



Perspective

## **Cross-cultural variations in sexual crimes: Public health perspective**

**Haniya Zehra Syed**

MSc Public Health Student, Anglia Ruskin University, Essex, UK

**Date of Submission :** 13 October 2021

**Date of Acceptance :** 25 December 2021

**Keywords:** Crimes, Sexual crimes, Asia, Africa, Cross-cultural sex crimes

Sex crimes are reported and well documented in nearly all parts of the world. Sexual violence is a significant social issue and a severe human rights violation (Ackerman & Furman, 2015). Sexual violence significantly increases the disease burden by increasing the risk of sexual and reproductive problems and affects physical and mental health (Borumandnia et al., 2020). Many variables influence the judging of sexual aggression. Amongst these factors, culture is a relevant variable as it applies to gender norms, traditional values, and beliefs. One of these beliefs is the “culture of honour”, which is likely to encourage or support a male’s aggression towards a victim, especially in cases of sexual assault within intimate relationships. This response is elicited as the victim’s pre-assault behavior is considered an insult to the perpetrator’s reputation or honor (Gul & Schuster, 2020). World Health Organization (WHO) has documented the violence against women and girls as a

consequence of gender inequality in society. Globally, these affect women (physical injury, disability, mental health issues, sexual and reproductive problems), families (loss of sense of security among children of victims and potential child abuse, loss of home, loss of income), and community as a whole with the high cost of providing services, loss of women and gender minorities participating in public life and loss of productivity (WHO, 2016). Given the complexities of human societies, knowledge of gender-based beliefs and cultural stereotypes beyond a specific country is crucial. The urban wave of migration and multicultural societies calls for the need for cross-cultural comparison of gender norms and cultural practices which influence sexual violence as well as public health worldwide (Fakunmoju & Bammeke, 2017).

What is a sex crime? Sexual violence (SV) is defined as “the sexual act or an attempt to obtain a sexual act forcibly through violence or coercion” (Krug et al., 2002). The definition of a sex crime, however, is not static. It changes over time and follows ever-changing social, moral, legal, and technological norms. They can be classified into various categories depending on multiple variables, e.g., violent crimes such as rape, sexual assault, and sexual abuse of children and adults. Other sex crimes include

**Corresponding author:** Haniya Zehra Syed

Email: [hzehra95@gmail.com](mailto:hzehra95@gmail.com)

**How to cite the article:** Syed, H.Z., (2021). Cross-cultural variations in sexual crimes: Public health perspective. *Indian Journal of Health Sexuality and Culture* 7 (2), 49–52.

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6062934>

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-Share Alike 4.0 License which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

exploiting children and adults, e.g., prostitution and sex trafficking. Some sex crimes include societal taboos such as exhibitionism (indecent public nudity), bestiality (sexual activity with animals), necrophilia (sex crimes with dead bodies), etc. (Vandiver et al., 2016). The WHO definition takes a broader approach adding sexual and physical abuse of those with disabilities, forced marriages, child marriages, intimate partner violence, denial of access and use of contraceptives for prevention against sexually transmitted diseases, and forced abortions, amongst others to the list of sexual crimes (Krug et al., 2002).

Sexual crimes are endemic and transcend national and international borders. Thus sex crime definitions are incomplete without cultural references from the native place, e.g., under the apartheid system of South Africa, only rapes involving white females were prosecuted. In contrast, the rape of a black woman was legally and socially acceptable (Armstrong, 1994). Similarly, in parts of rural India, child marriages involving girls below 18 years were legally authorized (Ouattara et al., 1998). The ethnic influence on sexual crimes and oppression is severely understated in literature. Although sometimes, race and culture are confined to a particular location, culture as an accumulation of behaviors, attitudes, and responses concerning sexual violence is hardly examined, considering its influence on gender- norms and values of virginity, shame, sexuality, power, and asking for help (Fontes, 1995).

Worldwide, women experience more sexual violence, with about 35.6% of women being victims of sexual crimes of some sort (Borumandnia et al., 2020). Intimate partner violence and sexual violence are the number one forms of violence against women and girls in every country of the world (WHO, 2016). While men are also subjected to sexual

violence, the prevalence is hard to establish. Most of the cases are under-reported, and there is a high number of non-reporting cases among men and boys (Borumandnia et al., 2020). Global data suggests a higher prevalence rate of sexual violence against women and girls due to cultural norms and values, which creates an unequal power equation between men and women. Due to gender roles, scarce services, and religious taboos in the same cultural society, men are reluctant to come forward as sexual violence survivors. Thus the prevalence of such cases is underestimated (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013; Borumandnia et al., 2020).

Moreover, research has demonstrated that sexual and gender minorities are more likely to be victims of sexual violence than the general population. This violence against gender minorities is motivated by their gender identities and orientations. This bias and resulting violence are documented in various countries of Africa and South America (Muller et al., 2021). This paper gives an insight into the cultural influence of sex crimes globally and the public health implications of the same.

A study conducted by Muller et al. reports that sexual and gender minorities in Southern and Eastern Africa are more likely to be the victims of sexual violence, and more than 50% of the sexual and gender minorities involved in the study had experienced violence. It indicates that bisexual women, transgender women, and gender non-conforming individuals were at the most risk (Muller et al., 2021). Moreover, sexual and gender minorities are not included in violence prevention policies and survivor support services. Other studies from South African countries show bias against gender minorities in criminal justice systems, healthcare access, and seeking help after experiencing violence (Muller et al., 2021).

Another research reported a strong link between politics and religion on restricting sexual and reproductive health rights. This identifies gender-related power differences within conservative Muslim socio-cultural-religious structures as restricting women from accessing sexual and reproductive prevention, care, and treatment facilities. Especially, women who engage in commercial sex work, extramarital/pre-marital sexual activities, and HIV risk-related practices, which are considered a social taboo and culturally immoral, are most at risk to experience barriers in accessing HIV and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in Muslim majority countries (Juliastuti et al., 2020).

Similarly, another study conducted by Smith et al. (2020) reported that the chances of getting sexually harassed were 2-5 times higher in sexual minorities than in straight persons. The study was conducted in a US school where cases were reported from middle to high school. Also, sexual minority women experienced a higher burden of sexual assault than their straight male counterparts (95% vs. 41%). The data also highlights an even greater risk for sexual minorities from different ethnicities or races (immigrants and non-English speaking sections). These homophobic, transphobic, and racist behaviors, both societal and internalized, affect reporting of crimes and help-seeking practices (Smith et al., 2020).

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is prevalent in low and middle-income countries ranging from 13.7% in Cambodia to 70.9% in Ethiopia. However, the attitude of IPV being acceptable is culturally normative and thus accepted by women and men in the society leading to less empathy and support towards the victim (Tran et al., 2016).

The highest increase in sexual violence against men was seen in Luxembourg and

Equatorial Guinea and for women in China, North Korea, and Taiwan. The study has also documented sexual violence among migrants and refugees. Without fundamental legal rights, they are left exposed to human trafficking, prostitution, and the sex trade (Borumandnia et al., 2020).

As globalization creates economic disproportionality among societies, various social stressors serve as a context in which sexual offenses occur. Being a culturally and economically diverse region, South-East Asia is still experiencing a socioeconomic transition. There are reports of undocumented migration, human trafficking, and sex tourism linked to the sexual aggression present in the region. Rape and sexual aggression have been documented to be used as a form of political weapon in these regions. These regions still conform to the traditional gender roles which endorse sexual aggression, particularly towards women (Winzer et al., 2019).

All these studies reinforce the idea of gender norms, patriarchy, and gender inequality as precursors for sexual crimes in society, irrespective of a country's border and the need for a global approach to tackle the concern.

**Acknowledgements :** None

**Conflict of interest :** None

## References

- Ackerman, A. R. & Furman, R., (2015). Sex Crimes: Transnational Problems and Global Perspectives. 1 ed. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Armstrong, S., (1994). Rape in South Africa: An invisible part of apartheid's legacy. *Gender and Development*, 2(2), 35-39.
- Borumandnia, N., Khadembashi, N., Tabatabaei, M. & Majd, H. A., (2020). The prevalence rate of

sexual violence worldwide: a trend analysis. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1835), 1-7.

Fakunmoju, S. B. & Bammeké, F. O., (2017). Gender-Based Violence Beliefs and Stereotypes: Cross-cultural Comparison Across Three Countries. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 7(9), 738-753.

Fontes, L. A., (1995). African Americans and Sexual Child Abuse. In: L. A. Fontes, ed. *Sexual Abuse in Nine North American Cultures; Treatment and Prevention*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE publications, 11-30.

Gul, P. & Schuster, I., (2020). Judgements of marital rape as a function of honour culture, masculine reputation threat, and observer gender: A cross-cultural comparison between Turkey, Germany, and the UK. *Aggressive Behaviour*, 46(4), 341-353.

Juliastuti, D., Dean, J. & Fitzgerald, L., (2020). Sexual and reproductive health of women living with HIV in Muslim-majority countries: a systematic mixed studies review. *BMC international health and human rights*, 20(1).

Kalra, G. & Bhugra, D., (2013). sexual violence against women: understanding cross-cultural intersections. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(3), p. 244.

Krug, E., Mercy, J., Dahlberg, L. & Zwi, A., (2002). The world report on violence and health. *Lancet*, 360(9339), 1083-8.

Muller, A. et al., (2021). Experience of and

factors associated with violence against sexual and gender minorities in nine African countries: a cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), p. 357.

Ouattara, M., Sen, P. & Thomson, M., (1998). Forced marriage, forced sex: The perils of childhood for girls. *Gender and Development*, 6(3), 27-33.

Smith, D. M., Johns, N. E. & Raj, A., (2020). Do Sexual Minorities Face Greater Risk of Sexual Harassment, Ever and at school, in Adolescence?: Findings from a 2019 Cross-Sectional Study of US Adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. DOI: 10.1177/0886260520926315

Tran, T. D., Nguyen, H. & Fisher, J., (2016). Attitudes towards intimate partner violence against women among women and men in 39 low and middle income countries. *PLoS One*, 11(11).

Vandiver, D., Braithwaite, J. & Stafford, M., (2016). *Sex crimes and sex offenders: Research and Realities*. New York: Routledge.

WHO, (2016). Global Plan of Action: Health systems address violence against women and girls. [Online] Available at: [http:// apps. who. int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/WHA69/A69\\_9-en.pdf](http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA69/A69_9-en.pdf) [Accessed 9-10-2021].

Winzer, L., Krahe, B. & Guest, P., (2019). The Scale of Sexual aggression in Southeast Asia: A review. *Trauma, Violence and Abuse*, 20(5), 595-612.