

# Invisible Gender-Based Violence: Attitudes & Awareness

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## Attitudes Towards Invisible Gender-Based Violence

The study of attitudes towards gender-based violence (GBV) traditionally focuses on overt, physical manifestations that result in visible injury or clear legal infractions. However, a significant and often more insidious category exists: **Invisible Gender-Based Violence**. This category encompasses psychological, emotional, financial, and structural forms of harm that, while lacking immediate physical markers, inflict profound and lasting damage upon victims. Public and institutional attitudes towards this invisible violence are critical, as skepticism, minimization, and outright denial serve as powerful mechanisms that sustain the violence, prevent effective intervention, and undermine justice for survivors. Understanding these attitudes requires a deep dive into societal norms, cognitive biases, and the systemic structures that implicitly sanction non-physical forms of control and abuse within gendered power imbalances. The prevailing tendency to define violence narrowly, primarily through physical assault, creates an attitudinal blind spot that renders complex forms of coercion and systemic oppression virtually undetectable within standard social and legal frameworks, thereby perpetuating the cycle of invisible harm.

The invisibility of these acts is not inherent to the violence itself but is socially constructed through collective attitudes that prioritize tangible evidence over lived experience. When emotional abuse, for instance, is dismissed as a "relationship difficulty" or economic control is framed as "poor financial management," society demonstrates a profound attitudinal failure to recognize abuse as abuse. This failure is deeply intertwined with historical and cultural gender expectations that normalize control, particularly over women and marginalized genders, within domestic, professional, and public spheres. Consequently, the attitudes held by key gatekeepers--police officers, judges, healthcare providers, and community leaders--often reflect this societal minimization, leading to institutional inaction. Effective prevention strategies must therefore move beyond simply addressing perpetrator behavior and focus intensively on transforming the deeply ingrained societal attitudes that grant these invisible forms of gender-based violence legitimacy or, perhaps worse, render them entirely unremarkable.

## The Conceptualization of Invisible Violence

Invisible GBV fundamentally challenges the traditional, visible paradigm of harm. It is characterized by sustained patterns of behavior designed to diminish autonomy, isolate the victim, and enforce compliance through non-physical means. Key examples include **coercive control**, which involves monitoring daily activities, restricting access to resources, and psychological manipulation, and emotional abuse, characterized by persistent degradation, humiliation, and invalidation. Attitudes towards these forms of violence are often ambiguous because they lack a clear, singular event that can be easily documented or reported. The psychological impact, though devastating, is often internalized, making it difficult for external observers to grasp the severity of the violation. This ambiguity allows perpetrators to mask their abuse within seemingly normal interactions, exploiting

the societal expectation that relationships involve some degree of conflict or emotional negotiation, thereby enabling minimization by bystanders and authorities alike.

A significant challenge in shifting attitudes is the psychological difficulty many individuals face in accepting that sustained, non-physical actions can constitute severe violence. Society is conditioned to equate violence with physical force, making it challenging to categorize the slow, steady erosion of a person's self-worth or financial independence as equally destructive. This conceptual barrier manifests in attitudes that demand "proof" in the form of physical injury, leading to the discounting of psychological and emotional testimony. Furthermore, the very nature of invisible violence often involves techniques like **gaslighting**, which systematically undermines the victim's perception of reality. When victims present their experiences, they are often met with skepticism--an attitudinal reflection of the perpetrator's own manipulative narrative--which further reinforces the invisibility and invalidity of their suffering in the public eye, thereby compounding the trauma through secondary victimization.

Sociological frameworks often categorize invisible violence as a form of structural or symbolic violence, where attitudes are shaped by deeply embedded power structures. For instance, structural violence relates to systemic inequalities that disadvantage specific gender groups, such as wage gaps or housing discrimination, which are forms of economic GBV. Attitudinal resistance to recognizing these systemic issues stems from an individualistic worldview that attributes failure to personal shortcomings rather than institutional bias. When attitudes refuse to acknowledge the systemic nature of harm, the violence remains invisible, perceived merely as unfortunate circumstance rather than deliberate marginalization driven by gendered expectations and power dynamics. This failure to conceptualize systemic harm as violence prevents the implementation of large-scale policy interventions necessary for true prevention.

## Psychological Mechanisms of Denial and Minimization

Societal attitudes that minimize invisible GBV are often rooted in powerful psychological defense mechanisms. One prominent mechanism is **cognitive dissonance**, where individuals find it easier to deny or minimize the reality of non-physical abuse than to confront the uncomfortable truth that violence can occur without physical evidence, particularly within seemingly normal relationships or institutions. Accepting the ubiquity of invisible violence would necessitate a radical re-evaluation of social trust and interpersonal boundaries, a burden many individuals and institutions are psychologically unwilling to bear. Therefore, minimization serves as an adaptive strategy to maintain a stable, predictable social environment, even if that environment is predicated on ignoring the suffering of others. This cognitive shortcut is highly efficient in maintaining the status quo, allowing bystanders to disengage from the moral responsibility of intervention.

The pervasive phenomenon of **victim-blaming** acts as another critical psychological barrier to

recognizing invisible GBV. Attitudes often seek to assign responsibility to the victim by questioning their judgment, emotional stability, or choices, especially when the abuse is psychological or economic. For example, a victim of financial abuse may be accused of being irresponsible or naive, rather than acknowledging the deliberate control exerted by the perpetrator. This psychological mechanism is reinforced by the just-world hypothesis--the belief that people deserve what happens to them--which provides a sense of control and security to the observer. If the victim is somehow responsible for the invisible abuse, the observer can maintain the illusion that they themselves are immune, provided they make the "correct" choices, thereby psychologically distancing themselves from the threat of similar victimization.

Furthermore, the **fundamental attribution error** often influences attitudes toward invisible violence. Observers tend to attribute the behavior of others to internal characteristics (e.g., the victim is emotionally weak) while attributing their own behavior to external, situational factors. When assessing invisible GBV, this manifests as an immediate focus on the victim's perceived flaws or emotional reactions, rather than recognizing the external, coercive power dynamics exerted by the abuser. This psychological bias makes it incredibly difficult for individuals to adopt an objective perspective, favoring instead an explanation that maintains personal comfort and avoids the difficult conclusion that invisible violence is a widespread, deliberate strategy of control rather than a mere failure of personal resilience or communication.

## Socio-Cultural Norms and Attitudinal Acceptance

Attitudes towards invisible GBV are profoundly shaped by entrenched socio-cultural norms, particularly those relating to gender roles and the sanctity of the private sphere. Traditional patriarchal norms often dictate that men hold authority over financial decisions and emotional regulation within a family unit, rendering economic control or emotional stonewalling acceptable or even expected behavior. When abuse aligns with these normative expectations, it ceases to be perceived as violence and is instead categorized as the normal exercise of marital or familial authority. This attitudinal acceptance is particularly strong in cultures where interdependence and submission are highly valued female traits, making it nearly impossible for survivors to articulate their experience as harm without challenging the entire social fabric of their community. The normalization of control within intimate relationships is perhaps the single greatest attitudinal obstacle to recognizing invisible violence.

The portrayal of relationships in media and popular culture also plays a crucial role in shaping attitudes of minimization. Narratives often romanticize intense emotional control, jealousy, and possessiveness as signs of passion rather than precursors to psychological abuse. This sustained cultural messaging blurs the lines between healthy attachment and coercive control, making it difficult for individuals to establish clear boundaries or recognize the signs of abuse in their own lives or the lives of others. When cultural attitudes celebrate dramatic, high-conflict relationships,

the quiet, persistent violence of emotional manipulation becomes socially invisible, as it fails to fit the dramatic script of recognizable violence. Challenging these pervasive cultural scripts requires a fundamental shift in media representation that accurately portrays the insidious nature of non-physical abuse.

Moreover, the prevailing attitude that what happens within the "private sphere" is immune to public scrutiny or legal intervention severely limits the recognition of invisible GBV. This attitude, often termed the public/private dichotomy, maintains that domestic issues, particularly psychological or economic conflicts, are matters for the individuals involved and not the concern of the state or the community. While physical abuse has increasingly breached this barrier, invisible forms of abuse remain firmly entrenched within the private domain, protected by attitudes that value privacy over safety. Overcoming this requires promoting a societal attitude that recognizes that all forms of violence, regardless of their location or visibility, have profound public consequences and necessitate communal responsibility and intervention.

### **Attitudes Towards Economic and Structural Violence**

Economic violence, a core component of invisible GBV, involves controlling a victim's access to financial resources, employment, education, or assets, ensuring their dependence on the perpetrator. Attitudes towards economic abuse are often characterized by a profound lack of understanding regarding its function as a tool of control. Because financial management is typically viewed as a complex, private matter, external observers tend to adopt attitudes that blame the victim for their lack of financial independence or their failure to secure employment. This minimization ignores the deliberate sabotage, coercion, and isolation tactics employed by abusers--such as destroying credit, forbidding work, or stealing wages--that actively create financial entrapment. The attitudinal failure to see economic deprivation as a form of violence is rooted in the capitalist emphasis on individual responsibility, which obscures the intentional mechanisms of financial subjugation.

Structural violence represents the most abstract and arguably the most invisible form of gender-based harm, manifesting in attitudes and policies that systematically disadvantage women and marginalized groups. Examples include systemic exclusion from high-wage sectors, inadequate protections for maternity leave, and discriminatory housing policies that disproportionately affect women. Attitudes toward structural violence often deny its existence altogether, framing systemic inequalities as natural outcomes of meritocracy or individual choice. This denial is reinforced by political narratives that resist acknowledging institutional complicity in maintaining gender hierarchies. When attitudes refuse to recognize that policy and structural failures constitute violence, they effectively shield the state and powerful institutions from accountability, allowing the invisible suffering caused by systemic disadvantage to continue unchecked.

Addressing negative attitudes toward economic and structural violence requires shifting the focus from individual pathology to systemic failure. For instance, attitudes must evolve to recognize that lack of access to affordable childcare is not merely an inconvenience but a structural barrier designed to limit women's economic participation--a form of invisible GBV that maintains gendered power imbalances in the workforce. Furthermore, legal and institutional attitudes must be reformed to integrate economic coercion and resource deprivation into the definition of domestic abuse, moving beyond the requirement of physical injury. Until attitudes recognize that control over life necessities is a potent form of violence, economic and structural abuse will remain legally and socially marginalized, continuing to trap survivors in cycles of dependence and poverty.

## The Role of Digital Spaces in Perpetuating Invisible Violence

The rise of digital technologies has introduced new, highly pervasive forms of invisible GBV, including cyber harassment, non-consensual image sharing (revenge porn), online surveillance, and digital stalking. Attitudes towards digital violence are heavily characterized by minimization, often dismissing online harm as "less serious" or "not real-world violence." This attitudinal skepticism stems from a historical bias that prioritizes physical presence and tangible impact. For example, victims reporting intense psychological distress resulting from repeated online threats or the dissemination of intimate images are frequently met with attitudes that suggest they should simply "log off" or "ignore the trolls," failing entirely to grasp the profound psychological terror, reputational damage, and real-world consequences of digital abuse.

The anonymity afforded by digital platforms further influences attitudinal responses. When perpetrators operate behind pseudonyms, the violence often feels abstract, leading observers to adopt attitudes that attribute the harm to the chaotic nature of the internet rather than to the deliberate, malicious intent of the abuser. This depersonalization makes it easier for bystanders to maintain psychological distance and for institutions to defer responsibility, claiming jurisdiction limitations or technical difficulties. However, digital violence is fundamentally a mechanism of coercive control, often used by former or current partners to maintain power through surveillance and reputational damage. Shifting attitudes must involve recognizing that the psychological impact of digital violence--including severe anxiety, depression, and social isolation--is often equivalent to or greater than that of physical assault, demanding equally serious institutional responses.

Furthermore, attitudes surrounding privacy and technology contribute to the acceptance of digital violence. There is a pervasive attitude that once data or images are shared digitally, the individual implicitly forfeits control, leading to victim-blaming when non-consensual sharing occurs. Countering this requires clear, educational messaging and legal frameworks that establish the absolute right to digital autonomy and privacy, regardless of prior sharing context. Until attitudes recognize that digital surveillance and harassment are modern extensions of traditional coercive control--designed to enforce gendered subordination--these forms of invisible violence will continue

to proliferate unchecked in the digital sphere, creating a climate of fear and vulnerability for gendered minorities online.

## Legal and Institutional Attitudes and Impediments

The legal and institutional response to invisible GBV is perhaps the clearest reflection of negative societal attitudes. Law enforcement and judicial systems are heavily reliant on tangible evidence, creating a systemic bias against cases involving psychological, emotional, or economic abuse where physical evidence is absent. Institutional attitudes often reflect skepticism toward non-physical trauma, requiring victims to provide extensive corroborating evidence that often does not exist, such as third-party witnesses to private emotional abuse. This skepticism is often compounded by a lack of specialized training, resulting in police officers adopting attitudes that minimize reports of coercive control or financial abuse, dismissing them as civil disputes or domestic arguments rather than criminal violence.

In the courts, judicial attitudes frequently impede justice for survivors of invisible GBV. Judges, relying on outdated definitions of violence, may struggle to integrate psychological evidence, such as expert testimony on trauma bonding or the effects of gaslighting, into their determinations of harm. This institutional resistance results in lower prosecution rates and lighter sentences for perpetrators of invisible violence compared to those who commit physical assault, sending a clear attitudinal message that non-physical harm is less worthy of legal protection. Furthermore, in family law contexts, attitudes often fail to recognize that ongoing psychological or economic abuse is a continuous threat, leading to unsafe custody decisions that prioritize shared parenting over the victim's and children's safety.

To overcome these institutional impediments, a fundamental shift in professional attitudes is required, moving toward trauma-informed and evidence-based approaches. This involves mandatory, specialized training for all legal and enforcement personnel on the dynamics of coercive control, financial abuse, and digital violence. Furthermore, legislative reform is necessary to codify these invisible forms of abuse as explicit criminal offenses, as seen in jurisdictions that have specifically criminalized coercive control. By formally recognizing these behaviors as serious crimes, the law can begin to reshape institutional attitudes, ensuring that the invisible nature of the violence no longer translates into invisibility within the justice system, thereby providing true legal recourse for survivors.

## Strategies for Shifting Attitudes and Promoting Recognition

Shifting deeply entrenched attitudes towards invisible GBV requires a multi-pronged approach focused on education, media reform, and communal engagement. Comprehensive educational programs, starting in early schooling, must move beyond physical safety and integrate detailed

lessons on healthy relationships, emotional literacy, and the full spectrum of coercive behaviors, including economic and digital abuse. These programs must challenge the cultural normalization of control and possessiveness, fostering critical thinking about gender roles and power dynamics. By establishing a foundational understanding of invisible violence early on, educational strategies can proactively shape attitudes that prioritize respect, consent, and autonomy over traditional hierarchies, thereby reducing the likelihood of minimization later in life.

Media and cultural representation hold immense power in shaping public attitudes. Strategies must focus on demanding more accurate and nuanced portrayals of non-physical abuse, moving away from sensationalized narratives that focus only on physical injuries. Media campaigns should highlight the devastating long-term impacts of psychological and financial abuse, using survivor testimony to validate these experiences and challenge the public's attitudinal skepticism. Furthermore, influential figures and public service announcements must adopt clear, consistent messaging that unequivocally defines coercive control and emotional manipulation as violence, thereby reinforcing the societal understanding that abuse is not defined solely by visible injury but by the intent to control and inflict harm.

Finally, effective attitude change requires fostering active community engagement and promoting bystander intervention training. These programs should equip individuals with the skills to recognize the subtle, invisible cues of coercive control--such as isolation, financial dependency, or monitoring--and provide safe, practical strategies for intervention without escalating danger. By cultivating a collective attitude of responsibility, communities can move away from passive minimization and towards proactive recognition and support for survivors. This communal vigilance, combined with institutional reforms and educational initiatives, is essential for dismantling the attitudinal barriers that currently shield invisible gender-based violence from public scrutiny and legal accountability, ultimately paving the way for a society that validates and protects all victims of violence.