

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN MEDIA

#GBVINMEDIA

A MEDIA ETHICS TOOLKIT
ON SENSITIVE REPORTAGE



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INTRODUCTION

This toolkit has been designed with the objective of providing media platforms and professionals a handy guide when it comes to reporting gender-based violence. The language employed by the media in reporting gender-based violence is crucial in furthering a society that is more informed and sensitive to survivors. Unfortunately, the reality is such that many media practices tend to perpetuate patriarchal mindsets and rape culture.

This toolkit provides an overview of the nature of rape reportage in English language media in India, and lists a number of ways in which problematic media practices can be replaced with sensitive and affirming methods that uphold the rights and dignity of survivors of sexual violence.

Trigger warning: Please note that this toolkit contains descriptions of cases of gender-based violence and could be triggering to read about. Do make sure that you take care of yourself if you choose to engage with this toolkit.

WHO ARE WE?

Feminism in India (FII) is an award winning intersectional digital feminist platform that aims to educate and create a feminist sensibility amongst the youth. With the central goal of increasing the representation of women and marginalized communities on the internet, FII publishes a daily magazine with articles on intersectional feminism, holds workshops and events, and creates and curates feminist resources like this one. FII has also directed several large-scale digital advocacy campaigns, both in collaboration with partners as well as in-house, that advocate for several issues under the feminist umbrella including online violence against women, safe abortion, sustainable menstruation, understanding consent and rejection, and gender-based violence in mainstream cinema among others.



WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

The discourse around the pandemic scale of gender-based violence has been gaining momentum all over the world, and especially in India. The global outcry and media attention after the 2012 gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey in Delhi led to a renewed nationwide interest in the safety of girls and women in India. The media was quick to follow - a study of 4 leading English language daily newspapers in India revealed a huge spike in rape coverage in India during the 2012 Delhi gang-rape and 4 times as much rape reportage in the 39 months following it (Jolly).

But does increased media attention translate to greater sensitivity in understanding rape, and creating a society that centres the rights of women and girls? The language that the media chooses to employ while reporting rape and sexual violence can heavily influence the way its audience views gender-based violence. It can determine whether an incident of rape is viewed in a way that reproduces victim blaming narratives and rape culture, or in a way that affirms the agency of women and girls, and their right to safety and freedom from violence. How the media chooses to frame gender-based violence has direct ramifications on how society understands the phenomenon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The #GBVinMedia campaign draws inspiration from similar campaigns across the world that strive to create a culture of ethical gender-sensitive journalism. The Chicago Task Force Media 'Reporting on Rape and Sexual Violence' Toolkit and the Femifesto Canada 'Use The Right Words' Toolkit were particularly helpful in the framing of this resource. We'd also like to thank Indian digital publications like The Hoot, Newslandry and Breakthrough India that have created resources on this issue that we drew upon in the making of this toolkit.

This toolkit could not have reached its present form without the invaluable feedback and suggestions from the following people - Sameera Khan, Mary Thomas, Raksha Kumar, Tejas Harad, Padma Priya, Chitrangada, Abha Khetarpal, Smita Ramanathan, Amanda Gilbertson and Shreya Jani.

We would also like to thank Women Deliver for their support and mentorship throughout this project.

GET INVOLVED

If you would like to collaborate with FII to bring this toolkit to your institution, have it translated or have us conduct a workshop, email info@feminisminindia.com with your collaboration request!

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The reportage of gender-based violence in Indian media is mired in insensitive language and imagery. The most important thing to keep in mind while reporting on gender-based violence is to uphold the rights and dignity of the survivor(s). This fact-sheet is a list of recommendations to be followed by media houses when reporting on gender-based violence.

- Use **thematic framing** rather than episodic framing when covering stories.

An episodic framing of a news incident views it as an isolated incident, focusing on sensationalist and provocative elements of the story. Thematic framing would embed the incident in the larger context of gender-based violence as a systemic issue. It provides a more sensitive and holistic understanding of an issue, rather than viewing incidents of gender-based violence as a series of random, disconnected episodes that can be combated by changing individual behaviour patterns.

To make an article more thematic:

- Offer a nuanced understanding of gender-based violence as a widespread and systemic issue. Highlight patterns of gender-based violence that occur on the intersections of caste, disability, sexual orientation etc. to show their systemic nature.
- Cite relevant statistics of the scale of gender-based violence in India.
- Include quotes by experts on gender-based violence.
- Counter inaccurate patriarchal myths and beliefs, especially if including quotes made by an authority figure that are sexist or derogatory to the survivor.

- Avoid **sensationalist headlines** and body text.

Sensationalist headlines create a spectacle of a crime, turning it into entertainment and disregarding the dignity of the survivor. Include only what is strictly necessary to transmit the details of the crime without falling back on salacious, provocative or titillating words and images. A play-by-play recounting of the crime is unnecessary and triggering to survivors.

- Do not characterize rapists as **inhuman monsters**.

By framing perpetrators as inhuman monsters, we take away from the commonness of sexual violence, suggesting that sexual violence is unusual rather than systemic. It also makes it harder for survivors to speak out about rape committed by those viewed as “respectable” members of society.

• **Avoid implying that the case is fake or made up.**

Most survivors of sexual violence are not believed when they speak out about their experiences, which is another reason that survivors hesitate to report sexual violence. The spectre of ‘fake cases’ is a popular argument to discredit the very real experience of sexual violence faced by millions. In order to combat the false perception that most reported cases of sexual violence are ‘fake cases’, journalists should familiarize themselves with the actual statistics of fake cases in India.

• **Language**

Avoid language that places the blame of the crime on the survivor, insinuates that the case is fake, or exonerates the perpetrator. Do not trivialise or minimize the gravity of gender-based violence.

LANGUAGE TO AVOID	LANGUAGE TO USE INSTEAD	WHY IT IS PROBLEMATIC
Extraneous details about the survivor - what she was wearing, her level of inebriation, details about her past or current relationships, what time she was returning home etc.	Limit your description to information necessary to the crime, and avoid focussing on the victim’s behaviour or habits. Keep your focus on the perpetrator.	These details may imply that it is the fault of the survivor for “inviting” or “provoking” sexual violence. Gender-based violence is the fault of the perpetrator, not the survivor.
Woman alleges rape against perpetrator	Woman reports rape by perpetrator	The use of the term ‘alleged’, used while the case is still being tried, insinuates that the survivor might be lying. Using a neutral term like ‘reported’ is recommended.
Woman claims “rape”	Do not place the term ‘rape’ or ‘sexual violence’ in quotes.	Using ‘rape’ in quotes implies disbelief in the event.
Woman confesses/ admits to being raped	Women reports that she was raped	Words like ‘confesses’ and ‘admits’ implies that rape is something one should be ashamed of.
Sex scandal	Use terms that accurately represent the crime - rape, assault, extortion etc.	The term ‘sex scandal’ sensationalizes gender-based violence while minimizing the gravity of the situation. It can also insinuate that the survivor was a consensual part of the incident, leading to victim blaming.

Sex with minor	Child rape/child sexual abuse	The use of the term 'sex' should not be used to refer to sexual abuse or rape. Minors cannot consent to sex according to Indian law.
Eve-teasing	Street sexual harassment	The word 'teasing' minimizes the gravity of these crimes, and suggests that women ought to just ignore it and not speak out about it.
Domestic dispute/ dispute with husband	Domestic violence	'Domestic dispute' minimizes the effect of the widespread and serious issue of domestic violence in India.
Jilted lover/roadside Romeo	Man/sexual harasser	These terms sympathize with the perpetrator by painting them as lovelorn tragic heroes, instead of perpetrators of gender-based violence.
Corrective rape	Homophobic rape	The term "corrective rape" to refer to the rape of LGBTQ+ people to "cure" them of homosexuality implies that the act is the righting of a wrong.
Woman raped (No mention of social locations of victim or perpetrator).	Man rapes woman. (Use active voice sentence constructions). If the perpetrator belongs to a dominant community and the crime is one of systemic violence against a marginalized community, mentioning the social positions of the perpetrator and the survivor will embed it in a larger context.	The absence of the perpetrator in the headline places the focus of the crime on the woman. Active voice places the blame of the crime squarely on the perpetrator.
Victim	Survivor	The term victim connotes feelings of helplessness and lack of agency. 'Survivor' connotes resilience and strength.

- Do **NOT** give details that would lead to the **identification of the survivor**.

Section 228A of the Indian Penal Code makes disclosing the identities of victims of certain offences, including rape, a punishable offence. Apart from the name, this would also include details like the survivor's address, exact workplace, etc. While the media is free to disclose the name of the perpetrator, it should be careful that details about the perpetrator does not lead to the identification of the survivor, especially in cases where they were acquaintances or related to one another.

- Use **images that reflect resilience and strength**, not those that portray women as helpless, passive victims. These images are inaccurate and may be triggering to survivors. Pictures of protests against rape, images of women saying no or neutral images of the environment that the crime occurred are suggested.

- When **interviewing survivors** of gender-based violence, be sensitive.

Acknowledge that recounting their experience might be traumatic and respect their boundaries. Do not be judgmental or imply that they are lying. Offer to show them a draft of your story before publishing it if possible.

- Finally, keep track of **who the media is reporting about**.

Research has shown an overemphasis on urban cases. Stories about survivors from marginalized castes, classes and other such intersections do not receive equal coverage and outrage. Try to change that.

UNDERSTANDING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE & RAPE CULTURE

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex OR gender identity.

It includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life.

Women are disproportionately harmed by gender-based violence (Women for Women International). Some examples of gender-based violence are rape, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, acid attacks, domestic violence, dowry deaths and female infanticide.

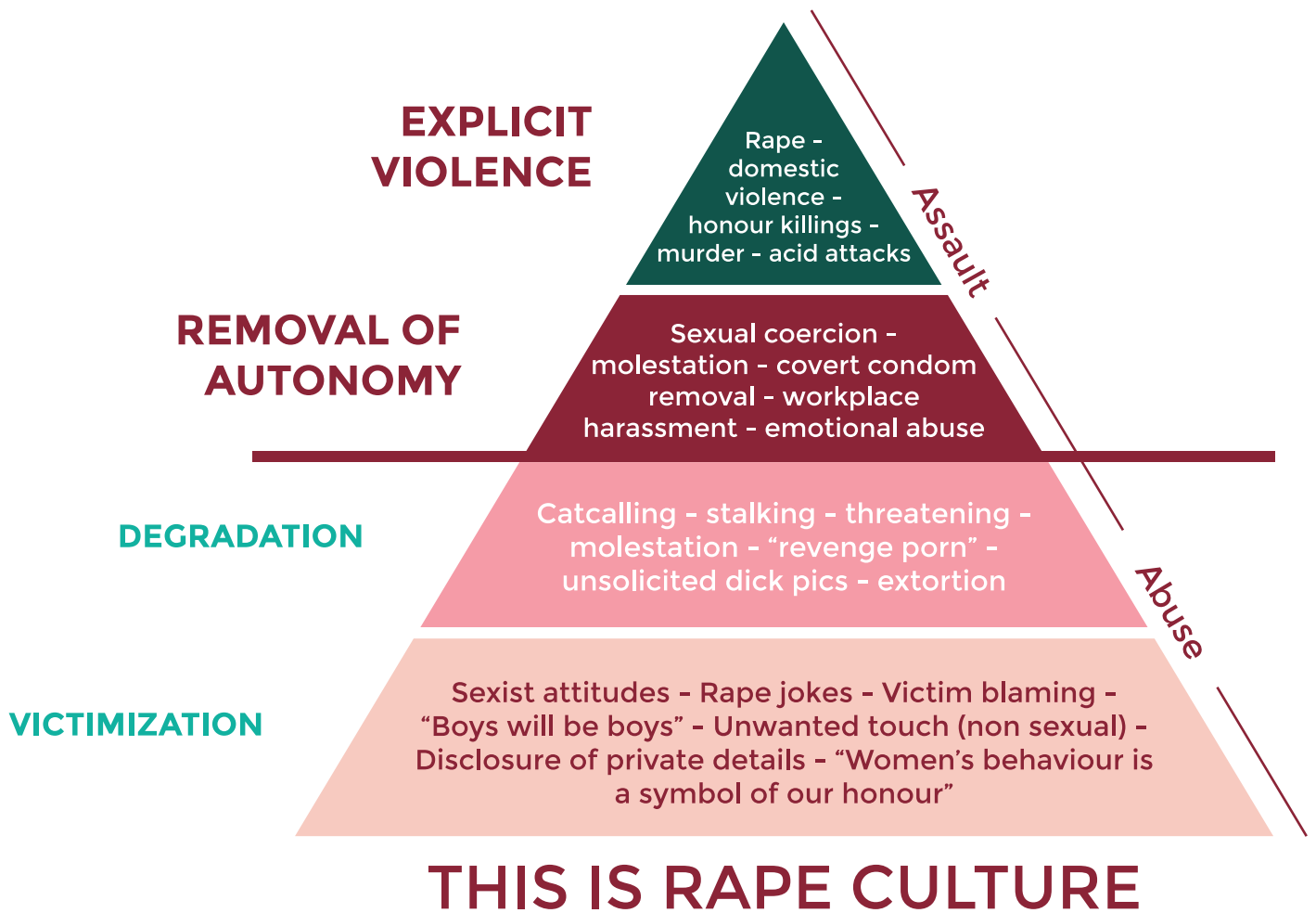
Gender-based violence in India occurs at a staggering scale, with 106 rapes being reported per day in 2016, and over 2 lakh rape cases going to trial in that year alone (Sengar). However, sexual violence is grievously underreported, with a 2018 study by National Family Health Survey finding that over 99.1% of sexual violence cases are not reported (Bandhopadhyay). The silence around sexual violence is one symptom of rape culture that relies on creating a culture of shame and stigma around such violence.

**OVER 99.1%
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NOT REPORTED.**

Sexual violence is seen as a source of shame for those at the receiving end of it, instead of those perpetrating it, making it harder for survivors to speak out about it.

SO WHAT IS RAPE CULTURE?

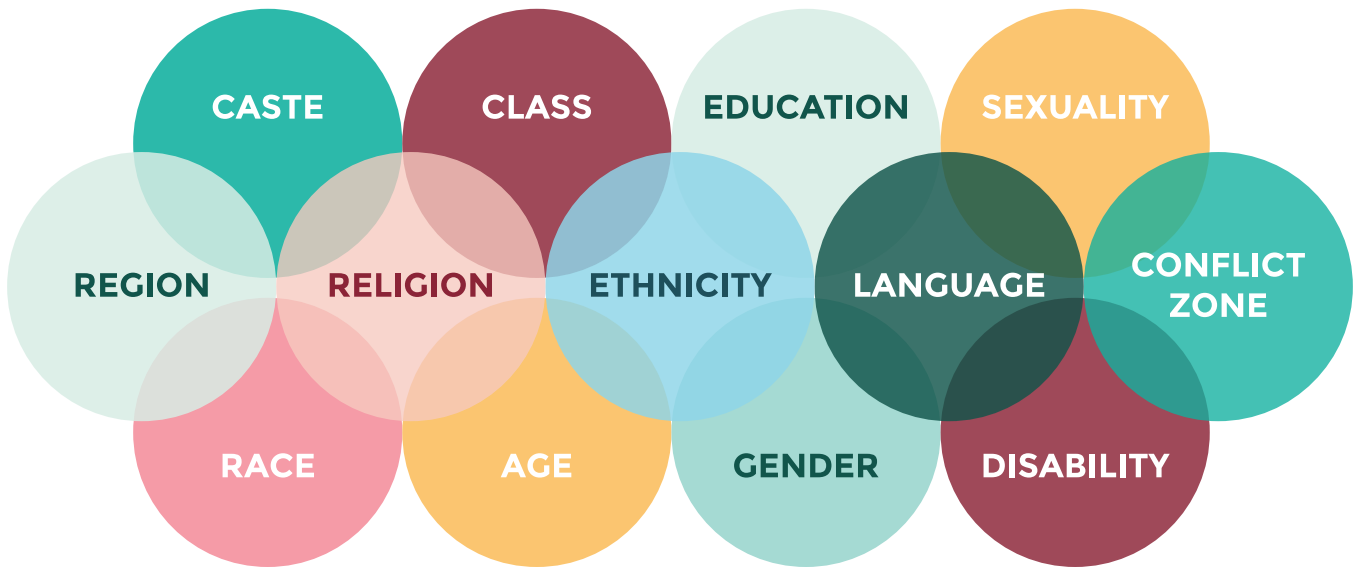
Rape culture is an environment in which rape is prevalent, and one where the prevailing values and belief systems normalizes sexual violence against women and girls. It is fuelled by patriarchal beliefs that place the onus of women's safety on women's behaviour rather than on the State and society, and those that minimize the trauma of sexual violence. Rape culture can start from seemingly innocuous things like rape jokes and the casual objectification of women, and includes the viewing of women as the bearers of family or community honour, victim-blaming attitudes and the culture of silence around sexual violence. Rape culture leads to the high incidence of violence against women and girls.



INTERSECTIONAL REALITIES

In a society as pluralistic as India, women’s vulnerability to gender-based violence is often not only due to their gender, but other marginalizations like caste, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, disability, etc. which intersect in complex ways. Understanding oppression through these multiple modes of marginalization is called **intersectionality**. Intersectionality is a feminist theory that helps us understand how different identities overlap or intersect to contribute to systemic oppression.

Communities that have been historically discriminated against due to caste, religion, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity are additionally vulnerable to sexual violence. Dalit women, transgender women and women with disabilities, for example, face a much higher proportion of sexual violence than able-bodied, dominant caste, cisgender women.



The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women has noted that Dalit women “face targeted violence, even rape and death from State actors and powerful members of dominant castes, used to inflict political lessons and crush dissent within the community.” **According to NCRB data, 6 Dalit women are raped every day** (Sengupta).

Violence against the transgender community is harder to quantify as there is no data by the government on violence against transgender people. However, data gathered by NGOs reveals that 40% of transgender people surveyed have faced some form of sexual violence before turning 18. Transgender people are also additionally vulnerable to harassment and violence from State authorities like the police (Changoiwala).

**40% OF
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BEFORE TURNING 18.**



Similarly, a global study by UNFPA revealed that **girls and women with disabilities faced ten times more gender-based violence than those without disabilities.** Many women with disabilities, especially those with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities face forced institutionalisation, abuse at the hands of caretakers, and no way to fight for justice, often due to a lack of awareness about avenues for redressal (UNFPA, Human Rights Watch).

While India does not officially recognize any of its domestic territories as conflict zones, the prolonged armed violence in Jammu & Kashmir, Northeastern India and in parts of central & eastern India would qualify as internal conflicts under the Geneva Convention, among others. **Women in conflict zones are extremely vulnerable to violence and assault, as rape and other forms of sexual violence is often used as a weapon of war to exert dominance over a community.** The perpetrators of these crimes are very often State armed forces and police personnel, and the victims poor, tribal, or oppressed caste women.

When reporting on rape, it is important to keep these vulnerabilities in mind. Gender-based violence is not an isolated phenomenon, it is a structural one.

It is important to keep in mind the structures that facilitate sexual violence - patriarchy, caste supremacy, ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities), transphobia (discrimination against transgender people) etc.- when writing about it, in order to draw attention to the ways that those disadvantaged by these structures are hurt by them. These forms of violence are otherwise often invisibilized and swept under the rug of an overarching theme of “violence against women and girls”, without taking into account the role that other axes of oppression impose.

EPISODIC VS THEMATIC REPORTAGE

The way a news story is framed is crucial to the way gender-based violence is understood by society. Media coverage of gender-based violence is often episodic rather than thematic. What are episodic and thematic styles of reportage?

EPISODIC

- Views rape/GBV as an isolated incident, taking a **close-up view** of the crime. Focuses on **individual** cases and discrete events.
- **Fails to embed the incident in the larger context of gender-based violence**, and does not include information about other structures of oppression like caste, ableism or transphobia. Focuses on sensationalist and provocative elements of the story.
- Reduces a structural problem to a series of **random, disconnected episodes**. Might spur unnecessary panic among the public, as well as an inaccurate understanding of sexual violence that propogates stereotypes that are harmful to survivors of sexual violence.
- By viewing each case of sexual violence in isolation, we fail to grapple with how we can **combat it as a society**. The solution for rape, when seen in this close-up view, veers towards discussing what each particular survivor could have done differently in order to avoid rape - victim-blaming 101.

THEMATIC

- Takes a **wide-angle view** - focusing on patterns of behaviour and the **social and environmental contexts** that incidents take place in.
- Contextualizes the incident of violence within a larger pattern of sexual violence, and includes **statistical information, commentary by gender experts**, legal and institutional information, help services and other information that would help the public view the incident in a larger context.
- Promotes a **greater public awareness** of the context of gender-based violence, and aids a more sensitive and accurate understanding of the issue.
- When a single incident of rape is juxtaposed against the staggering epidemic of sexual violence across the country, it becomes clear that the solution cannot come from changing individual behaviour patterns, but rather from a **systemic overhaul** of societal mindsets and State interventions (Benjamin).

AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD THEMATIC REPORTAGE

headline locates the crime as a pattern, not an isolated incident.

Crime against Dalits rises in Rajasthan, activists blame police

Crime against Dalits in Rajasthan increased in the past one year, say rights activists. The state witnessed protests by human rights groups in the past one week following the murder of a 16-year-old Dalit girl, Delta Meghwal, at a private teachers' training college in Bikaner.

Crime against Dalits in Rajasthan increased in the past one year, say rights activists.

The state witnessed protests by human rights groups in the past one week following the murder of a 16-year-old Dalit girl, Delta Meghwal, at a private teachers' training college in Bikaner. Meghwal was found dead in a water tank outside the college hostel on March 29.

On March 5, a video showing three Dalit teenagers being stripped and beaten up in a village in Chittorgarh, went viral. The youngsters, aged between 15 and 18, were held by a mob for allegedly stealing a motorcycle and tied to a tree before being stripped and paraded in the village.

Rights activists say that atrocities against Dalits have gone up in the past one year due to apathy of the police and administration.

"Even after 68 years of independence, Dalits do not feel safe in the country," says rights activist Gopal Keshawat.

quotes by human rights activists.

In Chittorgarh, the three minors were labeled as petty thieves just because they belonged to Kanjar community, he says. In September 2015, five Dalits in Nagaur's Dangawas village, were mowed down by a tractor and 16 other injured over a land dispute with the dominant Jat community.

In another incident in Jodhpur's Osian village, a 7-year-old student Dinesh Meghwal was allegedly beaten up by his headmaster and schoolmates for "touching" a plate food of a higher caste student.

"Both the incidents got wide media coverage following protests by rights groups. But everything cooled down after a few weeks. This has become a pattern in Rajasthan," says Taran Gupta, another activist.

A recent report by Centre for Dalit Rights (CDR), a Jaipur-based civil society organization, said that there are 55 pending cases of murder, attempt to murder, rape, attempt to rape, vandalism of property and forceful possession of land committed against Dalits in the past seven months.

relevant statistics embedding the crime in a larger context.

The CDR submitted the report to the Rajasthan Assembly scheduled caste welfare committee asking it to look into the pending cases. "Only a few cases of violence against Dalits get registered with the police. We have compiled a list of pending cases from August, 2015 to February, 2016 and submitted it to the president of SC welfare committee Chandrakanta Meghwal, asking her to initiate action on people guilty of the crime," says PL Mimroth of CDR.

The recent report of the National Crime Records Bureau shows that Rajasthan tops the list of crime against people of scheduled caste. Out of 47,064 incidences of violence against Dalits registered in the country, Rajasthan accounts for 8,028 for them.

"Until now, police personnel are trained by an outdated manual that characterizes some Dalit communities as habitual criminals, petty thieves and thugs. The attitude of police is the most troublesome aspect," adds Keshawat.

Hinged around case of Delta Meghwal, but reports about other recent cases as well.

Source: Hindustan Times, 7 April, 2016

This is an example of good thematic reportage. However, this article could have gone further and highlighted the additional vulnerability that Dalit girls and women face to caste-based sexual violence - especially since the case of Delta Meghwal was one of rape, extortion and finally, murder.

INDIAN MEDIA: WHERE DOES IT GO WRONG?



A study conducted by Niharika Pandit and Amanda Gilbertson titled 'Violence Against Women and Girls in Indian Newspapers' studied 725 English articles and 804 Hindi articles about gender-based violence in 4 leading newspapers in English and Hindi - Times of India, Hindustan Times, Dainik Jagran and Hindustan for a 2 month period in mid 2017. It analysed articles for the presence of episodic framing, the inclusion of caste and religious intersections in violence against women, victim-blaming language and sensationalism. We will be using these findings throughout this toolkit in order to corroborate our recommendations.

HEAVY USE OF EPISODIC FRAMING

Episodic, or incident-based reportage frames sexual violence as a one-off series of risky events, without placing these incidents in a wider context of structural violence and discrimination against women and girls. In their study, Pandit & Gilbertson found 92.3% of reportage of gender-based violence to be episodic, rather than thematic.

**92.3% OF REPORTAGE
OF GENDER-BASED
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This becomes additionally problematic in the case of caste-based sexual violence, or violence against other minorities. The structural problem of caste supremacy, religious bigotry, ableism or transphobia is erased when these identities are erased from reports of sexual violence.

When the victims of sexual violence belong to a marginalized community, it is important to highlight the context of sexual violence as pertaining to that community.

In the news image cited below, Jisha, the victim, belonged to a Dalit caste - a community that is routinely the target of sexual violence. However, her Dalit identity, along with the larger context of the violence faced by Dalit women, has been ignored entirely in favour of highlighting the poverty her family lived in. Caste and class are inextricably linked in India, but class is seen as less controversial to speak about.

The crime jolted Kerala and provoked massive protests. Besides the sheer horror of the assault and killing, the crime fueled politics as it brought into sharp focus the family's struggle with poverty.

Source: NDTV, Dec 12 2017 'In Kerala Law Student's Rape, Murder Accused Labourer Convicted By Court'

Similarly, in internal conflict zones, **media headlines often avoid attributing sexual violence to State authorities**. Women are at increased risk of sexual violence in conflict zones, and are routinely subject to violence – often by army and police authorities who enjoy impunity under laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). This context ought to be included when reporting about rape in conflict zones.

→

Woman ‘Naxal’ hit by 10 bullets, but no bloodstains found on uniform; gangrape alleged

Source: MyNews.in, 16 June, 2016

The **headline above** refers to the gang-rape and murder of a tribal woman, Madkam Hidme, in Sukma, Chattisgarh, by security forces in the region. Her death was covered up as a “Maoist encounter”, where her body was dressed in a Maoist uniform after her death. In this news clipping, she is framed as a Naxal (albeit in quotes), and the role of State security forces in her murder is missing.

Kerala: Transgender suspected to be kidnapper, mobbed and stripped

Chandana was mercilessly beaten and stripped in the middle of the night by the local villagers.

Source: India Today, 6 February, 2018

By stating that a transgender woman was attacked on suspicion of being a kidnapper in the headline, **this news article reinforces the harmful stereotype that transgender people are criminals, and does not counter this myth**. The article attached to this headline also did not highlight the rampant violence inflicted upon the transgender community, which could have situated the crime within the systemic issue of transphobic violence. Unnecessary details about her assault such as the fact that she was stripped adds a voyeuristic and salacious lens to this moment of trauma for the survivor. It is also worthwhile to note that **‘transgender’ is an adjective, not a noun**. Therefore, the headline should refer to the survivor as a transgender woman, or a trans woman, not simply ‘a transgender’.



When sexual violence happens by a member of a dominant community to a marginalized community, highlighting the social positions of both perpetrator and the survivor would help to locate the incident as a part of a larger pattern of systemic vulnerability.



9-year-old dalit girl raped by upper caste youth in Nainbagh



Source: Times of India, May 31, 2019

This headline is a good example of one that highlights the caste positions of both the perpetrators and the survivor, that holds the survivors accountable for sexual abuse and locates the crime in the structure of caste-based sexual abuse.

Sources cited

In their study, Pandit and Gilbertson found that 88% of English articles cited police or legal professionals in their reportage, while only 5.5% of English articles included quotes from gender experts or representatives from organisations working on gender-based violence.

Police and legal authorities often reproduce the same patriarchal mindsets and victim-blaming attitudes. **Quotes by experts can help contextualize the incident as a social issue and can help counter victim blaming attitudes expressed by legal/police authorities.**

Kerala minister says farming could prevent rape

Source: Times of India, Kochi, 14 May, 2017

Even apart from **the headline**, this article also did not counter this inaccurate statement made by a politician or offer rebuttals by experts on gender-based violence, and offered only a simple factual report.

SENSATIONALISM

Sensationalist headlines tend to provoke the reader, highlighting the case's "unusualness" and creating a spectacle out of the crime, by framing the incident of sexual violence as a sexualized event. This can be triggering to survivors of sexual violence in general, and humiliating to the victim/survivor of the specific crime being talked about. This kind of reportage also serves to emphasize the singularity of that particular crime - isolating it from the structural nature of gender-based violence.

The Rohtak Gangrape Horror Gets Uglier, Victim's Food Pipe Was Ripped Out And Gnawing Marks Found On Her Chest!

Source: India Times, 15 May, 2017

When reporting a crime, it is advised to give only as much detail as strictly necessary, without falling back on salacious, provocative or titillating words and images. A play-by-play recounting of the assault, for example, is voyeuristic and unnecessary. **The media must keep the survivor's sentiments in mind while reporting about gender-based violence.**



Source: *Mirror Now News*, 30 October, 2018

In this case, a woman reported harassment by police constables who were forcing her to come to a police station late at night, despite the absence of a female constable, which is mandatory. She stripped in order to protest the incident and prevent the police from forcing her to go. However, in this article, a story of harassment is turned into a provocative headline.

Monster theory of rape

It is also important to note the myth of the 'the monster theory of rape'. By framing perpetrators as inhuman monsters, we take away from the ubiquity of sexual violence, suggesting that sexual violence is unusual rather than systemic (Pandit & Gilbertson). It makes it harder to view rape as a phenomenon that occurs not only in shady alleys and dark corners by strangers who are 'monsters', but in homes, workplaces and families. It also makes it harder for survivors to speak out about rape committed by those viewed as "respectable" members of society - people are likely to say, "But he would never do something as horrific as that!"

'A monster': Singapore man forced wife into prostitution, sexually abused daughter; jailed

Deputy Public Prosecutor said the man forced his wife to advertise her sexual services online using physical and emotional violence "to ensure that she fulfilled a daily quota of customers."

Source: *Hindustan Times*, 20 February, 2019

Trigger warnings

In a world that has too many people that have suffered the trauma of gender-based violence, news should aim to be sensitive to survivors that are reading it. Trigger warnings are a useful tool that can help prepare readers for the content they are about to consume. This can be used on social media copy text before sharing articles on gender-based violence, as well as in the news articles themselves.

VICTIM BLAMING LANGUAGE

Sexual violence in India is largely unreported in part due to the culture of victim-blaming. Survivors of sexual violence are often questioned for what role they played in "inviting" violence upon themselves. Survivors are often shamed into silence, for bringing "dishonour" to the family or community. Media reportage about sexual violence can mirror this attitude. In their study, Pandit and Gilbertson found only 2.6% of English articles explicitly challenged victim blaming.

Extraneous details about the survivor

Details about what the survivor was wearing, what time she was outdoors, her state of inebriation or a history of her past/current relationships are unnecessary in a story that is reporting sexual violence.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Why highlight that in the headline?

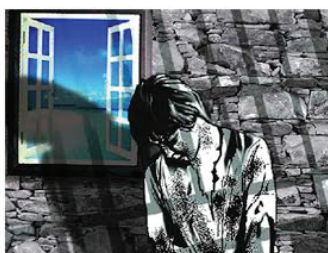
Nagaland woman alleges rape at Deer Park

TNN | Updated: Feb 20, 2017, 08:30 AM IST



Throw Pillows

One-Of-A-Kind Styles Just For You! Stylish Design & Worldwide Shipping



NEW DELHI: A 26-year-old woman from Nagaland has alleged that she was sexually assaulted, beaten up and robbed of her money and iPhone inside Deer Park adjacent to Hauz Khas Village in south Delhi around 1.30am on Sunday by a man who had befriended her.

CCTV footages of several pubs

have been scanned to identify the suspect. A sketch of the offender has been circulated along with CCTV grabs among beat policemen. An FIR under IPC sections of rape, robbery and assault has been registered at Safdarjung Enclave police station. Police suspect a restaurant staff or some local may have committed the crime.

The woman had gone pub-hopping with her sisters and friends around 9pm. The two sisters live in a rented accommodation at [redacted] and work at a spa in [redacted].

The friends went to three pubs at Hauz Khas village ending their revelry at Moonshine restaurant. The sisters were returning home around 1am when they met two men on the street.

The men struck a conversation with them and the elder sister began to walk ahead with one of them who said that he would drop her home. She took a rickshaw with the man and went to her house in Murli. Sources said the man stayed at her house for two hours and was spotted going out of Murli around 2.30am in a CCTV. This woman did not lodge any complaint with the police.

Meanwhile, the other man told the younger sister that he had parked his car on the other side of the park so they could take a short cut through it.

"He told me that there was a beautiful lake in the park and that we could go and sit there for some time and talk. The park gate was locked, so we scaled the wall. Once we were inside the park, he began to sexually assault me," the woman said.

After an argument, the woman screamed at him. A brief scuffle ensued during which she hit the man with a stone. He started bleeding and began to hit me brutally. He snatched my bag and threw it away. After hitting me for five minutes, he took away my iPhone and Rs 500 and left. I then climbed over the wall and came out," the woman added.

Around 1.30am, the area SHO and ACP were on patrol along with other policemen. When they saw her scaling the wall, the SHO asked her why she had gone inside. She narrated her ordeal after which she was taken for medical examination. Three teams launched a search operation, but the suspect had fled by then.

Police are also trying to get a complaint from the older sister after which a separate FIR of rape may be registered at Vasant Vihar police station.

It's high time we learn the concept of visual language.

One sentence = one paragraph! 45 words, seriously?

How specific.

Names of neighbourhoods reveal her identity. This is a criminal offence. Also, irrelevant

Judgemental much?

relevance?

Why do we need these details? All it showcases is how regressive your thinking is.

To whom?

Context? You mean, the other woman does not have a complaint, but the police is forcing her to?

Yes let's make it seem like she did something wrong. So what if she is the one who was raped?

Source: Manisha Pande of NewsLaundry's analysis of Times of India article dated 9 March, 2017

The headline and the extraneous details in this The Times of India article fall back on harmful stereotypes about Northeastern women being "loose", and victim-blaming attitudes that imply that she was at fault for having gone drinking.

By giving reasons for why the rape occurred or unnecessary details about the survivor, the media falls back on a she-asked-for-it mentality. The detail about the illicit affair **in this headline** is very suggestive of a victim blaming mindset.

Woman gang raped in Odisha on suspicion of having illicit affair

Source: Hindustan Times Bhubaneswar, 16 December, 2018

Spectre of 'fake cases'

Most survivors of sexual violence are not believed when they speak out about their experiences, which is another reason that survivors hesitate to report sexual violence. The spectre of 'fake cases' is a popular argument to discredit the very real experience of sexual violence faced by millions.

In order to combat the false perception that most reported cases of sexual violence are 'fake cases', journalists should familiarize themselves with the actual statistics of fake cases in India.

An infamous report by the Delhi Commission for Women in 2014 cited 53% of rape accusations as fake - a number cited ad nauseum by men's rights activists. However, further research found that **any cases that did not go to court were classified as 'false'**. There are many reasons that a case could be dropped before reaching the court - the survivor could be intimidated, threatened, bribed, or otherwise pressured to drop the case, it could have been too expensive or triggering, an out-of-court settlement could have been reached, the woman could have been forced to marry the perpetrator, or it might have been a case of consensual sex being criminalized by parents. Because out-of-court settlements are illegal, the survivors will then redact their previous statements, resulting in a public record of a false allegation (Jolly, Pandit & Gilbertson).

7.7% OF ENGLISH ARTICLES SUGGESTED THAT THE SURVIVOR HAD LIED.

The low rate of conviction ought to be seen as a result of a justice system that fails sexual abuse survivors, rather than a testament to false allegations by women. In their study, Pandit and Gilbertson found that 7.7% of English articles suggested that the survivor had lied.

Use of 'alleged'/putting 'rape' in quotes

Similarly, the use of the term 'alleged rape' or 'claimed that she had been raped', can reinforce the lack of belief in the survivor's testimony. Many news reports also use the term rape in double quotes (Woman was "raped"), implying suspicion of its veracity. While 'alleged' is used to avoid legal pitfalls while the case is still being tried, one can bypass this by using terms like **'man accused of rape'** or **'survivor reported/said that she had been raped'**.

Days after reports that several women were "raped" in Murthal, during the Jat quota protest on February 22, some eyewitnesses have recounted how a group of men "misbehaved" with a few women near the area.

Source: *The New Indian Express*, 12 April, 2019

Use of the term 'admits' or 'confesses'

By using terms like 'woman admits/confesses being raped', we reinforce rape culture by treating rape as something that the victim should be ashamed of, or something she was responsible for. Instead, use neutral language like '**woman shares experience**' or '**woman reports rape**' to describe survivor testimonies.

Use of the term 'corrective rape'

The term "corrective rape" is used to refer to the rape of LGBTQIA+ individuals (or those suspected to be LGBTQIA+) due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, with the intent of forcing the person to conform to heterosexuality.

However, the term 'corrective rape' implies that there is something to be corrected. LGBTQ+ identities however, are completely valid and not in need of "correction", and this should be seen as a hate crime against the community. The term '**homophobic rape**' thus better reflects the nature of the crime.

IDENTIFICATION OF SURVIVOR

Section 228A of the Indian Penal Code makes disclosing the identities of victims of certain offences, including rape, a punishable offence. Any information that could lead to the identification of victims of crimes detailed under **Sections 376, 376A, 376B, 376C** or **376D** is punishable by law. Supreme Court guidelines also recommend that Court documents and FIRs should not disclose the name of the survivor.

This is done in order to prevent survivors of sexual violence from the social ostracism that they routinely face, further victimizing them. The identification of the survivor might further put them at risk of violence.

This rule is waived in case the survivor authorizes the use of her name. In case the victim passes away, or is a minor or has intellectual disabilities, the next of kin may provide this authorization. This authorization must be provided to a recognized State welfare organisation.

Similarly, the **Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act** bars the media from revealing the identity of a minor rape victim - including their name, address, phone number, photograph, school, neighbourhood or any other details leading to the disclosure of identity.

These norms are also reiterated by the **Press Council of India Journalistic Conduct Norms** as well as the **Ministry of Information & Broadcasting**.

The media is free to disclose the name of the perpetrator. However, there is a high incidence of the perpetrator being related to or acquainted to the survivor.

In this case, extraneous detail about the relationship between the perpetrator and the survivor can lead to the survivor's identity being revealed. According to a study conducted by The Hoot that studied 216 English language articles, 32.4% of articles revealed enough details about the perpetrator that made the victim sufficiently vulnerable to identification (Bhagwat).

32.4% OF ARTICLES REVEALED ENOUGH DETAILS ABOUT THE PERPETRATOR THAT MADE THE VICTIM SUFFICIENTLY VULNERABLE TO IDENTIFICATION.

MINIMIZING OR TRIVIALIZING TRAUMA OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

While gender-based violence is staggeringly widespread, the discourse around it is often casual, minimizing the seriousness of the crime and negating survivors' experiences of the trauma it can cause.

Use of the term 'sex scandal'

Rape is non-consensual and forceful sexual intercourse. Terms such as 'sex scandal' being used to describe rape sensationalizes the incident, creating a provocative or titillating spectacle while minimizing the gravity of the situation.

It also casts aspersions on the survivor, leading to victim-blaming.

If the violence falls under the legal definition of the word 'rape', the media must not shy away from the term or use alternative terms such as 'forced/coerced sex' or 'non-consensual sexual intercourse'.

Gender experts have widely called rape an act of exerting dominance and power via sex. Highlighting the 'sex' instead of 'dominance' runs the risk of diminishing the crime of rape.

Lalu flays Nitish over SC order in Muzaffarpur sex scandal

Source: Times of India, 8 February, 2019

Use of the term 'eve-teasing'

Eve-teasing is a South Asian term broadly used to refer to cases of street sexual harassment and molestation. The use of the word 'teasing' trivializes the gravity of these crimes, and engenders the belief that women ought to ignore it and not speak out about it.

Minors cannot give consent

According to the Indian law, those under the age of 18 cannot legally give consent to have sex. While this does make

consensual sexual relationships between minors murky waters, the use of the term 'sex' should not be used to refer to child sexual abuse and child rape.

Indian sentenced to 13-year jail in Singapore for sex with minor

Source: The Tribune, 12 January, 2019

Failing to name 'domestic violence'

While domestic violence is a widespread issue in India, media reports of it often shy away from using the term 'domestic violence'. In their study, Pandit & Gilbertson found articles that elaborately described the crime, but failed to use the term 'domestic violence'. Alternatively, they used the more harmless term 'domestic dispute'. Reports of domestic violence were also found to subtly blame survivors by mentioning details like the survivor not having reported previous violence, or having stayed in the relationship despite previous violence.



By ignoring the generic term 'domestic violence', the media shies away from indicating the systemic nature of domestic violence. In their study, Pandit & Gilbertson found a surprising absence of media coverage of domestic violence. While most gender-based violence is perpetrated by intimate partners or family members, only 19.2% of English articles reported violence done by a family member. In contrast, NCRB data shows that relative-perpetrated crime is 32.6% of crimes against women in India (which is also a lowball figure, as 99.1% cases of sexual violence in India go unreported).

JUSTIFYING THE PERPETRATOR'S ACTIONS

Perpetrators of sexual violence benefit from rape culture - their actions are minimized, justified or ignored entirely. The "boys will be boys" narrative runs deep and perpetrators are often sympathized with. It is important to keep in mind that **sexual violence is purely the fault of the perpetrator**. By blaming violence on a troubled past, alcoholism or the perpetrator being rejected in a love affair, we feed into a rape culture that does not hold men accountable for their actions.

Romantic rejection as an excuse for violence

The "jilted lover" narrative is popular in Indian media. Many men in India do commit heinous crimes of sexual violence after being rejected - it is a symptom of the larger culture of male entitlement in which men believe they are 'owed' the attention and affection of women, and quickly turn violent when rejected. However, without this additional context, the 'jilted lover' narrative is an easy way to spin a sympathetic narrative about the perpetrator and blame the survivor for the violence.

Jilted lover commits suicide after killing beloved in UP

Gonda, Apr 7 (UNI) A jilted lover burnt his beloved by pouring petrol on her and later committed suicide under Chapia police station area in the district on Sunday.

In the incident mother of the girl also died when she got burnt while trying to save her daughter.

Police said here that the incident occurred in Sakadarpur village when one Sanjay Gupta (25) poured petrol on his lover Anju (22).

The mother Gulabo Devi (50) heard crying inside her house, she rushed to save her daughter but instead she also got burnt.

Source: United News of India, 7 April, 2019

In the article above, the perpetrator is painted as a tragic lovelorn hero instead of a murderer.

Use of the term ‘roadside Romeo’

Like ‘jilted lover’, the use of the term ‘roadside Romeo’ to describe sexual harassers minimizes the seriousness of their actions and treats them with benevolence.

Morning Breaking: Daughter, mother beat up roadside romeo in Madhya Pradesh's Hoshangabad

Source: Zee News, July 5 2018

Absence of perpetrator in headlines: the use of passive voice

Most headlines of sexual violence begin with the words “Woman raped”. This phrasing places the focus of the crime on the survivor and invisibilizes the actions of the perpetrator. It also implies passivity on the part of the survivor. An active voice articulation of the same – **“man rapes woman”** would place the responsibility squarely on the perpetrator.

It is even more important to place the perpetrator in full view in headlines in cases of institutional or State-sponsored violence, for e.g., the sexual violence perpetrated by the Army or police forces in conflict zones.

Woman out to attend nature’s call raped

Source: The Hindu, April 21 2019



Rashtrapati Bhavan staff rapes woman inside staff quarters

Source: India Today, April 11 2019



Casting perpetrators in sympathetic light

The media often delves into the background of the perpetrator, which might be necessary for the story. However, background information that highlights the perpetrator’s good nature, poignant backstory or difficult background creates sympathy for the perpetrator and can consequently put the blame on the victim for “ruining his life” by speaking out about sexual violence.

Thrissur murder: How can a calm person like Nidheesh do that? Ask friends, neighbours

According to relatives, Neethu used to share each and everything with the relatives.

Apr 5, 2019, 12:53 PM IST

T- T T+



Thrissur: Neethu who was burnt to death by a young man for rejecting his proposal had a painful life.

Source: Mathrubhumi English, 5 April, 2019

TREATING SURVIVORS AS HELPLESS BEINGS

A society that perceives women as the gatekeepers of honour also treats survivors of rape as irreparably tarnished. The aftermath of rape can be as traumatizing as the rape itself, where survivors are treated as passive, helpless beings who will forever be viewed as victims. Sensitive news coverage can combat this by treating survivors of rape with dignity and agency.

Victim vs survivor

The use of the term victim can reiterate feelings of helplessness and a lack of agency. The term survivor is preferred as it connotes a sense of resilience and strength. However, make sure the survivor approves of the language being used to describe them. The [news clipping above](#) is a good example of countering this perception of rape survivors.

Don't want to spend my life hearing 'bechari rape victim': MP survivor

Source: The Indian Express, 20 June, 2019.

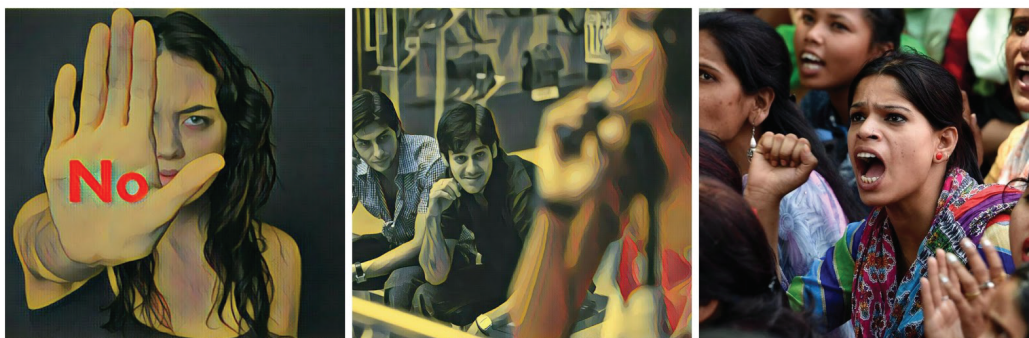
Images

Stock images of sexual violence in the media often depict women as covering away from looming hands, or running away in tears from a larger-than-life shadow, or being physically assaulted and silenced. Most of these visuals also portray conventionally beautiful women, adding an element of sexualisation to a horrific crime.



These images reinforce the notion that women are victims who are helpless in the face of sexual predation. They might also be exceedingly triggering for survivors of rape and other sexual crimes.

Instead of these, [use images that portray strength and resilience](#). Use images that protest sexual violence, such as those from protests or organized women's movements.



The first two images from L-R are from Breakthrough India's 'Redraw Misogyny' campaign, that created alternate images to depict gender-based violence. The middle image places the focus of gender based violence on the perpetrators instead of the victim. The rightmost image is from a protest against rape.

WHO DOES THE MEDIA REPORT ABOUT?



URBAN BIAS

In Pandit & Gilbertson's study, 93.4% of articles published about gender-based violence were located in urban areas, indicating a heavy urban bias. In a paper studying the popularity that the 2012 Delhi gang rape case received, a Times of India reporter is quoted saying that media offices give stories attention if they are about 'PLUs' - People Like Us. With newspapers being staffed largely by urban-dwelling, upper-caste and middle/upper class staffers, stories that receive coverage are overwhelmingly of victims/survivors that match these social parameters. This urban bias means that thousands of rapes from other parts of the country, of survivors that are not upper-caste and middle/upper-class, go unreported (Jolly).

STRANGER DANGER

Joanna Jolly points to one of the key reasons that 2012 Delhi gang rape case received so much coverage was because it reinforced the myth of "stranger danger" - i.e., rapes happen by unknown men outside the house, leading to the "solution" being that women should stay at home in order to avoid getting raped. This is at odds with reality, with NCRB data showing that 94.6% of reported rapes happening by someone that is known to the survivor, such as partners, neighbours, family members and colleagues (Jolly).

Men from marginalized communities, like Dalit and Muslim men are also implicated in this 'stranger danger' framing, seen as more dangerous and violent than men from dominant castes and religions.

94.6% OF REPORTED RAPES HAPPEN BY SOMEONE THAT IS KNOWN TO THE SURVIVOR.

Gilbertson and Pandit also found a glaring absence of media reportage that characterized domestic violence as domestic violence, indicative of this need to hush up violence that occurs within homes. The media should be careful to not under-represent cases of familial violence, so as to not perpetuate the myth of 'stranger danger', which absolves families, homes and workplaces of responsibility as being sites of gender-based violence.

CASE STUDIES


POLLACHI SEXUAL ABUSE CASE

The Pollachi sexual abuse and blackmail case made headlines recently. A group of four men were accused of carrying on a sexual abuse and blackmail racket for over seven years, where they would befriend women over Facebook, get them to agree to meet them at a private location, and then forcibly strip and assault them, while taking videos that would be used to blackmail survivors into silence later.

The handling of the case also made headlines for its insensitivity. First, the police superintendent revealed the name of the survivor at a press conference - a crime under the IPC and one that makes the survivor additionally vulnerable, while also deterring other survivors from speaking out. Next, a Tamil digital media platform released a clip of the video on its website after digitally masking the face of the survivor - making a horrific crime a lewd and voyeuristic incident that made a mockery of the privacy, dignity and mental health of the survivors.

Scandal that broke Pollachi's peace — and innocence

A Subburaj, Nivedha Selvam and V Mayilvaganan | TNN | Updated: Mar 25, 2019, 14:41 IST

POLLACHI (COIMBATORE): Pollachi is a small town, some 45 km south of Coimbatore. It's a place where nothing much happens. So when its residents learnt of a group of men that had been systematically targeting women, ensnaring them, sexually abusing them and then blackmailing the  into silence, they were stunned. "In Pollachi?" That was what many asked.

That could perhaps be one of the reasons why the women so easily trusted the predators.

Source: Times of India, March 25, 2019

The clipping above is problematic on several counts. First, the headline turns a case of systematic sexual abuse and blackmail into a salacious 'scandal'. The highlighted text further casts a victim-blaming tone - implicitly stating that these women ought not to have trusted these predators, thereby placing the blame of the crime on their 'naivete'. (This is echoed in the headline's claim of this case breaking the town's 'innocence'.)

This article chooses to focus on the perpetrator's alleged innocence, which then assumes that the survivors are lying. In a society where speaking out against sexual violence is already difficult, these takes are unnecessary at best and harmful at worst - especially in this case, where the police's illegal revelation of the name of the survivor has already made it harder for other survivors of this blackmail racket to speak out.

The headline of **this article** blatantly implies that the survivor who spoke out against the blackmail and abuse ring was lying. The complainant, in reality, had always maintained that she hadn't been raped, but had been stripped naked and filmed without her consent. By twisting these words to say that 'she had not been sexually abused', while also putting 'sexual abuse' in quotes, the headline casts her testimony as falsehood.

The images of the perpetrators included also shows one of them in distress, further depicts them as wrongfully accused and in need of sympathy.

Pollachi sex assault case: My son is innocent, says accused Thirunavukarasu's mother

Source: The New Indian Express, 15 March 2019

Exclusive: Pollachi 'Sexual Abuse' Complainant Says She Was Not Sexually Abused

Anand Kumar
13 Mar, 2019 at 18:19 PM



In an exclusive interview to The Lede, she revealed that while she herself was not abused by the gang of four, there are multiple victims who need help



Source: The Lede, March 13, 2019

BADAUN RAPE CASE - IMAGES

On May 27 2014, three men from a dominant caste kidnapped two minor Dalit girls in Badaun, Haryana, gang raped them and murdered them. They were found hanging from a tree. The image of the two girls found hanging went viral, with media outlets posting the images without blurring or hiding the faces of the girls, a blatant violation of Section 228A and that of the dignity of the victims, whose bodies' images, in this state of violation, were splashed all over the internet.

In a statement written by several Dalit and anticaste activists, this disregard for the dignity of Dalit and Adivasi victims' bodies was highlighted. They argued that the media was much more sensitive in respecting the privacy of dominant caste women, while the continuous dissemination of images of violated Dalit and Adivasi bodies normalized the violence carried out upon them (Savari).

HOW TO SENSITIVELY INTERVIEW SURVIVORS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



On 30 July 2016, a gang of 7 men accosted a mother-daughter duo in Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, and gang-raped them. What followed for the survivors was even more trauma, as hordes of media professionals descended upon their house asking for interviews, until the father of the teen survivor broke down on live television, begging the media to stay away. *“How many times should I repeat what happened with my daughter and my wife? They have been raped. What else do you want to know? My daughter was better till last night. With all the people visiting, she is now being asked to recall everything again. She has fallen sick again. She cannot stop crying. Please leave us alone. I wish we had never returned,”* said the father. The video of him crying went viral (Hindustan Times).

When the media interviews survivors of gender-based violence, they must keep in mind that they are asking survivors or their families to recount an extremely traumatic experience. It is imperative that this be done in as sensitive a manner as possible, to avoid exacerbating the situation and triggering survivors, many of whom might be in a fragile mental health state.

- Make sure to create a **comfortable, safe and relaxed environment** to conduct the interview.
- Female survivors of sexual violence might be more comfortable in the presence of women, no matter how sensitive the male interviewer. Try to make sure that **a woman conducts, or is present during the interview.**
- Since a media interaction might be a stressful experience for a survivor, try to **send a list of questions in advance so they know what to expect.** If this is not possible, try to mention what questions you will ask before the interview begins so that they have some time to be mentally prepared to answer them.
- While a survivor is narrating their experience, **practice active and non judgmental listening.** Do not cut them off in the middle of their narration due to lack of time or any other reason - being cut off in the middle of recounting a traumatic experience can cause additional hurt.
- **Respect the survivor’s boundaries.** Do not keep questioning them on something if they seem uneasy or state that they do not wish to speak about it. Respect their right to refuse the interview altogether.

- **Phrase questions that are rooted in compassion.** Make sure the questions do not attack the survivor or place doubt in their version of events. Questions should not be victim blaming or voyeuristic in nature.
- **Do not make assumptions** about how a survivor “ought” to react when recounting their experience. People have different ways of coping with trauma, and there is no right or wrong way to do so. Do not minimize the impact that sexual violence may have because a survivor is not as distraught as you expect them to be
- Trauma has many consequences, one of them being fragmented memories or blocking out the memory completely. **Do not question the veracity of the account** if the survivor’s testimony is contradictory or lacking.
- Offer to **run a draft of the article** by the survivor before it is sent for publishing. Make sure they are aware and consent to the way that the situation is portrayed. Inform the survivor exactly in what forms and where the interview will be published (i.e., if its local, national or international news, whether it will be in print or in digital media, etc.)
- If possible, **direct the survivor** to local NGOs or organizations that might be able to help them legally or psychologically.

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