

Insights from Offender Narratives: A Qualitative Analysis to Understand Factors Behind Rape

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ABSTRACT

A steady increase in occurrence of sexual offense cases has been observed, prompting a need to better understand the underlying psychological factors behind sexually offensive behaviour. The study has a qualitative design, with interviews conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. 23 respondents convicted of rape participated in the study. Responses were analyzed through narrative and thematic analysis. Six major themes emerged revealing prevalent negative attitudes like victim blaming, a tendency to deny or minimize actions, narcissistic and impulsive tendencies. Additionally, the respondents shared their thought processes behind committing the crime and their perceptions of the punishment they received. This work sheds light on how lack of personal accountability, combined with narcissism, impulsive behaviour, and victim blaming creates a culture in which sexually offending behaviour thrives. It underscores the need for education of real consent, and understanding the legal implications of behaviour. The findings emphasize the urgent need to effectively address systemic social bias against victims of sexual violence in particular and women in general. This study is among the few globally in which convicted perpetrators were asked to address the cause behind their crimes. It has a qualitative design, with verbatim data that gives us first-hand insight into criminal behaviour.

Keywords: *Sexual Offences, Rape, Cause of Criminal Behaviour, Criminal Psychology*

Every single day, women carry an acute awareness that they may face sexual harassment, abuse or harm. Sexual violence acts not only as a deterrent, but it instils a deep sense of pervasive fear and alarm and thus, an ongoing sense of vulnerability that holds women back. In order to live a wholesome life, with mental and physical wellbeing, we need to feel safe. As per National Crime Records Bureau report of 2022 (2023), over 31,500 rape cases were reported. Rape has a psychological impact not only on the victim, but the society as a whole, leaving all women in a state of worry and anxiety, simply because of the awareness that “it could have been me”.

What is it that drives men to commit an offence so horrifying? Are they not afraid of the law? Do they think they can get away with it? Is it some form of a feeling of superiority over

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women? Do they lack control over themselves? Or, is it that they feel they are entitled to do as they please, since clearly they hold more power in society?

When a rape occurs, the narrative quite easily shifts the blame onto the victim. “*Was it her clothes? Was she too friendly? Did she cross her limits?*” Such statements above are not just remarks made by influential members of the society; they are also a part of rape myths prevalent throughout our nation (Damania & Singh, 2022). Rape myths by themselves blame victims for the sexual assault rather than the perpetrators (Brownmiller, 2005). But when we ask questions to the victim, we are losing focus, because we forget that it is **not** the girl/woman/child that chose to be victimised. In order to understand the cause of rape, we must ask the rapist why they did what they did (Waldram, 2007). This paper is an attempt to ask the perpetrators “Why” and examine a rape from where it begins – in the mind of the rapist.

It is crucial to engage offenders in dialogue, asking them to express their thoughts and motivations behind criminal behaviour. This provides valuable insight into the underlying factors that drive such actions, revealing potential causal links and risk factors that increase the likelihood of offending. Understanding the interplay of social influences and mental health issues—such as anger, impulsivity, and other psychological conditions—can further shed light on the complex dynamics of criminal behaviour. Such insights are essential for the development of targeted rehabilitation programs and intervention strategies aimed at addressing the pervasive issue of sexual offenses against women.

The Rational Choice theory of crime, first discussed by Cornish & Clarke (1986) looks at crime and offending from a very functional perspective. They state that man is a rational actor, who conducts a cost-benefit or means-end analysis every time while making a decision. Applied in the sphere of sexual offences, it means that, every potential offender conducts a similar analysis in which the cost is the possibility of being apprehended and punished, while benefit is the sexual pleasure obtained as per ‘his’ choice.

Gottfredson & Hirschi (1990) have theorized that there are multiple reasons for a crime to take place; however, the strongest predictor of crime is the lack of self-control. They state in their theory that people with low self-control, i.e. those who are impulsive, do not think about the consequences of their actions, engaging in criminal activity. When committing sexual offences, it can be interpreted as a potential offender deciding to obtain sexual pleasure without thinking about the victim, or the consequences of offending.

While both the above-mentioned theories are distinct perspectives into understanding sexual offences, together they present us with several important aspects of sexually offensive behaviour: decision of the perpetrator to offend, impulsive *momentary* decision-making, and pre-disposition to self-serving behaviour. Combined with an attitude in which women (potential victims) are considered inferior, it creates an environment that is conducive of propagation of offences against women.

Personality traits of criminals have widely been studied in all areas of the world in an effort to demystify the criminal. It was found that individuals engaging in crime are suspicious of others, careless, demanding attention, and impulsive (Sinha, 2016; Russell & King, 2020). A study by Wright, Krueger, Hobbs, Eaton & Slade (2013) also reports that the suspiciousness component is also linked to narcissism and psychopathy, relevant to criminal behaviour.

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Impulsivity, or low self-control have both been documented as strong predictors of crime (Pratt & Cullen, 2000; Perley-Robertson, Helmus, Derkzen & Serin, 2016; Baumeister & Boden 1998). Researchers have also found that impulsivity is a distinguishing difference between perpetrators and non-perpetrators of sexual offences (Mouliso, Calhoun & Rosenbloom, 2013). Hazelwood & Warren (2000) have discussed that the impulsive rapist also has a strong sense of entitlement. Researchers have commented that anger is also related to sexual offending behaviour (Howells, Day & Wright, 2004). It is a well-known fact that anger leads to loss of self-control.

Narcissism as a factor for sexually offensive behaviour has been frequently discussed. Ziegler- Hill, Enjaian and Essa (2013) studied the different facets of the construct of Narcissism and found out that feelings of entitlement and willingness to exploit others were related to sexual aggression. Baumeister, Catanese and Wallace (2002) reported that men high on narcissism are more likely to use aggression to obtain sex because they cannot handle rejection of their advances, since they think so highly of themselves. Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk and Baumeister (2003) go further and state that narcissism was positively correlated with rape supporting beliefs and negatively with empathy for victims.

Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth & Malle (1994) have theorized that there often exists a part of society which thrives on the prevailing inequality, exploiting it to their benefit. This phenomenon, “Social Dominance Orientation” (SDO), closely related to a feeling of entitlement, was found significantly more prevalent in men than women. Kandpal (2023) in a study found that boys, from a young age become aware about their position in society, and often demand the privileges that they feel they are entitled to, simply because of their gender. Gajmer (2020) has made a similar observation - male offenders had an attitude of superiority towards women. Such an attitude often leads to confusion about consent and a feeling of entitlement towards women’s bodies.

Johnson (2019) has illustrated that there is a clear relationship between the attitudes that men hold towards women and sexual assault in general; along with a component of blaming the victim, which makes it easier for men to justify behaviour of offenders. In India, Social Attitudes towards women are the most robust predictor of sexual violence (Basu Roy & Ghosh Dastidar, 2018). The negative portrayal of rape victim is deeply imbedded into our society. Not only does the common man show disbelief towards the victim (Hill & Marshall, 2018), but all efforts are made to discredit women even in the court of law (Barn & Kumari, 2015).

In a patriarchal society like India, men and women are expected to adhere to clearly defined gender roles. Defying social boundaries makes women liable for ramifications, by “bringing it on themselves”. This is further illustrated by the existence and proliferation of Rape Myths which are not only endorsed, but repeatedly reinforced by political figures, Khap Panchayats, and other influential individuals time and again (Edmunds & Gupta, 2016). Studies have shown that Rape myths are more strongly held by sexual offenders (Malamuth, 1981), and are somewhat popular among non-offenders as well (Kamdar, et al. 2017). This creates environments which gives importance to the comfort of men, rather than prioritise the safety of women.

METHODOLOGY

Sample:

The objective of the present study was to interview convicted prisoners incarcerated for offences under IPC Sec 376 (1860) with an aim to gain an in-depth understanding about the cause of crime from the side of the perpetrator.

Respondents to this study were incarcerated prisoners in Tihar Jail, New Delhi, India. The study was conducted only on convicted prisoners, and undertrial prisoners were excluded. It was also made sure that all prospective respondents were explained the nature of questions, and an informed consent was taken prior to beginning the interviews. It was also explained that they can withdraw from the study and interview at any point, without any repercussions. A total of 27 interviews were initiated, out of which only 23 interviews were completed (n=23) as four respondents withdrew from the study. All respondents were male, with ages ranging from 23 years to 68 years.

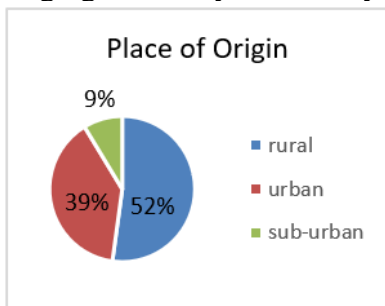


Figure 1: Place of origin of participants

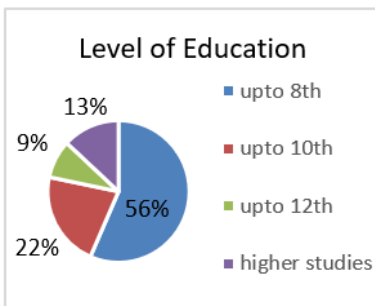


Figure 2: Level of Education of participants

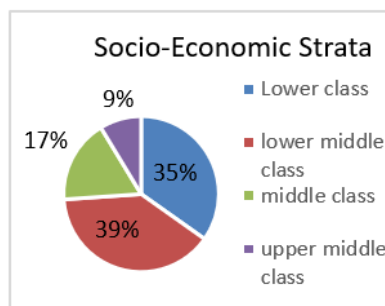


Figure 3: Socio-economic strata that participants belonged to

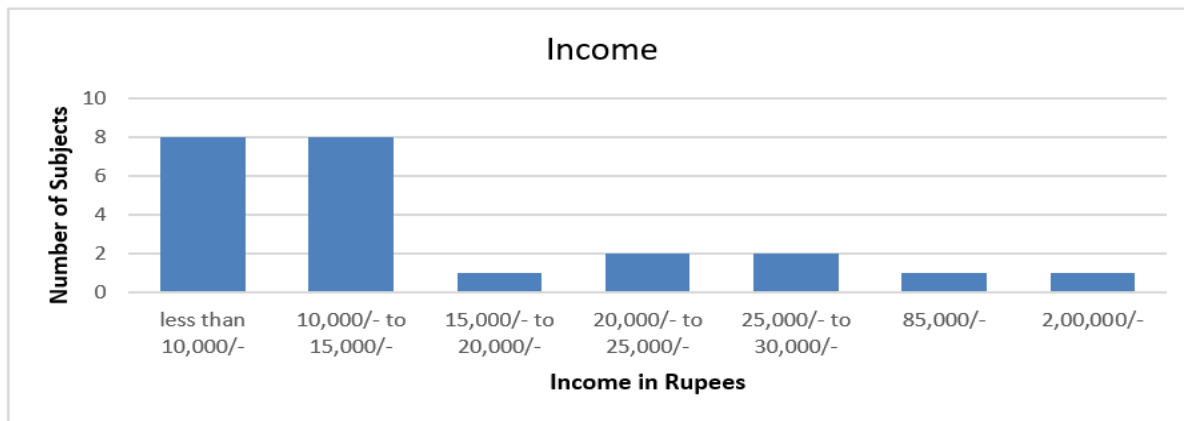


Figure 4: Level of income of participants

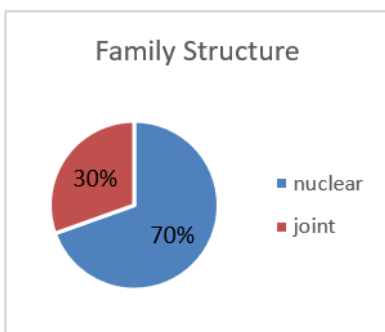


Figure 5: Family structure of participants

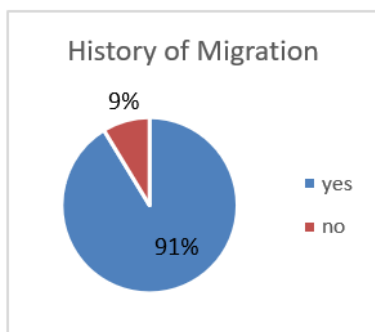


Figure 6: History of migration of participants

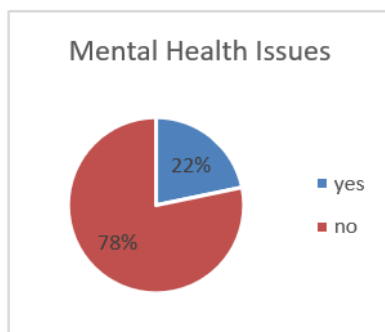


Figure 7: Reported Mental Health issues of participants

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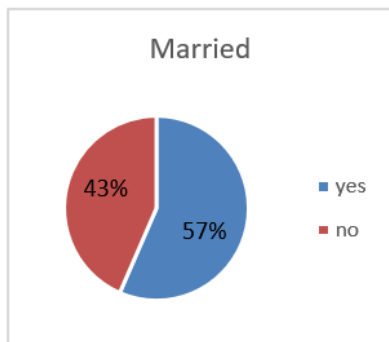


Figure 8: Marital status of participants

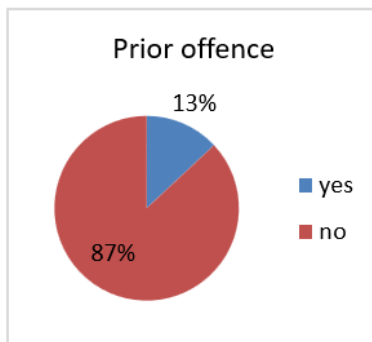


Figure 9: Reported history of prior offences of participants

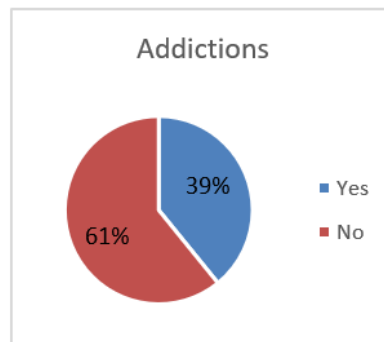


Figure 10: Reported history of addiction to substances of participants

Tool / Questionnaire

For the purpose of this study, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the respondents. The questions of the interview were open-ended, and allowed the respondents to speak freely. The questionnaire had 21 questions beginning from the background of the respondents, to the crime and how did it occur, their perception of the victim before, during and after the crime. Respondents were also asked about their own feelings about themselves and the crime as well.

Procedure:

Interviews of convicted prisoners were conducted in Tihar Jail, New Delhi after due permissions were received from concerned authorities. Ethical clearance was also granted by the Institutional Ethics Committee in Savitribai Phule Pune University. Prison rules and regulations were meticulously followed to ensure the mental and physical well-being of the prisoners as well as researcher. All efforts were made to guarantee that the prisoners were comfortable during the entire duration of data collection.

Prospective respondents were explained the nature of study and informed consent was sought from them for participation. It was made extremely clear to them that: i. they can withdraw from the study at any time, ii. They will not face any repercussions if they decide to decline to participate or if they decide to withdraw, iii. This researcher does not offer them any favours for participation, and lastly, iv. The results of this study shall not reflect in their case file, i.e. it shall not have any detrimental effects on them.

The time duration of each interview ranged from between 75 to 90 minutes. It was guided by the questionnaire stated above. Participants were given free space to speak, and follow-up questions were asked when necessary. After the interview, the participants were given an opportunity to ask further questions to the interviewer about the research, if they had any.

RESULTS

For the purpose of this research, narrative analysis was found to be the most useful method for analysis of collected data. Further, thematic analysis was used to derive major themes and subthemes.

1. Distinct personality traits

- Almost all respondents stated that they were **impulsive** when the crime in question took place. They would behave impulsively on occasion. Most respondents reported that they usually planned their tasks, or that they in general considered themselves to be a “plan-oriented” person.

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“It was spontaneous. I saw an opportunity and I took it.... I usually plan before doing things. But in this case, I did what I did without thinking.”, Respondent no. 16

- Another facet of being **short tempered** and experiencing high level of **anger** was overwhelmingly reported by respondents which sometimes clouded their thought process.

“I get angry if things do not happen as per my wish.” Respondent no. 06;

“When I get angry, I get aggressive; I have a very short temper” Respondent no. 01

2. Absence of sense of personal responsibility

- There was an **absence of personal responsibility** displayed by the respondents with respect to the crime in question. Almost all of the respondents blamed other factors for the crime; be it alcohol, anger, frustration due to work, false allegation by the victim, etc. There was a recurrent theme of shirking off of responsibility.
- In an effort to profess their innocence, most of the respondents **claimed that they had no prior history of misbehaviour**, therefore, by extension, they were incapable committing such a heinous crime.

“I have never troubled anyone. My parents never even got a complaint about my misbehaviour” Respondent no. 15

- Respondents also stated that they **did not agree with the investigation, and that they did not make any mistakes**. It must be mentioned again at this point, that all respondents were convicts. Therefore, this observation must be interpreted as one which did not give undue advantage to the respondent, which he may have expected. It also sheds light onto his view of himself, in which, according to him, his actions are not so wrong for him to be found guilty of any wrongdoing.
- There was a recurrent theme of downplaying / **diminishing the severity of the crime** by the respondents. Several respondents also stated that the punishment that they received was disproportionate to the crime.

“I have been given more punishment than necessary.” Respondent no. 11

3. Denial

- Denial was also repeatedly observed in the responses given by the respondents. They **denied the crime itself** frequently, even when directly questioned about it.
- **Denial about planning the crime** was also observed. These individuals accepted that the crime had occurred, but they denied planning the crime.
- Some individuals **denied choosing the victim**, i.e. denied making a conscious effort of selecting a particular girl / woman / child.

4. Opinion regarding victims

- Respondents did not generally have a good opinion about their victims. It is not surprising, considering that they **blame the victims** for getting them punished.

“She was 13 years old. She told me she wanted me to marry her. She was flirting with me. How could I stop her? She is not a good girl” Respondent no. 04

- Several respondents either provided a severely **negative description** of their victim, or outright committed **character assassination of their victims**.

“I don’t think I was wrong in this scenario. You cannot make a clap with only one hand. That girl was an equal participant in the scenario as I was.” Respondent no. 20

5. Cause of crime according to perpetrator

- A lot of the responders shifted the responsibility of the crime onto other external factors. Multiple responses indicated that the respondents believed that they had been implicated due to **money** matters.
- More frequently, responders **blamed the victims** for the crime. As illustrated above as well, the respondents did not consider themselves to be the aggressor / perpetrator, and instead considered the victims to be the ones who ‘initiated the sexual interaction’ by flirting, or by asking for help, or by even living in the same neighbourhood and being friendly.
- Some respondents stated that they were in a relationship with the victim, and the crime occurred only because there was an **absence of knowledge of law**.

“I knew that she was not 18. We spent the night together...I was not entirely aware about the law. If I knew, I would not have made such a mistake” Respondent no. 23

6. Persistent feeling of being wronged

- Several respondents had a **persistent feeling of being wronged** or being the aggrieved party. It was observed that there was a prevalence of an erroneous thinking style in many of the respondents. Their conviction in a heinous crime case, even after following the due process of law was not enough to make them understand that their actions, their behaviour was wrong.
- In multiple cases, the respondents **portrayed themselves as the true victim**. They considered themselves to be the victims of the entire scenario, wherein they were punished for reasons beyond their understanding.

“I have been wronged by all those people who were plotting against me.” Respondent no. 09

DISCUSSION

Through detailed interviews with convicted sexual offenders, we are able to get an understanding of how and why a crime such as rape occurs. While it is clear that every crime, every story and every case is different, some common factors do emerge in all of these cases.

Respondents to our study stated that they usually were plan-oriented people, however, they were also known to behave impulsively. Multiple respondents admitted that at the time of the offence, they were impulsive, they were not thinking clearly. The General Theory of Crime (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990) supports this finding. It is theorized that low-self control and impulsive actions are the strongest predictors of crime. Studies have shown that impulsivity is a trait commonly found in perpetrators of sexual offences (Mouliso, Calhoun & Rosenbloom, 2013). The respondents of this study offered another insight into their impulsive actions: anger and aggression. When their demands were met with denial, they lost their temper, and reacted aggressively. This aggression often has an additional facet of a feeling of entitlement, in which one loses temper when one feels he is being denied with what he should rightfully get.

Aforementioned entitlement mentality is also a well-known aspect of narcissistic behaviour. When convicts were asked about if they felt guilty about the crime that they committed, most denied any responsibility in the crime. According to the respondents, the victim was at fault, or maybe the crime happened because they were frustrated with something. These responses were consistent with the findings of Bushman et al (2003). Respondents to the present study even claimed that they had never indulged in any sort of misbehaviour to

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emphasise that this crime was not their mistake. They firmly held this view even after being convicted and proven guilty beyond doubt. This sheds light on the personality of the respondent in which his sense of self is held in higher regard than anything else.

This mindset of the respondents was also observed when they asserted that they did not agree with the investigation of the crime. As is seen with individuals displaying narcissistic traits, they rarely agree with any criticism about themselves. They consider themselves to be superior to others (Levy et al, 2007), and being found guilty of a heinous crime does not fit well into their view of self. Participants of the study further made it clear that the punishment they received for the crime was disproportionate. It was apparent that the respondents had mentally distanced themselves from a crime that is unacceptable in a lawful society, which helped them maintain their self-image.

In the present study, respondents frequently denied the planning of the crime, denied selecting a victim, or denied the crime entirely. Denial & minimization by sexual offenders, denying their guilt at all stages of the investigations and even post-conviction is well-documented (Dietz, 2020; Schlank & Shaw, 1995; Malcom, 2002; Ward, Hudson & Marshall, 1995). Denial can be a psychological strategy (Bandura, 1990) for those who feel entitled and are willing to exploit others, enabling them to maintain their self-image and continue their exploitative behavior without confronting the ethical or legal implications.

Several participants blamed the victim for the entirety of the crime. Participants assassinated the characters of victims, stating that it happened because the victims were of bad moral character. This is in agreement with a study by Caron & Carter (1997) showing that men assign responsibility of a rape on the victim. Studies have reported the high prevalence of rape myths in Indian society in which responsibility for sexual assaults are placed on irrelevant activities of victims (Mittal, Singh & Verma, 2017; Damania & Singh, 2022).

Another interesting aspect of the phenomenon of victim-blaming is the inherent feeling of superiority in men. Kandpal (2023) has noted that in patriarchal societies similar to India, notions of dominance and entitlement were observed, creating a power imbalance. This imbalance can make it easier for men to perpetrate sexual violence without fear of repercussions. Gajmer (2020) agree, as male sexual offenders were often observed to express superiority over women. Respondents in the present study echoed these sentiments. They stated that the victims “initiated a sexual encounter” through innocuous actions, such as asking for help, being friendly, or something as basic as living in the same neighborhood. In such scenarios, sexual aggression in response to denial of demands is a mere consequence.

A few participants of this study admitted that they were sexually involved with adolescents, claiming that they did not know that it was illegal. Being unaware of the law can easily be used as an excuse to minimize responsibility for illegal actions. Individuals who are aware about their superior status in society may give any excuse in order to exploit people and systems for their personal benefit. Such individuals rate highly on the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), and research shows that men usually are more Dominance Oriented than women Pratto et al. (1994). Research further shows that men who rated higher on SDO held more hostile attitude towards women (Rollero, Bergagna, and Tartaglia 2021). Offenders who hold such attitudes may try to argue that they were provoked by women or mistreated by others, thus deflecting responsibility. Respondents in our study also portrayed themselves as the “real” victims in the scenario. They had a persistent feeling of being the aggrieved

party. When offenders try to present themselves as the victims, they try to exploit sympathetic sentiments in the society to escape punishment for their illegal acts.

CONCLUSION

This study was undertaken in an effort to understand the cause of sexual offences from the perspective of the perpetrator. It has given valuable insights into the thought processes of the offenders, their underlying reasons and behavioural presentations. Interaction of factors like impulsivity and aggression, coupled with absence of personal responsibility, along with a social dominance orientation and a general negative attitude towards women creates the environment for unchecked sexual exploitation of women. By asking the offenders what made them offend, we now can build systems with rich knowledge to devise strategies to effectively combat sexual offences. Effective strategies, coupled with systematic implementation can help us achieve reduction in recidivism by addressing risk factors, reduction in crime through gradual behavioural change in the society, increasing public safety for women and promoting overall social well-being.

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Conflict of Interest

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