

Headline violence and silenced pleasure: contested framings of consensual sex, power and rape in Delhi, India 2011-2014

Emme Edmunds,^a Ankit Gupta^b

a Midwife and nurse practitioner, Cornell University, Ithaca NY, USA. Correspondence: ee59@cornell.edu

b Independent consultant, Delhi, India

Abstract: *Though coercion and rape have cast a persistent shadow over prospects of sexual health and consent in contemporary India, other narratives, agency and tools are quietly emerging to transform collective claims of power and bodily dignity. In these narratives from collectives, NGOs, on social media and among friends, dialogues about consent and pleasure feature prominently. This paper analyses statements in the news made by highly visible political and public figures regarding the subject of rape in the context of themes emerging from ethnography and semi-structured interviews with middle class people in Delhi. Using the device of social frameworks, contested framings of rape and consent are examined in order to interrogate essentialist gender norms, compare putative “causes” of rape, and highlight local efforts promoting sexual consent, health and well-being. © 2016 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.*

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Introduction

Indian feminist scholars have long interrogated the processes of ideology, legal rulings and structural violence against women (VAW) whereby rape is sometimes normalized in Indian society. They have analyzed over 67 years of history, from India's partition to widely publicized cases in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Badaun.¹⁻³ Partly due to these crimes, India ranks fairly low in measures of gender equality among countries rated by the UNDP gender inequality index.⁴ Yet, within this bleak landscape, the shapes of other narratives, agency and tools are challenging the narrative of the entrenched sexual victimization of women, and transforming individual and collective experiences of power, agency and bodily dignity. These challenges are found in conversations among urban, middle class, educated friends, at events of Indian-based collectives and NGOs, and in socially mediated print and on-line English language news coverage of rape-related statements by public figures.

A fatal gang rape on a bus in Delhi in December 2012 made national and global headlines. Millions grieved while a young woman lost her life and her male friend was left to recover from the ordeal. Amidst widespread protests, the release of a commissioned judicial report to reform Indian rape law⁵ and a national election, numerous public figures opined

about rape and women's safety. Public dialogue about how to deal with violence against women became a central debate as the protests fueled discussions of prevention, causation, punishment and accountability.^{5,6} These events afford an opening to explore specific questions: how do public framings of consensual and non-consensual sexuality align with what people are learning privately? Do predominant rape narratives address the problem of intimate partner violence (IPV)? What strategies promote learning about consensual sexualities and the prevention of coercive sexual behaviors?

Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical device of social frames, originally detailed by Goffman,⁷ reveals patterns of interpretation that people use to organize, communicate about, and respond to events. Frames were later employed by Altheide⁸ in his research on fear in the news media. This paper uses the perspective of frames to consider the manner in which public figures depict problems in particular narrative structures that tend to gloss over complexity and ambiguity inherent in social situations, and suggest solutions that appear simple and clear. These processes, which produce stories that Altheide likens to “morality plays”, often obscure significant

information and complexity that could result in different perspectives and more effective problem solving. Such morality plays reproduce existing social hierarchies and norms. He provides an example of how news coverage in the United States regarding child neglect and abuse often focuses on kidnapping by strangers. This distracts attention, funding, legislation and policy away from the much more frequent problem of several hundred thousand abused, abandoned, neglected and runaway children in cities in the United States.⁸

In a further elaboration of framing theory, Benford and Snow⁹ discuss how frames play central roles in how social change actors and movements construct meaning about contested topics. They delineate separate framing processes within social change movements, such as *diagnostic framing* to attribute blame or responsibility, *prognostic framing* to suggest solutions, and *motivational framing* to call people to take action. Using frames and discourse oriented ethnography, we examine ethnographic interviews, public events, and 25 statements by public figures in the news, as they discuss gender norms, attribute responsibility and suggest solutions regarding rape. Using the theoretical device of frames enables us to contrast how people and groups in different positions of power construct and convey the meanings of social phenomena. These meanings, in turn, influence actions, laws, and policy that affect people's lives and well-being.

Background: sexual violence versus pleasure in the global and Indian contexts

In 2013, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that, globally, violence against women (VAW) is a "health problem of epidemic proportions". WHO estimates that one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner, or non-partner sexual violence. WHO estimates also show that rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) far exceed rates of non-partner sexual violence.¹⁰ These global findings are largely corroborated in India.^{11,12} For example, in a recent analysis of Indian National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports and National Family Health Survey results, Aashish Gupta finds that, by conservative estimates, the incidence of sexual assault by husbands may be as much as forty times that by other men.¹³ Furthermore, according to the NCRB report from 2013,¹⁴ the incidence of reported rape has been increasing since 2009, and Delhi has the highest rate at 18.6 per 100,000 women compared to

the national average of 5.7 per 100,000. In 2013, offenders were known to the victims in 94.4 % of reported rape cases. Research that compares survey results with crime reports indicates significant underreporting^{13,15,16} that may be a result of several factors: social tolerance for physical punishment of women, lack of support from agencies and police, and social mores which claim that IPV is a private matter. It bears noting that as of this writing in 2016, forced sex within marriage is still not considered rape and therefore does not appear in the crime records.^{5,13,17}

While sexual violence has always been framed as a human rights problem, it is increasingly becoming understood as a significant health issue.¹⁸⁻²⁰ In Delhi, scholars and members of urban-based NGOs and collectives have expanded upon the human rights perspective, publishing and promoting materials, curricula and guidelines for comprehensive sex education that work to prevent and oppose gender violence for both adolescent and adult audiences. A well-developed network of mostly urban, Indian NGOs and collectives, many based in Delhi itself, conduct related workshops and panels. They also release print and digital web-based media teaching about sexuality, education about consensual sex and alternatives to coercion.^{18,19,21-23} Other NGOs and feminist publishing houses have produced edited volumes and annotated bibliographies about sexuality as well as histories of women's rights advocacy.²³⁻²⁵

Increasingly, scholars and advocates have been addressing issues of women's sexual pleasure, consent and agency within South Asia, both in the present and with historical lenses. Expanding beyond Eurocentric feminisms and Foucauldian analysis and discourse, they have excavated histories that have sometimes preceded, merged with, or subverted colonial and nationalist versions of sexual repression.²³⁻²⁸ Social and historical evidence indicates a history (and present) of variation in kinship practices, sexual expression, and gender norms in India that were diminished by a combination of local patriarchal controls, colonial laws and nationalist projects.^{23,25,28}

Sexual violence, agency, and consent are also development issues. Development practitioners have noted that far from being silent, mainstream development has long engaged with sexuality, albeit often focusing on medicalized, negative and dangerous aspects such as population control, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual violence.^{21,29} Others focus on the need to listen to women's own

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