

## MEDIA COVERAGE OF CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

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### INTRODUCTION

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In most societies, women –regardless of race, nationality, class or age– are victims of physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence, or even of femicide. Gender-based violence is the main obstacle to the achievement of women’s and girl’s human rights. As this is a structural problem, directly linked to the sustaining of patriarchy, international, regional and national organization(s) have called attention to the responsibility that key institutions have to eliminate gender-based violence. One of these actors is media industries. Media has an influence on knowledge, thought, and expression of violence against women, it has led to the sexual inequality problem and the mentioned violence continuing in society.

Language is the agent to transmit the thinking system, values, and culture as sexual inequality in the social structure. Language was used as a regulator to drive some thought and expression and may hide the thought and expression at the same time. Media in its manipulative language has over time sensationalized and wrote derogatory interpretation of women and her character. Three decades ago violence against women didn’t attract any significant attention either internationally or domestic i.e. nation-states, but overtime with gender concept and awareness of the plight of the female gender across cultures all over the world, particularly in 1980’s, when women groups were organized locally and at international level to set the agenda on violence against women as a “legitimate human rights issue”. To this effect there have been sustained concerns by the international community on violence against women in the different spheres of social interaction which is society wide and in specific local space which are domestic, occupational and cultural spaces that violence against women mostly occur.

We are not arguing that viewing violent media makes a person violent – there is not a direct causal relationship. However, humans are affected by their surroundings, and media is one of the ways that society expresses its norms and expectations, and thus, it is one of the ways that we are enculturated. But certainly a check and balance has to be put into force.

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### THE PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: THE CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

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“Gender violence is as old as humanity it is only in the past decade that it has been publically recognized, systematically studied, and legislated against to any significant degree. In the 1990’s, such violence finally gained currency on the international level with its recognition as a human rights issue. This is a welcome news and most of the credit goes to women’s

group that have struggled against enormous odds to bring the issue to the light” But this is no reason for complacency. Recent studies suggest that certain form of violence against women is on the rise for gender violence in all its varied manifestations is not random and it is not about just the sex. It serves a deliberate social function asserting control over women’s lives and keeping them as second class citizens. Dividing violence against women into two levels: personal violence and structural violence. Personal violence is visible in actions such as physical battering, rape, or sexual harassment. Structural violence is invisible but engrained in the social structure and related through norms, thoughts, and beliefs, and is then blended and transferred to other generations through the socialization patterns, such as the values of men’s and women’s roles, women’s images, the role of the wife etc., and automatically affects the anticipation of violence of receivers.<sup>1</sup>

Talking about India, on a broad scale, India maintains high rates of violence against women, gender hierarchies and marginalization of women. The examination of these rates leads to consideration of the cultural and socioeconomic circumstances as causative factors. However, before making this claim, it is necessary to question the feasibility and ethics of this examination. Is it right, if at all possible, to blame Indian society and culture for the presence of violence against women? Can we pragmatically speak of Indian culture as one entity? Is gender hierarchy an essential component of India, or can we remove violence while maintaining Indian uniqueness? In order to strengthen my argument, I will pursue these questions and their associated opposing claims. In speaking of traditional and modern Indian culture, one must take into account the enormous size and diversity of the Indian country. It is near impossible to define an exclusively “Indian culture” due to the geographical differences in religion, language, cultural nuances, socioeconomic level, etc. Even minor generalizations in a population of India’s size disregard the diversity of millions of Indian citizens. Some suggest that many of the current issues surrounding violence against women are not uniquely Indian, but rather are characteristics of patriarchal societies internationally. More specifically, “regressive social codes that disproportionately penalize women are not unique to India, and have been a social hurdle in all countries when it came to extending political, legal, and economic rights to women” .Statistics across the globe follow suit, showing gender gaps in the literacy rate, an extremely low sex ratio, and high instances of domestic abuse. However, by making this claim, this argument unintentionally offers excuses for Indian violence, nearly normalizing the current crisis by relating it to several other recognized countries. In this way, the claim fails to hold Indians and Indian cultural practices accountable.<sup>2</sup>

The United Nations is interested in the concept of violence against women as a pattern of discrimination and human rights threats to women though its declaration on the elimination of violence against women at the United Nations General Assembly on

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos A. Cuevas, Callie Marie Rennison, *The Wiley Handbook On the Psychology of Violence 197* (Bogard, 1988)

<sup>2</sup> Reid, Penny, and Gillian Finchilescu, “*The Disempowering Effects of Media Violence Against Women on College Women.*” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (1995)

December 20, 1993 (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). The declaration summarized concerns that violence against women will be a barrier to fulfill humanity's goals of equality, development, and peace. Violence is also a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women. He noted that violence against women is a phenomenon of the basic power relationship between men and women which is unequal. This phenomenon causes further domination by men and discrimination against women and has interrupted women's improvement. It is also clear that violence against women is one of the savage social mechanisms that affect women's status making them inferior to men. In the past two decades, there have been many research studies about violence against women, named variously as violence against women, sexual violence, and gender violence. The key to any study is to set the appropriate topic, reflect the right message, propose a definition of violence, and follow the direction of feminism. Existing discriminatory laws, lack of support system for survivors of trafficking, and lack of specific laws on sexual assaults have further aided the rise in violence against women. Due to murder, rape, sexual abuse, battering, mental torture and various other kinds of violence, women of every community, class, level and economic status were being deprived from the rights of living with dignity.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the demand that living free from violence is women's human rights had been raised globally.

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### WOMEN AND MEDIA: TURMOIL & DISGUISE

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The image of gender in the present times has undergone a significant change from the traditional constructs. However, the same value system of the society remains somewhere in women's depiction in the media. Women are being portrayed in a stereotyped way. The women's issues are being suppressed and marginalized. They are supposed to be silent and not to remonstrate against the violence and exploitations they go through. Their talent is being devalued and body is being commoditized or commercialized. Before we consider the media's role further, it is worth establishing the relative position and status of men and women in the present democratic society. "Men and women generally have equal rights in every steps of life according to the law. But our modern westernized society is an odd mix of equality and inequality. Women and men may feel equal, but at the same time are aware that this is a kind of inaccurate". The media draws from a ready reservoir of gender differentiating stereotypes, myths, legends and symbols. This becomes more dangerous when it is represented by a media that is considered egalitarian and secular since no filters are used while decoding their message. Subtle stereotyping is more insidious as it is relatively more invisible but nonetheless demeaning and patronizing. The media, as an important agent of socialization in the modern world, either support or contest cultural conceptions, and have a significant impact on the social construction of gender. "The media's effects operate at the level of gender belief systems, affecting individual beliefs and opinions about males and females, and about the purported qualities of masculinity and

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<sup>3</sup> DREW HUMPHRIES , WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND THE MEDIA: READINGS IN FEMINIST CRIMINOLOGY 192 (2009)

femininity. The mass media have been found to play a critical role in maintaining the gender-power imbalance, passing on dominant, patriarchal/sexist values”

“Theorists have also argued that the media contributes to the perpetuation of sexual assault because it commodifies women’s bodies”<sup>4</sup>. We argue that sex is merely a commodity. Youth of the Nation are bombarded by the culture that sexualizes commodities and commodifies women’s sexuality. Media plays an important role in this act of sale and resale of women’s commodification. Media content reproduces sexist stereotypes that associate male identity with violence, domination, independence, aggression and power, while women are depicted as emotional, vulnerable and sensitive, and dependent upon male actions. Women are usually stereotyped as sexual objects or even as mere body parts and term it ‘modernization’. Only 24% of news subjects are women, 76% are men. Representation of gender in news is associated with relations of domination and subordination: whereas men are represented as sportsmen, politicians and businessmen, women are represented as vox populi –that is to say, they use to be associated to the lack of status and power<sup>5</sup>

It's hard to pinpoint the exact point in the history of media when it became okay to report situations of crimes against women with absolutely no thought to the dignity of the subject herself. And worse, it is especially considered fair game if the woman in question is on the wrong side of the law. As an observant person, one can instantly recognize this to be one of "those" stories — the kind that draw in readers in large numbers. A tragedy that can be retold in a number of ways to ascertain "maximum mileage" out of. It is shameful to admit that a large part of our media industry has fallen prey to the lure of the "readership trap"; reporting stories not to inform but to feed the human desire for gory and insensitive details.

One of the first things you learn in a journalism school is to report by a pre-decided style-book, a certain set of rules prepared by every media organisation on the nuances of how a certain story is told. This style-sheet is usually considered to be a holy book for newsroom storytellers, guiding the little details in language and grammar of any copy. But unfortunately, while this newsroom bible can tell you how you should spell a word, it offers no direction on how you should protect it. And so with as little style-sheet errors as possible, the self-regulated Indian media industry has gone ahead and made some of the biggest blunders in journalism history. Despite our press freedoms, we have failed to draw ethical boundaries on what is appropriate while reporting a story that involves a woman's dignity. I say "woman's dignity" not because I consider the dignity of a man any less, but because it is imperative to recognise the patriarchal order of the present Indian society and how vulnerable a "woman's dignity" remains within it. This actually brings up a key point that might help understand this perspective a little better. While the media, to a very large extent is free and self-regulated, it is not impervious to the larger cultural influence, and more often than not this seeps into the reporting that you see every day. Even the most

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<sup>4</sup> Katharine K. Baker, *Once A Rapist? Motivational Evidence and Relevancy in Rape Law*, 110 Harv. L. Rev. 563 (1997)

<sup>5</sup> Michael & Bob Pease “Factors Influencing Attitudes to Violence Against Women.” *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 124-125 (2009)

liberal of media organizations at some point dish stories that assert cultural bias. It has become a norm for the media to be judgmental of every situation. And they instead of providing raw facts, provide the general viewers the 'sensationalized' facts. Newsrooms are witness to an ongoing struggle over ethical coverage of a potentially "viral" story. But the fact that there is even a conflict on what's defined as ethical and not, says a lot about the mindsets in an Indian newsroom.

How far we have, as a community of the free press, drifted from unbiased and ethical coverage that respects all aspects of human dignity. As stated earlier, there is no one right way of reporting crimes against women, but there are plenty of ways to do it wrong. At this point, we would say that 'reducing women to sexual objects and making them available for consumption through communication and information technologies seems to be one of the most dramatic expressions of the digital age'

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## WOMEN, VIOLENCE & GENDERED MEDIA

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Hard News sell and so does violence, which is considered primarily as a hard news-value. In today's globalizing world, information (such as news) is heavily commoditized, far exceeding the thresholds set in the earlier half of the last century. News business is rapidly driven by hard news-values, such as the nature, cause and the brutality of violence (but certainly not limited to these). More so, the journalistic code of ethics, media's responsibility toward societies etc., are becoming volatile, passé constructs to many media practitioners. Violence does not only leave its indentations on news stories and features, but also on various contents of today's popular media. Films from Hollywood, Bollywood and even some of today's popular TV soaps contain elements of violence, to varying extents of course. Action-films register more clicks on Box-office ratings than does films of other genres. We also find an increasing amount of violence shown on television; every soap aired on television deals with revenge, greed, deceit and diabolical plots. The visual media, be it television or cinema, is a very powerful vehicle for communicating ideas and images. It creates a pseudo-reality; a realm which seems very real and the audience are unable to differentiate between the constructed, reel world and the real one. We are given simplistic solutions to complex issues by the media, rather than bolstering ourselves to search for more robust, holistic remedies. Thus, we are posed with a serious question: Whether or not popular media encourage, if not cause, crime, violence, adultery, and aggressive, anti-social and even criminal behavior?

So far, research has not been able to find a direct causality between exposures to mediated acts of violence and aggressive, criminal behavior. The American Psychological Association concluded that "there is absolutely no doubt that those who are heavy viewers of TV violence demonstrate increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior". But this statement does not confirm the existence of a causal link. However, there is a general consensus amongst researchers that exposure to mediated acts of violence

leads to a general desensitization' in audiences; "it lowers inhibitions against and increases tolerance of violent behavior"<sup>6</sup>

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## MEDIA'S CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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Misogyny is defined as "hatred of women." Interestingly, *miso* in Greek not only means "hatred", it also means "half." If we apply this definition to the way women are presently being depicted in the media—in many movies, television shows, cartoons, music videos, and even comic books—it is clear that women are presented as half-human and objectified. If a woman is looked upon as an object, without feelings, life, soul, or thoughts, then it is easy to ingest images of her that defy her humanity. She is not a woman—a living creature with human attributes. She is merely a body, a vacant, empty, vessel intended to contain the needs of others—preferably men—and her body, which is the most desired aspect of her existence, perfect, lithe, smooth and hair-free, is open for interpretation and domination. In 'Where the Girls Are', Susan J. Douglas recounts the various methods used by the entertainment industry to exploit women and observes that we "continue to live with media images not of our making, so, on some level, we will always feel like outsiders looking in at a culture that regards us as unknowable, mysterious, laughable, other ... wooed as consumers, yet rejected as people"

As shown over the media, the woman on screen is mute. She functions but cannot express herself. In particular, she cannot express her personal experience in ways readily understandable to others. She suffers in silence for this. She strikes back but cannot explain or defend herself. For this she is in imminent danger to get destroyed. This relates to the issue of silencing of women in the real life. They prefer to keep mum rather than speaking out and revealing their problems which they face. And we tag all this as the 'creative expression' from the side of Media. which is not so. Likewise, a portrayal of violence against women tends to increase men's acceptance of interpersonal violence, and especially in the case of sexual violence, may increase their acceptance of rape myths<sup>7</sup>. This has been shown for multiple media types. Viewing violence against women, however, may increase a woman's feelings of disempowerment, it all depends on how the violence is portrayed. If it is shown to have negative consequences such as in crimes shows where rape and violence are punished, there is fewer acceptances of rape myths.<sup>8</sup> Portraying women as sex object as in pornography, revealing the name of rape victims and disrespecting the dignity of abused survivors, the portraying women in seducing ways through advertisements and the cheap reporting of so called 'wardrobe malfunctions'. These activities have been shown to be harmful for the individual women involved and have a negative impact on the position of all women through the objectification of women's bodies. This happens irrespective of

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<sup>6</sup> Russo, Nancy Felipe and Angela Pirlott. "Gender-Based Violence: Concepts, Methods, And Findings". *Annals of The New York Academy of Sciences*. (2006) .

<sup>7</sup> Fanti, Kostas A, Eric Vanman, Christopher C Henrich, And Marios N Avraamides. , Desensitization To Media Violence Over A Short Period Of Time 99 (1989)

<sup>8</sup> Malamuth, NM, and J Briere. "Sexual Violence in the Media: Indirect Effects on Aggression Against Women." *JOURNAL OF SOCIAL ISSUES* (1986)

whether individual women claim success or empowerment from the activity. It is essential to separate sexual activity from exploitative sexual activity. A sexual activity becomes sexual exploitation if it breaches a person's human right to dignity, equality, respect and physical and mental wellbeing. It becomes commercial sexual exploitation when another person, or group of people, achieves financial gain or advancement through the activity.

Media contradicts itself from the very point that how abusively they report a crime against a women and then ironically pleads before the public to show respect towards the victim.

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## Conclusion

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*“Violence against women and girls is the most pervasive violation of human rights in the world today. Its forms are both subtle and blatant and its impact on development profound. But it is so deeply embedded in cultures around the world that it is almost invisible. Yet this brutality is not inevitable. Once recognized for what it is—a construct of power and a means of maintaining the status quo—it can be dismantled”*<sup>9</sup>

It is estimated that 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual at some point in their lives.<sup>10</sup> The media have the capacity to play a role in maintaining a masculinity representation of violence against women and act in myriad ways to perpetuate ambiguity and ambivalence concerning the definition, the dynamics and the harms of family violence and sexual assault. Media also have the capacity to effect change. The qualitative analysis has shown that there are some news stories that appear to be framed in a non-sensationalistic manner and may be reporting the social context in which men perpetrate violence, thereby repudiating mythology and stereotypes.

Media projects women are cornered in the world of beauty and in the house hold space. The intensifying and insensible impact of these media messages, or lack thereof, can very often worsen gender discrimination/ stereotyping. Media held a mirror that exposed the ills of society. Though cases of violence against women have always existed, the media is one of the major tools to play an important role in taking up the issues. The role of media is crucial to the issue of violence against women; both in terms of how media cover the issue and how media may be used as a tool to help activists and governments raise awareness and implement programs on this issue. From an analysis of the discourse on violence against women in the mass media, academics should be aware of the influence of the mass media and find appropriate approaches for positive social change. This would create a movement towards the correct understanding, a change from a patriarchy system to human

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Bunch, *The Intolerable Status Quo: Violence against Women and Girls*, UNICEF 1 (2009)

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization, Department of Reproductive Health and Research, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, South African Medical Research Council (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*, p.2. For individual country information, see *The World's Women 2015, Trends and Statistics*, Chapter 6, Violence against Women, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2015.

rights awareness of sexual equality, by using the mass media to support women's power in negotiations with the patriarchy and other influential forces acting against women and her rights. Violence against women and girls is a public issue, as is the debate about the responsibility of media industries with respect to this issue. The growth of gender-based violence shows its mechanisms are more sophisticated than they were in the past, as are the forms of representing it in media content.