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## Silent sufferers and resilient voices: Women's agency in the 2020 Delhi communal riots

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### Abstract

The 2020 Delhi Communal Riots, marked by widespread violence and destruction, disproportionately impacted marginalized communities, with women bearing the brunt of both physical and psychological traumas. This paper examines the dual roles of women as silent sufferers and resilient voices in the aftermath of the riots. While women were victims of sexual violence, displacement, and loss, they simultaneously exhibited significant agency, taking part in activism, rebuilding efforts, and amplifying the stories of those most affected. Through interviews, media analysis, and community narratives, this study highlights how women navigated the complexities of their suffering while actively challenging dominant power structures. It underscores the transformative role of women in reshaping narratives of resistance and resilience, particularly in politically volatile environments. By recognizing the intersectionality of gender, religion, and class, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of women's agency in conflict zones, emphasizing the need to consider their voices in post-violence reconstruction and social justice processes.

**Keywords:** Women's agency, 2020 Delhi Communal Riots, gender, resilience, communal violence, activism, trauma, intersectionality, social justice.

### Introduction

Communal violence in India has been a recurring blight on its social fabric, exacerbating religious divides and deeply impacting vulnerable communities. The devastating consequences of communal violence disproportionately affect women, who experience physical, psychological, and socio-economic trauma in its aftermath. Despite their unique experiences, the perspectives of women in communal violence are often overlooked, overshadowed by male-centered narratives. The 2020 North-East Delhi riots were no exception, marking one of the deadliest instances of communal violence in recent years. These riots erupted against a backdrop of escalating tensions surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and saw extensive casualties, displacement, and property destruction, particularly impacting the area's substantial Hindu and Muslim communities. This study aims to examine the roles and agency of women during these riots, exploring how they navigated survival, solidarity, and activism within constrained socio-political landscapes. While existing research on communal riots typically focuses on men as primary actors, women's involvement-whether through passive endurance, active resistance, or support roles-adds crucial depth to our understanding of the dynamics of communal violence. Women are often seen as symbols of community honor and, consequently, bear unique burdens in times of social unrest. This research investigates how women responded to the crisis, the extent of their political awareness, and their efforts to maintain or restore interfaith harmony within riot-affected areas. By focusing on three riot-stricken neighborhoods in North-East Delhi-Shiv Vihar, Mustafabad, and Jaffarabad-this study uses a gendered lens to shed light on the unique challenges faced by women and the limited agency they were afforded. It also examines the policy gaps that leave women vulnerable in such situations and offers recommendations to support women's empowerment in communal crisis contexts. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the discourse on communal violence in India by bringing women's voices and experiences to the forefront. The existing literature on communal violence in India reveals complex socio-political dynamics but often underrepresents the gendered aspects of such conflicts.

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Paul Brass, in *"The Production of Hindu-Muslim Violence in Contemporary India,"* posits that riots are rarely spontaneous but are orchestrated by "riot specialists" who manipulate ethnic tensions for political gains. Brass introduces the concept of an "institutionalized riot system" where political actors strategically incite violence, framing it as a cultural clash. Similarly, Ashutosh Varshney's *"Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life"* emphasizes that civic engagement networks help prevent communal violence. He distinguishes between quotidian (everyday) and associational networks, noting that cities with strong inter-community organizations are less prone to riots due to higher communal resilience. Gender-specific analyses in communal contexts challenge the notion of women as passive actors. Atreyee Sen's *"Shiv Sena Women"* reveals how women in right-wing organizations can actively engage in violence, fueled by ideological motivations and community solidarity. This contrasts with the widespread perception that women primarily play nurturing or supportive roles during crises. Further, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *"Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition"* highlight how communal violence weaponizes women's bodies, marking them as territories of honor and control in ethnic conflicts. Their feminist account underscores how patriarchal societies exploit women's bodies to enforce cultural dominance and perpetuate communal animosities. TURvashi Butalia's *"The Other Side of Silence"* and Kumari Jayawardena's *"Embodied Violence"* examine gender-based violence, particularly during events like the Partition. Butalia's use of oral histories reveals how women, often silenced in mainstream narratives, experienced displacement and trauma while negotiating complex identities. Jayawardena, focusing on South Asia, argues that communal violence systematically targets women, using their bodies as symbols of community purity and honor.

The existing studies on communal violence in India have primarily centered on male actors, overlooking the unique experiences and agency of women, who are often seen as passive victims rather than active participants. This gender bias leaves a significant gap in understanding how women navigate communal unrest and how gender dynamics shape their involvement and responses. The predominant narratives fail to capture women's perspectives on violence, interfaith solidarity, and survival strategies, resulting in an incomplete portrayal of communal violence's impact on communities. Further, while women's voices were

prominent in anti-CAA protests, few studies explore their roles and responses during subsequent riots, such as the 2020 Delhi riots.

### Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to explore women's agency, experiences, and responses during the 2020 Delhi riots. A semi-structured questionnaire was used, featuring both open-ended and closed questions to allow for spontaneous responses while also providing data for pattern analysis. The qualitative aspects captured in-depth insights into the respondents' perspectives, while the quantitative elements enabled cross-comparisons across demographics. The fieldwork focused on three riot-affected neighborhoods in North-East Delhi: Shiv Vihar, Mustafabad, and Jaffarabad. These areas were selected due to their significance in the riots, with high Hindu and Muslim populations, enabling an examination of interfaith dynamics within highly polarized settings. Field visits involved conducting interviews with a diverse sample of 108 women, chosen through random and snowball sampling to ensure varied representation across age, education level, and occupation. This approach allowed the study to capture both the broad patterns and the unique experiences of women affected by the riots.

Ethical considerations were paramount, particularly given the sensitivity of discussing trauma and violence. Informed consent was obtained, and anonymity assured to protect respondents' identities. The methodology, by integrating diverse data sources, aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of women's experiences and agency in communal violence contexts.

North East Delhi - North East Delhi is one of the eleven administrative districts of Delhi, India. The district was established in 1997. North East Delhi borders the Yamuna River on the west, Ghaziabad District to the north and east, East Delhi to the south, and North Delhi to the west across the Yamuna. Karawal Nagar, Seelampur and Yamuna Vihar are 3 sub-divisions of this district. According to the 2011 census, North East Delhi had a population of 2,241,624. This gives it a ranking of 202nd in India (out of a total of 640). The district has a population density of 36,155 inhabitants per square kilometre. Its population growth rate over the decade 2001-2011 was 15. North East Delhi has a sex ratio of 886 females for every 1000 males and a literacy rate of 83.09%.

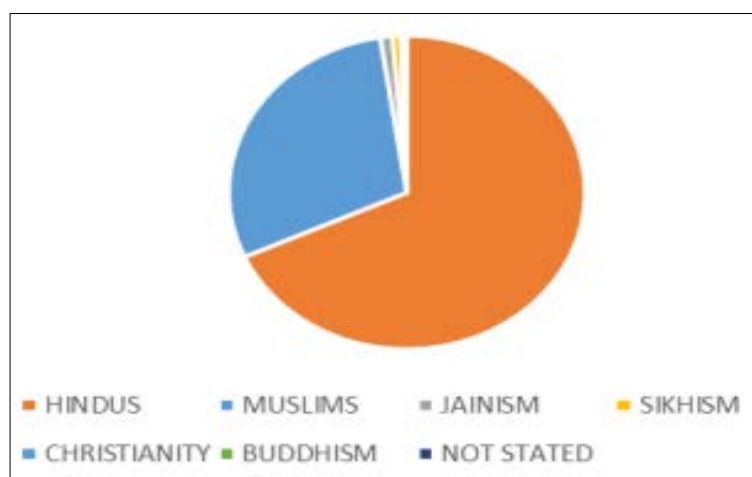


Fig 1: Religion wise distribution of Hindus and Muslims (2011 census)

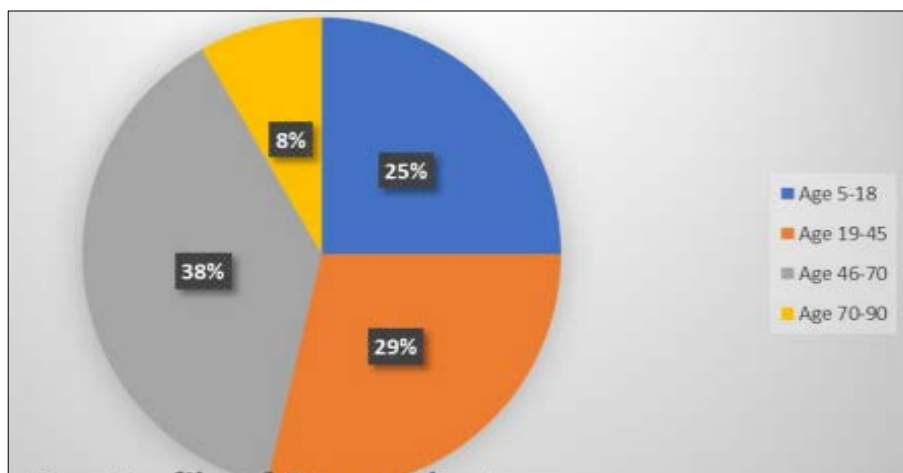
## 2011 Census

Demography of the sites - In North East Delhi visited are Shiv Vihar Mustafabad, Jaffarabad. Jaffarabad- In the 2011 census, Jaffarabad had a population of 54,601 with 53% men and 47% women. The average literacy rate is 62%, exceeding the national average (59.5%), with male literacy at 67% and female literacy at 56%. Many residents moved from Old Delhi, including Karigars and Karkhandars, due to limited space in their old neighbourhoods. New Jaffarabad, distinct from the rest, hosts upper-middle-class residents, professionals, and manufacturers with spacious houses and amenities like an air-conditioned mosque. Hindu percentage in Jaffarabad is 27.60 percentage of total population, while Muslim population is 70.63 percentage. Mustafabad - In the 2011 census, Mustafabad had a population of 127617 with 58% men and 42% women. The average literacy rate is 58%. It is basically a Muslim dominating area with 78.05 percentage of total population, while 21.62 percentage is Hindu population. Shiv Vihar and Karawal Nagar – Shiv Vihar area is present in north- east Delhi and is mostly Hindu populated area. In Karawal Nagar 88.88 percentage of population is Hindu and 10.44 percentage is of Muslim.

The selection of Shiv Vihar, Mustafabad, and Jaffarabad as field sites for this study is based on their roles as focal points during the 2020 Delhi riots, making them critical areas to examine the gendered impact of communal violence. These neighborhoods are not only geographically close but also represent a microcosm of the religious and socio-economic diversity seen across North-East Delhi, with Hindu-majority (Shiv Vihar) and Muslim-majority (Mustafabad) areas, as well as mixed-community spaces (Jaffarabad). This diversity allows for a comparative analysis of the varied experiences, roles, and responses of women in each community during the riots. These neighborhoods were some of the hardest-hit, experiencing extensive violence, displacement, and economic setbacks. Their high population density, limited economic resources, and pre-existing inter-community tensions created a volatile

environment, resulting in a deeply embedded communal divide post-riots. By focusing on these areas, the study gains insight into how women from different religious and socio-economic backgrounds engaged with or were impacted by the riots, including their responses to violence, issues of agency, and shifts in interfaith dynamics.

The sample size for this study comprises 108 women, chosen to reflect the socio-demographic diversity within the riot-affected neighborhoods of Shiv Vihar, Mustafabad, and Jaffarabad. This sample was designed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and responses, including variations across religion, age, educational background, and economic status. The study specifically sought a balance between Hindu and Muslim women, resulting in a sample with approximately 54% Muslim and 46% Hindu respondents. This proportional representation enabled an exploration of how communal violence impacted women differently across religious lines. The selection process combined random and snowball sampling methods. Random sampling helped avoid biases, allowing for a diverse representation of women across each area. Snowball sampling was also utilized to access respondents who may have been otherwise reluctant to participate due to the sensitive nature of the subject. This method proved effective, as initial participants connected researchers with other women willing to share their experiences. The demographic diversity within the sample-spanning young students, middle-aged homemakers, and elderly women-enabled the study to capture a range of perspectives on agency, resilience, and trauma, providing valuable insights into the distinct ways communal violence affects women across different life stages and backgrounds. The sample also contains interviews of women across various generations with 25% of the respondents belonging to the age 5 to 18, 29% falling under the age profile of 19 to 45, 38% coming from the age profile of 46 to 70 and the remaining 8% of the women belonging to the age profile of 70-90.



**Fig 2:** Age Profile of Respondents

When it comes to education, most of the women I interviewed in between the age profile of 45 to 70 were

illiterate and had never gone to a school during their entire lifetime.

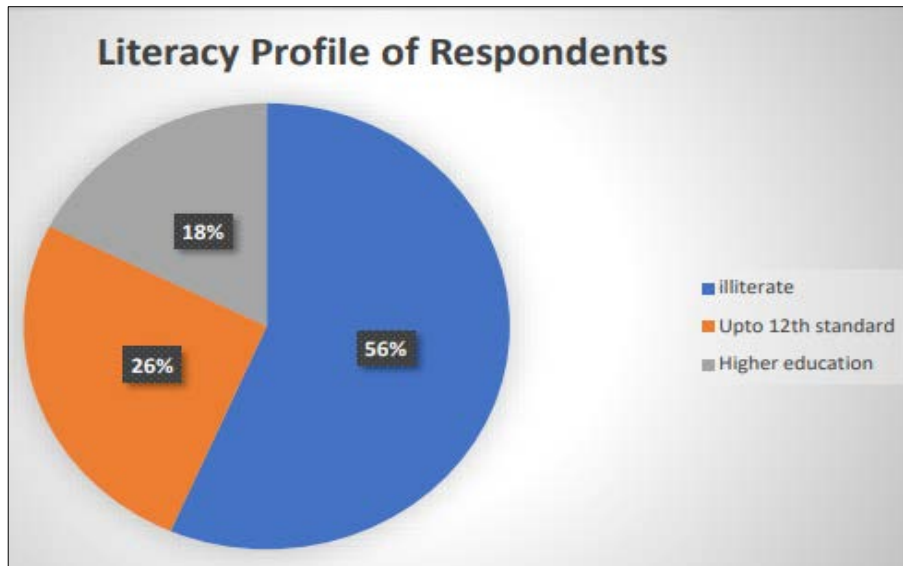


Fig 3: Literacy Profile of Respondents

I also interviewed young Muslim and Hindu school going girls of Manoj Public School and Rajdhani Public School in Shiv Vihar area. However, the number of girls pursuing higher education was relatively lower than any other category. Out of the total 108 women we interviewed, 56% of the illiterate, 26% have attended school only till 12th standard or are currently enrolled in it and finally, only 18% of girls are pursuing higher education.

### Survey Findings

The survey conducted in Shiv Vihar, Mustafabad, and Jaffarabad, three of the most affected neighborhoods during the 2020 Delhi riots, provides profound insights into the experiences and perspectives of women amid communal violence. Women's accounts reveal diverse forms of agency, survival strategies, and socio-political awareness, with significant variations across religious lines, age groups, and educational backgrounds.

One of the most striking findings is the passive involvement of women, particularly Muslim women in Mustafabad, who adopted extreme defensive measures to protect their families. Fear permeated their actions; many recalled nailing electrical wires to doors or keeping acid for self-defense, driven more by desperation than resistance. Women described a sense of helplessness as they struggled to secure their families, but they also exemplified compassion by aiding survivors. In Al Hind Hospital, for instance, Muslim women volunteered to cook meals, provide medical support, and tend to injured individuals. This humanitarian response amidst fear demonstrates a unique blend of resilience and vulnerability that marked their experiences during the riots. The survey further reveals that communal violence impacted young women profoundly, leading to abrupt marriages as families attempted to safeguard their daughters. In Mustafabad, several young Muslim girls were hastily married off by families fearful of possible harassment or attack. These marriages, often arranged without prior knowledge of the groom or his family, reflect how deeply ingrained notions of honor and protection influence decisions regarding women's lives. As one respondent mentioned, these nikkahs, or marriages, occurred at local mosques and were often facilitated by international Muslim associations that provided dowries for the brides. However,

these rushed unions came with future repercussions; reports indicate that some of these young women now face domestic violence or marital instability. The pattern of forced marriage underscores a recurring theme where women, especially in crises, are positioned as symbols of family honor, their autonomy curtailed by cultural norms that prioritize safety over personal choice. The study also explored the level of political awareness among women, finding stark differences based on educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Political awareness, crucial for understanding the socio-political triggers of the riots, was generally low among marginalized women, particularly in the economically constrained neighborhood of Shiv Vihar. Around 78% of respondents lacked a basic understanding of the riots' causes or the implications of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which partly incited the violence. Many women, particularly those from households with low literacy levels, deferred to male family members to speak on political matters, indicating how deeply gender roles limit women's public engagement in such communities. However, among more educated respondents, particularly those from Jaffarabad, political awareness was more prevalent. Around 40% of these women demonstrated a solid understanding of the events and had even participated in protests, such as those at Shaheen Bagh. The contrast highlights how education and economic independence contribute to political consciousness, enabling women to engage with and even resist communal narratives actively. Interestingly, the survey uncovered minimal interfaith solidarity among women despite the shared trauma of the riots. While it was initially expected that women would unite in empathy regardless of religious affiliation, communal consciousness often overshadowed any sense of shared womanhood. Several Muslim respondents reported mistrust toward Hindu women, with some accusing them of participating in looting during the riots. Others lamented the lack of support from Hindu women, even after the violence had subsided. Contributing factors include the clear physical and social divisions between Hindu and Muslim communities, with limited spaces for interaction and no shared public venues. This segregation not only hindered interfaith solidarity but also perpetuated a cycle of mistrust and alienation, further dividing communities already

strained by religious differences. In a few isolated cases, Hindu women expressed a desire to assist their Muslim neighbors but felt restrained by their husbands or their community's expectations. The lack of solidarity is a stark reminder of how communal violence fractures social bonds, leaving lasting repercussions even among women who otherwise share similar socio-economic challenges. The survey findings further highlight the impact of communal violence on women's education, with Muslim girls in particular facing barriers to continuing their studies post-riots. Economic setbacks resulting from property damage or job losses forced many families to withdraw their daughters from school. Additionally, concerns about safety curtailed the mobility of Muslim girls, with some families forbidding them to attend classes. Approximately 21% of Muslim girls surveyed had dropped out permanently, while a majority of those who returned to school reported irregular attendance. In contrast, Hindu girls, who faced fewer economic repercussions, continued their education at a much higher rate. This disparity underlines the compounding effect of religious and economic factors on women's education, suggesting that communal violence not only disrupts the immediate lives of women but also has long-term implications for their social mobility and independence. Gender-based violence emerged as another critical theme, with women of both communities experiencing specific atrocities tied to their gender. Respondents reported cases of sexual assault, though many were reluctant to discuss these incidents openly due to the social stigma surrounding sexual violence. One respondent recalled witnessing a young girl being stripped and thrown into a fire, while others recounted how women's bodies were frequently targeted as symbols of communal honor. Muslim women, especially those returning to affected areas, expressed a deep sense of fear and insecurity, with many refusing to disclose assaults out of concern for their families' reputations. The prevalence of gender-based violence during the riots underscores the vulnerability of women in communal conflicts, where patriarchal norms and communal narratives converge, subjecting them to targeted attacks as markers of community pride or shame. An intriguing generational divide emerged in attitudes toward communal harmony. Younger respondents, particularly Hindu and Muslim schoolgirls, displayed a more optimistic outlook, with many expressing tolerance and a willingness to interact with peers from other religions. In contrast, older women, who had experienced a lifetime of communal tension, were more pessimistic, often viewing interfaith interactions with suspicion. For example, 69% of young Muslim girls surveyed expressed optimism toward interfaith relations, compared to just 23% of older Muslim women. This generational shift reflects changing social dynamics, possibly influenced by increased exposure to education and modern communication, though traditional views still exert considerable influence over older generations. Again, the study talks how communal violence influenced the mobility and economic agency of women. In riot-affected neighborhoods, economic losses prompted many women to seek employment for the first time, often within conservative bounds such as home-based work. Some women took up crafts like weaving or joined local NGOs to support their families, especially when male earners were incapacitated or absent. Interestingly, mobility restrictions were less severe for Hindu women post-riots, as new security measures, like the installation of gates, allowed

them more freedom. In contrast, Muslim women faced increased restrictions on movement, driven by security concerns and reinforced by conservative cultural norms. Women of both communities expressed a dependency on male family members for protection, especially during times of crisis, underscoring how gender roles influence the agency of women even in violent contexts. The psychological impact of the riots was also substantial, with many women experiencing prolonged trauma, anxiety, and stress. Due to their confinement within domestic spaces, women had limited outlets for emotional expression, and many reported being haunted by memories of the violence. Respondents recounted traumatic moments such as fleeing with young children, witnessing the destruction of their homes, and hiding for hours in cramped spaces. For some, the trauma was exacerbated by the helplessness they felt in protecting their children or property. This psychological toll points to the need for accessible mental health resources, particularly for women in violence-prone regions, where communal unrest leaves lasting scars.

### Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for gender-sensitive policies to address the impacts of communal violence on women. The following recommendations aim to improve support systems, foster interfaith solidarity, and enhance women's agency in riot-prone areas.

#### 1. Comprehensive Data Collection on Affected Women

Government agencies and NGOs should prioritize accurate data collection on women affected by communal violence, particularly concerning displacement, economic losses, health issues, and exposure to violence. Reliable data enables targeted support in areas such as healthcare, mental health services, economic assistance, and legal aid, ensuring that interventions are effectively designed to address women's specific vulnerabilities.

#### 2. Awareness and Communication for Rehabilitation and Legal Rights

Many women affected by the riots were unaware of available compensation or legal avenues for support. Government and community organizations should organize awareness campaigns directly in affected areas, using trusted community leaders and women's organizations to disseminate information about rehabilitation options and claims processes. Ensuring that women know their rights and entitlements can empower them to advocate for their needs in post-riot recovery efforts.

#### 3. Incorporating Women into Peace-Building Committees

Mohalla-based peace committees should include women from both Hindu and Muslim communities, offering diverse perspectives essential for building resilience against future violence. Women's presence on these committees will bring attention to gender-specific issues, such as safety, healthcare, and economic rehabilitation, which may otherwise be overlooked. Women's roles as mediators and caregivers can be valuable in fostering trust and empathy across community lines.

#### 4. Political Education and Empowerment

NGOs and community-based organizations should

promote political education and engagement for women, focusing on understanding communal dynamics and developing resilience against divisive narratives. By enhancing political literacy, women can better participate in democratic processes, making informed decisions about their communities and challenging communal biases. This empowerment is essential for long-term social cohesion and reducing women's dependency on male family members for information on political matters.

#### 5. **Economic Empowerment and Skill Development**

Economic vulnerability severely affected women's ability to recover from the riots. Skill development programs, especially for home-based industries, can provide economic opportunities that align with cultural expectations. Financial support, such as microloans for women-led small businesses, can also boost women's economic independence, reducing the long-term impact of riots on their livelihoods.

#### 6. **Promoting Interfaith Solidarity and Dialogue Programs**

Structured interfaith dialogue programs involving male community leaders and eventually extending to women can foster understanding and solidarity between Hindu and Muslim women. Government and NGOs could sponsor community events that celebrate shared cultural traditions or invite both communities to participate in each other's festivals. Facilitating interfaith dialogue in a structured manner helps mitigate biases and promotes unity, making communities more resilient to communal divides.

#### 7. **Safe Public Spaces for Intercommunity Engagement**

Establishing shared public spaces such as parks, community centers, or women-only meeting spaces can enable safe interactions between Hindu and Muslim women. These venues encourage dialogue, build trust, and reduce the isolation that fosters communal mistrust. Such spaces can also serve as informal hubs for women's economic activities or training programs, promoting social and economic integration across communities.

#### 8. **Mental Health and Counseling Services**

The psychological toll of communal violence on women calls for accessible mental health support in affected areas. Government agencies should work with NGOs to establish counseling services, particularly for trauma recovery. Mobile mental health clinics or community-based therapy groups can be especially beneficial in densely populated or lower-income areas where access to formal healthcare services is limited.

#### 9. **Protection and Reporting Mechanisms for Gender-Based Violence**

Given the prevalence of gender-based violence during communal riots, dedicated reporting mechanisms and protection programs are essential. Police and legal systems must ensure that women feel safe reporting incidents of sexual violence without fear of stigma or retaliation. Special helplines, community-based protection networks, and legal aid programs should be strengthened to provide timely and effective support for survivors.

#### 10. **Long-Term Community Building and Civic Networks**

strengthening civic engagement networks, as

highlighted by Ashutosh Varshney, can be instrumental in preventing communal violence. Government initiatives should encourage the formation of women-led community organizations and associations that promote interfaith activities and civic engagement. Such networks create a foundation for mutual support and conflict prevention, enhancing communal harmony.

#### **Conclusion**

This study highlights the profound impact of communal violence on women, focusing on their experiences during the 2020 Delhi riots. Women, often viewed as passive victims of such crises, demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and a willingness to support their communities despite facing immense psychological, economic, and social challenges. However, their agency was frequently constrained by deep-rooted gender roles and the pervasive threats of gender-based violence. The study underscores that, while women actively responded to the crisis—providing aid, organizing shelter, and even engaging in activism—significant barriers, such as lack of political awareness, limited economic resources, and community divisions, hindered their full participation and agency. The survey findings reveal critical disparities across religious and socio-economic lines, illustrating how communal violence exacerbates existing vulnerabilities. For Muslim women, educational setbacks, restrictions on mobility, and forced marriages emerged as prominent issues, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to support their recovery. Hindu women, although less economically affected, also faced mobility restrictions and a lack of interfaith solidarity, which have lasting implications for community cohesion. The recommendations proposed in this study emphasize the need for gender-sensitive policies that support women's mental health, economic independence, and civic engagement. Addressing these areas through structured community programs, inclusive peace committees, and dedicated safe spaces can empower women, making them critical agents of change in preventing future communal violence. Ultimately, this study calls for an inclusive approach to communal violence prevention, one that recognizes women's unique experiences and potential to foster resilience and unity in conflict-prone communities.

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