

RESPONSE OF INDIAN CHURCHES TO THE CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA - AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

The paper explores the possible factors contributing to the crimes against women in India. It also aims to examine the response of the churches in India to the crimes against women. One hundred and nine Christian men and women from the urban context participated in this Quantitative research. One of the main findings is that the churches in India understand their social obligation to prevent crimes against women, but they have failed to play their role. This research has helped to understand the need for Christian families, churches and Family Life

Educators to put their unified efforts into preventing and addressing this issue from a Christian perspective.

Introduction

It was 18 May 2022. Shraddha Walkar was murdered by Aaftab Poonawala at their rented flat in Delhi. She was brutally strangled and chopped into 35 pieces. Aaftab kept the body in a fridge and discarded or dumped it in a forest nearby (Sengar). Shraddha was 27 years old, and Aaftab was her live-in partner (“Shraddha Walkar Murder”). She had given a complaint to the police on 23 November 2020 because Aaftab used to assault her physically. The letter says: “Today he tried to kill me...he scares me and blackmails me that he will kill me, cut me up in pieces and throw me away.” Sadly, Aaftab’s parents knew about his violent behaviour. Shraddha was not in touch with her parents as they did not agree on their interfaith relationship (Agarwal).

Recently, two more such murders have shocked our nation, India. Nikki Yadav was murdered by Sahil Gehlot on 10 February 2023 (“How A Cop ‘Helped’ Nikki Yadav’s Partner Plan Her Murder, Hide Body”). Just a few days later, on 14 February 2023, when most of the world was celebrating love on Valentine’s Day, Megha Torvi was murdered by her live-in partner Hardik Shah (Shaikh).

The common thread across these above cases is brutal acts of murder or crime; victims were educated, working women, in a live-in relationship or secretly married without their parent’s consent and lived in urban settings. Crimes against women have continued to rise in India for the past several years.

This research explores the possible factors contributing to the crimes against women in India and the Indian churches’ response to them.

Literature Review

The Indian Penal Code 1860 defines Crime in the Indian context as “any activity that involves breaking the law and enforcement. The concept of Crime involves the idea of a public as opposed to a private wrong with the consequent intervention between the criminal and the injured party by an agency representing the community as a whole” (Pawar and Chandran 31).

According to the Indian Penal Code 1860, kidnapping, eve teasing, chain snatching, rape, sexual harassment, domestic violence, honour killing, cyber-crimes (bullying, abuse, violence, pornography), dowry deaths, acid attacks, stalking, assault to outrage modesty, women trafficking etc., are crimes against women (Bajaj). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2020, the total number of Crimes against women was 371503 and out of this, 496 cases were registered under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA) (Government of India).

Factors that Lead to Crimes Against Women in India

Patriarchy, characterised by unequal power distribution between men and women, is the root cause of the crimes against women. Researchers claim that men predominantly commit crimes against women (Gilani). There is a lack of role models of men who treat women with respect (Priji). Exposure to violence at an early age has a negative influence on children. Violence on television, movies, video games etc., increases the risk of violent behaviour in them. It is just like growing up in an environment filled with actual violence, which increases the risk of violent behaviour later in life. A virtual ‘bad street’ is readily available to them (Huesmann).

Fears in women, such as conflicting emotions, maternal instincts, economic dependence, social pressure, family’s dignity, own safety etc., make them stay in unhealthy relationships (Aziz et al., *Why Do Women Continue To Persevere in an Abusive Relationship?* 1). Victims

hesitate to seek help because they fear that exposure of the abuser or violator might lead to more violence (Aziz et al., *Reasons Behind Women Tolerance Of Abusive Relationships*).

Parents and guardians of the violators are partially responsible for the crimes they commit. Parents are responsible for teaching their children about a healthy understanding of gender and alerting them to gender bias (Harvard College). Christian parents are responsible for creating a nourishing environment, especially teaching from the Bible when they are with them (Isacs-Morelle). They also have to keep in touch with the children who move out for their education, jobs etc (“Talk with People Who Can Relate”).

The Response of Churches in India towards Crimes against Women

The church accurately reflects the heart of God when it acts on behalf of the oppressed and restores the dignity of God’s creation to their rightful place as imago Dei (Moy). The church is only a church when it follows Christ into the world. Resisting the strongholds begins with prayer and humility. The church must support any political, religious and social effort to end crimes against women (Gerhardt). Ending violence or crimes against women is everyone’s business (UN Women). The Church must also be a safe haven and never tolerate crimes against women in its gathering (Priji).

Theological Reflection

A Biblical worldview of humanity values both women and men, created equally in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). God treats women equal to men (Galatians 3:28). In Jesus Christ, women have a God who identifies in their suffering and pain (John 8:1-11). He offers hope and restoration for both the victims and the violators (John 4:4-42; Matthew 9:2-6). The Church, God’s people, are responsible for advocating for victims (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Context of the Study

The research focuses on Christians either living in or who have come from an urban context in India. An urban setting can be defined broadly based on population density, administrative bodies and infrastructure concentration, and a diverse set of livelihood and income generation activities (Center of Expertise for Urban Programming).

Methodology

The quantitative research study was conducted in urban settings in India. One hundred and nine Christian men and women responded by participating in finding out the Indian churches' response to the crimes against women in India. The Research Questions that drove this study were: 1) What are the factors that contribute to the increased crimes against women in India? 2) How is the response of the Indian churches to the crimes against women in India? In this research, the 109 participants were Christian men (30%) and women (70%) from the urban setting. 86% of them were 31 years and above. 81% of the participants were married. 72% of them were employed or in Christian ministry. The primary data was collected through a questionnaire prepared using a Likert scale with 30 questions. The questions were sent to the participants using Google Forms, and 109 participants responded promptly and with concern about the crimes against women. The collected primary data were exported to a Microsoft Excel sheet. Then it was analysed through a simple percentage method and reported with the help of pie charts, bar diagrams etc.

Findings

According to the findings of the study, factors that contribute to the increased crimes against women in India are:

1. The Patriarchal System in India Contributes to the Crimes against Women.

47% of people say it is normal that crimes against women happen. 96% of people say there are laws in place to protect women, but they are not efficiently implemented. The patriarchal system in India has deeply influenced the values and belief system over time and dramatically contributes to the crimes against women.

2. Media has a Tremendous Potential towards Crime against Women.

86% of the respondents say that watching violence in the media at an early age desensitises children and leads to aggressive behaviour. 95% of the respondents say that earlier, frequent exposure to on-screen violence is a significant contributor to crimes. Those who allow their children to indulge in visual entertainment without parental supervision pave the way for them to form their values and opinions about relationships and life based on what they watch.

3. Fears in Women Cause them to Stay in Unhealthy Relationships and Not Seek Help.

90% say many fears in women make them continue to stay in dangerous and unhealthy relationships. The victims are fearful and hesitant to seek legal or professional help. These fears cause the violators to gain control over their victims, leading to lifelong bondage and even risking their own lives.

4. Parents, Guardians and the Family Members of the Violators are Partially Responsible When They Fail to Provide a Healthy, Nourishing Environment at Home.

92% of the participants have expressed that the family of the violators are partially responsible for their crimes. 77% of respondents expressed confidence in sharing with family when they go through abuse. 76% say that they discuss crimes in society, and 97% say that they should be taught the value of people without gender bias at home. When children don't have such a nourishing family environment, crimes against women are a reality.

Response of the Churches in India to the Crimes against Women in India

1. Though The Churches Understand Their Social Obligation To Prevent Crimes Against Women, They Have Failed to Play Their Role.

65% of the participants believe their churches have understood their social obligation towards preventing crimes against women. 72% of the participants say churches have failed to play their part. When churches respond to such crimes against women, there will be a significant impact on society's overall health.

2. Though People are Confident to Seek Help, the Churches have Failed in their Responsibility to Offer A Safe Haven.

69% of the participants say they have the confidence to seek help from pastors, elders, and others in the church when they go through abuse. 91% of participants have expressed that there is gender discrimination and crimes against women among Christians. 19% of the participants say they have experienced and witnessed abuse in church gatherings.

3. Though the Churches are Lacking, There is Still Hope when Proper Teaching from the Word of God Exists.

98% also said that their faith played a crucial role in shaping their beliefs and attitudes towards crimes against women. 98% of the participants hope that proper teaching from the Bible can help combat such crimes.

4. Though the Churches have Failed to Stand against the Crimes against Women, Something can still be done to Prevent such Incidents.

87% of participants disagreed with the statement, 'We live in a fallen world. We must accept this as a reality, and we can do nothing to prevent such incidents (crimes against women).' So, the participants have hope for a change.

Recommendation

For Church

- To follow Jesus Christ into the world and serve those who are hurting and in need.
- To pray and be humble as a church before resisting the crimes in the community.
- To support political, religious, and social efforts to end crimes against women.
- The churches can link them to other institutions or organisations that offer professional help and support to the victims.
- To make the churches a safe place without gender bias and crimes against women.

For Families

- To teach the daughters to be strong women based on the values drawn from the Bible.
- To create a nourishing family environment where there is conversation and discussions regarding recent trends and the content consumed through media.
- To teach the children about gender equality and our sons to respect girls/women and be role models for other boys/men.
- To connect and support children when they relocate to the urban setting for studies or work.
- To extend support to the family members if they become victims and help them overcome their fears.

For Family Life Educators

FLEs must work with the Indian churches and their families to create awareness, educate or equip, and help build support systems.

1. Create Awareness

- To organise open conversations with pastors, elders, and core members of the churches.
- To work with pastors to create support groups for victims in churches.
- To create awareness in educational institutions, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and churches.
- To organise seminars to educate families and equip the teams in the churches who will work for the victims.

2. Educate or Equip on the following Topics

- Gender equality
- Right use of media
- Early signs of an unhealthy relationship
- Recent trends and Changing values.

3. Help Build a Support System by

- Empathetic listening and systematic caregiving for the victims.
- Offering consistent mentoring to the teams who work for the victims.
- Helping with age-appropriate parenting.
- Linking churches to experts who can help the victims.
- Forming support groups for victims.

Limitations

This study had its limitations. 70% of the participants were women, and a considerable number of them were not in the workforce. It was realised that the challenges women face in

workplaces might not be correctly represented here in this study. So, we could only infer something from the data collected about the crimes meted out by women in their workplaces.

This study was conducted in a short time with a limited number of participants.

Scope of Further Study

Further study is recommended on various areas like, how the churches handle crimes against women and provide care, what the fears in women that make them stay in unhealthy relationships, the role of media or virtual bad street for the youth today, Christian men to be role models in treating women equally, awareness of social injustice and women's voice, and creating churches a safe space for women.

Conclusion

The research shows that the churches understand their social obligation to stand against crimes against women. At the same time, they have sadly failed to stand against such crimes. It clearly shows a divide between what they know and what they do. The FLEs have a significant role to play along with the Indian churches and their families to reduce this divide by educating, creating awareness and extending support to have a lasting impact on society.

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