



Review Article

Sexual violence against women, culture and media: An Indian scenario

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Abstract

Violence against women is a significant global challenge, particularly acute in India. Violence against women is on the rise in India, highlighting the severity of the issue. The prevalence of violence against women impedes progress towards achieving SDG5: Gender Equality. Violence against women is deeply ingrained in Indian society, posing significant obstacles to gender equality and societal advancement. Addressing violence against women is crucial not only for India but also for achieving gender equality worldwide. In the current study, we first discussed different types of violence against women and its effects on physical and mental health. As a powerful platform, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse, raising awareness, and influencing societal attitudes towards this pressing concern. This paper aims to explore the role of national media in India in addressing violence against women, focusing on its impact on public opinion, policy formulation, and fostering societal change. Finally, some suggestions are presented to reduce violence against women in India.

Keywords: Culture, Gender equality, Media, Public opinion, Sexual violence, Women

Introduction

Where is tomorrow without water?

Where is man without woman?

Just as life is not possible without water, in the same way life of a man is not possible without a woman. A woman not only plays an important role in the

society as a mother, sister, daughter and wife, but also performs many responsibilities and tasks throughout her life. According to Manusmriti and Atharvaveda “Yatra Naryastu Pujyante Ramante Tatra Devta, Yatretastu na Pujyante Sarvastafalah Kriya”.^[1,2,3] It means, the place or family where women are worshipped, the deities reside there and the best children are born. On the contrary, in a family where women are not worshipped, all work becomes fruitless. In the Indian society, women are considered equal to Lakshmi (a Hindu Goddess). In the Vedic era, women had the status of goddess. It is said in ‘Taittiriya Braahman’ that a woman is half of the soul of a man.^[4] The origins and relationship of men and women are equal and equitable, neither one can exist or fully function without the other.^[5] The continuous increase in violence against women in modern times raises questions about our education system, culture, and value tradition. The

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male-dominated socio-economic, legal, and political order has roots in crimes against women.^[6,7]

Violence against women is a critical social issue that continues to plague societies around the world, including India. It encompasses a wide range of abuses, from physical and sexual violence to emotional and economic exploitation. Addressing this pervasive problem requires collective efforts from various stakeholders, and the media, as a powerful communication platform, plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, raising awareness, and driving social change.

In the context of India, where deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and gender inequalities persist, the role of national media becomes particularly significant. National media platforms, including television channels, newspapers, magazines, and online news portals, have the potential to reach millions of people across diverse demographics, making them influential agents in shaping public discourse and attitudes toward violence against women.

The media serves as a mirror to society, reflecting its values, biases, and concerns. By highlighting cases of violence against women and providing in-depth coverage, the media brings these issues to the forefront of public consciousness, creating awareness and empathy among the masses. Media coverage can generate public outrage, mobilize support for survivors, and create pressure for accountability and justice. Additionally, through investigative journalism and exposés, the media can uncover systemic failures, legal framework gaps, and institutional complicity instances, thus compelling policymakers to take action.

National media not only reports on incidents of violence against women but also shapes the narrative surrounding these incidents. The manner in which the media portrays such cases influences public perceptions and understanding of gender-based violence. The framing, language used, and perspectives included in media coverage can either reinforce stereotypes and victim-blaming attitudes or challenge them, thereby contributing to societal attitudes and responses. Responsible and sensitive reporting can counter myths, challenge societal norms, and foster a culture of empathy and support for survivors.

Furthermore, the media plays a crucial role in holding authorities accountable for their response to violence against women. By providing a platform for survivors' voices and experiences, the media gives them agency, validates their stories, and helps break the silence surrounding these crimes. Media coverage can bring attention to the deficiencies in the legal system, law enforcement, and support services, pressuring the government and relevant institutions to implement necessary reforms and allocate resources to combat violence against women effectively.

However, the role of national media in addressing violence against women is not without its challenges and limitations. Media organizations often face constraints such as commercial pressures, limited resources, and political influences that may impact their reporting. Sensationalism, voyeurism, and the tendency to prioritize certain types of violence over others can distort the narrative and perpetuate stereotypes. Moreover, ethical considerations, including the need to respect the privacy and dignity of survivors, require media professionals to navigate a fine line between reporting and retraumatizing individuals.

The present study has tried to explore the role played by national media in the present time to address the cases of violence against women in India and how the narratives by media shape public opinion and affect society.

Types of violence against women

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender- based violence that result in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women".^[8] Crime against women refers to such crimes punishable under the Indian Penal Code and other specific and local laws, which are specifically committed only against women.^[9] Crime against women under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) includes rape (Sec 376), kidnapping and abduction (Sec 363-373), dowry death (Sec 304-B), molestation (Sec 354), physical and mental harassment (Sec 498), importation of girls (Sec 366-B) and sexual harassment (Sec 509).

Because of the different types and forms, it is very difficult to define or set a definite boundary of violence against women. According to a report

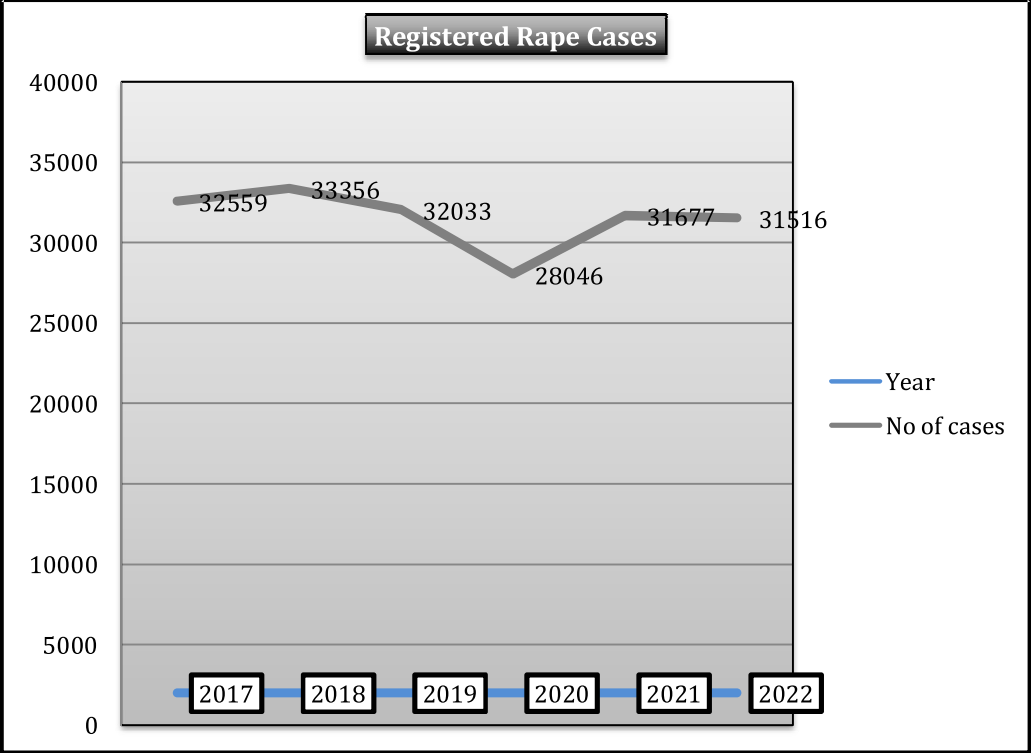
released by the World Health Organization (WHO), every day, one in three women in the world are victims of some form of physical or mental violence.^[10] Violence against women and girls includes not only physical, sexual, and psychological violence within the family or community but also includes economic violence, emotional violence, femicide, honour killing, sexual harassment, rape, human trafficking, female genital mutilation, child marriage, online or digital violence (cyberbullying, non- consensual sexting, doxing, etc.).

Sexual violence refers to any act or behaviour that involves unwanted sexual contact, coercion, or exploitation inflicted upon an individual without

their consent. It encompasses a broad range of offenses that violate a person’s bodily autonomy, dignity, and sexual integrity. In the Indian context, sexual violence against women is a pervasive issue that poses significant challenges to their safety, well-being, and rights. Various types of sexual violence exist in India, including:

Rape: Rape is a form of sexual violence that involves non-consensual sexual intercourse or penetration by force, threat, coercion, or when the victim is unable to give consent due to factors such as age, mental incapacity, or intoxication. It is a deeply traumatic experience that can cause severe physical and psychological harm to survivors.

Figure 1: Trend of rape crime in India, 2017-2022^[11-16]



Sexual assault: Sexual assault encompasses a range of non-consensual sexual acts, including groping, fondling, and other forms of unwanted physical contact that are sexual in nature. It may involve varying degrees of force or coercion.

Marital rape: Marital rape refers to non-consensual sexual acts perpetrated by a spouse or intimate partner within the context of marriage or

a marital-like relationship. Despite its prevalence, marital rape is not explicitly criminalized under Indian law, contributing to the challenges faced by survivors seeking justice. In a study, Sardinha et al. found that 16 countries including India, had the second highest prevalence ranges, with 35-39% of ever-married or ever-partnered women aged 15-49 years having been subjected to physical or sexual, or

both, violence from an intimate partner at least once in their lifetime.^[17] According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), one-third of crimes against women in the country are related to cruelty by husbands and relatives.^[18]

Sexual harassment: Sexual harassment includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours, or other verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive environment. It occurs in various settings, such as workplaces, educational institutions, and public spaces.

Table 1 : Category wise crime against women in India, 2022 ^[16]

Crimes against women under Indian Panel Code (IPC)	
Murder with rape/gang rape	248
Dowry deaths	6450
Abetment to suicide of women	4963
Acid attack	124
Miscarriage	236
Attempt to acid attack	38
Cruelty by husband or relatives	140019
Kidnapping and abduction	85310
Selling of minor girls	8
Human trafficking	781
Insults	8972
Rape	31516
Attempt to commit rape	3288
Assault	83344
Buying of minor girls	3
Crimes against women under the Special and Local Laws (SLL)	
Dowry Prohibition Act	13479
Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act	946
Cyber crime	2940
Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act	468
Protection of Child from Sexual Violence Act	62095
Indecent Representation of women (Prohibition) Act	28

National Crime Records Bureau’s (NCRB) data shows 4% rise in crimes against women during 2022 over 2021. A total of 4,45,256 cases of crime against women were registered across India in 2022, almost 51 cases every hour, up from 4,28,278 in 2021 and 3,71,503 in 2020. The rate of crime against women (number of incidents per one lakh women population) rose to 66.4 in 2022 from 64.5 in 2021.^[16]

Addressing sexual violence requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses legal reforms, accessible support services for survivors, public awareness campaigns, gender-sensitive education, and efforts to challenge societal norms and attitudes that perpetuate violence against women.

Effects of sexual violence against women

Sexual violence against women in India has severe physical consequences that can result in immediate injuries and long-term health complications. Survivors of sexual violence often experience a range of physical harms as a direct result of the assault. The physical consequences of sexual violence include:

Physical injuries: Survivors may suffer from a variety of physical injuries, including bruises, cuts, abrasions, and fractures. The use of physical force during the assault can lead to injuries in different parts of the body, such as the head, face, limbs, and genital area. In some cases, the injuries may be severe and require immediate medical attention and treatment.

Genital trauma: Sexual violence can cause significant trauma to the genital area. Survivors may experience tearing, bruising, or other injuries to the vagina, perineum, or anus. In cases of forced penetration, there is a higher risk of internal injuries, which may result in internal bleeding or damage to organs.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs): Sexual violence exposes survivors to an increased risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, and herpes. The lack of consent and the potential absence of protection during the assault heighten the risk of transmission if the perpetrator is infected.

Reproductive health complications: Survivors of sexual violence may experience reproductive health complications, including unintended pregnancies, miscarriages, and damage to the reproductive organs. Unwanted pregnancies resulting from sexual violence pose significant challenges and decisions for survivors, as they may need access to safe abortion services or support in navigating their options. According to WHO's 2013 study women who experienced intimate partner violence were 16% more likely to suffer a miscarriage and 41% more likely to have a pre-term birth.^[19]

Chronic pain and physical disabilities: Some survivors may develop chronic pain conditions as a result of the physical injuries sustained during the assault. Chronic pain can affect multiple areas of the body, including the pelvic region, back, and joints. Additionally, survivors may experience physical disabilities or impairments that require ongoing medical care and support.

Impact on overall health and well-being: The physical consequences of sexual violence can have a profound impact on a survivor's overall health and well-being. Survivors may experience sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, weight fluctuations, and a weakened immune system. The physical trauma can also exacerbate existing health conditions or contribute to the development of new health issues.

Sexual violence against women in India has profound and lasting effects on the mental well-being of survivors. The trauma inflicted by such acts can have significant psychological

consequences that impact every aspect of a survivor's life. Understanding the mental consequences is essential for providing appropriate support and interventions. Some of the common mental consequences of sexual violence against women include:

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): Many survivors of sexual violence experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. This can include intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, and intense psychological distress related to the assault. Survivors may also develop hyper vigilance, feeling constantly on guard and anxious, as well as avoidance behaviours to cope with reminders of the trauma.

Depression: Sexual violence can trigger feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities. Survivors may experience symptoms of depression, such as persistent low mood, changes in appetite or sleep patterns, difficulty concentrating, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide. The trauma and stigma associated with the assault can contribute to the development or exacerbation of depressive symptoms.

Anxiety disorders: Survivors may develop various anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and social anxiety disorder. They may experience excessive worry, fear, and nervousness, often related to their personal safety, social interactions, and future relationships. Anxiety disorders can significantly impact a survivor's daily functioning and overall quality of life.

Substance abuse and addiction: Some survivors turn to substance abuse as a way to cope with the psychological pain and trauma of sexual violence. They may use drugs or alcohol as a means of self-medication to numb their emotions or escape from distressing memories. Substance abuse can lead to addiction, further exacerbating mental health issues and impeding the survivor's recovery.

Self-esteem and body image issues: Survivors of sexual violence may experience profound disruptions in their self-esteem and body image. They may struggle with feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, internalizing societal attitudes that wrongly place responsibility on the survivor. The assault can also lead to a distorted perception of one's body, resulting in negative body image and

difficulties in developing healthy self-worth and self-acceptance.

Trust and relationship challenges: Sexual violence can severely impact a survivor's ability to trust others, including intimate partners, friends, and family members. Survivors may struggle with forming and maintaining healthy relationships due to fear of vulnerability and concerns about being betrayed or harmed again. Rebuilding trust and establishing healthy boundaries can be a long and complex process.

Emotional dysregulation: Survivors may experience difficulties in regulating their emotions, leading to emotional instability and mood swings. They may find it challenging to manage intense emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness. Emotional dysregulation can have a significant impact on the survivor's relationships, social interactions, and overall emotional well-being.

Crime and media

Media is also known as the fourth pillar of democracy. Media plays an important role in the exchange of information, education, entertainment, marketing, etc. Increasing misuse of social media platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter leads to an increase in cybercrimes, such as cyber-bullying, cyber-theft, identity-theft, email phishing, online job fraud, malware, cyber-stalking, etc. Because of privacy issues in social media, there is a high risk of a third party exploiting a person's private information.^[20] The misuse of personal information, such as a women's name, image, location and address has become all too frequent, especially for women. According to Thukral and Kainya, anonymity and fakeness of social media, have contributed to an increase in online violence.^[21] Mass media, such as news papers, social media suffer from a strong bias towards violent or sexual crimes.^[22] Nowadays, in Indian newspapers, violence against women, like rape and other sensitive issues, is displayed in an entertaining way, while the news related to the punishment given to criminals is given less space. Such practices make criminals fearless and motivate them to commit crimes. According to Sutherland's theory of differential association, a criminal behaviour is learned behaviour.^[23] The behaviour of any criminal is also influenced by the surrounding environment and the actions taken with other criminals. According to Tarde, criminal behaviour

is learned by imitation.^[24] Therefore, to limit crimes, criminals should be given immediate and severe punishment, and news related to these punishments should be given more space in newspapers and social media. This type of practice will increase the atmosphere of fear among the criminals and will help in limiting the crimes.

The Indian media is very important for shaping public opinion and making people aware of important issues like crime and violence against women. However, in recent years, the media has come under fire for its unfavourable role in making crimes seem sensational and for encouraging a culture of misogyny and violence. The tendency of Indian media to focus on sensational topics rather than providing accurate and impartial reporting is one of the main charges leveled against it. This has increased the amount of violent crimes that are covered and given crimes against women a disproportionate amount of attention. The presentation of these concerns can be hurtful and insensitive, despite the fact that it is crucial to draw attention to them. The Indian media has been charged with damaging gender stereotypes as well as sensationalizing crimes. This involves dehumanising women, treating them like objects of desire, and holding them accountable for the atrocities perpetrated against them. A culture of victim blaming may develop as a result of such reporting, which may negatively affect how women are viewed in society. The media has additionally come under fire for contributing to the culture of impunity surrounding crimes against women. The media can help normalise violence and maintain an environment where violence against women is acceptable by praising aggressive and violent behaviour and treating women as objects of desire. Concern should be expressed about the Indian media's overall negative coverage of crime and crime against women. It is essential that the media assume responsibility for the effects of its reporting and make sure that it covers these significant subjects in an accurate, balanced, and sensitive manner. By doing this, the media may support a society that values equality, respect, and justice for everyone.

Conclusion and suggestions

To prevent violence against women, several steps have been taken by the central and state governments in India, but still the desired results were not achieved.

To effectively reduce violence against women, it is essential to focus on improving the existing law and order system. Rather than introducing excessive laws and policies, the key lies in the efficient implementation of necessary amendments. Immediate and severe punishments should be given to the culprits based on the intensity and impact of the violence. Furthermore, there should be a stronger emphasis on moral and value education at both the school and higher education levels. It is crucial to ban movies, serials, and social media content that promote sexual crimes and negativity against women. In order to encourage the disclosure of the criminal's identity, rewards and protection should be provided to those who come forward. It is imperative to challenge the regressive mind set that places blame on women for their attire or activities, as this contributes to the perpetuation of crimes. Society as a whole must undergo a shift in thinking to prevent crimes such as rape. Women are an integral part of society, and it is our collective responsibility to respect and protect them. The "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" campaign initiated by the government of India can prove to be effective in addressing this issue and should be actively promoted and supported by all. By implementing these measures, we can take significant strides towards reducing violence against women and creating a safer society for all.

The media in India plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, influencing social norms, and driving conversations on critical issues. To effectively address sexual violence against women, the media can adopt several strategies and practices. Media professionals should receive comprehensive training on gender sensitivity, trauma-informed reporting, and ethical journalism practices. This training should emphasize the importance of survivor-centred reporting, consent, and avoiding victim-blaming language. Sensitized journalists can ensure that their reporting is respectful, accurate, and avoids re-traumatizing survivors. They should prioritize survivor anonymity, unless explicit consent is obtained, to protect their privacy and safety. Media should avoid sensationalism, graphic details, and excessive focus on the personal lives of survivors. Responsible reporting can contribute to a more empathetic and dignified portrayal of survivors, reducing stigma and encouraging other survivors to come forward. Media platforms have the power to raise awareness about sexual violence, its impact,

and available support services. They can run dedicated campaigns, documentaries, and interviews that provide accurate information, challenge stereotypes, and promote a culture of consent, respect, and gender equality. Such initiatives can help in educating the public and creating a supportive environment for survivors. Media outlets should actively seek to amplify the voices and experiences of survivors. By providing survivors a platform to share their stories, perspectives, and advocacy efforts, media can empower survivors and foster a sense of solidarity. This can help break the silence around sexual violence, encourage more survivors to come forward, and challenge societal attitudes that perpetuate victim-blaming and silence. Media organizations can collaborate with NGOs, experts, and activists working on gender-based violence to develop accurate and informative content. By leveraging their expertise, media outlets can provide well-researched articles, documentaries, and interviews that shed light on the causes, consequences, and potential solutions to sexual violence. This collaboration can also help in ensuring a survivor-centred approach and incorporating diverse perspectives. Media can actively promote positive role models who advocate for gender equality, consent, and ending sexual violence. By highlighting the stories of individuals and communities working towards change, media can inspire others and foster a sense of collective responsibility in addressing sexual violence. Counter narratives that challenge traditional gender norms, victim-blaming attitudes, and cultural practices that perpetuate violence should also be given prominence. Media platforms should engage in critical discussions on policy reforms and legal mechanisms to address sexual violence. By reporting on key developments, advocating for stronger legislation, and holding authorities accountable, media can influence public discourse and contribute to the implementation of effective measures to prevent and address sexual violence.

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