



## **IMPACT OF MORAL POLICING ON WOMEN OF HINDI BELT OF INDIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract:** Societies have traditionally established rules and regulations to govern the behavior of their members, ensuring that they conform to established social norms, values, customs, and cultural practices. However, this phenomenon has been exploited by certain vigilante groups, which assume the role of self-appointed guardians of societal norms and values. These groups, often driven by a desire to impose their own interpretation of morality, seek to enforce their version of societal norms on others. This manifestation of moral policing has been examined in this study, with a specific focus on its contemporary form and its impact on society, particularly on marginalized women. The study investigates whether moral policing, in its current form, is beneficial to society, and how it affects women who are already vulnerable and marginalized. By examining the effects of moral policing on this demographic, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex power dynamics at play in societal regulation.

**Index Terms:** Society, Social Norms, Values, Vigilante groups, Morality, Moral Policing .

**Introduction:** Every society establishes its own distinct norms, laws, rituals, customs, and values to maintain its existence and ensure proper functioning, thereby exerting control over the lives of its members. While it is true that societies require certain levels of control to maintain social order and prevent chaos, the question remains whether this control has been disproportionately exerted upon a specific segment of the population, namely women, throughout history. The control exerted over women has been perpetuated under various guises throughout history, with the present-day manifestation being termed as 'moral policing.' Although moral policing is not exclusive to women, its impact on them is disproportionately severe, particularly in Indian society as women continue to occupy a marginalized position, and consequently, bear the brunt of these ruthless phenomena. The persistence of moral policing reinforces the existing power dynamics, perpetuating the subjugation of women and restricting their autonomy and agency. "Moral policing can be understood as a mechanism that exercises surveillance and control over individuals who attempt to disrupt the fundamental structure of society. In the context of Indian society, this phenomenon is rooted in traditional social standards that were established years ago, based on relevant cultural texts, values, and norms. Moral policing is a situation where an individual's morality is questioned by a collective group that claims to uphold the moral fabric of society. This phenomenon has transcended societal boundaries, extending its reach to art, paintings, and cinema, thereby exerting control over creative expressions (Jaiswal, 2020).

**Area Profile:** The present study is situated within the context of the Indian Hindi belt. The Hindi belt is a geographic and cultural region in India that spans across northern, central, eastern, and western parts of the

country, covering nine states as well as union territory where Hindi is the predominant language. The constituent states of the Hindi belt are Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and the union territory of Chandigarh, along with the National Capital Territory of Delhi.

**Objective of the study:** This study aims to explore the phenomenon of moral policing and its impact on women's lives in the present society. The research objectives include investigating the experiences of women who encounter moral policing in their daily lives and examining the effects of moral policing on women's individuality and societal status. By exploring these research questions, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex and nuanced experiences of women in the Hindi belt, and the ways in which moral policing shapes their lives and identities.

**Research Methodology:** This study employed a multi-faceted approach to data collection, incorporating secondary data sources gathered through a comprehensive literature review, as well as print and electronic media. To add depth and nuance to the research, I also drew upon my own experiences as a young woman from the Hindi belt. Unstructured interviews were conducted with women from the region, providing valuable insights into their perspectives and experiences. These interviews were complemented by data collected during research visits, which involved engaging with women on the research topic. By integrating these diverse data sources, this study aims to provide a detailed and contextualized understanding of the research issue.

### **The Contemporary State of Moral Policing:**

It's undeniable that moral policing isn't a new system that started a few years ago. Instead, it has existed throughout history, manifesting in different forms and names across various time frames. By definition, moral policing is inherently gender-biased and seeks to regulate behaviors that offend cultural, religious, or majority sentiments. However, from a sociological perspective, it's clear that moral policing disproportionately targets women more than men. Moral policing is typically perpetrated by vigilante groups that evolve over time, often recruiting like-minded individuals and changing their group's name to suit their agenda (testbook, 2023). Despite lacking any legitimate authority, these groups assume the role of self-proclaimed guardians of social morality, purporting to reform society according to their own moral code. In reality, these groups operate outside the purview of legal or social authority, and their actions are not sanctioned by any legitimate institution. Instead, they rely on their own self-appointed mandate to impose their moral standards on others, often using coercive tactics to enforce compliance. The agenda of moral policing entities often spans a wide range of issues, from broad nationalist and religious concerns to more localized caste and communal matters. These vigilante groups justify their actions by invoking cultural, caste, and religious norms, thereby positioning themselves as moral authorities within society. In particular, these groups often target individuals engaging in behaviors perceived as deviating from traditional norms, such as boyfriend-girlfriend relationships, live-in arrangements, divorce, inter caste marriage, LGBTQ issues, adoption of Western cultural practices, public display of affection, any behavior they consider indecent and dietary habits. By policing these aspects of personal life, moral policing entities seek to enforce their own moral code and maintain social control. Social control is a ubiquitous phenomenon observed in nearly all societies worldwide. Initially, this control was instituted to ensure the proper functioning of society, and over time, societies have introduced flexibility into these control mechanisms to prevent them from becoming obsolete. However, the forced moral policing perpetrated by certain self-proclaimed groups cannot be regarded as a form of responsible social control that promotes the well-being of society. The boundaries between decent and indecent behavior in public places are currently being debated, and in this context, it is questionable whether individuals should assume the role of moral police, imposing their own judgments on others. It is evident that moral policing has transcended

individual scrutiny and now extends to artistic expressions such as cinema, painting, songs, and other creative works. While some limitations and boundaries are necessary, it is crucial to examine the underlying agenda driving moral policing and assess its tangible impact. Specifically, it is questionable whether activities such as burning effigies, destroying movie posters, and engaging in publicity-seeking stunts are justifiable under the guise of moral policing. Such actions not only infringe upon artistic freedom and creative expression but also undermine the fabric of democratic societies that value diversity and tolerance.

**Impact of moral policing on the women of Hindi belt of India:** While moral policing is not exclusive to India or specific regions within the country, it is accurate to state that in the Hindi belt, moral policing disproportionately targets women. Although men, women, and other genders are all affected by this phenomenon, women and other genders face more rigorous scrutiny. In the Hindi belt states, which lag behind in terms of development and women's empowerment, factors such as poverty, backwardness, and patriarchal norms create an environment conducive to moral policing. The prevalence of superstition and imposition of judgment is more pronounced in these regions, where social and economic vulnerabilities render individuals, particularly women, more susceptible to moral censure. Since the inception of society, men have consistently wielded significantly more power than women, resulting in the latter's perpetual disempowerment. Throughout history, women have been systematically marginalized, oppressed, and subjected to various forms of control, thereby denying them the agency and autonomy to exercise their rights as fully empowered individuals. The pervasive influence of moral policing extends to various aspects of women's lives, including their attire, mobility, lifestyle, educational choices, and social relationships. Women are often subjected to scrutiny and judgment regarding their clothing, with moral police dictating what constitutes acceptable attire. Furthermore, women's freedom to move about in public spaces is frequently restricted, with moral police imposing constraints on their mobility. Even their lifestyle choices, such as education and career aspirations, are often policed, with women being advised on which colleges or subjects to pursue. Additionally, women's social relationships, including their choice of friends and partners, are also subject to moral policing. However, as emphasized by the honorable Kerala High Court, these choices should inherently be a woman's personal decision, free from external interference or judgment. This underscores the need for recognizing and respecting women's autonomy and agency in making choices about their own lives, without the suffocating influence of moral policing (The Hindu Bureau, 2024).

### **Research findings:**

**Educational disparities among women:** An examination of India's states with the lowest female literacy rates reveals a concerning trend. According to available data, the states with the lowest female literacy rates are: Bihar, with a female literacy rate of 51.50%, Arunachal Pradesh, with a female literacy rate of 57.70%, Rajasthan, with a female literacy rate of 52.12%, Jharkhand, with a female literacy rate of 55.42%, Andhra Pradesh, with a female literacy rate of 59.15%, Jammu and Kashmir, with a female literacy rate of 56.43% Uttar Pradesh, with a female literacy rate of 57.18%, Madhya Pradesh, with a female literacy rate of 59.24%, Chhattisgarh, with a female literacy rate of 60.24%, and Assam, with a female literacy rate of 66.27%. Notably, a significant proportion of these states are located in the Hindi belt region, where female education appears to be lagging behind. This trend underscores the need for targeted interventions and policy initiatives to address the educational disparities faced by women in these regions (census, 2025). It is undeniable that the prevalence of moral policing contributes significantly to the low female literacy rates in these regions. In rural areas and small towns, young women often face stringent scrutiny from their neighbors, relatives, and community members, who assume the role of moral police. These self-appointed guardians of morality impose restrictions on women's education, mobility, and autonomy, dictating what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable

behavior. By exerting control over women's lives, they perpetuate a culture of patriarchy and reinforce existing power dynamics, ultimately hindering women's empowerment and educational attainment.

**Constraints on self-discovery:** Upon transcending the confines of gender identity, it becomes evident that every individual's life inherently yearns for self-discovery. Until a person assumes responsibility for their own life and becomes their own support system, it is challenging for them to contribute positively to society. Experiencing various dimensions of life and embarking on solo journeys facilitate an individual's understanding of life. However, women continue to face obstacles in pursuing these essential aspects of personal growth. Notably, when a subset of women attempts to assert their autonomy and individuality, self-proclaimed custodians of culture and tradition often emerge, judging and criticizing these women for their choices. This phenomenon underscores the persistent societal barriers that hinder women's empowerment and self-actualization.

**Limitations on marital autonomy:** Most religions and scriptures grant individuals the freedom to choose their life partners. Indeed, a fundamental aspect of a civilized society is the autonomy to select one's own partner, particularly when both individuals are of legal age. However, when women exercise this right, moral policing becomes particularly pronounced. Self-appointed guardians of morality and tradition emerge, armed with an arsenal of prescriptions and proscriptions. They not only disseminate their wisdom but also employ derogatory language to stigmatize women who assert their agency in choosing a life partner. These women are often labeled as 'disgracing the family's honor' or 'immoral,' forcing many to retreat from their decisions due to the societal pressure and emotional distress inflicted upon them.

**Exclusions from public spheres:** It is evident that genuine societal progress can only be achieved when both genders have equal opportunities to grow and develop in life. However, women often face intense scrutiny from society and, unfortunately, even from law enforcement agencies, which can limit their access to opportunities. The constant judgment and criticism that women face can be overwhelming, leading them to withdraw from public spheres and relinquish their agency. This can result in women becoming disengaged from social and political activities, such as attending gatherings and advocating for their rights.

**Psychological Issues:** Nearly 41.9% of neuropsychiatric illnesses that cause impairment in women are depressive disorders, compared to 29.3% in males. Dementia, organic brain disorders, and depression are the three main mental health issues affecting the aged. Women make up the majority. In addition to poverty, research conducted in India has demonstrated a high correlation between female gender and CMDs including anxiety and depression. Women are, on average, two to three times more likely to be impacted by CMD, according to research conducted on treatment seekers and in the community (Savita Malhotra, 2015). An analysis of the data reveals that women experience higher levels of mental exhaustion compared to men, with the roots of this exhaustion often tracing back to their immediate environment, including their homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Women are frequently coerced into suppressing their identities, desires, and aspirations due to societal norms, expectations, and regulations, leading to feelings of mental imprisonment. The fear of moral policing is a significant contributor to this phenomenon, as women are often judged and labeled as 'morally wrong' by society, particularly when they strive for progress and empowerment.

**Conclusion:** The conclusion of this study suggests that moral policing, in itself, cannot be categorically deemed as entirely good or bad within a societal context. While moral policing may not be inherently malicious, this study reveals that its current manifestation in our society, driven by a particular agenda, has far-reaching consequences that are detrimental to the well-being of a significant segment of the population. The pervasive presence of moral policing in rural, remote, and even small urban areas perpetuates a culture of oppression, where self-proclaimed moral guardians impose their will on others. This phenomenon is

particularly egregious in certain regions, where it has been used to justify heinous crimes such as honor killings and the perpetuation of regressive social norms through institutions like khap panchayats (A non-statutory organization formed by like-minded individuals who assume the role of societal regulators, lacking constitutional legitimacy). These findings underscore the need for introspection and self-reflection within our society, prompting us to reevaluate our values and norms. It is essential that we acknowledge the harm caused by moral policing and work towards creating a more inclusive, equitable, and just society that respects individual autonomy and agency.

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