

DNA, Mumbai, 08 Dec 2008

The silent suffering of rape v

A recent report stated that two women are raped, every hour, in India. Mumbai too is afflicted by this heinous crime, but many victims never see their perpetrators pay

Humaira Ansari

A report released recently by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) stated that two women are raped in India, every hour. States like Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan have some of the highest numbers of recorded rape cases, in the country. In Mumbai, however, a large number of rapes go unreported, due to long trials, an absence of a special unit to handle such cases, and a lack counselling for the victims.

Amu Abraham from Women's Centre, an organisation that works with women that have suffered sexual violence, and which also took up the case of Sister Meena, the nun raped in Orissa, says, "Many victims who come here say, 'I don't want to be raped again by the system'." Nevertheless, she points out that the Centre encourages victims to fight it out legally, rather than live a lifetime with the trauma. "We try to explain to them that they should fight their case, and consider it to be part of their therapy. They are fighting, not only for themselves or for a personal cause, but for the larger cause of injustice against women," says Abraham.

Crimes against women: The facts

A study in Zaria, Nigeria, found that 16 per cent of hospital patients treated for sexually transmitted infections were younger than five.

More than 90 million African women and girls are victims of female circumcision or other forms of genital mutilation.

An estimated one million children, mostly girls, enter the sex trade each year.

Four million women and girls are trafficked annually.

Globally, at least one in three women and girls is beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime.

At least 60 million girls who would otherwise be expected to be alive are 'missing' from various populations, mostly in Asia, as a result of sex-selective abortions, infanticide, or neglect.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported that 2002 saw a 25% increase in 'honour killings' of women, with 461 women murdered by family members in 2002, in Sindh and Punjab alone.

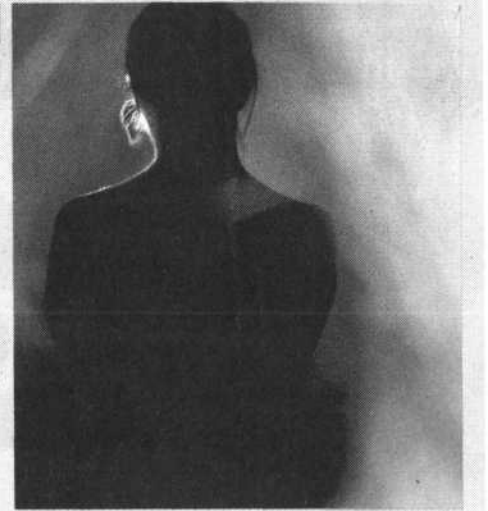
It is often observed that the rapist is someone known to the victim, and the report stated that 10 per cent of the rapists happen to be relatives of the victim. Clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, Seema Hingorrany, who has counselled rape victims and has paid home visits to a few, says that rapes within the family go largely unreported. "The trauma of a rape victim is unfathomable. They mostly suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and severe Chronic Depression." Citing one particular case, she says, "An educated girl, working with a reputed firm, was raped by her boyfriend. In the absence of any support system she came to me for counselling." Non-acceptance by families only adds to the victim's woes, wherein their emotional side is scarred, this is compounded by their physical suffering.

The general procedure followed when reporting a rape, is that the victim is required to register a case at the local police station, which then sends the victim for a medical examination, and then registers a First Information Report (FIR). The court case, however, only starts once charges have been brought. Most Mumbai police stations, however, do not have any special unit to handle rape cases. Raghunath Mahale, a sub inspector with the Azad Maidan police station, says, "If we get any rape or molestation case, we ask our lady constables to be present. We also try and arrange for a special room in which to talk to the victim."

As rape is considered a crime against society, a prosecutor is appointed by the state on behalf of the victim, while the accused defends himself by appointing his own

lawyer. Geeta Kishore Vaiude, a prosecutor who has fought rape cases, is aware of the long trials in rape cases, but, she states that there is no other alternative. Vaiude, points to the fact that in a rape case, before the trial starts, the required medical tests and examinations — on both the victim and the accused — need to be done. "Medical examinations of the victim and the accused are done, and their clothes analysed. After this, a team of experts goes through the medical report," she says. All of this is a time-consuming process.

"In case the victim and the accused are in a relationship, the accused is generally acquitted. Sometimes the accused also manages to bribe the parents, if the victim happens to be a poor girl, and walks away scot-free," says prosecutor, Kiran Rayekar.



Photography by Cecilia Johansson

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victims

Abraham says that if the victim happens to be unmarried, then the "family insists that she should try and forget the incident and proceed with her life". She adds that it is not that easy for any woman to forget and move on, when she is ripped apart not only physically, but also psychologically.

Harish Shetty, clinical psychiatrist at LH Hiranandani Hospital, who has counselled over 15 rape victims, from both poor families, and from the city's upper classes, says, "The equation in the two set-ups is very different. While in the rural backdrop, it stems from violence, in cities it is more to do with the power equation." He also says that while not all family members may know of the incident, at least one member of the family is generally always aware. "The mental state of the victim is sad. They begin to hate their body, and consider themselves useless; there is categorically a lack of self-worth."

Hingorrany also believes that there is a stigma attached to the crime, and often the victim is blamed. She talks about one rape victim who was more worried by the fact that her colleague told her that she lured the rapist because she wore short skirts. "I told her that it is not her fault, nobody has the right to lay hands on a woman just because she is wearing a short dress."

But until the state machinery gears up to tackle the sensitive issue of rape, and families cease attaching a stigma to the crime, many more women will live their lives in the grip of fear and trauma...made worse in the knowledge that they are alone in their pain.

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