



Review Article

Traditional gender role: A predictor of sexual violence against women

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Abstract

India is a country with a dynamic past and a rapidly changing present, wherein its culture remains a charming fusion that reflects its depth, complexity, and resilience. Gender equality and women's empowerment are among the fastest refining domains in the country as well. Despite significant strides in gender equality in many of the sectors, there is an increase in the number of sexual violence against women across the country. As per statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau, an average of 86 cases are reported every single day in the country, which is quite an alarming number. Also, World Health Organization reports reveal that 30% of women have been subjected to either intimate-partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. This depicts the hard reality of inequality women still face across the world. Studies reveal the fact that women still outnumber males in being the victims of sexual violence. In this review article, the focus is on analyzing how traditional gender-role attitudes act as a predictor in the augmentation of sexual violence towards women. The researcher also attempts to put forward a few ways to reduce gender-based violence that is attributed to traditional gender roles.

Keywords: Attitude, Traditional gender roles, Sexual violence

Introduction

India has recently witnessed a high incidence of sexual violence in various states. Sexual violence here implies any sexual act or an attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or

advances, acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person's sexuality using coercion by any person, regardless of their relationship with the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work as defined by World Health Organisation (WHO). The country lodged an average of 86 rapes per day, and 49 offenses against women per hour in 2021, as per NCRB data. According to the 2021 annual report of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 31,677 rape cases were registered across the country, on an average of 86 cases daily.^[1] India, a developing country in every aspect, is often seen deteriorating in areas like sexual violence, domestic violence, and other violence towards women and children. According to WHO, about 1 in 3 (30 %) of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and /or sexual intimate partner violence or

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non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime.^[2] The statistics show that it's not only a national issue, but a universal matter that should be addressed at its earliest.

According to the statistics of the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, about sexual violence, 91 % of the perpetrators of sexual violence are male and 9% of perpetrators are female.^[3] There seem to be multiple factors leading to sexual violence, ranging from the perpetrator's characteristics to situational factors. Researchers believe it is high time to implement sustainable development goals through remarkable transformations through awareness and/or intervention strategies. Links between attitudes toward women and beliefs about sexual assault are explored, and are found to have a positive correlation. It is found that traditional masculine ideologies are related to acceptance of the rape myth.^[4] In this review article, the chief focus is on how the traditional gender role attitude acts as a foundation for normalizing sexual violence against women. The method includes collecting and examining research articles from Google scholar, PubMed, NCBI, Springer, SAGE Journals, Research-gate, etc., to explore the ways in which a traditional gender role acts as a predictor of sexual violence in women. We also explore ways to reduce sexual violence through the modification of traditional gender roles.

Gender role in the Indian context

India is globally known for its collectivistic nature, where societal norms are usually prioritized over individual needs. Relationship orientation, familism, and belief in hierarchy are believed to be the dominant themes of Indian collectivism.^[5] With its multitude of cultures and belief systems, India is a diverse country where gender roles vary widely from region to region and community. As we sail through the history of the nation, we can see that a wide range of gender norms are strongly bonded within society. Gender norms expect women and men to think and act in a way that conforms to the group norms. India is a highly patriarchal society, where male members are expected to take care of financial responsibilities and women to manage domestic chores. When the male members make decisions regarding the family, females obey. Within the institution of marriage, too, decisions are taken solely by males in many families. All these

fuels widen the gender gap in multiple ways.

When seen through the chamber of sexual violence, we can see that, in certain segments of society, conservative values still influence expectations in a sexual relationship. Traditional gender roles propound specific behavioral expectations and outcomes that are mostly unacceptable, mainly for women. Compared to rural areas, urban areas show a rapid shift in gender role attitudes, where aspects of sexuality that were sensitive earlier are now discussed openly. However, sexual matters still have communication restrictions caused by social taboos and conservative norms.

Arranged marriage is another facet that continues to persist in the traditional way. Marriage, where all matters, including marital duties and roles except sexual compatibility, are openly discussed, may later pop up as a causal frame for sexual violence. India witnessed the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2009.^[6] But due to traditional norms, expectations, and other reasons, social acceptance is still miles away. The advancement of the internet and social media is paving the way for normalizing sexual deviance, which is not acceptable for the majority of the population. Sinko et al., in their study, identified similar findings with the student population, who tend to normalize sexual violence after repeated exposure to the same.^[7] Legal frameworks are improving, aiming to protect individuals from sexual violence and harassment. However, the implementation of the laws still varies. Even though there have been many legal reforms in India to address gender inequality and violence against women, the country has a long way to go.

In the current scenario, positive changes in the area of gender equality have been seen all over the nation. Therefore, the rigid gender norms leading to greater gender equality have declined in many areas, such as the educational sector.^[8] The changing gender norms not only give way to education and economic opportunities but also challenge traditional expectations regarding marriage and family roles. The greater awareness and insight on the importance of gender-based equality, value in relationships and sharing responsibilities inside and outside the home gained trend.

Besides all these changes that occur within the broader context of India, several alarming news

that arises on gender-based violence is shocking. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the number goes even higher with lock-down and stay-at-home, with an increase in gender-based violence.^[9] One among them is the number of cases that arose from the statistics of sexual violence against women. When on one hand, women's participation in areas exceeds the traditional gender role expectations; on the other pole, women have to suffer from many sensitive issues like sexual violence and also other gender-based violence. Every hour, approximately 4 women are raped in India.^[10]

The cases reported in India are still found to be less compared to the actual number. The traditional gender role stigma discourages women counterparts from reporting the violence faced by them to avoid consequences proceeding in the future.^[11] Traditional ways of viewing the situation, such as blaming the victim as well as pointing out victim characters for sexual violence, are key factors for not reporting.

Risk factors for sexual violence

The factors leading to sexual violence against women are many which involve complex social, cultural, and psychological factors. In the context of gender roles, limited knowledge about the importance of healthy relationships is said to lead to sexual violence. A person who lacks awareness of the consequences of sexual violence has a higher chance of engaging in the same. Media influence is one of the major causes that lead to coercive sexual fantasies that may end up in sexual violence.^[12] Some perpetrators have a history of childhood traumas or sexual abuse itself, that, in turn, leads them to act the same. A few among the perpetrators are individuals who have underlying psychological disorders that are untreated.^[13] There is a high risk of a delinquent personality taking part in such acts without second thoughts. Another factor leading to sexual violence is due to social and economic disparity. Individuals with less economic privileges are exploited sexually by the privileged. The lack of legal consequences drives the perpetrators to commit violence more and more as they are fearless about any retribution.^[14] Alcohol or drugs play a key role in leading to sexual violence. Disrespecting the opposite partner, the feeling of less need/ no need of consent, etc., are promptly seen in the drug-induced/alcohol-induced person

being a perpetrator.^[15] Studies show that a person who is exposed to childhood abuse, either physical emotional, or sexual, has a higher chance of engaging in sexual violence in the future. Children with parents from broken families also have a higher chance of engaging in sexual violence.^[16]

Individual personality traits such as risk-taking behavior pave the way to sexual abuse in both intimate partners and strangers. Though the factors leading to sexual violence are many, in the current study, we focus on how gender roles and sexual violence intersect.

How traditional gender roles act as a predictor of sexual violence in India

In a widely recognized collectivistic country like India, which holds its traditional values and beliefs in its classic form, gender roles are also very deeply rooted with particular expectations from both men and women. Traditional values and beliefs are always welcomed as long as they do not cause maltreatment to the society or individuals who bear upon them. Das et al., have found that those who prefer traditional gender roles are more likely to accept sexual violence.^[17] Looking towards such grounds that arise from the deeply rooted traditional gender role expectations and beliefs, there are a few important factors to enumerate the grounds for the escalation of sexual and gender-based violence.

Power imbalances

As a country that gives wide acceptance of patriarchy, there is a very rigid, visible power imbalance among male and female members both within and outside the family.^[18] In India, the dominance of male members is instilled even from childhood itself. The male members, who believe themselves to be the most powerful, possess every right to take action against the less-powerful women, leading to domestic as well as sexual violence that is unquestioned. A situation where woman denies a request from a male partner or a non-partner leads to an inferiority feeling or makes them feel "small," which in turn provokes them to compulsive acts of violence against the woman.

Objectification of female gender

Higher rates of sexual violence are expected to be more prevalent in cultures that encourage the objectification of women, thus making them

appear inferior to men.^[19] A study by Boeringer says that there is a strain in the male culture that views women as sex objects and commodifies women.^[20] These types of stereotypes tend to aggravate the acceptance of the rape myth, which in turn results in greater amplification of sexual violence against women.

Hyper-masculinity

Hyper masculinity is one of the key characteristics of traditional gender roles. When masculinity features are exaggerated, giving more emphasis on physical strength and aggression, violence takes place in order to conform to the group. Perpetrators are usually reinforced to act out their masculine features, leading to acts that go violent in nature. When hyper-masculinity acts, features like caring and politeness move apart, expanding the depth of sexual violence. In a study by Great house et al., it was found that hyper-masculinity is a key characteristic that is commonly found in perpetrators.^[21]

The influence of gender roles portrayed in the media

Media influences evoke both positive as well as negative attitudes towards any aspect of life. Vinnakotta et al. say that men are usually portrayed as in charge, while women are obedient and submissive in the media.^[22] Even though the portrayals in the media have changed a lot, there still exists an absurd way of chauvinism in many of the media. This is primarily seen in films and porn videos, as per studies. India stands in third position among most porn-watching countries and fourth in the highest rape crime countries.^[23] These kinds of media portrayals cause unrealistic expectations regarding sexuality and therefore, lead to forceful sexual acts and violence against women.

Victims are blamed rather than the accused

Beholding traditional gender roles often leads to victim blaming in sexual offences. Post sexual assaults, many times; the victims are blamed for the clothing they wear or traveling at night, or staying alone rather than blaming the perpetrator. They are solely blamed for the cause of harm or the reason for the assault to be triggered. In a study by Albin R.S. in psychological studies of rape, it was argued that, following the rape assault, there was a matter of question whether the woman was provocative to the perpetrator in committing the crime.^[24]

Traditional gender roles tend to normalize a sexual assault by a man and respond to females as responsible for the violence even when the victims are females. The acts are ascribed to the female victims' attributes.

Silencing and stigmatization

Traditional gender roles encourage women to be passive rather than assertive and be submissive to obey what is told them to do. Because of this expected attribute, the women/ girl survivors are often discouraged from reporting incidents of sexual violence due to fear of judgment or not conforming to social norms.^[25] People who hold traditional gender roles attitude expect women to tolerate sexual violence and not disclose it to the public. This actually reinforces male counterparts in exhibiting more and more violence without feeling of shame or guilt.

Traditional gender norm

Traditional masculine norms revolve around being the breadwinners of the family and being assertive, powerful, and the ultimate decision-maker. The decision for family situations to the most basic right of women is decided by a male member according to traditional gender roles. Acceptance of decisions made by males and obeying them is viewed as a societal norm that has to be adhered to. When such predicted outcomes are not encouraged by women, domestic violence, sexual violence, and other assaults take place. In a study by Abbey et al. they found that perpetrators/men feel like "real men" when they endorse dominance or aggressive acts during sexual activities as reported.^[26]

Inadequate financial stability

Families who hold rigid traditional gender roles still refuse women to go out for paid labour. Many women are threatened by their male counterparts that they will be divorced or left alone with their children. Due to inadequate financial stability, women tolerate the violence, fearing their inability to take up the responsibility of meeting their children's needs.

Preventing sexual violence through the trail of changing gender role attitudes

Social attitudes and norms regarding gender roles play a crucial role in shaping the context in which sexual violence occurs. Gender roles are becoming

very flexible these days, but very little advancement or betterment in the field of sexual or domestic violence is observed. In a study on 'Preventing sexual violence, promotion of sexual ethics', restructuring of norms on romance, shaping of cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity, and seeking of consent were suggested.^[27] Prevention efforts should focus on changing societal attitudes and promoting consent education starting from the early years of age. Cultural change, legal reforms, support for survivors, and efforts to challenge ingrained power dynamics and create environments that prioritize the safety and well-being of all individuals.

Efforts to address sexual violence often include dismantling harmful gender roles and stereotypes in the first hand.^[28] For effective social change and its perseverance, moulding from early age is the most important. Healthy, respectful, and equitable relationships based on consent and mutual understanding can contribute to reducing the incidence of sexual violence and lead to a safer and sustainable development of society.^[29] Thus, in the current study, a few ways to expand awareness to reduce sexual and gender-based violence in the context of gender roles are portrayed in the following figure:

Ways to aid gender roles in a healthier mode

Traditional values and beliefs are always encouraged and promoted as long as they do not cause damage to an individual or a society. Here are a few ways, in which gender roles can be upgraded in a healthier manner in preventing violence.

Educating and giving awareness

Right education is the golden capsule for developing healthier and more stable individuals. Studies show a high impact of education intervention in reducing violence in India.^[30] Proper education from childhood itself, both from home and school, should be promoted regarding how to respect and value other genders in the first hand. A comprehensive sex education and intervention program enhances gender equality and, thus respect each other regardless of gender.^[31]

To promote equity and welfare, along with guiding teachers, awareness programs for parents as well as the general public are most important to enhance

overall growth. Raising awareness regarding the prevalence and impact of sexual violence on both the victims and perpetrators needs to be focused. Awareness in the form of public campaigns, workshops, and community events can be employed.

Dodge the commodification of women

Both men and women and all genders have rights to equality, privacy, and bodily integrity. Objectification can strongly influence power dynamics in a relationship, where one person will be valued more primarily for appearance or purpose rather than their thoughts, feelings, or characters. Objectification of any gender can contribute to relationship expectations and communication patterns, which will lead to unhealthy relationships. With traditional gender roles, objectification of females and silence play a crucial role in perpetuating systems of dominance.^[32] This includes normalization of unwanted advances, catcalling, and other forms of sexual harassment which perpetuates a culture where boundaries are not respected. Objectification of women in the academic and professional sector is also not uncommon, where women are discriminated against for physical appearance rather than identifying their merits and abilities. Expelling the objectification of women from family, workspace, public spaces, and transport, media etc is most important in order to reduce violence.

Importance of the media

The media plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's attitude, perceptions, and decision-making. The media can act as a catalyst to enhance positive as well as negative stereotypes of gender roles. The gender roles portrayed in the media directly influence the public in forming attitudes that are congruent with them. So, providing realistic representation of men and women in media can reduce harmful expectations contributing to sexual violence. Advertising sexualized images of women perpetuates the concept that women's value is correlated to physical appearance.^[33]

Open communication and acceptance

Traditional gender roles, which always promote men to be expressive and women to be passive have changed to a great extent. The issues raised by the

fact that, communication, mainly rejection from the part of a female counterpart, is still unaccepted by males. An act of negation from females is mostly followed by negative consequences in the long term, either from the male counterpart or the spheres around her.

Open and healthier communication acquaints partners with each other's roles, likes, and dislikes and can lower intimate partner violence.^[34] This should take place starting from the childhood itself. Giving an equal chance to speak out opinions from both girls and boys to be encouraged and valued both at home, educational spaces, etc.

Social learning from ideal models

As gender norms change faster, so are accepted by children and youngsters. Elders are more reluctant to change as the institution has been carried out by them for years. In the current scenario, education and gender equality is more focused, and reforms take place in the best way. Children are often educated to a great extent by educational institutions regarding gender equality and respect. According to social learning, children model their parents, teachers, public figures and people whom they are interested in. Where usually, the models of young children would be their parents, in order to instill gender equality in children, the models should not merely teach the children about gender equality, but rather models at home and in public. Most perpetrators of sexual violence have witnessed or were the victims of sexual violence or domestic violence at home or in the immediate spheres of their society, which leads them to carry out the same in the future.^[35] So, it is highly important to act in front of children with caution and express respect for each other in a marriage as well as in society.

Egalitarian gender roles

Egalitarian attitudes toward gender roles are always fruitful in nature. People often encourage traditional ways of gender roles, even from childhood itself. Individuals that are reinforced with traditional gender roles, tend to behave/ express gestures that go hand in hand with it.^[36] A boy/ man, from the childhood itself, is asked to take up leading roles in both family, schools, etc, where the power imbalances start taking place. In every context, all genders should be given equal chance of power and responsibilities so that

acceptance of each as a leader and responsible individual happens in long term.

The rigidity of norms opens the way to act/ behave like the exact stereotype, leading to unhealthy expectations and conduct. Boys / males should be asked to discuss gender equality and promote positive masculinity. Within themselves, rather than unrealistic expectations from the opposite genders. Weakening of traditional gender roles directs towards healthier relationships and reduces gender based violence in the first hand.^[37]

Discourage victim blame and stigmatization

Traditional gender roles always perceive females as wrong doers, especially when related to sexuality. Women/ girls who are victims of sexual violence are always encouraged to keep silent on such incidents, projecting that it will cause a negative image of themselves than the perpetrator. They are either blamed for their dress, behaviors, or expressions as the reasons for the sexual violence.^[38] The victims usually withdraw from social settings due to fear of accusation where the girl/ woman would again remain the victim in the long run. Stigmatization of victims and blaming results in reinforcing sexual violence to multiply.

Reinforce revealing the assaults

This is commonly seen when the perpetrator is a socially relevant person or celebrities as a man. This in-turn promotes perpetrators who take such silences for granted and reignite to repeat the assaults. Family and the entire social system should be shored up to bring the assaults to light to reduce such non-partner violence. It is advantageous for the sexual perpetrators not to reveal their names or identity even if they commit a violent act.^[39] In order to avoid perpetuating harmful narratives, media reporting should show justice to the victims rather than the culprits. A study by Pillai et al. says that lack of awareness, holding negative attitudes about intimate relationships, and misconceptions about women's needs often result in sexual and gender-based violence.^[40]

Conclusion

Gender role attitudes and social norms play a vital role in situations where sexual or gender-based violence takes place. Studies reveal there is a recognized relationship between gender roles and sexual violence that intersects consistently.

Traditional gender roles strengthen masculine and feminine stereotypes, which can contribute to power imbalances and attitudes that perpetuate sexual violence. Unrealistic expectations of relationships and sexuality lead the way to gender based violence as well. Proper modification and dismantling of the stereotypes make advancement to more functional roles that disfigure sexual and gender-based violence in the long run.

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