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He Called the Helpline for Help. They Did Not Know What To Do With a Man

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INTRODUCTION

He called the helpline after weeks of being terrorized. His wife made regular threatening statements to destroy his career by making criminal complaints about him. When he finally found the courage to call, he expected advice and support. Instead, the operator asked him if he called the wrong number. The helpline, they explained, was geared towards women. They recommended that he "*try to work out things at home*" rather than cause problems. Just that little exchange was enough to make him feel invisible. His suffering was real, but was not recognized by the system as a victim¹.

This experience is not an isolated incident - it is one from a structural problem that exists in India's social and legal landscape. Men are not often shown compassion when they are hurt, threatened or emotionally abused. The silence surrounding the victimhood of men is so normal, that society does not know what to do when a man asks help. In homes, the workplace, hospitals, and courts, men are expected to suffer in dignified ways. Pain, in the case of men, is treated as a private burden, and not a social problem.

MASCULINITY, SILENCE, AND THE CULTURAL BURDEN

From an early age, Indian boys are socialized to link masculinity with emotional toughness. They are told not to cry, not to complain and not to depend on others. Being vulnerable is considered weakness, even more so as a betrayal of their role as protectors. The message of men being strong is reinforced everywhere: popular cinema, family, school and religion. When boys reach adulthood, they tend to bring this cultural burden with them into their adult relationships. They do not talk about the emotional or physical abuse they suffer, as they think it will only bring ridicule².

¹ National Commission for Women, *Annual Report on Protection and Helpline Services* (2025), 41.

² NIMHANS, *Men and Mental Health: Patterns of Help Seeking in India* (2019),

The inability to seek help is not about pride but about survival. Men are afraid of the shame of being humiliated socially and the loss of their reputation, and that they will be misinterpreted as an aggressor when they report abuse. The cultural script is men perpetrators and women victims. This binary lens, makes it psychologically impossible for many men to express pain. The result is underreporting, social isolation, trauma, and in some cases, irreparable psychological collapse³.

HELPLINES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS: A DOOR HALF OPEN

Helplines in India were established to provide safety and instant emotional security. They are supposed to be neutral spaces where fear, anxiety and distress can be spoken freely. But most helplines were conceptualised on the lines of women's need. In effect, this means that when men call, callers or counselors are often unprepared or confused. Many helpline staff are only trained in recognizing and helping women being abused by their partners in domestic violence. Male callers who report emotional blackmail, physical intimidation or threats of false legal action often find that they are not believed⁴.

Even when helpline operators do attempt to empathise with men they often refer men to reconciliation or complain to the police instead of psychological support. The silence surrounding male trauma makes it hard for helplines to even envisage men as victims. The call turns into an awkward conversation instead of an emotional lifeline. The man who reaches out feels like he is invading a space which was not intended for him.⁵

The irony, however, is evident if one looks at disease-oriented helplines such as HIV/Aids counselling services. These helplines often receive more calls from men, a majority. Research has shown that men do seek information and emotional support but when the subject is medical rather than interpersonal. This proves that men are willing to seek help, but not without a neutral, stigma-free and nonjudgmental environment.⁶

THE LAW THAT DOES NOT SEE MEN

The Indian legal framework in the domain of abuse, domestic violence and harassment were largely developed in the context of patriarchal violence against women. This was important and

12-15.

³ *Towards an Indian Feminist Jurisprudence* (OUP, 2021), 88–93.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ UNAIDS, *India: HIV Counselling and Helpline Data Report* (2018), 21–23.

⁶ The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, ss. 2(a), 2(q).

imperative. However, the limited nature of these laws has left male victims unprotected. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 accepts only women as "aggrieved persons" and does not include men at all. A husband emotionally blackmailed, physically assaulted, or psychologically terrorized by his spouse is not recognised as a victim under the statute.

This asymmetry produces a dangerous terrain of the law. Men who do speak about domestic violence are often laughed at or told to put up with their partners. In many cases they are afraid of being attacked back because the law offers the woman multiple tools, such as the right to protection orders or the right to reside, and quick legal remedies. The weaponization of the law has been recognized by the courts. In *Rajesh Sharma v. State of UP*, the Supreme Court issued a warning against the misuse of Section 498A IPC and noted that the false accusation has destroyed families and nervousness.

The ramifications are carried to the family courts and maintenance proceedings. In *Rajnish v. Neha*, the Supreme Court emphasized the need for fairness in disputes over maintenance, but also recognized that unresolved matrimonial conflict can put emotional and financial pressure on husbands. The Court did not identify men as victims but its reasoning also indirectly brought out the silent burden that men bear. When the system fails to offer emotional support or protective remedies, men get to feel their pain as illegitimate.

The workplace is another place men suffer invisibly. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (POSH) can only see female victims. There is no statute route for a male employee who is subjected to threats, sexual intimidation, or abuse from a female superior. Cases in which men have tried to make such complaints have often concluded in procedural dismissals on the grounds that the law does not envisage them to be targets.⁷

THE MENTAL HEALTH TOLL

The effects of silence, stigma and being legally excluded play out in mental health statistics. India is known to have some of the highest male suicide in the world. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, more than 75% of suicide deaths every year were by men⁸. These statistics indicate a crisis of suffocation of feelings. Men, by nature, internalize stress, they repress fear and they live with it alone until the pain is unbearable. Instead of

⁷ The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, long title and scope.

⁸ World Health Organization, *Suicide Worldwide in 2019: Global Estimates* (2021), 18–22.

seeking therapy, many choose withdrawal, addiction or self-harm. Depression in Indian men is not diagnosed due to the fact that very few men seek treatment. Mental health is still made to be a luxury and not a necessity and the stigma is worse for men. Families tend to tell them to "focus on work" or "adjust" rather than get help. The lack of support systems, coupled with financial pressure and emotional isolation means men have nowhere to turn. The collapse is private, often invisible, and often fatal.

WHERE MEN'S RIGHTS FIT INTO GENDER EQUALITY

Men's rights movements in India is a common misconception that it is anti- women, but the truth is that many of the grassroots organizations working in this field came into existence due to loss: men who committed suicide due to false cases, fathers who were being denied access to their children, sons who were being emotionally abused at home, or young professionals being humiliated online due to complaints that have not been proven. These activists are extremely conscious of how women are suffering. They call simply to share-not ration - compassion.

The goal is not to reverse or discredit the protections for women. It is to complete the circle. Gender-neutral laws are not about taking away the rights of women. They are about confronting the fact that suffering is not biologically selective. A victim is a victim, whether male or female. Courts have started to give hints of this shift. In *Suhasini v. State of Maharashtra*, the Bombay High Court noted that the consequences of false accusations are very real as far as the mental health of men is concerned and it expressed a need for responsibility in the application of gender-specific laws⁹.

Academic research is reflective of this need. Studies from NIMHANS, TISS and independent scholars highlight that men under report abuse not because it does not happen but because society refuses to accept them as vulnerable. The lack of recognition pushes them towards silence, withdrawal and self-harm. Without legal or psychological support this becomes a repeating pattern in the different age-groups.

BEYOND LAW: A CULTURE OF COMPASSION

The story of the man calling the helpline is not a failure of a single employee - it is a failure of cultural imagination. We cannot pretend to practice gender equality by only declaring women as the victims and men as the perpetrators. Real equality recognizes pain wherever it is present. It invites us to reckon with

⁹ Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), *Masculinity, Stigma and Mental Health among Indian Men* (2020), 7- 10.

uncomfortable truths without fear of unsettling previous reforms.

A gender just society is not achieved by replacing one kind of blindness with another. Women were oppressed for centuries because the law did not acknowledge them. Today, men suffer in silence because the social imagination is unwilling to acknowledge their suffering. Both forms of denial result in injustice. Both deserve correction. Compassion is not a zero sum game; it can be shared with all without anyone being diminished.

If India wants to build a society that is rooted in dignity, then that India must take every caller seriously in its helplines, must treat every victim similarly in its laws and unlearn the stereotypes about masculinity in its institutions. No one should be told that their suffering is illegitimate because of the body that they were born into. One day, a man will call a helpline and say that he is afraid. On that day, the person who gets to answer has got to know exactly what to do.