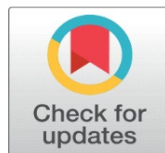# UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL STIGMA RELATED TO RELIGION AND WOMEN IN INDIA AND IDENTIFYING WAYS TO PROMOTE DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

The study has tried to connect social stigma and religion that exist in India especially among women causing their distress. Indian women suffer from discrimination in all places that restricts their contribution to society. The research has highlighted that Christian groups of women expressed a feeling of suppression and discrimination by 30% in a survey of 2020. The POSH Act fails to address the social injustice that religious scriptures impose on this patriarchal society. Thus, a secondary qualitative study has been conducted to critically examine the factors influencing social stigma and causes of insufficient democracy in India.

Keywords: Social Discrimination, Employment Opportunity, Indian Democracy, Religious Impact, Women Empowerment

1. INTRODUCTION

Social stigma related to religion and gender is prevalent in India which especially impacts women. Such social phenomena exist in different cultures of India and are influenced by various factors such as criminal background, religious or caste identity, social-cultural deviation, and the respective (Nair & Vollhardt, 2020). According to Saldanha (2016), approximately 17% of the population of India is Dalit, and they have become aware of their value and status in recent times. Dalits can be considered as a result of community splitting and political gimmicks that are raising women's oppression as well. Vaishnav (2019) has also explained that the religious structure of India has created a negative impact on women in terms of becoming the victim of sexual abuse. Women are often described as manipulators, sinners, and temptresses by scriptural interpretations that contribute silently to their abuse.

1.1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

According to Kalpana Kannabiran, the director and a Hindu woman of the Council for Social Development in Hyderabad "Religion is not a given, it is a negotiated reality" (Saldanha, 2016). Religious scriptures have always used

culturally conditioned interpretations, symbols, and language to alienate women and influence their exploitation. Cyrilla Chakkalakal a Franciscan Sister of St. Mary of the Holy Angels has referred to the murder case of the two sisters in the congregation of 1990. She denoted how crucial character assassination can become when the media turns public attention towards the sexuality of the sisters and the Catholic community also fails to stand beside them (Hansen et al. 2018). The existence of a caste mindset among all the religious groups in India has internationalized women from their social status and made them voiceless.
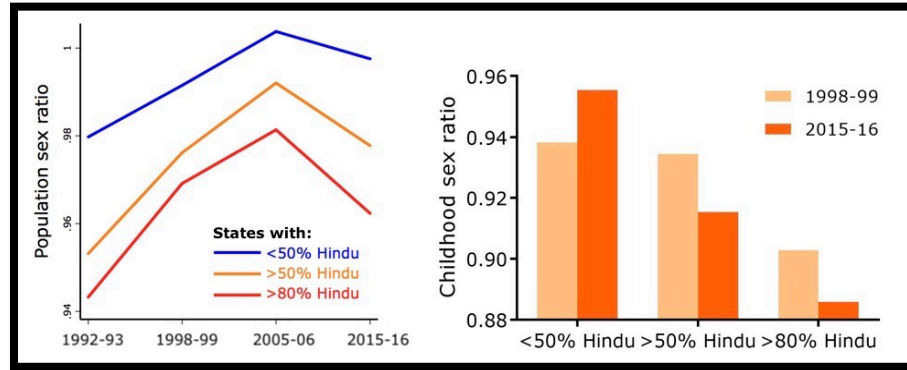

Figure 1 Rate of discrimination against women in 2018 by Hindus

(Source: Influenced by Sadanandan, 2018)

As per a survey that is carried out among Indian women in 2018, more than 80% of Hindu women groups felt widespread discrimination (Sadanandan, 2018). Hindus are followed by Christians and Jains, Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists as studies have revealed.
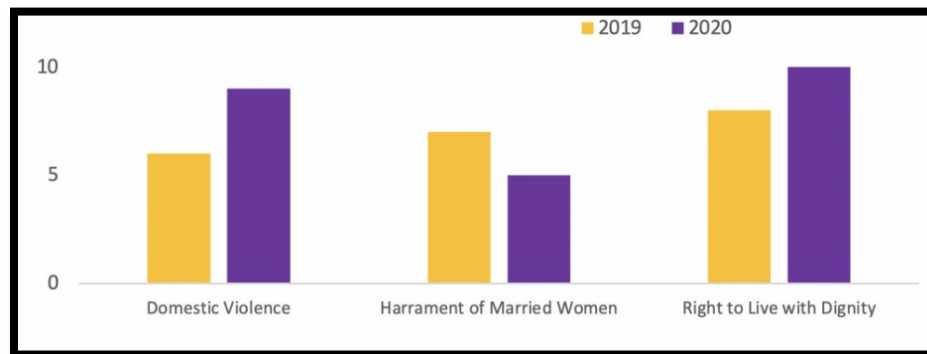

Figure 2 Increased rate of violence against women in India of 2019-2020

(Source: IGC, 2020)

Figure 2 shows how violence against Indian women is increasing over time. According to the reports of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), such violence has escalated by 131% by May 2020 (IGC, 2020). Delhi tops in crime rate against women by 66.4% followed by Haryana, Telangana, Orissa, and the respective. Religious influence in these mentioned areas is mostly negative, increasing a higher risk of gender violence. The Indian government has acknowledged the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013 which is commonly known as the POSH Act fails to protect women from discrimination and harassment.

2. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

1) Aim

The study aims to understand the social stigma associated with religion and women in India and to identify strategies for promoting democracy.

2) Objectives

To identify the social stigma of regions and Indian women causing their distress

To understand the reasons behind social stigma for Indian women and the role of religion in restricting democracy

To recognize methods are to promote democracy to overcome the social stigma of religion and Indian women.

3) Method

A secondary method of data collection and interpretation has been followed as it can bestow the research with effective knowledge from various sources. The data has been gathered from ProQuest, ResearchGate, ScienceDirect, Elsevier, and the respective databases as they offer a generous amount of authentic information (Kumar, 2018). Only peer-reviewed journals and existing publications have been collected to execute the study. Besides, information and data have been extracted from potent newspaper articles and magazines providing evidence to support the research. Such databases have improved the data quality included as well as interpreted during the research.
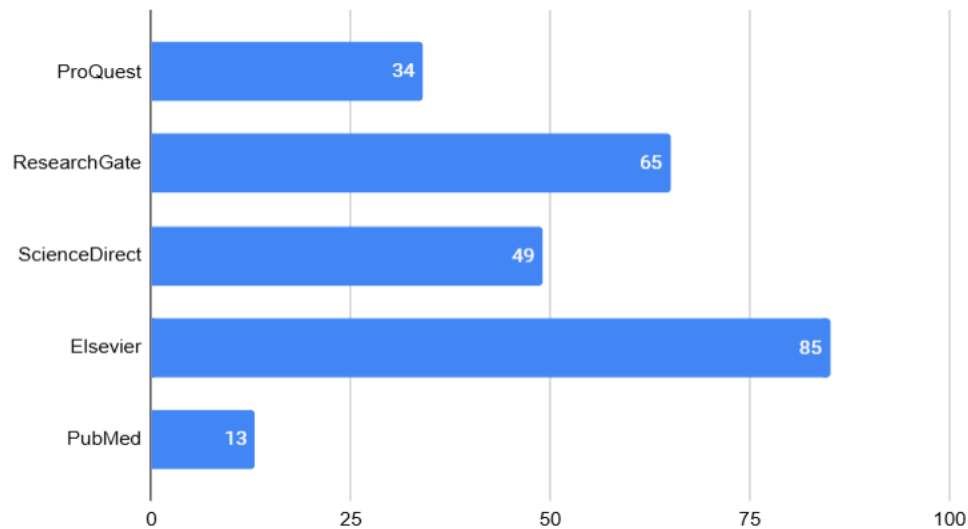

Figure 3 Share of collected journals and articles

Figure 3 presents a graphical presentation of the number of journals and articles selected from the databases. It presents that the majority of the publications have been selected from Elsevier with 85 articles followed by 65 from ResearchGate.
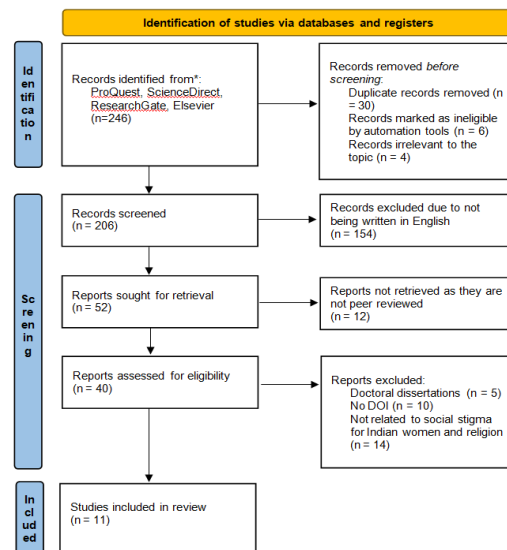

Figure 4: PRISMA
Source Influenced by Kothari, 2017

The research method has applied a PRISMA diagram presented in Figure 4. This has worked as a tool of screening tests to obtain only relevant sources for the data analysis process (Kothari, 2017). 11 journals and articles have been determined to be included for their relevance and rich content regarding the topic. However, the main criteria for their selection include English as a written language, containing proper information on the authors, DOI, and date of publication for higher credibility.

Keywords	AND/OR	Keywords	AND/OR	Keywords
Social stigma	AND	Indian women	OR	Social Education
Indian religion	AND	Indian culture	OR	Inclusive policies
Social discrimination	OR	Democracy	AND	Gender inequality

Table 1 Boolean search result

Source Influenced by Mahajan et al. 2019

Boolean search operator has been implemented to use effective keywords during the search process of peer-reviewed journals. The keywords have been projected in Table 1 showing that "social stigma", "Indian women", "Indian religion", and the respective have assisted in filtering the chosen 11 sources from the vast amount of results. Thus, it has led to a thematic analysis to discuss social stigma related to Indian women and religion for the identification of democracy-promoting strategies. These themes have assisted in narrating the reasons for the existence of social stigma that requires the promotion of democracy in India.

3. RESULTS

Authors	Codes	Themes
Hasnain & Srivastava (2018) Aswathy & Kalpana (2018) Dutt (2018) Heise et al. (2019)	Discrimination against women, patriarchal society, social constraints, male dominance	"Theme 1: Patriarchal norms and gender roles are the major social stigma that Indian women encounter"
Davis & Gao (2020) Barak-Corren (2017) Reilly (2017) Khaitan & Norton (2019)	Gender equality, religious beliefs and interpretation, women empowerment, social injustice	"Theme 2: Religious interpretation often restricts democracy for women due to social stigma"
Kc et al. (2018) Aldersey et al. (2018) Newbigging & Ridley (2018)	Census of India, social education, adult education, literacy rates	"Theme 3: Social education for the population can only help in promoting democracy and overcoming social stigma"

Table 2 Axial coding

The importance of axial coding can be seen through its representation by mentioning the chosen authors and the codes extracted from their works for data analysis. These mentioned themes are critically examined in this research to point out the study's potential and purpose.

4. ANALYSIS

Theme 1: Patriarchal norms and gender roles are the major social stigma that Indian women encounter

Gender roles in India are viewed with discrimination due to the dominance of the patriarchal society. As mentioned by Dutt (2018), traditional gender roles in Indian family life are highly driven by religious structure. According to many Indian religions, a wife must always abide by her husband and men tend to have a more prominent role in a domestic

setting. Indian religions also prohibit last rights or burial rituals in funeral practices as a fundamental right of sons, not daughters. Sex-selective abortion in India is a matter of concern which four-in-ten women of this country have also accepted (Aswathy & Kalpana, 2018). It indicates a lack of social education gender bias among Indian citizens and religious influence.
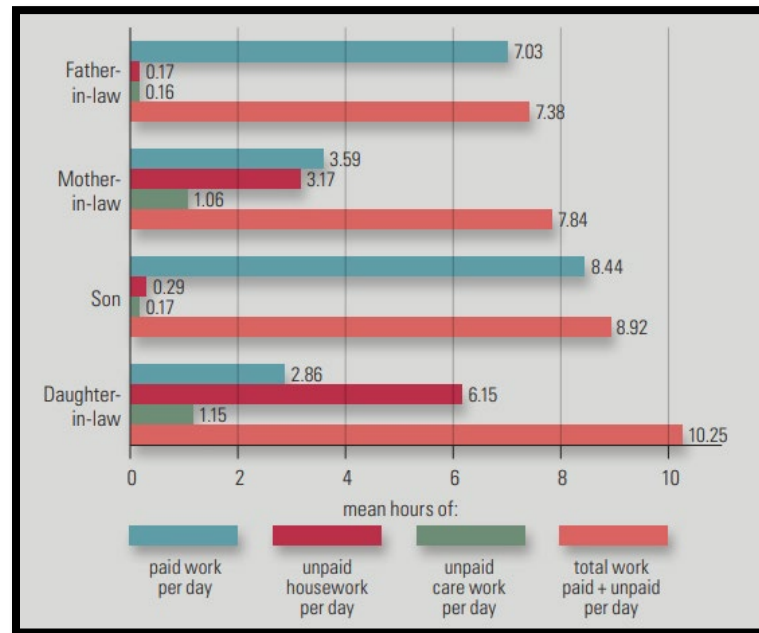

Figure 5 Gender roles and responsibilities in a household

Source: Influenced by Hasnain & Srivastava, 2018

Figure 5 presents the survey results which were executed by Hasnain & Srivastava (2018) to understand the points of view of Indian people on gender roles and responsibilities. It has revealed a shocking response from the female or mother-in-law spends almost 3.17 hours per day in unpaid housework. The majority of the respondents have also shared that daughter-in-law in a household spend almost 10.25 hours per day in total paid and unpaid works (Hasnain & Srivastava). On the contrary, paid works are done by only for 2.86 hours per day by daughter-in-law and 3.59 hours per day by mother-in-law. It reflects the dominance of males in Indian culture and economic sphere as women in India have also somewhat accepted such discriminatory practices (Heise et al. 2019).

On another note, several women in India have been proven to be great leaders challenging the patriarchal society and norms. Among the influential Indian women, Sonia Gandhi is a prominent politician who challenged social stigma and said "From smoke-filled kitchens to flood-lit stadiums, the Indian woman's journey has been a long one". Further religious law and customs have imposed other stigmas on women such as social exclusion. Women go through marginalization and discrimination within their households, families, communities, and society from a broader prospect (Aswathy & Kalpana, 2018). Religious stigmas bring restrictions on women in terms of their education, public life, healthcare, and employment.

Indian women often go through psychological distress as a result of the continuous oppression of the male-dominated society. As discussed by Dutt (2018), many Indian female children are deprived of their right to education and marry off at an early age despite having a keen interest in building careers on their own. They are often pressured by their husbands to quit their jobs due to the belief of female gender roles in having the responsibilities of dealing with household chores (Heise et al. 2019). It leads to psychological distress for women such as depression, anxiety, shame, and low self-esteem.

Theme 2: Religious interpretation often restricts democracy for women due to social stigma

Indian women and their struggle for equality are tied to democratic rights in India. Debates associated with women's rights are restricted by religious interpretations and traditions (Barak-Corren, 2017). Public discourses visualize women's issues and sexuality as a social taboo which is a perplexing fact of Indian culture. Moreover, it imposes various

challenges to the notions of democratization of India in terms of struggles for women's rights and complexities. Women of India are coming forward to raise their voices against their oppression on January 1, 2019, women came from different towns and districts of Kerala to walk as a stand against gender inequality and discriminatory practices (Reilly, 2017). It directly addressed the issue of women's entry into the Sabarimala temple and directed women's assertion of equal rights.
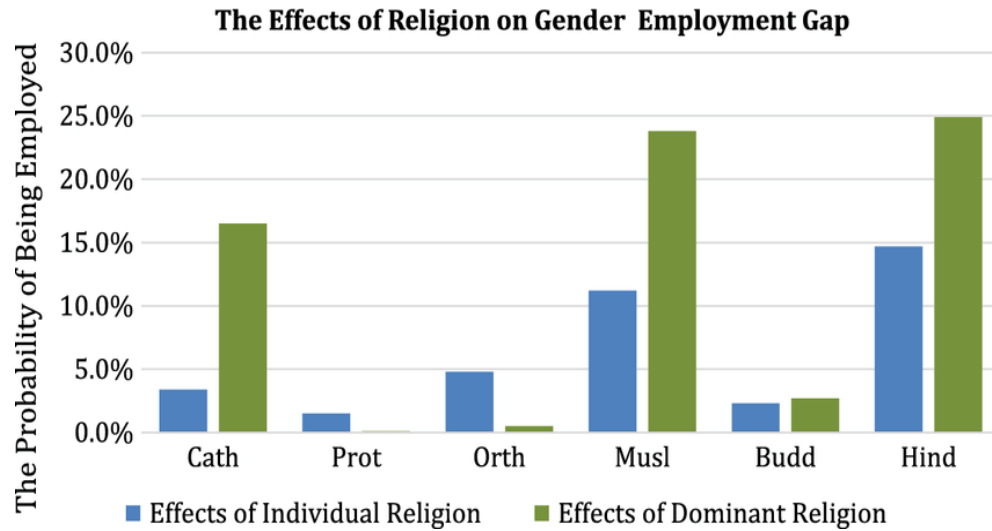

Figure 6 Influence of religion on gender employment gap
Source Influenced by Davis & Gao, 2020

The gender employment gap is a rising challenge in India as a result of discrimination and social stigma, especially in rural areas. Indian women are reported to face a 100% employment gap which is attributed to gender discrimination (Khaitan & Norton, 2019). Similarly, the study by Davis & Gao (2020) expressed that different religions in India face this challenge as the probability of Hindu women being employed is only about 25% in terms of the effects of this dominant religion. Likewise, the effects of individual religions allow only 10% of Muslim women and less than 5% of Buddhist women to acquire employment opportunities. Social expectations are deep-rooted and bring limitations to the right to education for women who prioritize domestic responsibilities for them (Barak-Corren, 2017). As a result, they lack professional pursuits and even face workplace discrimination and harassment.

Religion's interpretation plays a crucial role in restricting democracy for women and it is often reinforced by social stigma. Khaitan & Norton (2019) have pointed out that various Indian religions portray their texts, norms, and traditions in a patriarchal way that disadvantages women's lives. They create a theological basis on certain passages downplaying the role of women creating gender inequality. In contrast, historical or cultural contexts might be different than the literal explanations that lead to outdated social norms and perpetuation (Reilly, 2017). Consequently, Indian culture is dominated by male power and male authority in religions. Such social stigma is manifested in various ways such as restrictions on women's presence outside the home or interaction in public places with men (Davis & Gao, 2020). Certain religious beliefs also dictate that men must be providers of the households that exclude the voices of women in decision-making.

Theme 3: Social education for the population can only help in promoting democracy and overcoming social stigma

Social education for the Indian population is predominant to promote democracy to overcome social stigma. As demonstrated by Kc et al. (2018), social education fosters awareness of rights, critical thinking, and democratic practices. It encourages women in social prospects that lead to a more just and inclusive society. A detailed explanation of the need for social education shows that it helps in enlightening citizens to improve their skills and gaps. It also encourages women to participate in different social and democratic activities such as engagement in constructive dialogue, voting, and holding leaders accountable (Aldersey et al. 2018). Thus, it makes them responsible citizens enabling them to engage in civic activities of the country.

Adult education in India requires huge capital expenditure that the country is recently lacking. As highlighted by Newbigging & Ridley (2018), inadequate government funding for adult education is restricting basic literacy in India

along with the poor implementation of the programs. Moreover, social and adult education in India leaves marginalized individuals and majorly women who remain undeserved. India has various adult literacy programs such as the Saakshar Bharat Mission that have declined over the years due to insufficient funding (Kc et al. 2018). India also lacks quality educators, equipped centres, and learning materials to be provided for Indian adults to understand gender equality.
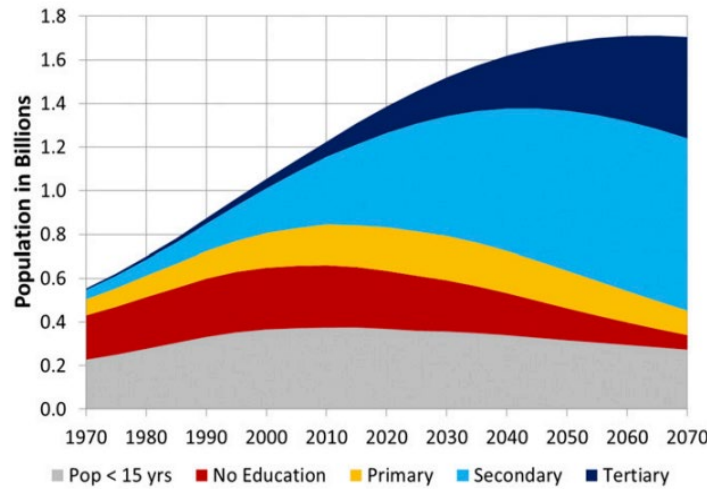

Figure 7 Literacy population of India 1970-2070
Source: Influenced by Kc et al. 2018

A probable literacy population of India from 1970 to 2070 has been projected in Figure 7. According to the findings of Kc et al. (2018), the Indian population has risen from 554 million in 1970 to 1.3 billion in 2015. This has projected the fact that social and economic consequences are changing with the increased population of this country. Community development and their active participation in adult educational programs are causing inadequate knowledge among people about women's rights against discrimination (Aldersey et al. 2018). The government must take initiatives to make people understand that empowering women can contribute significantly to promoting democracy as well as the Indian economy.

Social education and awareness differ in rural and urban areas of India as urban areas tend to have easy access to resources. As illustrated by Newbigging & Ridley (2018), educational structure and awareness in rural areas lack establishing proper infrastructure and access to educational quality. Religious interpretations in rural areas are challenging due to limited funding, accessibility, and poverty that add to the religious beliefs. The presence of socioeconomic disparities is evident in rural areas negatively impacting adult education and social knowledge among citizens (Kc et al. 2018). Henceforth, India has a lower literacy rate that compels the population to rely on religious facts and beliefs causing discrimination for women.

Social stigma can be overcome by promoting democracy within the Indian population that focuses on inclusivity and respect for women. Women are being denied their social injustice and equal rights restricting their engagement with the communities (Aldersey et al. 2018). Indian policies include the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments mandating women's reservation in local governance. Contrarily, Indian political parties are often driven by religious norms and agendas that regulate and make the situation for women more challenging and discriminating.

5. DISCUSSION

Social stigma among Indian women is a deep-rooted and complex issue as it is connected to various religions. As stated by Varghese (2020), India has prevalent historical biases, patriarchal implications, and cultural norms in the religious context. Moreover, social stigmas of India are manifested in multiple forms that lead to social exclusion of women and discrimination. For instance, in many Indian communities, menstruating women are not allowed to touch food or serve it to elders due to the religious belief of them being "unclean" during this time (Diehl et al. 2017). Women suffer from unequal social status in India as Kerala has banned the entering of menstruating age of women in the Sabarimala temple as the deity of this temple is believed to submit to celibacy (BBC, 2018).

Gender stereotypes are present that have been reinforced by religious norms and confine women to only domestic responsibilities. As per the view of Haq et al. (2020), the majority of Indian women are deprived of their educational and career opportunities due to patriarchal manners and beliefs. Religious customs have oppressed women and are disadvantageous for women regarding their divorce, marriage, personal laws, and inheritance. For example, the practice of "triple talaq" in Muslim communities has been widely criticized as it was discriminatory to the rights and security of women (Silva, 2019). Therefore, the Indian government needs to focus on promoting democracy to address such challenges to uphold the fundamental rights of women.

6. CONCLUSION

The critical analysis of the research has shown that the existence of religious beliefs about women being a matter of abuse has been present in India for a prolonged time. Different religious scriptures have interpreted women differently and people in the patriarchal society of India have adopted the notions. The secondary research has highlighted the fact that women face the stigma of gender roles along with other challenging discriminatory practices. A lack of social structure, knowledge, and government policies has made it difficult for Indian women to express their opinions. India needs to promote democracy to overcome the disproportionate caste system, gender complexities, and marginalization of women.

7. FUTURE SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study has significant scope to be further discussed in the future as it has addressed a recurrent issue of Indian women and religion suffering from social stigma. Existing knowledge on the current position of Indian women has been interpreted and can be used in future research on similar topics. Besides, the types of social stigma present in Indian culture for women can provide further information in exploring relevant areas providing the study with a potential future scope.

Despite highlighting the key characteristics of social stigma present for Indian women, the research has a few limitations. For instance, insufficient statistical data is evident in the research as it is a secondary study. It works as a limitation as it could have conducted a survey among Indian women to understand their points of view. Similarly, the study also lacks in administering theoretical concepts regarding social stigma as secondary research which is also a restriction of the study.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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