

## Attitude towards Sexuality: Perceptions of Male University Students in Gujarat

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### Abstract

At a time when there is an unprecedented surge in reported cases of all forms of sexual violence, including rape of women by men even within intimate relations across the world, it is essential to investigate men's attitude towards sexuality with its intricacies from a gendered perspective, especially when the legal, social and cultural structures continue to fail in challenging the prevailing gendered discourses around sexuality. This study attempts to explore the attitude of male university students towards sexuality and encapsulate the same with gender-specific patriarchal theories. With a descriptive research design, this study interviewed 396 male university students from a chosen university in Gujarat, India, selected by stratified — systematic sampling method from different streams of study. Quantitative analysis underlined and clearly portrayed the unfavourable attitudes towards sexuality held by a large proportion of university students. This study also attempts to illustrate how gendered power inequality highly influences their sexual entitlement and sexual constriction attitudes.

**Keywords:** Sexual Violence; Men; Sexuality; Gendered Power Imbalance; Naturalist Approach; Feminist Theory; Gujarat; India

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## Introduction

There is an unprecedented surge in reported cases of all forms of sexual violence worldwide, leading to a sudden impetus in sexuality studies among researchers in many academic disciplines. Sexuality is a very personal and intimate aspect of life. It is “also interwoven with myth, taboo, and morals. It encompasses eroticism, sexual behaviour, social and gender roles and identity, relationship and the personal, social and cultural meanings that each of these might have” (Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action, 2005. p.5). For women and girls, to be aware of, control over, and able to make decisions on their sexuality is critical to their empowerment (Heera et al., 2021). Attempting to control women’s sexuality often resulted in many human rights violations like rape, forced sex, forced marriage, and restrictions on mobility, autonomy, education, career, and social life (World Health Organisation, 2021).

In many places, men and boys who exert more power and control in their relationships infringe upon a woman’s right to control her own body, and they are often unlikely to take care of their sexual and reproductive health (Kato-Wallace et al., 2016). Sexual assaults are “driven by many factors operating in a range of social, cultural and economic contexts. At the heart of sexual violence directed against women is gender inequality” (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002, p. 174; see also, Oza, 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2023).

Despite the fact that younger generations exhibit more egalitarian attitudes, particularly those who have received a university education and have been exposed to a more gender-neutral professional and social environment, studies conducted in different geographical spaces show that boys still hold relatively high traditional attitudes toward gender roles (Andrade, 2013; Shah et al., 2020; Streatfield et al., 2023). This gendered difference can be explained by the experiences of females, who feel more constrained by historically unfair gender standards about sexuality and

misogynistic opinions of men (Diehl et al., 2022; Srivastava et al., 2017).

Thomas et al. (2018a) acknowledged the potential of prevalent social constrictions and norms in shaping gendered sexuality in boys and girls. Scholars like Petersen & Hyde (2010) and Kacha & Lakdawala (2019) underlined the role of culture in forming attitudes on sexual behaviour while presenting significant gender differences in attitude toward sexuality, including sexual behaviour, between cultures having high and small levels of gender power equations. They argued that the comparatively higher gender differences in sexual behaviour reported from Asian and African countries than the USA and Europe can be attributed to the culturally different gender constrictions prevalent in the continents. Research shows that fundamental to this communal edifice of gender is the inability of society to appreciate women’s roles and ability to make personal and sexual decisions (Thomas et al., 2018a).

A sexual double standard that endorses more sexual freedom to men than women (Wingood and DiClemente, 2000) is the result of these highly gendered societal norms and gender role expectations. The gendered sexual stereotypes, such as men’s attitude towards frequent sex, multiple partners, and sex outside wedlock are more permissive for men than women, are intricately intrinsic within the traditionally defined gender roles of men and women, which accorded the sexual domination of husband on his wife. At the same time, in cultures where societal norms place a higher value on masculine than feminine, men will control women and are likely to exert control on women in relationships (Jenkins, 2000; Thomas, 2017a). So, to fully understand how individuals will behave in sexual situations, it is vital to understand not only their gendered beliefs in sexual domains but also how their gendered role attitudes influence (if at all), their attitude toward sexuality.

Khan et al. (1997) illustrated several changing attitudes and behaviours influencing sexuality among men and women in rural Gujarat. Although some changes are tolerated in society,

for example, sex before and outside marriage, this study highlighted how the presence of gendered double standards condemned and disapproved women than men under similar situations and how masculinity is equated with sexuality by about a quarter of rural men under study while admitting violence and forced sex with wives.

A study among medical students in Gujarat reported problematic pornography and more positive attitudes towards pornography among male students (Kumar et al., 2021). Kacha & Lakdawala (2019) also reported more liberal sexual attitudes in male medical students in Gujarat. However, less is known about male university students' (other than medical students) attitudes towards sexuality in Gujarat, and the present study is also an attempt to assess the same from a gendered perspective. In the current scenario, where sex is considered a right for both men and women, young postgraduate male university students' attitudes towards sexuality carry significant value as they add to our understanding of how they equate masculinity with sexuality, especially concerning their attitudes towards sexual desire, consent to sex, the right to refuse sex and victim-blaming.

The following section presents a theoretical orientation of this study.

### **Feminist Approach**

The prevalent gendered discourses around sexuality, from a feminist perspective, *are not simply a reflection of the power men have over women in other spheres*, as endorsed by many, *but are also the production of those unequal power relationships*. This argument highlights patriarchy's impact on women's rights across various aspects of life, including sexual entitlements, resulting in numerous restrictions (Oza, 2023; also, Bhattacharyya, 2015; 2023).

The findings of a study by Chatterjee (2018) underpinned the myriad of constrictions women undergo as manifestations of constructions of sexism or sexuality in families, educational institutions, workplaces, businesses, politics, and public life. The imposed restrictions on fair sex are as powerful as their violations, which

invite profound disapproval and absolute hostility from society and, in their fervent attempt to enforce corrective steps or punishments, put deviants under severe control and constrictions.

One of the proximate factors ascribed to sexual violence on women by research since long endorses consistent influence of men's attitude towards sexuality, stemming from notions about supremacy within genders as an outcome of internalised imbalanced gender power equations and masculine stereotypes. Right from childhood, in men, as emphasised by several studies, gender inequity experiences and associated socialisation play a pivotal role in shaping deeply ingrained misogynistic perceptions, an important predictive factor of violence upon women by men. Once we are embedded in a culture, we internalise the customs, norms, and mores that define the same, allowing our actions and behaviour to be regulated unconsciously.

Although there is a consensus on the interrelation between gender and sexuality, many radical feminists attribute sexuality as the key mechanism of gender inequality; as MacKinnon (1982, p. 531) argues, "it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around", while others view sexuality constrictions as outcomes of gendered power imbalances (Bhattacharyya, 2015; 2023; Oza, 2023; Segal, 1987; Rowbotham, 1989; Thomas et al., 2017b).

### **Naturalist Approach**

"Within the premises of the naturalist approach of sexuality, male sexual urges are perceived as natural, compelling, forceful, active, dominant and aggressive while women have supposed sexual role as passive, submissive and responding to meet men's sexual needs. Sexualised male aggression is then viewed as a natural response to sexual arousal instead of sexual violence, an argument vehemently opposed by feminist theorists, while often used by many to justify violent sexual acts of perpetrators including rape" (Thomas, 2020, p. 42). The key motivation reported by men for sexual violence, including rape, is their sense of

sexual entitlement (Jejeebhoy & Sarah, 2003; see also, Oza, 2023; Bhattacharyya, 2023). The feminist stance opposes these naturalistic explanations of sexuality and argues that the body and sexuality are socio-cultural constructs rather than natural realities.

In cultures where male sexual entitlement attitudes are sanctioned or overvalue male sexuality and expect female sexuality to satisfy male needs, it is difficult for women to negotiate for their sexual rights (Kalra & Bhugra, 2013). Sexuality, as a social construct, is often used to explain aggressive masculinity within intimate relations, too. For them, a girlfriend or wife must fulfil the sexual needs of the partner whether she wants it or not. Men's absolute control over women's sexuality is underlined by Khan et al. (1997), who reported that about one-fourth of men from a rural Gujarat, study admitted using coercive methods, including abuse, violence, and forced sex with wives on their refusal to have sex with them. At the same time, a much higher proportion of women (56%) reported sexual violence from husbands for noncooperation or refusal to meet their sexual needs.

Attitudes sanctioning dominant and aggressive male sexual urges are endorsed by women, too, when they grow up in cultures where patriarchal constrictions impose constraints on all aspects of women, including their sexuality. For them, male supremacy is an internalised notion that puts men over women in all spheres of life, including sexuality, and deviations from the passive, submissive sexual role of women can be punished.

The naturalist approach to sexuality promotes the sexual double standard, where men and women are judged differently based on gender. Studies show that women with more partners are more harshly judged than men with permissive behaviours (Milhausen & Herold, 1999; Kreager & Staff, 2009; Ine, 2009; Jennifer & Shibley, 2010). This gendered stereotype of sexuality is rapidly diminishing, with evidence suggesting that these ideologies will continue to change over time (Barreto & Doyle, 2023; Solbes-Canales et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2006).

## Methodology

The main objective of this study is to illustrate the attitude of male university students towards sexuality. The sampling frame for the present study comprises 396 male, unmarried students aged 20 to 25, pursuing their masters in the postgraduate departments of a chosen university in Gujarat, India. The systematic sampling method is used to select the respondents from a list of all male students of the University. Care was taken to include students from arts, science, and management to ensure diversity (Mukherjee et al., 2019) in the samples so that the sampling method is stratified and systematic random sampling. A detailed interview schedule covering areas of demographical variables was prepared to understand the respondents' background variables. To assess their attitude towards sexuality, selected items from the Gender Equitable Men (GEM) scale developed by the Horizons Program and Instituto Promundo in Brazil with young men aged 15-24 years (Barker et al., 2011) was used. The 04 selected statements included in the present study were phrased as *Men need sex more than women do; A woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband; When a woman is raped, she is usually to be blamed for putting herself in that situation; and If a woman doesn't physically fight back, it's not rape.* To understand their degree of agreement with the notion of consent to sex, an additional statement, *A woman's consent is a need to have sex with her,* is also included.

"Responses collected on the four-point scale were later collated under two broad categories: agree (which combined the responses 'strongly agree' and 'agree') and disagree (which combined the responses 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'" (Priya et al., 2012, p.25). The results of the study are discussed in the following section.

## Results

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data after the data cleaning. The level of 'agreement' of respondents with respect to attitudes toward sexuality statements is given in Table 1. Although attention has long been given to sex and sexuality within the context of public

health, the significance of patriarchy in the socio-cultural and geo-political determinants shaping gender-specific human sexuality attitudes has only recently come to light. As a result, scholars

have started paying more attention to gender disparities in sexual desire, consent for sex, the right to sex, the right to refuse sex, and rape myths.

<b>Table No.1: Attitude towards Sexuality</b>		
<i>Attitude towards Sexuality</i>		
	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
<b>Men need sex more than women do.</b>	<b>40.3</b>	<b>59.7</b>
<b>A woman’s consent is a need to have sex with her.</b>	<b>62.4</b>	<b>37.6</b>
<b>A woman cannot refuse to have sex with her husband.</b>	<b>14.8</b>	<b>85.2</b>
<b>When a woman is raped, she is usually to be blamed for putting herself in that situation.</b>	<b>12.4</b>	<b>87.6</b>
<b>If a woman doesn't physically fight back, it's not rape.</b>	<b>37.5</b>	<b>62.5</b>
<b>Source: Field Survey, 2022</b>		

**Sexual Desire**

Even though a very strong assertion about gender differences in sexuality was held by sex experts<sup>1</sup> traditionally, numerous scientific investigations continued to refute this unproven theory, and feminists both warned against the pervasive gendered attitude toward sexuality and pressed for equal sexual rights (Peplau, 2003).

The findings of this study document male university students’ perspectives on four significantly important aspects of sexuality. First, men need more sex than women. A 40% proportion of university students endorsed this perception. Many research studies also demonstrate that men show more sexual desire expressed in terms of their wish to engage in sexual activities (Baumeister et al., 2001). The result of a study from Malta by Xiberras (2016) also correlated higher sexual desire and a more open attitude towards casual sex with men. However, a study from India (Khan et al., 1997) revealed that for most men, sex is a natural and biological need that is equally desired and enjoyed by men and women. However, few opined that sexual urge is higher and more potent in men than women.

At the same time, Peterson & Hyde (2010) reported that college men tend to report more nonjudgmental attitudes towards casual sex than women and engage in risky casual sex more than women (Clark and Hatfield, 1989). But Black et al. (2011) found that it is the fear of being victims, not less sexual desire, that women’s involvement in uncommitted relations is less. Nonetheless, many empirical findings revealed that men reported more sexual desires and sexual fantasies, spent more on visual sexual stimuli (Baumeister et al., 2001) and were more likely than women to masturbate (Oliver and Hyde, 1993). As Jozkowski & Peterson (2013) found, for men, sexual pleasure is primary, while for women it is secondary. Also, men are considered initiators of sex and women as sexual gatekeepers.

**Consent for Sex**

Despite media coverage about sexual consent, “little is known about the attitude of university students toward it” (MacDougall et al., 2020, p.154). The findings of this study revealed that 62% of the respondents endorsed the notion of consent in sex. Consent in sexual relations is significant for maintaining healthy sexual relationships (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). There is empirical evidence of experiencing sexual

<sup>1</sup> *Sex expert* is an umbrella term that refers to people from a wide variety of professions. Generally, though, sex experts are people who have studied sex or sexuality in some way —like a sex therapist or a sex coach. Some of

the most common sex experts include sex coaches, sex therapists, sex researchers, sex educators and those with sexuality studies degrees (Harel, n.d.).

coercion or sexual violence on unwilling female undergraduates (Cantor et al., 2017; Forsman, 2017) in their intimate relationships. Even though sexual desire has been considered a private affair, men's self-concept about sexuality is characterised by domination, power, and aggression than women's sexual self-concept (Peplau, 2003), and a vast majority of sexual assaults are perpetrated by known persons, including intimate partners (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013), which underlines patriarchy's held notion that a man has absolute power over his partner including his wife. Fernandez et al. (2013) found significant gender-wise differences in the prevalence of aggression in intimate romantic relationships, a reflection of the attitude that consent is not important but "force and coercion are legitimate ways to gain compliance and specifically that they are legitimate in intimate and sexual relationships" (Burt, 1980, p. 218).

The notion of consent in sex endorsed by the majority of university students in this study carries great significance in the backdrop of the ongoing debate in the Delhi high court about marital rape, which revolves around a fundamental rape myth that marriage gives the husband a divine right to have sex with his spouse whether she likes it or not, and whether wife's consent is needed in marital sex or not.

### **Right to Sex and Right to Refuse Sex**

Sexual rights include the right to liberty and autonomy in the responsible exercise of sexuality (HERA, 1999). It allows people to have a pleasurable sexual experience, which in itself is a beautiful way of having love between people. It allows both men and women to live their sexuality with joy, dignity, autonomy, and freedom. Nevertheless, several studies on men and masculinities have linked many sexual constraints, for example, using force and sexual coercion on women with the unequal patriarchal gender notions, particularly by those men who conform to the traditional patriarchal norms (Greig, 2006; Kato-Wallace et al., 2016; Amin et al., 2018).

To determine how accepting male university students are of women's sexual autonomy, it is

crucial to comprehend how they feel about a woman's right to refuse sex in marriage. Sexual autonomy encompasses the right to refuse sex for reasons ranging from the husband's illnesses to the wife's lack of mood as well as tiredness (Madan, 2013). In a society where women are considered "owned property" (Bhattacharyya, 2015), it must be challenging to acknowledge that women, supposed to be submissive to their husbands' sexual desires, have the right to refuse the same.

But 85% of male university students in the current study said a woman could refuse sex if she is tired or not in a mood, implying that nearly 15% of them refuse to acknowledge women's sexual autonomy in the given situation, an opinion which echoed the internalised perception of men about the "submissive sexual role of women". This finding is substantiated by Madan (2013), who explored the proximate factors associated with men's attitudes towards wife beating and sexuality and asserted that educated men are more likely to support women's right to sexual autonomy.

Given that refusing sex can lead to sexual coercion, forced sex (CORT, 1997), rape within intimate relationships, sexual abuse, unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, and marital rape (Khan et al., 2003; Martin et al., 2007), it can be inferred that for a healthy sexual relationship within a marriage, the husband should respect the wife's decision to refuse sex when it concerns her in certain situations. The sexual autonomy of women gets affronted in abusive relationships where women do not dare to refuse (Peplau, 2003), fearing physical or psychological backlash for sexual non-compliance from male partners.

### **Rape Supportive Attitude/Victim Blaming Attitude**

Male-centric societies, which endorse rape myths, often blame the rape victims fully or partially for being raped (Bhattacharyya, 2015). In such societies where sexual assaults by men are trivialised and the victims' character, attire, personal life, and background are publicly scrutinised, sexual assault is one of the most underreported crimes (Fisher et al., 2000;

Rennison, 2002; Bhattacharyya, 2015). Suarez and Gadalla (2010) found that men have a high level of acceptance of rape myths and supported the feminist belief that it is sexuality that perpetuates the acceptance of these myths.

In the present study, 12.4% of the respondents endorsed the statement that when a woman is raped, she is usually to be blamed for putting herself in that situation. This victim-blaming attitude is in line with the prevalent societal double standard that “nice girls don’t get raped” (Wegner et al., 2015, p.16). It also sanctions victim-blaming for women who violate traditional gender roles (Bhattacharyya, 2015; Grubb and Turner, 2012) and wear “provocative” clothing that invites sexual assaults (Mogul and Suri, 2022). Rape myth endorsement studies (O'Connor & McMahon, 2022; Schewe et al., 2022; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) documented the greater prevalence of victim-blaming attitude, rather than perpetrator blaming, among people with orthodox sexual assault myths. But at the same time, a comparatively high proportion of respondents, about 38%, supposed that if a woman does not physically fight back, it is not rape. So, it is clear that more than one-third of respondents believe it is women's responsibility to keep themselves safe from sexual violence like rape. According to them, the onus of fighting back is also on the woman who was subjected to rape to prove that she is of “good character” and did not invite trouble for her.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study document male university students’ perspectives on four significantly important aspects of sexuality, namely sexual desire, consent for sex, right to sex/right to refuse sex, and rape-supportive attitude/victim-blaming attitude. Even though the majority of university students endorse the autonomy of women on their body, findings undoubtedly underline the need of having sensitisation programs for our young male and female students, as a small but disturbingly significant number of respondents holding unfavourable attitudes towards sexuality too should understand the value of sexuality in

general and women’s sexual autonomy in particular. Given that many of the perpetrators and victims in the recent surge of sexual coercion cases reported in India are young men and women, it is imperative that a range of programmes and intervention strategies be implemented at the university level.

A life skills-based sexuality education programme has the ability to improve participants’ understanding of sexual and reproductive health as well as their level of life skills. It can also help participants recognise appropriate behaviours in sexually dangerous settings (Lee & Lee, 2018). Life skill programmes with topics of gender equality, sexuality, sexual rights, and autonomy should be made part of the curriculum in all streams of studies at the university level, and discussions and deliberations on these so-called “stigmatised” topics should be the pedagogy of the teaching-learning process. As faulty attitudes towards sexuality are detrimental to both girls and boys with short-term and long-term physical as well as psychological consequences, these sex education activities will reduce their sexual vulnerabilities by countering the gender stereotypes of all university students while recognising the concept of sexual rights in its fullest meaning.

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### **Ethical Approval and Conflict of Interest**

The manuscript was prepared following the protocols of the Helsinki Declaration. However, ethical approval was not required for this attitudinal study. I declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### **Informed Consent**

Informed written consent was taken from all the participants. For this, all the research participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and voluntary participation was sought from them. They were also informed that if they decide to take part and change their mind later, they can withdraw from the study. Also, they were free not to answer any questions or

withdraw at any time. That their responses would be treated as confidential, and all reasonable efforts would be made so that no individual participant would be identified with his/her answers.

**Funding and Data Availability Statement**

There is no funding involved in this study. Data can be made available if required.