

Editorial

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The Stigma of Rape: Gendered Victimization

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The problem of rape is as old as civilization and it is a universal concern of great magnitude. Rape is classified as a violent crime in all nations and attracts strong penal action. This however has not deterred sexual offenders, and statistics related to rape indicate that it continues to traumatize not only women but men and children also. In India, rape is more common against girls and women. The proportion of crime committed against women against all types of crime in 2012 was 9.40% according to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB).¹ Of this, 1% was rape and in 98.20% of cases, the offenders were known to the victims. It is likely that the figures may be much higher as many victims do not report the crime to the police due to fear of stigma and its consequences.

In patriarchal countries such as India, the offender is rarely punished or shamed. Politicians and other public figures in India often dismiss rape as a forgivable offence with one political leader recently describing rape as an understandable act since 'boys will be boys'. Others have blamed women for the act and have dismissed accusations of rape as only 'mistakes committed by men'. Some public figures have recommended punishing the victim also for the crime.² Laws are rarely implemented even when the victim and her family muster the courage to file a complaint. The police also discourage the victim from registering a complaint as it would sully her image in society. For instance, the police refused to register a complaint of rape when a minor victim along with her mother went to the police station to report the crime. The police advised the mother against filing a complaint as her daughter's reputation would be ruined.³ As a result of such attitudes; men go scot free after committing the criminal act, adding to the misery of the victims. Even in cases where a complaint is registered, girls and women are re-traumatized during medical examination when doctors use the humiliating 'two finger test' to confirm rape instead of more advanced medical procedures.⁴

While little or no stigma is attached to a male rapist, girls and women who have been raped are victimized by family members, friends and society for bringing shame and dishonour to the family. An unmarried girl, who has been raped, is considered to be unfit for marriage as she is no longer 'pure'. A rape victim embodies the living dead since she will always have to live with social stigma. In some cases, the victims have been forced to marry the rapist as a compromise and it has even been recommended by a high court judge as a solution for the victim.⁵ The reputation of girls and women in India is defined in terms of 'sexual purity' which has to be protected at all costs. Failure to do so, invites wrath even if the victim has suffered severely at the hands of the perpetrator. Loss of virginity through rape or 'defilement' of a married woman by a rapist is often considered to be a sin that has to be atoned for by the victim. Further, the victim's parents or spouse are also blamed for not 'bringing up the girl with adequate moral standards' or 'not having control over one's wife'. The family members in turn blame the victim for their plight leading to the burden of shame and guilt in the victim. In many instances, family members tell the victim that they would be better off if she were dead. Thus, the emotional and social costs of the crime are enormous for the victim, leading to further traumatization. Hence, rape is often described by women as an experience 'worse than death'.

Two examples will serve to illustrate the nature of punishment and victimization meted out to victims of rape in India. The subjects of the examples were part of a larger study on

loss, trauma and suicidal ideation among women living in a shelter published elsewhere.⁶ In the first case, an 18-year old girl was raped by a boy who was employed in the local post office, where her father also worked, when he found her alone at home. The mother was devastated and her father was infuriated when they were informed about the incident. The loss of face in society was too much for the father to bear and he decided to inform the victim to leave the house. In spite of the entreaties of the mother, the girl was forced to leave the house with instructions to 'never come back' and no complaint was filed against the boy. The girl made her way to the shelter with the help of well-wishers of the family.

In the second case, a 21 year old young woman sought refuge in the shelter as she did not want to live with her paternal aunt's family with whom she was staying after her father's death when she was six years old. When she was 20 years old, she was raped repeatedly by her paternal cousin. When she informed her aunt, she was criticized for lying which emboldened her cousin to continue the abuse. The victim became pregnant after a few months and her aunt was forced to acknowledge the truth. She however ensured that the matter remained a family secret and managed to take the victim to another town till the delivery of the baby, after which the baby was given away to an orphanage. Subsequently, the victim decided not to go back with her aunt and made plans to live in a shelter home.

The examples indicate that the authority of the head of the household cannot be questioned and that close female relatives may also not be supportive when their family's reputation is at stake. The physical and emotional suffering of the victims is considered to be of no consequence. Their rights are violated and they often have no one to turn to as they are ostracized or betrayed by their own family members. The girls are sacrificed at the altar of 'family honour' and the agony and trauma of their mothers and siblings are very often not addressed. The stigma increases manifold if the woman becomes pregnant following rape and gives birth to a child. In such cases, the stigma also gets attached to the child, condemning it to a life of rejection and hostility. Further, if girls and women are abandoned by their families after rape, they become potential victims of sex traffickers and they will be doomed to a life of forced prostitution. Hence, social and cultural attitudes towards rape and victims of rape have to be addressed to protect girls and women against a vicious cycle of victimization. Barriers to reporting the crime and obtaining justice have to be minimized and the law has to be enforced stringently against the offender. This requires sustained and committed efforts by various sections of the society as well as law enforcers.

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