Parental Rape Myth Acceptance: Contributing Factors and Their Influence on Parental Communication

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ABSTRACT

The current study explored the extent of rape myth acceptance among parents, pinpointing key beliefs and attitudes of parents with high and low rape myth acceptance and factors contributing to it. Further, it explored how the perpetuation of rape myth acceptance influenced parental communication on sensitive subjects such as rape. The data was collected in two phases. During the first phase, a survey method was used to screen parents through purposive sampling followed by semi-structured interview of 10 parents with high and low acceptance of rape myths. This helped to gain an in-depth understanding of their attitudes and beliefs on rape myths. Thematic analysis was performed to analyze the data. The findings revealed that parents with high rape myth acceptance had restricted communication as compared to parents with low acceptance which was influenced by the beliefs and attitudes towards rape myth acceptance. In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of parental attitudes towards rape myths in shaping communication patterns within families. The stark differences observed between parents with high and low acceptance highlighted the urgency for targeted interventions aimed at dispelling such myths to facilitate healthier and more open discussions surrounding sensitive topics like rape.

Keywords: rape myth acceptance, parents, attitude, communication

INTRODUCTION

India is a nation with a vast history and diverse culture, but it is also a place where women are constantly at danger of being assaulted as evidenced by a four percent increase in registered crimes reported by the National Crime Records Bureau in 2022. Such crimes, including rape, sexual assault, domestic abuse, and violence related to dowries, have severe psychological and physical consequences for survivors (Black et al., 2011). It is crucial to comprehend risk factors and psychological distress caused by sexual assault, including rape, committed against women. Given that sexual assault continues to be prevalent in the India, it is crucial that we understand the attitudes and cultural norms that decrease or promote rape myths. Thus, prevention begins with understanding factors that contribute to existent myths.

1.1 Rape Myth and Rape Myth Acceptance

The notion "rape myths" is one of the many elements that encourage crimes against

women and deny women from their basic liberties and rights. The concept of "rape myths," first introduced by Martha Burt, refers to prejudicial or false beliefs about rape, victims, and perpetrators (Burt, 1980). Acceptance of these myths often leads to victim-blaming and excuses for the perpetrator's behaviour (Newins, Wilson, & White, 2018). According to Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1994), "If a woman goes home with a man she doesn't know, it is her own fault if she is raped." Social views toward victims are influenced by beliefs about rape. A person can place the blame for the crime on the victim by endorsing such myths (Chapleau & Oswald, 2013). These notions were also found in a study conducted by Damania & Singh, (2022) where semi-structured interviews with various members of the general public and legal professionals revealed Indians reject some rape myths but overvalue false accusations and blame factors like women's behaviour, attire, and lack of parental supervision. Cultural factors such as attitudes towards 'Western' attire and leisure travel also influence perceptions, emphasizing the need for tailored educational programs to combat rape myths effectively. Rape myth acceptance is about having certain ideas that affect how we see sexual assault, and these ideas can have harmful consequences on how we react to such situations. They claim that RMA gives men the ability to silence dissenting thoughts when they are thinking about committing sexual assault, and that men who believe these myths about rape are more likely to commit sexual assault (Baldwin-White et al., 2016). The majority of the literature on sexual assault and rape has concentrated on incidents with female victims and male offenders (Edwards et al., 2011), which restricts the researcher's understanding of male victim perceptions. These rape myths have also been used to justify sexual violence against women. There is evidence that rapists who have been found guilty of RMA have used myths to justify their actions (Chiroro et. al., 2004).

1.2 Belief and Attitude Towards rape

Rape is influenced by societal attitudes towards women, which are shaped by gender roles and stereotypes. Men and women are socialized to conform to these expectations, with women expected to be passive and submissive, and men expected to be dominant and aggressive (McCormick, 2010; Ryan, 2011). Within these gender norms, male violence is often seen as a means of enforcing social control (Burt, 1980).

Attitudes about rape differ between genders, with men more likely to blame victims, especially in cases involving acquaintances (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). Studies show that empathy plays a role in these attitudes, with women more likely to empathize with victims and men more likely to empathize with perpetrators (Osman, 2011). Situational factors and characteristics of the assault also influence perceptions of rape. Factors such as victim resistance, appearance, and sexual history can impact blame attribution (Clarke & Stermac, 2010; Cohn et al., 2009). Victims who conform to traditional gender roles are often seen as more credible, while those who deviate from these roles may face more scrutiny (Cohn et al., 2009).There is an idealized concept of "real rape" that includes elements such as the perpetrator being unknown, the use of a weapon, and physical injuries to the victim (Page, 2008a). Belief in rape myths influences how society perceives sexual assault as a kind of interpersonal violence as well as a cultural phenomenon. Larger repressive social factors including ageism, sexism, racism, heterosexism, and religious intolerance are linked to the acceptance of rape myths (Earnshow, et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 2011). For instance, Aosved and Long (2006) showed that acceptance of rape myths was connected with greater levels of sexism, racism, heterosexism, ageism, and religious intolerance in a study involving 998 male and female college students.

Therefore, it would seem that these elements reinforce a cultural belief system that is systemic and holds people accountable for social issues, such as rape, rather than society as a whole.

1.3 Role of parents

While there has been substantial progress in the study of rape myth acceptance in terms of determining its frequency and effects among different groups, one group in particular, parents, remains a mostly unexplored region. Parents are the primary instructors who shape their children's attitudes, and values in addition to being their caregivers. The literature contains numerous studies that have highlighted the parenting influence on the social, cognitive affective development of the child: gender stereotypes (Bandura et al., 2011; Fagot & Hagan, 1991; Pomerantz, 2004), behavioural disorders (Romano, et al., 2005); school success (Joussemet, et al., 2005), parental beliefs influencing the parental attitudes and behaviors which in turn, will have consequences on the psycho-social adaptation and integration of the child (McGillicudy-Delisi, 1985; Murphey, 1992). According to Smith & Cook, (2008) in a qualitative study with 18 women of diverse backgrounds it was found that open and positive parental conversations about sex correlated with women's likelihood of disclosing sexual assault to their parents. So, it is crucial to examine how parental beliefs interact with the acceptance of rape myths. However, cultural norms and myths often hinder open discussions, leading to indirect and implicit communication about sexual assault. These Cultural variations were evident in the types of myths held by parents (Mahajan & Sharma, 2005). Supportive communication from parents, along with accurate information on sexual assault, good touch, bad touch and right information about sex has been associated with more frequent awareness among children (Neer & Warren, 1988). The impact of parental communication on children's sexual attitudes and awareness

may be better understood by exploring the underlying values and beliefs that influence how parents keep them aware about topics related to sexual assault such as rape. According to Livingston, Allen, Nickerson, and O'Hern (2020) certain parental views act as barriers to child sexual abuse education, such as unclear messages, denial, discomfort, fear of innocence loss, gender stereotypes, intergenerational abuse, mistrust of authorities, and limited childcare options. Overall, parents' communication about sex, sexual assualt, is often indirect, implicit, and influenced by their ability to address various sex-related topics and convey diverse attitudes to their children. Examining the beliefs and values that drive parents to engage or avoid discussions about sex, sexual assault can enhance our understanding of the impact on their attitude towards rape myth.

1.4 Theoretical Background

Several theories attempt to explain the prevalence of sexual violence in society, including biological theory, feminist theory, and social control theory.

Biological theory posits that rape is a result of men's biological imperative to reproduce and dominate sexual partners (Thornhill & Thornhill, 1983). According to this perspective, men may resort to rape when they are unable to find willing sexual partners, as it offers a way to increase reproductive opportunities (Thornhill & Palmer, 2000). On the other hand, feminist theory suggests that rape is primarily a tool used by men to exert power and control over women (Brownmiller, 1975). It argues that rape is rooted in patriarchal systems that perpetuate gender inequality and justify violence against women as a means of maintaining male dominance (Boake, 2009). Social control theory also emphasizes power dynamics in understanding sexual violence, positing that it is used as a means to control and enforce traditional gender roles (Moffett, 2006). This theory suggests that rape myths are perpetuated by societal norms that benefit from the subjugation of

women, ensuring that they remain subordinate to men (Riger & Gordon, 1981). These theories offer different perspectives on the causes and perpetuation of sexual violence, highlighting the complex interplay of biological, social, and cultural factors. They contribute to our understanding of rape myths and the larger societal attitudes that shape attitudes towards sexual assault and victims.

1.5 The Current Study

A considerable body of research is yet to be done on the influence of parents on rape myth acceptance, especially in the Indian setting. Despite the fact that previous studies have examined the concept of rape myth acceptance and its effects on diverse demographic groups (Das & Bhattacharjee, 2022) and cultural settings, parental viewpoints on child sexual abuse (Eelmaa, 2021), less research has been done on the precise relationship between parental beliefs, attitudes and the acceptance of rape myths. Nevertheless, this research is crucial because it addresses a significant gap in our understanding of how the acceptance of rape myths contributes to parents' beliefs and attitudes. By addressing its causes, it can help to improve parental communication on delicate subjects, and inform the creation of more effective education programmes. Therefore, this study has the potential to contribute to the development of a more compassionate, knowledgeable, and secure family environment.

The present study aims to explore and probe the following two objectives:

1. To identify key beliefs, attitudes, and influencing factors contributing to parents' rape myth acceptance.
2. To explore how the perpetuation of rape myth acceptance influences the parental communication.

MATERIALS & METHODS
Statement of problem
This research aims to assess the extent of rape myth acceptance among parents, pinpointing contributing factors, and explore the influence of rape myths on parental communication.

Research Design
This study utilized a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the concepts and their relationship with each other. It also utilized the explanatory research design with primary focus on understanding the key beliefs, attitudes, and influencing factors contributing to parents' acceptance of rape myths and how this acceptance influences the communication patterns.

Participants
This study included the participants who were selected through purposive sampling. Eligibility requirements were parents who have children above 12 years of age and lived with their children under the same roof. Of the 100 initially screened (68 female and 32male), 67 Parents qualified for the interview including 42 parents having high rape myth score and 25 having low rape myth score, 33 were the average score participants, 33 expressed interest in participating including 15 (high) and 18 (low), and 10 were ultimately interviewed in which 5 participants were selected having high score and 5 having low score in rape myth acceptance. The mean age of the parents was found to be 47- 48 and were diverse across age, ethnicity, and religion. The majority (N = 9) of the participants were women and 1 participant as Men. The remaining participants either changed their minds and did not want to participate, in which case the interview was terminated, or the interviewer was unable to get in touch with them, making it impossible for them to organize an interview within the research time frame.

Screening Instrument
The primary screening instrument used in this study was the Polish adaptation of the Updated Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale, (McMahon & Farmer, 2011) prepared by Debowska et al. (2015). The

scale comprises four subscales measuring acceptance of the rape myth - i) It wasn't really rape, ii) He didn't mean to (includes both normal items and intoxication items), iii) She lied, and iv) She asked for it. The Cronbach's alpha of the subscales ranged from .64 to .80 and is composed of 19 items with a 5-point Likert scale. The scale was previously evaluated in an Indian setting with excellent psychometric qualities, and the complete test's Cronbach's alpha was high (α = .87), indicating strong reliability (Das – Bhattacharjee, 2021).

Procedure
Screening procedure
Screening procedures were conducted and participants were asked to complete a screening questionnaire and read an attached description of the follow-up interview study. On the description page, they were asked to indicate if they were interested in participating in the interview and, if so, to provide their contact information.

Interview procedure
Post screening a telephonic interview was conducted with 10 participants- 5 high rape myth and 5 low rape myth parent. Recruitment began by identifying suitable candidates who provided informed consent. A semi-structured interview guide was used, addressing research questions and interviews were scheduled at convenient times, with a focus on building rapport further open-ended questions facilitated in-depth responses. Recordings with participant consent aided accurate transcription. Post-interview, field notes were taken, and thematic coding was applied to transcripts for analysis. The process adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring a comprehensive and rigorous qualitative research outcome.

Data Analysis
After audio recordings from telephonic interviews were converted into transcripts and subjected to the thematic coding method (Braun & Clarke, 2006), analysis and composition of the article were done for both categories of high and low-score rape myth parents. To address research problems, an inductive data-driven strategy was employed. The findings were divided into four main themes: (a) parental perceptions of female risk profiles (b) parental perceptions of perpetrator profiles; and (c) parental communication around sexual assault (d) Preventive Measures and acquiring resources.

RESULT
The figure displays themes that were discovered during the data analyzing process that were shared by the participants. These themes shed light on common attitudes and beliefs parents have towards sexual assault such as rape. Therefore, these themes were useful indicators of the attitude parents have towards rape and how these level of rape myth influence the communication with their children.

Main theme: Parental perceptions on the risk profile of females
The attitudes held by parents regarding the risk profile of females play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences and perceptions of their daughters in discussing sexual assault with parents (smith & cook, 2008). Parents' attitudes and beliefs on the rape risk perceptions related to females were divided into 2 sub-themes.

Sub theme: Factors related to victim blaming
Parents may attribute risks to the behaviour of females, often engaging in victim-blaming by associating clothing choices, lifestyles, late-night activities, and outgoing behaviour—with a higher probability of experiencing danger which is also supported by the study done by (Mahajan & Sharma, 2005). The parents who have high rape myth scores confirm the attitude that females are inviting trouble by themselves-wearing revealing clothes, being open, more talkative- participant 3-" I think if females expose themselves more, give their presence

and going out of the way being bold, they shouldn't be too much outgoing, if you are too talkative and conversant with people they feel you are inviting them and they should keep limit in everything, going out late at night, being too friendly," whereas parents having low rape myths confirms that its not the fault of girls but the prevailing attitude towards female gender as a whole in the Indian society. (Participant 3 - "Today's females can't wear clothes of their choice because of the mindset of people. Women face challenges due to societal mindsets, especially in rural areas, where they are restricted by family and also politicians.")
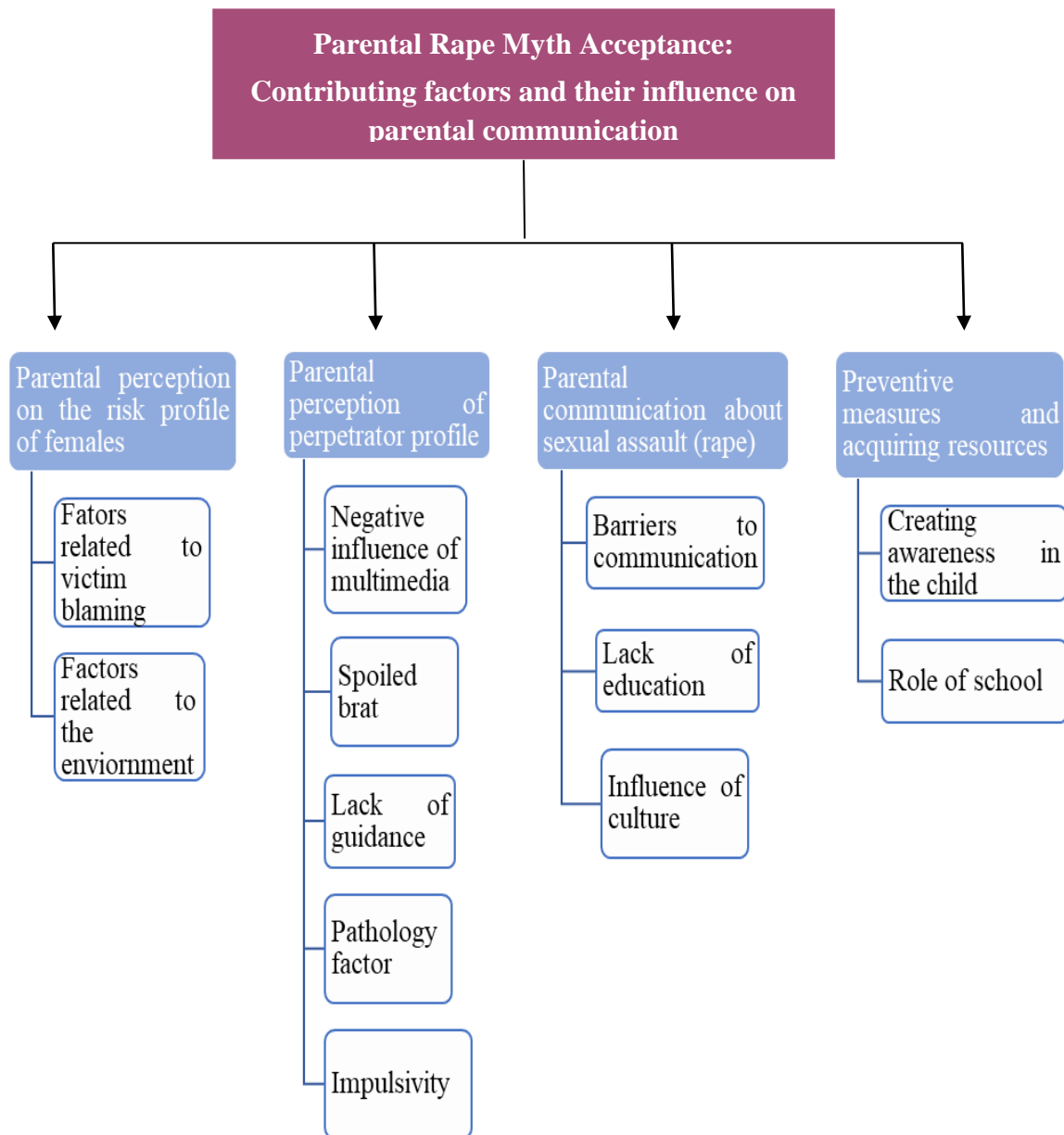
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- **Parental perception on the risk profile of females**
  - Fators related to victim blaming
  - Factors related to the enviornment
- **Parental perception of perpetrator profile**
  - Negative influence of multimedia
  - Spoiled brat
  - Lack of guidance
  - Pathology factor
  - Impulsivity
- **Parental communication about sexual assault (rape)**
  - Barriers to communication
  - Lack of education
  - Influence of culture
- **Preventive measures and acquiring resources**
  - Creating awareness in the child
  - Role of school

Figure1: is representing 4 key themes

Sub theme: Factors related to the environment

Parents worry about certain situations that could put the females in danger, like staying out late, drinking alcohol late at night parties, and visiting deserted locations.

(Participant 5 - "Nowadays, it is not safe to go out alone, mostly staying alone, going in deserted places, drinking in pubs, restaurants, traveling alone at night in cabs, autos, these are the places where there is maximum danger.") Whereas the parents

with low rape myth concurred that a female would have a higher chance of assault in the above scenario however they emphasized that it's not the situation in itself that would increase the chance of a female being assaulted but it is the perception of the people again. "Participant 2 "Women are at risk in lonely places, at night, at home, and work. Until the mentalities of people wouldn't change, everywhere feels unsafe". Only low rape myth parents acknowledged the impact of societal mindsets on restricting the freedom of females whereas parents with high rape myths somehow held females responsible when they were assaulted in the above situations.

Main theme: Parental perceptions of perpetrator profiles
Parents have different opinions about the characteristics of the perpetrator (Eelmaa, 2021).

Sub theme: Negative influence of multimedia
As per the study, high rape myth parents believe that a person who commits rape is likely to be highly influenced by multimedia. Explicit images and videos in movies and other platforms can influence them to commit sex crimes. The justification and at times glorification of rape and aggressive conduct in movies also have a negative bearing on the mindset of these people which in turn contributes to the increase in such incidents in our society (participant 1 - "I think nowadays movies and shows frequently depict aggression, influencing people negatively by exposing and portraying things in a negative light.")

Sub theme: Spoiled brat
Parents with high rape myth acceptance associate rape with individuals who have a "spoiled brat" attitude who lacks ethics and proper upbringing (participant 1- "spoiled people who adapt bad habits, staying in families where these things keep happening") and they are also likely to be under the influence of alcohol or used to

abusing different intoxicants (participant 3 - "people who are so high class they drink and take drugs too much and think nobody can do anything to them and they don't care about other people") commits rape. Whereas parents having low rape myths highlighted anger issues as one important factor (participant 4- "People who drinks too much and lost control, they act out of suspicion or anger").

Sub theme: Lack of guidance
While parents of both categories have the same viewpoint that people who commit rape have lacked the guidance from a childhood of what is right and wrong, it's their conservative mind and mentality they hold influence these behavior (participant 3- ".it's because of the conservative, uneducated mind they hold"), (participant 1 - "uneducated individuals, often seen in rural areas where proper education and guidance are lacking)

Sub theme: Pathology factor
According to low rape myth parents, a perpetrator is slightly to be who have some pathology, and usually, such acts carried out because of the pathology that they are experiencing, one parents said (participant - "people who are mentally disturb,") another factor that they pointed out is that perpetrators could be someone who has been hurt in childhood, had similar experience can have enactment of it on committing such crimes (participant - "people who are hurt in childhood or who themselves physically and mentally unfit,")

Sub theme: Impulsivity
Both categories of parents concurred that a perpetrator is somebody who has difficulties in regulating impulse (participant 1- they do because they lose control over their sexual drive) low rape myth - (participant 1- "to seek pleasure or sometimes they are physically frustrated and take advantage of person,")

Main theme: Parental communication on sexual assault (rape)

According to a study, women were more likely to tell their parents about sexual assault if they had an open and encouraging conversation with them about sex (Smith & Cook, 2008). In the current study, we found that the level of rape myth acceptance among parents can influence parental communication on sensitive topics such as rape and sexual abuse.

Sub theme: Barriers to communication

The parents with low rape myth scores felt comfortable in expressing, no hesitancy in using terms and discussing sexual assault (participant 1 - No, I haven't faced any challenges because I communicate in a friendly and understanding manner) while parents with high rape myth also concurred that there is need to discuss these with children however, they reported the difficulties in expressing, (participant 1- " In villages such topics are not discussed and the impact of such words is not good over children") discomfort in discussion and using terms (participant 1- "I feel hesitancy while talking to children about such topics, what if they keep questioning me how I will answer and I feel anxious about how they might take the information given to them. Speaking such words and talking about it seem very difficult that's why we don't discuss much it") and restricted discussion about sexual assault, they described how, in their families, discussion of sexual assault was mostly ignored, discussed later, and handled uncomfortably, reported (participant 3- "No I don't think so i have discussed but yeah I have elaborated things which were taught in schools and told them if something happens you should inform to your parents") which prevented them from discussing and teaching their children about sexual assault or handling abuse disclosures.

Sub theme: Lack of education

When it was asked why parents face challenges in communicating about sexual assault, both categories highlighted the same response as lack of education on how to discuss openly and parents who feel unprepared are more likely to avoid talking about sensitive subjects like sexual assault (participant - i think they don't know how to discuss, they have no training, they haven't grown up in such environment thats why they face difficulties and education level also impact how they discuss)

Sub theme: Influence of Culture

Certain parents with high rape myths expressed that it isn't in their cultural practice to speak about sex and related topic with their children (participant - "Yes, our upbringing was in very family environment, we lived in village where we didn't hear nor our parents talked about such things. We never heard of such topics") Interestingly, low rape myth parents also seem to acknowledge the existence of cultural factor which hinders communication around sex in their household but they expressed the need to adapt with time and adopt a more open form of communication like one of the parents expressed that - (participant- 4. "Yes, it shapes the way we discuss, but we learn as the time changes, and today's generation is so fast we need to teach them what is right and wrong at the right time before it gets late.")

Main theme: Preventive Measures and acquiring resources

Parents play a crucial role in implementing preventive measures and equipping their children with the necessary resources to navigate potential risks (Wurtele & Kenny, 2010). This detailed analysis explores various preventive measures endorsed by parents and the strategies employed to acquire essential resources for fostering a safer environment.

Sub theme: Creating awareness in the child

In fostering a safer environment, both categories of parents recognize the pivotal role of creating awareness in children about personal safety. Parents with low rape

myths highlighted that proper information needs to be shared with the children. (participant 1 - "Here, children should be taught to have a positive mindset. Those who think that rape happens only when girls wear short dresses are wrong. Rape can happen even if a girl is fully covered. The mentality of such people is not correct. Children should be explained with love that such things happen, and then they should be provided with information.") Whereas parents having high rape myth acceptance have given restricted information and stereotypical views like participant said - "I've told them that if someone makes inappropriate contact, they should seek help or inform at home. Avoid being overly friendly with anyone, and it's essential to dress appropriately."

Sub theme: Role of school

According to parents, the integration of age-appropriate education in school curricula is essential for fostering awareness, and prevention among children. Participants having low myths highlighted that ("Schools play a very important role in educating children about right and wrong,") also they should work on a collaboration with parents like holding workshops of open communication about sensitive topics in school as one participant said - "Schools play an essential role. If parents cannot understand or connect with their children, they can learn from schools through seminars or workshops." while parents with high rape myth also present same views like participant 3- "If schools provide knowledge, they should give it comprehensively; half knowledge isn't enough. When parents were asked what the appropriate age to educate, both categories had differences, according to the low rape myth parents' early age from 6-7 is appropriate to start giving education whereas the high rape myth said it should start around puberty age explaining from the age of 12-13.

DISCUSSION

According to the findings, parents' attitudes related to rape myth acceptance highlighted significant differences between parents with high and low rape myth acceptance. In terms of the risk profiles of females, high rape myth parents frequently engaged in victim-blaming, linking female behaviour such as clothing choices and outgoing demeanor to risks. This point of view demonstrated a propensity to place the blame for an assault on the victim rather than the perpetrator, which is also supported by a study done by (Damania & Singh, 2022). They often ascribe rape to external factors like alcohol and multimedia influence, when it comes to the traits of perpetrators. On the other hand, parents who score low on rape myths, reject victim-blaming and emphasize how societal mindsets limit female freedom, highlighting the need to question cultural norms. They also considered internal characteristics of perpetrators like pathology, impulsivity, and anger issues to be responsible. This suggested a more sophisticated understanding of the underlying reasons for sexual assault. According to the high rape myth parents, it's also clear that upbringing had an impact on these views and sometimes they also blame their conservative and uneducated background for their inability to have a conversation about sexual assault, which may indicate a reluctance to break from the norm. Conversely, parents with low rape myths show a willingness to adjust to changing social norms and stress the value of teaching children about right and wrong in today's society, even though they acknowledge the influence of upbringing and the challenges it brings. These differences emphasized how parental attitudes formed during childhood have an impact on their view of sexual assault and how they communicate. Similarly, studies done by (Livingston, Allen, Nickerson, & O' Hern, 2020) and (Andari, Woro, & Yuniastuti, 2019) highlighted the parental barriers in discussing child sexual abuse and providing

early sex education. Concerning Communication, parents of low rape myths said they felt comfortable talking about sexual assault, but parents of high rape myths faced difficulties like uneasiness and hesitation. The study done by (Aspy et al., 2007; Smith & Cook, 2008; Richards, 2013) supports the current findings which emphasized the influence of parental communication on adolescents' sexual behaviour and attitudes. Both groups agreed that education was important, but parents who believed less in the rape myth were more open to change and saw the significance of having proactive conversations, promoted awareness-raising, open communication and school involvement whereas parents who had high rape myths offered more limited information and emphasized stereotypical beliefs. These differing viewpoints draw attention to how important parental beliefs and attitudes are in influencing conversations about sexual assault and how they may affect communication and prevention tactics**.**

CONCLUSION
The findings of the study indicated that parents with high levels of rape myth acceptance were influenced by cultural norms, tend to blame victims, lack education on effective communication due to limited resources, resulting in constrained communication with their children. In contrast, parents with low levels of rape myth acceptance demonstrated an openness to change, acquiring insights that facilitate better communication with their children. Therefore, parents with high rape myth acceptance had restricted communication as compared to parents with low rape myth acceptance which was influenced by the beliefs and attitudes they had towards rape myth acceptance.

It emphasized the need to address victim-blaming tendencies, promote open communication, and reduce stereotypes. The focused interventions are required to close the gap between individuals with high and low rape myth scores. Educational initiatives should offer important insights that reduce the acceptance of rape myths among parents who scored high on the survey. Interventions that emphasize early instruction about sensitive topics, sexual assault, consent, and respect are essential for parents to communicate about delicate subjects, like rape, to build awareness, resilience, and the safety of the next generation.

The current study provides significant insights but there are limitations to take into account. A significant constraint is that this study provided only limited insight into fathers' accounts. The cultural context in which the study was conducted limits the generalization of the findings to other cultures. Future research can be conducted with larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of findings.

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