

Research Paper

Non-Consensual Sexual Advances Towards Women in Public Spaces: Why do Indian Women Blame Themselves for It?

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore the psychological and socio-cultural factors that contribute to self-blame among young women who experience non-consensual sexual advances in public spaces. The study adopts a qualitative approach in order to gain deeper insights into women's lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of such incidents within the broader socio-cultural context of India. For this study a sample of 15 women aged between 18-30 years residing in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai was selected using purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participant's experiences, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms related to public-space harassment. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the collected data and identify recurring patterns. This led to appearance of themes and sub themes such as (1) Internalised self-blame and cognitive attribution, (2) Socio-cultural conditioning and victim blaming narratives, (3) Bystander apathy and social validation, (4) Learned helplessness and passive acceptance, and (5) Self-surveillance and behavioural adaptation. The findings suggest that self-blame is significantly shaped by socio-cultural norms, repeated exposure to harassment, and lack of social intervention. These findings highlight the importance of addressing victim-blaming attitudes and promoting safer and more supportive public spaces for women.

Keywords: *Self-Blame, Non-Consensual Sexual Advances, Victim-Blaming, Socio-Cultural Norms*

Non-consensual sexual advances in public spaces are a pervasive yet often overlooked form of gender-based violence experienced by women in India. Despite increased awareness regarding women's safety, such experiences continue to be normalized within everyday social interactions, particularly in urban public spaces. These behaviours, which include unwanted comments, gestures, physical proximity, and non-consensual touch, often go unreported and frequently dismissed as insignificant, thereby reinforcing their persistence.

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Received: May 13, 2026; Revision Received: August 01, 2026; Accepted: August 06, 2026

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Young women navigating public spaces for education, work, and social engagement are particularly vulnerable to such experiences. These encounters not only compromise their sense of safety but also significantly impact their psychological well-being. One of the most concerning psychological outcomes associated with such experiences is self-blame, wherein victims internalize responsibility for actions perpetrated against them. Self-blame is often understood through attribution theory, where individuals make internal, stable, and global attributions for negative events (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1972).

Socio-cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping these perceptions. In the Indian context, patriarchal values and victim-blaming narratives often place responsibilities on women rather than perpetrators. Such beliefs are further supported by the just-world hypothesis, which suggests that individuals tend to assume that victims are responsible for their misfortune (Lerner, 1980). Additionally, the absence of bystander intervention in public spaces can lead victims to question the seriousness of the incident and their own reactions (Latané & Darley, 1968).

Repeated exposures to such incidents can also contribute to learned helplessness, where individuals begin to perceive these experiences as unavoidable and beyond their control (Seligman, 1975). Over time, this may result in passive acceptance, reduce reporting, and behavioural adaptations such as avoidance of certain spaces and increased vigilance (Vera-Gray, 2016; Fileborn, 2017).

Here the focus is not only restricted to identifying the presence of self-blame but also on understanding how cognitive processes, societal conditioning, and repeated exposure interact to shape women's perceptions and lived experiences.

Objectives of the Research

The primary research questions addressed in this study was:

1. What psychological mechanisms contribute to self-blame in women who experience non-consensual sexual advances in public spaces?
2. How do socio-cultural norms and societal conditioning influence self-blame among women in the Indian context?
3. How do repeated experiences of non-consensual sexual advances shape women's perceptions, behaviours, and responses in public spaces?

Rational of the Study

The goal of this study is to explore the phenomenon of self-blame among women who experience non-consensual sexual advances in public spaces in India. This research uses a qualitative research design in which thematic analysis is operationalized. The study examines women's lived experiences and perceptions, focusing on the psychological and socio-cultural factors that contribute to self-blame.

Furthermore, these themes are complex and remain underexplored, particularly in the Indian context where such experiences are often normalized. Existing literature largely focuses on severe forms of sexual violence, with limited attention to everyday public harassment and its psychological impact. For these reasons, a qualitative approach is considered most appropriate.

METHODS

Sample

Purposive sampling was implemented with a limited sample size to enable an in-depth exploration of the subject matter while maintaining consistency in participant characteristics. For this study, the following criteria were followed in selecting participants:

1. The participants included young Indian women (aged 18 to 30 years) residing in urban or semi-urban areas, particularly those who actively navigate public spaces for education, work, or daily activities.
2. Participants must have experienced at least one instance of non-consensual sexual advances in public spaces to ensure relevance to the research focus.

Qualitative studies typically employ smaller sample sizes to allow for detailed exploration rather than generalization. This study consisted of a sample of fifteen participants who met the above selection criteria.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to allow flexibility while ensuring consistency across interviews. This approach enabled participants to freely express their experiences while guiding the discussion toward topics relevant to the study. Interviews were conducted in-person and in private and supportive setting to facilitate open communication. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on experiences of non-consensual sexual advances, emotional responses, self-blame, and socio-cultural influences such as gender expectations and internalised norms. Each interview lasted between 15 to 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Based on the responses, the data is analysed to create categories that accurately reflect participants' experiences. The researchers analysed transcripts to discover themes, patterns and codes, and evaluated replies methodically.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and systematically analysed. Manual coding was employed to identify patterns within participant responses. Following initial coding, the data was organised to develop themes and subthemes. These themes were further refined through re-analysis by combining similar categories and re-coding data to ensure consistency. The final themes and subthemes were selected based on their recurrence across participants' responses. Relevant verbatim quotes were incorporated to support and substantiate the findings.

Ethical Practices

- **Informed Consent:** The purpose of the study was explained to participants, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.
- **Confidentiality:** Participants' identities were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used to ensure privacy.
- **Data Handling:** Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessed only by the research team and guide.
- **Emotional well-being:** Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage, and a non-judgemental environment was maintained to minimise discomfort.

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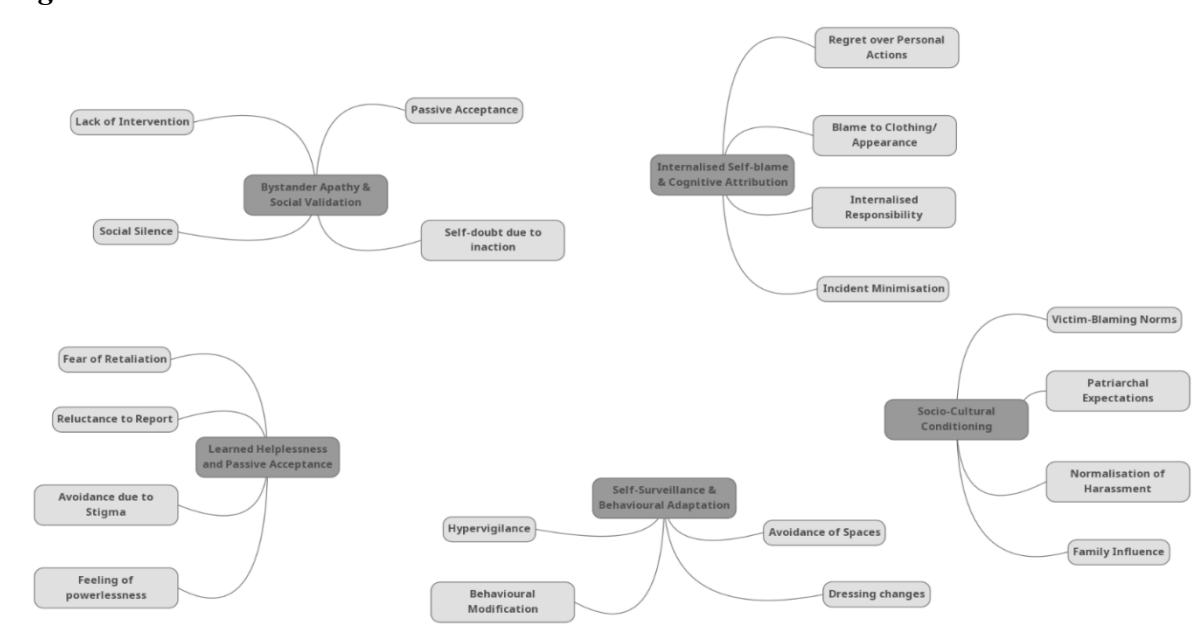
The information was then transcribed and underwent thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights that aligned with the research aims.

RESULTS

A total of 15 young adult women were interviewed through purposive sampling to explore the psychological and socio-cultural factors contributing to self-blame in the context of non-consensual sexual advances in public spaces.

Findings

Figure



SS04

"Yeah, I did blame myself. I thought maybe it was because I was wearing a dress. I was already conscious about my clothes and who I was with, so their staring just reinforced that feeling."

AD03

"I found myself questioning ki if I was a bit early and if I would have boarded my compartment, it would have never happened in first place."

YS02

"My first thought was like that I'm in the general compartment, if I had taken the ladies compartment, this would have not happened in the first place."

AD03

"At this point, I've accepted that men are creepy and they do certain things. So it's like just ignore things."

AD03

"If I speak up for myself, what if that guy decides to just take revenge? What if his relatives? What if someone he knows will come and do something to me?"

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SK01

"Making it a legal matter would have made it a matter that I have to tell my family which I did not want to."

YS02

"Ever since that incident, I have stopped travelling in the general compartment."

SK01

"You hesitate anywhere. Doesn't matter if you're even in your safe space or wherever you're always alert, always noticing who's listening. Your peripheral vision is always active."

AD03

"They start blaming ki you wore this these clothes. 'You should not have gone out during this time' jab tumhe pata hai vo jagah kharab hai why did you go there?"

SS04

"I'm not able to do anything, I cannot do anything to prevent such experiences. And because of that, I feel a lot of anger, a lot of irritation, frustration, everything."

YS02

"It felt like this is finally happening to me. I've always thought that it's just something that happens to everyone, something that happens at least once, it's just something to get over with."

SK01

"Even if I'm just wearing normal clothes, I'll still carry a shawl or something just to be more protective. I try to make sure but still, staring happens. There's no end to it."

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research study is to understand the nature, cause and impact of self-blame amongst young urban Indian women, on experiencing non-consensual sexual advances by a stranger in a public setting. This section will provide an interpretation of the findings obtained through semi-structured interviews with young Indian women (18-30 years old) who have experienced any form of non-violent, non-penetrative, non-consensual sexual advances in a public space by a stranger.

Understanding the findings in relation to the research questions and thematic analysis:

Self-blame is a maladaptive cognitive attribution used to deal with the psychological stress of experiencing some form of 'non-consensual sexual advance'. It is often internal, stable, and global (Feiring, Taska & Lewis, 2002).

The fifteen women who were interviewed as part of our research had experienced some form of 'non-consensual sexual advance' towards them by a male stranger in a public setting, such as catcalling, touching, staring, groping, exhibitionism, etc. Most of them reported experiencing some form of self-blame after the incident. Interviews were directed to explore not only the reason for attributing blame to oneself but also the role our Indian society as a whole play in this phenomenon.

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In our study, the women who did self-blame often blamed their actions, a type of self-blame known as ‘behavioural self-blame’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1979). Clothing and mere presence in a public space at a particular time (e.g., boarding the general compartment of the local train during rush hour) emerged as common forms of behavioural self-blame. While others questioned their perception of the incident or downplayed its severity in attempts to minimise the psychological stress of experiencing some form of non-consensual sexual advances. Unfortunately, one of the women we interviewed reported feelings of shame due to her gender, a type of ‘characterological self-blame’ (Janoff-Bulman, 1979).

Self-blame, in our study, was often associated with self-surveillance, i.e. behaviours adopted to prevent any form of non-consensual sexual experience from being repeated in the future. Hypervigilance of one’s surroundings, carrying self-defense tools, dressing modestly and using public spaces strictly for women (e.g. ladies’ compartment of the local train) were common strategies adopted to safeguard oneself. This stems from women internalizing the responsibility of their own safety in public spaces.

Additionally, experiencing non-consensual sexual experiences left women with either embarrassment, shame, disgust or rage in the moment and persistent fearfulness, hypervigilance and unease in public spaces after the incident. Some women avoided taking any action against the perpetrator due to fear of retaliation or revenge. Such incidents also affect the trust women have in men, whether in public spaces or in platonic/romantic relationships.

Self-blame does not exist in a vacuum. It is deeply embedded in the very structure of families, society, and the collective culture of the Indian subcontinent.

Some women reported experiencing ‘victim blaming’ by their family and close friends while others hesitated to disclose their experience altogether to avoid victim blaming or dismissal of their pain from their close ones. It is also worth noting that some avoided disclosing their experience with family to keep their freedom to go out in public intact. On the other hand, some avoided disclosing their experience with family to safeguard their loved ones from feelings of blame that come with their child being unsafe in public.

Indian society as a whole is quite dismissive of women who have experienced non-consensual sexual advances. Women tend to internalize the shame and stigma that society attributes to victims, contributing or rather reinforcing self-blame in women. This has unsurprisingly resulted in women under-reporting such crimes, even when they are illegal as per the Indian constitution. They fear the stigmatization, ostracization, trivialization or dismissal, by not only the legal body of our country but also their families and the society. Media, be in the news or the entertainment content we consume, either trivialize or even romanticize such crimes. The exposure to such content further drives in women that they are sexual objects who can be exploited if they are out in the world. In some cases, religion was used to shame and blame women for their experiences. Repeated exposure to societal apathy fosters resignation, where reporting is viewed as unnecessary or futile. A society which objectifies women and views women as an open property in public leads to women taking up the responsibility of safety in their own hands while losing faith in the social, legal or religious systems to ever help them.

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India is a patriarchal society. Here, men are valued over women and men are expected to be dominant while women are expected to be submissive. Under this social system, women are seen lesser than and is considered the backbone for many regressive societal norms and institutions within India. Systematic patriarchy, either within or outside the family structure, standardizes atrocities against women (Namy et al., 2017; Bhattacharyya, 2016). This ultimately leads to women feeling responsible and eventually blaming themselves for crimes committed against them. Patriarchy was attributed by many women in our study as the root cause of sexual crimes towards women as well.

Non-consensual sexual advances are non-penetrative and non-violent in nature. Its lower degree of severity, from the perspective of psychological and physical harm in comparison with rape or other violent crimes, causes minimization and trivialization of such crimes. This minimization, added with objectification of women and anonymity of strangers in public, causes normalization of such incidents. Some women even see it as a “rite of passage”, something women in India just experience in a public space. This is a clear example of learned helplessness, where women are let down by social, cultural and in some cases, religious, factors. They end up passively accepting atrocities.

There is, however, a silver-lining in our study. While some women did report self-blame after experiencing some form of non-consensual sexual experience, others did not. These women instead attributed blame to the perpetrator. Factors which played a protective role for these women involve close relationships with family and friends, supportive upbringing, and having trusted men (e.g. family member, friend) around in a public setting.

During the interview, women were asked to describe societal changes which would make them feel safer in public. Key responses included urgent systemic legal, social, and educational changes to address harassment, promoting bystander accountability, sex education, especially regarding consent, respect, and gender equality, appropriate coverage and representation by the media, not just regarding such incidents but also women as autonomous human beings, and advocating for active, non-judgmental listening of victims and their experiences. All of this indicates that women want to be heard and understood by the society and the legal system, with weight being given to their opinions and humanity.

Comparisons with Theoretical Models

Our study is heavily based on theoretical models around self-blame to understand the psychological mechanism of the self-blame in women who have experienced some form of non-consensual sexual experience in a public space by a stranger. The patterns observed through thematic analysis can be explained by these models.

Attribution theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1972), in the context of our study, explores the causation women tend to attribute to experiencing non-consensual sexual advances in a public setting by a stranger. Our study demonstrates that women who attribute the cause of such incident to themselves, either their behaviour or character (Janoff-Bulman, 1979), tend to self-blame, while those who attribute the cause of such incident on the perpetrator do not experience the same degree of self-blame.

Learned helplessness (Seligman and Maier, 1967), in the context of our study, explores how some women have lost faith in the familial, social and legal systems due to continuous dismissal, trivialization and stigmatization of their non-consensual, sexual experiences. This

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learned helplessness showed up in many interviews when women explicitly mentioned feeling hesitant to share their experiences with their family members or the police. When women are failed by those around them, they naturally learn to not ask or expect help anymore. They ‘passively accept’ the reality and its atrocities instead as a ‘rite of passage’. In the interviews, many women, sadly, accepted their fate as they were in a public setting with strangers.

Just-World Hypothesis (Lerner, 1980), in the context of our study, helps us understand not only self-blame in victims but victim blaming tendencies in the broader social and cultural context. Our patriarchal society tends to place the responsibility of protecting “women’s honour” in their own hands. When someone violates this, blame is attributed to the woman, not the man. Since the world is neutral and the women should have been responsible, people tend to blame the victim and the victim internalizes the blame and hold themselves responsible for the atrocities committed against them. While no one in the interviews explicitly blamed themselves, they did however attribute their clothes or just taking space in public, which indicates that they did consider the world as morally neutral and themselves morally flawed when an incident happened with them.

Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957), in the context of our study, explores the psychological parkour the minds’ of victims goes through when they experience some form of non-consensual sexual experience. While many if not all women are aware that their experience was completely unjust and exploitative in nature, some still attribute blame to their own selves for the experience. This was evident when women being interviewed claimed that society must be structurally changed to accommodate them but some trivialize their own situation or blame themselves when they actually experience non-consensual sexual advances. This psychological stress results in emotions like anger and shame.

Self-Surveillance (Foucault, 1977), in the context of our study, explains how some women internalize the responsibility of their own safety. Many women coped with their experience by becoming hypervigilant, carrying self-defense tools, dressing modestly and using public spaces strictly for women. These behaviours make it crystal clear that some women learned from their experience and their family and society that it is on them to protect themselves. In some cases, this results in chronic fear of being harassed in public and limits the freedom with which women can take space in public.

The above mentioned theories provide an evidence-based framework to explain why some women tend to blame themselves and the psychological impact it has. It also explains the role of our society as a whole in pushing women to fend for themselves while simultaneously snatching their bodily autonomy due to objectification and dehumanization of women in public spaces in India.

Limitations of The Study

Although this study offers critical insights into how young urban Indian women internalize self-blame following non-consensual sexual advances in public settings, several limitations must be acknowledged to situate the findings more accurately.

Firstly, the participant group does not fully reflect the full range of socioeconomic diversity present in urban India. Women from lower-income communities, who may face heightened exposure to public harassment and reduced access to mental health resources, were

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underrepresented in the sample. Due to practical constraints in recruitment and outreach, this study primarily captured the narratives of women from relatively more privileged backgrounds. As a result, the experiences of those facing intersecting socioeconomic and gender-based vulnerabilities remain underexplored.

Secondly, the interviews collected for this research focused exclusively on gendered interactions where the survivor identified as female and the perpetrator identified as male. While this reflects a predominant pattern in sexual harassment cases, it inadvertently sidelines the experiences as individuals across the gender spectrum. Harassment involving female perpetrators, non-binary individuals, or same-gender dynamics was not included, limiting the gender inclusivity of the analysis. This narrow focus may obscure alternative psychological trajectories of self-blame and coping that are shaped by diverse gender identities and expressions.

Thirdly, the study only included women between the ages of 18 and 30, which means the voices of younger girls and older women were not heard. But age plays a big role in how people experience and process harassment. A teenager navigating these situations for the first time, or an older woman shaped by a lifetime of societal expectations, might carry very different emotions, fears, or ways of blaming themselves. Their stories, shaped by different life stages and generational beliefs, are just as important. By focusing only on a narrow age group, the study misses the depth and diversity of experiences that come with age and with that, a fuller understanding of how self-blame can take shape throughout a woman's life.

By acknowledging these limitations, this study lays the groundwork for more inclusive future research. Expanding the participant pool to better represent marginalised socioeconomic groups and adopting a more intersectional gender framework would contribute to a more holistic understanding of how non-consensual sexual advances affect self-perception and psychological well-being in a variety of lived concepts.

CONCLUSION

This research identifies the key importance of social psychological processes, patriarchal systems, and victim-blaming norms in determining young urban Indian women's self-blame, emotional experiences, and behavioural responses following non-consensual sexual advances by a stranger in a public setting. Social norms that criticise women's attire, behaviour, and personal preferences feed negative stereotypes that imply complicity, whereas supportive environments that promote disclosure and healing can reduce self-blame. Patriarchal expectations and gendered power dynamics standardise atrocities against women, forcing them to internalise shame and examine their own actions while shifting blame from offenders to survivors. Parental and family influences whether through direct victim-blaming, fear of disclosure, or restriction of freedom serve as early socialising agents, and young women either internalise these norms or resist them depending on their upbringing and close relationships. Beyond cognitive attribution, emotional dimensions such as fear of stigma, fear of retaliation, hesitancy to report, and feelings of powerlessness indicate that non-consensual sexual advances affect not only self-perception but also women's confidence, freedom, and sense of safety in public spaces. For improved psychological outcomes and survivor-centred support, societal and legal systems need to address victim-blaming narratives, promote bystander accountability, and create non-judgmental spaces for disclosure and healing.

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Acknowledgment

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: Deshmukh, A., Karmakar, S., Sakhrani, Y., Subah, S., Phatarpekar, S., & Sathe, V. (2026). Non-Consensual Sexual Advances Towards Women in Public Spaces: Why do Indian Women Blame Themselves for It? *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 14(3), 799-808. DIP:18.01.067.20261403, DOI:10.25215/1403.067