



## Access to support services by survivors of gender-based violence: Findings from a community-based intervention



*Collaborative work of AALI and CEHAT*

Gender-based violence against women and young girls is a gross violation of human rights<sup>1</sup>. It affects their health and well-being as well as impairs their social and economic opportunities. Violence hampers women's ability to access and benefit from such opportunities and prevents them from reaching their full potential. Patriarchal norms prevent women from raising their voice against violence and seeking support<sup>2</sup>. A culture of silence is encouraged and any assertion by victims is strictly discouraged, even penalised.

The state has the responsibility to uphold the fundamental right of women to live a violence-free life by preventing violence and facilitating holistic remedies for the same. However, far from facilitating access to justice, the state itself often assumes a patriarchal stance and responds to women and girls insensitively and inadequately<sup>3</sup>. This results in secondary victimisation and deters women from further seeking support from the state.

The unsupportive response of individuals, communities, and institutions sustains and legitimises the normalisation of violence against women. It fosters an ecosystem that impairs help-seeking. Women who are marginalised by their religion, class, caste, sexuality, and location face additional barriers to seeking justice. In these contexts, interventions located and led by people from the community can be a useful model to facilitate access to justice for survivors of gender-based violence. These interventions can leverage the existing knowledge and relationships of the community to end the stigma associated with gender-based violence. Thus, they have the potential to go beyond individual casework and bring collective empowerment and social change.

Through this fact sheet, we are attempting to present the findings from a well-established community-based legal aid intervention model established by Association for Advocacy and Legal Initiatives Trust (AALI). AALI is a women-led organisation committed to the protection and advancement of the rights of women, children, and other marginalised communities. AALI has a direct field presence in Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, and Bihar, and provides technical support to various women's rights organisations and groups across India.

In this model, AALI builds the capacity of community-based workers of local organisations to provide support to survivors of violence. These workers are trained in law and related processes to facilitate survivors' access to justice. The workers are from the same community and thus, are aware of the ground realities of survivors and are in a key position to provide context and need specific support services to survivors.

Individuals from marginalised groups like women, Dalits, Bahujans, Adivasis, or Muslims and working with local organisations are identified. Selected representatives are provided training on a wide range of conceptual and technical topics that help strengthen their knowledge, perspective, and skills to assist in cases of gender-based violence. They act as 'caseworkers' and are given technical support and hand-holding by AALI staff to respond in cases of violence at the grassroots. They mobilise community members, increase the community's knowledge of rights, provide support to individual survivors of violence, and hold systems accountable at the grassroots through interactions with district-level stakeholders. By adopting and replicating standard good practices at the community level, the caseworkers practice a robust model of feminist, rights-based intervention.

This fact sheet highlights the socio-demographic profile of women and young girls who sought services from community-based caseworkers in 11 districts of Uttar Pradesh in the year 2020-21. The analysis also provides information about

<sup>1</sup> UN Women. (1993, December 20). *Declaration on the elimination of violence against women*. [https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.21\\_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.21_declaration%20elimination%20vaw.pdf)

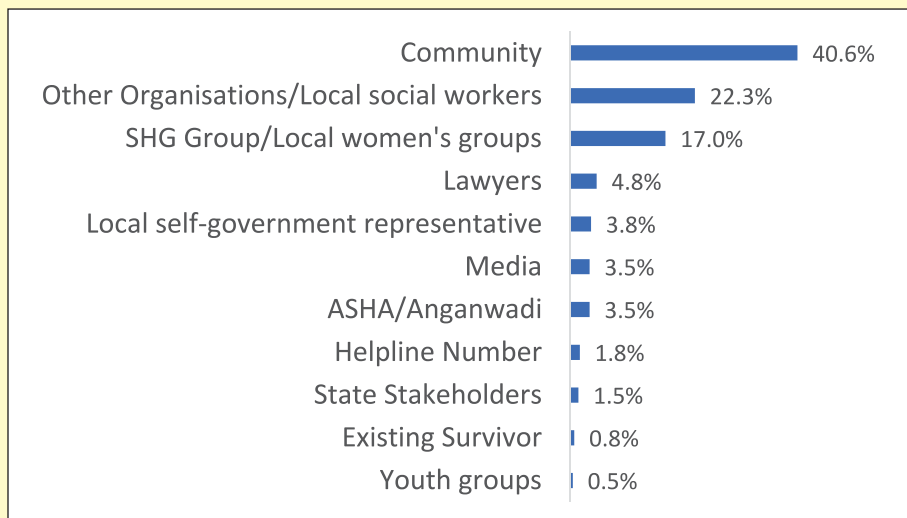
<sup>2</sup> Mshweshwe, L. (2020). Understanding domestic violence: Masculinity, culture, traditions. *Heliyon*, 6(10). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e05334>

<sup>3</sup> Jaising, I. (2012, December 30). Blind to what, Your honour? *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/deep-focus/blind-to-what-your-honour/articleshow/17815724.cms>

informal and formal support sought by women before approaching community-based workers. Further, the response received by women from the formal and informal systems is also highlighted.

Community-based caseworkers intervened in 399 cases of gender and identity-based violence from 11 districts in 2020-21. Community-based caseworkers vigorously network in the communities through continuous meetings, campaigns, and individual interactions. About 41% of the survivors were referred to caseworkers by individuals within the community and another 17% by women from self-help groups or other formal groups organised by the caseworker. This indicates the visibility and linkages of the workers in the community through planned interaction, organisation, and mobilisation.

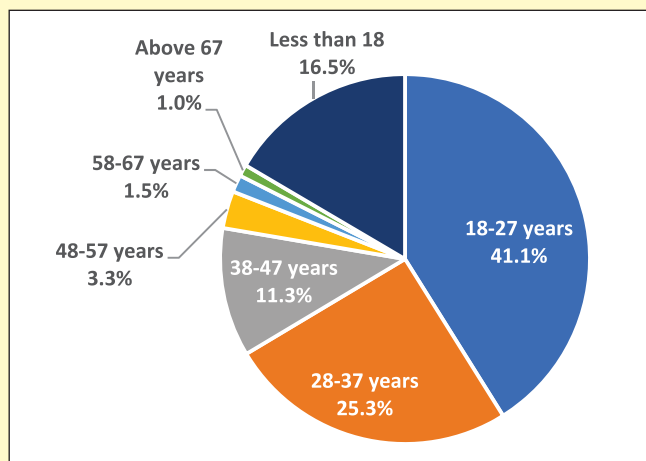
**Figure 1: Referral of survivors to community-based workers**



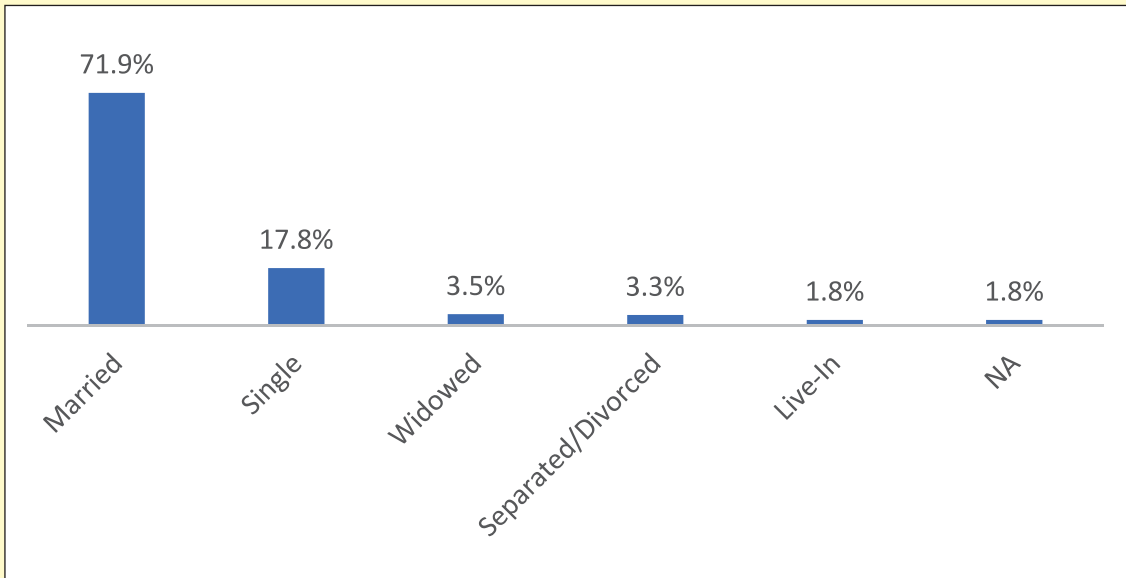
**A. Demographic and socio-economic profile**

The data indicates that it is mostly younger women below the age of 28 (58%) who reached out to community-based caseworkers to seek support during the past year. It is important to note that about 17% of survivors were below 18. The community-based workers are accessible to young girls who face barriers in accessing support services due to restrictions in their mobility and lack of resources. This is because caseworkers undertake special outreach among adolescent girls and young women by organising legal awareness programs in schools and colleges and mobilising younger women to form youth-led groups in the community. Many community-based caseworkers also work on issues such as health and livelihood and come in contact with adolescent girls and younger women during such programs.

**Figure 2. Age of the survivors**



**Figure 3. Marital Status of survivors**



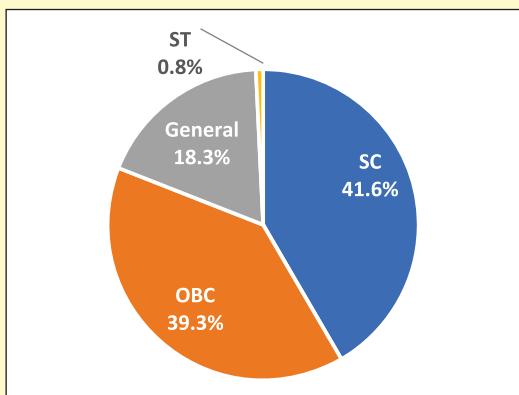
About 72% of survivors were married whereas 18% of women were single. There were about 2% of children up to 12 years of age (mentioned as NA in the graph) who faced sexual violence.

A significant advantage of the community-based caseworkers' marginalised identities is their physical and socio-cultural proximity to their own communities within their fields of intervention. The caseworkers also spend a large amount of their time facilitating access to basic needs and this helps them build a unique trust. The community-based caseworkers can thus go beyond conversations regarding socio-economic rights, and into the domain of the private where survivors themselves approach them for support in cases of gender and identity-based violence.

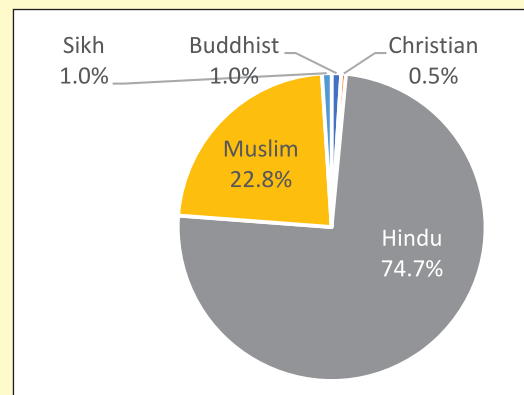
This unique outreach is reflected in the intervention data, where the majority of survivors were from the marginalised group. 42% were scheduled caste and about 39% were from other backward castes. About 23% of survivors were Muslims.

This is significant as our data on caste distribution is not representative of the data at the level of the selected districts. For example, the caste distribution in one of the selected districts is 25% Scheduled Caste (SC) and 0.07% Scheduled Tribe (ST) (Census India, 2011). Thus, more women from marginalised communities seek help from community-based workers. Our data on caste distribution shows that violence against SC women is proportionately higher - for example, the caste distribution in one of the selected districts is 25% SC and 0.07% ST (Census India, 2011).

**Figure 4. Caste of survivors**



**Figure 5. Religion of survivors**



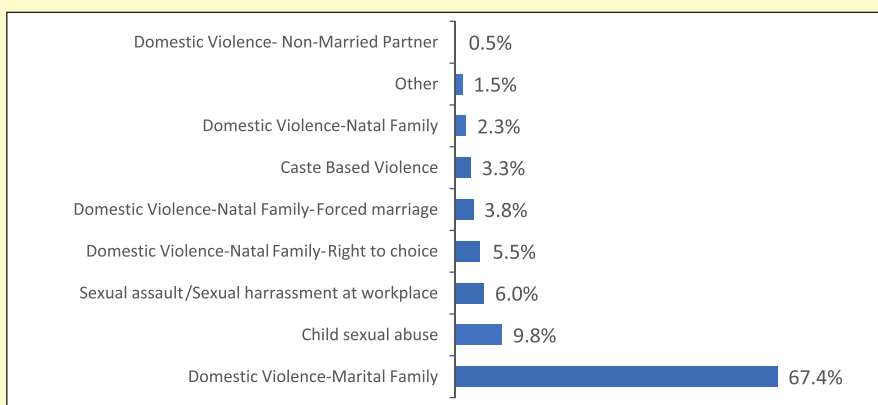
The survivors who approached caseworkers were also marginalised based on education and employment. Nearly 28% of women had no formal education while there were only 13% of women who reported completing graduation and/or undergraduation. Further, about 77% of women were financially dependent and the majority of the rest who were working were earning less than 5000 INR per month and had little control over their income.

To conclude, the socioeconomic and demographic data indicate that the strategic location of the caseworkers, their own socio-demographic identities, and their immersive partnership with the community creates an enabling environment for marginalised women and girls to seek help.

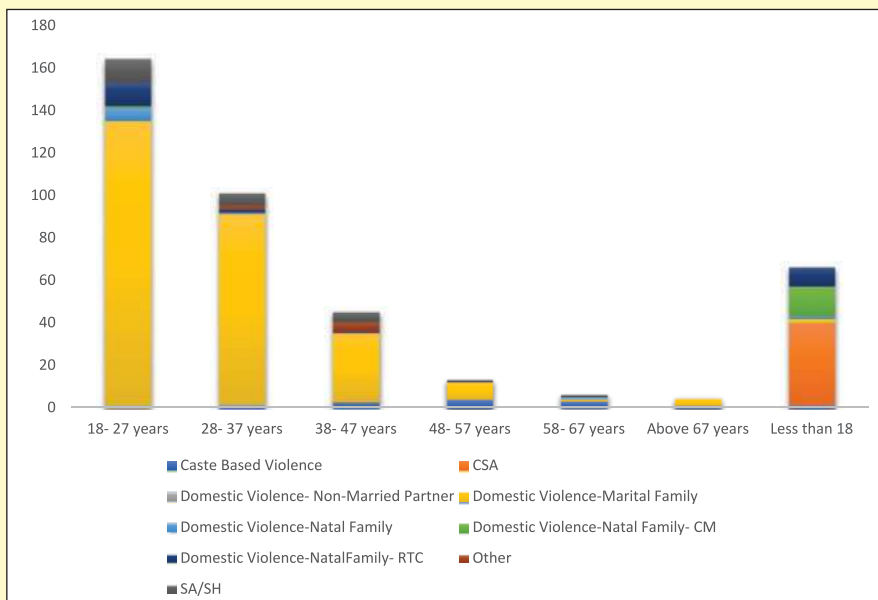
### B. History of violence

The majority (68%) of women faced domestic violence from husbands alongwith the marital family. There were almost 10% cases of sexual violence where survivors were children below 18 years of age. There were 6% of never-married young girls who faced domestic violence due to opposition of natal family to their choice of partner. Additionally, in 4% of cases, young girls were forced by the natal family for below legal age marriage. It is important to note that girls below 18 were able to seek support from community workers to address forced marriage and disapproval of their choice of partner. About 3% of women faced violence from acquaintances like neighbours, other village people, and local administrators due to their caste. Physical violence was reported by about 91% of the survivors while financial violence was reported by 58% of survivors. About 57% of women faced physical, sexual, and financial violence from their husbands and marital family. It is important to note that sexual violence within marital relationships was not reported by any woman facing violence, possibly due to the stigma associated with sexual violence in marriage.

**Figure 6. Forms of violence**

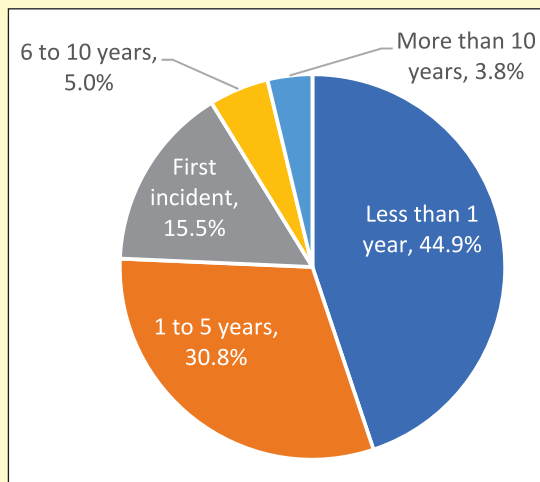


### 7. Age and forms of violence



Nearly 45% of the survivors sought support from the caseworkers within 1 year of abuse. These were mainly cases of violence from natal families due to opposition to relationships and forced marriage. Around 31% of women sought services from community workers between 1 to 5 years of abuse. Age and education stood out as the enabling factors. Most survivors below the age of 27 approached the caseworkers more readily than those above 27 years of age. Similarly, those survivors who had completed at least class 5th had approached caseworkers within one year of abuse.

**Figure 8. Years of abuse**

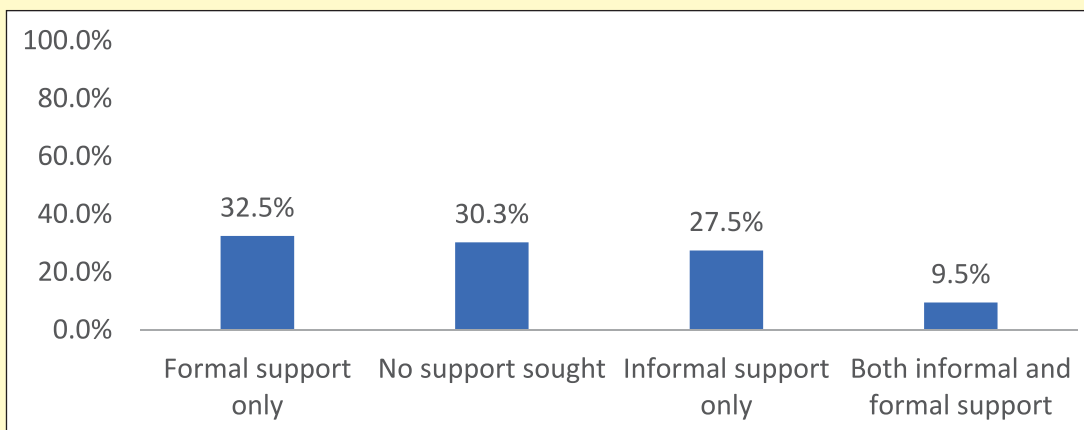


**C. Support sought by survivors before reaching community workers**

The data shows that a substantial (31%) of women had never sought any support before reaching out to caseworkers. This shows that building the capacity of community-based caseworkers is extremely important because they are potentially the first point of contact for a large number of marginalised women seeking support for violence. Additionally, almost 27% of the survivors sought support only from informal systems like natal family, friends, and Panchayat. Nearly 37.5% had sought formal support exclusively from police, lawyer, NGOs, and protection officer.

An analysis of the socio-demographic details of the women who had not sought any support showed that young women up to 27 years of age and scheduled caste are more likely to not seek any support from formal or informal systems before approaching the caseworker. This highlights the importance of community-based interventions which can play an important role in breaking the culture of silence around the issues of violence against women and can result in early help-seeking by women. Further, women who faced violence from natal family were found to be more likely to seek support from caseworkers.

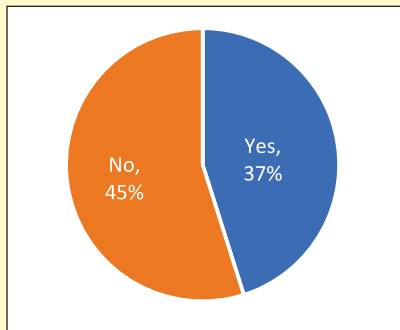
**Figure 9. Support sought by women before reaching community workers**



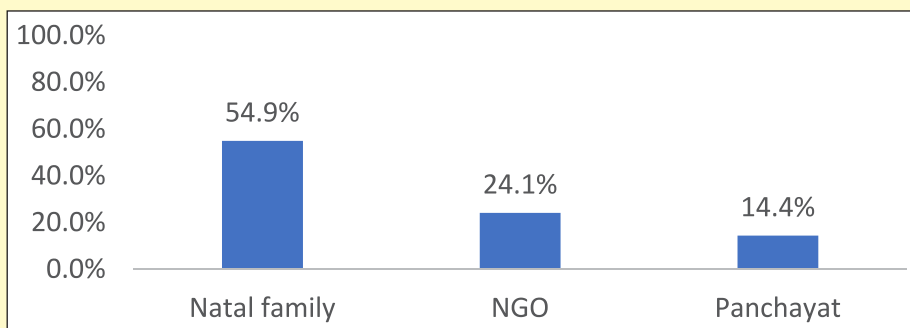
**Informal systems of support** were accessed by about 37% of women. These support systems institutions lie outside the designated justice delivery mechanism and are usually more accessible to women. These systems are preferred by women to seek services as violence is often justified and there is a lot of stigma in taking any formal action against it. Also, women are concerned that taking punitive action against the abuser will affect their socio-economic security.

The analysis has found that natal families (55%) and Panchayats (21%) were the most common sources of informal support systems accessed by women. In cases of caste-based violence, panchayat and religious leaders become the source of support.

**Figure 10. Sought any form of informal support**



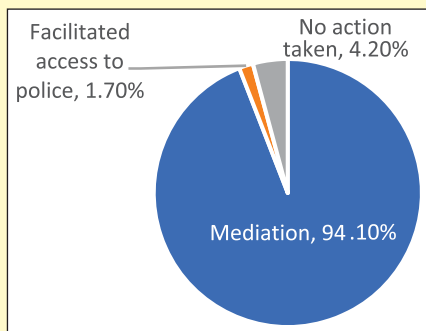
**Figure 11. Sources of informal support**



In about 94% of the cases, social mediation was the response of the informal system while in nearly 4% no substantial action was taken by the informal system. The survivor was merely counselled.

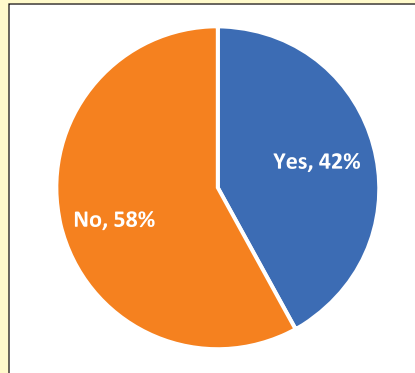
Although reconciliation/mediation is the most common expectation of women, there are several concerns about the way it is carried out by natal, marital family, panchayat, and religious leaders. Often, the rights and needs of women are ignored which results in "compromises". Women are manipulated to go back to the violent situation to restore the relationship. This kind of intervention fails to address the violence and meet the needs of women.

**Figure 12. Response of the natal family**

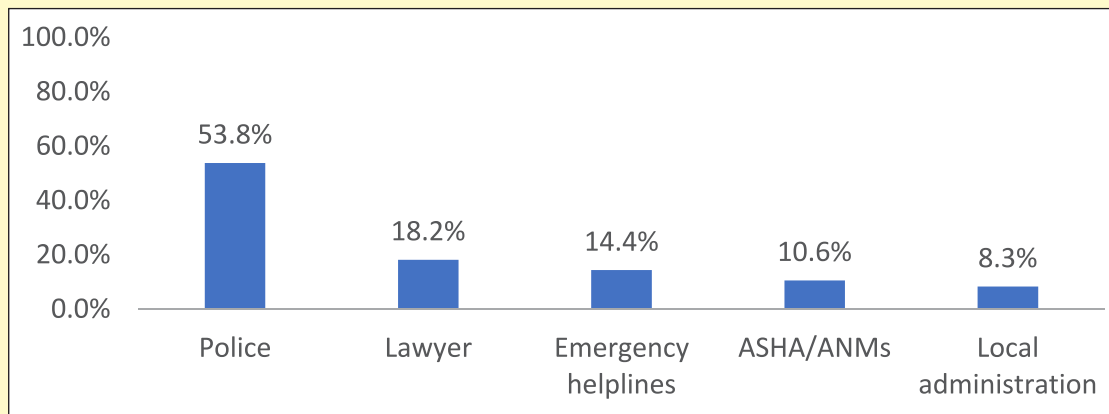


**Formal support systems** like police and lawyers were availed by 42% of women. Among those who sought formal support, a maximum (44%) approached other local NGOs in the area. About 41% of women went to the police for filing a complaint against the abuser while 19% met a lawyer to take legal action.

**Figure 13. Sought any form of formal support**

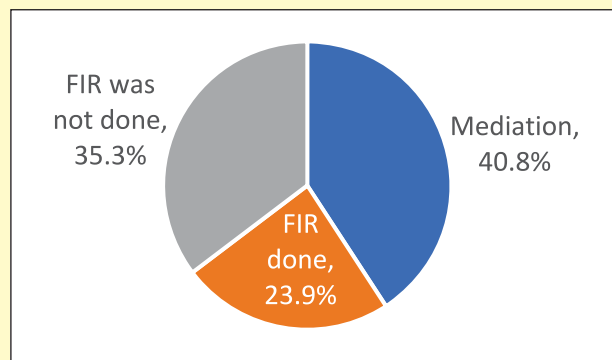


**Figure 14. Sources of formal support**



While Police are recognised as an important service provider in cases of gender-based violence against women and girls, the response of the police was found to be highly contradictory. Survivors who reached the police with applications for registering a complaint were made to undergo mediation (41%). In 35% of cases, police refused to file a complaint and didn't take any action. An FIR was filed by police in 24% of the cases. While social mediation might be a strategy the police may use, especially in matrimonial matters, whether the police are trained to facilitate social mediation in a rights-based manner is a matter of concern.

**Figure 15. Response of the police**



**Figure 16**, on the responses of both formal and informal systems, is based on the qualitative information documented by caseworkers while providing support services to survivors. The findings indicate that community-based interventions led by trained people from the community can improve access to rights and justice for vulnerable groups. It points towards scaling up such efforts to improve access to justice by the vulnerable group.

**Figure 16. Response to formal and informal systems**

FAMILY	PANCHAVAT	NGOs	POLICE	EMERGENCY HELPLINES	LAWYERS/COURTS	DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION	COMMUNITY BASED CASEWORKER
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forced mediation/ Mediation not rights based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forced mediation/ Mediation not rights based</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forced mediation/ Mediation not rights based</li> <li>Lack of information or expertise on legal system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forced mediation/ Mediation not rights based</li> <li>Refused to register FIRs</li> <li>Misleading FIRs</li> <li>No immediate response to continue violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Referral to the systems that don't comply to their roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of proper legal advice</li> <li>Delay in relief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of role compliance</li> <li>Delay in relief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improves access to rights and justice</li> <li>Holds system accountable</li> </ul>

To conclude, the insensitive and inadequate response of individuals, communities, and institutions towards survivors of violence is ubiquitous and is deeply rooted in a patriarchal culture. This finding is important as there is evidence on how a strong social support system improves access to justice and enjoyment of rights for survivors. Yet, families and communities are more committed to ensuring that socio-cultural notions of 'honor' are upheld rather than the rights of the survivor. Further, women marginalised due to socioeconomic and demographic factors face additional barriers in accessing any form of support system due to compounded burdens of identities and continue to endure violence. Also, despite the presence of a legal framework with clear roles and responsibilities of different service providers, the response of the formal support system, especially in cases of domestic violence within marital relationships, is highly insensitive and problematic. Because of the unhelpful responses of the formal system like the police, one of the common expectations of the survivors from community-based caseworkers is to assist them in registering a police complaint and follow up for investigation. Given the barriers faced by survivors, especially from marginalised communities, a community-based intervention delivered by trained caseworkers from the community can be instrumental in meeting unmet needs in a feasible and sustainable manner.