



UNVEILING GENDER STEREOTYPING: EXPLORING THE LINKAGES BETWEEN WOMEN'S WITCH-HUNTING AND VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The year 2020, for India, inter-alia has been a prominent one that drew our attention to a high-profile case of death by suicide of an actor. It became all the more shocking and significant in foregrounding gender inequality, witch hunting and human rights violations at the national level in spite of our country having come a long way in constitutional and institutional progress as a democracy. This also drew our attention to the fact that 'gender-stereotyping' is still not only deeply ingrained in the Indian culture for women but is also comfortably normalized. This brings attention to the fact that women still are the easy targets to the violations of human rights dissecting their human dignity and character, revealing the gender gap that exists for women in gender equality. This gap exists as the social and cultural traditions still eye women in subordination to men. This subordination not only overlooks the elements such as independence, empowerment, modern outlook for women, but also disregards them in toto when it comes to claiming equality with men. The result is that Indian women are still battling the archaic standards of age-old culture and tradition that have not changed in their perception for women freedom thus leading to serious human rights violations and severe compromises on something as basic as human dignity. In the aforesaid light, this paper tries to explore the dimensions of human rights violations under the umbrella of larger cultural norms that at times hold both procedural and substantive justice in total disregard thus widening the gender gap. It also tries to throw light on the fact that social attitudes for women remain largely unchanged from antiquity to modern day and remains grounded in cultural norms and practices. And how this rigidity is eating away at the freedom of women to live with dignity at various junctures in their life. The Research adopts a case analysis approach, focusing on the examination of existing secondary data sources. This design allows for a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter, drawing insights from various existing studies, reports, and documents.

Keywords: Gender Stereotyping, Witch-Hunting, Human Dignity, Culture, Human Rights

Introduction

Human rights are the rights to which all individuals are entitled, irrespective of their background. Human Rights and Human dignity are closely intertwined concepts. Human dignity is the inherent value and worth of every individual, simply because they are human. Human rights are often grounded in the principle of human dignity, as they aim to protect and uphold the fundamental worth and respect owed to each person. In essence, human dignity serves as the philosophical foundation for the establishment and protection of human rights, ensuring that individuals are treated with respect, fairness and equality.

Gender stereotyping can significantly impact women's dignity by perpetuating harmful assumptions and expectations. It can limit opportunities, reinforce inequality, and undermine their confidence. When women are expected to conform to narrow roles and attributes, it can lead to discrimination, reduced self-esteem, and a sense of being undervalued.

Gender stereotyping can perpetuate human rights abuses by reinforcing harmful beliefs and expectations about the roles, behaviours, and capabilities of individuals based on their gender. This can lead to unequal treatment, discrimination, and limited opportunities. Stereotypes can contribute to violence, unequal pay, restricted access to education and healthcare, and other forms of oppression. Challenging these stereotypes is crucial for promoting gender equality and preventing human rights violations. ⁱ

Gender stereotyping in India takes place through a variety of ways, including traditional cultural norms, media representation, education and social interactions. It has historical, cultural and societal roots. This often involves assigning specific roles, behaviours, and expectations to individuals based on their gender. Traditional gender roles have often been deeply ingrained, with women expected to fulfil domestic roles and men taking on more public and authoritative positions. These stereotypes have been perpetuated through media, religious beliefs, and social norms.

Gender stereotyping and women witch hunting can be related through the perpetuation of harmful beliefs. It can be related in the sense that both are manifestations of societal biases and discriminatory practices against women. These stereotypes often reinforce traditional and limiting role for women, such as being submissive, nurturing, and solely responsible for domestic tasks. Women witch-hunts, historically prevalent during periods like the European witch trials, involved the and execution of predominantly women who were accused of practising witchcraft. These accusations often arose from societal fears, religious beliefs and gender-related biases. The association of women with supernatural and harmful powers reflected underlying prejudices and reinforced stereotypes that positioned women as dangerous and subversive.

Both gender stereotyping and witch hunting illustrate how deeply ingrained biases can lead to systemic discrimination and harm against women, perpetuating unequal power dynamics and limiting their opportunities and freedoms.

India is one such country where these biases are deeply ingrained and foregrounded through social, cultural and economic factors. In India it is a direct consequence of limited beliefs pertaining to the aforesaid factors. From 'cradle to grave' women are intended to follow both defined and undefined rules of the society that guide their physical and emotional existence. Even a slight deviation from these rules of society holds a potential possibility for them to stand in social trial where even without a courtroom, every common person acts a self-proclaimed judge and thus hold the right to dictate terms with regard to the ideal behavioural norms, failing to conform with which leads to dire consequences for women such as public humiliation and freedom of movement which stand in sharp contrast to the norms of human rights and human dignity.ⁱⁱ

What is modern day witch-hunting?

Modern Day witch hunting refers to the persecution or targeting of individuals or groups based on false accusations, often fuelled by superstition, misinformation, or social prejudices. While it may not involve literal accusations of witchcraft, it can take the form of false accusations, discrimination, or harassment against people who are deemed to be different or are perceived as threat for various reasons. This can occur in contexts such as social media "cancel culture", political or ideological conflicts, or even cases of vigilante justice.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Indian Case, Witch-hunting and Human rights abuses

On one hand India has come a long way in ending the social evils practised against women. It was made sure that centuries of oppression meted out to women should be resolutely resolved. We have also witnessed obvious positive outcomes in this direction of changing social perception and attitudes. However, we also would never completely agree to the fact that our culture has been truly inclusive for women. notwithstanding inclusiveness, there have been both enumerated and unenumerated behavioural traits and standards that women ought to conform to, to fit into the ideal imagery as conceived by the society and its underlying norms and conventions.^{iv}

Women have been glorified, praised and placed on pedestals since centuries. They have been equalled to 'goddesses', been called 'ghar ki izzat' (pride of home) and like name callings that push in on them to remain enmeshed in the box of standards and contain them in the box itself. Subsequently, what happens when they try to peek out or step out of this box of conformist standards? The answer to the question is easy to comprehend as it is a popularly accepted one. The deviation from the glass ceiling throws them open to being torn apart in human dignity, witch-hunted and human rights abuses. We regress immediately into the larger tapestry of patriarchal biases from which we had carved our way out to the so called progressive world. We take no time to fall back into the same old frame of pointing fingers to women based on regressive thinking and cultural biases, beyond reasoning.

It feels deeply saddening that our awareness, wisdom and consciousness is not ready to progress at a pace with which the country has in terms of various institutional developments.

The social evil of witch-hunting that directly targets the dignity of women in a social set up leading to the violation of their basic human rights has found its way from antiquity to present, in a renewed form if not in the literal. Its tip-toeing into the modern constitutional system despite the changed times and consciousness along with modern instruments of justice is a serious concern that needs to be addressed openly instead of being normalized widely.

The year 2020 saw a grave case of death by suicide of an actor, and an entertainment industry celebrity and actor, following which an Indian actress who happened to be her girlfriend and fiancée was dragged into the controversy and got involved into the investigation surrounding the death of the actor. There were various allegations and controversies related to their relationship and the circumstances of his passing where the actress faced intense media scrutiny, online harassment, and

allegations from some quarters from where public perception and events took their turns to evolve. Her trial in the case garnered significant media attention and public interest.^v

Some observers, during the case raised concerns about potential human rights violations during the course of the investigation and trial. These concerns included issues like media trial, invasion of privacy, online harassment and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. The intense media coverage and sensationalism around the case potentially violated the actress's right to privacy and fair trial. Online harassment and cyber bullying targeted at her and her family members were also reported, which could be seen as a violation of their basic human rights. Additionally, the legal process when subjected to public pressure and bias, might not uphold the principles of justice and fairness. Human rights advocates argue that it's crucial to maintain a balanced and impartial approach in high profile cases to ensure that the rights of all parties involved are respected.^{vi}

Recognising gender stereotyping in the case

During the investigation and legal proceedings related to the death of the actor, his fiancée, the actress faced significant gender stereotyping and biases in the media and public discourse. Some of the ways she was subjected to gender stereotyping include:

Blame and Responsibility: She was often portrayed as the primary reason for the actor's emotional state and circumstances leading to his death. This perpetuated the stereotype that women are responsible for men's emotional and mental well-being.

Character assassination: She was subjected to character assassination and her personal life was scrutinized in ways that reinforced traditional gender norms and expectations. This can be seen as an attempt to discredit her based on societal perceptions of 'acceptable' behaviour for women.

Victim Blaming: She faced victim blaming, with some sections of the media implying that her actions might have contributed to the tragedy, this aligns with a broader pattern of holding women accountable for situations beyond their control.

Stereotypical Roles: Some media coverage portrayed her in stereotypical roles such as the "clingy girlfriend" or the "Gold-digger".

Invasion of Privacy: Her privacy was invaded, with private messages and personal information being leaked and discussed in the media. This invasion of privacy reflects the unequal power dynamics and the tendency to scrutinize women's personal lives more harshly than men.

Emphasis on Appearance: Media often focused on her appearance, attire, and demeanor during court appearances, which can reinforce the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her physical appearance rather than her actions or character.

Recognising the pattern of Witch-Hunting in the case

The case involving the actor's death and the involvement of her girlfriend garnered significant media attention and controversy. Witch-hunting in this context, refers to the intense public scrutiny and negative portrayal of the actress which some argue was fuelled by sensationalized media coverage and social media speculation. Allegations were made against her, including involvement in the actor's death, financial misappropriation, and drug related accusations.

The situation unfolded primarily through:

Media Coverage: News channels and tabloids extensively covered the case, often sensationalizing information and presenting it in a manner that contributed to public judgment.

Social Media: Social media platforms played a significant role in amplifying the case, with various narratives and opinions shared widely, often without factual verification.

Investigations: Law enforcement agencies conducted investigations into the case, including the actresses' involvement. These investigations led to her arrest on drug-related charges, although her involvement in the actor's death was not established.

It's important to note that the actress faced significant public backlash, harassment, and character assassination during this period. It serves as an example of the potential dangers of the trial by media and the importance of fair and thorough legal investigations to determine guilt or innocence.

Exploring the linkage of witch-hunting with the violation of human rights in the case

The term "witch-hunting" in the aforesaid case is often used metaphorically to describe the intense media scrutiny and public backlash faced by the actress in relation to the investigation into the death of the actor and her boyfriend.

It can be outlined how such situations can potentially lead to the violation of human rights.

Presumption of Innocence: Every individual is entitled to the presumption of innocence until proven guilty in a court of law. In high profile cases like this, intense media coverage and public opinion can influence public perception and create an environment where it becomes challenging for the accused to receive a fair trial.

Right to privacy: The excessive media attention and intrusion into an individual's personal life can violate their right to privacy. This includes the publication of personal details, invasive questioning, and unauthorized surveillance.

Right to fair Trial: A fair trial is a fundamental right. Public pressure and sensationalized reporting can interfere with the impartiality of the judicial process, making it difficult for the accused to receive a fair and unbiased trial.

Mental and Emotional well-being: The emotional and psychological toll of being subjected to public scrutiny, harassment, and false accusations can have a severe impact on an individual's mental health, potentially violating their right to mental and emotional well-being.

Right to Legal Representation: Accused individuals have the right to legal representation and defense. The hostile public environment can deter lawyers from taking up their cases, further hindering their ability to receive a fair trial.

The above-mentioned points not only apply to case in question here, but can also be centric to any high profile-case where individuals face intense public scrutiny. The justice system is designed to ensure that everyone, regardless of their public image, receives a fair and impartial trial while safeguarding their human rights.

Highlighting Witch hunting and violation of human rights as a direct attack on human dignity

The actress's experience with media scrutiny, legal issues, and public opinion has been challenging even after the passage of over three years. Such situations can indeed have a significant impact on a person's dignity as well as their reputation as a public figure. *The intense media attention and public speculation can lead to emotional distress and damage to one's personal and professional life.* This is reflected in the "cancel culture" she was compelled to face given her involvement in the death by suicide case. She was publicly condemned and faced social media backlash. Trial by media with her character being discussed extensively in the press was a direct attack on her dignity as a human being. Accompanied by this she received a significant amount of online harassment and threats on social media platforms. She was presumed guilty by some even before the legal process took its course. Such violent attacks did lead to her isolation and career damage. Her career in the entertainment industry was affected as she faced difficulties finding work due to negative public perception. Many people formed strong opinions about her guilt or innocence, which led to her being ostracized by some sections of society. It is essential to remember that such situations can be emotionally and mentally challenging for individuals involved, and the effects can be long lasting. The cancel culture making inroads into her dignity strongly impacted the actress's social life which was a direct result of a strong public opinion passing judgments on her even when the legal case was ongoing, and any final judgment from the court system was awaited.

Modern Day Witch-Hunting: A serious concern violating human rights and maintaining gender gap

Modern Day witch-hunting is as much a serious concern in India, as anywhere else. It violates several fundamental human rights.

Right to Equality: Witch-hunts disproportionately target women and vulnerable individuals. This is a clear violation of the right to equality, as discrimination based on gender or vulnerability is prohibited by international human rights standards.

Right to Life and Security: Witch hunts often lead to violence, including torture and murder. These acts infringe upon an individual's right to life and security, as outlined in international human rights agreements.

Right to Social and cultural participation: Witch-hunts can force individuals into isolation, preventing them from participating fully in their communities and enjoying their communities and enjoying their social and cultural rights.

Right to Freedom from torture: Victims of witch-hunts are frequently subjected to physical and psychological torture. This is a clear violation of the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Right to fair trial: Often, accusations of witchcraft are followed by mob violence, summary judgments, and extra-judicial punishments. This undermines the right to fair trial, where individuals are entitled to due process and the opportunity to defend themselves.

Right to Non-Discrimination: Accusations of witchcraft are often rooted in prejudices, social hierarchies, or disputes within communities. Such discrimination directly contradicts the right to be free from discrimination.

What can be done to mitigate the modern-day practice of witch-hunting to preserve the dignity and human rights of women, and bridging the gender-gap?

Mitigating the modern-day practice of witch-hunting and preserving the human rights and dignity of women requires a multifaceted approach:

Legal Reforms: Implement specific legislation addressing witch-craft accusations and related violence. Ensure that the legal system protects the rights of those accused and provides them with fair trials.

Public Awareness and Education: Launch awareness campaigns to educate communities about the consequences of witch-hunting affecting the rights of women, thus promoting gender equality and women empowerment.

Social Services: Provide counselling and support services for victims and survivors of witch-hunting. Create safe spaces for those who are at risk or have experienced violence due to witch-craft accusations.

Media and Advocacy: Engage media to raise awareness about the issue and challenge harmful stereotypes. Collaborate with local and international human rights organizations to advocate for change.

International Cooperation: Encourage global cooperation to address witch-hunting as a human rights issue. Collaborate with international bodies to pressure countries with high incidences of witch-hunting to take action.

Research and Data Collection: Collect data on cases and outcomes to inform policy and intervention strategies.

Legal Aid and Support: Establish legal aid programs to provide representation and support for those accused of witch-craft and being vulnerable to violation of basic human rights under its veil.

Long Term Cultural Change: Promote gender sensitive education that challenges harmful cultural practices and beliefs.

Conclusion

Combating witch-hunting and protecting the rights of women is a complex process that requires sustained efforts at multiple levels, involving governments, communities, civil society, and international organizations. It necessitates a commitment to human rights, gender equality, and the eradication of harmful traditional practices and perception. ^{vii}

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