

Exploring Indian Women's Understanding of Benevolent Sexism

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ABSTRACT

Sexism has been described as any practice based upon the idea that a person is inferior because of their sex, resulting in differential behavior against them. One component of sexism is benevolent sexism, which presents itself as a patronizing attitude towards women. Research indicates women exposed to benevolent sexist attitudes suffer damage to their self-esteem as well as perceptions of self-competence. However, despite this evidence supported impact, people were found to not pay attention to benevolent sexism. To increase discourse regarding benevolent sexism, this study explores Indian women's understanding and awareness of benevolent sexism using a qualitative approach. Seventeen women from the upper middle class with a mean age of twenty-four were interviewed with the help of a validated interview guide. Audio transcription was done to create edited transcripts. The data obtained was analysed using Braun and Clarke's model of thematic analysis. From the results, we understand women's understanding of benevolent sexism to be present in the background of how they comprehend womanhood and gender. Two global themes were identified: 'being a woman' and 'sexism.' The findings hold significance as they provide a deeper understanding of women's understanding of sexism, which could provide useful information to tackle the hegemonic phenomena.

Keywords: *Benevolent Sexism, Womanhood, Gender, Qualitative*

The concept of sexism can be described as a practice maintaining gender inequality at an economic, social and individual level. The Council of Europe (2019) describes sexism to be "any act, gesture, visual representation, spoken or written words, practice, or behaviour based upon the idea that a person or a group of persons is inferior because of their sex, which occurs in the public or private sphere, whether online or offline." It is primarily viewed as hostility and discrimination towards women. However, this laymen conceptualization is incomplete and one-dimensional in nature. Ambivalent sexism theory states sexism, specifically prejudice towards women, to be an amalgamation of two differing ideologies. On one hand, hostile sexism manifests itself through aggression, exclusion and competition towards women. The other, lesser known, component presents itself as inherently positive, but patronizing, paternalistic attitudes towards women. This is known as benevolent sexism (Hammon et al, 2018).

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Received: February 21, 2023; Revision Received: April 21, 2023; Accepted: April 25, 2023

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The concept of benevolent sexism provides gentler justifications of male dominance and prescribed gender roles. Feelings of affection and positivity are inherent to the benevolent sexist; to the point where they themselves may not be aware of the sexist undertones of their actions. The theory of ambivalent sexism, as given by Glick and Fiske, stated both hostile and benevolent sexism to justify and maintain patriarchal social structures. While they may differ in valence and intensity, both forms of sexism hold assumptions such as viewing women to be the weaker and lesser sex (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

Components of benevolent sexism

The theory defines benevolent sexism to be comprising of three components: protective paternalism, gender differentiation and intimate heterosexuality. Protective paternalism manifests itself through a sense of 'ownership', 'protectiveness' and 'need to provide' for women. Gender differentiation limits and views women solely in traditional, orthodox gender roles such as that of a wife or a mother. Finally, women are romanticized to be sexual objects which men deem necessary to acquire in order to be 'complete' (Glick & Fiske, 1997). At the core of all these deeply rooted beliefs, is an inherent assumption that men possess greater authority, power, and strength than women.

Impact of benevolent sexism

Benevolent sexism holds positive attitudes toward women in traditional roles: women who fit the traditional image of a woman are idealized, accepted and desired. Due to this pressure and expectation, the impact of benevolent sexism has been found to be overwhelmingly negative.

Women exposed to benevolent sexist attitudes suffer damages to their self-esteem as well as perceptions of self-competence (Dardenne et al, 2007). The impact of hostile and benevolent sexism has found women to experience similar levels of anger and depression (Bosson et al, 2007). Thus, while benevolent sexism is deemed to be a less relevant component of sexism, its impact on women's cognitive performance and distress level indicates the major role it plays in perpetuating gender inequality.

Response to Benevolent Sexism

It is due to this layered nature of benevolent sexism that responses towards it have not been opposing or negative in nature. Existing research has found a discrepancy between the concept, impact of benevolent sexism and the perception of individuals. Women have been found to accepting of protective and paternalistic reasons given by their male companions to curtail and prohibit their behaviour (Moya et al, 2007), with women seeking relationship security preferring partners with benevolently sexist attitudes (Cross & Overall, 2018). Moreover, women who were measured to hold high ideals of benevolent sexism accepted explicit, restrictive, blatantly sexist justifications presented by their partners (for example: it is not safe for any woman outside). Another study examining women's approval of benevolent sexism found women to approve of benevolent sexists much more than hostile sexists (Kilianski et al, 1998). This higher inclination of women towards benevolent sexism was found to be present in their perception of 'good', and 'safe' men as well. Women have been found to prefer partners who had inherently benevolent sexist attitudes as they would consider themselves safe in their presence (Gul & Kupfer, 2019).

Moreover, differences in attitudes of benevolent sexism were found to be present across age groups as well. A study examining the trajectory of sexist attitudes throughout one's life found a common pattern to be present (Hammond et al, 2018). Benevolent sexism in women was found to be high in late adolescence and older ages. On the other hand, men's affirmation

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of benevolent attitudes was found to steadily increase with time. It is important to note that this study was found to be one of the few ones looking at benevolent sexist attitudes across the life span.

Benevolent sexism in India

When looking at cultural differences, research on benevolent sexism in India has found the component of protective paternalism to be its most salient manifestation. A positive relation has been found to exist between Indian philosophy and benevolent sexism. Indians' inherent preference for paternalistic relationships was found to inculcate and propagate benevolent sexism in India (Mulla & Krishnan, 2012). Another study exploring the prevalence and consequences of benevolent sexism in India found high levels of both hostile and benevolent sexism to be present in men; but higher levels of benevolent sexism to be present in women than men (Jain et al, 2020).

Purpose of the present study

Background literature shows the understanding of sexism to exist from the perspective of hostile behaviour (exclusion, discrimination, violence towards a gender). While research has been conducted on benevolent sexism, the universal awareness and understanding of this concept is highly limited, thus indicating a need for exploratory research to be conducted for these topics.

One of the major research gaps identified was the discrepancy between the impact of benevolent sexism and its perception. While benevolent sexism has been found to make women susceptible to anxiety, depressive feelings, lower cognitive and professional performance as well as lowered self-esteem (Dardenne et al, 2007; Bosson et al, 2007), research has found women to not consider benevolent sexist attitudes as problematic and discriminatory (Moya et al, 2007; Kilianski et al, 1998). Additionally, while existing research has indicated age-based differences to exist in attitudes towards benevolent sexism (Hammond et al, 2018), an overall dearth of examining attitudes and understanding of this concept across the lifespan was found in academia.

Finally, research in this area has been found to be sparse in the Indian setting. An Indian qualitative study holistically exploring the thoughts and understanding women's perspective is yet to be found. It is due to such research gaps that an objective to explore this subtle yet pervasive form of sexism; which limits identities of women to fixed, stereotyped boxes, was formed.

The major significance for exploring this topic comes from my identity as a woman and my experience of being exposed to benevolent sexism. In India, benevolent sexism has been found to exist with a component of 'protectiveness' and 'paternalism', leading to belittling, restricting and suffocating of women due to the patriarchal roots of society. Furthermore, understanding this concept in the field of psychology would build towards tackling this manifestation of systemic oppression and aid women who may face challenges due to patriarchy increasing its significance.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The target population for this study was heterosexual, upper middle-class Indian women above the age of 18. The process of sampling was guided by the data saturation theory. Therefore, the sample size was dependent on the point where no new data would be obtained.

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Purposive sampling was employed, where the sample was based on the typicality of the cases, in this case being heterosexual Indian women (Singh, 1997).

The sample included women of upper middle-class who were fluent in English and Hindi. Women who were identifying as non-heteronormative or with any cognitive dysfunction or psychiatric disorder were excluded from the study. The study was limited to Indian residents only.

Table number 1- Table showing the demographic details of the participants (N=17)

Participant	Gender	Age
P1	Female	18
P2	Female	21
P3	Female	19
P4	Female	21
P5	Female	21
P6	Female	21
P7	Female	21
P8	Female	22
P9	Female	22
P10	Female	27
P11	Female	27
P12	Female	30
P13	Female	30
P14	Female	39
P15	Female	45
P16	Female	48
P17	Female	47

Instruments

A semi-structured interview was prepared to collate data for the study through flexible, open-ended questions. This method aids in comprehensively exploring perceptions and narratives of participants, no matter how layered they are (Barriball & While, 1994). They allow the researcher to mold the interview according to the narrative of the participant, but do not have a lack of structure which may lead to collection of irrelevant data. The process of constructing the interview guide followed guidelines of asking closed-ended as well as open ended questions, using language ensuring non-judgmental acceptance, focusing on rapport and demographic details in the initial stage of the interview as well as having a rough constructed timeline of the interview (Newcomer et al, 2015). This construction of an interview guide was validated through the process of expert review.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was followed for the purpose of this study. The objective of the study is to delve into how women perceive benevolent sexism. This objective was postulated to be best achieved through an exploratory stance towards the research topic. A detailed, in depth understanding of the narratives of women regarding benevolent sexism would be reached through this research design.

Furthermore, the study adopted a constructivist grounded theory design. This methodology focuses on learning about the experience, assumptions and beliefs about a particular

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participant in order to make existing societal practices, hierarchies and communication patterns visible (Charmaz, 2006). Due to this focus on bringing, interpreting and analysing lived experiences to the forefront along with a theoretical base, the design was considered best suited for the present study. The study can also be seen to be embedded in the social constructivist paradigm, which views reality, experience and knowledge to be subjective, individual creations.

Procedure

The sample for this study was heterosexual, upper middle socio-economic class women. A google form was created to ask people whether they want to be a part of the study, which would obtain demographic information of the participants. Women interested in this study were given an informed consent form. A semi-structured interview protocol was designed before-hand. Participants were informed of the relevant ethical considerations taken. The conduction of the interview was recorded and analysed using thematic analysis. The researcher engaged in reflection and introspection throughout the data collection process in order to be aware of their own biases and motivations which may impact the research process.

Data Analysis

The obtained data was interpreted using the Braun and Clarke framework of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analyzing patterns in data by delineating common as well as separate themes across the information received. The six phases of thematic analysis are familiarization with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up (Braun & Clarke 2013). Such a method of analysis would aid in identifying and bringing to the surface relevant patterns of data.

The data validation strategy of the study included clarifying researcher bias. Through the strategy of clarifying researcher's bias, the researcher commented on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This was done from the very onset of the data collection and interpretation process. This method would work even more as the purpose of the study is to explore women's understanding of benevolent sexism, with the researcher's identity being a woman, thus holding the potential to interfere with objective research.

Researcher's Bias

It is important to note here that certain qualities, background as well as value systems of the research may interfere with the data collection and interpretation process. The researcher's identity as a cis gendered woman herself may influence the construction of the interview schedule, data collection as well as interpretation of results. Furthermore, the researcher's identity as a feminist may result in a bias being present regarding the topic of research as well.

After reflection during the data analysis process, the researcher was able to identify her own understanding of feminism to interfere with emerging themes from the data. The identified subtheme of incomprehension of feminism was therefore seen to be rooted in some level of bias. The researcher's schema can be understood as being subjective, and thus not generalizable for everyone. This realization was important to maintain the authenticity of data.

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The process of data collection included noticing internalized concepts of sexism in participants. During this process, feelings of frustration and empathy were noticed to be coming up for the researcher; as the participants were also seen as fellow women.

This level of subjectivity and reactions to the process of the study was tackled by having detailed field notes and reflections. Additionally, the process of data analysis was done under supervision.

Ethical Considerations

Research was conducted only after the approval by the Institutional Review Board (IBR) of Christ University, Bangalore. Voluntary participation and informed consent were ensured by circulating a google form as well as an informed consent form delineating the objective and significance of the study. Information obtained from the participants was kept confidential on a password protected laptop. Identities were protected by using numbers for participants' identification. A debriefing script sharing the contact information of the research was shared with the participant. Potential emotional distress stemming from the topic of conversation was anticipated. In order to prevent any harm, three helpline numbers were shared with all participants by incorporating them in the debriefing script.

RESULTS

Figure No. 1- Global Theme of Sexism

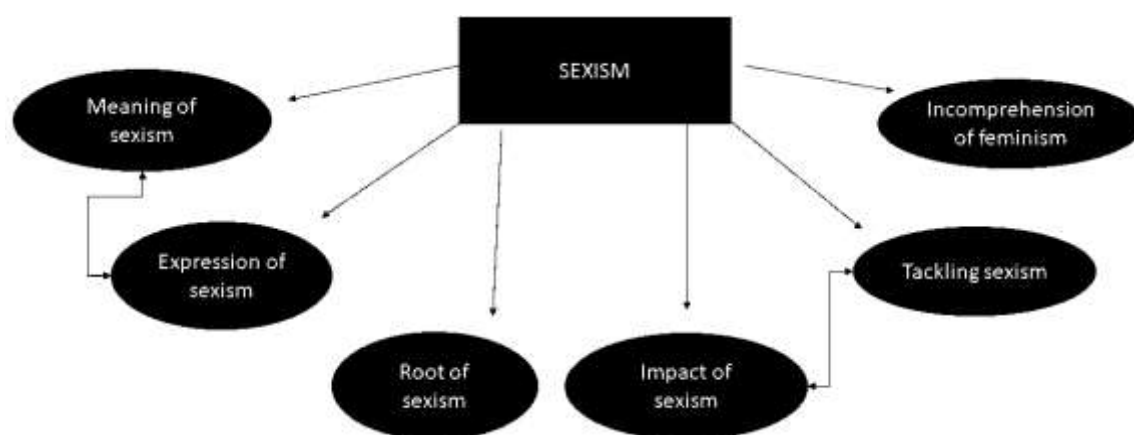
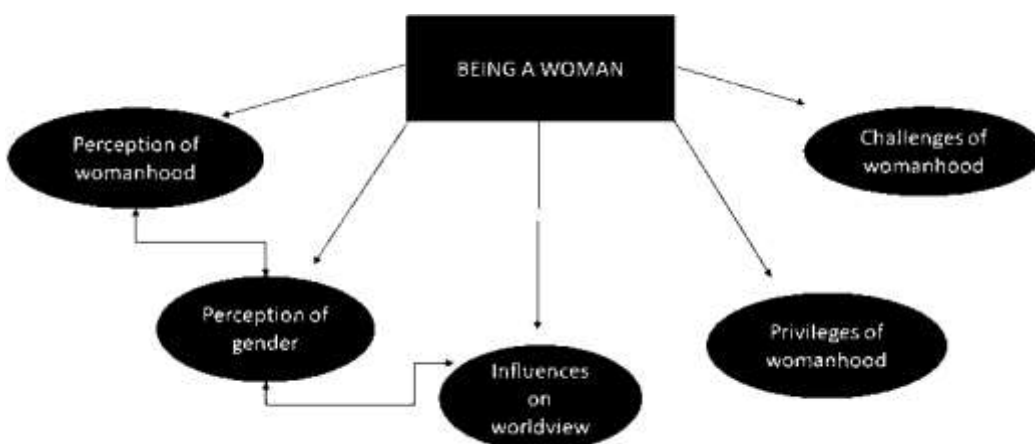


Figure No 2- Global theme of Bring a Woman



DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to explore the understanding and awareness that heterosexual Indian women have regarding benevolent sexism. The process of data collection and analysis showcased how entrenched benevolent sexism as a concept was in all participants' understanding of sexism. The data analysis process identified two global themes emerging from the data. These have been depicted in Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2. Following Braun and Clarke's model of thematic analysis, it was uncovered that participants' understanding of 'sexism' existed in the backdrop of their understanding of 'being a woman'. These were the two global themes identified in the data. While each participant shared personal experiences, collated data showcased the impact of sexism to be common for most, if not all women. Based on the interviewing and analysis process, two themes and eleven subthemes were identified. Each will be discussed in detail below.

Being a woman

The participants' experience and understanding of sexism was found to be stemming from their experience of being a woman directly. Be it their own perception of womanhood, gender as well as experienced challenges and privileges, specific commonalities were visible across participants. These commonalities were found to center around their challenges.

Interestingly, when asked what meaning 'being a woman' holds for participants, their responses showcased majorly expectations placed on a woman. The participants' construction of gender was seen to be dividing and creating stratifications. As is shared by Lorber (1994), gender is understood not only as a social construction but also as a system of stratification. This essence of this global theme lies in the realization that women's identity and life experiences have been shaped by the social construct of 'gender'. The terms 'gender', 'womanhood' and 'sexism' can be seen as interconnected in the themes and subthemes.

Perception of womanhood

Participants, when asked about their identity as a woman, delineated common expectations, roles and challenges as the core of what constitutes this gender. A woman was found to be equated to the societal restraints and responsibilities placed on her, across age groups. Womanhood, for most participants, was characterized by the societal expectations placed on this particular gender. Participants described being a woman as fitting a specific role and position in society. Being a woman was equated with performing expectations and duties intrinsic to the gender, through no or little choice for members belonging to this community to have.

According to West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender, "a person's gender is not simply an aspect of who one is, but more fundamentally it is something that one does, recurrently, in interaction with others". This can be seen to be true here as well.

Participant's responsibilities and acts associated with being women were related to expected performance of certain acts. Multiple participants mentioned womanhood requiring completing tasks such as cooking, marrying, having children and being family-oriented. One common observation was how a woman's role, thus identity, is limited to her family and nothing else. This was expressed as a harsh reality for women. Being a woman was seen to be come with multitudes of 'should be's and 'expected to's from society.

"P2: Being a woman would be someone who is, at the same time, independent of her own decisions, and has her own opinion, but at the same time, she is someone who is taking care of a family."

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"P7: Being a woman would be having a certain number of responsibilities."

Benevolent sexism has been seen as perpetuating strict differences in roles given to men and women. Theoretically, benevolent sexism is rooted in intimate interdependence between the sexes (Moya et al, 2007). The strict differentiation regarding responsibilities according to gender leads to this interdependence of the sexes, thus also perpetuating a social script of functioning. This component of benevolent sexism could be traced in participants' sharing.

It was also observed that some participants characterized their womanhood as a rebellion against society; thus, considering gender to be a subjectively owned facet of one's identity and not a result of constraints placed by society. This rebellion was found to be present in the younger demographic of participants (age 19 to 27). The rejection of benevolent sexist ideals was found to be present saliently in this age demographic.

P17: "So my identity of myself, to tell you personally is more that of a professional that I see myself as and not just the gender that defines me"

P5: "As a woman, I feel like, there are two things that are very important to me, that is my sense of independence...I can't be in a you know, a system where independence is not appreciated, because I have to be free, I need to make my own choices, decisions."

It was inferred that a woman was rarely defined as her own person. As mentioned above, this ownership of gender was seen as an act of rebellion by those who did it. The societal construction of womanhood was found to be made in relation to a man, as mentioned by P8. As shared by Garcia et al (2016), women in India are seen to be important solely to the family setting, with a full-time job of taking care of their children, cooking and housework. A person constructed for providing, supporting and nurturing others, the societal conception of a woman was considered to be made solely for helping others flourish.

P8: "it's very strange that it is like that, but like, it really is, like Simone de Beauvoir also says they, that it's always positioned against somebody else. So, you want the other sex or the other gender, as I like to put it. So, I've always felt my position as a woman in relation to somebody else, or, and more specifically, a man in the house."

Perception of gender

Perception of womanhood was found to be interconnected with what participants believed the construct of gender to be. Gender is primarily viewed through a divisional, binary lens, with women playing an entirely separate role than men in society. The concept of gender binary, formed in the 1930s, promoted masculinity to be necessary for good psychological adjustment in men and femininity for women accordingly (Pleck, 1981). This theoretical concept was validated by participants' sharing, with many talking about the challenges they faced due to the differential lens society adopts to look at both genders. As was shared by P5, women were viewed as procreators and wives even in professional settings. This was not found to be present for men, who were instead viewed as bread earners. Benevolent sexism in and of itself permeates this thought process as well; of gender role differentiation.

P5: "It was wrong for both women and the men involved, especially the women cause we've been, like, taught to like, you know, be submissive and demure, and that we are like, be a non-commodity that is to like, be taken care of men, we can like, sustain"

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ourselves. And like, men don't like I feel like looking in the other aspect, I feel like a lot of young men are kind of put under pressure that, oh, you need to earn well, so that you can like sustain a family, you can like have a wife. And yeah, that burden is there."

This division was observed to be limited to certain actions that men and women engage in. Connecting this to the concept of gender performativity, West and Zimmerman introduced the concept of 'doing gender' as was explained above. Thus, gender can be considered to be both a feature and outcome of social situations (Hyde et al, 2019). In the context of this study, gender can be seen as influencing participants' perception of womanhood while being an outcome of their sharing as well. This role that gender plays was found to be present in the participants' perceptions saliently.

Participants also shared believing some fundamental differences between men and women to be evolutionarily and religiously (from God) true. As shared by P14, some differences were considered to be created by God, thus holding a difference between men and women and their approach to life events.

P14: "That's how god has made them. Right. So as a mom, but I see the love that comes within for the little ones. From a female point of view and from a male perspective, I see that very different. But the warmth that comes from women is way too different."

Over here, participant's perception of gender was seen to be a reflection and microcosm of the society's placement of genders. As is supported by research, gender remains a social construct, with its conceptualization being influenced by numerous factors such as gender-role socialization, interpersonal interactions, media messages, and personal experiences as women (Settles et al, 2008).

P8: "it's like air right, like, gender is like air, it's literally everywhere, and you breathe it every day."

Influences on worldview

Participants reported their perception of individuals to be a result of multiple influences. As shared by participant 17, friends, spouses and families all form one's worldviews. Additionally, the representation of gender roles in media was also brought up to perpetuate such binary thinking.

P17: 'what frames your worldview is your friends, they are a primary influence, of course your spouse, their families'

P17: 'Believe me that you know those the soap operas which are so popular, they have a bigger, bigger role than just entertainment.... you know how women are projected in those serials; in that garb of very cute behaviour.'

Research has supported the influence socialization and other elements of society have on the construction of gender and womanhood for individuals. Gender identities can be considered to be renegotiated in contextually specific everyday interactions (West and Zimmerman, 1987). The difference between the social construction of masculinity and femininity has an impact on perception and understanding of gender differences in both behaviors and outcome (Payne et al, 2008).

Privileges of womanhood

When asked about the benefits of womanhood, participants brought up the provisions placed in the employment and education sectors for women to be the overarching privileges.

P6: "like I think the quota thing which is there this is also good, very good. So, and the basically like relaxation, which is which is a good thing so I can that is a good Initiative".

However, many participants also brought up traditionally feminine traits of women to be privileges, as is shown below.

P7: "usually women have a higher emotional quotient, So they are more sympathetic or they can understand emotions better, or feel the emotion better, a benefit in terms of understanding someone who is trying to express an emotion to them."

P10: "they are given the benefit of the doubt that when they are talking about something, especially something that might affect their virtue, the way they're being viewed in the world, their word is taken I think to a certain degree for what they're saying"

The participant's responses also indicated their internalization of one of the central tenets of benevolent sexism, which is differentiating expectations. This was found to be present in participants as well, with characteristics and qualities of 'emotional intelligence', 'virtue' and 'warmth' being seen as solely feminine traits, with no overlap between the two. People with benevolently sexist attitudes view women in role-restrictive ways (e.g., believing that women need men's help and protection), but they appear emotionally and subjectively positive (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This was found to be present in the participants' case.

Another major finding was the lack of benefits identified by some women. When asked about potential benefits, participants brought up a lack of any such identified privileges due to the oppression of women in the current society.

P2: all I see right now is how being a woman is so difficult that right now, I can't really put myself into like thinking about the benefits of being a woman, especially in the current society that we're living in.

Challenges of being a woman

When viewing women and their role in society, a very specific, expectation-centered position comes up. For example, when viewing a family set-up, the role of the husband is that of economic support of the family, and that of the wife is centered on the home and domestic tasks. Research shows these expectations remain firmly anchored not only in marital practices but also in the expectations that spouses have towards each other (Attané, 2012). Thus, the highly gendered roles that still exist within the couple are part of a continuum of inequality between the sexes that can be seen throughout the life-span.

Such gender roles were found to be at the root of most challenges brought up by participants. Additionally, research has showcased Indian society to believe that women are the weakest gender, with girls and women being in a less privileged position (Burton et al, 2000.) This thought process was proved to be correct with participants sharing instances of differential treatment regarding their curfew, division of household chores and moral policing in family

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as well as school settings. Additionally, instances of sexual misconduct as well as objectification in public were brought up as challenges for women.

P3: “(My father) I did find that he was a lot more skeptical of, you know, my abilities and what I could do than my brother”

P3: “I know there's a dress code for boys as well. But when they violate it, their character is not attacked. But for girls, it is ki the only reason why you would violate a dress code is because you want attention or you want to impress a guy or something. I think that is a very obvious thing I've noticed as well is that this was a theme in my school every teacher did this.”

P5: “a family where there's a girl and a boy child are more likely for the girl child to do more household chores. Because why? Because she needs to learn how to be a woman with a child, man. I mean, boy, the boy child is not like, you know, forced to do anything. And they decided to do it on their own, but like cooking, cleaning, doing the dishes. So many, like, of my friends who have like, siblings have told me like, how it's so unfair.”

Participants also brought up the expectations placed on them regarding their behaviour as a major challenge. Most women were expected to behave in a traditionally feminine manner, such as being soft-spoken, kind and adaptable. Thus, gender was found to dictate the trajectory of behaviour, activities as well as thought processes for women. This creation and expected performance of gender can directly be linked to the second component of benevolent sexism; gender differentiation.

P9: “You should know how to be like soft spoken with the you know, not, you shouldn't come across with too dominating too loud, too opinionated.”

Sexism

The global theme of sexism explored the meaning, expression, root, impact and tackling and incomprehension of sexism. Based on the participants' responses, it was inferred that hostile sexism is not equated to the overarching construct of sexism by participants.

Rather, facets of benevolent sexism were perceived to constitute the concept of sexism in entirety. An overlapping conceptualization of benevolent sexism was found to be identified from the participants' end. Therefore, the results section uncovers the understanding participants had of benevolent sexism, which could be further explored in detail.

Meaning of sexism

Participants found sexism to be ingrained in society and expressed in multiple ways. Stemming from patriarchy, sexism was understood as a reality rendering woman to face more challenges than men. At its core, sexism was defined by all participants as differentiation between genders and prejudice against women. It was considered to form, maintain and perpetuate gender inequality, through multiple manifestations. Participants also shared sexism to be discrimination, but with differing expressions of this manifestations.

P9: “It's differentiating between the two sexes, treating them differently.”

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P10: "things that we are supposed to just naturally be able to do and figure out as individuals, but for some reason, because of the sex, or because of your gender, you're kind of categorized into things."

P17: "sexism to my mind is attributing some roles to genders and putting them in watertight compartments and not allowing flow."

This understanding of sexism indicated the awareness participants have regarding concepts which make up benevolent sexism. For example, sexism including strict gender role differentiation is a major tenet of benevolent sexism. Thus, while awareness of the term 'benevolent sexism' was not seen to be present, its understanding was still identified in most participants.

Expression of sexism

As is shown in the sub themes above, all women shared binary differentiation of men and women, being sheltered and protected by society as well as being sexualized and romanticized to constitute sexism for them.

As was shared by participants, women were found to be placed on a pedestal, placing the family's/community's and society's honor onto them, thus protecting and curbing their behaviour even more. A woman's virtue, from a sexist ideology, is not just her own, but her entire communities. The component of protective paternalism was also identified as restricting opportunities and cocooning women's life by some participants.

P2: "the comparison thing, of course, I mean that my brother is allowed to go out late. And like a lot of similar instances like that have that have been there, which have been like, for example, sharing the location like he was ever asked to share his location, I'm always asked to share my location for wherever I go"

The final component of benevolent sexism was the romanticization of women, viewing them solely as partners and objects for sexual pleasure. This one-dimensional view of women was reiterated by participants, sharing instances of their bodies being sexualized, regardless of place or situation. Participants expressed the lack of safety and comfort women experience in their bodies due to the permanent male gaze ingrained in society.

P3: "no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, women just always have this hyper focus on their bodies. they are sexualized in a very demeaning sort of way."

P10: "I don't know if this is something all women feel, but the sense of fear for one safety, if not, because you are physically stronger than men, or just that I'm like, not that physically fit, whatever the reason may be, but that fear will always be there."

Finally, some participants also mentioned such expectations not being limited to just women, but also men, thus depicting the pervasive impact sexism has on society as a whole.

P7: "telling a boy, if he's crying to, like, you know, to man up and then, not be a girl, like, stop acting like a girl, I think, I believe that's what sexism will be."

P10: "Obviously, the brother has to protect the sister. And you know, it's obviously the girl has to, you know, listen to what the brother says."

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Root of sexism

The root of sexism was identified by participants to be years of conditioning, ancestors, religious influences and evolutionary concepts. Additionally, normalisation and perpetuation of patriarchy in the current society was also found to be a root of sexism.

P2: "And the fact that a lot of us have been brought up in that way, especially like our parents and their generation...It just becomes a kind of an expectation that you are supposed to do that."

P3: "So it's kind of people think that controlling women's behaviour, is going to stop all of this, from years and years of conditioning."

Additionally, participants also identified religion to be an influence on today's gender roles. As shown in research, Hinduism places the female in a position to provide company to men and facilitate procreation, progeny and continuation of family lineage. Thus, women in Hinduism were seen to be in a lesser position than men, resulting in sexism in society (García et al, 2016).

P4: "religion, maybe indirectly puts us in, like, you know, maybe puts us in a lower stature because a lot of them say that, like, you know, the duty of a woman is to, like, stay at home and take care of kids"

P17: the woman biologically God made her like that...then childbirth leaves her weaker and she depends on the man to actually survive, matlab survival agar hum sirf roti- kapda maganme, wo hi survival hai. So, the woman was dependent on the man and that is where the root of today's woman is also."

P6: "Our ancestors, they have, like, you know, narrowed down certain roles, Responsibilities."

P7: "when our ancestors, and people who used to pray a lot, and these people used to call the males and the priests. You know they would call the priest the man of the house, the ultimate person"

Finally, participants expressed sexism to perpetuate and continue in society through the normalization of sexist practices and ideologies, as is mentioned below.

P9: "A lot of a lot of the time we tend to think when we see them around us we do not speak up because it is conveyed enough, okay, this is how this is how things are supposed to Be."

Impact of sexism

Participants shared experiences of sexism to result in individuals feeling numb and self-conscious. Additionally, they shared a range of emotions towards this expectation, such as sadness, frustration and even acceptance.

Although benevolent sexism does not reflect hostility toward women, it does compliment women for their adherence to traditional gender role stereotypes. When these messages are internalized through passive acceptance, this kind of superficial kindness shows a hostile, unsympathetic side by not seeing these stereotypes as problematic (Shi & Zheng, 2020). This passive acceptance was found to be present in some participants, who shared very stereotypical notions of the responsibilities of a woman.

P7: "I've been told to look a certain way, I've been told to wear things a certain way. And that has definitely changed my perception of how I view other women."

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It is important to showcase the influence of benevolent sexism on the passive responses women are found to have in response to sexism. A study conducted aiming to understand the influence of benevolent sexism on women responding to restrictions placed by men also corroborated the impact of benevolent sexist attitudes on women and their behaviour. The study indicated how even women with low benevolent sexist attitudes accepted patriarchal restrictions imposed on them in specific instances, regardless of how sexist the proposition was. Thus, benevolent sexism can be seen as influencing women's behaviour and response to sexist situations, indicating its pervasive impact. This was shared by a participant, who reflected letting her viewpoints being superficially molded by the people around her.

P2: "But at the same time, there, I because like, if, let's say, if I'm sitting with my family, and we're coming to a discussion of how women should be innocent and nurturing, let's take the same example. same sentence, moving that patient, I might as well just say, Oh, yeah, maybe, maybe. But maybe I partially agree to that, or partially disagree to it, I wouldn't say to their face, oh no, I completely disagree to that."

P3: "I gave these people the benefit of the doubt and thinking that there was some truth to what they were saying. So mainly, these comments were about my character and how I may give the wrong impression to people, especially guys"

Tackling sexism

It was found that most women were verbally challenging and resisting the gender binary and accompanying sexism. Participants of younger age groups shared a need to call out individuals who are making sexist comments and prioritizing their own well-being and status as women. As shared by participants, resisting (and thus not tolerating in the future as well) sexist remarks thrown their way. Many participants talked about challenging sexism as being necessary for women to create their own space in the world.

*P3: "I will definitely not let it slide, if that is something that I've never been able to do, if it happens to me or anyone else, I always stand up for it
Screen reader support enabled."*

*P9: "But now if I see happening with someone telling me that pathetic perspective to me, I point it out right there, you know, and then people said that, that's right, you tell you
read, okay, whatever you're thinking that not true. At this point, I straight up point it out, and I straight up call out that person right there and then. I don't feel so sad."*

However, internalization of gender norms was also observed in some participants. For example, many participants brought up initially accepting gendered ideas, and only with time unlearning and resisting sexism and gender norms. One research supported impact of benevolent sexism is its contribution to maintenance of unequal social status (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Its subtle nature of differentiating between genders and placing women in traditional roles, without being seen as a form of prejudice, results in women internalizing this component of benevolent sexism.

This sub theme indicated the presence of internalization of benevolent sexist attitudes in some participants. Interestingly, this was found to be present majorly in the older age range of participants. As shared, participants shared accepting and going along with gendered expectations due to the pressure they experienced from society and family.

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"P3: If I want to, you know, be safe and be healthy and happy. So, I become a lot more practical about it and not engaging."

P5: "It's just that at the end of the day, I feel like all of us need to choose and pick our battles. This is a fight that I don't want to like waste time of my life and my energy on because I know this person will not change. And if they do change good for them. But like, I don't want like I it's not my responsibility to make another person change unless they choose to learn on their own."

Incomprehension of feminism

Participants' internalization of sexism was also found to be present by their incomprehension of feminism. The researcher of this study aimed to uncover women's conceptualization and understanding of sexist concepts in an attempt to pen down on paper the pervasive impact of the lesser-focused dimension of sexism. With these identified themes and subthemes, a nuanced understanding of the culture of sexism would be enhanced and explored further.

"P17: it is women who are so unforgiving about each other."

P17: "Feminism is an attempt to attach male gender roles onto women, which is problematic, and I disagree."

Limitations

The generalizability of the study is limited as it only takes into account the view point of heterosexual Indian women. The participant sample was limited only to individuals from a metropolitan city residence, thus reducing the external validity of the findings. It is also important to note that the data collection process was limited to the online mode due to the Co-vid 19 pandemic. Such a mode of conduction limited the cues and richness of data the researcher might have received.

Other limitations in the study stem from data saturation being the guiding principle of data collection. Research has proven data saturation to have a lack of transparency and clarity. The sample size is guided by rules of thumb, thus not allowing a standardized number of the sample to be predecided. Another potential danger with having a prior sample size determination is the change in data as research progresses (Lowe et al, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The study elucidates the internalization all women have of gender norms and sexist expectations enforced by society at varying degrees. The experience of sexism, in particular benevolent sexism was found to be unavoidable for all the women, indicating its pervasive nature. Each participants' sharing indicated all three components of benevolent sexism to be present in their understanding of womanhood as well as sexism. This finding stands true for both their lived experiences as well as general lens of understanding.

The findings of the study may provide future researchers to have a deeper understanding of how women themselves comprehend sexism, thus giving them greater tools to conduct researches and design interventions to fight against the hegemonic structure of sexism.

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Acknowledgement

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Kishore, S. (2023). Exploring Indian Women's Understanding of Benevolent Sexism. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 11(2), 367-383. DIP:18.01.037.20231102, DOI:10.25215/1102.037