

The Roots of Rape in New Delhi and Globally

by Stephanie Cholensky



This December, a young medical student suffered fatal internal injuries after a brutal gang rape in New Delhi. Outrage over the attack has sparked massive protests across the country and has launched women's rights to the forefront of public attention.

These protests are of historical importance to India, not only because of their scope and size, but because so many women and men who never aggressively questioned the sexual status quo are now in the streets demanding answers to important questions about patriarchy in our society. For women in India and all over the world, the latest attacks are just an extreme example of what we have to live with every day. Sexual harassment, groping and unwelcome sexual advances are a common occurrence for women in public.

A young lawyer from Agra described to reporters how every day she faces a gauntlet of harassment on her way to and from work, and that bystanders rarely intervene. "For most men, any woman who is out of the four walls of her house is fair game" she says. "It's all a power trip" says another woman who carried pins on the bus in

order to discourage men from harassing her.

In a country where a rape occurs every 20 minutes, yet the majority of rapes go unreported, this attention is long overdue. An undercover investigation by the Indian Weekly Tehlka gave insight into why so many women fear the justice system that is supposed to protect them. Hidden cameras caught dozens of police officials stating that in their opinion almost all rape cases they have seen are either fake or the fault of the victim. These officials claim everything from dressing in a certain way, being in public alone, dancing, or being seen out with friends at night as a clear indication of consent by the victim.

"No rape in Delhi can happen without the girl's provocation."

- Sunil Kumar, New Delhi police inspector

Unfortunately, they are not alone in blaming the victims of sexual assault. Women who seek refuge in hospitals or turn to family members often are treated callously and with little sympathy because of the stigma and shame attached to rape victims.

Protesters are calling for important changes such as the dismissal of law enforcement and health care providers that act in such a way toward victims, increasing the amount of women on the police force, strengthening sexual harassment laws and enforcement, boosting the conviction rate for the rapists that are brought to trial well beyond the current 35%, and creating support services for rape survivors, but this only a start.

The real change must be within the mindset of society. This is a global problem, just one of the many symptoms of the disease of patriarchy and systemic oppression of women for centuries. We must demand complete equality for all women, and for all people from all systems of oppression.

These systems of control are not natural; they have to be taught. Therefore, we are always one generation from achieving a better world. If we stand together, we can change the world as it is now, and ensure these poisonous ideas are not inherited by the next generation. Hopefully, these protests will lead to meaningful and long lasting change in oppressive patriarchal cultures in India and beyond. Hopefully, this young woman's death will not have been in vain.