

Printed from

**THE TIMES OF INDIA**

# Life after rape

TNN | Aug 7, 2016, 12.19 AM IST



**T**he outrage over sexual crimes has risen, the terminology has changed from victim to survivor but picking up the pieces hasn't got any easier.

"What would you like to do to the criminals?" a television reporter prods the woman who was raped in Bulandshahr. "I'd like them to hang, I'd like to hang them myself and gouge out their eyes," she says mechanically through the green dupatta veiling her face, seated in her living room in Noida. The reporter persists: "You want to punish them yourself?" He seems to want to wrench another sensational proclamation from her but runs aground. In the dead air, the chorus of protesters/spectators gathered outside the house is heard to rise. "Please leave us alone," the

husband pleads to the cameras.

Here's the irony. While the outrage against sexual crimes is mounting, so too is the callousness with which survivors are treated - harangued by the media, police and politicians, treated coldly by the medico-legal system, and blackballed by people around them. "Everyone in our locality knows about the incident. How will we be able to live with respect there?" the harassed husband demanded.

## The social assault

Given our relatively young history of confronting sexual crimes, neither the survivor nor society knows how to respond and recover from them. Survivors are pushed to relocate, restrict their mobility and discontinue education. A young call centre executive raped by a stranger in Bengaluru was warned by her landlord she'd have to vacate the flat because he didn't want to

deal with cops at his door. A survivor in Kolkata was asked to leave a restaurant when she went to dine there with her daughters. A family in Hyderabad was uninvited to family functions after their daughter was raped. In Delhi, a woman was disowned by her husband after she was raped by an acquaintance.

"Even today, there is little psychological support or validation of the survivor's feelings and experiences; her therapeutic needs are not met," points out Aarthi Chandrasekhar, research officer at Cehat, a Mumbai-based organisation working to improve comprehensive healthcare response to survivors of violence. "Forensic biases such as comments on hymen, vaginal elasticity and the past history of the survivor persist. An insensitive response leaves the survivor feeling responsible for the act, preventing her from seeking further care and support," she says.

### **Normalcy is a mask**

According to NCRB data the number of reported rapes has risen: 9% for women, and 11.3% for children in 2014 over the previous year. New laws like POSCO and The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act have no doubt brought more offenders into the net. Of the reported 36,735 adult rapes and 13,766 child rapes in 2014, only a fraction have access to therapy that would help them deal with the stress (often manifest as Rape Trauma Syndrome).

Yogesh Kumar, programme coordinator at Association for Development in Delhi, says survivors often stop coming to them for counselling after six months. "Sometimes, when we land up at their homes to inquire why, neighbours say they left without leaving behind an address," he says. In their new environment they try to suppress memories and carry on with a mask of normalcy, but symptoms like depression, insomnia or panic attacks can afflict them for years.

### **Shame the rapist**

The absence of empathy stems from the continued stigmatization of sexual crimes, which shames the victim not the offender. This is so strong that people don't want to talk about it, says Vidya Reddy, executive director of Tulir, a Chennai NGO working against child sexual abuse. "Even people writing about their own experiences of abuse online do it anonymously. Why don't we ever have a name or a face to a story, when it's no fault of theirs? Ironically, it's the perpetrators whose faces are masked when they come to court — why? In their rape porn videos they all grin for the camera," Reddy notes.

The law decrees that the identity of a victim ought to be concealed to preserve her dignity but that is rendered meaningless by an intrusive media and a lascivious social media that circulates the victim's personal details, and now, even videos of the assault. "Circulating such videos on social media further stigmatizes the survivor. It also creates a sense of despair which may result in suicidal thoughts and attempts as well," says Chandrasekhar.