

Victim Blaming in Religion-Based Sexual Harassment and Religious Patriarchal Culture

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Abstract	Article Info
Sexual harassment is a complex social issue often exacerbated by the practice of victim-blaming, the tendency to blame victims for the violence they experience. In societies with strong religious beliefs, this practice often gains legitimacy through gender-biased religious interpretations influenced by patriarchal culture. This article aims to analyze the relationship between victim-blaming in sexual harassment cases and the construction of a religious patriarchal culture through a literature review approach. The method used is a literature study by examining various scientific articles, books, and research findings that discuss sexual harassment, gender inequality, patriarchy, and religious perspectives on victims. The results of the study indicate that a religious patriarchal culture contributes to shaping narratives that place victims as responsible for the harassment, for example through assessments of women's dress, behavior, or social roles. Religious interpretations that are insensitive to gender equity also have the potential to reinforce stigma against victims and hinder the reporting and recovery process. Therefore, a more contextual, inclusive, and victim-protection-oriented religious approach is needed to reduce the practice of victim-blaming and encourage the creation of a more just and safe environment for all parties.	Article History <i>Received :</i> <i>August 09, 2025</i> <i>Revised :</i> <i>November 23, 2025</i> <i>Accepted :</i> <i>December 28, 2025</i> Keywords: <i>Victim Blaming,</i> <i>Sexual</i> <i>Harassment,</i> <i>Religious</i> <i>Patriarchal</i> <i>Culture</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence that remains a serious problem in various parts of the world. Its impacts not only cause physical injuries but also leave psychological trauma, social stress, and long-term disruption to victims' quality of life. Amid growing public awareness of the importance of victim protection, there is still a tendency to question victims' behavior, dress, or decisions rather than highlight the perpetrator's actions. This phenomenon is known as victim blaming, the practice of blaming victims for the violence they experience. As a result, victims not only face the suffering of sexual harassment but also endure social stigma that can hinder the process of recovery and the pursuit of justice.

In the context of religious communities, the practice of victim blaming often has a more complex dimension. Religious values, which should be a source of protection and respect for human dignity, are sometimes understood in a fragmented manner, giving rise to gender-biased interpretations. This situation can reinforce the view that women have a greater responsibility to maintain social morality than men. Consequently, when sexual harassment occurs, public attention is directed more towards the victim's behavior than the perpetrator's. This situation demonstrates that the issue of victim blaming is not only related to individual

aspects but also closely linked to the social and cultural constructs that develop within society.

Patriarchal culture is one of the main factors influencing the emergence of victim blaming practices. Patriarchy is a social system that places men as the dominant group in various aspects of life, including decision-making, leadership, and control of social norms. Within this system, women are often positioned as those who must conform to certain moral standards. Research on sexual harassment in Islamic educational institutions shows that patriarchal culture and paternalistic leadership play a role in creating an unequal power relationship between religious leaders and community members, thus opening up opportunities for sexual violence and limiting the opportunity for victims to openly share their experiences. (Razak dkk., 2024).

Furthermore, a patriarchal religious culture operates not only through social structures but also through symbolic legitimization processes that utilize religious authority. Religious figures are often placed in positions of high respect, making their words and actions considered unquestionable. This situation can create an unequal power relationship between religious leaders and their followers. In some cases, this authority is abused through the use of religious doctrine to gain the victim's obedience. One study showed that the practice of cults of religious figures, paternalistic culture, and the misuse of religious dogma are factors that enable sexual harassment in faith-based educational environments. (Razak dkk., 2024).

A similar phenomenon has also received attention in various contemporary religious discourses. The global growth of the #MeToo movement demonstrates that sexual violence occurs not only in public spaces and the workplace but also within religious communities. Theological studies of this movement emphasize the need for a reinterpretation of religious teachings that is more oriented toward gender equality and victim protection. This approach is crucial because some traditional religious interpretations still maintain hierarchical structures that place women in a subordinate position. Therefore, religion needs to be understood as a source of values that support justice, respect for human dignity, and support for victims of sexual violence, rather than as a tool to legitimize gender inequality. (Arifianto & Rahayu, 2025).

In Indonesia, discussions about victim blaming in cases of religion-based sexual harassment have become increasingly relevant given the strong influence of religious values in social life. Although various regulations have been developed to protect victims of sexual harassment, the practice of victim blaming remains commonplace, both within families, communities, social media, and religious institutions. Research even shows that a strong patriarchal culture often places the burden of proving the truth of their experiences on victims, while perpetrators receive protection from social structures that support male dominance. (Razak dkk., 2024).

Based on the above description, a study of victim blaming in cases of religion-based sexual harassment is crucial. This research seeks to analyze how a patriarchal religious culture contributes to the formation of victim-blaming narratives and how social and religious constructs influence societal responses to cases of sexual harassment. Through a literature review approach, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between patriarchy, religious interpretation, and victim blaming, while also offering a more just perspective oriented toward victim protection in social and religious life.

METHOD

This study uses a literature review method to analyze the phenomenon of victim blaming in cases of religion-based sexual harassment and its relationship to religious patriarchal culture. The literature review method was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon through the review of various relevant scientific sources, such as journal articles, academic books, research reports, and policy documents. Through this approach, researchers do not conduct direct field data collection, but instead focus on synthesizing and interpreting the results of previous research to identify

patterns, research gaps, and developments in thought related to the topic under study. (Snyder, 2019).

Literature review is an important method in socio-humanities research because it can generate in-depth conceptual understanding based on the accumulation of existing scientific knowledge. Literature reviews not only serve as summaries of previous research but also as a means to build conceptual frameworks, identify academic debates, and generate new perspectives on an issue. In this study, various literature discussing sexual harassment, victim blaming, gender, patriarchy, religious power, and religious studies is critically analyzed to obtain a comprehensive picture of the factors influencing the emergence of victim blaming practices in religious settings. (Grant & Booth, 2009).

The data collection process was conducted through a search of scientific articles indexed in Google Scholar, Scopus, and accredited national journal databases using keywords such as victim blaming, sexual harassment, religious patriarchy, gender inequality, and sexual violence in religious institutions. The selected literature was publications relevant to the research focus and published within the most recent timeframe to reflect the latest developments in the study. Furthermore, the data was analyzed using content analysis techniques through the process of identifying themes, conceptual categories, and critical interpretation of previously published research findings. (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

REESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. RELIGIOUS PATRIARCHICAL CULTURE AS THE ROOT OF THE EMERGENCE OF VICTIM BLAMING

Religious patriarchal culture is one of the main roots of victim blaming against female victims of sexual violence. In societies that still uphold religiously based patriarchal values, women are often positioned as the ones responsible for upholding the honor of their families and communities. When sexual violence occurs, victims are often blamed for violating norms or failing to meet traditional gender expectations. (Maharani, 2024), (Ganira dkk., 2025), (Indonesian Police Officer, Polda Metro Jaya, Jakarta & Supriyanto, 2023).

Research in Indonesia shows that acceptance of modern rape myths and certain moral foundations are key predictors of victim-blaming tendencies, while still shaping societal mindsets (Maharani, 2024). Conversely, a study in Malaysia highlighted how religious sermons often link women's clothing or behavior to the risk of sexual violence, reinforcing the narrative that victims are responsible for what happens to them. (Abdul Hamid, 2021).

Furthermore, patriarchal religious culture also reinforces women's subordinate positions through gender-biased interpretations of scripture and religious doctrine. This is evident in church communities in Kenya, where hierarchical structures and masculine language about God reinforce gender inequality and provide a space for perpetrators of violence to hide behind religious legitimacy (Ganira dkk., 2025). As a result, female victims of violence experience not only physical and psychological suffering but also profound social stigma.

Victim blaming in the context of a patriarchal religious culture is also exacerbated by a lack of legal protection and society's tendency to judge victims based on appearance or behavior deemed inappropriate (Indonesian Police Officer, Polda Metro Jaya, Jakarta & Supriyanto, 2023). Negative labels are often attached to female victims of sexual violence without considering human rights and the principles of justice (Darma dkk., 2022). Therefore, efforts to address victim blaming must begin with a shift in cultural and religious paradigms toward a more gender-just one.

Finally, it is crucial to involve religious leaders and the media in efforts to change public perceptions regarding victim blaming. A culturally and religiously sensitive

approach can be a sustainable solution to creating a more inclusive and just society for victims of sexual violence (Maharani, 2024).

B. RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY AND THE FORMATION OF VICTIM-BLAMED NARRATIVES.

Religious authorities play a central role in shaping social narratives regarding victim blaming. Religious leaders are often used as moral guides in society, so their interpretations of religious teachings significantly influence public perceptions of victims of sexual violence (Ali & El Majdoubi, 2024), (Puchner & Markowitz, 2022), (Whitnah, 2022).

In many cases, religious authorities reinforce victim blaming through patriarchal-biased readings of scripture. Studies on the history of rape culture in Islamic societies show that decontextualized interpretations of Quranic verses have been used to justify perpetrators' actions and blame victims (Ali & El Majdoubi, 2024). Yet, authentic hadith emphasize that rape victims should not be punished or their testimony questioned.

In the digital public sphere, an analysis of Facebook discourse on cases of harassment by religious leaders reveals a discursive strategy that erases the voices of victims and focuses sympathy on the perpetrators or religious institutions. In this discourse, female or male victims are often ignored or even considered the cause of the problem, while the perpetrators are positioned as deserving of empathy (Puchner & Markowitz, 2022). This strategy reinforces a patriarchal moral economy in which women or men (victims) are considered to "owe" sexual favors to the perpetrators.

Furthermore, internal conflicts within religious organizations also influence victim-blaming narratives. A comparative study of evangelical organizations in the United States found that the debate between the gender ideologies of complementarianism (which emphasizes male authority) and egalitarianism (which demands gender equality) resulted in different responses to domestic violence cases. Organizations with patriarchal ideologies tended to deflect attention from victims' experiences, while egalitarian organizations were more critical of patriarchal theology as a cause of violence (Whitnah, 2022).

The victim-blaming narrative is also reinforced by the mass media, which often uncritically adopts the perspective of religious authorities. This leads to increasingly biased public opinion against victims and slows social change toward gender equity. Finally, it is crucial to promote critical education for religious leaders so they can develop alternative narratives that favor victims and reject patriarchal myths in the interpretation of religious teachings.

C. REINTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS AS AN EFFORT TO ERADICATE VICTIM BLAMING

Reinterpretation is a strategic step in eliminating the practice of victim blaming in religious communities. This effort involves rereading sacred texts contextually and progressively to better support gender justice and victim protection (Chandra dkk., 2022), (Boyer dkk., 2022), (Landman & Mudimeli, 2022).

One example of reinterpretation is a feminist reading of the narrative of the adulteress in the Gospel of John 7:53–8:11. Through a feminist lens, the narrative is no longer seen as a judgment against women, but rather as a critique of the patriarchal social system that silences victims' voices for the benefit of religious authority (Chandra dkk., 2022). This new perspective encourages the church to provide safe spaces for women or men (victims) of gender-based violence in the digital age.

An experiment in Uganda showed that when religious leaders were given the opportunity to offer progressive interpretations of gender roles during premarital or couples counseling, there was a significant decrease in intimate partner violence and an improvement in power sharing between men and women (Boyer dkk., 2022). These

findings confirm that reinterpretation of religious teachings by religious authorities can be an effective agent of change in reducing gender-based violence.

Furthermore, research on the spiritual experiences of female victims of gender-based violence in South Africa recommends deconstructing harmful religious discourse, such as the "male head of the household" doctrine, and replacing it with a public theology that emphasizes the equality of all humans before God (Landman & Mudimeli, 2022). This transformation of religious discourse is believed to facilitate psychological healing and empower women to escape the cycle of violence.

Reinterpretation efforts must also involve critical theological education for religious communities, enabling them to distinguish between universal human values and local, patriarchal-biased interpretations. In this way, religious teachings can inspire movements for social justice and the protection of human rights.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that the practice of victim blaming in sexual harassment cases does not arise from individuals, but rather is a social construct influenced by a patriarchal religious culture. A patriarchal system that places men in a dominant position and women as guardians of social morality has given rise to a tendency to blame victims when sexual violence occurs. As a result, victims are often held responsible for their actions through assessments of their dress, behavior, and social roles. This study shows that religious authorities have a significant influence in shaping public perceptions of victims of sexual violence. Gender-biased interpretations of religious teachings and the decontextual use of religious doctrine can reinforce narratives that blame victims and legitimize unequal power relations. In such circumstances, victims not only suffer the physical and psychological impacts of sexual harassment but also face social stigma that hinders reporting, recovery, and the pursuit of justice. Furthermore, social media, mass media, and certain socio-religious structures contribute to the maintenance of a culture of victim blaming by reproducing discourse that focuses more on the victim's behavior than the perpetrator's. This phenomenon demonstrates that sexual violence cannot be understood solely as an individual issue, but rather as a structural problem related to gender inequality, power relations, and a patriarchal culture that remains deeply rooted in religious communities. Further explanation: this study found that reinterpreting religious teachings oriented toward gender justice and victim protection is a strategic step to reduce the practice of victim blaming. A contextual, inclusive, and humanitarian-based religious approach can provide a more equitable understanding of victims and encourage changes in societal attitudes. This reinterpretation needs to be supported by critical theological education, the involvement of religious leaders, and increased public awareness of the rights of victims of sexual harassment. Therefore, efforts to eradicate victim blaming cannot be achieved solely through law enforcement. It also requires cultural transformation and a religious understanding that is more responsive to gender equality issues. Religion should be a source of values that uphold justice, respect for human dignity, and protection for victims, thereby creating a safe, inclusive, and discrimination-free social environment for all members of society.

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