PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC ON JUSTICE: A SOCIO-LEGAL ANALYSIS OF INFLUENCING FACTORS

PERCEPCIONES DEL PÚBLICO SOBRE LA JUSTICIA: UN ANÁLISIS SOCIO-JURÍDICO DE LOS FACTORES DE INFLUENCIA

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Abstract: Public plays a vital part in the administration of justice in a representative society. The role of public to accomplish its accountabilities is also vital for the society to function proficiently. In that sense, to build and sustain confidence of the public, it is relevant to institute congruence of the public opinion and justice administration and its workability. Many aspects are responsible for the perception of crime by the public: socio-economic dynamics; demographic aspects like race, gender, personal beliefs and attitudes; religious orientations; etc. It is also pragmatic that age shows a significant part in varying dynamics of crime and punishment for people. Older age people have been found to favor stern punishments of imprisonment, but the younger are more inclined towards reformatory initiatives. Therefore, policy makers should

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focus on ameliorating the wrongdoer than putting them behind prison as they are also a member of the society. In other words, they must be rehabilitated by vigorous reformatory processes of the system to reintegrate with the public and to avoid recidivism, which will confirm law and order and prevent future crimes. The paper attempts to analyze and understand various aspects which affect the equilibrium of crime and punishment and its perceptions by the public; regarding this, various aspects that contribute to frame public perception are media, political influence, socio-economic disparities, gender-based perception, attitude of police and cultural narratives; these are all explored. Finally, the paper concludes with suggestions for the improvement of public opinion.

Keywords: Punishment, Public-perception, Crime, Rehabilitation, Media.

Resumo: El público desempeña un papel fundamental en la administración de justicia en una sociedad representativa. El papel del público en el cumplimiento de sus responsabilidades también es fundamental para que la sociedad funcione de manera eficiente. En ese sentido, para generar y mantener la confianza del público, es importante establecer una congruencia entre la opinión pública y la administración de justicia y su viabilidad. Son muchos los aspectos que influyen en la percepción que tiene el público de la delincuencia: la dinámica socioeconómica; aspectos demográficos como la raza, el género, las creencias y actitudes personales; las orientaciones religiosas; etc. También es pragmático que la edad tenga un papel importante en la dinámica variable de la delincuencia y el castigo de las personas. Se ha observado que las personas de más edad están a favor de penas severas de prisión, mientras que los más jóvenes se inclinan más por iniciativas reformatorias. Por lo tanto, los responsables políticos deberían centrarse en mejorar a los delincuentes en lugar de encarcelarlos, ya que también son miembros de la sociedad. En otras palabras, deben ser rehabilitados mediante procesos reformatorios vigorosos del sistema para reintegrarse en la sociedad y evitar la reincidencia, lo que confirmará la ley y el orden y prevendrá futuros delitos. El documento intenta analizar y comprender diversos aspectos que afectan al equilibrio entre el delito y el castigo y su percepción por parte del público; en este sentido, se exploran diversos aspectos que contribuyen a configurar la percepción pública, como los medios de comunicación, la influencia política, las disparidades socioeconómicas, la percepción basada en el género, la actitud de la policía y

las narrativas culturales. Por último, el documento concluye con sugerencias para mejorar la opinión pública.

Palavras-chave: *Castigo, Percepción pública, Delito, Rehabilitación, Medios de comunicación.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The public plays a vital role in shaping policy in a democracy like India. Legislative and judicial decisions are often influenced by public opinion and perceptions of crime and punishment. The Nirbhaya case, for example, received extensive media coverage, and news debates featured various expert and legal opinions on potential verdicts (Singh and Khan, 2022; Prabhu and Thirumalaiah, 2024). The public strongly criticized the government's handling of law and order during this period, which led to widespread outrage and pressure on the authorities to enact stricter laws to prevent future abuse. In response, the Justice Verma Committee was established to recommend legal reforms. Public perception of the inadequacy of existing laws at the time played a key role in the enactment of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, which strengthened legal provisions related to crimes against women, including rape, stalking, voyeurism, and acid attacks.

India's societal structure is highly complex, shaped by its vast geography, diverse cultural narratives, religious beliefs, linguistic variations,

political ideologies, social and economic disparities, racial dynamics, and psychological factors (Apel, 2022). Public perception significantly influences individual behavior, lawmaking, and law enforcement (Maruna and King, 2013). These perceptions are shaped by various factors beyond formal statistical studies. Elements such as public sentiment, voting behavior, and policy decisions often stem from these deeper influences (Duffy et al., 2008).

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (Government of India, 2022) shows a declining trend in crime rates. Nevertheless, a large segment of the population continues to believe that crime, particularly heinous crimes, is rising. Despite the legal reforms following the Nirbhaya case, the brutality of such crimes has not diminished and appears to be growing more severe. Increased penalties for heinous crimes have not effectively balanced crime and punishment in India. Bridging the gap between perception and reality requires a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that shape public views, which is essential for developing effective crime prevention strategies and sound public policies.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to examine the various factors that shape public perception of crime in India. Key elements include the influence of the police, media, law enforcement, gender, socio-economic disparities, and cultural diversity. It aims to analyze the role of the media in shaping public views on crime and levels of trust in law enforcement agencies, as well as to assess how political discourse influences public perception of the criminal justice system.

The study also examines police conduct in terms of transparency and accountability, and how this affects the development of a strong criminal justice system. It explores gender-related dimensions in shaping public attitudes toward crime and trust in key stakeholders within the justice system.

Additionally, the research investigates how cultural and regional disparities impact public perceptions across different socio-economic and demographic groups in India. It considers the combined effect of political narratives, media sensationalism, and public trust in authorities.

Finally, the study aims to propose policy recommendations for building a more effective system that promotes responsible media reporting, enhances public trust, and addresses social biases through reforms in legal and administrative frameworks.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted for this study is doctrinal. The doctrinal approach will involve analytical, descriptive, and comparative methods. This qualitative methodology will include a thorough examination of relevant information and data, aiming to address the current issues in a practical and effective manner.

Content analysis will be conducted to systematically review the roles of the media, political narratives, police officials, and other related stakeholders, as well as the interactions and mutual influences among them. The study will also examine the legal framework –such as statutes, judicial precedents, commentaries, and reports– to understand how it influences crime reporting and shapes public perception.

Society remains deeply engaged with the portrayal of crime in the media, often participating in what has been described as "crime talks." Both the media and the government have played significant roles in shaping public perceptions of crime. As noted by Gebotys et al. (1988), the media has a substantial role in disseminating information about crime and the implementation of laws to address it. However, in recent times, especially in the case of television and electronic media, there has been a tendency to overstep boundaries by acting as unofficial adjudicators and offering public judgments on criminal cases (Boda and Szabó, 2011). Such practices undermine the rule of law and have been criticized in several judicial decisions.

For example, in Dr. Mrs. Nupur Talwar v. State of UP & Anr. (2012)[1], also known as the Aarushi Talwar case; and in the case of Rhea Chakraborty following the death of a Bollywood actor, media coverage significantly impacted the reputation of the accused. Similarly, in Zahira Habibullah Sheikh and Ors. v. State of Gujarat (2006)[2], the Honorable Supreme Court of India expressed concern over false allegations propagated by the media. The Court emphasized that "each one has an inbuilt right to be dealt with fairly in a criminal trial", and further observed that the denial of a fair trial constitutes an injustice both to the accused and to the victim and society as a whole.

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[1] 2012 (11) SCC 465.
[2] 2006 (3) SCC 374.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

IV.1. Role of Media in Amplifying Crime Perception

The media plays a central role in shaping public perception of crime in society. It is one of the most prominent channels for disseminating information, particularly crime-related news, through television, digital platforms, newspapers, radio, and social media. This media coverage significantly influences public understanding of crime. However, the overrepresentation of violence, exaggeration of facts, and sensational portrayal of incidents often distort public perception. Such portrayals suggest that crime is widespread and urgent, leading the public to believe that society is overrun with criminals and that stricter laws and harsher punishments are necessary (Smolej and Kivivuori, 2006).

Research indicates that individuals who consume more news, especially via television and online platforms, tend to overestimate crime rates and perceive society as more dangerous than it actually is (Pickett et al., 2015). This perception can create undue public pressure to reform laws, often under the mistaken belief that the current legal framework is inadequate. As a result, media-driven narratives can intimidate the public and influence lawmakers to introduce reactive legislation based on fear rather than fact.

The media often amplifies fear of crime by presenting a distorted picture of criminal activity, contributing to the illusion of a dangerous world. George Gerbner's concept of the "mean world syndrome" (Dyson, 2011) describes how continuous exposure to sensationalized crime content can lead to such skewed perceptions. Media outlets typically focus on severe crimes, such as murder,

rape, kidnapping and terrorism, because these stories attract greater attention and financial gain, while petty crimes and white-collar offenses are underreported. This selective coverage creates a distorted view of criminality and fuels public demand for tougher laws and more aggressive policing.

On the other hand, "trial by media" (Suresh and George, 2021) is a critical element of this sensationalism. The media often casts judgment on the accused before legal proceedings conclude, shaping public opinion and sometimes prejudicing judicial outcomes. Viral posts, online campaigns, and trending hashtags can sway public sentiment and lead to social media trolling. If unchecked, this can result in misinformation, incite violence, and foster mob justice. During the Nirbhaya case[3], for instance, media coverage mobilized public support for severe punishment, and since then, numerous cases involving crimes against women have been prominently featured in the media. Although the legal system ultimately determines the outcomes, media narratives have increasingly shaped public belief that crime is pervasive and that personal safety is constantly at risk.

Crime reporting in newspapers, films, and television shows has also been linked to criminal behavior. There have been instances where offenders admitted to being inspired by crime-related entertainment. For example, a young offender confessed to modeling his actions after the TV show *Savdhaan India* (Haider, 2022). The lack of proper content regulation on OTT (*over-the-top*) platforms in India has made it easier for audiences to access violent and explicit content, which can have a profound impact on youth. Popular films and series such as *Pushpa*, *Bhaukal*, *KGF2*, *Kabir Singh*, *Money Heist*, *Darr*, and

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[3] Mukesh & Anr. v. State for Nct of Delhi & Ors, AIR 2017 SC 2161.

Dexter have reportedly influenced individuals to commit crimes ranging from theft to murder (Times of India, 2022).

In that sense, Media portrayals often reinforce stereotypes by disproportionately associating certain ethnic groups, minorities, and socio-economically disadvantaged communities with criminal activity. This bias leads to the stigmatization of these groups, fostering systemic discrimination. Marginalized individuals are frequently depicted as perpetrators, while the elite are portrayed as victims, reinforcing prejudices within law enforcement and the judiciary and contributing to disproportionately harsh punishments.

Media narratives also influence legislative policy. Political representatives often respond to media coverage of law and order by pushing for stricter penalties, expanded policing, and increased surveillance. Following the extensive media attention during the 2012 Nirbhaya case, the Indian government enacted significant amendments to criminal law in 2013. Similar "tough on crime" policies have been observed in other countries, often driven more by public fear than factual evidence. When laws are amended without empirical support, the legislative process risks being undermined, potentially leading to vigilante justice and widespread moral panic.

IV.2. Intertwine of Politics and Public Perception of Crime

In India, political actors significantly influence public discourse by shaping the narrative around crime statistics. Politicians often claim that the high incidence of crime signals a dangerous society, using this portrayal to justify the need for an overhaul of the current government (Tapscott, 2021). Through selective presentation and interpretation of data, they seek to sway

voters, discredit opposing parties' crime control efforts, and legitimize changes in crime control policies. This narrative fosters a belief among the public that a crisis exists, and that a change in leadership would enhance safety and reduce crime.

The sedition law under the Indian Penal Code has been criticized for being frequently misused to suppress dissent. In Tejender Pal Singh v. State of Rajasthan (2024)[4], the Supreme Court warned against the use of similar legislation to silence opposing views. Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) addresses such issues by penalizing acts that threaten the sovereignty, unity, or integrity of the nation (Anand and Tripathi, 2025). Politicians have also been accused of exaggerating crime rates and linking them to specific ethnic groups for political benefit. Crime statistics are often cited both to attack political opponents and to praise initiatives that claim to reduce crime, thereby cultivating public anxiety.

Likewise, government approaches to crime through policies, policing, and public communication –such as safety campaigns– play a vital role in shaping public perceptions of security (Heydari, 2022). A government that emphasizes law enforcement and public safety may foster a sense of security, while neglect can lead to public mistrust and fear. The interaction between legislation, law enforcement, and public messaging must be examined to understand their combined influence on public perception. Ensuring law and order through effective policing is a fundamental responsibility of the state (Berman, 2018). Coordinated efforts in these areas are essential to foster the belief that society is safe and crime is under control. Nevertheless, media

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[4] 2024:Rj-Jd:14186.

portrayals often exaggerate threats, making the public more fearful than the actual crime rates justify.

In a democracy, public perception of crime and punishment plays a significant role, but the public is not a monolithic group. People's understanding varies based on factors such as class, gender, region, religion, and education (Leheza et al., 2021). Numerous studies have provided insights into how different groups perceive crime and punishment. Research conducted in Britain during the 1990s revealed that the general public did not overwhelmingly support harsh punishments and tended to favor alternatives to incarceration, such as community sentencing. Similar findings emerged from other independent studies (Freeman, 2000). These results suggest that political and media-driven calls for severe punishment do not always align with public sentiment.

In India as well, there is growing support for alternatives to imprisonment. The newly enacted BNS, which replaces the Indian Penal Code, introduces the concept of "community service" under Section 4(f)[5]. This provision offers an alternative to incarceration, requiring offenders to perform unpaid work for the community's benefit. Implementation typically involves a probation officer who supervises the offender and provides rehabilitative

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[5] Section 4, BNS.
The punishments to which offenders are liable under the provisions of this Sanhita are:
a) Death.
b) Imprisonment for life.
c) Imprisonment, which is of two descriptions, namely:
1. Rigorous, that is, with hard labour.
2. Simple.
d) Forfeiture of property.
e) Fine.
f) Community service.

counseling (Prasad, 2024). The concept is rooted in reformative justice, aiming to reintegrate offenders into the society they have harmed. Finally, community service is designated for non-violent, minor offenses and excludes serious or violent crimes (Harris and Lo, 2002).

IV.3. Socio-economic Disparities and its Effect on Public Perception

Socio-economic disparities in India are deeply intertwined with its complex social structure. Inequalities in income, employment, education, access to resources, and legal justice significantly influence how different communities or individuals perceive crime (Amrit, 2021). These disparities shape how law enforcement agencies treat marginalized groups, often resulting in biased attitudes toward social, political, and economic issues. This unequal distribution of resources and opportunities contributes to systemic imbalances, undermining the ideal of equal justice for all.

Key dimensions of socio-economic disparity include income inequality, limited access to quality education, inadequate healthcare, and restricted employment opportunities. An individual's income largely determines their standard of living, the services they can access, and their social identity. When aspirations for a luxurious lifestyle clash with limited financial means, individuals may become frustrated and, in some cases, resort to corrupt practices to achieve their goals (Onyeneke and Karam, 2022). Access to quality education remains largely confined to privileged groups, limiting the socio-economic mobility of those from lower-income backgrounds. The inability to afford quality education restricts future earning opportunities. Similarly, access to healthcare is often determined by one's financial capacity, with poorer individuals struggling to obtain necessary medical services. In that sense,

people in lower socio-economic strata often work in insecure jobs, making it difficult to achieve financial stability or long-term planning.

Those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to engage in serious crimes due to financial instability, unemployment, and a lack of community support. Their vulnerability is often shaped by direct or communal experiences with poverty and insecurity. Economic hardship can also heighten anxiety about personal safety, potentially leading to involvement in criminal activities. In contrast, individuals from higher-income groups tend to view crime less severely and are generally more concerned with property-related offenses or public disorder (Ahmad and Asim, 2020). They are often insulated from direct experiences of crime due to better financial means, such as living in gated communities or employing private security. This group typically favors rehabilitative justice measures.

In that sense, areas with high unemployment rates tend to report more crime, as economic insecurity can increase both actual and perceived criminal activity (Brown, 2000). Such conditions often generate public support for stricter law enforcement and harsher penalties. The state plays a crucial role in addressing these disparities. By implementing social welfare programs and policies aimed at economic upliftment –such as creating employment opportunities, offering financial guidance, and supporting entrepreneurial efforts– the government can help reduce crime and shift public perception in a positive direction.

IV.4. Prejudices in Cultural Contexts

India, as a multicultural society, accommodates a wide range of cultural identities. The coexistence of diverse cultural narratives significantly influences how individuals perceive the severity of crime and shape their behavioral responses. Understanding the impact of multiculturalism is essential for fostering an equitable society. Regional and cultural differences result in varying interpretations of criminal behavior and its seriousness within communities (Pantazis, 2006).

In collectivist cultures, such as many African and Asian societies, social welfare and communal harmony are prioritized. These cultures emphasize collective goals over individual rights, and any criminal act that disrupts social order, such as theft or public disturbance, is regarded with high seriousness. In many Asian societies, for example, family reputation holds substantial value. Therefore, crimes seen as dishonorable, such as honor killings or elopement for marriage, are considered threats to the community's harmony and family integrity (Duffy et al., 2008).

In contrast, individualistic cultures, typically found in western societies, prioritize personal autonomy and rights, including liberty, privacy, and property (Payton, 2015). These societies place a strong emphasis on individual rights, with legal frameworks centered around personal freedoms. As a result, they often do not connect as strongly with collective concepts such as inheritance, family, or gender-based rights, and may appear less sensitive to issues rooted in communal or familial concerns.

The state plays a vital role in developing inclusive policies that promote a sense of belonging for minority groups within multicultural societies. Societal

narratives are often biased, wrongly associating certain groups with higher criminal tendencies. Policing practices have been observed to disproportionately target specific communities. For instance, black individuals have faced decades of police brutality in western contexts. Similarly, in India, minority communities and lower castes frequently suffer mistreatment by law enforcement. Public perception also tends to unjustly associate these groups with criminal behavior. Crime statistics often portray racial and ethnic minorities as disproportionately involved in crime, reinforcing fear and mistrust toward them (Wood and Viki, 2013). It is necessary to mention here that media and political rhetoric further amplify these narratives (Sampson and Lauritsen, 1997).

On the other hand, state governments that implement policies focused on education and community engagement have seen improvements in public perceptions of crime. Citizens in these regions tend to have a more informed and balanced understanding of criminal activity compared to other areas (Tyler and Huo, 2002).

IV.5. Policing Attitude and Public Perception of Crime

Law enforcement, particularly through the police, plays a vital role in maintaining social harmony. The police are central to ensuring public safety and preventing crime. There is a strong link between how the police respond to crime and how the public perceives its seriousness. Understanding this relationship is essential to building trust in the justice system (Kappeler and Potter, 2017).

Public trust in law enforcement significantly shapes perceptions of crime. However, this trust is often weakened by negative experiences, such as a lack of cooperation from police officers. Factors like corruption, brutality, and inefficiency contribute to this erosion of confidence (Crawford and Evans, 2017). In many cases, victims report that police lack empathy and support, undermining their confidence in the justice process. Instances of corruption, including evidence tampering and record manipulation, further violate the principles of justice (Mythen, 2017).

Therefore, crime prevention, investigation, and apprehension of offenders are core responsibilities of the police. Their work includes both proactive and reactive policing. Proactive policing involves measures to prevent crime before it occurs, while reactive policing refers to responding to crimes after they have taken place.

As a democratic state, India is expected to uphold the rule of law and implement legal procedures without bias. It is the responsibility of state governments not only to train police officers but also to reform all actors involved in the justice delivery system (Hough, 2003). Reform through sensitization programs can enhance transparency, fairness, and effectiveness, thereby restoring public trust in the police to ensure their safety through prevention and response (Lee and McGovern, 2013).

Moreover, the relationship between police attitudes and public perception of crime in India is complex and shaped by historical, social, and cultural factors. Historically, India's policing system, rooted in colonial practices designed to serve rulers rather than citizens, contributed to a longstanding public view of the police as corrupt and inefficient (Nalla and

Madan, 2012). This legacy continues to foster public distrust, fear, and hostility toward law enforcement, rather than cooperation.

In India, public perception of crime is often shaped more by media and political rhetoric than by regional realities. Studies show that the public tends to overestimate youth crime based on media coverage, leading to inconsistent opinions on appropriate sentencing that mix correctional and preventive approaches. These misperceptions can distort understanding of crime rates and undermine confidence in policing efforts.

Research from Rajasthan highlights challenges in improving police performance and public trust. Though initiatives such as community engagement and in-service training have been introduced, inconsistent implementation has limited their impact. In that sense, effective administrative performance is key to fostering public cooperation, which is essential for successful law enforcement.

Gender also plays a role in shaping public perceptions of policing. Studies on all-women police stations in India show mixed outcomes. While these stations have increased reporting of crimes against women, unintended consequences include higher travel costs for victims and an emphasis on reconciliation over arrest (Capers, 2008). As for public support for female officers, this is generally higher in urban areas, though concerns about corruption can weaken this support.

Police legitimacy is crucial for public cooperation. Colonial legacies, perceived insensitivity, and corruption undermine this legitimacy, making it difficult for the police to gain public support. Enhancing legitimacy through fair procedures can improve public cooperation and reduce violent behavior

(Mazerolle et al., 2012). However, in regions affected by conflict, the public often places more importance on the effectiveness of police performance than on perceptions of legitimacy.

In summary, public perception of crime and attitudes toward policing in India are influenced by historical legacies, media portrayals, and police performance. Although efforts are being made to improve both performance and legitimacy, challenges persist, especially in conflict-affected regions. That is why a dynamic approach grounded in fairness, procedural reform, community engagement, and attention to gender issues is essential. Strengthening public trust and collaboration can enable the police to better address the complex realities of crime and justice in India.

IV.6. Gender-based Crime Perception

Gender-based perception of crime refers to how individuals, communities, and institutions interpret crimes committed by or against people of different genders. These perceptions are shaped by longstanding societal norms and stereotypes, influencing how offenders and victims are viewed based on their gender. Many societies hold entrenched beliefs about gender roles, which affect responses to crime. A recent case involving the rape and brutal murder of a resident doctor has revived public memory of the Nirbhaya case. Despite the legal reforms introduced in its aftermath to impose harsher penalties, the overall situation remains largely unchanged; women continue to face threats in various environments: at home, in public spaces, and at work. The fears and concerns of men and women differ significantly, with women experiencing higher rates of physical and psychological victimization.

Gender is one of the key factors influencing public perception of crime. Women are often seen as more frequent victims and are generally perceived to feel greater fear regarding safety in society. This perception contributes to the view of the public sphere as inherently unsafe for women. Gender biases also lead to distorted interpretations of crime statistics, influence how media report crimes, and affect the development of policies.

Women are frequently subjected to domestic violence, harassment, and sexual assault. Their perception of crime is shaped by personal experiences, cultural expectations, and media representations, including portrayals in films, news reports, and social media platforms (Njuguna, 2017). Many crimes against women remain unreported due to social stigma, family pressure, or fear of retaliation. Victim-blaming is widespread; women are often held responsible for the crimes committed against them (Ceccato, 2016). In patriarchal societies, survivors of sexual violence may be accused of provoking the assault through their clothing or behavior, or for being in public spaces at night. This mindset, particularly among men, needs to shift toward understanding the actual causes of gender-based violence rather than blaming victims (Yadav, 2022). Police officers, as members of the same society, may reflect these biases in their treatment of victims (Randall, 2004).

Perceptions of crime are also influenced by societal expectations of gender roles. Men are often viewed as aggressive, dominant, and more likely to engage in criminal acts, especially violent crimes such as robbery, theft, or assault. Women, by contrast, are seen as passive, vulnerable, and dependent on men for protection. Therefore, when women are accused of crimes, the response is often more severe due to their perceived deviation from traditional gender roles. That is why gender stereotypes not only influence legal outcomes but also

reinforce a narrative where male offenders are expected and female offenders are seen as moral transgressors.

Women are frequently blamed for sexual violence committed against them, often accused of provoking men or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Such attitudes are rooted in societal stereotypes and contribute to a culture of victim-blaming, where women's dress, behavior, or lifestyle choices are scrutinized. On the other hand, instances of domestic or sexual violence against men are often dismissed due to the prevailing belief that men do not suffer such abuse. Intersectionality –considering caste, class, ethnicity, and religion– further complicates public perceptions of crime, as members of different social groups may experience or be perceived differently even within the same gender.

Media representations also reinforce gender biases, shaping public attitudes toward crime. Crimes against women receive more media attention than similar crimes against men, largely due to the portrayal of women as inherently vulnerable and victimized. Male offenders are often portrayed as products of unemployment, social pressure, or psychological issues, while female offenders are depicted as morally deviant, emotionally unstable, or manipulative (Szczepan, 2024). Selective media reporting amplifies these narratives, drawing public attention to crimes that deviate from traditional norms –such as violent crimes committed by women– while downplaying or ignoring issues like domestic violence against men.

These patterns in representation and reporting shape public understanding of crime and reinforce gendered stereotypes, ultimately influencing societal responses and the justice system's approach to both victims and offenders.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Given the complexity of Indian society and the multiple factors influencing public perception of crime, it is essential to identify key areas where practical solutions can be proposed. Stakeholders in the justice delivery system –particularly lawmakers, policymakers, the police, and other law enforcement agencies– can work in coordination with civil society to bring meaningful changes in how crime is addressed and perceived by the public.

Government-led campaigns can help reduce public fear and address safety concerns by providing accurate information and promoting awareness (Sindall et al., 2017). These campaigns should also educate the public about the legal process and how to seek police assistance in times of distress. It is crucial that government officials and responsible departments ensure the dissemination of clear and reliable information. In the same way, legal literacy initiatives should be tailored to address the specific concerns of different demographic groups, including variations in age, gender, and geographic location.

The police can adopt a proactive approach by increasing patrols in areas with high crime rates, conducting public awareness programs, and implementing community policing initiatives to build trust. In contrast, reactive policing involves following legal procedures after a crime has occurred, including thorough evidence collection and adherence to criminal justice protocols to ensure fair and effective outcomes.

Policymakers should promote responsible journalism, as media portrayals significantly influence public perception of crime (Pande, 2021). Sensationalized reporting can incite fear, encourage discriminatory attitudes,

and spread unverified accusations. While the media enjoys the right to freedom of speech and expression under article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution[6], this right is subject to reasonable restrictions under article 19(2)[7]. In R. K. Anand v. Delhi High Court[8], the Supreme Court discouraged media sensationalism, noting that such behavior could amount to contempt of court. Similarly, in Saroj Iyer v. Maharashtra Medical (Council) of Indian Medicine[9], the Court emphasized that the media's role is to provide an accurate account of legal proceedings, not to influence or determine their outcomes.

Media outlets should be encouraged to provide balanced coverage of crime-related news to prevent the spread of fear and avoid unnecessary public pressure on the government to impose harsher penalties. Media should also avoid aligning with specific political interests or using crime coverage to criticize opposing parties. Ethical journalism grounded in fairness and factual reporting should be made a standard across platforms to strengthen public trust in the information being shared.

Political narratives also strongly affect how crime is perceived by the public. Therefore, state actors and political representatives should present law-and-order situations based on verified statistics rather than advancing political

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[6] Article 19 of the Indian Constitution: protection of certain rights regarding freedom of speech, etc.
1. All citizens shall have the right:
a) To freedom of speech and expression.
[7] Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution:
2. Nothing in sub-clause (a) of clause (1) shall affect the operation of any existing law, or prevent the State from making any law, in so far as such law imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right conferred by the said sub-clause in the interests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence.
[8] 2 (2009) 8 SCC 106.
[9] AIR 2002 Bom 97.

agendas. Depoliticizing law enforcement is essential; these institutions should function independently, free from political interference. Additionally, media organizations should support independent fact-checking bodies to ensure the accuracy of information released to the public.

Public perception of laws in multicultural societies is shaped by the communities' aspirations, beliefs, and values as reflected in legal systems and processes. To build an inclusive and equitable legal framework, laws and procedures must accommodate pluralistic ideals and cultural identities. Recognizing diverse cultural perspectives in mainstream legal systems can foster trust and a sense of belonging. Language and legal literacy remain key barriers for many cultural groups, especially when their native language is not used for official communication (Berry and Sam, 2014). The state should address this by translating legal rights, duties, and procedures into multiple languages to improve access.

Engaging communities through participatory law-making processes can further enhance confidence in the legal system. Legislatures should seek public feedback to ensure that laws reflect diverse expectations. Including members of marginalized communities in roles such as judges, police officers, and lawmakers can also increase trust in the fairness of the legal system, as people feel more represented and better able to relate to institutions of justice.

It is also the responsibility of the public to stay informed about crime statistics and law enforcement strategies to resist the influence of misinformation. Policymakers should base legal reforms on empirical evidence and justice principles, rather than public sentiment. They must also align with

international guidelines on offender treatment and human rights to ensure fairness and transparency in the legal process.

Rehabilitation of offenders should be a central policy goal. Addressing the root causes of crime –such as poverty, lack of education, and social exclusion– through programs focused on counseling, reformation, and reintegration is essential. Implementing progressive taxation to fund social welfare initiatives can reduce inequality and, in turn, decrease crime rates among economically disadvantaged groups. In a socialist framework like India's, wealth redistribution and policies aimed at job creation and fair wages are vital for achieving social justice.

Finally, fostering community cohesion is also critical to rebuilding trust and cooperation between the public and law enforcement; and collaborative initiatives –such as partnerships between local police and community members to address area-specific concerns– can improve relationships and encourage a more cooperative approach to crime prevention and justice.

VI. CONCLUSION

Public perception of crime and punishment in India is shaped by a complex interplay of deeply rooted factors. Cultural stereotypes and narratives, religious beliefs, trust in justice delivery institutions, socio-economic conditions, media influence, and political implications all contribute to shaping this perception. Additionally, demographic variables such as location, age, gender, and educational background significantly influence how crime and punishment are understood across different segments of the population (Chaudhary and Gupta, 2021).

Given this complexity, there is no universal solution to improve public perception. A nuanced approach that considers these diverse influences is necessary for developing effective and context-specific strategies. These dynamics often result in fluctuating public opinions, ranging from support for severe punitive measures to favoring rehabilitative approaches aimed at offender reform. In that sense, lawmakers are advised to avoid reactive policymaking driven by public pressure following violent crimes, as such responses may compromise long-term justice goals.

Therefore, there is a growing public inclination toward reformatory justice, with increasing recognition of the underlying causes of crime and the importance of addressing them to prevent future offenses. Policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and communities must collaborate and address these concerns collectively to improve law and order and enhance public safety. At the same time, the public must engage with the realities of crime and justice, and actively contribute to building a society grounded in fairness, prevention, and security.

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