



Review Article

Breaking silence: Navigating sexuality-related shaming and challenges in modern Indian society

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Abstract

This study examines the prevalence of sexual stigma and shaming practices across various sectors of Indian society. The methodology involves extraction of data from various databases using keywords like sexual shaming, slut shaming, social media, gender-based shaming, sexual stigma and India. The prisma guidelines were followed for the review of studies. Findings reveal widespread instances of sexual stigma and shaming, particularly targeting public figures based on perceived sexual behaviors. The phenomenon is found to resonate with global trends observed in Western democracies. Factors contributing to sexual stigma include cultural norms, religious beliefs, and power dynamics within institutions. Psychological impacts on individuals include feelings of shame, guilt, and self-doubt, with implications for mental health and well-being. The study emphasizes the need for policy interventions, educational reforms, and cultural shifts to combat sexual stigma and shaming, promoting inclusivity and dignity.

Keywords: Sexual shaming, Slut shaming, Gender-based shaming, Media, Sexual stigma, India

Introduction

Sexual stigma and shaming practices are pervasive issues in Indian society, deeply rooted in cultural

norms, religious beliefs, and patriarchal values. These practices manifest in various forms, including slut-shaming, victim-blaming, and moral policing, which collectively contribute to the marginalization and psychological distress of individuals, particularly women.^[1,2] Gender-based shaming towards women encompasses a spectrum of behaviours and attitudes that seek to stigmatize and marginalize women based on their sexual orientation, preferences, or behaviours.^[3,4]

The intersection of media and gender-based shaming has become a focal point of discourse, reflecting and shaping societal norms, attitudes, and perceptions, particularly toward women.^[5] The pervasive influence of media, encompassing

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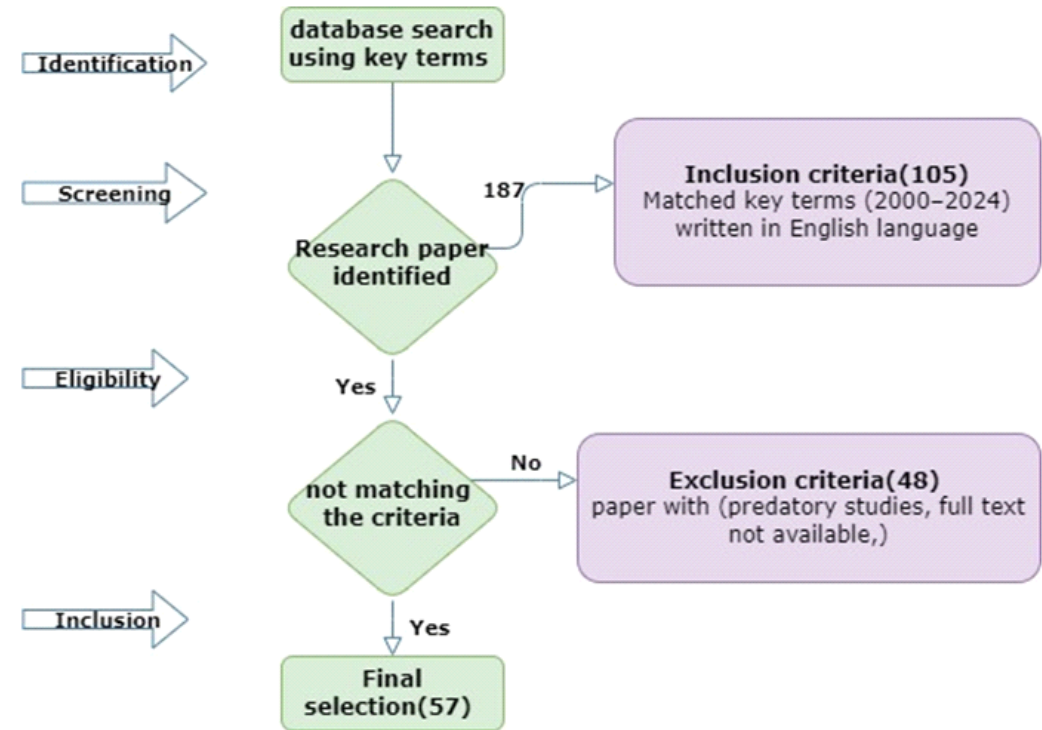
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traditional outlets such as television and film, as well as digital platforms like social media, has significantly impacted the portrayal and reception of women’s sexual identities, behaviours, and expressions.^[6-8] However, alongside the opportunities for representation and empowerment that media offers, there exists a darker undercurrent: the phenomenon of gender-based shaming or sexual shaming towards women. According to a study, slut shaming in India is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies that prescribe rigid standards of female modesty and chastity. Women who challenge these norms by expressing their sexuality or engaging in consensual sexual relationships often face severe social backlash and stigma.^[9-11] Moreover, slut shaming is intricately linked to notions of familial honour, where women’s sexual behaviour is seen as a reflection of their family’s reputation.^[12-14] The research suggested slut shaming can be directed through clothing choice, having male friends, past

life. This form of shaming manifests in various contexts, ranging from interpersonal interactions to institutional structures, but perhaps most prominently in media representations. Television shows, movies, advertisements, and social media platforms often perpetuate stereotypes, uphold double standards, and propagate moralizing narratives that reinforce societal judgments about women’s sexuality.^[6,15,16]

In this article, we aim to explore the magnitude and impact of gender-based shaming or sexual shaming towards women, focusing particularly on its manifestations in mass media (such as television film, and social media), and the dynamic interplay between these platforms. We will explore how media portrayals of women’s sexuality contribute to the normalization of shaming behaviors, perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and shape societal attitudes towards diverse sexual identities and expressions among women. Furthermore, we will

Figure 1 : Data extraction process



examine the broader implications of gender-based shaming or sexual shaming, including its effects on individual well-being, and interpersonal relationships. Understanding the complexities of slut shaming in India. By shedding light on the lived

experiences of women affected by slut shaming, this research seeks to inform advocacy efforts and empower marginalized voices within Indian society.

Research questions based on previous findings

Research Question 1: Dominant Sociocultural Norms and Ideologies

Research Question 2: Experiences and Perceptions of Slut Shaming

Research Question 3: Psychological and Social Consequences

Methodology

We planned this review article to shed light on sexual-based shaming. We conducted a literature search through various databases, including Scopus, PubMed, Psyc INFO, Web of Science, and the search engine Google Scholar. We used key terms such as sexuality, shaming, women, females, slut-shaming, media, television, and social media to identify relevant studies. The inclusion criteria encompassed studies conducted between 2000 and March 2024 published in English, and studies which matched criteria. Studies published in predatory journals, those that did not align with the key themes, and those with methodological errors were eliminated from consideration. The figure illustrating the PRISMA guidelines is presented in Figure 1.

Results

Research question 1: Dominant sociocultural norms and ideologies

The analysis of dominant sociocultural norms and ideologies revealed a significant emphasis on patriarchal values that prescribe rigid standards of female modesty and chastity. Participants highlighted the societal expectation for women to conform to traditional gender roles, which often leads to the stigmatization of those who deviate from these norms. Additionally, religious and cultural beliefs were found to play a significant role in perpetuating slut shaming attitudes, with participants citing cultural taboos surrounding female sexuality as a contributing factor.

Research question 2: Experiences and perceptions of slut shaming

Findings from interviews with women across various contexts, including family, education, and the workplace, revealed a pervasive experience of slut shaming. Participants described instances where they were subjected to derogatory remarks, gossip, and social exclusion based on perceived or actual sexual behavior. Moreover, participants

expressed a sense of internalized shame and guilt resulting from societal expectations regarding female purity and virtue.

Research question 3: Psychological and social consequences

The analysis of psychological and social consequences highlighted the detrimental impact of slut shaming on women's mental health and well-being. Participants reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem as a result of being slut shamed. Furthermore, participants described strained interpersonal relationships and difficulties in forming trusting connections due to fear of judgment and rejection.

Discussion

Prevalence of sexuality-related shaming across sectors

Sexuality-related shaming is a pervasive issue across various sectors of Indian society, reflecting global trends observed in other countries. Slut-shaming in India is deeply ingrained across multiple sectors, driven by societal norms and amplified by both offline and online environments. Public figures often face criticism based on perceived sexual behavior, a phenomenon not confined to India but also prevalent in Western societies.^[1,2] Media sensationalism exacerbates stereotypes, as evidenced by studies on media representations of sexuality in Western contexts.^[17,18] Similarly, Bollywood and regional cinema perpetuate narrow depictions of sexuality, echoing critiques of Hollywood's portrayal of gender and sexuality.^[19-22] Furthermore, educational taboos on sex hinder comprehensive education efforts, echoing global challenges faced by educators in addressing sexuality in school curriculum.^[23-26] Workplaces in India, akin to those in Western societies, often avoid discussions on sexuality and gender diversity, contributing to discrimination and marginalization.^[27-29]

Factors contributing to shaming

The multifaceted factors contributing to sexuality-related shaming in India align with broader global trends. Cultural norms, religious beliefs, and patriarchy reinforce traditional gender roles, mirroring findings from studies on gender norms and sexual stigma in diverse cultural contexts.^[19,30]

Emerging digital spaces exacerbate shaming, as seen in international studies on online harassment and cyberbullying.^[31,32] The study critiques how media coverage often sensationalizes sexual violence, contributing to a culture of shame rather than promoting justice and empathy for survivors.^[33] Additionally, the prevalence of conservative values and power dynamics within institutions mirrors global patterns of discrimination based on gender and sexuality.^[34,35] Some of the Indian data suggests that shaming women can be based on clothing, having male friends, past life, and heavy makeup. On the other hand slut shaming is seen less during school years, and higher slut shaming is from fiancé and spouse, neighbors, peers, and alienation from family and relatives.^[36]

Impact on individuals and society

The profound psychological impacts of sexuality-related shaming resonate with findings from international literature. Shame, guilt, and self-doubt experienced by individuals subjected to shaming align with studies on the psychological consequences of stigma and discrimination. Victims of shaming often exhibit increased rates of anxiety, depression, and other psychosocial challenges, reflecting global patterns of mental health disparities faced by marginalized populations. Moreover, the normalization of shaming behaviors perpetuates harmful power dynamics, reinforcing existing inequalities and marginalizing individuals worldwide.^[37-39] The societal acceptance of slut-shaming behaviors perpetuates a cycle of discrimination and marginalization, where individuals who deviate from prescribed norms are continually penalized.^[35,37]

Media representation and counter narratives

Despite challenges, counter narratives in media representation offer hope for challenging traditional norms. Groundbreaking works like Lena Dunham's 'Girls' provide examples of nuanced story telling that challenge stereotypes and spark discussions about gender dynamics and authenticity.^[40,41] Diverse portrayals in popular culture underscore the importance of representation in fostering empathy and understanding across diverse audiences, a theme echoed in international studies on media representation and social change.^[42,43] These counter narratives play a crucial

role in challenging dominant discourses and providing alternative perspectives on women's sexuality and agency.

Role of social media platforms in perpetuating slut shaming

Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, play a significant role in perpetuating sexual shaming or slut shaming towards women, as revealed in recent studies.^[6,44,45] The anonymity and reach of these platforms amplify the impact of derogatory comments and cyber bullying targeting women based on their perceived sexual behavior or appearance. Moreover, social media influencers and celebrities often become targets of slut shaming, particularly when their behavior deviates from societal expectations of female modesty and chastity. Posts and comments that shame women for their sexuality can quickly spread across platforms, reaching a vast audience and perpetuating harmful stereotypes on a large scale. The use of hash tags and trends can also contribute to the spread of slut-shaming content. For example, the hashtag #SlutWalk, originally intended to challenge slut-shaming and sexual violence, has been hijacked in some instances to perpetuate derogatory comments and reinforce negative stereotypes about women's sexuality.^[46] Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook significantly contribute to perpetuating slut-shaming towards women. The anonymity and broad reach of these platforms amplify derogatory comments and cyberbullying, targeting women based on their perceived sexual behavior or appearance. Research indicates that teenage girls are particularly vulnerable to harassment and slut-shaming on social media, impacting their self-esteem and mental health. Celebrities and influencers are also frequent targets, reinforcing societal norms about female modesty. The viral spread of shaming content and algorithmic bias further exacerbate the issue, creating echo chambers that normalize slut-shaming attitudes within online communities.^[37]

Psychological impact on victims

The psychological impact of slut-shaming on social media can be profound. Victims often experience anxiety, depression, and a significant decrease in self-esteem due to the public and permanent nature of social media posts, leading to

repeated retraumatization. Studies have shown that the stress and trauma associated with cyberbullying and slut-shaming can result in long-term mental health issues, including chronic anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The intense feelings of shame, guilt, and self-doubt experienced by individuals subjected to shaming align with international studies on the psychological consequences of stigma and discrimination.^[12,47,48]

Victims of shaming often exhibit increased rates of anxiety and depression, reflecting global patterns of mental health disparities faced by marginalized populations. According to research by Ringrose et al. (2013), teenage girls subjected to slut-shaming reported significant emotional distress, including feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt, which can have long-term effects on their mental health and well-being.^[37] Studies suggested that individuals who experienced sexuality-related shaming exhibited higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to those who had not been shamed, consistent with Hatzenbuehler's (2009) findings on the mental health impacts of stigma and discrimination.^[12,48,49]

Additionally, victims of slut-shaming often face various psychosocial challenges, such as struggling with interpersonal relationships and experiencing social isolation due to the stigma associated with their perceived sexual behavior.^[50,51] This can lead to a vicious cycle of marginalization and discrimination, as Major and O'Brien (2005) found that stigma and discrimination contribute to negative outcomes, including decreased social support and increased stress.^[52]

Addressing shaming and promoting inclusivity

Multifaceted approaches to addressing shaming align with global efforts to promote inclusivity and social justice. Policy interventions, educational reforms, and cultural shifts towards greater acceptance and inclusivity are essential components of a comprehensive strategy to combat stigma and discrimination. By challenging stereotypes, promoting empathy, and fostering environments that affirm the dignity and rights of all individuals, societies can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

Movements like Slut Walk and the Pink Chaddi Campaign have emerged to counteract slut-

shaming and reclaim women's agency. These movements challenge the societal norms that perpetuate slut-shaming and advocate for a reevaluation of women's rights and autonomy.^[53] In addition to these movements, other Indian strategies have also been influential. For example, the "List of Sexual Harassers in Academia" [LoSHA] is a prominent tool used by feminists to expose and hold accountable perpetrators of sexual harassment within academic institutions. This initiative, despite facing significant backlash, has been pivotal in raising awareness about the prevalence of sexual harassment in academia and challenging the culture of silence and complicity.^[54,55]

Another significant initiative is the "#MeToo" movement in India, which has seen women from various sectors coming forward to share their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. This movement has provided a platform for survivors to voice their experiences and pressured institutions and individuals to take accountability for their actions.^[56] Moreover, the digital campaign "Happy to Bleed," launched in response to menstrual taboos and the discrimination women face due to menstruation, has been crucial in challenging regressive attitudes and promoting gender equality. This campaign advocates for the normalization of menstruation and fights against menstrual shaming, furthering the discourse on women's bodily autonomy.^[57]

Despite these efforts, the prevalence of slut-shaming on social media remains a significant issue, highlighting the need for more substantial and sustained action. One might say, "These campaigns often feel like painting over cracks; the underlying issues of slut-shaming and misogyny remain deeply entrenched and unresolved."

Conclusion

The pervasive issue of gender-based shaming or sexual shaming towards Indian women seems to be emerging as a huge issue, focusing on its prevalence across various platforms and its profound impact on individuals and society. It highlights the dual role of social media as a site where slut-shaming occurs but also as a platform where women can assert their agency and challenge gendered norms through activism and solidarity networks. Media representations can contribute to the normalization

of shaming behaviors and perpetuate harmful stereotypes about women's sexuality. It is of paramount importance to address slut shaming in India to promote gender equality and combat gender-based violence (physical, emotional, sexual).

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