

Women's Safety: Domestic Violence, Rape, and Media Portrayal of Women

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Abstract - This paper examines the critical issues of women's safety, focusing on domestic violence, rape, and the media portrayal of women. Domestic violence remains a pervasive problem globally, with women experiencing physical, emotional, and psychological abuse, often at the hands of intimate partners. Rape and sexual assault are severe violations of women's rights and bodily autonomy, frequently resulting in long-lasting trauma. The media's portrayal of women significantly influences societal attitudes and behaviors, often perpetuating harmful stereotypes and contributing to a culture that trivializes violence against women. This paper explores the intersectionality of these issues, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies that include legal reforms, education, and media accountability to enhance women's safety and promote gender equality. By addressing these interconnected aspects, society can work towards creating a safer and more respectful environment for women.

Keywords: women's safety, domestic violence, rape, media portrayal, gender stereotypes, societal attitudes, legal reforms, trauma, gender equality, media accountability.

1.INTRODUCTION

Women's safety is a fundamental human right and a crucial aspect of achieving gender equality. However, the prevalence of domestic violence, rape, and the problematic portrayal of women in the media highlights significant challenges that undermine this right. Domestic violence, encompassing physical, emotional, and psychological abuse, remains a widespread issue affecting millions of women globally. Despite efforts to combat it, many women continue to suffer in silence due to societal stigma, fear of retaliation, and inadequate legal protection.

Rape and sexual assault represent some of the most severe violations of a woman's bodily autonomy and dignity. These crimes not only cause immediate physical harm but also lead to long-term psychological trauma, affecting survivors' mental health and overall well-being. The pervasive nature of sexual violence, coupled with low reporting rates and often inadequate

judicial responses, underscores the need for robust support systems and legal reforms.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes towards women and gender-based violence. Unfortunately, the portrayal of women in the media often reinforces harmful stereotypes and normalizes violence against them. From victim-blaming narratives to the objectification of women, media representations can perpetuate a culture of misogyny and discrimination.

This research paper aims to explore the interrelated issues of domestic violence, rape, and media portrayal of women. By examining these topics in depth, the paper seeks to highlight the systemic nature of violence against women and the critical need for comprehensive approaches to address these issues. Through legal reforms, educational initiatives, and media accountability, society can move towards a future where women's safety is prioritized, and gender equality is realized.

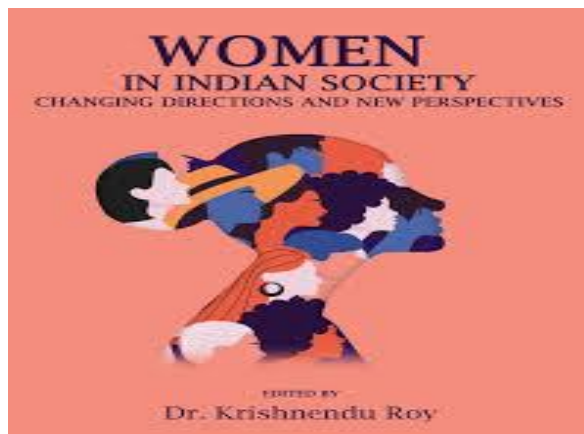


2. Body of Paper

WOMAN'S PLACE IN SOCIETY

Indian Society has always revered women. In Hinduism, man and woman represent the two halves of the divine body. There is no question of superiority or inferiority between them. Hindu history is witness to the super-women, such as Gargi, Maitreyi and Sulabha, whose faculty of reasoning was far superior to that of ordinary mortals. Many female deities Saraswati, Durga, Laxmi, Kali etc., are worshiped across the country. According to the Mahabharata by cherishing the woman one virtually worships the goddess of prosperity. On the darker side, the patriarchal system has continued since the time of Rig Veda. Customs and values were made by men to favor men. Women suffer this discrimination in silence.

Historically, the Indian woman has been made to adopt contradictory roles. The strength of a woman is evoked to ensure that women effectively play their traditional roles of nurturance as daughters, mothers, wives, and daughters-in-laws. On the other hand, the stereotype of “a weak and helpless woman” is fostered to ensure complete dependence on the male sex.



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: THE EVIDENCE

Violence against women occurs throughout the life cycle from prebirth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood to senescence. Most of the data are believed to be unreliable as many cases go unreported. Cases of violence against women are steadily increasing in the country. According to the National Crime Record Bureau, India, there is one dowry death in the country every 78 h, one act of sexual harassment every 59 min, one rape every 34 min, one act of torture every 12 min and almost one in every three married women experienced domestic violence. Studies from India reported violence in 19–76% of women (75–76% in lower caste women; 42–48% in Uttar Pradesh and 36–38% in Tamil Nadu and 19% in an urban slum community of childless women. In Western India, 15.7% pregnancy-related deaths in the community series and 12.9% in the hospital series were associated with domestic violence. In Uttar Pradesh, 30% men reported beating wives. 22% of women of childbearing age from a potter community were

physically assaulted. 34% of those physically assaulted required medical attention.

The population-based, multicenter based collaborative project of the study of abuse in the family environment (India-survey of abuse in family environment) was established in seven sites in India. It looked at the association with poor mental health. A total of 9938 women participated (from rural, urban slum, urban non slum areas). 40% reported experiencing any violence during their marriage. 56% had self-report questionnaire scores indicating poor mental health.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The home is often equated with a sanctuary, a place where individuals seek love, safety, security and shelter. For some women, the home is a place that imperils lives and breeds some of the most drastic forms of violence perpetrated against girls and women. Violence is usually perpetrated by males who are, or who have been in positions of trust and intimacy and power



e.g. husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, stepfathers, brothers, uncles, sons, or other relatives. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), 2005 defines domestic violence as any act, omission or commission or conduct of the respondent, which includes threat or actual abuse. In the 1996 survey of 6902 men in the state of Uttar Pradesh, up to 45% of married men acknowledged physically abusing their wives.



The National Health Survey conducted under the stewardship of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, reported that >1/3 of women (34%) between the ages of 15–49 years have experienced spousal physical violence. The adverse health consequences that women experience due to violence are wide-

ranging with physical, reproductive and sexual and mental health outcomes. In a community-based study involving 450 women in Gujarat, 42% experienced physical beatings and sexual abuse, and 23% experiences abusive language, belittlement and threats. It is interesting to note that 56% of women believe that wife beating is justified. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) in multiple centers in India reported that 85% of men admit they had indulged in violent behavior against their wives at least once in the last 12 months. 57% of men admitted to have sexual abuse with their wives. 32% of men admitted to committing violence on their pregnant wives. The men indulged in violence to establish their power over the weaker sex. Subtle and insidious forms of violence include repeated humiliation, insults, forced isolation, limitations on social mobility, the constant threat of violence and injury, and denial of economic resources.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT WORK PLACE

A social worker (BD) was gang-raped by a group of the upper class, influential men, because she had tried to stop the practice of child marriage. The accused was acquitted by the trial court. This inspired several women's groups and NGOs to file a petition in the Supreme Court under the collective platform of Vishaka (Vishaka and others vs. State of Rajasthan and others). It is a landmark case as it was the basis for Supreme Court guidelines on sexual harassment at workplace.



DOWRY RELATED VIOLENCE

The age-old practice of dowry has persisted and driven many women to suicide. In 50 district court judgments, 1987–1989, Maharashtra, West India, there was dowry related violence. 120 cases of dowry deaths and 20 cases of intentional injury related to dowry were identified. There were intentional injuries, including physical violence (59%), mental torture 28%, molestation by family members and perversity (10%), and starving 3%. The causes of death in the women who died were:



Burns 46% and drowning 34%. It is worth noting that the

women were very young-88% below 25 years; 58% of them were childless, and 22% had only female children.

Harassment by in-laws on issues related to dowry emerged as a risk factor for poor mental health. It is characteristic of the Indian setting. Dowry related violence is on the rise in India. More than 5000 women are killed annually by their husbands and in-laws, who burn them in “accidental” kitchen fires if their ongoing demands for dowry before and after marriage are not met. On an average five women a day are burned, and many more cases go unreported.

Incident Reporting by Media

A content analysis of 26 articles covering the attack on the victim provided varied details of the incident. Approximately 44% of the reports stated that the victim was assaulted with an iron rod, and her boyfriend was beaten. Additionally, 40% reported that the victim was thrown from the bus, and 20% indicated that the victims were robbed. Reports also mentioned that the accused attempted to run over the victim (16%) and tried to erase evidence by washing the bus (12%). The timing of the events was inconsistent, with one report stating the victim was found at 9:15 pm on December 16, while two others indicated she boarded the bus at 9:45 pm. The sources of evidence varied, with 90% of the articles relying on police statements or reports and 10% on claims from physicians regarding the victim's condition. Testimonies from the victim, her boyfriend, and her family were featured in 24 reports.



The boyfriend's testimony and TV interview were discussed in 12 reports, with 66% highlighting his description of bystanders' apathy. Additionally, 50% of these reports criticized the police response time. Four reports included the family's response, with 75% mentioning the father's wish to have his daughter named to inspire others.

Victim's Health Condition Reporting by Media

There were 112 media reports focusing on the victim's health and medical decisions, with 52 (46.8%) describing the gang-rape event. About 20.7% of the reports provided information on the victim's transportation via helicopter to Singapore. More than half of the reports (54.9%) stated that the victim was in serious condition, and 33.3% discussed multiple surgeries performed to aid her. Additionally, 38.7% described her condition as having internal bleeding and intestinal damage,

while 11.7% mentioned brain damage. A few reports (3.6%) detailed her inability to talk but her ability to write down thoughts, with one quoting her statement, “Ma, main jeena chahti hoon” (“Mom, I want to live”). Information about the victim's death and cremation was released in 26.1% of the reports. Analysis of data sources revealed that 58.1% of the reports quoted attending physicians or hospital representatives, while others used quotes from politicians, Indian newspapers, family, and friends.



Reporting of Protests

A total of 134 media reports primarily discussed the protests resulting from the nationwide outrage. Over half (55.2%) indicated that the protests were based on criticism of the government's lack of action in protecting women. About 20.9% of the reports emphasized the demand for justice and the death penalty for the perpetrators, while 23.9% underscored both government criticism and justice demands. Reports varied from describing violent protests (50.7%) with police barricades and use of force to peaceful demonstrations (26.7%) such as candlelight marches. Some reports (22.2%) described peaceful protests internationally, with the first noted in Toronto. Analysis showed that 61.6% of the reports provided evidence, including quotes and photographs, to demonstrate opinions of protestors and officials, while 36.4% expressed only officials' viewpoints.



Opinions of Victim Reported by Media

The 55 articles addressing public response showed a polarized representation. Support for the victim and shock at the events

were characterized in 58.1% of the reports, with the victim being symbolically named “Damini” (meaning Lightning) after a 1993 Hindi film. Conversely, 41.81% of the reports emphasized global outrage and demands for change in women's treatment and safety in India. Ten reports highlighted international criticism of the Indian government. However, some articles (10.9%) described instances of victim blaming, suggesting that women dressing conservatively or not going out past sundown could prevent rape. This narrative provoked nationwide protests contesting the idea that victims hold responsibility in rape cases. The sources of these articles primarily represented views of individual citizens, students (80.7%), government or police officials (14.3%), and photographs (5.3%).



Discussion

In 2012, there were 24,923 rape cases reported to the Ministry of Home Affairs in India, representing a 15.8% increase from 2009. Rape is vastly under-reported, and estimates often understate the true extent of the problem. The brutal gang-rape of a 23-year-old student on a moving bus in South Delhi in December 2012 sparked nationwide and global protests demanding harsher punishment for rapists, including the death penalty. Media played a crucial role in spreading information about the event, protests, and public responses, highlighting the media's ability to create social movements. The analysis shows that news of the gang-rape spread globally within two days, with peaks corresponding to the incident, protests, and the victim's death.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths:

1. Comprehensive reading of each news source before inclusion.
2. Use of extensive media databases (Factiva and LexisNexis) for article searches.
3. Independent, duplicate screening for media analysis and author bias, increasing reliability.

Limitations:

1. Focus on online media sources, excluding small, local media.

2. Potential deletion or archiving of some online sources.
3. High variability in assessment methods between raters due to poorly defined criteria for author bias.
4. Exclusion of social media's role in spreading information.
5. Manual searching of English news sources, potentially omitting non-English articles.
6. Difficulty in identifying specific times for reports from Indo-Asian countries, affecting accuracy.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The comprehensive analysis of media reporting on the December 2012 gang-rape incident in South Delhi underscores the critical role media plays in shaping societal reactions to violence against women. This case highlighted the urgent need for improved protective measures, more stringent law enforcement, and societal changes to ensure women's safety. While media coverage helped maintain focus on the issue, leading to legal reforms and public scrutiny, the variability in content and instances of victim-blaming showed the importance of responsible and sensitive reporting. Positive portrayals, like the symbolic naming of the victim as "Damini," can inspire public sentiment for justice, while negative portrayals can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

The portrayal of women in the media significantly affects public perception and attitudes towards gender issues. Media organizations must adopt guidelines for reporting on gender-based violence, ensuring sensitivity and accuracy, and should focus on stories of survival and resilience to empower victims. Public awareness campaigns, policy advocacy, and continuous research are essential to track progress and improve reporting practices. By responsibly highlighting women's strengths and struggles, the media can contribute to a culture of respect and equality, fostering long-term societal and policy changes to enhance women's safety.

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