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Faith and Sexual Violence: An Empirical Assessment

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ABSTRACT
This study empirically examines the potential impact of religious composition on sexual violence on a global scale. A dataset of 120 countries, for which both religious distribution and rape per capita data are available, is used for analysis. Preliminary descriptive analyses reveal that nations with the highest rape per capita rates are predominantly Christian-majority, with an average Christian population of 83%. North America and Europe are home to 68% of these countries. Conversely, countries with the lowest per capita rates of rape show a significant presence of Muslim populations, averaging 36%. More than 60% of Asian countries with significant Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim populations are categorized as low in terms of the prevalence of sexual violence per capita. Regression analysis indicates a statistically significant positive relationship between the percentage of the Christian population and the incidence of rapes per capita. Conversely, there appears to be an inverse relationship between Muslim population percentage and the occurrence of sexual violence. The examined dataset did not yield any evidence to support a relationship between the percentages of Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and other religious groups and the incidence of rapes per capita. These findings suggest that there are potential faith-related factors that play a role in sexual violence, highlighting the need for more research.

Keywords: *sexual violence, religious composition, rape statistics by country*

I. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life" (UNGA, 1993). It includes domestic abuse, sexual violence and rape, stalking and harassment, trafficking of women, female genital mutilation, intimidation and harassment at work, in education, or in public, forced prostitution, and forced marriage. Estimates published by the World Health Organization indicate that 1 in 3 women globally have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2024).

Sexual violence against women is a major social issue with far-reaching impacts on individuals, families, and communities. Aside from the immediate physical and emotional harm, rape and sexual abuse survivors often face chronic health issues, depression, and a propensity for substance abuse. The impact of rape extends beyond the immediate victims, affecting their families, neighborhoods, and even entire communities. An associated concept is rape culture which refers to a sociocultural environment or system in which rape and sexual violence are normalized, excused, or even encouraged. According to Buchwald et al. (1993, vii), rape culture is a "complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women as the norm."

Rape culture not only normalizes sexual assault but also creates an environment where victims are blamed for the sexual violence they have endured. This could entail scrutinizing their actions, attire, or personal background, insinuating that they somehow brought on or encouraged the assault. Some of the common rape myths include ideas like "only bad girls get raped" and "women ask for it." Burt (1980, p. 217), in a study on the dimensions of rape myths, demonstrates that higher sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, and acceptance of interpersonal violence led to their greater acceptance. Jozkowski and Wiersma-Mosley (2017, p. 89) use a socialist feminist lens to analyze rape culture in US colleges and conclude that "patterns of power and control dictate and influence contemporary campus norms in relation to gender and class," thereby perpetuating a culture of sexual assault.

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The media, entertainment, and advertising industries also have the power to reinforce damaging stereotypes by downplaying or romanticizing sexual assault. The role of faith in the perpetuation of rape myths cannot be ignored, and several studies have investigated the impact of religion on facilitating rape culture. A study by Barnett et al. (2016) examining the influences of gender, religious affiliation, and religiosity on rape myth acceptance by U.S. adults aged between 18 and 30 found that "individuals who identified as Roman Catholic or Protestant endorsed higher levels of rape myth acceptance than their atheist or agnostic counterparts." In another study, Palm (2018) explores the connection between rape culture and hierarchical gender norms and religious formation in the context of South African higher education institutions. The study, which uses a feminist lens, concludes that "further empirical engagement" is needed to understand the role of religion "if the gendered social norms that often underpin sexual violence are to be disrupted."

The focus of the present paper is to examine whether faith influences the occurrence of sexual violence on a global level by conducting a statistical analysis of rapes per capita and religious composition of countries across the globe. The purpose of this approach is to uncover patterns that may exist between the predominance of certain religions and the rates of sexual violence. By focusing on rape per capita rather than absolute numbers, the study aims to provide insights into the relative safety of women from sexual violence in countries with different religious majorities. The objective of this study is to examine how the religious composition of a country impacts rape, offering vital insights that contribute to the ongoing discussion surrounding faith and sexual violence.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative analysis approach to investigate the correlation between religious distribution and the incidence of rape per capita across different countries. The primary data source for religious distribution is derived from the World Population Review (2024a) database on the religious composition of countries. This study categorizes religious affiliations into six major groups: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Others. The "Others" category encompasses atheism, folk or tribal religions, and other minor religious groups not included in the primary categories.

To analyze the prevalence of rape, we utilize a second dataset from World Population Review (2024b) detailing reported rape incidents by country. Our analysis focuses on the rate of rape per capita, calculated as the number of reported rape incidents per 100,000 individuals. This measure allows for comparative analysis across countries with varying population sizes, ensuring that the data accurately reflects the prevalence of sexual violence irrespective of the country's total population.

For this study, we have identified 120 countries for which comprehensive data on both religious distribution and rape incidents per capita are available. This study utilizes a two-phase analysis to thoroughly examine the relationship between religious distribution and rape rates across various countries.

Phase 1: Descriptive Statistical Analysis

In the first phase, the countries in the dataset are categorized into three distinct groups of 40 items based on their rape per capita rates: high, medium, and low. For each group, we calculate the average percentage distribution of the major religious affiliations: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Others. This provides a concise summary of the religious composition in each category of rape incidents per capita, emphasizing any significant variations in religious distribution among the groups.

Phase 2: Regression Analysis

In the second phase, regression analysis is used to explore the potential impact of the distribution of individual religions (independent variables) and rates of rape per capita (dependent variable). This analysis is conducted separately for each of the six religious groups identified in the study, where the percentage of a country's population adhering to a particular religion is plotted against the country's rape per capita. This analysis seeks to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between religious affiliation and the incidence of rape.

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III. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Phase 1: Descriptive Statistical Analysis

Table 1: Phase 1 Analysis | Religious Trends

Category	Rape per 100,000	Christianity	Islam	Hinduism	Buddhism	Judaism	Others
High (Top 40)	94.9	83%	8%	2%	1%	3%	3%
Medium (Middle 40)	23.9	75%	8%	3%	8%	1%	5%
Low (Bottom 40)	4.5	51%	36%	3%	9%	0%	1%

Phase 1 results with respect to religious distribution are provided in Table 1. Upon examination, a distinct trend becomes apparent in the rate of rape per capita when categorized into three tiers of forty countries each. There is a significant difference in rape rates per capita, with the top tier experiencing a rate that is 4 times higher than the middle tier and over 20 times higher than the bottom tier. The top tier, characterized by its high rape per capita rates, predominantly consists of countries with a Christian majority, averaging around 83% of the population. Conversely, the dataset's lowest third, consisting of countries with the lowest rates of rape per capita, exhibits a significant presence of Muslim populations, averaging at 36%. The data also suggests that regions with higher proportions of Buddhism and Hinduism tend to have lower rates of per capita rape incidents. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand that correlation does not imply causation. A range of socio-economic and cultural factors, including rape reporting, the effectiveness of law enforcement, societal attitudes towards sexual violence, and legal interpretations of rape, play a role.

Table 2: Phase 1 Analysis | Geographic Trends

Category	Europe	North America	South America	Oceania	Asia	Africa
High (Top 40)	10	17	5	2	3	3
Medium (Middle 40)	17	4	5	1	8	5
Low (Bottom 40)	13	0	0	0	19	8

The distribution of rapes, as shown in Table 2, offers us valuable insights into geographic patterns. Europe and North America dominate the top tier, accounting for about 68% of the countries with the highest rates of rape per capita. On the other hand, in the bottom tier, which includes countries with the lowest rates of rape per person, 68% of these countries are located in Asia and Africa. This finding could mean two things. Either these continents have lower instances of sexual violence, or there may be significant underreporting. The middle tier, with moderate rape per capita rates, shows that over 50% of the countries are also from Europe and North America. In Asia, there is a clear trend. Only 3 out of 30 or 10% of Asian countries have high instances of sexual violence on a per capita basis, and more than 60% of Asian countries have relatively low reported instances of sexual violence. However, caution must be exercised when interpreting the data. While it is true that North America and Europe have higher reported instances of rape per capita compared to Asia, it is crucial to avoid oversimplifying these trends.

Phase 2: Regression Analysis

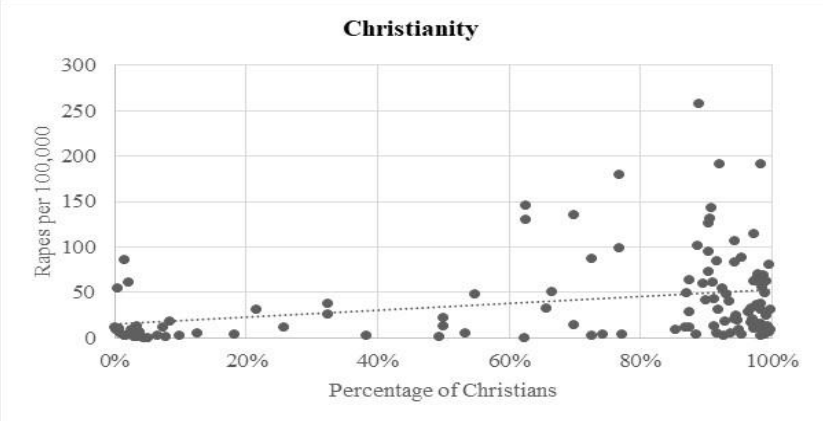

Figure 1

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Figure 1 depicts the relationship between the percentage of the Christian population within a country (x-axis) and the country's reported rapes per capita (y-axis). The visual representation suggests a positive association; as the percentage of Christians in the population increases, there is a corresponding rise in the rate of rapes per capita. A regression analysis confirms the pattern indicated by the graph: the model's F-statistic is 10.49, and the p-value is 0.0016, which suggests a statistically significant relationship. This means that the proportion of the Christian population is a predictor of the rape per capita rate. The low adjusted R squared value of 7.39%, however, suggests that while the predictor is statistically significant, there are other factors not captured in this model that are likely contributing to the variation in rape rates.

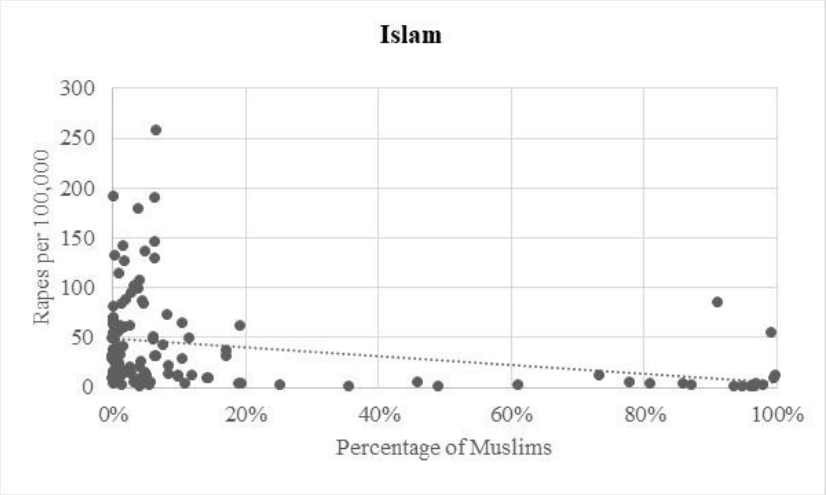

Figure 2

Figure 2 depicts the relationship between the percentage of the Muslim population within a country (x-axis) and the country's reported rapes per capita (y-axis). The visual representation suggests a negative association; as the percentage of Muslims in the population increases, there is a corresponding decrease in the rate of rapes per capita. Regression analysis confirms the pattern indicated by the graph. The model's F-statistic is 10.33, and its p-value is 0.0017, which is highly significant. The adjusted R squared value is, however, 7.27%, which indicates that while the proportion of the Muslim population is a predictor of the rape per capita rate, there are other factors not captured in this model.

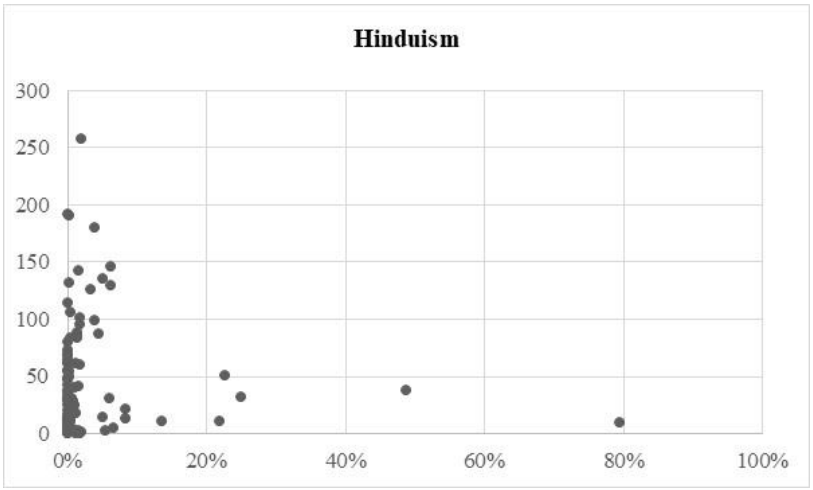

Figure 3

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between the percentage of Hindu population in a country (x-axis) and the country's reported rapes per capita (y-axis). In the graph, a noticeable clustering is visible in areas with a low Hindu population and a high prevalence of sexual violence. This indicates that in places where Hinduism is more prevalent, instances of sexual violence are low. However, the regression analysis shows an unverifiable relationship, as indicated by the model's F-statistic of 0.07 and a p-value of 0.78, which is not statistically significant.

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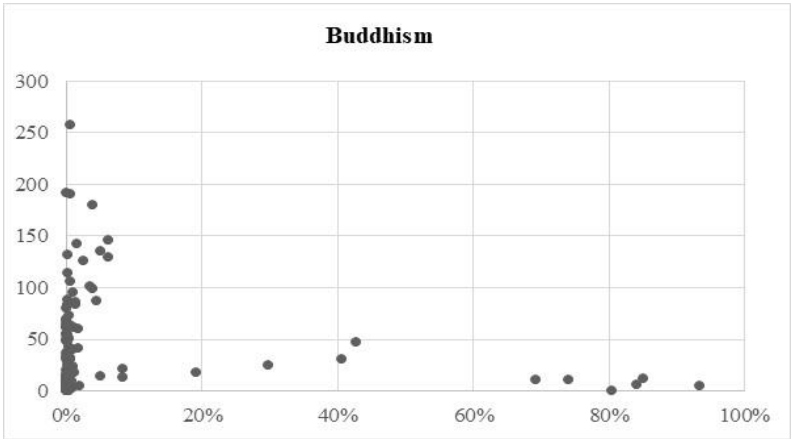

Figure 4

Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between the percentage of Buddhist population in a country (x-axis) and the country's reported rapes per capita (y-axis). Here also we notice a decrease in incidences of sexual violence as the Buddhist population percentage rises. Nevertheless, the regression analysis is inconclusive with the model's F-statistic at 2.23 and a p-value of 0.13, which is not considered statistically significant.

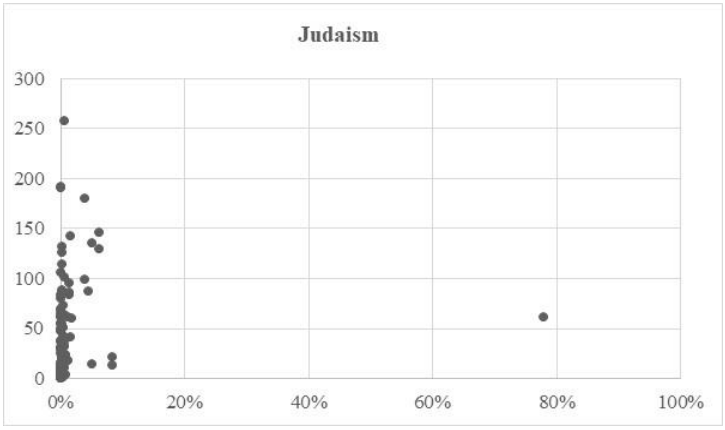

Figure 5

The graph in figure 5 depicts the relationship between Jewish population percentage and reported rapes per capita. Areas with low Jewish population and high sexual violence rates show significant clustering, similar to figures 3 and 4. Nonetheless, the regression analysis is statistically not significant with the model's F-statistic of 0.49 and a p-value of 0.48.

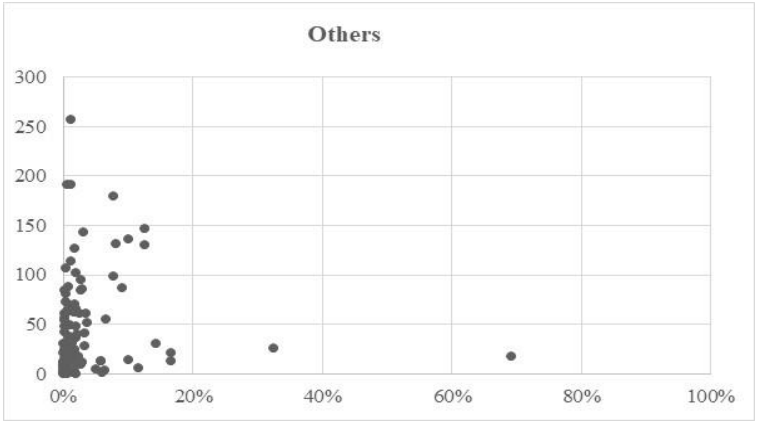

Figure 6

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Figure 6 shows the correlation between other religious groups and rape rates. We observe a significant clustering in areas with low population and high sexual violence as earlier. Nevertheless, the regression analysis is inconclusive, as evidenced by the model's F-statistic of 0.06 and a p-value of 0.80, both being statistically not significant.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Countries in the top tier, which have the highest rates of rape per capita, are mostly Christian-majority nations, with an average of around 83% of the population and relatively small Hindu and Buddhist populations. About 68% of countries in the top tier are in Europe and North America. There is a substantial variation in rape rates per person across different tiers, with the highest tier having a rate that is four times higher than the middle tier and more than twenty times higher than the bottom tier.

The dataset's bottom third, which includes countries with the lowest per capita rates of rape, shows a noticeable representation of Muslim populations, with an average of 36%. Moreover, the data seems to suggest an intriguing correlation between higher proportions of Buddhism and Hinduism and lower rates of per capita rape incidents. Among Asian countries, over 60% fall into the lowest tier, indicating relatively low instances of sexual violence per capita.

Regression analysis indicates that there is a measurable increase in rapes per capita associated with an increase in the Christian population percentage. At the same time, there appears to be a noticeable decrease in sexual violence as the Muslim population percentage increases. The impact of the percentage of Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and other religious group populations on rapes per capita is not statistically significant for the given data set, which suggests that these religious groups do not contribute to sexual violence in a statistically meaningful way.

The results obtained in this study must be regarded as initial findings. The regression analysis shows that the percentage of Christian and Muslim populations are statistically significant predictors of rapes per capita, although the adjusted R squares of 7.39% and 7.27% respectively are indicative of a modest explanatory power. Typically, social science research models with an R square value of less than 10% are deemed weak and not considered robust. Acceptability of models with low R squares, even those around 10%, is premised “on the condition that some or most of the predictors or explanatory variables are statistically significant” (Ozili, 2023, p. 134). However, it would be unwise to completely disregard these models, as they indicate the presence of certain faith-based factors that merit further investigation. It should be noted that although this study focuses on the impact of religious distribution, it does not deny the existence of additional non-religious factors that could have a significant impact on the occurrence of sexual violence. It is hoped that the results of this study will encourage more research on the impact of religious beliefs on sexual violence and the perpetuation of rape culture.

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