

Blaming Women Across History for Their Persuasive Behavior: A Psychological Study

¹Prionty Shaily ✉ ²Asfakul Ashekin

¹⁻²Bachelor of Arts, Department of Psychology, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Abstract

In our social structure, women always face suspicion, blame, punishment, and judgment from the male population. This judgment is noticeable in social, political, and interpersonal areas. Women have been blamed for their persuasive behavior, but the behavior of men is always being ignored. In this paper we have tried to challenge the fairness of this prejudice, using psychological aspect. We tried to reach out manifestations from primitive religious narratives, which include the witch hunts of early modern Europe, to contemporary legal and cultural context. We have focused on system justification theory, ambivalent sexism, attribution theory and psychoanalytic perspectives. This analytical argument claims that the reason behind blaming women for their persuasive behavior functions psychologically and it has multiple functions. It maintains existing gender hierarchies, alleviates cognitive dissonance about gender inequality, and manages unconscious anxieties about female power. The paper concludes by considering the persistent influence of these historical patterns in the modern context and their implications for women's participation in public discourse.

Keywords: Blaming women, Victim blaming, gender stereotypes, persuasion, system justification, ambivalent sexism.

1. Introduction

According to the male perspective, the first persuasive event takes place in a haven. Eve has always been blamed for her influence over Adam. These biblical narratives establish an example: women as persuaders and men as persuaded. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great emperor of history. History records his companion Joséphine de Beauharnais as the most influential person of Napoleon's life. Our male pre-dominant society always established Joséphine as a persuader.

In discussion of recent events, in 2022 at the Academy Awards, a notable segment of public discourse quickly pivoted to blame the wife of a known actor for the abusive behavior of the actor towards the person who made fun of the actor's wife.

This paper investigates the psychological underpinnings of this persistent pattern. Why have women's persuasive efforts,

whether successful or not, so often resulted in blame directed back at the women themselves? Why not ever men got the blame for their action? Is it really women or the nature of men?

2. Method

This paper is written using qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology including historical analysis, literary criticism, and psychological theory and is being used to examine the existing narrative of blaming women for persuasive behavior. The research is designed as a theoretical synthesis, based on primary textual sources including religious narratives (the Book of Genesis), early modern historical records (witch trial documentation), and Renaissance dramatic literature (Shakespeare's Macbeth and Hamlet) as well as extensive literature from gender studies and social psychology. A comparative historical

analysis was done to find out the pattern of blame culture across history. The pattern was systematically interpreted through psychological frameworks using system justification theory, ambivalent sexism theory, attribution theory and psychoanalytic perspectives.

3. Historical Manifestations of Blaming Women for Persuasion

3.1 Religious and Mythological Foundations

If we focus on the first religious narrative that established woman as a persuader, that would be Adam and Eve's event in the haven. We always blame Eve for influencing Adam to intake the forbidden fruit. We always analyze this event as women's persuasion. We make it normal to count women as dangerous persuaders. Whether Adam was created first, he was superior by knowledge, he had his own will power.

3.2 The Trojan War: Helen as the Original Scapegoat

Perhaps no figure in Western literature embodies the blaming of women for persuasive influence more enduringly than Helen of Troy. The most beautiful mortal woman in the world, Helen abandoned her husband Menelaus, King of Sparta, to elope with the Trojan prince Paris, thereby becoming in the cultural imagination the cause of the Trojan War. As one analysis observes, Helen "caused the Trojan War, brought death and destruction to Trojans and Greeks alike, and yet returned home after the war, un-divorced, unscathed, unpunished". It was never considered that both men in this case were lost in lust. They

worshipped the beauty. They only tried to establish their power by achieving a woman.

3.3 The Witch Hunts: Persuasion as Conspiracy

Between the 14th and 18th centuries, tens of thousands of people predominantly women were executed for witchcraft across Europe. The witch hunts represent perhaps the most extreme historical manifestation of blaming women for perceived persuasive or manipulative power. As one analysis observes, "The persecution of witches has never been about magic, it's always been about punishing (mostly) women who do not conform to patriarchal standards". Mostly it was the misuse of the power, just the domination of women.

3.4 Classical and Renaissance Rhetoric

In classical rhetoric, the public sphere was explicitly gendered male. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg note that "patriarchal notions of public speaking declared that women could persuade only by seducing a male audience". This framing reduced women's persuasive capacity to sexual manipulation, thereby delegitimizing their rhetorical contributions while simultaneously rendering them blameworthy for any influence they exerted.

3.5 Shakespeare's Tragic Women: Persuasion and Its Consequences

The plays of William Shakespeare provide some of the most enduring literary depictions of women blamed for their persuasive influence. Two figures Lady

Macbeth in Macbeth and Queen Gertrude in Hamlet exemplify different dimensions of this phenomenon.

Lady Macbeth is perhaps Shakespeare's most famous female persuader. Described as a "strong, rational, and calculating woman," she is "determined to see her husband put aside his 'milk of human kindness' to fulfill their ambitions to rule". Some scholar puts it, "Lady Macbeth's ambition and manipulation drive the play's tragic events".

4. Psychological Mechanisms

4.1 System Justification Theory

According to system justification theory, people of our society like to follow the social system, which are already existed in the society, despite of their harmful effects of those system. Research has shown that "gender related system justification motivation predict the propensity to blame a female rape victim among men" while men are the only catalyst of such event, also our prejudices play a powerful role for victim blaming behavior. Prejudices that we inherited form the existing social system. System justification theory works differently for men and women. Male population used to blame victim in general, regardless the victim match the stereotypes or not. This suggests that the root of such behavior towards women is our cultural framework and gender inequality. When a woman showing persuasive behavior, their influence over men consider as illegitimate, manipulative or dangerous in the context of system justification. On the other hand, men are belong to existing gender hierarchy, they

hold predominantly persuasive authority and appear more natural and justified.

4.2 Ambivalent Sexism

Men always have shown dual nature toward women. Men decide that to whom they will be hostile and to whom they will be benevolent. Men punish woman those who did not meet the traditional gender role or tried to escape the system also men are benevolent to them who admitted the necessity of male protection. This protection must provide by male while men are the only accused, but they will blame the women for the consequences, who reject their protection. Research on stranger harassment has found "dominant ideas blaming women for harassment based on their appearance, behaviors and emotional expression", with a recurring them being "the belief to regulate male desire". According to men, desire of men always provoked by female, women's persuasive presence is responsible for the consequences. That is the existing framework. In this scenario men's behavior and their personal belief and thought are being completely ignored.

4.3 Attribution Theory and the Fundamental Attribution Error

Attribution theory examines how people assign responsibility for events and behaviors. Research has demonstrated that "delayed accusations resulted in the attribution of negative motives toward the victim," and these "negative motives, in turn, increased victim blaming". When women engage in persuasive behavior particularly when that persuasion challenges existing power

structures observers may attribute negative motives (manipulation, selfishness, deception) to explain the behavior, thereby justifying blame.

A critical feminist approach to attribution theory suggests that "perspectives of marginalized groups are valuable sources of knowledge" and that we must "interrogate how social positionality for those in power may impact attributions of blame". Those in dominant positions may systematically attribute blame to women's persuasive agency while excusing men's actions—a pattern consistent with the fundamental attribution error, in which observers attribute others' behaviors to dispositional factors while explaining their own behaviors situation ally.

4.4 Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Psychoanalytic theory explains our behavior from the deep state of mind. The root of blaming women for their persuasive behavior lies into men's subconscious mind. Paul H. Elovitz has argued that "man's need to belittle and subjugate women is based on counter dependency". Men begin life identifying with their mothers but are then "instructed to separate themselves from the person they have primarily identified with". The need to prove oneself "not a 'momma's boy'" creates a psychological dynamic in which female influence maternal, persuasive, nurturing must be rejected and denigrated.

Elovitz further suggests that when men "sexualize the breast that fed us and turn women into sex objects who are to be 'fucked'," they are "not only fulfilling sexual impulses but are also denigrating the mother

and mothering which, at an unconscious level, they continue to long for". Men are used to be hostile toward woman, but men are also used to believe that the mother figure is only safe space for them, but when they follow the masculine framework, they like to blame women persuasion.

5. Modern Manifestations and Continuing Patterns

5.1 Legal Systems and Victim Blaming

Contemporary legal systems continue to exhibit patterns of blaming women for their persuasive agency. In rape and sexual assault cases, "it is often the victim, usually female, who stands trial. Her perpetrator and his violent actions are typically lost as her choice of clothes, behavior, substance use, and mental health are all brought to the forefront". The victim's presence, behavior, and choices are framed as persuasive provocations that explain or mitigate the perpetrator's actions.

5.2 Political and Public Discourse

Women in politics continue to face blame for their persuasive efforts. Gendered disinformation "aims to discredit, delegitimize, and marginalize female political actors", and "voters may still doubt women's competence and view persuasive behavior as counter-stereotypical for women". Female politicians who speak assertively are labeled "shrill" or "ambitious" "terms that carry implicit blame for violating gender expectations.

5.3 Media and Cultural Narratives

Media representations continue to blame women for persuasive influence. As one analysis notes, "Women are routinely blamed for men's actions in novels, movies, and social media". The woman who "made" her partner angry, the woman who "led him on," the woman who "provoked" violence these narratives persist across media forms.

6. Implications and Future Directions

Blaming women for their persuasive behavior is a matter of psychological study, and it is rooted in gender equality. Firstly, we need to find out the origin of the problem. Psychological analysis will help us to understand the root causes of this kind of attitude. We need to focus on the psychology of the male population of society. Second, we need to look back to our existing history and literature, the representation of women, how we created a structure for blaming women across history. Our literature and history should be re-examined, neutral analysis should be conducted for such behavior as victim blaming. The third point is policymaking. Persuasive behavior of women should be normal, legitimate and acceptable. There is no place to judge women's behavior as persuasive, influential and illegitimate. Organizations that are responsible for policymaking also need to focus on implementation. The most important step would be the psychological study of our male population. It is essential. When we analyze the problem psychologically, we will find out the root causes of the behavior.

7. Conclusion

Blaming women for their persuasive behavior is a discussable agenda for our society. If we look back to ancient times, we can find the pattern of this behavior, whether it is Stone Age society or civil Greek society. In modern times, our behavior is consistent toward women. Men always blame women for their persuasion. This behavior is not coincidental but a psychological mechanism to maintain the gender hierarchy.

In this paper, historical events and literature have been analyzed, but the behavioral pattern does not differ by time or era. In our society, this issue is not recognized. Our pre-existing social structure still considers the recognition of this issue as a weakness. Recognition of this issue is the first step to solving it. Understanding psychological mechanisms, psychological awareness, institutional change, and working on education is necessary. Women's full engagement in social, political, and professional aspects will change the attitude of men.

References:

- Carli, L. L. (2001). Gender, language, and influence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(1), 19-35.
- Merchant, K. (2012). *How men and women differ in communication outcomes and perceptions*. Claremont McKenna College Silo.
- McColley, D. K. (1983). *Milton's Eve*. University of Illinois Press.
- Twain, M. (1906). *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*.
- Ruether, R. R. (1993). *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Beacon Press.

- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38(2), 217–230.
- Campbell, R., et al. (1999). The impact of rape on women's health. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 14(2), 121–142.
- Elovitz, P. H. (2014). *Historical reflections on women. Clio's Psyche*, 21(2), 149–152.
- Euripides. (n.d.). *The Trojan Women*.
- Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths: In review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18(2), 133–164.
- Pollard, P. (1992). Rape victim blaming: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, 7(2), 123–139.
- Shakespeare, W. (2015). *Hamlet*. Penguin Classics.
- Shakespeare, W. (2016). *Macbeth*. Fingerprint Publishing.
- Strickler, R., et al. (2023). Social dominance orientation and victim blaming. *Social Justice Research*.