

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence is a widespread phenomenon around the world. Earlier, its presence was not acknowledged and was kept under wraps. But as time has progressed we see that discussions around this topic have gradually increased, not necessarily in the right manner though. Society's main form of receiving information happens to be the media, which procures information and then decides which bits and pieces are most relevant for the current society, or what gives them the most economic benefits. The questions that this article aims to ask are, how does the media decide what instances of sexual violence are to be broadcasted, based on what criteria are they decided, and how does their representation warp the people's perception of the reality? It also focuses on how the media uses sexual violence as a means to achieve other goals such as rallying for the nation or a "good copy", which refers to a bestselling story.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various authors have written about the effects -positive, neutral, and negative- that the media has on the sexual violence perceived in society. One among them is Divya Arya, whose work primarily focuses on how the Delhi gang rape in 2012 carved a change in the way the media approached the issue of covering sexual assault.¹ She elaborates on the process by which the media selects and develops the news to publish to the general public. It is a three-step process in which the first step is a selection of a crime statistic to be reported on. This step depends on various factors such as the working of the industry, the individuals involved, and so on.² The second stage is one in which the news gatherers tap into their sources, which are mainly the police, and present either "new leads" or offer a deep contextual analysis to hold the attention of the viewers. Finally, the statistic is ready to be presented as a story with real characters. Media channels battle for "ownership" of the coverage, and this gives rise to the phenomenon of "campaign journalism", which is the process by which a news outlet claims credit for leading

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¹ ARYA, DIVYA. "Reporting Sexual Violence in India: What Has Changed since the Delhi Gang Rape?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 44, 2015, pp. 57-66,

www.jstor.org/stable/44002804#metadata_info_tab_contents

² Ibid

the coverage of a particular issue. However, in their haste to cover the matter they end up dramatising the events, and thus reason and logic go out the window. In her extensive interviews with various journalists, there is stress and emphasis on the terms “real rape” and “true victim”, which implies the existence of victims who are faking it. She was told that rapes by strangers, gang rapes, and rapes of minors were most likely to be covered, even though they were a fraction of the actual cases. In cases where the victim was already acquainted with the accused, such as in a consensual relationship, there is a very slim chance of the news getting published by the media. Owing to the new Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013, there was a rise in the number of false cases being filed against a live-in partner or a boyfriend. This is the perception of all the crime correspondents that the author interviewed.³

Another work that is analysed to understand the topic with better depth, is a blog written by Rose Khan which examines how our understanding of sexual violence is warped by the presence of the media representation of the topic. One of the main points that the author makes is that conflict-related sexual violence is not something that men exclusively subject women to.⁴ This provides an incomplete picture of the war and conflict situation. According to a study conducted in Mexico, information spread through a public platform had a greater impact on the individual than when they are provided on an individual basis. She talks about the construction of women as perpetual victims, as they are vulnerable to attack and should always be protected. This strips them of agency and makes them passive citizens. We would defy gender norms by understanding that women are capable of committing violence, and there are instances where this has happened already. One of the most prominent examples of this is the prisoner abuse scandal in Abu Ghraib, where a woman in the U.S. military was held to be accountable for the widespread sexual violence among the prisoners. While one side of the media called her behaviour deviant and monstrous, the other side enabled her actions by regarding her as an abnormality who was unable to differentiate between wrong and right.

Jenny Kitzinger writes about the evolution of the way media covers sexual violence in the US and UK since the 1970s. They have helped in bringing about a radical change in the way people think and process. She talks about how revolutions have helped acknowledge the lesser-known forms of rape such as child abuse and marital rape. Media was thus an ally in achieving feminist

³ ARYA, DIVYA. “Reporting Sexual Violence in India: What Has Changed since the Delhi Gang Rape?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 44, 2015, pp. 59
www.jstor.org/stable/44002804#metadata_info_tab_contents.

⁴ Khan, Rose. “Media (Mis) Representation of Conflicted-Related Sexual Violence.” *Media@LSE*, 23 Feb. 2022, blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2022/02/23/media-misrepresentation-of-conflicted-related-sexual-violence/.

goals, and often rallied public support for the same. She also talks about the initial unfamiliarity and peculiarity of people getting abused by their known ones while they were young. It was with the help of the media that the public was validated that what they experienced was not unique to them and that they could seek redressal for the same. She also lists down and elaborates on the limitations in the way media portrays sexual violence.

ANALYSIS

Sexual violence means that a person has been coerced or forced into unwanted sexual activity without their consent. This violence can be experienced by children, teenagers, and adults. There are various forms in which this exists such as rape, forced incest, intimate partner sexual assault, and so on. The intention behind doing so is often said to be for sexual gratification. It must be noted that it is not limited to it, one of the main reasons why sexual violence occurs is to assert dominance over the other individual. We cannot just regard rape as a sexual act. We must acknowledge the fact that it is an exhibition and expression of their domination over the victim. By violating the most intimate and private part of an individual, they claim to have shamed the victim. Often, it is seen as an insult to not only the person but rather the family, state, or even the country. Thus, rape is used as a method of silencing victims during war and conflict.

According to Mohammad Tareq Hasan, rape is used to establish dominance, and thus an unequal relationship between people of different social statuses or communities. An individual's social circumstances end up determining his violent actions in society. We understand that rape is not about dominance over the weaker sex, rather it is about asserting dominance over someone from a weaker section of society. Rather than putting rape aside to be a gender-based issue, we must examine it from a dominance-based lens, where we understand that it causes shame to the victim that they were raped. They want to escape the trauma of having their consent disregarded and their bodily autonomy was stolen away from them.

The forms of sexual violence are various, and the media coverage thus sees to it that the general public is aware and informed of it. They do not necessarily show all types of it, as their economic agenda plays a factor in it too. According to various interviews with crime correspondents, certain categories are more likely to be published in the news. They are rape by a stranger, gang rape, and rape of minors. The reason for this can be said to be the age-old

rape myths, which say that either a woman is “innocent” and “pure”, or she is said to be a vamp, a wanton woman who “was asking for it”. The media avoids handling cases in which a live-in partner or a boyfriend is involved because often some sort of consent was already present there. The amendment in the law was made to cover all types of sexual violence, but it was used for a different purpose. Thus the media and police decided in consensus that such cases would not be published, as they had lesser chances of getting a trial. Rather, they focussed on rape by strangers, because more questions could be asked to the authorities about the upkeep of law and order, and the state of women’s security in the country.⁵ Even when there are cases of incest, because they are bound within the security of their home, the media tends to give these cases lesser importance.

Another factor that determines whether a particular incident gets coverage or not is the location in which the crime occurs. Most headquarters of major news channels are based in metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai. Therefore, a majority of their reporters are based here and the crimes are noticed. On the other hand, if the same crime occurred in a smaller city or town, the news channel's interest in the story would drop. This explanation also gives us a reason as to why Delhi is referred to as India’s ‘rape capital’. This is because there are a higher number of reporters stationed here. Certain states are not given importance merely because of their lack of relevance at the national level.

If a caste-based crime was committed in a small village or a town, it would not be given the same coverage if it would have occurred in a big city. Caste reinforcement is also one of the major causes of sexual violence. Dominant caste members violate the ‘purity’ of the members of lower castes to remind them of their true position in society. But more often than not, the caste angle is not realised. It is looked upon as just another story of a rape occurring, but that is not the case. A prime example of this is the famous Vishakha case, where a social worker was raped by the male members of a family for reporting a child marriage. The men felt that their pride and honour had been affected by a woman reporting them to the police and that too a woman belonging to a lower caste. They could not tolerate this blow to their masculinity and caste. However, in the courts as well as the media, this was said to be a case of sexual

⁵ ARYA, DIVYA. “Reporting Sexual Violence in India: What Has Changed since the Delhi Gang Rape?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 50, no. 44, 2015, pp. 59
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harassment at the workplace. This illustrates how a case is manipulated according to the version the media and the police want to portray.

Media often represents stories of sexual violence in a manner that ensures “good copy”, or higher watching, which correlates to higher earnings too. This causes them to try to get the earliest scoop possible. They end up engaging in tactics to reach the location of the crime and often try to invade the privacy of either the victim or the family in an attempt to get information. By presenting this very information in a breaking news format, with constant continuous updates, they try to create an enthralling story. This is harmful and detrimental not only to the victims but to society as a whole.

CONCLUSION

In countries around the world, the media has shed light on the darkness surrounding sexual violence. It has happened at its own pace and according to each of their particular crime rates. They have made considerable progress in their reporting, but there are a few limitations still. Certain biases and stereotypes manage to make their way into the reports. This problem has to be effectively addressed in order to ensure a difference in the way society perceives sexual violence, which by extension will reduce its occurrence.