

Protest Paradox: Examining Disparity in Protest After Rapes in India

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the disparity in public protest following rape cases by taking numerous factors into account such as societal attitude, intersectionality, media's influence. Through use of survey, podcast and a detailed literature review research finds how media framing, victim's social identity, transparency interplay to shape public reaction. Preliminary finding indicates geographical location, intersectionality, media interplays to shape public opinions towards a particular rape incident which in turn leads to perpetuation of rape culture due to spontaneous not a perpetual efforts to tackle it.

Keywords: Rape culture, Media, Protest, Public discourse, Intersectionality, Reform

1. INTRODUCTION

Rape culture is a perpetuation or normalization of ideology or, in a way, society, due to its passive resistance, accepts and normalizes sexual violence, often reflected in failure to address such crimes. Despite several positive initiatives at the legislative level, it continues to persist due to a deep-rooted patriarchal mindset, which is reflected in complicit masculinity attitudes, objectification, and sexualization of women's bodies. The culture allows victim-blaming and trivializes sexual assault, resulting in failure of positive paperwork implementation on the ground.

On August 9, 2024, a postgraduate trainee doctor was raped and murdered at the state-run R.G. Kar Medical College. An FIR was not recorded for 14 hours after the incident. On August 10, junior doctors, resident staff, and other medical personnel organized a public protest demanding justice.

The case in Kolkata highlights a recurring pattern in India: public outrage often leads to a new significant landmark legislation, but the root cause remains unresolved. If we trace back the time, it shows similar results; for instance, the Mathura rape case in Gadchiroli, Maharashtra (1972), resulted in the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1983) following public outcry. The Nirbhaya rape case (2012) led to the Criminal Law Amendment Act (2013), which was further reinforced after the Shakti Mill gang rape case. The horrific Kathua rape case resulted in the Criminal Law Amendment Act (2018). The Hyderabad veterinarian rape and murder case (2019) led to the Disha Act (2019).

Despite all legislative efforts seeming to go in vain, the impact on actual crime rates and conviction remains questionable. The conviction rate for rape cases varied between 27% and 28% over the period from 2018 to 2022.

Tracing public outrage in rape cases in India reveals a pattern of spontaneous protests, often concentrated on a few high-profile cases despite the broader scale of the problem. The first major protest that captured widespread attention was triggered by the Mathura rape case in 1972. Following this, there was a long period of relative silence until the Nirbhaya rape case in 2012 reignited public outrage. These all followed

by a rape case, protest, and then legislation in a spontaneous manner, while systemic issues remain largely unaddressed.

2. REVIEW OF LITREATURE

The interplay between media representation, sexual violence, and societal norms plays a critical role in shaping the discourse around rape trials. The concept of “justice as a secret,” as discussed by Taussig (1999), provides a foundation to understand how the truths of sexual violence are often obscured in courtrooms. Despite being a non-compoundable crime, rape trials frequently witness compromises that, rather than delivering justice, often protect societal structures. These compromises are not merely legal transactions but are deeply rooted in socio-cultural contexts, where victims face intimidation and coercion, leading to the erasure of their voices. Defense lawyers often leverage such compromises to pressure victims into altering their testimonies, perpetuating a culture that normalizes violence against women (Taussig, 1999). Historically, the expectation for victims to immediately report their assault has influenced the legal landscape (Torrey, 1991). Although the “hue and cry” requirement has been abandoned for other crimes, it continues to affect rape prosecutions. The absence of witness protection programs further complicates matters, often leading to witnesses turning hostile due to societal pressure or fear (Smart, 1989). In these instances, compromise not only silences the victim but also reinforces family and community structures that prioritize honor over justice.

Moreover, the media plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and perceptions of sexual violence. Research by Becker in Fiji shows how exposure to Western media significantly alters cultural standards, influencing everything from body image to interpersonal relationships, including perceptions of sexual violence (NSVRC). Media portrayals can shape societal attitudes toward victims and perpetrators, often reinforcing harmful stereotypes that blame the victim or minimize the severity of sexual violence (Schwark). This misrepresentation can trigger trauma for survivors and create misconceptions about sexual violence, leading victims to internalize blame, particularly if their experiences don’t fit the societal “rape script” (Littleton).

Rape myths further complicate public understanding of victim-blaming attitudes. Studies show that belief in these myths correlates with increased victim-blaming, and that men are generally more accepting of rape myths than women. Additionally, victims who had consumed alcohol prior to an assault are often blamed more than sober victims (Girard & Senn, 2008). Traditional gender roles play a significant part in this dynamic, with women who deviate from these norms facing greater blame for their victimization (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). These insights highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of how societal attitudes toward sexual violence are formed and perpetuated.

The case of Jyoti Singh, also known as Nirbhaya, is a significant example of societal influence, as it sparked nationwide protests and brought attention to systemic failures in law enforcement and women's safety. The media’s portrayal of the case, alongside public outrage, served as a crucial moment for exposing the justice system's inadequacies, particularly for marginalized communities (Rajan, Kundu, & Sarkar). This case illustrates how some rape incidents, often intertwined with broader socio-political contexts, receive heightened media attention and public outrage, while others remain unnoticed.

Despite the violent and sensational coverage of high-profile cases, the language used to describe these incidents—words like ‘harrowing,’ ‘shocked,’ and ‘graphic’—often frames rape as an unusual event rather than an everyday reality. This selective portrayal influences which cases attract public attention and protests, as highlighted by the documentary India’s Daughter and Web Series Delhi Crime, which, while

aiming to raise awareness, also risk normalizing the performativity of rape in India (Rajan, Kundu, & Sarkar).

Yogita Bhayana (Anti rape Activist), POSH EXPERT, FOUNDER-“PEOPLE AGAINST RAPE IN INDIA (PARI) in a podcast with Raj Shamni shares how the patriarchal nature of Indian society, reinforced by religion, politics, and Bollywood, plays a significant role in the prevalence of rape cases, with women often viewed as vulnerable and subordinate. Films like *Animal* and objectifying item songs further degrade women’s roles, contributing to the normalization of violence. This societal framework results in a vast underreporting of rape cases, with roughly 90% going unreported and only the most severe cases, where victims are hospitalized, gaining attention. Religion and political remarks often reinforce these patriarchal ideals, while the lack of co-educational culture exacerbates gender divides. To address these issues, it has been recommended that at least two days of dedicated parliamentary discussions on women-centric issues be held annually. Additionally, there is a pressing need to improve evidence collection in rape cases and ensure responsible media portrayals that do not objectify women but instead promote gender equality.

While existing literature extensively covers media representations, societal norms, and legal procedures concerning sexual violence, a critical gap remains in understanding the underlying reasons why some rape cases elicit widespread public protests, while others fade into obscurity without attracting significant attention. This research aims to explore the complex interplay of various factors—including media coverage, community narratives, and the concept of intersectionality—that collectively influence public perception and mobilization in response to these cases. By investigating these intricate dynamics, the study seeks to uncover the specific reasons why certain cases manage to spark significant protests and public outcry, while others remain largely sidelined and overlooked. In doing so, it addresses an important and previously underexplored gap in the existing literature, contributing valuable insights to the broader understanding of public response to sexual violence.

3. HYPOTHESIS

- Certain rape cases elicit significant public protests, while others remain sidelined, hindering ongoing discourse about the pervasive nature of sexual violence.
- Protests frequently transcend boundaries of caste, race, and gender, as seen in public outcry surrounding high-profile cases like:
 - Jyoti Singh's case (an upper-caste Hindu).
 - The Unnao case involving a Dalit woman.
- Media coverage plays a crucial role in mobilizing public support:
 - Cases with significant media attention inspire greater collective action.
 - Cases with minimal reporting often fail to achieve similar public mobilization.
- Factors such as media influence, legal transparency, and the dynamics of intersectionality work together to shape public protests in response to sexual violence.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this research study is to identify the factors responsible for public outrage in certain rape cases while others remain unnoticed. The focus will be on media influence, the intersectionality of the victim, the role of social media in enhancing visibility, and societal attitudes. This analysis seeks to

uncover the circumstances and patterns under which protests occur.

To achieve this, the study will address the following research questions:

- To analyze the factors that lead to heightened public protests in response to certain rape cases in India.
- Which is more dominant in setting the agenda: media or public protests? This question explores the dynamic interplay between media and public reactions.
- What factors contribute to public outrage? This aims to identify key drivers in shaping public protests.
- To what extent does media enhance the visibility of protests?

This research is significant because it sheds light on the factors that drive protests in rape cases, highlighting issues that might contribute to the normalization of rape culture in India. By understanding these dynamics, the study aims to improve policy-making, ensuring that such cases receive the consistent attention they require is essential for creating a deterrent environment against sexual violence and implementing more effective legal changes on the ground, rather than merely enacting laws and amendments on paper.

Methodology

To study the above mentioned objectives survey method was adopted.

Population

The population of the current research work included youth in the age group of 18-28. A survey was conducted in September 2024 to November 2024 to investigate the reason why public response differs to different rape cases and how media shaping it.

Sample Size

The sample size of the current research work was 100 respondents (males and females).

Sampling Technique

The respondents were recruited by purposive sampling. It is a non-probability sampling method. Respondents of the study were chosen based on the researcher's personal judgment, and other respondents were rejected as not fitting the desired profile.

Tool

Self-administered questionnaires were sent online to respondents (Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, E-mail). The google form contained both open and closed ended questions. This was most appropriate because the goal was to collect a wide range of information in a short period of time.

Data Source

Primary Data was gathered from the survey method and Secondary Data was gathered from different websites, podcasts, journals, etc.

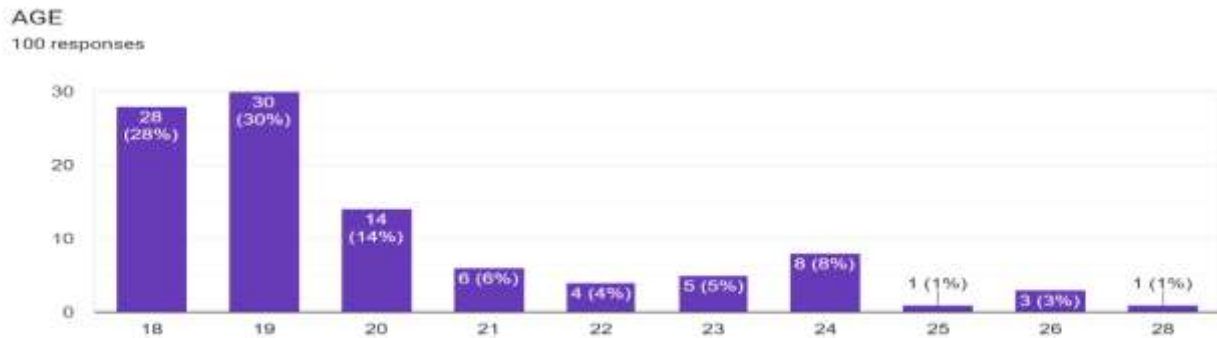
Limitation

The use of purposive sampling presents its limitations on the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, due to time constraints, pool of respondents was low. The overall response rate was low, which further hindered the ability to draw broad conclusions. An employment of qualitative scale consisting of “Yes,” “Maybe,” and “No.” The inclusion of “Maybe” aimed to capture respondents’ indecision towards certain ideas. However, analyzing responses solely through a binary Yes/No lens could help reduce bias and yield clearer insights into respondents’ actual opinions.

5. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS:

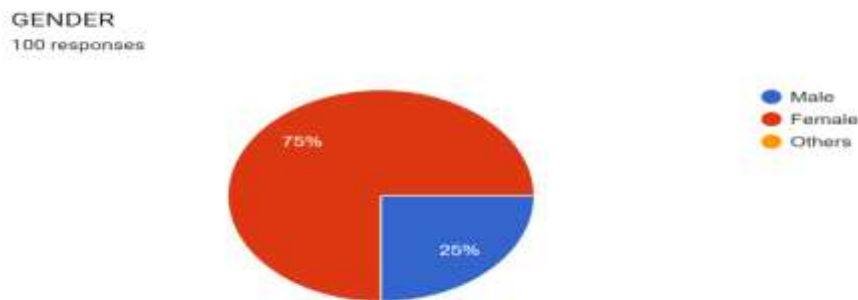
OVERALL SAMPLE PROFILE OF SURVEY:

AGE: Sample mostly include youth percentage while conducting survey age includes from range of 18 to 28



Source: The authors. These are the findings from the statistical analysis done during the study.

GENDER:

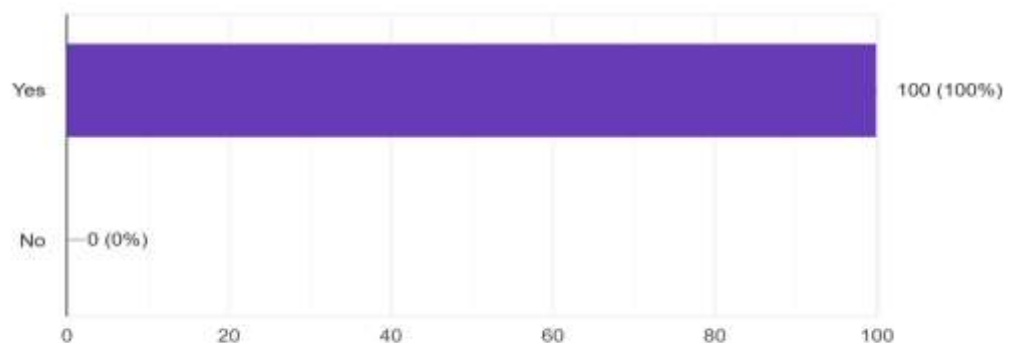


Source: The authors. These are the findings from the statistical analysis done during the study.

FINDINGS:

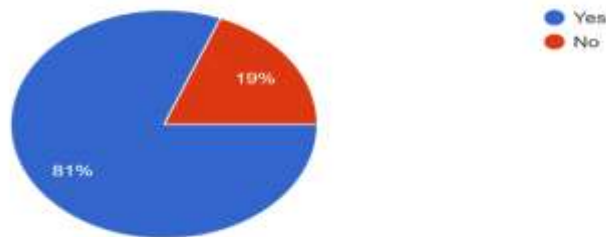
1.Are u aware of the 9 August 2024 Kolkata doctor's Rape case at R.G. Kar medical college?

100 responses



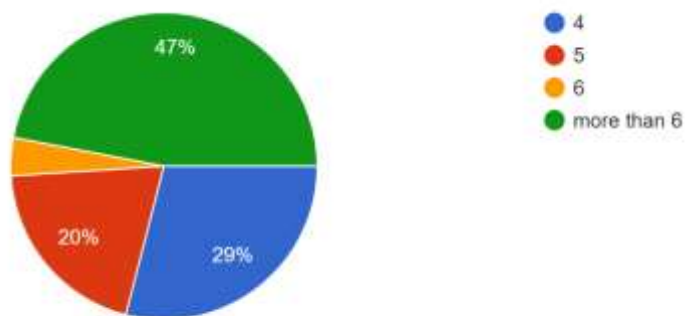
DESCRIPTION: 100% of the respondents were aware of the R.G. Kar Medical College rape case; there wasn't a single individual who was unaware of it.

2. Are u aware of a incident which takes place on 30th July "a nurse in Uttarakhand was brutally raped and murdered, with her mutilated body found the same night as the Kolkata incident"?
100 responses



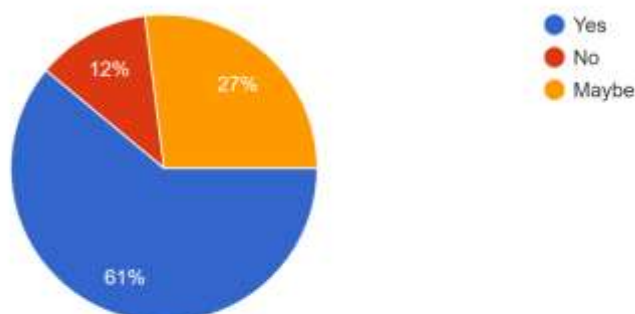
DESCRIPTION: 81% of the respondents are aware of the 30th July incident in Uttarakhand, while 19% remain unaware of it.

3. How many public outrages you can recall that were organised for rape cases in India?
100 responses



DESCRIPTION: When asked about public outrage over rape cases, 47% of respondents could recall more than six instances, 29% remembered four, 20% recalled five, and 4% mentioned six cases.

4. Do you think that public outrage is influenced or speed up by the way case handled , transparency and accountability of responsible law enforcement body?
100 responses

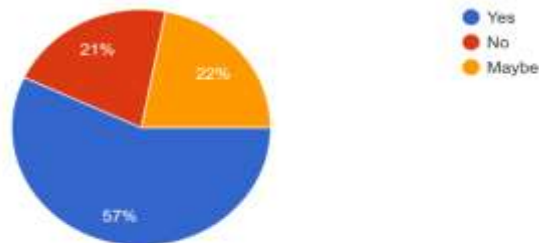


DESCRIPTION: According to 61% of respondents, the way a case is handled by the responsible

authorities significantly impacts public outrage. Meanwhile, 27% believe it may influence protests, and 12% feel it has no effect on shaping public outrage.

5. Do you think that intersecting identities (gender, race, religion, caste) combinedly influence the public perception towards a particular rape case?

100 responses



DESCRIPTION: According to 57% of respondents, intersecting identities influence public perception of a particular rape case. Meanwhile, 20% believe it may have an effect, while 21% disagree, stating that intersecting identities do not influence public perception in rape cases.

6. What factors do you think contribute to the level of public outrage in rape cases?

According to the respondents, multiple factors contribute to public outrage in rape cases. The majority consider media coverage and social media to be the most prominent influences. Additionally, respondents highlight a lack of transparency, how the case is handled, and delayed justice as key factors that fuel outrage. Some respondents also pointed out that the brutality and severity of the rape can influence the level of protest. Other factors mentioned include women's empowerment, victim-blaming, the location of the crime, and intersectionality (age, caste, gender, and the victim's overall identity).

7. According to you whether its media which influences or shapes public outrage in rape cases or does the media itself get shaped by the outrages and report on the case longer?

According to the respondents, media coverage of rape cases is often driven by selective choices, including sensationalism, which shapes and influences public outrage. The media tends to highlight the failure of authorities and sympathize with the victim's family, contributing to public outcry. On the other hand, some respondents believe it's a two-way process, where media initially provides information, but growing public outrage pushes them to continue reporting for the sake of TRP. Another section of respondents thinks that media itself is shaped by public outrage, leading to prolonged coverage of the case.

8. What impact does the visibility of protest movements (e.g., #MeToo) have on bringing attention to lesser-known rape cases?

100 responses



DESCRIPTION: According to 54% of respondents, protest movements increase visibility and

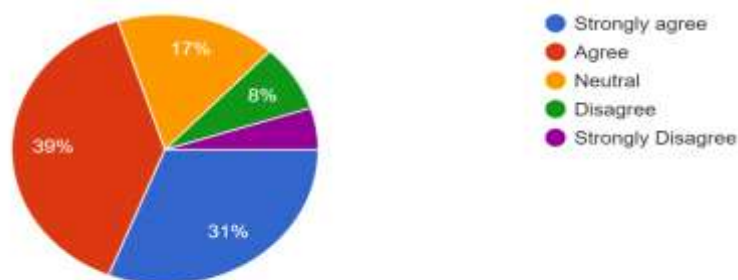
attention to rape cases. However, 31% believe this is limited to high-profile cases, while 15% feel that protests have no impact on lesser-known cases.

9. What measures do you think should be implemented to ensure more consistent and unbiased media reporting on rape cases?

Respondents emphasized that to ensure more consistent and unbiased media reporting, it is essential for the media to adhere to ethical standards. They highlighted the need for accountability through regulatory bodies, penalizing irresponsible reporting, ensuring fact-checking, avoiding victim-blaming, and steering clear of political influences, including political funding for media houses. Additionally, they suggested training reporters to handle such cases sensitively, avoiding sensationalism, and assessing the profit-loss ratio of TRP in these situations. Respondents also stressed the importance of maintaining victim anonymity, achieving balanced and unbiased reporting, and avoiding the highlighting of intersectional issues like caste, which can divert attention. They called for focusing on all rape cases rather than just specific ones, ensuring the safety of reporters from threats, and continuing follow-up coverage until justice is secured.

10. Does the attitude of society toward sudden rise of outrage in some cases and not in other leads to normalization of rape culture in India?

100 responses



DESCRIPTION: 31% of respondents strongly agree that the sudden increase in outrage in some cases, compared to others, leads to the normalization of rape culture. Additionally, 39% agree with this statement, while 17% hold a neutral opinion. 8% disagree, and 5% strongly disagree.

6. DISCUSSION/FINDINGS:

The study brings out that public awareness of rape cases tends to be higher in instances which followed by the public outrage, while systematic issue and cases which not brings the spark of such a great intensity remain largely unnoticed. This is evident from the data: 100% of respondents were aware of the R.G. Kar Medical College rape case, whereas only 81% had knowledge of a similar incident in Uttarakhand. The disparity in public awareness due to various factors, including the extent and intensity of public outrage, with media—particularly social media—playing a very significant in shaping public responses. According to the study, 61% of respondents indicated that the way authorities handle a case has a strong impact on the level of public outrage, while 27% said it may have some influence, and 12% believed it had no impact at all. Coverage of media, transparency in investigation and delay justice delivery plays crucial role in influencing public protests, with respondents emphasizing the media's role in either fueling or stifling public engagement with these issues.

Moreover, the brutality and intensity of the crime were also cited as significant factors that contribute to public outrage, although respondents noted the problematic tendency to categorize rape cases based on perceived severity. This reflects broader societal inclinations to classify cases through preconceived notions of what constitutes extreme violence. Such tendencies have been criticized in media portrayals, as seen in the documentary *India's Daughter* and the web series *Delhi Crime*. These projects, while intending to raise awareness, have been critiqued for potentially normalizing the performative nature of how rape is viewed in India (Rajan, Kundu, & Sarkar). The use of terms like “harrowing,” “shocking,” and “graphic” often frames rape as an unusual, isolated event rather than addressing it as a pervasive, systemic issue that affects women across all strata of society.

The study underscored the role of women's empowerment, victim-blaming, and intersectionality—factors such as caste, gender, and the identity of the victim—as contributing factor in public protest. Intersectional issues, particularly caste, often complicates and divert the attention away from the core issue of justice. According to the data, 54% of respondents felt that social media campaigns and protest movements play an important role in increasing the visibility of rape cases, though 31% believed this visibility only applies to high-profile cases, while 15% felt that protests have little to no impact on lesser-known incidents.

To address these disparities, the study emphasizes there is an urgent need for media to adopt ethical reporting practices. This includes holding media outlets accountable through regulatory oversight, penalizing irresponsible and sensationalist reporting, ensuring thorough fact-checking, and avoiding politicization and corporatization of media. Reporters covering sensitive cases should provide proper training to approach the subject matter with care, ensuring respect for victim anonymity and focusing on more balanced, responsible and ethical coverage. In addition to, intersectional factors such as caste, which divert attention from the core issue of sexual violence, should be approached with caution and sensitivity, avoiding narratives that overshadow the pursuit of justice.

The study also highlights how the current culture of sudden spikes in public protest, followed by a rapid decline in attention, contributes to the normalization of rape culture in India. To combat this, there is a need for sustained media coverage and continued follow-up on cases, ensuring that justice is pursued for all victims with similar attention. This calls for a fundamental shift away from the sensationalizing of specific cases and towards a more consistent, justice-driven approach.

7. RECOMMENDATION

To reduce the prevalence of rape culture in India, it is essential to initiate the change from the grassroots level through an integrated approach. Educational institutions with other social structures, including families, peers, religious organizations, and the media (both traditional and social, including the film industry), must work collaboratively to create a gender-sensitive society.

At all levels, especially within educational institutions, there needs to be fostering a gender-sensitive environment. This includes equipping children with the ability to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy cultural practices by developing a rational mindset, as well as addressing the prevalence of abusive language that is derogatory to women. It is crucial to impact children's understanding from within where the culture of complicit masculinity shrinks.

Families play a vital role in changing societal perceptions of women, who are often considered subordinate. By actively involving women in decision-making processes, families can empower them and help establish a more gender-neutral culture. The government should also take steps to mitigate the subordinate role of women by ensuring the proper enforcement of existing laws, particularly in rural areas

where practices like dowry persist despite more than 60 years of legislation aimed at abolishing them. It is imperative that all progressive laws be implemented effectively.

In religious practices that undermine women's dignity in the name of religion, the government should work at societal level through bottom up approach- to create a harmonious balance between the principles of secularism and women's rights in society.

The media should act as a catalyst for change by regularly discussing women-centric issues, ensuring that these topics remain relevant by continuous follow up and ensuring that these issue do not fade over time and remains a forever rather a spontaneous. By raising public awareness of such issues 24/7, the media can play a significant role in combating the prevalence of rape culture.

Society must adopt a unified stance that recognizes that "a rape is a rape is a rape," emphasizing that such cases should not be categorized based on brutality. It is crucial to acknowledge that rape is a heinous crime that cannot be minimized or dismissed. The media should be encouraged to report every case with the same urgency and to advocate for speedy justice delivery.

As a reflection of society, the media should portray women in equal standing to men. The objectification of women and the use of derogatory language in item songs must be curtailed. The government should issue strict guidelines to ensure gender sensitivity in media representations and ensure adherence to these standards.

8. CONCLUSION

The findings of study open up the complexities surrounding public awareness and mobilization in response to rape cases in India. While high-profile incidents generate significant outrage and media attention, while other various cases ,fade into obscurity. This disparity is largely influenced by factors such as media portrayal, the intensity of public response, and the manner in which authorities handle such cases.

The emphasis on high-profile cases blurs the broader issue of sexual violence that affects women across all societal strata. Addressing these divergence requires a concerted effort from various sectors, including media, government, and educational institutions, to create a more equitable society where all victims receive the attention and justice they deserve.

Ultimately, it is crucial to ensure public engagement and accountability in all cases, rather than just those that attract media frenzy. This calls for a shift from episodic outrage to a consistent commitment to justice, demanding that every case is treated with the same level of seriousness it deserves.

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