

Sexual Violence Against Women in India: Daily Life and Coping Strategies of Young Women in Delhi

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

This study assesses the current situation concerning sexual violence against women in India and women's individual coping strategies. We conducted 15 semistructured interviews with 17- to 22-year-old Indian college students. First, results about the current situation showed threatening circumstances for women and revealed how deeply sexual violence affects women's lives. Second, to cope with sexual violence women mentioned three types of strategies, namely (a) safety, (b) avoidance, and (c) empowerment strategies. In the discussion, we suggest that women's use of safety and avoidance strategies are safety behaviors that play a key role in maintaining women's fear and societal dynamics.

Keywords

sexual violence, violence against women, India, individual coping strategies

Introduction

While sexual violence constitutes a universal and global phenomenon that affects men as well as women (Basile et al., 2006), data on the prevalence of sexual violence indicates that women are more frequently affected than men (Decker et al., 2014). In the present study, sexual violence is defined according to the definition of Basile, Smith, Breiding, Black, and Mahendra (2014) as a range of behaviors, including nonconsensual

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sexual acts (e.g., rape), attempted nonconsensual sexual acts or abusive sexual contact (e.g., unwanted touching), and noncontact sexual abuse (e.g., threatened sexual violence or verbal sexual harassment). Sexual violence not only represents a tremendous violation of human rights but also has a profound negative impact on the physical and mental health of women (Campbell, 2002; Krahe, Tomaszewska, Kuyper, & Vanwesenbeeck, 2014). Sexual victimization can lead to an increased risk of sexual and reproductive health problems (Jewkes, Sen, & Garcia-Moreno, 2002) as well as mental disorders, including depression to the point of suicidality (Basile et al., 2006).

In recent years, the issue of sexual violence against women in India has received worldwide media attention due to the fatal gang rape of a student in New Delhi. The student was raped on a bus by a group of men and died from her injuries a few days after the incident (Raj & McDougal, 2014). The crime shocked and concerned people all over the world (Talwar, 2013). Thus, a societal discussion on sexual violence has emerged, and the victim of the 2012 December gang rape, referred to in the media as Nirbhaya (meaning “fearless”), has become a symbol of the struggle to end sexual violence against women in India (Shandilya, 2015; Talwar, 2013). Despite the current media attention and the resulting impression that sexual violence has become a prevailing issue overnight, sexual violence against women is, in reality, not a new phenomenon in India (Kimuna, Djamba, Ciciurkaite, & Cherukuri, 2012; Saravanan, 2000). Sharma (2005) stated that sexual violence against women in India emerges from patriarchal notions of men’s ownership over women’s bodies, sexuality, mobility, and autonomy. Thus, sexual violence against women is sometimes even accepted and tolerated as a part of family life in India (Satish Kumar, Gupta, & Abraham, 2002). However, the occurrence of sexual violence against women is not limited to the private sphere. In fact, figures indicate that the prevalence of sexual violence against women in public—for instance, verbal sexual harassment and unwanted touching—is even higher (Akhtar, 2013; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). Yet, despite the media coverage on brutal rapes in India (e.g., Yee, 2013), relatively little is known about how Indian women perceive the current situation and how they try to protect themselves from this assumed to be terrifying state of affairs. Consequently, the objective of the present study is to explore how Indian women perceive the current situation of sexual violence against women in India and to identify what impact it has on their daily lives. The study further aims to investigate women’s ideas about individual strategies to cope with the present situation, especially sexual violence in public.

Public Sexual Violence Against Women in India

This article focuses on how women in India perceive the threat of sexual violence outside the home. Considering this aspect, sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of sexual violence in the public setting (Anagol-McGinn, 1994). The term *sexual harassment* refers to verbal assaults (e.g., making a pass or an unwanted sexual comment), nonverbal assaults (e.g., staring, whistling, or making an obscene gesture), and physical assaults (e.g., pinching or rubbing against a woman; Akhtar, 2013;

Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). In fact, these forms of sexual violence in public are extremely prevalent in India (United Nations Women, 2013). Dhillon and Bakaya (2014) confirmed that in India sexual harassment of women by male strangers in public spaces is a widespread and serious problem. Many incidents of sexual harassment take place during the day on roads and on public transportation (Jagori, 2011), and they happen to women of all social and economic classes (Akhtar, 2013). A study by the Gender Study Group (1996) of the University of Delhi revealed that 91.7% of women hostellers and 88.2% of women day-scholars have faced sexual harassment on the campus roads of Delhi University. In the study by Dhillon and Bakaya (2014), women described street harassment as extremely prevalent, and women perceived that they experienced public sexual harassment 50% to 100% of the time they were in public. Ramasubramanian and Oliver (2003) further described that 90% of female college students in New Delhi reported the experience of sexual harassment.

In the Indian literature, most authors refer to public sexual harassment as *eve-teasing* (Akhtar, 2013; Anagol-McGinn, 1994; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Gangoli, 2007). *Eve-teasing* is a culture-specific “Indian-English” term and is mostly used within Indian society to allude to public sexual harassment, such that the term *eve-teasing* is often used interchangeably with sexual harassment, even though sexual harassment is a form of sexual violence. Because “eve-teasing” represents a euphemistic expression for sexual harassment, it is profoundly problematic; it trivializes sexual harassment as playful teasing and places the responsibility of harassment on women as temptresses who provoke men (Gangoli, 2007). To understand the occurrence of public sexual violence against women, the next sections present several root causes of sexual violence against women in India, namely patriarchal values and traditional gender roles, the patriarchal backlash against growing empowerment of women, and the taboo of sexuality and sexual violence in Indian society.

Patriarchal Values and Traditional Gender Roles

Although there is substantial evidence that India has been undergoing many changes in recent decades (Simister & Mehta, 2010), India remains a largely male-dominated and patriarchal society (Gupta, 1994; Kimuna et al., 2012; Sharma, 2005). Patriarchy describes a cultural construct of male dominance and power, granting men the privilege to direct women’s lives while putting women in a subordinate and disempowered position (Kandiyoti, 1988). If widely shared, patriarchal norms reflect a gender inequality at the societal level that contributes to creating power hierarchies where men are perceived as superior compared with women (Sharma, 2005). Patriarchal norms can even result in the legitimization of sexual violence by men and the subtle acceptance of sexual violence by women as part of their everyday lives and relationships (Kimuna et al., 2012).

According to Simister (2012), these sociocultural factors are closely connected to gender role socialization in India. Gender role socialization describes the process of learning the social expectations and attitudes that are associated with one’s gender. The acceptance of traditional gender roles is one risk factor related to sexual violence

(Lichter & McCloskey, 2004). While men in India seem to undergo a socialization process in which they internalize gender role stereotypes like domination and control, women seem to internalize those of submission and dependence (Saravanan, 2000). Gender role stereotypes are cultural beliefs that reflect the societal understanding of male and female, and they are mostly transferred across generations and learned mainly informally from different sources such as parents, peers, teachers, and the mass media (Macrae, Stangor, & Hewstone, 1996). According to Saravanan (2000), a girl in India is exposed to gender differences from the time of birth and is socialized by her family, by the community, and even by the state to accept hierarchical relations. These gender roles emphasize patriarchy, power relations, and hierarchical constructions of masculinity and femininity and contribute to the problem of sexual violence against women in India.

Growing Empowerment of Women and the Patriarchal Backlash

Several authors have argued that sexual violence occurs significantly more often in the presence of certain risk factors and significantly less often in the presence of protective factors (Jewkes et al., 2002; Sen, 1998). The term *risk factor* describes factors increasing a person's risk of sexual victimization, including social and environmental factors (Jewkes et al., 2002). For instance, the maintenance of patriarchy or male dominance in a society, as mentioned above, is generally considered a risk factor associated with the occurrence of sexual violence (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). In contrast, protective factors decrease the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence (Koenig, Stephenson, Ahmed, Jejeebhoy, & Campbell, 2006). Sen (1998) argued that education in general can serve as a protective factor for women's risk of experiencing violence. Thus, if women get access to education and wage labor, they should become empowered and less vulnerable to falling victim to sexual violence. However, other authors in India and elsewhere (e.g., Lodhia, 2014; Momsen, 2006; Simister & Mehta, 2010; Trivedi, 2010) have argued that if women become empowered and start to take a much larger role in society, which thereby challenges traditional gender roles, this may cause tension within the society that, in turn, results in increased sexual violence against women. In the literature, this phenomenon is called patriarchal backlash (Lodhia, 2014; Momsen, 2006; Simister & Mehta, 2010; Trivedi, 2010). Thus, the patriarchal backlash represents an increase in sexual violence against women by men to retain traditional gender roles and to regain control (Lodhia, 2014; Simister & Mehta, 2010). In fact, Simister and Mehta (2010) observed that as Indian women have gained more liberty, the prevalence of violence against women has increased. Similarly, Lodhia (2014) explained that if women in India challenged traditional gender roles, men would feel threatened and deprived, afraid of losing their control and domination over women.

Consequently, the patriarchal backlash might be another factor beyond patriarchal norms that is driving the high prevalence of sexual violence against women in public spaces in India. Gangoli (2007) argued that men use public sexual harassment to control women who leave the private sphere. In patriarchal societies, women are usually

discouraged from leaving the house on the pretext that women need to be protected and that public places are dangerous for women. However, because of the recent modernization of Indian society, women's mobility and their presence in public places has increased. According to several Indian authors (e.g., Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Saravanan, 2000), men may use sexual harassment against women in public to make them feel inferior and to keep them in the domestic sphere. This goes along with the findings from one of the first Indian studies on public sexual harassment by Anagol-McGinn (1994). Therein, Anagol-McGinn (1994) identified that one explanation for sexual harassment was men's anger at women's societal mobility. In that context, women who traveled alone in public were considered rebels against traditional gender roles, and they were thereby sexually harassed by men aiming to regain control (Anagol-McGinn, 1994).

Taboo of Sexuality and Sexual Violence in Indian Society

Another factor that might influence the occurrence of sexual violence against women in India is the representation of sexuality in society. In India, sexuality is taboo, especially premarital sex (Abraham & Kumar, 1999; Aggarwal, Sharma, & Chhabra, 2000; Deway, 2009; Tikoo, Bollman, & Bergen, 1995). Abraham and Kumar (1999) noted that due to strict social norms and gender segregation, sexual behavior among adolescents and premarital sexual relationships are proscribed. Tikoo and colleagues (1995) further stated that in India, sexuality is not openly discussed within the family. George and Jaswal (1995) found that mothers refused to discuss issues related to sexuality and reproduction with their daughters, considering it to be distasteful and embarrassing. Instead, mothers wanted their adolescent children to stay uninformed about sex-related issues (George & Jaswal, 1995). Gupta (1994) also stated that in Indian culture, public demonstrations of affection between partners are viewed as inappropriate. The common view in India of sex as taboo is further demonstrated by the reluctance of making sex education part of the school curriculum (Phadke, 2005). Similar to how sex-related issues are not discussed within the family, implementing sex education in educational systems is a highly sensitive topic (Gabler, 2012). Thus, due to the lack of sex education in the Indian school system and the reluctance of parents to impart relevant information about sexuality, adolescents use other sources of information, such as friends or the media (Aggarwal et al., 2000; Gabler, 2012). Aggarwal and colleagues (2000) reported that the three most common sources of information about sex among adolescents in India were friends (74.5%), pornographic films (56.2%), and magazines or books (55.1%), even though these sources likely provide highly questionable information. Consequently, Gabler (2012) stated that because of adolescents' limited knowledge, there is huge uncertainty around sex-related issues as well as unawareness and misinformation about sexuality. This, in turn, increases women's vulnerability to sexual violence (Santhya & Jejeebhoy, 2007) and is even more problematic in India, as sexual activity might occur relatively early during adolescence due to early marriages (Jejeebhoy, 1998).

However, it is not just human sexuality alone that remains taboo in India; according to the International Institute for Population Sciences (2007), there is a culture of silence around sexual violence as well. In the context of public sexual harassment in India, the societal taboo of sexuality and sexual violence might be a further explanation for the high prevalence of sexual violence in public spaces. Saravanan (2000) stated that sexual harassment of women in public spaces might be due to the inability of men to communicate with women. In fact, discussions about romance and sexuality in Indian society and between the sexes are considered inappropriate and remain taboo (Chakraborty & Thakurata, 2013). In addition, Sodhi and Verma (2003) explained that in India, men and women are not allowed to interact freely without being married. In this context, communication between men and women is seriously impaired, and some men might consider eve-teasing as the only possible way to show interest in a woman (Sodhi & Verma, 2003). Furthermore, in Indian pop culture, such as Hindi films, eve-teasing is not presented as a crime but as an act of love. It is, in fact, the most common form of sexual violence depicted in Hindi films (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003). According to Saravanan (2000), this results in a misunderstanding of abuse as love and the legitimization of male domination and power over women. Considering the root causes of sexual violence against women in India as presented above, the Nirbhaya case represents one of the most terrifying examples how these factors may actually lead to sexual violence.

The Nirbhaya Case

The Nirbhaya case, one of the most famous cases of sexual violence against women in India, has not only revealed a threatening situation for women, but it has also shown how deeply patriarchal values and the low social status of women are engrained in Indian society (Lodhia, 2015). Thus, in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case, several politicians started to blame the victim for being raped and for her own death (see Goodman & González, 2013; MacAskill, 2013). For instance, the victim of the gang rape was blamed by politicians for being out late at night with her male friend and was therefore depicted as asking for trouble (Goodman & González, 2013). The assumption that women who are out late at night are asking for trouble represents a form of victim blaming. According to the Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime (CRCVC; 2009), the term *victim blaming* describes the devaluing act of blaming victims themselves for a crime that was actually committed against them. Thus, it was alleged that women like the victim of the Delhi gang rape were sending men the wrong signals because of their Westernized dress and behavior (MacAskill, 2013).

However, even if the Nirbhaya case has revealed a concerning situation, positive changes have been observed as well. Lodhia (2015) described social changes in the form of protests for women's rights that were carried out by both women and men. One of the most significant changes has affected the legal framework in India. Due to many protests and strong public outrage in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case, the Indian government passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, publicly known

as the “Anti Rape Law.” One significant shift that resulted, for example, was that in the new law a lack of physical struggle does not imply consent (Lodhia, 2015).

Despite these positive changes, the cultural factors that facilitate the occurrence of sexual violence against women in India will not disappear overnight. In addition, recent newspaper articles still indicate a threatening situation for women in India (e.g., Yee, 2013). However, apart from the study by Dhillon and Bakaya (2014) on street sexual harassment of women in Delhi, little is known about the actual situation for women and how they cope with sexual violence in their daily lives. Thus, the present study aims to shed light on the current situation for women in India and their individual coping strategies. Against this background, the following main research questions were derived.

Research Question 1: What is the current situation in India concerning sexual violence against women?

Research Question 2: What are women’s ideas about individual strategies to prevent themselves from falling victim to sexual violence?

To address these research questions, the first author conducted problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 1989) with female college students in New Delhi that were then analyzed based on principles of qualitative content analysis.

Method

Participants

The sample of the present study consists of 15 young women aged between 17 and 22 years ($M = 20$, $SD = 1.36$) residing in Delhi. Nine women were born and raised in Delhi, whereas the other six women were born in another state of India and moved to Delhi later in their lives. All women were students at the Lady Irwin College in New Delhi and came from middle- and upper middle-class families. Most of the women (73.3%) were members of the Hindu religion. One woman was Muslim, two women were Sikhs, and another woman was of the Jain religion. The sample was recruited through personal contact on the campus of the Lady Irwin College in New Delhi.

Procedure

For the present study, problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 1989) with Indian women were conducted. As sexual violence is a sensitive topic (Cook, Gidycz, Koss, & Murphy, 2011) and to avoid additional traumatization of former victims of sexual violence, the questions in the interview guide were formulated and asked from a bystander perspective (e.g., “Which strategies do you know that women use to prevent themselves from falling victim to sexual violence?”). It was important to us that participants did not feel under pressure to divulge any personal experiences they did not want to reveal. The interview guide consisted of two main parts: First, it asked about

the current situation in India concerning sexual violence against women, and second, it inquired about women's ideas on individual prevention strategies. The first part was introduced by the key question "What is the current situation concerning sexual violence against women in India?" and the second part was introduced by the key question "What could women do to help prevent themselves from falling victim to sexual violence?"

Data Collection

Prior to the data collection, the interview guide was piloted with three students of the Lady Irwin College in September 2015 and subsequently revised. The main data collection took place from September to November 2015. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews. As all participants were bilingual, the interviews were conducted in English. At the beginning of each interview session, participants were informed about the research project, asked for their permission to audiotape the interview, and asked to sign a consent form. At the end of the interview, demographic data were collected. Finally, women were given an information sheet about help lines and information centers.

Coding and Analyses

Data from the present study were analyzed using qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (2010, 2014). In the present study, the interview records of students formed the basis of analysis and were transcribed based on the transcription rules of Kuckartz (2010). In the next step, the concrete plan of analysis was defined. In the case of an explorative research design based on a predefined interview guide, as in the present study, Mayring (2014) proposed a combination of deductive and inductive procedures for analysis, namely a content structuring/theme analysis. In the first step, relevant text material was identified for each research question, that is, per interview topic. In the second step, the material was reduced by inductive category formation. This started with defining coding units (Krippendorff, 1980). A coding unit is the smallest component of a text that can be coded. In the present study, the coding unit was defined as a word. In the next step, the material was read line by line and categories were formulated with regard to the level of abstraction. The level of abstraction determines the generalization or specification of the category formulation (e.g., "restrictions" vs. "restrictions on mobility"). After initially categorizing the content on a rather specific level, more abstract categories were constructed by integration. This process followed an iterative process, arriving at the final coding scheme, including specific coding rules and anchors. Furthermore, as categories occurred repeatedly across interviews, we followed Mayring's (2014) suggestion and further analyzed frequency data. More specifically, two aspects were considered for frequency analysis: first, the absolute number of occurrences across interviews, and second, the number of students mentioning the category at least once.

In the present study, the qualitative data were coded using MAXQDA, version 12. Finally, as the last step of analysis, Mayring (2010, 2014) proposed applying content-analytical quality criteria in the form of interrater reliability. Interrater reliability describes “the comparison of two analysts coding the same material” (Mayring, 2014, p. 109). In the present study, a second analyst coded 20% of the material (i.e., three interviews) independently based on the final category system. We then compared the results of the two analysts with regard to identifying relevant text material (percentage agreements > 89%) and the actual classification of text material to the categories of the final category system by the coefficient kappa ($kappas > .90$, further details below), according to Brennan and Prediger (1981).

Results

Current Situation Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women— Women’s Daily Life

Analyses of students’ responses concerning women’s daily life resulted in six categories: (a) restrictions on mobility, education, sexuality, and clothing; (b) women’s constant concern about safety and their fear of sexual violence; (c) the protectionist attitudes of families; (d) the societal pressure and victim-blaming mentality in Indian society; (e) the perceived dangerousness of public spaces; and (f) the resulting impact of sexual violence on women’s daily lives (see Table 1). For further examination, categories were analyzed according to their frequency of occurrence in the material.

The most frequently mentioned category was *restrictions on mobility/education/sexuality/clothing*. All students named at least one restriction on mobility, education, sexuality, or clothing that arose from women’s fear of falling victim to sexual violence. A further examination of the interview material with regard to the four different types of restrictions showed that the restriction on mobility occurred as the most frequent type of restriction. In this context, a 21-year-old student described the restriction on mobility as “the inability to move around freely.” A 20-year-old student explained that “women in India are not allowed to be out of their places after a certain point of time. Like if you take our college only, after seven, girls living in hostel are not allowed to go out.” Another statement from a 21-year-old student showed a link between restrictions on mobility and the protectionist attitudes of families and their concern about their daughters’ safety. The student stated that “parents don’t allow the girl to stay late until night. . . . They don’t allow them to go here and there like any places.”

However, parents were not the only ones concerned about their daughters’ safety; students further reported that women themselves were constantly concerned about their own safety and afraid of falling victim to sexual violence. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the second most frequent category occurring in the student interviews was *constant concern about safety/fear of sexual violence*. About 85% of students described women’s constant concern about safety and their fear of sexual violence. A 21-year-old student stated,

Table 1. Frequency Analysis of Categories Regarding the Daily Life of Women.

Daily life of women	N of C	% of C	N of P	% of P
Restrictions on mobility/education/sexuality/ clothing	58	32.2	15	100.0
Constant concern about safety/fear of sexual violence	30	16.7	13	86.7
Protectionist attitude of families	28	15.6	14	93.3
Victim blaming and societal pressure	22	12.2	12	80.0
Perceived dangerousness of public spaces	21	11.7	14	93.3
Impact of sexual violence on daily life	21	11.7	13	86.7
Σ	180	100	15	—

Note. Categories ordered by frequencies; N of C = number of codings (number of occurrences); % of C = percentage of all daily life codings; N of P = number of persons; % of P = percentage of all persons who mentioned the category at least once.

Every girl is scared of even going out like to study. Like when I am leaving my home and going like in the metro. So I am very alert that where should I sit, where should I stand and who are the people around me.

A 22-year-old student said,

Women in India . . . they are doing so many good things. Women, they are empowering themselves. But still there is a fear of becoming a victim of sexual violence. Like every college student . . . when she steps out of her home, then she has to think of herself like how did I dress myself so that I don't feel afraid.

This statement also represents a link between women's constant concern about safety and the fear of falling victim to sexual violence and resulting restrictions, in this specific case, restrictions on women's clothing. Another statement by a 20-year-old student further illustrates the omnipresence of women's fear and concern about safety in their daily lives. She explained that women's fear of falling victim to sexual violence "is in the back of their mind always while they are stepping out. Taking care of themselves. This is one thing that is really always there in the back of their mind."

But as mentioned earlier, students did not describe women as being the only ones afraid; parents were also characterized as being very concerned about their daughters' safety, which results in a protectionist attitude within families and various restrictions regarding women's mobility. Consequently, the category *protectionist attitude among families* was the third most frequent category in the interview materials. A 20-year-old student described,

In my house only, it's like if I am on the metro station, it's like five minutes walking from my house and if I am in the metro station if it's dark outside, my mom will call me, "Stay

on the platform only and I'll call you and then only you'll come down so that I can take you back home."

This statement reveals a link between the protectionist attitudes of families and resulting restrictions on women's mobility. The following statement by a 19-year-old student further illustrates parents' concern about their daughters' safety and its effect on the implementation of restrictions. She explained the protectionist attitudes in families as follows:

Yeah, because they [parents] are concerned. . . . Actually my father, every time he actually tells me that, "We trust you but we do not trust the world, the people who are walking, we do not know them. So just because we want you safe, I want you by this time in our place." So he is like, he is concerned. So it is like, ja, there are restrictions.

Another factor that was found to have a significant effect on women's daily life was the *societal pressure and victim-blaming mentality in Indian society*. Eighty percent of students described that women in India were blamed for the occurrence of sexual violence (e.g., by dressing, according to society, provocatively) or pressured by society to accept restrictions in their daily lives. In this context, a 21-year-old student referred to the Nirbhaya case and explained,

See, I think the community does give restrictions like, I am sure you would have heard about the much talked rape case [Nirbhaya case] that happened. . . . So comments after that came up for like, that girl shouldn't wear such clothes and they were wearing short clothes and that is what is gonna happen.

This statement reveals the victim blaming in Indian society as it was visible in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya case and the pressure that women face if they do not follow the restrictions (e.g., regarding clothing) society imposes on them.

The fifth category that emerged from students' responses was the *perceived dangerousness of public spaces*. Nearly 95% of students stated that they perceived public spaces, especially at night, as extremely dangerous and not safe for women. In this context, a 22-year-old student explained that "it is not safe for a woman to step outside at night." Another 20-year-old-student explained that she thinks it is dangerous to be out at night because there are many men out in public at night. She stated,

Because after seven, it's usually dark and you are more prone to . . . There are more empty places and you are more prone to these things [violent sexual acts]. In India, it is like, dark times is for boys, they will go out at night and they will do their stuff out there.

Students also connected the perceived dangerousness of public spaces with the restrictions on mobility. An 18-year-old student explained that "it is not safe outside. So it is good that we have a deadline for seven o' clock." Taking all these factors together, 87% of students reported that sexual violence highly affects their daily lives. Thus, the

Table 2. Frequency Analysis of Categories Regarding Women's Individual Prevention Strategies.

Individual prevention strategies	Previous				Ideal			
	N of C	% of C	N of P	% of P	N of C	% of C	N of P	% of P
Safety strategies	29	51.8	13	86.7	32	30.8	13	86.7
Pepper spray/sharp objects	8	14.3	7	46.7	11	10.6	6	40.0
Not going out alone	7	12.5	7	46.7	5	4.8	5	33.3
Emergency numbers	6	10.7	5	33.3	7	6.7	6	40.0
Risk assessment	5	8.9	3	20.0	6	5.8	5	33.3
Escape from a situation	2	3.6	2	13.3	2	1.9	2	13.3
Fake phone calls	1	1.8	1	6.7	1	1.0	1	6.7
Avoidance strategies	19	33.9	9	60.0	14	13.5	6	40.0
Avoidance of public spaces	9	16.1	6	40.0	7	6.7	4	26.7
Avoidance of certain timings	4	7.1	3	20.0	5	4.8	5	33.3
Ignoring of sexual violence	3	5.4	3	20.0	1	1.0	1	6.7
Avoidance of attention	3	5.4	2	13.3	1	1.0	1	6.7
Empowerment strategies	8	14.3	7	46.7	58	55.8	14	93.3
Self-defense skills	5	8.9	4	26.7	14	13.5	9	60.0
Sharing experiences	3	5.4	2	13.3	6	5.8	4	26.7
Mental strength	—	—	—	—	20	19.2	10	66.7
Showing self-confidence	—	—	—	—	11	10.6	7	46.7
Education	—	—	—	—	7	6.7	5	33.3
Σ	56	100	15	—	104	100	15	—

Note. Categories ordered by frequencies; N of C = number of codings (number of occurrences); % of C = percentage of all individual prevention strategy codings; N of P = number of persons; % of P = percentage of all persons who mentioned the category at least once.

impact on the daily life of women (general restrictions) appeared as another category in the interviews of students. This category was used if students did not further specify restrictions or just spoke about the huge impact of sexual violence on their daily life in general. For instance, a 21-year-old student explained that “our life is like totally limited. In every way.”

Women's Individual Prevention Strategies

To deal with sexual violence in their daily lives, women reported using different coping strategies, presented in the following section. Analyses of students' responses concerning women's individual prevention strategies were first categorized as either previous (i.e., actually used) or ideal (i.e., theoretical) strategies and resulted in 15

categories (see Table 2). Strategies were then sorted and summarized as safety, avoidance, or empowerment strategies. For further examination, we analyzed categories according to their frequency of occurrence in the material.

The category that students most frequently mentioned in the interviews concerning strategies that women have used was *safety strategies*. Nearly 90% of students named at least one type of safety strategy that women use to prevent falling victim to sexual violence, and more than 50% of the text passages were assigned to this category. Safety strategies include: (a) assessing risk factors (e.g., the dangerousness of certain places) before leaving the house, (b) not going out alone, (c) using emergency/helpline numbers or mobile applications, (d) making fake phone calls (i.e., pretending to be on the phone while using public transportation), (e) carrying pepper spray or a sharp object, and (f) running away or escaping from an assumed dangerous situation. The second most frequent category concerning women's previously used strategies was *avoidance strategies*. Avoidance strategies were mentioned by 60% of women and include: (a) avoiding public spaces, public transportation, or going out in general; (b) avoiding certain times of going out (e.g., late at night); (c) avoiding any kind of attention (e.g., avoiding eye contact or skin exposure); and (d) ignoring sexual violence (e.g., not reacting to a sexually abusive comment). Finally, the least frequent category regarding women's previous individual prevention strategies was *empowerment strategies*. Less than half of the women reported that women use empowerment strategies to protect themselves from falling victim to sexual violence, and less than 15% of text passages were assigned to that category. Empowerment strategies include: (a) practicing and using self-defense skills and trying to achieve a certain level of physical strength; (b) trying to show self-confidence in threatening situations or trying to scream; (c) trying to be mentally strong (e.g., not getting emotional) in perceived dangerous situations; (d) sharing experiences with others, expressing solidarity, and trying to become aware that women of all classes are affected by sexual violence; and (e) getting educated and knowing about personal rights (e.g., civil liberties).

Besides the students' descriptions of women's previous and currently used prevention strategies, students also mentioned ideal strategies, or possibly more effective strategies, to prevent women from falling victim to sexual violence (see Table 2). The analysis of the women's statements regarding ideal individual prevention resulted in a change in the category frequency. Specifically, results showed that the most frequently mentioned category was *empowerment strategies*. More than 90% of students named at least one type of empowerment strategy that women should use to prevent themselves from falling victim to sexual violence. Furthermore, more than 55% of the text passages were assigned to that category. The second most frequently mentioned category was *safety strategies*, which was mentioned by more than 85% of women. Finally, the least frequently mentioned category regarding ideal individual prevention strategies was *avoidance strategies*. Only 40% of students reported that women should use avoidance strategies to protect themselves from falling victim to sexual violence, and less than 14% of the text passages were assigned to that category. We sum up the previously presented empirical results and put them in the context of the theoretical framework in Figure 1.

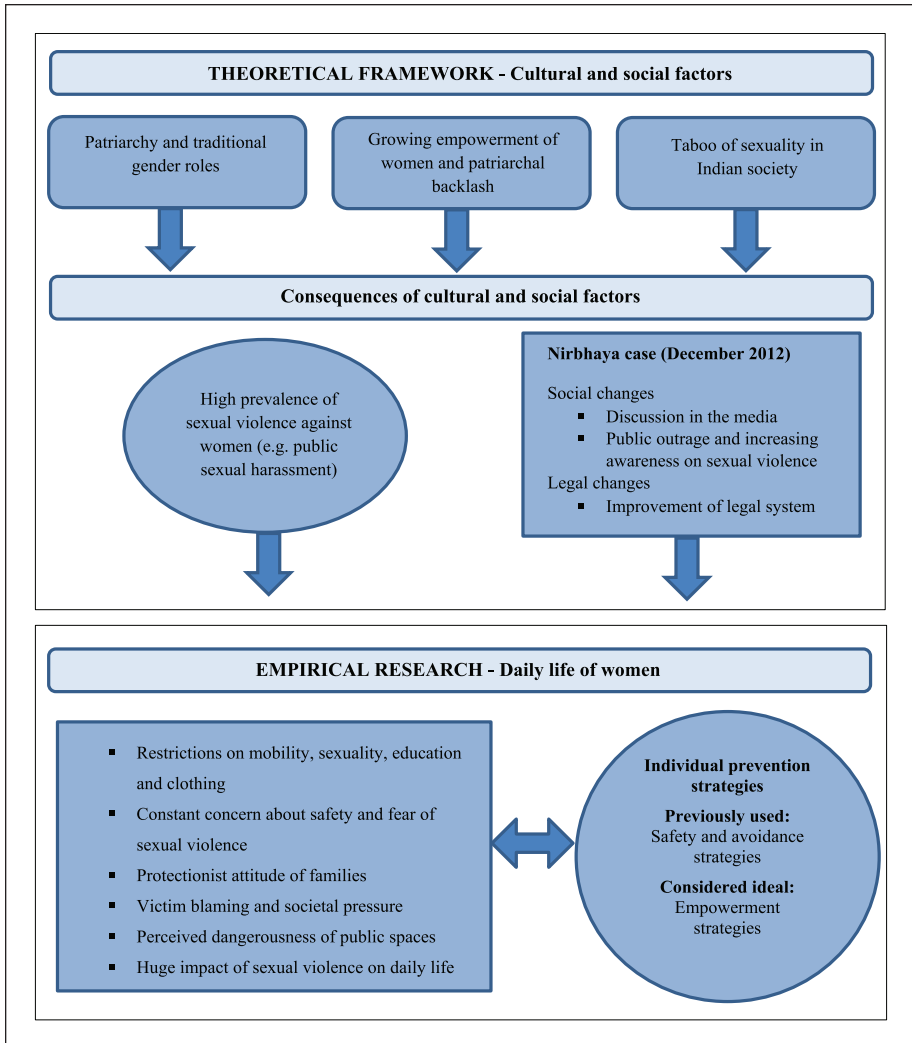


Figure 1. Combined results of the literature research and empirical research on the current situation concerning sexual violence against women and women's individual prevention strategies.

Interrater Reliability

We measured the interrater agreement for each research question. Results for identifying relevant text passages within the students' interview material showed good agreement (percentage-wise) between the two analysts (daily life = 91.4%; women's individual prevention strategies = 89.5%). We measured interrater agreement on the

classification of text passages using as a basis the six categories concerning the daily life of women and the 15 categories of women's individual prevention strategies. Furthermore, we only included text passages that were previously identified by both analysts. Results regarding the classification of text passages showed an almost perfect strength of interrater agreement (see Landis & Koch, 1977) based on the coefficient kappa (daily life: $\kappa = 1$; women's individual prevention strategies: $\kappa = .91$).

Discussion

Current Situation in India Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women

The first research question of the present study addressed the current situation in India concerning sexual violence against women with a special focus on women's daily life. Results of the literature review revealed three different cultural and social factors facilitating the occurrence of sexual violence against women in India, namely (a) patriarchy and traditional gender roles, (b) growing empowerment of women and the patriarchal backlash, and (c) the taboo of sexuality in Indian society (see Figure 1). A high prevalence of sexual violence against women, especially sexual harassment of women in public, was found in previous studies (Akhtar, 2013; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; United Nations Women, 2013). The Nirbhaya case has finally drawn national and international attention to the issue of sexual violence against women in India, and as a result, the current literature has identified many social changes, namely the discussion of sexual violence in the media, the public outrage against such violence, increasing awareness about sexual violence, as well as legal changes in the form of improvements to the legal system (Lodhia, 2015). However, recent newspaper articles indicate that the situation for women in India is still concerning (e.g., Yee, 2013).

This was confirmed by our findings about the current situation concerning sexual violence against women and how it affects women's daily life. In the interviews, women were described as facing numerous restrictions regarding their mobility, sexuality, education, and clothing. These restrictions were described as so immense that the category of restrictions appeared as the most frequently mentioned category for how sexual violence affects women's daily lives and, accordingly, had the biggest impact on women's lives. Our findings indicate that restrictions originate from different sources, including the perceived dangerousness of public spaces and women's resulting concern about their own safety and their fear of falling victim to sexual violence. In addition, students described a victim-blaming mentality in Indian society and therefore a societal pressure to obey restrictions (e.g., regarding dress style). This corresponds to the findings in the literature regarding the Nirbhaya case and the victim blaming that occurred in the aftermath of the incident (see Goodman & González, 2013; MacAskill, 2013). Another source of restrictions was depicted by students as stemming from the protectionist attitudes of families. Thus, many restrictions on women's daily lives appear to result from parents' concern about their daughters' safety. In this context, several authors (e.g., Kalra & Bhugra, 2013; Sen, 1984; Sharma, 2005) argue that restrictions, especially if they are inflicted on women

by their parents, represent another outcome of patriarchal control over women's mobility and sexuality. Accordingly, several of the students' statements indicated that boys were treated differently within families and within the society compared with girls. For instance, students stated that boys were allowed to go out late at night or to travel alone. However, it also appeared that parents were sincerely concerned about their daughters' safety, justifying the use of restrictions as a way to ensure their safety. Regarding the victim-blaming mentality in Indian society, this might be an outcome of the lack of societal awareness of sexuality and sexual violence. Similarly, this lack of awareness might also be illustrated by the use of the term *eve-teasing* to refer to public sexual harassment. However, even students themselves used that term during the interviews; again, though, this might be related to the lack of awareness about sexual violence in Indian society. As the term *eve-teasing* implies that women are responsible for sexual violence, it might as well be an allusion to Indian society's patriarchal values and the low social status of women. Taking these findings together, it appears that sexual violence has a huge impact on women's daily lives.

Women's Individual Prevention Strategies

The second research question addressed women's previous individual prevention strategies with the objective of identifying functional and dysfunctional prevention measures. The findings about women's individual prevention strategies were divided into three main categories: safety strategies, avoidance strategies, and empowerment strategies. The vast majority of mentioned strategies appeared as either safety strategies (e.g., carrying pepper spray or going out in groups) or avoidance strategies (e.g., avoiding public spaces and public transportation or not leaving the house).

With regard to the results about the current situation in India concerning sexual violence against women, the constant concern about safety and the fear of sexual violence were characterized by students as omnipresent in women's daily lives. Thus, it appears that women's attempts to prevent sexual violence are led by that same fear. Considering the findings about women's previous individual prevention strategies and the high frequency of safety strategies and avoidance strategies (e.g., risk assessment, avoidance of certain places and certain times for going out), it seems that women arrange much of their lives around the fear of sexual violence. In the clinical psychology literature similar behavior is described as safety behavior (Salkovskis, 1991; Salkovskis, Clark, Hackmann, Wells, & Gelder, 1999). The term *safety behavior* is mostly used in the literature on anxiety disorders, such as social anxiety disorder, and refers to anticipatory (avoidant) and consequent (escape) behaviors (Salkovskis, 1991). In this context, Gray (1971) pointed out the crucial role of safety signals; threatening situations lead people to adopt avoidance or escape behaviors and to search for safety signals (e.g., persons or situations). For instance, students reported that some women only went out in groups, or they took a male friend if going out in public. The company of others serves as a safety signal. The result is a short-term reduction in anxiety, but it also prevents cognitive change (Gelder, 1997). Safety behaviors prevent

women from making disconfirmatory experiences and inhibit them from changing threat-related cognitions. Therefore, such safety behaviors play a key role in maintaining fear (Salkovskis, 1991; Salkovskis et al., 1999). In the case of the previously presented example, the avoidance of going out alone in public prevents disconfirmatory experiences such as feelings of self-confidence and security. Instead, not going out alone and using the company of others as safety signals increases the fear of sexual violence and the fear of going out alone in public. The perceived threat remains while cognitive change is suppressed.

Considering the current situation in India, safety strategies and avoidance strategies reinforce the notion that women are the weaker sex and in need of protection. This strengthens patriarchal values and men's control over women. To improve the current situation and to effectively prevent sexual violence, women need to gain self-confidence, which would be better achieved through empowerment strategies like solidarity among women. Accordingly, the vast majority of text passages that referred to ideal prevention strategies fell within the category of empowerment strategies; furthermore, forms of empowerment strategies were mentioned most frequently by students as the ideal and most effective strategy against sexual violence. Taking all the findings of the present study together, women seem to acknowledge the need for empowerment strategies, but they might be restrained from actually using them because of the current circumstances (e.g., the perceived dangerousness of public spaces and the fear of falling victim to sexual violence) and societal dynamics (e.g., the patriarchal backlash).

Limitations of the Present Study

The present study has focused on sexual violence against women in public because previous reports have indicated that less severe forms of sexual violence, for instance, sexual harassment, are extremely prevalent in India (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; United Nations Women, 2013). However, past research also indicates that domestic sexual violence is a major issue in India (Kimuna et al., 2012). Due to the restricted thematic focus of the instrument of the present study, this aspect was not investigated, and questions about women's prevention strategies focused only on the public rather than the domestic setting. As a result, students' statements regarding prevention strategies applied only to public sexual violence not domestic sexual violence. Another limitation of the present study is that the sample is not representative of the entire young female population in India. Consequently, results may not be generalized to other social and economic classes or to young women living in rural areas. Given the huge population in India and the immense cultural diversity, it is necessary to include women of all social and economic backgrounds and from urban as well as rural areas to be able to generalize the present results.

Implications for Future Research

The results of the present study show a very concerning situation for young women in India and an urgent need for effective action. As we have shown, current coping

strategies are rather dysfunctional in that they help to perpetuate the current situation and societal dynamics. Thus, functional strategies need to address the root causes of sexual violence to effectively tackle sexual violence against women in India. The primary focus should be on changing the traditional gender roles and patriarchal values in Indian society and increasing awareness of sexuality and sexual violence. This might be best achieved through the implementation of sexual violence prevention programs that include information about gender role socialization and human sexuality as well as sexual violence education. Consequently, future research should focus on the development, implementation, and evaluation of a sexual violence prevention program including these topics. However, because this might take time and the current situation requires immediate action, we also recommend examining how to decrease women's constant concern about safety and fear of sexual violence. Our results indicate that women mostly use avoidance and safety strategies that might actually increase their fear of sexual violence. Consequently, the use of empowerment strategies, such as joining in solidarity with other women, should be promoted. In summary, sexual violence against women in India is a very complex topic influenced by various social and cultural factors (e.g., traditional gender roles and the taboo of sexuality in Indian society). To change the current situation in an enduring way, these issues need to be addressed on the societal level as well as on an individual level.

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