

Research Article

Reframing Consent, Law, and Harm: A Multidimensional Analysis of Marital Rape Across Legal, Psychological, and Socio-Cultural Contexts

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Abstract

Marital rape represents one of the most persistent yet under-acknowledged forms of gender-based violence, situated at the intersection of law, culture, sexuality, and power. Despite growing international recognition of sexual autonomy as a fundamental human right, sexual violence within marriage continues to be normalized, legally exempted, or socially minimized in many societies. This article undertakes an extensive theoretical and empirical examination of marital rape by synthesizing legal history, feminist theory, psychological research, and public health evidence, drawing strictly on existing scholarly literature. It explores how marriage has historically functioned as a site of sexual entitlement, obscuring consent and legitimizing coercion. The analysis traces the evolution of marital rape laws globally, with particular emphasis on India, where legal immunity remains contested and deeply entangled with cultural narratives of marriage, duty, and family honor. The article further examines the psychological and mental health consequences of marital rape, highlighting trauma, depression, post-traumatic stress, and the compounding effects of social silence. Perceptual studies on consent, sexual precedence, and victim resistance are discussed to reveal how societal beliefs shape responses to marital rape and influence legal outcomes. By integrating insights from criminology, mental health research, and socio-legal studies, this article argues that marital rape is not merely an individual crime but a structural phenomenon sustained by patriarchal norms and institutional inertia. The discussion critically engages with counter-arguments surrounding criminalization, including concerns about misuse of law, and situates them within broader debates on justice, accountability, and gender equality. Ultimately, the article calls for a paradigm shift that reconceptualizes marriage as a relationship grounded in continuous consent, dignity, and bodily autonomy, emphasizing the urgent need for legal reform, survivor-centered support systems, and transformative social change.

Keywords: Marital rape, consent, intimate partner violence, gender justice, mental health, legal reform

INTRODUCTION

Sexual violence within marriage has long occupied an uneasy and often invisible position within both legal systems and social consciousness. While rape is widely recognized as a grave violation of bodily autonomy and personal dignity, its occurrence within marriage has historically been denied, justified, or rendered legally impossible through doctrines that conflate marriage with irrevocable consent. The notion that a husband cannot rape his wife is not merely a legal technicality but a reflection of deeply entrenched assumptions about gender roles, sexual entitlement, and the nature of marital relationships. These assumptions have shaped law, social attitudes, and even victims' own understandings of their experiences, contributing to widespread underreporting



Received: 12 November 2025

Revised: 2 December 2025

Accepted: 20 December 2025

Published: 01 January 2026

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and normalization of harm (Martin et al., 2007).

The persistence of marital rape exemptions across jurisdictions reveals the tension between evolving human rights frameworks and enduring cultural narratives that frame marriage as a private domain beyond state intervention. Historically, marriage has been conceptualized as a contract that grants husbands sexual access to their wives, a view rooted in patriarchal legal traditions such as coverture, which subsumed a woman's legal identity under that of her husband (Hasday, 2000; Cody, 2022). Although many countries have formally abolished marital rape exemptions, the legacy of these doctrines continues to influence judicial reasoning, law enforcement practices, and public perceptions of legitimacy and harm (Jackson, 2015).

In the Indian context, marital rape remains legally exempted under the criminal law, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, dignity, and personal liberty. This exemption has been the subject of intense debate, with proponents of criminalization emphasizing women's bodily autonomy and opponents invoking concerns about cultural values, family stability, and potential misuse of law (Garg and Singla, 2013; Kim, 2018; Dotania, 2022). These debates cannot be understood in isolation from broader patterns of intimate partner violence, gender inequality, and social silence surrounding sexual abuse within marriage (Nair and Banerjee, 2021; Deosthali et al., 2022).

Beyond legal considerations, marital rape has profound psychological and mental health consequences. Research consistently demonstrates that sexual violence by an intimate partner can be as damaging, if not more so, than rape by a stranger, due to the betrayal of trust and ongoing nature of exposure (Kilpatrick et al., 1988). Survivors of marital rape often experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and long-term impairments in self-esteem and relational functioning (Agarwal et al., 2022). These harms are frequently compounded by societal attitudes that minimize marital rape or frame it as a marital obligation rather than a crime.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive, publication-ready analysis of marital rape by integrating legal history, socio-cultural theory, psychological research, and public health perspectives. Rather than treating marital rape as a marginal issue, it positions it as a central concern in discussions of gender justice, consent, and human rights. The literature reviewed reveals significant gaps between formal legal norms and lived realities, as well as between recognition of harm and effective redress. By elaborating these dimensions in depth, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced and informed discourse that can support meaningful reform and survivor-centered responses.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative, integrative research methodology grounded in systematic literature analysis and theoretical synthesis. Rather than generating new empirical data, the article draws exclusively on peer-reviewed academic literature, legal analyses, public health studies, and documented case-based evidence provided in the reference list. This approach is particularly suited to examining marital rape, a phenomenon that is deeply embedded in social structures, legal doctrines, and cultural meanings, and which cannot be adequately understood through isolated quantitative indicators alone.

The methodological framework is interdisciplinary, combining insights from sociology, law, psychology, criminology, and gender studies. Legal history texts and socio-legal analyses are used to trace the evolution of marital rape exemptions and criminalization debates across jurisdictions (Hasday, 2000; Jackson, 2015; Kim, 2018). Feminist theoretical perspectives inform the interpretation of consent, power, and sexual entitlement within marriage, emphasizing how law both reflects and reinforces gender hierarchies (Yllö and Torres, 2016). Psychological and mental health studies provide evidence of harm and trauma, offering an empirical basis for evaluating the consequences of legal and social denial (Kilpatrick et al., 1988; Agarwal et al., 2022).

In synthesizing these sources, particular attention is paid to conceptual clarity and contextual specificity. Concepts such as consent, acquiescence, resistance, and coercion

are examined not as abstract ideals but as socially situated practices shaped by norms, expectations, and constraints (Basile, 1999; Monson et al., 2000). Studies on perceptions of marital rape are analyzed to understand how attitudes influence legal outcomes and survivor responses (Ferro et al., 2008; Monson et al., 1996). Indian-specific literature is foregrounded where relevant, allowing for a culturally grounded analysis that avoids universalizing assumptions while situating India within global debates on marital rape and gender-based violence (Banerjee and Rao, 2022; Deosthali et al., 2022).

The methodological rigor of this article lies in its commitment to depth rather than breadth. Each thematic area is explored extensively, with careful attention to theoretical implications, counter-arguments, and internal tensions within the literature. By weaving together diverse strands of scholarship, the article aims to produce a coherent and comprehensive account that advances understanding of marital rape as a multidimensional phenomenon.

RESULTS

The analysis of existing literature reveals several consistent and interrelated findings that illuminate the nature, causes, and consequences of marital rape. First, historical and legal scholarship demonstrates that marital rape has been systematically excluded from the definition of rape due to enduring notions of marital consent and sexual entitlement. The marital rape exemption emerged from legal doctrines that conceptualized marriage as a permanent transfer of a woman's sexual autonomy to her husband, rendering consent irrelevant within marriage (Hasday, 2000; Cody, 2022). Even in jurisdictions where the exemption has been formally abolished, its ideological residue continues to shape legal interpretations and enforcement practices (Jackson, 2015).

Second, socio-cultural studies consistently show that societal perceptions of marital rape differ markedly from perceptions of non-marital rape. Research on attributions and attitudes reveals that sexual refusal within marriage is often viewed as less legitimate, particularly when there is a history of prior consensual sex or when marital duties are emphasized (Shotland and Goodstein, 1992; Monson et al., 1996). This perception reduces empathy for victims and increases the likelihood of victim-blaming, reinforcing silence and underreporting (Ferro et al., 2008).

Third, psychological research highlights the severe mental health impacts of marital rape. Survivors frequently experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and sexual dysfunction, with effects that can persist long after the abuse occurs (Kilpatrick et al., 1988). The intimate nature of the relationship exacerbates harm, as victims are often forced to continue living with their perpetrators, limiting opportunities for recovery and escape (Martin et al., 2007). In the Indian context, systematic reviews indicate that marital rape significantly contributes to poor mental health outcomes among women, intersecting with broader patterns of intimate partner violence and social disadvantage (Agarwal et al., 2022).

Fourth, studies on consent and acquiescence reveal that many instances of marital rape occur without overt physical force. Instead, coercion operates through emotional pressure, economic dependence, fear of conflict, and internalized expectations of wifely duty (Basile, 1999). This challenges narrow legal definitions of rape that prioritize physical resistance and underscores the need for consent-based frameworks that recognize subtler forms of coercion.

Finally, Indian-specific literature reveals a complex and contested landscape. While service-based evidence confirms the prevalence of sexual violence within marriage, legal debates remain polarized (Deosthali et al., 2022). Arguments against criminalization often emphasize potential misuse of law and the sanctity of marriage, yet these claims frequently lack empirical support and overlook the documented harms experienced by survivors (Dotania, 2022; Banerjee and Rao, 2022). The persistence of the marital rape exemption in India thus reflects not an absence of harm but a reluctance to confront the implications of recognizing that harm.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this analysis underscore that marital rape cannot be understood merely as an extension of rape law but must be situated within broader structures of gender, power, and social regulation. At its core, marital rape exposes the contradiction between the ideal of marriage as a relationship of mutual respect and the reality of marriage as an institution historically shaped by male dominance and female subordination. The legal fiction of irrevocable consent has functioned as a mechanism for preserving this dominance, insulating marital relationships from scrutiny while prioritizing social order over individual rights (Hasday, 2000; Yllö and Torres, 2016).

One of the most significant theoretical implications of this analysis concerns the concept of consent. Consent is often treated as a discrete event, given or withheld at a particular moment. However, the literature on marital rape reveals consent to be an ongoing, relational process that must be continuously affirmed. The tendency to interpret marriage as blanket consent undermines this understanding and perpetuates harm. Studies on sexual precedence demonstrate how prior consensual sex is used to delegitimize subsequent refusal, reflecting a broader cultural discomfort with women's sexual autonomy (Shotland and Goodstein, 1992; Monson et al., 2000).

The mental health consequences of marital rape further challenge narratives that minimize its severity. The evidence that marital rape is as psychologically damaging as, or more damaging than, other forms of sexual assault undermines arguments that marital status mitigates harm (Kilpatrick et al., 1988). In fact, the betrayal inherent in marital rape, combined with social isolation and lack of legal recognition, often intensifies trauma. In societies where divorce or separation carries stigma, survivors may feel trapped, exacerbating mental health outcomes (Agarwal et al., 2022).

Counter-arguments to criminalization, particularly those emphasizing misuse of law, warrant careful consideration but must be contextualized. Concerns about false allegations are not unique to marital rape and have historically been used to resist reforms in rape law more broadly. The literature suggests that such fears are often exaggerated and unsupported by empirical evidence, while the harms of non-criminalization are well-documented (Banerjee and Rao, 2022). Moreover, the existence of misuse in some cases does not negate the need for legal recognition of harm; rather, it underscores the importance of fair procedures and safeguards.

The Indian debate illustrates the tension between constitutional ideals and cultural practices. While the law continues to exempt marital rape, constitutional jurisprudence increasingly emphasizes dignity, privacy, and bodily autonomy. This dissonance creates a fragmented legal landscape in which women's rights are recognized in principle but denied in practice. The persistence of the exemption signals not cultural inevitability but political and institutional reluctance to challenge patriarchal norms (Kim, 2018).

Future research and policy must adopt a holistic approach that integrates legal reform with social change. Criminalization alone is insufficient if not accompanied by survivor-centered support systems, judicial sensitivity, and public education aimed at reshaping norms around consent and marriage. Interventions must also address intersecting factors such as alcohol use, economic dependence, and social isolation, which can exacerbate intimate partner violence (Gallagher and Parrott, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Marital rape represents a profound violation of human rights that challenges foundational assumptions about marriage, sexuality, and consent. The literature reviewed in this article makes clear that marital rape is neither rare nor benign; it is a pervasive form of intimate partner violence with severe psychological, social, and legal consequences. Its historical exclusion from rape law reflects patriarchal notions of ownership and entitlement that are increasingly incompatible with contemporary understandings of gender equality and personal autonomy.

This article has argued that recognizing marital rape requires more than legal amendment; it demands a conceptual shift in how marriage is understood. Marriage must be reframed not as a site of entitlement but as a relationship grounded in mutual respect

and continuous consent. Legal systems play a crucial role in signaling societal values, and the continued exemption of marital rape sends a message that women's autonomy is conditional within marriage.

By synthesizing interdisciplinary scholarship, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of marital rape as a structural phenomenon sustained by law, culture, and silence. Addressing it requires courage to confront uncomfortable truths about intimate relationships and a commitment to aligning legal norms with principles of dignity and justice. Only through such alignment can societies move toward meaningful protection of women's rights and well-being.

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