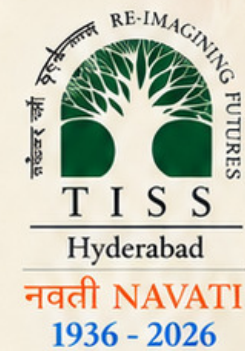


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BEYOND CASE COUNTS

Policing as Fiduciary Duty

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School of Public Policy and Governance, TISS Hyderabad

Working Paper No. 12
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Beyond Case Counts

Policing as Fiduciary Duty

Ipsita Sapra^{*, **}

Abstract

Governance is typically evaluated through metrics that assess procedural compliance and outputs. However, very often, these reveal little about whether state institutions act as trustworthy stewards of citizens' interests, especially those of the most vulnerable. This paper advocates for an ethical governance framework, grounded in fiduciary theory, deliberative accountability, and horizontal democratic oversight, to evaluate police-led responses to gender-based violence (GBV) in India. Using the Telangana Women Safety Wing (TGWSW) as a primary case study, and drawing on semi-structured interviews with institutional officials, civil society partners, and community representatives, the paper argues that the Wing represents a significant and instructive attempt to operationalise the state's moral stewardship obligations. Certain institutional design features already reflect core elements of ethical governance, notably survivor agency and the rejection of coercive reconciliation. Persistent gaps remain, however, in intersectional reach, horizontal accountability, and community co-governance. Reading TGWSW against Telangana's own Social Action Committee model, the paper argues for greater engagement with home-grown approaches. It concludes by foregrounding the ethical governance framework as an analytical lens to illuminate and deepen what TGWSW is already attempting, one that offers both theoretical and practical value for gender-sensitive policing in India.

Keywords: gender-based violence, ethical governance, Telangana Women Safety Wing, fiduciary theory, community co-governance, survivor agency

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1. Introduction: Governance, Violence, and the Limits of Performance

In democracies, governance derives its legitimacy from the kind of relationship institutions create and sustain with citizens. In substantive terms, such relationships go beyond compliance with procedures and demand trusteeship that is characterised by conscientious care and genuine accountability. The distinction between governance as bureaucratic performance and governance as stewardship lies at the critical core of a persistent gap in how state institutions are evaluated.¹ Conventional evaluation paradigms prioritise measurable outputs, primarily service delivery statistics and numbers that can be compared over time.² In doing so, they reproduce a conception of governance that is answerable primarily to political superiors and administrative auditors rather than to citizens. These metrics cannot capture whether state power is exercised with genuine concern for the interests of its beneficiaries, whether the most vulnerable experience institutional engagement as protection, and whether the deliberative quality of institutional practice reflects the space that citizens have within institutions.³ Given that these are constitutive of what ethical governance should look like, it is imperative that they are integrated as a part of governance evaluation frameworks.

This paper takes that question as its primary concern and grounds it in the domain of gender-based violence (GBV), where the gap between institutional presence and substantive justice is both measurable and urgent. The paper engages with GBV as including violence against men, sexual minorities or those with gender-nonconforming identities, in addition to violence against women (VAW), which is a part of GBV.⁴ However, given that several important data points use VAW, the paper refers to these to present an understanding of the scale of the issue.

As Fineman insists, GBV is not a niche concern affecting a special interest group.⁵ It is a manifestation of the universal human condition of vulnerability, and the state's obligation to address it is therefore a core expression of what responsive governance requires. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported 4,45,256 cases of crimes against women in India in 2022.⁶ National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6) data document that 22.3% of ever-married women aged 18–49

¹ Mark H. Moore, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Terry L. Cooper, *The Responsible Administrator: An Approach to Ethics for the Administrative Role*, 6th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).

² Moore, *Creating Public Value*.

³ Cooper, *Responsible Administrator*.

⁴ World Bank, "Terminology", *Violence Against Women and Girls Resource Guide*, accessed 22 July 2026, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/violence-against-women-and-girls/terminology>.

⁵ Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: New Press, 2004).

⁶ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2022* (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2023).

in India have experienced spousal violence.⁷ In addition, women and sexual minorities experience violence in the form of sexual assault, including rape, kidnapping, workplace harassment, and cybercrime. Furthermore, scholars suggest that the actual extent of GBV is likely to be much higher than what official crime data capture.⁸

This is despite India's substantial legislative architecture for addressing GBV. From India's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 to Section 85 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, and from the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005, the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, to the provisions on dowry death (Section 80) and sexual harassment (Section 75) of the BNS, 2023, the statutory framework reflects robust national and international commitments. Yet law on paper and justice in practice remain stubbornly distant. GBV persists across class, caste, geography, and generation, often reflecting the gap between institutional design and lived experience.

NFHS-5 data show that nearly 86% of women who experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence did not seek help from any source, reflecting not merely the persistence of violence but the failure to translate legal and institutional provisions into accessible and usable practices.⁹

The present paper is an attempt to understand this gap and to connect it with the larger ethical governance framework, which offers both conceptual insights and practical pathways to address it. GBV serves here both as the empirical context and as a lens for understanding the strengths and limitations of state governance. The conditions under which women do not report, including fear, social risk, stigma, prior experience of institutional apathy, and structural inaccessibility, illuminate

⁷ International Institute for Population Sciences, *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6), 2023–24: India Fact Sheets* (New Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2026).

⁸ Malin Leonardsson and Miguel San Sebastian, "Prevalence and Predictors of Help-Seeking for Women Exposed to Spousal Violence in India", *BMC Women's Health* 17 (2017): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-017-0453-4>.

⁹ Naila Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment", *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7660.00125>; International Institute for Population Sciences and ICF, *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21: India Report* (New Delhi: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2021); R. Ghoshal et al., "Factors Associated with Help-Seeking by Women Facing Intimate Partner Violence in India", *BMC Global and Public Health* 2 (2024): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s44263-024-00056-3>.

what happens when the state fails to act as a faithful trustee of its citizens' interests.¹⁰ The 86% who stay silent are those whose experience with the state does not offer the conditions of trust, care, and safety that genuine governance requires.¹¹

This gap, the paper argues, is at its core a governance problem. It raises questions about the quality, character, and orientation of state action. How does the citizen survivor of GBV perceive the police institution? What does justice feel like to those who experience it, across the intersections of caste, class, and other markers of identity? These are questions that quantitative performance metrics, while important, cannot answer alone.

The paper therefore argues that the ethical governance framework, grounded in fiduciary theory,¹² deliberative accountability¹³ and democratic horizontal accountability,¹⁴ offers a powerful lens through which to understand what GBV governance should look like and to assess how far existing institutions approximate it. It also builds on Fineman's assertion of universal vulnerability, which challenges the concept of the 'autonomous' individual upon which most laws are built.¹⁵ She contends that human beings are inherently dependent at various stages of life and that dependency is not a 'failure' but a natural state that requires a state response. Because vulnerability is universal, Fineman argues that the state has a responsibility to be 'responsive'. This means that the state, in fulfilment of its fiduciary duty, must provide the 'institutional assets' (legal, social, and economic) that allow people to navigate their vulnerability.

Methodology

This paper is grounded in a qualitative research design, drawing on the author's sustained institutional engagement with the Telangana Women Safety Wing (TGWSW) over the period 2020 to

¹⁰ Flavia Agnes and Audrey D'Mello, "Protection of Women from Domestic Violence", *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 44 (2015): 76–84; Ghoshal et al., "Factors Associated with Help-Seeking"; Leonardsson and San Sebastian, "Prevalence and Predictors"; U. Vindhya and Lakshmi Lingam, "Social Action Committees: Community Intervention to Reduce Gender-Based Violence", *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 26, no. 3 (2019): 263–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521519861160>.

¹¹ Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Evan Fox-Decent, *Sovereignty's Promise: The State as Fiduciary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mark Bovens, "Analysing and Assessing Accountability: A Conceptual Framework", *European Law Journal* 13, no. 4 (2007): 447–68.

¹² Fox-Decent, *Sovereignty's Promise*.

¹³ Ethan J. Leib and Stephen R. Galoob, "Fiduciary Political Theory: A Critique", *Yale Law Journal* 125, no. 7 (2016): 1820–79.

¹⁴ Guillermo O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability in New Democracies", *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 3 (1998): 112–26.

¹⁵ Fineman, *Autonomy Myth*.

2026. This longitudinal engagement is understood here as an epistemological resource, as extended institutional proximity enabled contextual and iterative depth. The analysis is situated within a tradition of qualitative inquiry that foregrounds researcher positionality as a condition of analytical richness.

The primary empirical basis comprises semi-structured interviews with eight senior and mid-level officials (including counsellors and administrators) of the TGWSW responsible for managing its various units at the state level, oriented towards understanding the institutional logic, operational priorities, and governance challenges. Complementing these, interviews were conducted with representatives of two non-governmental organisations and one representative of an academic institution partnering with the TGWSW, providing a perspective simultaneously embedded in and partially external to the formal organisational structure. A third strand of primary research derives from interviews with two representatives of transgender community groups that had engaged with the TGWSW in the formulation of action plans, bringing survivor perspectives into the analysis. All interviews were held in English. These primary interviews were supplemented by a review of institutional documentation available through the TGWSW's official communications.

As the study involved interviews with institutional actors, civil society partners, and community representatives in their professional capacities, and did not involve any direct engagement with survivors of GBV, formal institutional ethics board review was not sought. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interview, and pseudonyms are used to protect their identities; participants were informed of the study's purpose and of their right to withdraw.

The paper often uses self-reported data shared on the TGWSW website, which is a recognised limitation of this study. Where possible, key figures have been cross-checked against National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports, NFHS data, and press documentation.

These sources are used to examine institutional architecture, stated organisational practices, and the conditions under which stewardship is intended to operate, rather than assuming that these translate into survivors' lived experience. However, an important limitation of the paper is that it could not engage with survivors directly. For that, it relied mainly on the rich literature and comprehensive data sets that are available. The absence of survivor-generated evidence limits conclusions about care, trust, agency, and equitable access, and, as such, conclusions drawn from institutional and intermediary voices must be understood as provisional. These would require direct survivor testimony to be confirmed and refined.

Data analysis follows narrative analysis, attending to how institutional and other actors account for their practice, frame governance challenges, and articulate the assumptions that shape institutional behaviour. This narrative evidence is situated within the extant academic literature on fiduciary theory, deliberative accountability, feminist governance, and community-based GBV intervention.

A clarification of scope and intent is necessary at this point. This paper does not offer a ready-to-use evaluation template or a standardised instrument that can be applied uniformly across GBV interventions. Standardised templates presuppose that the conditions of justice are sufficiently similar across contexts for a single metric to capture them. The framework proposed here rests on the contrary premise that governance is deeply context-embedded. Furthermore, vulnerability is often intersectional, and the quality of the state–citizen relationship can only be assessed through analytical lenses that are sensitive to the specific institutional histories, community structures, and social ecologies within which interventions operate. What this paper provides, therefore, is the conceptual foregrounding necessary to deploy such a framework. This includes the theoretical architecture that establishes what ethical governance requires, the historical, empirical, and institutional context that shapes what it means in Telangana, and the analytical vocabulary through which existing interventions can be examined.

The paper proceeds as follows. The following section provides a brief introduction to the TGWSW, sketching its institutional architecture and approach. Section 3 presents the ethical governance framework through its three theoretical pillars, while Section 4 reads the TGWSW through this framework, identifying the ways in which the TGWSW already partially reflects ethical governance principles and the gaps that remain. Section 5 examines the Social Action Committee (SAC) model as an exemplar of community co-governance and argues for substantive institutional structures built on trust and drawing on the pillars of ethical governance. Section 6 draws together the previous sections and contextualises them for the TGWSW to reflect on what a more fully realised ethical governance approach would require.

2. GBV and the Institutional Architecture of Response in Telangana

The newly formed state of Telangana presents a complex landscape of GBV manifestations, with recent data indicating significant prevalence across urban and rural contexts. NCRB data for 2022 record over 22,000 cases of crimes against women in Telangana, producing a crime rate of approximately 117 per 100,000 women and placing the state among the highest nationally. The most

prevalent categories are cruelty by husband or relatives (9,996 cases), assault with intent to outrage modesty (4,652 cases), and offences under POCSO.¹⁶

While the rates are alarming, the appropriate interpretive lens matters. Higher numbers not only indicate high prevalence but may also signal higher reporting rates, greater institutional legitimacy, survivor confidence in formal systems, and accessible reporting mechanisms. A large randomised evaluation in India showed that gender-sensitive police interventions (women's help desks, outreach, and police training) increased reporting of VAW, reflecting improved police responsiveness that increased survivor confidence in approaching formal institutions,¹⁷ not necessarily an increase in the underlying incidence of violence. Studies comparing NFHS prevalence estimates with NCRB police data conclude that police statistics primarily reflect reporting behaviour, which varies substantially across states because of differences in reporting practices, institutional accessibility, and willingness to report, and not necessarily because violence itself is more prevalent.¹⁸

In this context, the Telangana Police's Women Safety Wing (WSW), established in 2014, represents India's pioneering integrated approach to women's safety and is deployed here as a live, albeit partial, attempt to practise ethical governance.

The architecture of the TGWSW reflects an evolution in India's response to GBV over the past four decades, shaped significantly by the women's movement, whose sustained advocacy led to the recognition of GBV as a public concern demanding state accountability.¹⁹ These interventions challenged the limitations of an exclusively criminal justice response while demanding greater responsiveness to survivors' diverse needs. Among the earliest institutional manifestations were the Special Cells for Women in police stations, established in Maharashtra and replicated across several states, which integrated psychosocial counselling, legal aid, crisis intervention, and inter-agency coordination.²⁰ Furthermore, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, ex-

¹⁶ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2022*.

¹⁷ Sandip Sukhtankar, Gabrielle Kruks-Wisner, and Akshay Mangla, "Policing in Patriarchy: An Experimental Evaluation of Reforms to Improve Police Responsiveness to Women in India", *Science* 377, no. 6602 (2022): 191–98, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abm7387>.

¹⁸ K. O'Leary, "Tackling Under-Reporting of Violence against Women", *Nature Medicine* 28 (2022): 1543; A. Gupta and K. Sharma, "Violence against Women in India: Levels and Trends of Incidence and Reporting" (preprint, OSF Preprints, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/n2x9w>; Ghoshal et al., "Factors Associated with Help-Seeking".

¹⁹ Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993); Indu Agnihotri and Vina Mazumdar, "Changing the Terms of Political Discourse: Women's Movement in India, 1970s–1990s", *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 29 (1995): 1869–79.

²⁰ Agnes and D'Mello, "Protection of Women".

panded the state's response beyond criminal sanctions to include residence rights, custody, counselling, and other civil remedies.²¹ The One Stop Centres (Sakhi Centres) under the Ministry of Women and Child Development embodied a multi-sectoral model in which police intervention constituted one component of a broader ecosystem of psychosocial, legal, medical, and shelter services.²² Thus, the TGWSW is an important institutional consolidation of these survivor-centred approaches within a specialised policing architecture.

The TGWSW operates through a life-stage-wise modular structure, with distinct functioning models for different manifestations of violence, administered by the police but staffed by qualified professionals. Operating through a set of specialised, context-sensitive modules, the TGWSW moves beyond the generic 'one-size-fits-all' orientation of conventional policing towards an approach enabling tailored interventions for specific contexts. Several features of the TGWSW – its approach to understanding the vulnerability of women across life stages, its counselling-first approach to domestic violence, its resistance to coercive reconciliation, its extension of institutional structures to remote areas, and its inclusion of gender minorities – already embody parts of fiduciary and deliberative principles in institutional form.

The TGWSW's architecture encompasses several distinct operational units. These include (but are not limited to):

BHAROSA Centres: At 15%, Telangana has a higher rate of cases under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act compared to the national average of 9%.²³ BHAROSA centres operating across 34 locations provide single-window services to survivors of sexual abuse. Centres are positioned away from police station premises, offering victim-friendly environments with counselling rooms, medical examination spaces, video-conference rooms, and child-friendly areas. By 2025, the BHAROSA Society had facilitated compensation to 3,288 survivors.²⁴

Centre for Development and Empowerment of Women (CDEW) – Family Counselling Centres (FCCs): According to NFHS-5, 37% of married women in Telangana face domestic violence.²⁵ CDEW operates 27 facilities across Hyderabad. Each FCC has trained psychologists/counsellors,

²¹ Government of India, *The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005*, Act No. 43 of 2005 (New Delhi: Ministry of Law and Justice, 2005); Agnes and D'Mello, "Protection of Women".

²² Ministry of Women and Child Development, *One Stop Centre (OSC) Scheme: Operational Guidelines* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2022).

²³ National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2023* (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 2024).

²⁴ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives", n.d., <https://womensafetywing.telangana.gov.in>.

²⁵ IIPS and ICF, *NFHS-5*.

legal support officers, medical professionals, and police personnel. CDEW's approach emphasises supporting women to make informed decisions regarding legal options, safety, and socio-economic opportunities. The centre has registered 25,000 cases since its establishment in 2023. It employs around 252 professionals and had held 82,592 counselling sessions by 2025.²⁶

SHE Teams: Established in 2014, SHE Teams is an effort to address sexual harassment in public and online spaces. There are at present 341-plus teams across the state that work round the clock to ensure the safety of women.²⁷

Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs): Through 31 units, the AHTUs address trafficking for sexual exploitation, bonded/child labour, child marriage, illegal adoption, begging, and cyber exploitation through the identification of source–transit–destination points, hotspot mapping, database development, capacity building, and public awareness campaigns.

AHTU data reveal 415 human trafficking cases registered in 2024. Over 80% of cases are reported from the tri-Commissionerate areas (Hyderabad, Rachakonda, and Cyberabad), suggesting stronger reporting mechanisms in urban centres.²⁸ NCRB 2024 data also recorded a similar figure, reporting 423 human trafficking cases in Telangana, the highest among all states and union territories.²⁹

Non-Resident Indian (NRI) Cell: Launched in 2019, the NRI Cell addresses cases involving NRI spouses/relatives as accused in marital violence cases. Operating with legal collaboration and stakeholder coordination, the cell has achieved 209 settled cases, 20 passport impoundments, 93 Look-Out Circulars, and the return of 71 accused to India since its inception.³⁰

Women Help Desks (WHDs): Established across 751 police stations statewide, WHDs provide exclusive first-contact points for women entering police stations. The WHDs facilitate gender-sensitised case registration protocols and awareness integration.³¹

Pride Place: The Transgender (LGBTQIA+) Persons Protection Cell, Pride Place, is a dedicated support and protection cell for the LGBTQIA+ and transgender community. The unit operates to address violence, ensure physical safety, raise public awareness, and assist with legal or discrimi-

²⁶ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

²⁷ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

²⁸ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

²⁹ NCRB, *Crime in India 2023*.

³⁰ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

³¹ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

nation issues.³²

SAHAS: SAHAS is a programme to support women facing workplace sexual harassment through legal aid, trauma counselling, integration with industry, and training of Internal Committees. It represents the very first instance of a state police entity launching a statewide intervention targeted at addressing workplace sexual harassment.

Together, these modules reflect an institutional recognition that GBV takes different forms and that survivors come with different needs, identities, and histories. This modular logic is itself a governance choice, as it attempts to provide differentiated care. The model, especially the Bharosa centres and the SHE Teams, has been widely recognised and rewarded. The TGWSW has received the prestigious SKOCH Order-of-Merit for its governance and citizen-centric programmes for protecting women and children across the state.³³ Initiatives such as statewide awareness campaigns urging men to be allies against harassment and VAW have been reported and lauded by the press.³⁴ The following section details the ethical governance framework and attempts to illustrate and translate what the theoretical tenets of the approach have to offer practice.

3. The Ethical Governance Framework: Three Theoretical Pillars

The ethical governance framework, when applied to GBV interventions, can be seen as resting on three interconnected theoretical pillars, each of which contributes a distinct dimension to the analysis.

3.1 *The State as Fiduciary: Police as Moral Stewards*

Fox-Decent's fiduciary theory of the state offers a foundational reorientation for understanding the police's relationship to GBV survivors.³⁵ In the conventional administrative model, the police enforce the law and citizens are the recipients of that enforcement. The fiduciary model is deeply cognisant of the power asymmetry between the state and the citizen, in this case between the police and women/gender minorities. Given their vulnerabilities, limited information, and social capital, the latter, while agentic, are dependent on the institution to exercise its power in their interest by

³² Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

³³ Telangana Women Safety Wing, "Modules and Initiatives".

³⁴ "Telangana Women Safety Wing Intensifies 'Stand With Her' Campaign against Harassment", *The Hindu*, 12 May 2026.

³⁵ Fox-Decent, *Sovereignty's Promise*.

protecting bodily safety and facilitating legal recourse and the pathways to justice.

The fiduciary relationship generates specific obligations. These include loyalty, which implies that institutional priorities must align first with the survivor's interests, not administrative convenience; care, which implies that interactions must be conducted with competence and attentiveness to individual circumstance; non-discrimination, which implies that equal protection must be substantively equal, not merely formally equal; and transparency, which implies that survivors must be able to understand, participate in, and, where necessary, challenge institutional decisions. These obligations require more than procedural compliance; they require that the survivor's preferences are understood with sensitivity. Thus, when an overwhelming number of women who experience intimate partner violence do not seek help from institutions, this indicates that legal and institutional arrangements are not perceived or experienced as accessible, trustworthy, and usable by those they are intended to protect.³⁶

Fox-Decent further argues that vulnerability creates heightened fiduciary obligations. Where citizens cannot protect themselves, as GBV survivors often cannot, the state must exercise special conscientiousness. This has direct implications for evaluating the TGWSW, as the question is not only whether the TGWSW performs its procedural functions but whether it performs them with the quality of deliberation and moral seriousness that heightened vulnerability requires.

This is also very pertinent in the context of Fricker's work on epistemic injustice, which helps explain the ethical stakes of survivor prejudice.³⁷ Epistemic injustice is a harm done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower. This occurs when the state (the police) or the community fails to recognise a survivor as a legitimate source of knowledge about their own experience of violence. Epistemic injustice manifests at two distinct levels. Testimonial injustice occurs when a survivor's account is assigned low credibility by institutions on account of identity-based prejudice. For individuals occupying positions of intersectional marginalisation, such as Dalit women, transgender persons, or women with disabilities, this credibility deficit is compounded. Furthermore, survivors of GBV often encounter hermeneutical injustice, which can be insidious, as they lack the social and conceptual vocabularies through which their experience can be voiced or made legible to institutions. For example, where women lack the vocabulary to name intimate partner violence as a violation rather than a domestic dispute, they may be unable to articulate their experience to in-

³⁶ Kabeer, "Resources, Agency, Achievements"; Leonardsson and San Sebastian, "Prevalence and Predictors"; Ghoshal et al., "Factors Associated with Help-Seeking".

³⁷ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

stitutions and seek redress. Together, these two forms of epistemic injustice explain why certain communities perceive the state as an untrustworthy fiduciary, reinforcing underreporting. However, in a context in which violence is produced socially, better policing alone cannot deliver justice. It requires engagement with the structures that generate violence. Thus, for the TGWSW, discharging its fiduciary obligation requires not only training officials to listen without prejudice but also investing in the community-level interpretive frameworks through which violence becomes nameable, reportable, and institutionally legible.

Mashaw argues that the way the state treats a citizen during a process, regardless of the outcome, can cause ‘dignitary harm’, especially if it treats them as a mere object of administration and not as a self-respecting subject.³⁸ In a fiduciary relationship, the trustee, here represented by the TGWSW, therefore has a deliberative requirement to consider the beneficiary’s particular circumstances and treat them with respect. Thus, while fiduciary relationships are asymmetric and presume that the marginalised beneficiary cannot act for themselves, Mashaw asserts that the duty here is not to decide on their behalf but to create the enabling conditions in which citizens can decide for themselves.³⁹

3.2 Deliberative Requirements and Robust Demands

Leib and Galoob contribute two critical specifications of what fiduciary duty requires in practice.⁴⁰ The first is the deliberative requirement, which insists that an institution cannot satisfy its duty by achieving procedural compliance; it must demonstrate that it has genuinely considered what would best serve this particular survivor. This shifts attention from outputs to process, from *what was done* to *how it was decided*.

The second specification is the robust demands principle, which insists that trustees must proactively seek to understand beneficiaries’ interests, rather than waiting passively for beneficiaries to articulate them. For the TGWSW, this means that the institution cannot simply respond to complaints as they arrive. It must actively seek out those who cannot or do not report. This would include women embedded in social hierarchies that normalise violence, transgender persons who fear institutional hostility, rural women distant from district headquarters, and persons with disabilities whose access to services is structurally constrained.

³⁸ Jerry L. Mashaw, *Due Process in the Administrative State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

³⁹ Mashaw, *Due Process*.

⁴⁰ Leib and Galoob, “Fiduciary Political Theory”.

Joan Tronto's *Politics of Care* offers a powerful external theoretical supplement, providing a rigorous ethical vocabulary to deepen this. Tronto articulates four moral dimensions of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness.⁴¹ These offer the TGWSW an opportunity to move from administrative management to substantive moral stewardship. Attentiveness transforms the need to hear out survivors and proactively learn about their situation into a moral requirement. Further, Tronto's framing of responsibility anchors the state's fiduciary duty, ensuring that it accepts a moral liability for bodily integrity rather than just following legal protocols. Competence demands that the institutions – in this context, the modules of the TGWSW – perform effectively, asserting that well-intentioned but incompetent care is also an ethical failure. The distinction between Tronto's idea of competence and standard performance metrics lies in the shift from measuring bureaucratic outputs to evaluating the moral quality of the care provided. Finally, the element of responsiveness provides the ethical justification for survivor feedback.⁴²

3.3 *Horizontal Accountability and Democratic Depth*

O'Donnell's framework of democratic accountability provides the third pillar.⁴³ O'Donnell distinguishes between vertical accountability, wherein citizens hold government accountable through elections and formal complaint mechanisms, and horizontal accountability, wherein state institutions and civil society organisations exercise mutual oversight.

For GBV governance, vertical accountability drives the institutional emphasis on quantitative metrics such as case registrations, arrests, conviction rates, and case closures. These are legible to political principals and serve the logic of administrative reporting. However, they do not surface the quality of justice experienced by survivors. In some cases, as Lipsky argues in his seminal work on street-level bureaucracy, actors may actively distort institutional priorities, as institutions incentivise case closure over survivor support.⁴⁴

Horizontal accountability, by contrast, requires that survivors and communities function as active participants in assessing institutional performance, not merely as data points. It requires civil society organisations, women's collectives, and community groups to have structured, effective channels for raising concerns and demanding institutional responsiveness. O'Donnell's concept of

⁴¹ Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴² Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

⁴³ O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability".

⁴⁴ Agnes and D'Mello, "Protection of Women"; Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010).

brown areas, referring to regions or populations where the formal rule of law applies nominally but not in substance, is particularly relevant here.⁴⁵ For GBV survivors who are socially marginalised or geographically distant, the TGWSW's reach may be nominal rather than real, and horizontal accountability mechanisms are the primary means through which these gaps can be made visible and addressed.

4. Reading the TGWSW through an Ethical Governance Lens

Applying the ethical governance framework to the TGWSW reveals an institution that is, in important respects, already attempting to practise what the framework prescribes. It also reveals the gaps that remain between aspiration and practice, and between formal reach and substantive access. Furthermore, it is important to refrain from making assumptions about institutional performance in the absence of survivor experience. Evidence of implementation and distributive outcomes needs more rigorous, field-based study. The paper is more of an engagement with the mandate, the evidence for the design (organisational architecture), and institutional procedures.

4.1 *Where the TGWSW Embodies Ethical Governance*

Counselling over Coercion in Domestic Violence Cases

Perhaps the most significant alignment between TGWSW practice and ethical governance principles lies in the approach to domestic violence. The deliberate emphasis on counselling rather than coercive reconciliation is a direct institutional expression of fiduciary loyalty and deliberative care. Many GBV intervention systems, particularly those mediated by community or family structures, operate under an implicit pressure to restore the marital unit, often at the expense of the survivor's safety, dignity, and stated preferences.⁴⁶ By positioning the counsellor as an advocate for the survivor's interests rather than a mediator towards settlement, and by not treating reconciliation as a default option, the institution operationalises the fiduciary principle of loyalty in concrete institutional form.

We try not to offer solutions, but give a sense of the different options that women have and encourage them to come up with a well-considered decision that is her own and most

⁴⁵ O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability".

⁴⁶ Agnes and D'Mello, "Protection of Women".

suitable for her circumstances.

— Vandana, Senior official working with the CDEW

This orientation goes beyond procedures and reflects a deeper recognition of the survivor's agency and right to determine the course of their life, including their relationship with their abuser. However, despite these claims, the social pressure for 'family restoration' persists, with rewards and incentives to both families and the CDEW for achieving it (detailed in Section 4.2).

Avoidance of Re-traumatisation

The challenge of building genuinely usable institutional responses to GBV is compounded by a structural feature: no single institution can address GBV, as it permeates the jurisdictional boundaries of multiple agencies. When these systems operate in silos, as they routinely do, the survivor is required to navigate multiple institutional thresholds, each carrying its own risks of disclosure, stigma, and re-traumatisation. This is precisely what the Bharosa Centres attempt to address. By co-locating police, medical, legal, and counselling services under one roof, they acknowledge that the fiduciary obligation to a GBV survivor can be discharged only through coordinated, convergent action that meets the survivor at the point of her need rather than requiring her to traverse the architecture of the state.

At the Bharosa Centre, you hardly see people in uniforms. There are toys. There are rooms for women to take rest. Clean toilets. Counsellors who listen without judgement. The idea is to not further intimidate women and children who are already traumatized.

— Nancy, Bharosa Centre Administrator

Building such convergence is not an administrative convenience; within a fiduciary framework, it is a substantive obligation.

In addition, there is a deliberate emphasis on effectiveness through capacity building, which matters given the importance of competence in the ethical governance framework.

Given the sensitivity of the cases we engage with, we receive multiple training from such reputed specialized institutions such as the NIMHANS. The rigorous training and follow ups enable us to help the survivors better.

— Counsellor at Bharosa Centre

The integrated service model of the Bharosa Centres reflects a deliberate institutional response that reflects an institutional and governance decision, not merely a welfare consideration.

Life-Stage Sensitivity and Intersectional Awareness

The modular architecture of the TGWSW, with its distinct units, reflects an institutional recognition that GBV is not experienced uniformly. Its forms vary across the life course; its severity is shaped by intersecting vulnerabilities of caste, class, geography, disability, and sexual identity. By disaggregating the institutional response to match this complexity, the TGWSW demonstrates a commitment to the proactive understanding of differentiated needs rather than administrative standardisation.

TGWSW has improved survivor support by simplifying the reporting by having different modules that ensure that women and gender minorities do not have to approach police stations for everything. They demonstrate the rare sensitivity that going to the police station is in itself stigmatised. Creation of Bharosa, CDEW, SAHAS present a less of a police and more of an organization vibes, encouraging survivors reluctant to approach Police stations. The decisions enabling Police personnel to visit the survivors in plain clothes and register their complaint also shows the sensitivity to social contexts and stigma.

— NGO leader working with TGWSW

Inclusion of Gender Minorities

The establishment of Pride Place, the LGBTQIA+ Cell, represents a meaningful extension of fiduciary obligation to a population historically excluded from police protection.⁴⁷ Transgender persons in India face compounded vulnerability: they experience high rates of violence and encounter significant institutional hostility when they attempt to report it. It is noteworthy that the TGWSW reached out to members of the community and sought their engagement in drafting policies that would include non-discrimination, safety, and institutional safeguards.

I did not really imagine that one day I will be sitting in a police Department office and help the police draft policies and develop manual on how police should engage with the trans-gender community. While the relationship of the police the community has been

⁴⁷ Telangana Women Safety Wing, “Modules and Initiatives”.

rather hostile, since it was a matter concerning civil liberties, we thought that it was useful to create the content for the police that reflected the concerns of our community.

— Radha, Social Activist, Transwoman

Importantly, the activists worked on two documents, one for the police and one for the Department of Women Development and Child Welfare (DWDCW), to ensure convergent action. This reflects the robust demands principle, which requires institutions to proactively reach those least able to advocate for themselves.

However, while such efforts are heartening, for these to fructify into tangible action is another story.

It was a great opportunity as it brought together multiple departments. However, after a few meetings and consultations and after we had put in a lot of effort in putting together the components of the manual and action plans, it never saw the light of the day. Not sure what happened.

— Siddharth, Rights Activist, Transperson

Working with Civil Society

In its efforts to strengthen horizontal accountability, the TGWSW has forged relationships with civil society organisations and proactively augmented the GBV agenda through them. Most of the training modules of the TGWSW are developed by an NGO, TARUNI (meaning ‘young/youthful girl’). In addition, the TGWSW works closely with Rubaroo, a well-known organisation in the domain of gender, on training and sensitisation on safety across educational institutions, increasing conversations around such critical matters that often remain under-explored in school and family settings. Such efforts indicate a recognition of the epistemic value that such collaborations offer. However, there are concerns:

A lot depends on the leadership. Which NGOs get to work, the comfort levels with the concerned officers, alignment of vision, all of these depend on the leadership. Also, while the leadership might be aligned to gender-sensitive policing, the team might be across various levels of acceptance. So the sustenance of the programmes, once the leadership changes, can be an issue.

— NGO leader working with TGWSW

These bureaucratic idiosyncrasies also affect other convergences, as civil society partnerships become contingent on leadership styles. While some leaders work closely with NGOs, others believe in departmental institutionalisation, with NGOs playing more of an advisory role.

Synergistic Relationship with Other Departments

An important achievement of the TGWSW is its mandate and ability to forge partnerships and work in a synergistic manner with the DWDCW and the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP). Together, the agencies are able to harness each other's institutional strengths to build a continuous informational base, with women's collectives and frontline workers of the DWDCW reporting violations, both actual and anticipated, the TGWSW controlling through law enforcement, and the DWDCW providing spaces for institutional care and rehabilitative support services.

A way in which we have been able to make inroads into remote rural areas is by working with SERP that allows us to reach out to millions of rural women in the Self Help Groups (SHGs).

— NGO leader working with TGWSW

However, such convergences are neither linear nor without rough patches.

There was a time when DWDCW that has started One Stop Shelters for women saw Bharosa centres with its co-location approach as competition. There are also divergent views on the role of the academic institutions and NGOs – whether to engage them in implementation or keep them out or at best just in toothless advisory positions.

— Erstwhile academic partner to DWDCW

The discussion illustrates that collaborations and convergences are fraught with internal challenges and need constant revisiting.

4.2 Persisting Gaps

Honest engagement with the ethical governance framework also requires acknowledging where the TGWSW's practice falls short of its institutional ambitions.

Urban–Rural Disparities and Brown Areas

O'Donnell's concept of brown areas maps directly onto a persistent structural challenge for the TGWSW.⁴⁸ Cyber Labs, CDEW, and Pride Place are predominantly urban resources. Bharosa Centres, while now established across districts, need strengthening in these areas. Women in tribal areas, remote mandals, and districts underserved by civil society organisations may be formally within the TGWSW mandate, but there would be ground to cover in these areas. High aggregate reporting figures can obscure this spatial inequality, as the cases counted are those that enter the institutional record. For fiduciary duty to be equally discharged, the TGWSW must ensure that geographical and social marginality does not translate into second-class protection.

We have a strong staff strength for the initiatives in Hyderabad with very few turnovers. However, in the districts, we struggle to find the right people to manage the Bharosa Centres. The turn-over is also quite high as people are often reluctant to get in what is considered 'difficult'. There are safety concerns, especially for women.

— Ramesh, Senior official of TGWSW

The above statement illustrates the challenges that accompany the intent of the TGWSW outside the well-resourced urban areas. Without a comprehensive informational base covering the brown areas that can capture a layered understanding of the socio-cultural and political factors that pre-determine vulnerabilities, access to institutional rehabilitative and restorative support services will continue to be compromised.

Vertical Accountability Pressures

The TGWSW operates within a governance environment in which performance is measured and reported through vertical accountability channels. These metrics enable comparison, track scale, and are legible to administrative and political principals. But they can generate institutional incentives that are very different. Headlines such as the following appear attractive and could create unrealistic pressure towards reconciliation.

*6,700 Couples Reunited, 9,700 Disputes Resolved ...*⁴⁹

⁴⁸ O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability".

⁴⁹ "6,700 Couples Reunited, 9,700 Disputes Resolved in Malkajgiri", *Deccan Chronicle*, 7 June 2026, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/southern-states/telangana/6700-couples-reunited-9700-disputes-resolved-in-malkajgiri-1961864>.

The news report details the counselling process; its mention of ‘Certificates of appreciation to reunited couples, and honours for best-performing CDEW centres, for their contributions to family welfare and dispute resolution’⁵⁰ might require additional scrutiny. Is the TGWSW succumbing to social pressure to close cases with ‘reconciliation’ that overrides deliberative attentiveness to individual survivor needs? The faithful discharge of fiduciary duty requires institutional cultures and evaluation frameworks that actively resist these pressures.

Staff Burnout as a Governance Variable

Fiduciary duty cannot be discharged by exhausted, under-supported, or demoralised institutional actors. Officers and counsellors who work at the frontline of GBV response carry significant emotional and psychological burdens. If these burdens are unaddressed or treated as personal rather than institutional matters, the quality of deliberation and care that ethical governance requires will be systematically undermined. Staff well-being is not peripheral to but a precondition for empathetic governance systems. This is a challenge for the TGWSW in the brown areas, which present challenging working conditions and pose safety concerns for women, who might be vulnerable to criminal networks engaged in GBV, such as trafficking in persons.

Some parts of Telangana are sex trafficking hotbeds with strong political nexus. Some are geographically remote. It is difficult to get staff to work in these areas. Those who stay, often worry about burnouts.

— Ramesh, Senior official of TGWSW

Intersectional Gaps in Reach

Despite the modular architecture’s intersectional ambitions, the experience of Dalit women, sex workers, women with disabilities, and migrant labourers within the TGWSW’s institutional ecology remains underexplored. The robust demands principle requires not simply that services exist but that they are genuinely accessible to those most in need of protection. Caste-mediated dynamics within policing,⁵¹ stigma associated with certain survivor identities,⁵² and the geographic concentration of specialist services⁵³ constitute well-documented structural barriers that the TG-

⁵⁰ “6,700 Couples Reunited”.

⁵¹ Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch, *Barriers in Accessing Justice: The Experiences of Dalit Survivors of Sexual Violence* (New Delhi: Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2020).

⁵² Leonardsson and San Sebastian, “Prevalence and Predictors”.

⁵³ United Nations Development Programme, *Enhancing Meaningful Access to Justice in India: A People-Centred Justice Needs Assessment* (New Delhi: UNDP India, 2025).

WSW's current architecture would still need to fully overcome.

5. Lessons from Home-Grown Solutions: Social Action Committees (SAC) and the Case for Community Co-governance

The SACs that emerged from Andhra Pradesh's SERP programme offer instructive, if partial, evidence of what community-embedded GBV governance can achieve when it is grounded in genuine trust.⁵⁴ Drawn from within the communities they served, SAC members shared the social world, caste locations, and everyday vulnerabilities of the survivors who approached them. Their legitimacy was earned incrementally through visible, responsive action, such as arriving as a collective, facilitating face-to-face mediation, and holding perpetrators socially accountable through a model combining persuasion, community pressure, and the credible threat of formal recourse. This reflects what Leib and Galoob identify as the robust demands of fiduciary practice: reaching beneficiaries where they are, through relationships.⁵⁵ The transformation of institutional relationships, not merely policy commitments, is also emphasised by scholars such as Kabeer, who consider such a change critical for women's empowerment.⁵⁶

This quality of trust carries particular force in the 'brown areas', where the formal authority of the state is nominally present but substantively unreachable.⁵⁷ For Dalit women, women in remote rural habitations, and survivors embedded in tightly networked communities where disclosure carries social risk, the vertical accountability chain of state institutions offers little functional protection. As Fox-Decent argues, the fiduciary relationship intensifies where vulnerability is greatest.⁵⁸ The SAC model operationalised this principle organically, deliberating about what would genuinely serve each survivor's interests in their particular circumstances, which is precisely the deliberative quality that distinguishes faithful fiduciary practice from procedural bureaucratic processing.

The SAC model is also usefully read through Nedelsky's concept of relational autonomy, which understands the capacity for self-governance not as individual independence but as something fostered through supportive relationships.⁵⁹ For a GBV survivor, autonomy is often compromised not

⁵⁴ Vindhya and Lingam, "Social Action Committees".

⁵⁵ Leib and Galoob, "Fiduciary Political Theory".

⁵⁶ Naila Kabeer, "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal", *Gender & Development* 13, no. 1 (2005): 13–24.

⁵⁷ O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability".

⁵⁸ Fox-Decent, *Sovereignty's Promise*.

⁵⁹ Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

only by the violence itself but by the breakdown of social networks. The state's fiduciary role, on this account, is not simply to protect but to provide the relational conditions through which a survivor can regain voice and decision-making power. The SAC's peer-based model, in which women from the community served as interlocutors, embodied this principle more readily, without the paternalism that institutional authority tends to generate.

The SAC's most significant governance achievement was transforming GBV from a private domestic matter into a public social concern subject to community accountability. Mediations involved genuine collective reasoning among the survivor, their support network, and the perpetrator about what response would best serve her interests. As such, restorative justice worked through moral deliberation rather than alternative dispute resolution. The SAC also engaged men as participants in normative change rather than only as subjects of accountability, pursuing a gender-transformative rather than merely gender-responsive approach. In O'Donnell's terms, the federated structure from village to mandal to district constituted a layered system of horizontal accountability capable of bridging the distance between formal institutions and communities for whom such institutions were otherwise unreachable.⁶⁰

Unfortunately, the sustainability of the SAC depended on external funding and a dedicated institutional champion within the state apparatus. The model was discontinued following the cessation of World Bank funding. Such discontinuation can also be understood as a fiduciary failure, revealing a structural fragility. However, it demonstrates a proof of concept that community co-governance can be an effective complement to formal institutional mechanisms when it is resourced, institutionally anchored, and protected from funding discontinuities.

The evidence from national programmes to support livelihoods through the formation of women's collectives, such as the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM), illustrates the challenges in creating trust only through programme design. The *Nayi Chetna 3.0* assessment found that despite 5,000 Gender Resource Centres nationally, awareness regarding GBV remained low even among SHG members, and the proportion of women choosing silence as a response to GBV rose steeply to 51% over the years.⁶¹ This reinforces that consent is contingent, i.e., citizens trust the state only if they believe the state is acting in their interest, especially in contexts where trust has not been organically established.⁶² Singh's Jharkhand study further corroborates that formal institutional

⁶⁰ O'Donnell, "Horizontal Accountability".

⁶¹ S. Avasthi et al., *Nayi Chetna 3.0 Assessment Report* (New Delhi: IWWAGE, 2026).

⁶² Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

pathways were accessed by a mere 2.6% of respondents following GBV experiences, with women perceiving approaching institutions as socially risky.⁶³

What this evidence collectively establishes is that the gap between fiduciary obligation and institutional practice cannot be closed by architectural expansion alone. The literature on state-building through trust explores how citizens' willingness to comply with the law depends on their perception of the state as a fair dealer.⁶⁴ Trust that makes institutions genuinely usable is not conferred by formal presence but built through sustained community presence, demonstrated care, and social legitimacy. The argument, therefore, is for the recognition of community co-governance as a structurally necessary feature of ethical GBV governance, one that requires formal acknowledgement, sustained resourcing, and protection from institutional discontinuities.

6. Towards More Fully Realised Ethical Governance

At this point, it is pertinent to ask what it would mean for the TGWSW to move from partial to more fully realised ethical governance. The framework suggests several directions, which require deepening the existing institutional architecture.

6.1 Centring Survivor Experience as Governance Evidence

The most significant reorientation required is epistemological: it requires treating survivor experience as primary governance evidence rather than as a welfare supplement. In practical terms, this would translate into establishing systematic feedback mechanisms to document and evaluate institutional encounters and shape institutional practice. This implies supplementing quantitative metrics with qualitative, intersectional, and experience-based measures that capture what the numbers cannot, such as whether survivors felt heard, whether their agency was respected, whether the institution's response matched their needs, and whether the most vulnerable received attentive care. This requires survivor journey mapping, tracing the experience of navigating the institutional system from first contact through to resolution, and identifying where the system serves and where it fails. Disaggregating this evidence by caste, class, geography, sexuality, and disability will further provide the intersectional edge needed to plan interventions that best align with the fulfilment of fiduciary responsibilities. An ethical governance framework makes this supplementation obliga-

⁶³ N. Singh, "Beyond Institutional Design: A Systems Assessment of NRLM's Gender Strategy", LinkedIn, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/beyond-institutional-design-systems-assessment-nrlms-gender-singh-zeu8c/>.

⁶⁴ Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*.

tory, since it is only through these measures that fiduciary duty can be properly assessed. These can be captured through regular and ongoing in-depth qualitative studies that document the institutional experiences of women and gender minorities and feed such information back to amplify successful interventions and respond to the challenges.

6.2 Formalising Community Co-governance and Horizontal Accountability

Based on the SAC experience, the TGWSW may consider creating formal, well-resourced roles for women's collectives and civil society organisations. This would extend institutional reach into geographies and communities where state presence is thin, while generating information about service quality that administrative data alone cannot capture. This would also give survivors and communities a genuine stake in governance rather than a passive role as beneficiaries. However, as the previous section demonstrates, this cannot be a bureaucratic exercise but has to build on SAC-type community configurations that have substantive social authority and legitimacy beyond an institutional nomenclature.

6.3 Treating Staff Well-being and Recognition as Institutional Infrastructure

The TGWSW must further strengthen staff well-being through supportive training, supervision, and interventions towards social recognition. This would include meaningful engagement to balance authority with social acceptance. Striking the right balance between supporting vulnerable groups, remaining alert to deeply embedded community structures, and resisting co-option by local power groups implies tremendous work. In addition to training, staff would need psychological support and genuine recognition of the emotional weight of GBV work as a critical governance investment. The quality of deliberation that survivors deserve depends on the quality of the conditions in which counsellors and officers work and on how effectively they are able to connect with the community co-governance system for women.

7. Conclusion: From Institutional Innovation to Fiduciary Transformation

Telangana's high GBV rates can be variously interpreted as high incidence or as evidence of improved reporting. What is clear, though, is that the women who report are those for whom the threshold of access has been lowered sufficiently. Significantly, the majority who do not report are likely constrained by fear, stigma, social risk, geographic distance, or the accumulated weight of

previous institutional encounters. The task of ethical governance, as this paper has argued, is not just to count the former but to take responsibility for the latter.

The TGWSW represents an innovative police-led institutional architecture for responding to GBV in India. Its modular, life-stage-specific approach, its convergence ambitions through the Bharosa model, and its deliberate extension to transgender communities all reflect an institutional seriousness that is rare in the governance of gender justice. Yet institutional design is not the same as institutional trust, and the presence of services is not the same as their usability. As the evidence from community-level interventions across India consistently shows, women navigate formal systems not on the basis of what institutions are mandated to provide but on the basis of what they have experienced, or witnessed others experience, when seeking support. The gap between mandate and experience is where fiduciary duty is most consequentially tested.

The fiduciary framework this paper proposes asks whether survivors, across the intersectional range of their identities, experience the state's engagement as faithful care. The SAC model demonstrates that community-based structures functioning as horizontal accountability mechanisms, as co-governors of safety, are not supplementary but, in many contexts, the only form in which that responsibility can be faithfully discharged.

Furthermore, GBV permeates the jurisdictional boundaries of every institution that touches a woman's life – police, health, law, child protection, social welfare, and legal aid. No single institution can discharge the fiduciary obligation alone. What is required is a culture of sustained, structured inter-agency responsibility and mutual accountability across departments.

The evaluation framework this paper argues for has both analytical and practical implications for evaluating survivor-centred public institutions. It asks that justice be measured not by conviction statistics and caseloads but by experienced dignity and the quality of deliberation that each person received, holding the TGWSW to the standard that the fiduciary relationship demands. Similarly, it holds that the existence of institutions is not sufficient; the question is to assess the social legitimacy and trust that make those institutions genuinely accessible to the most vulnerable. It insists that survivors be co-governors and co-evaluators rather than counted beneficiaries, and that the communities within which violence is embedded be partners in governance rather than targets of awareness campaigns.

The TGWSW's architecture provides institutional conditions consistent with ethical governance, while the evidence also reveals important gaps that prevent a full assessment of stewardship. Telan-

gana has built an institution with the ambition of moral stewardship. This paper argues that a rigorous, survivor-centred, intersectionality-aware evaluation framework can help the institution be meaningful to the lives of those it exists to serve.

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