

# High Literacy and Mounting Violence: A Case of Women in Kerala, India

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**Abstract-** In this paper titled 'High Literacy and Mounting Violence: A Case of Women in Kerala, India', a modest attempt has been made to discuss the forms and types of violence against women. In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture. It has been recognized as a violation of basic human rights of women and of their exercise of fundamental freedom. Why should violence against women be distinguished from other forms of violence? Because it has a global magnitude and it is based on sex inequality. It cuts across cultural and religious barriers, impeding the right of women to participate fully in society. Kerala, one of the most developed states of the country in terms of human development indices, is unfortunately no exception in the matter of crimes against women. Government and voluntary agencies are doing their level best to protect women and wipe out this negative indicator of development yet it continues to increase day by day. The paper also suggests remedial measures for preventing violence against women.

**Index Terms-** Violence, Women, Kerala, Kerala Model of Development, Education

## I. INTRODUCTION

Women constitute almost the half of the total world population. Gender based violence is a common reality in the lives of women and girls in many parts of the world, developing and industrialised countries alike. It has been recognised as a violation of basic human rights of women and of their exercise of fundamental freedom. In all societies, to a greater or lesser degree, women and girls are subjected to physical, sexual and psychological abuse that cuts across lines of income, class and culture. The low social and economic status of women can be both a cause and a consequence of this violence. Though there were several attempts to upgrade the status of women, the condition of women remains the same but for a few changes among some sections of women. History shows that women have never had an opportunity to express their individuality, since their freedom has always been suppressed by their immediate society. It is in this backdrop, that one has to analyse the status of women. The methodology used in this study is historical and analytical in nature. The data were collected mostly from secondary sources. Available primary sources were also consulted.

## II. IDENTIFY, RESEARCH AND COLLECT IDEA

### Violence against Women: A Theoretical Framework

Male violence against women is worldwide phenomenon and can be understood as the consequence of characteristics of societal structures like class, gender, etc. Violence against women is sometimes a mechanism for subordination or sometimes women's unequal status favours their vulnerability to violence.

### Defining Violence against women

The most widely used definition of violence against women (VAW) is:

The Declaration on Elimination of Violence Against Women adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993, defines Violence Against Women as "any act of gender based violence against women that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or private spaces".

The Centre for Diseases Control in the US has defined four different types of violence:

- Physical violence<sup>11</sup>
- Sexual violence
- Threat of physical or sexual violence, and
- Psychological or emotional abuse.

*Economic violence* is another category of violence identified by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. This is perpetrated usually by an intimate partner or family member and includes economic blackmail, control over money a woman earns, denial of access to education, health assistance or remunerated employment and denial of property rights (Coomaraswamy 1996).

Gender-based violence against women takes many forms and occurs throughout a woman's life cycle. Heise (1994) describe the different forms of violence that women experience throughout their lifespan

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<sup>1</sup> This includes the intentional use of physical force with the potential for causing death, disability, injury or harm. Coercing or forcing other people to perform any of the above actions has also been classified as physical violence.

**Table 1**  
**Forms of violence experienced by women throughout their lifespan**

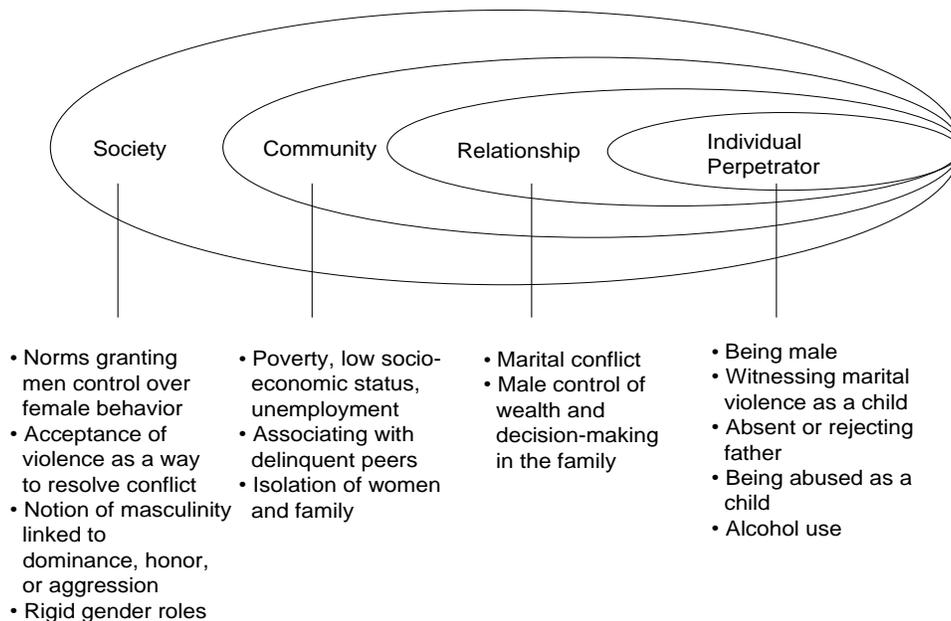
Phase	Type of Violence Present
Pre-birth	Sex-selective abortion; battering during pregnancy; coerced pregnancy.
Infancy	Female infanticide; emotional and physical abuse; differential access to food and medical care.
Girlhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Child marriage; genital mutilation; sexual abuse by family members and strangers; differential access to food, medical care and education.</li> </ul>
Adolescence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Violence during courtship; economically coerced sex (e.g. for school fees); sexual abuse in the workplace; rape; sexual harassment; arranged marriage; trafficking.</li> </ul>
Reproductive age	Physical, psychological and sexual abuse by intimate male partners and relatives; forced pregnancies by partner; sexual abuse in the workplace; sexual harassment; rape; abuse of widows, including property grabbing and sexual cleansing practices.
Elderly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Abuse of widows, including property grabbing; accusations of witchcraft; physical and psychological violence by younger family members; differential access to food and medical care.</li> </ul>

Source: Heise, Pitanguay and Germain (1994). *Violence Against Women: The Hidden Health Burden*. **World Bank, Discussion Paper**. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

According to Ahuja (1998) and Sharma (1997) a common approach in some of the theories has been to focus on individual aggressors. There are two kinds of explanations focusing on individuals. One includes psycho-pathological explanations that focus on personality characteristics of victims and offenders. These theories provide pathological explanations for violent behaviour focusing on brain structures, chemical imbalances, dietary deficiencies, hormonal factors as well as evolutionary theories and genetic characteristics to explain violent behaviour. The socio-psychological model on the other hand argues that violent behaviour can be understood by careful examination of the external environmental factors that have an impact on the behaviour of individuals leading to stressful situations or family interactional patterns.

Feminist analysis of violence has been based on power relations between men and women that deny women equal access to power and resources thus making them more vulnerable to violence from men. The cause of this violence can be traced to patriarchy – the ideology that bestows on men power and authority over all aspects of women’s lives including their bodies (Mo Hume (2009). Heise (1998) proposes a clearer and interrelated ecological framework for understanding violent behaviour among individuals. This framework includes a range of physical, social, emotional and psychological factors at the personal, community and societal levels. In this model, the causative factors are represented in the form of four concentric circles (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
**Ecological Model of Factors Associated with Partner Abuse**



Source: Heise (1998) **Violence against women: an integrated ecological framework**. Violence against women.

### III. WRITE DOWN YOUR STUDIES AND FINDINGS

#### Studies on Violence against Women

Studies from WHO (1997) indicate that between 16% and 52% of women world-wide are physically assaulted by an intimate partner at least once in their lives. Evidence from Sri Lanka shows that 60% of 200 women interviewed said they were beaten by their partners, 51 of the women said their partner used a weapon during the physical assault. In Bangladesh, 50 % of wives murdered were killed by their husbands (Coomaraswamy 1996). In Ecuador, for example, a World Bank study found that approximately 22% of women reported being sexually abused in school. A qualitative study in Ethiopia found that harassment and sexual abuse contributed to low female enrollment rates and high dropout rates from secondary school. In Pakistan nearly one-third of the women had experienced physical violence at least once in marital life, the reasons being financial constraints, children or in laws, although these factors were not significantly associated with anxiety/depression. Many incidences of violence are not reported because of the shame and fear associated with being a victim. Rates of sex trafficking, sexual violence in armed conflict situations, female infanticide, and violence in schools and the workplace, for example, are thought to be significantly underdocumented, particularly in developing countries (Coomaraswamy1996).

Women in India constitute half of its population (50%) and most of them are grinding under the socio-cultural and religious structures. The study found that overall about 50% of the women had experienced physical or psychological violence at least once in their married lives. National Family Health Survey (NFHS - 2002) found that at least 1 in 5 ever married women in India have experienced domestic violence since the age of 15. In *India safe* 2000 multi-site study of nearly 10,000 households, 40 percent of

the women reported experiencing at least one form of physical abuse and 26 percent reported severe physical abuse, including being hit, kicked, or beaten. UNFPA also reports that 40% of the women in India suffer domestic violence and abuse from male partner. Records from the Special Cell for Women and Children in Mumbai, established by the Police Commission to provide a range of support services to women and their families, revealed that 53 percent of women endured domestic violence for 3-17 years before complaining to police (Dave and Solanki 2000). National Crime Record Bureau statistics show that the rate and incidence of crime has increased from 5.1 and 14 in the year 2006 to 34.9 and 59 during the year 2011(Appendix 1, 2 and 3). The most common crimes against women in India are sexual harassment, rape, dowry, child marriage, female infanticide and sex-selective abortion, domestic violence and trafficking. Many rapes go unreported. Due to "family honour" many complaint files are withdrawn and in many cases the police do not give a fair hearing.

#### The Position of Women in Kerala's Development

Kerala is one of the smallest states in the Indian union. It occupies 1 per cent of the total land area of India with a population of 3.33 Crore, which is 3 % of the total population of India at the 2011 census. The land of Kerala comprises the narrow coastal strip bounded by the Western Ghats in the east and the Arabian Sea on the west. Kerala has had a vibrant history springing from the ancient times flowing down the mediaeval and running to the present. Modern Kerala came into existence on 1st November 1956, by amalgamating the states of Travancore-Cochin and Malabar on the basis of the State Re-organization Act.

Kerala has often been referred to as the "land of women" (52%). Historically the state has been quite different from the rest of the country in terms of the indicators of women's

development. The Kerala model of development owes its attributed success to the achievements in the areas of health and education where the contribution of women is particularly significant. Several factors have contributed to the success. The matriarchal system<sup>2</sup> that prevailed among some of the dominant communities in the past, the progressive social movements, government policies, and a historically conducive climate are a few of the other factors that have been identified as contributors to the success of women in Kerala. Along with the government, various Christian missionaries like LMS, CMS and BEMS- the pioneers of women's development made continuous efforts to popularize women's education and empowerment. LMS missionaries were the first protestant missionary society which sent missionaries to Kerala. Johanna Mead was the pioneer missionary in the field of women's education in Kerala. The activities of the missionaries helped to change the attitude of the people towards girl's education. Members of each caste became aware of their rights in the society and tried to improve their conditions. Certain social evils such as sati, smārtha, devadasi system, pula Pedi etc disappeared from the society of Kerala. Communities such as Ezhavas, Nairs and Harijans were guided by great visionaries and monastic orders (Ashrams) - Sree Narayana Guru, Sree Chattambi Swamikal & Ayyankali<sup>3</sup> - who exhorted them to educate themselves by starting their own schools. The teachings of these saints have also empowered the poor and backward class women to organize themselves and bargain for their rights. The rulers of the Princely state of Travancore (Thiruvithaamkōor) were at the forefront in the spread of education. A school for girls was established by the Maharaja in 1859, which was an act unprecedented in the Indian subcontinent. Starting with the turn of the last century, the state had a favorable sex ratio (1004) which gradually picked up and reached 1084 in 2011 (India figure is 940). Similarly in terms of literacy, infant mortality rates, birth rate, and mean age at marriage, women in Kerala score higher than their counterparts elsewhere in the country (Appendix 4 and 5). In fact, the girls outnumber boys from the secondary school level onwards due to their lower dropout rates. Girls constitute 52% at the plus two

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<sup>2</sup> The term matrilineal system refers to groups that trace their ancestral descent through maternal lines instead of paternal lines and in which familial authority is wielded by women. The status of women is better in matrilineal families whereas they are in subordinate status in patrilineal families.

<sup>3</sup> In 1903 Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam was started for the upliftment of the Ezhava Community and in 1907, Ayyankali (belonging to the Pulaya caste, the lowest in the caste hierarchy) formed the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sanghom and they were in reality the strident voices of the oppressed of the times. In 1906, Vakkom Abdul Khadder Moulavi established the Islam Dharma Paripalana Yogam for the upliftment of the Muslims. Almost during this time all the major low castes like Kuravass, Thandars, Parayass, Arayass and Kammalass formed their own associations. These are social actions for their progress collective.

level, 76% at the graduate level and 74% at the post graduate level (K.P. Kannan 2012)

The Kerala model of development<sup>4</sup> owes its attributed success to the achievements in the areas of health and education where the contribution of women is particularly significant. These early achievements in literacy and education have positively influenced the status of women in the state. In fact statistics (from different human development reports) indicate that women have contributed more than men in the development of education programs and health sectors of the state. According to Geraldine Frazer- Moleketi, "Kerala's strength is the high levels of female literacy. Because when you educate a woman, you educate a family (Geraldine Frazer- Moleketi 2012)."

### Why this huge increase of violence in a highly literate state?

Most people have a glorified image of Kerala as a matrilineal society that boasts several positive social indicators. However, the matrilineal system existed only among the Nairs and a few other communities. And none of the social or political movements that contributed to great change in Kerala (class, caste, etc) ever took up gender issues or upheld the dignity of women. Why does a state that boasts India's highest literacy levels and excellent social development indicators see a 300% increase in violence against women? possibly because literacy and education do not change mindsets. In a deeply patriarchal society, education teaches women only to be good wives and mothers. Recent research carried out by organizations and individual researchers suggests that routine violence against women is high in Kerala. What propels such widespread violence against women in the state where women are so highly literate?. The **International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)** study found that Thiruvananthapuram had a very high prevalence of domestic violence. Violence in Thiruvananthapuram is about 64% in urban non-slum areas and 71% in rural areas, as shown in the graph. This is higher than Bhopal, Lucknow, Nagpur and Vellore (Appendix 5). Another study on gender-based violence in Kerala, undertaken by Sakhi in 2004 for the Kerala government's department of health, revealed that 40% of respondents had experienced violence in the home at some point in their lives. Another study conducted in Kerala found that 45 percent of women had at least one incident of physical violence in their lifetime. More psychological and physical violence was reported by women who had less social support (Rajmohan and MKC Nair 2003).

A research study conducted by C.S. Chandrika (1998) on sexual harassment at the workplace as a part of the study for SAKSHI, an NGO in New Delhi found that 95% of the women felt that there was prevalence of sexual harassment at the work place in Kerala. Another phenomenon is that of 'missing girls' in

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<sup>4</sup>Kerala model is defined as the Kerala's high standard of living (comparable to US or Europe) at very low per capita income which is only 1/80th of US citizens per capita income. According to Frank and Chasin this model is "a set of economic practices developed in the state of Kerala, resulted in attaining a high level of standards in human development, despite having a very low industrial development" (Frank and Chasin 2000).

Kerala. A serious issue in the context of Kerala is the atrocities against tribal women and the increasing number of unwed mothers in tribal hamlets. According to an ICRW-INCLIN (International Centre for Research on Women and International Clinical Epidemiologist Network) study (2000), Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city of Kerala, ranks first among five cities in India in prevalence of domestic violence. There are increasing reports of dowry-related violence, rape (1019 reported rape in 2012) and other atrocities against women in Kerala. Kerala has recorded 23,853 cases involving violence, including rape, against women and 1,326 cases of attack on children in the past two years (2013). Domestic violence dominates among the crimes against women in Kerala, a study by the Institute of Social Science for Kerala Police (2013) has revealed. As much as 51.4 per cent of the crimes are related to domestic crimes which are more common among the women who are between 26 and 40 years (44.9 per cent). Poverty coupled with alcoholism is the root cause for crime against women, it has been revealed. But there are other causes among which the most vulnerable ones are social media and modern ICT tools. A high level of divorced (Appendix 6) and widowed women at the macro level state data and micro level panchayat data show the poor status of women in the Kerala society, argue Ramanathaiyer and Macpherson (2000).

#### IV. CONCLUSION

##### 1. Conclusion and Suggestions

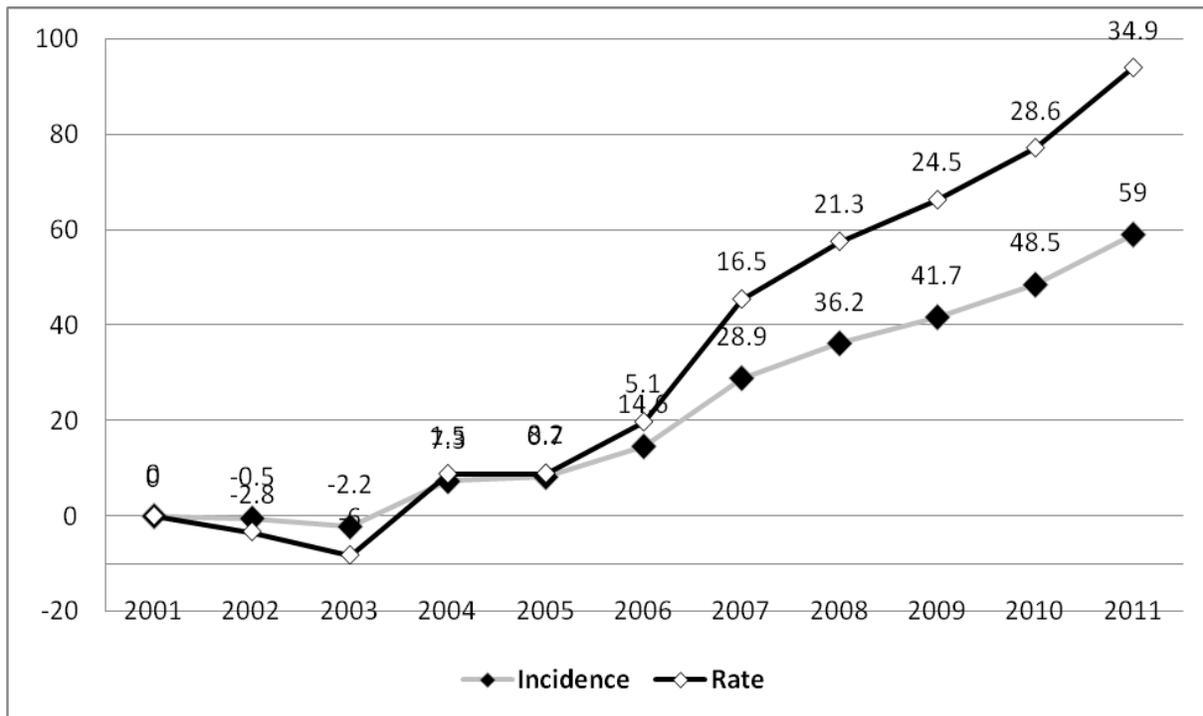
Centuries have come, and centuries have gone, but the plight of women is not likely to change. Time has helplessly watched women suffering in the form of discrimination, oppression, exploitation, degradation, aggression, humiliation. It has been seen that when the society imposes sanctions against the perpetrators of violence, the women are empowered to exert for their rights. Only when the family and the society are democratized, the status of the women is strengthened. At this time, it becomes the duty of the state to facilitate and strengthen the process. The solution lies in the fact that women empowerment approach to combat violence against women should be well integrated and interwoven into all policies and programs of the governments. Women should be equal partners not only at the public places but should have adequate control of their own resources.

The following measures can be considered for bringing phenomenal change in the status of women.

1. There should be co-ordinated efforts of police, administration and judiciary for enforcing measures against atrocities on women.
2. Efforts should be made for the proper and effective enforcement of existing laws related to women.
3. Police need to be sensitized to treat domestic violence cases as seriously as any other crime. Special training to handle domestic violence cases should be imparted to police force. Women representation in the police force should be increased.
4. Non- Governmental agencies and private institutions need to be a part of any initiative that seeks to address the issue of Domestic Violence.
5. People's Planning Programmes through Self Help Groups and Neighbourhood Groups should be encouraged to facilitate mutual sharing between women
6. More counseling centers with professionally qualified counselors should be started at the rural/urban areas focusing more on domestic violence victims.
7. Pre-marital and post marital counseling should be made compulsory resulting in the minimization of the breaking down of families.
8. Frequent legal awareness camps for women empowerment and spreading social awareness about women's status & rights should be organized in rural /urban areas.
9. Male attitudes and society's attitudes need to undergo change. Since prevention of domestic violence requires fundamental changes in attitudes and behaviour, it confronts societal and individual resistance to change.
10. To increase the reporting of such cases at first we need to empower the women and children. They must be educate on their rights and encourage them to come forward to register the cases. There are many violent cases but due to stigma in the society very few are reported.
11. Punishment of every culprit need to be exemplary
12. Law enforcers should be well trained to react swiftly and with sensitivity towards the women and children cases.
13. Women's Commission should be given more penal powers beyond just recommendatory powers. It should be expanded with more members and provided with adequate resources and personnel.

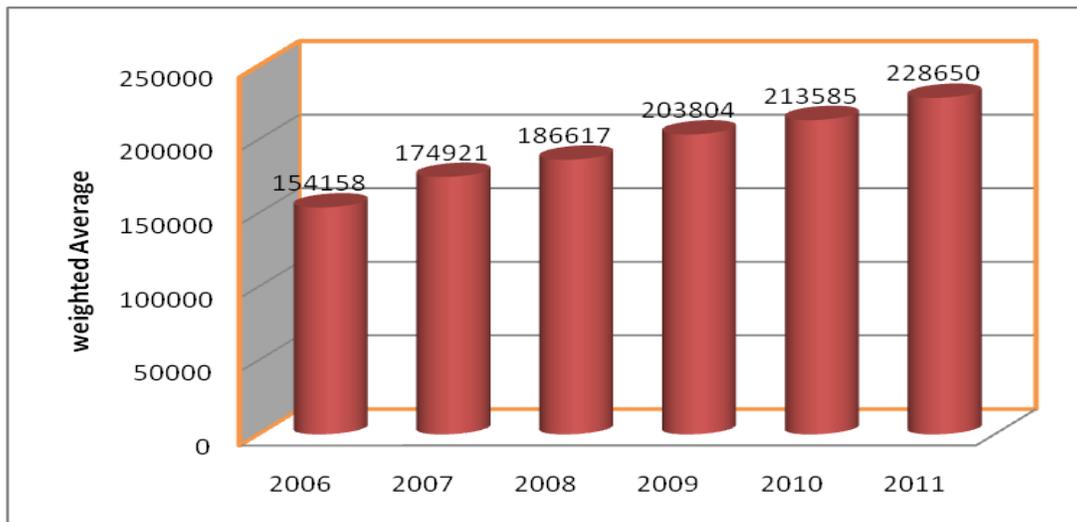
## Appendices

**Appendix 1: Incidence & Rate of Crime against Women Percentage Change from 2001**



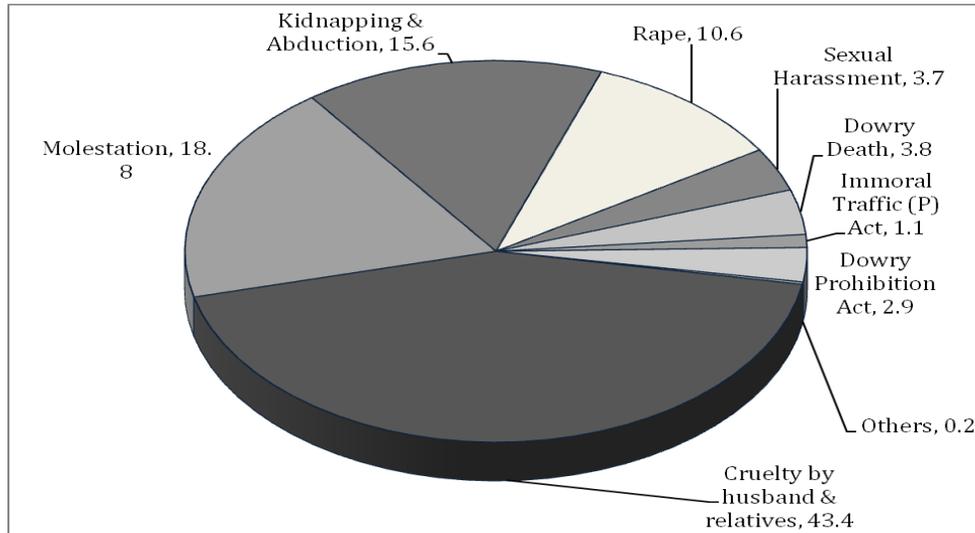
Source: **Crimes in India**, 2011, National Crime Record Bureau.

**Appendix 2: Rate of Crime against Women: 2006-2011**



Source: **Crimes in India**, 2011, National Crime Record Bureau.

**Appendix 3: Crime against Women Percentage Distribution during 2011**



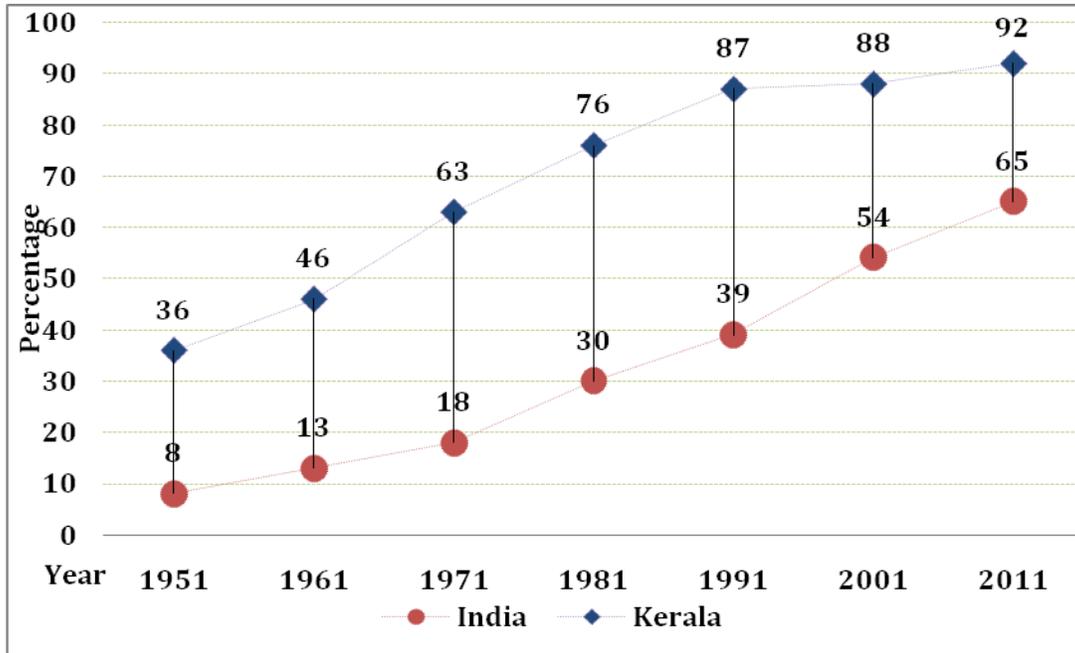
Source: **Crimes in India**, 2011, National Crime Record Bureau.

**Appendix 4: Vital statistics of Kerala and India: 1951-2011**

Year	Birth Rate		Education		Infant mortality		Sex Ratio	
	Kerala	India	Kerala	India	Kerala	India	Kerala	India
1951	44	40	47.37	16.67	128	146	1028	946
1961	39	41	55	24.02	94	129	1022	941
1971	32	37	60.42	29.45	61	114	1016	930
1981	26	34	70.42	36.17		110	1034	935
1991	18	30	90.59	52.11	16.5	92	1040	928
2001	17.3	26	90.92	65.38	11	70	1058	933
2011	14.8	20.9	93.91	74.04	13	48	1084	940

Source: **Census of India**, Various Years

**Appendix 5: Growth Trends in Female Literacy-Kerala and India**



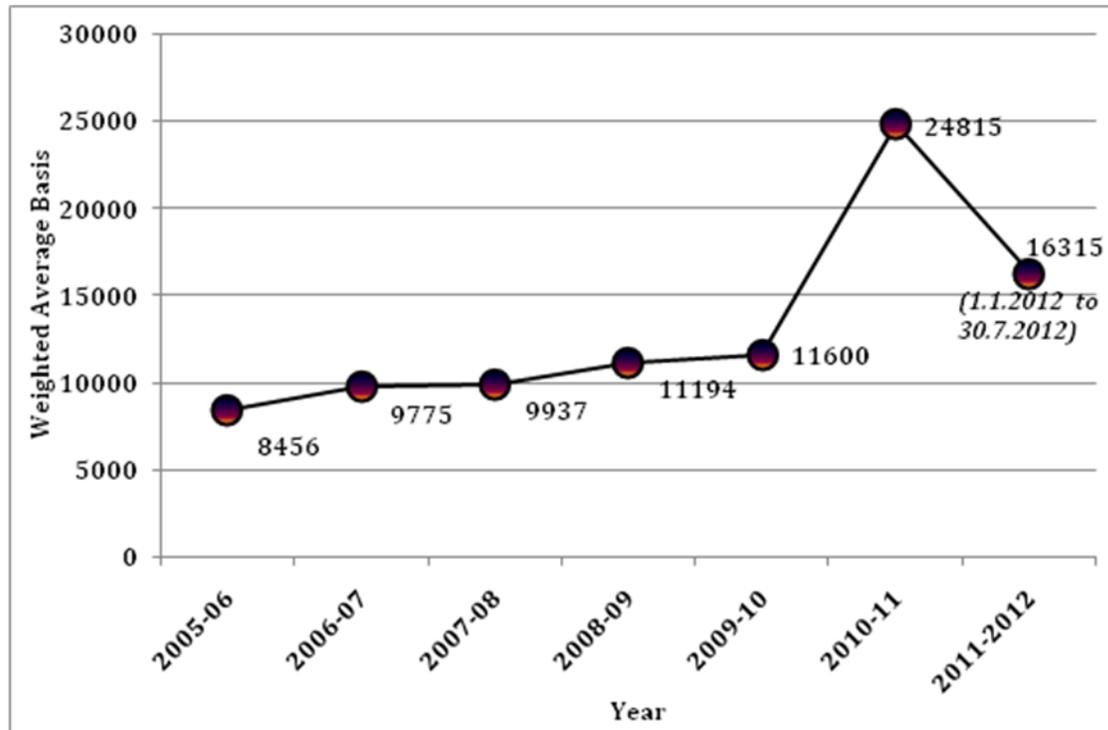
Source: Census of India, Various years.

**Appendix 6: Violence against women (%) in selected rural sites in India (19)**

Name of the city	Any type	Psychological	Physical
Bhopal	25.4	22.6	15.6
Lucknow	60.3	56.3	41.5
Nagpur	59.5	58.7	34.6
<b>Trivandrum</b>	<b>68.8</b>	<b>68.9</b>	<b>30.7</b>
Vellore	42.9	38.8	28.8
<b>Overall</b>	<b>51.7</b>	<b>49.2</b>	<b>30.9</b>

Source: ICRW (2000)

### Appendix 7: Divorce Rate (Weighted Average Basis)



Source: Divorce Cases, Family Court, Trivandrum, Kerala.

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