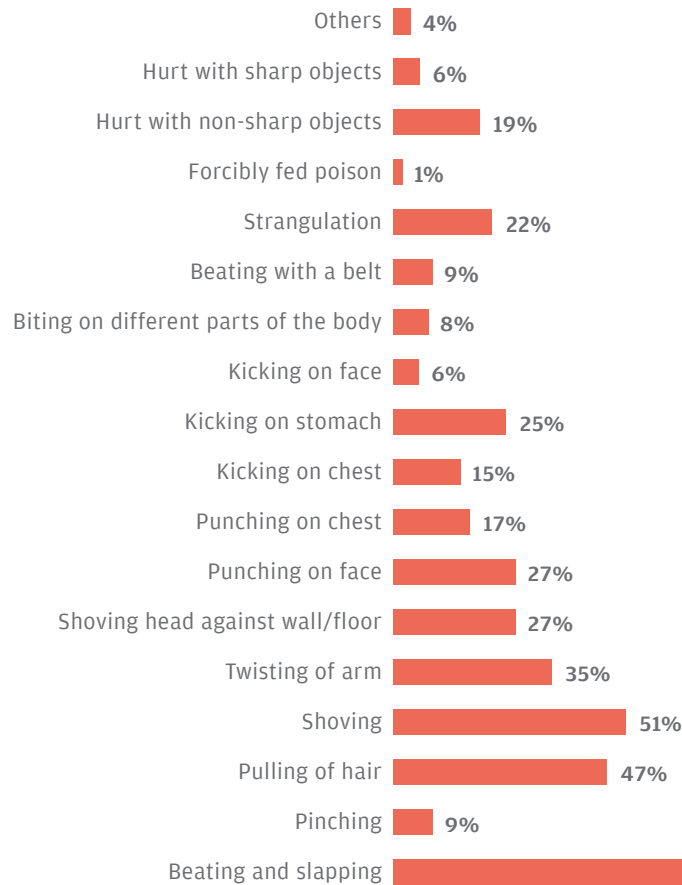


66%
Economic Abuse

Aggrieved women reporting DV at the GMKs complained of various forms of violence which included physical, mental, sexual and economic abuses. Of this, women subjected to DV were most susceptible to different forms of physical and mental abuse however not limited to it.

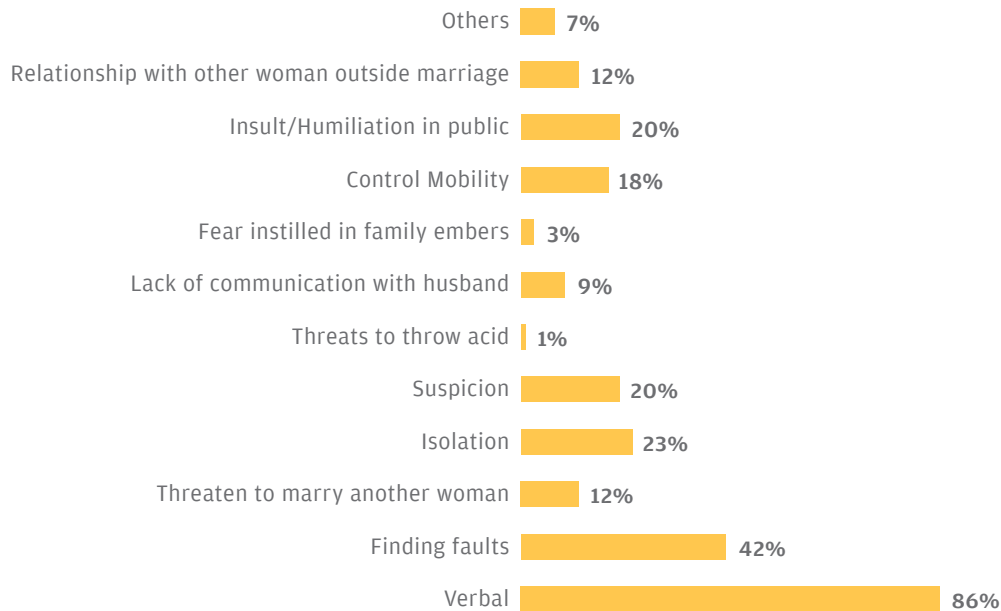
TYPES OF PHYSICAL ABUSE

85% of these aggrieved women who reported of DV at the GMKs were subjected to physical abuse. They endured different forms of physical abuse which included beating, punching, kicking and slapping. High risk forms of abuse were also reported which included strangulation, hurting with sharp objects, feeding of poison, etc.



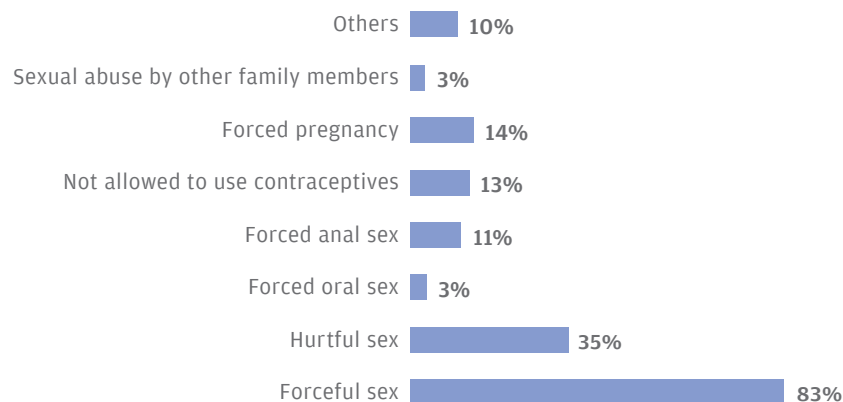
TYPES OF MENTAL ABUSE

Mental abuse ranging from verbal abuse, insulting women in public to isolating women from their families and friends are some instances experienced by 91% of these aggrieved women. Threats of throwing acid, though it's a small percentage is an emerging concern.



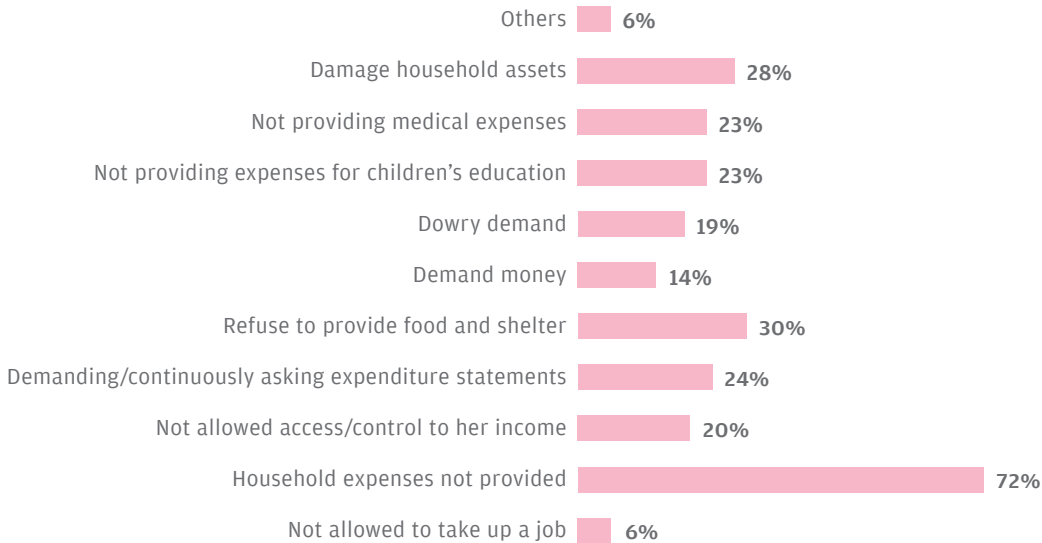
TYPES OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Aggrieved women reporting DV at the GMKs were also subjected to various forms of sexual abuse which included forceful or hurtful sexual intercourse, forced pregnancy, sexual abuse by other family members. Such violence also deprive women's choices to planning and spacing births by not allowing to use contraceptives. Other forms of abuse reported were inappropriate touching of private parts, forcibly kissing and hugging.



TYPES OF ECONOMIC ABUSE

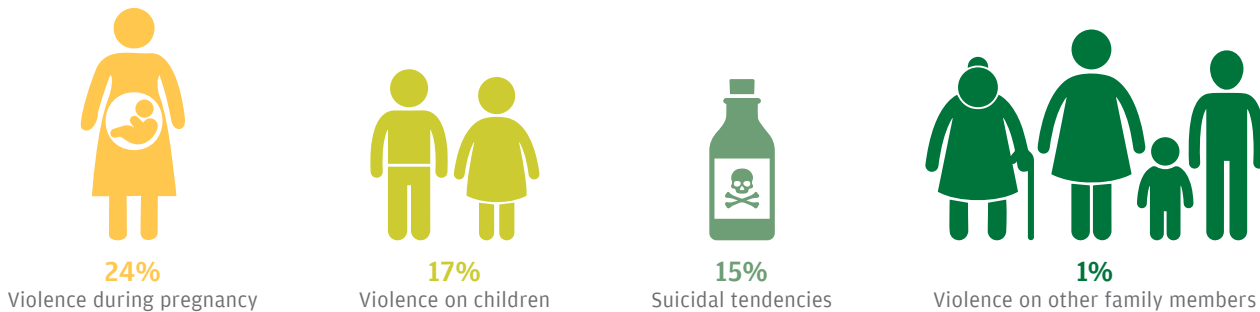
Aggrieved women reported that household expenses were not provided to them. Various forms of economic abuse ranged from demanding dowry, not providing any medical expenses to these women, to refusing them food and shelter were reported among others.



OTHER FORMS OF ABUSE

Survivors who approached the GMKs were also subjected to various forms of abuse during pregnancy. Their children and family members also faced violence in the hands of the perpetrators.

15% of these aggrieved women even contemplated suicide in order to escape such violence meted out to them.



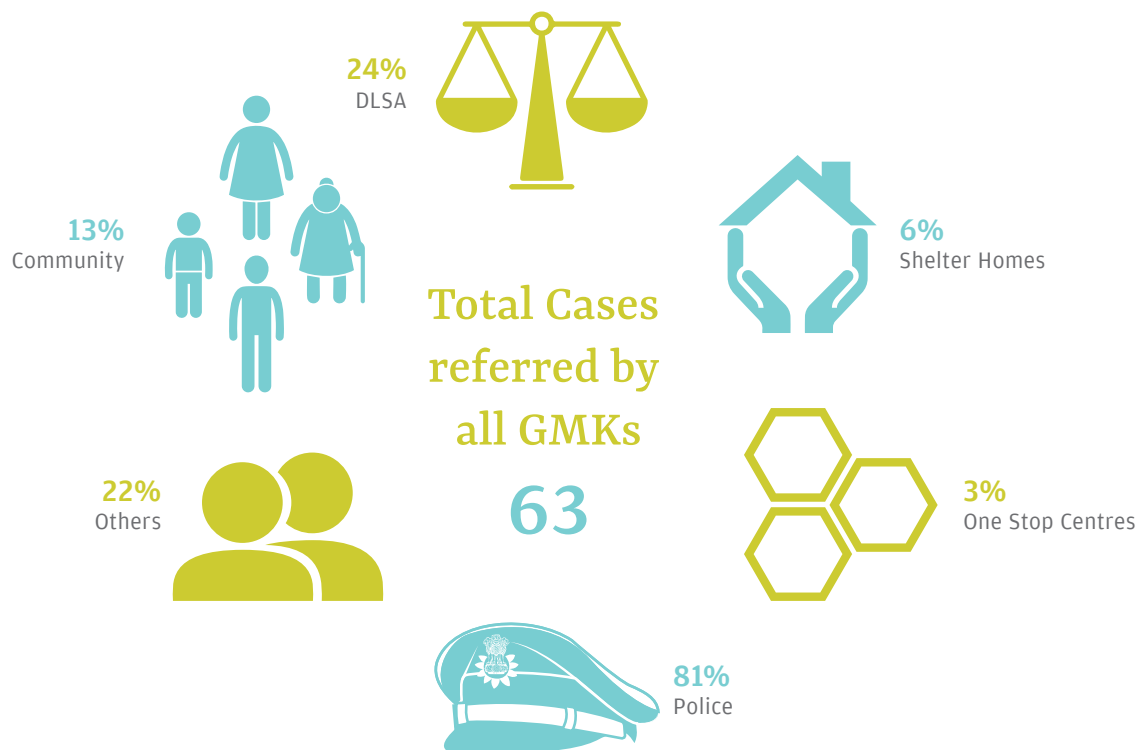
CASE REFERRALS BY GMKS

Depending on the severity of a case, the barefoot counsellors of the GMKs involved other stakeholders to resolve the cases of DV.

81% of these cases were referred to the local police while 24 % of the cases were referred to District Legal Services Authority to seek help in filing for divorce from the spouse or resolving property issues among other.

22% of cases were referred to other stakeholders. These mostly included health check up at local hospitals to treat these aggrieved women of the various forms of physical and sexual violence they may have experienced.

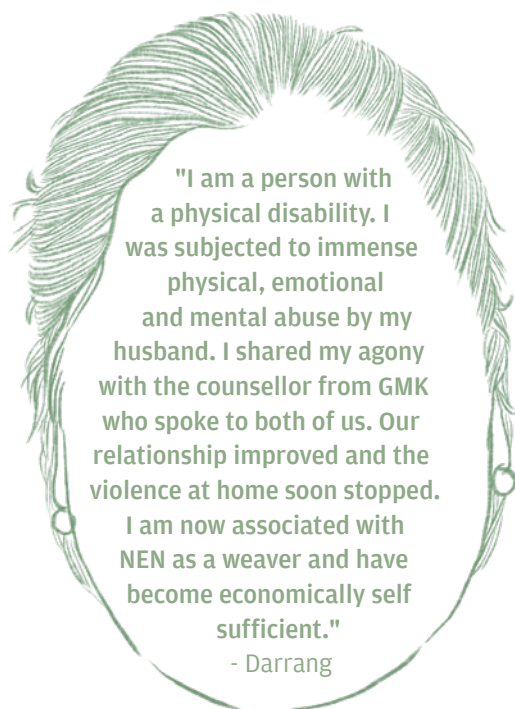
DV cases were also referred to Protection Officers and local non-government organisations providing free legal aid. This was to ensure further interventions as desired by aggrieved women.



STATUS OF CASES

104 (57%) aggrieved women have benefitted through counselling services by GMKs which have prevented further violence in their lives. The counsellors also continue to follow up with each women at regular intervals.





"I am a person with a physical disability. I was subjected to immense physical, emotional and mental abuse by my husband. I shared my agony with the counsellor from GMK who spoke to both of us. Our relationship improved and the violence at home soon stopped.

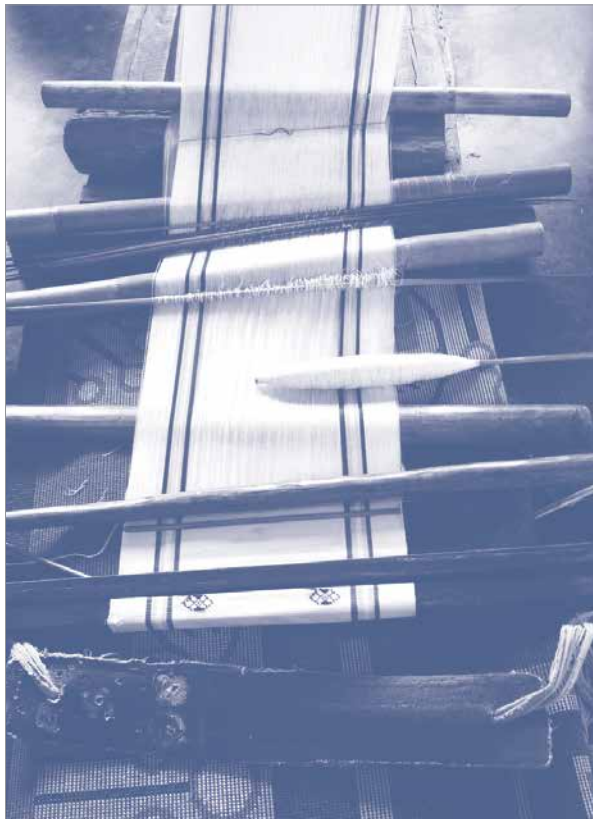
I am now associated with NEN as a weaver and have become economically self sufficient."

- Darrang

Thus, it clearly signals that cases which are reflected in the NCRB are only the tip of the iceberg. Cases of domestic violence are mostly being normalised and therefore not reported. Communities do not understand these as rights violation but rather think such violence is a part and parcel of a woman's life.

With the interventions at the GMKs, a large number of DV cases are resolved at the grassroots level, especially in places where women have no access to legal support or schemes of government.

Alternate dispute resolution strategies have always existed in the society but in many instances with biases towards women complainants. Local solutions offered to reconcile often pushes women to further abuse and indignity. Hence, feminist barefoot counsellors and rights-based community owned intervention centres as seen in the GMK model are the need of the hour to initiate dialogue amongst communities to address and redress domestic violence faced by women.



THE INDIAN EXPRESS

FROM SEXUAL HARASSMENT TO DOMESTIC ABUSE

Assam's barefoot counsellors are lending a ear to a gamut of issues faced by women living in small towns and remote villages.

NOVEMBER 19, 2018



Report by:
Anurita, Neha Das, Nilanju Dutta, Rashmirekha Borah

7b, J N Boroah Lane, Jorpuhuri, Guwahati, 781001, Assam.
+91 94350 17824 | www.northeastnetwork.org

Illustrations, design and layout by Neelima P Aryan | www.blinker.in