

Living in a Man's World

THE “TO-DO LIST”



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She/Her
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Content Warning: Sexual Assault

“Your shorts can’t be too short.” Check. “You can’t be out too late at night.” Check. “Make sure to be respectful to a man trying to talk to you.” Check. Check. Check.

What can we as women change about ourselves to avoid being sexually assaulted? This mindset has been engraved into the heads of young girls as soon as they are able to pick out their own clothes or go anywhere unattended by their parents. Reinforced behavior regarding rape is caused by limited consequences for the perpetrator

that often lead to decreased reporting from victims. Sexual violence is not limited to one area of the world, yet there seems to be an epidemic of sexual assault against women in India.

The National Crime Records Bureau of India reported 32,033 rape cases in 2019—that translates to 88 cases a day—yet this was estimated to be just 10% of the actual rapes that occurred, according to the Times of India. The issue at hand requires understanding the central cause of India’s rape problem. At its root, women in India face a high risk of sexual assault due to deeply engrained historical and prevailing attitudes that they are inferior to men.

The prevalence of sexual violence in India is formed from generations of perpetuating the ideal that women are second class citizens who deserve to be shamed for being sexually assaulted. Those accused of rape are frequently protected from allegations by police, politicians and family members—or, as is the case frequently, the family members

are the assailants.

Unwilling sexual advancements between a wife and a husband are considered a crime in almost every country of the world; India is one of the 36 that still have not considered it a criminal offense, according to Sarthak Makkar, writer for the Harvard Human Rights Journal. In the 1860s, when the Indian Penal Code was drafted, a woman was not considered to be a separate entity from her husband. This prevented thousands of victims from speaking out about their sexual assault due to beliefs that they were not even their own person. Women have been conditioned to form merging identities with their husbands in order to limit their abilities to speak for themselves.

A power-hungry attitude from politicians and law enforcement tends to condemn women for acting a certain way or being at the wrong place, rather than educating men on respecting the women they encounter. The Case of Mathura in 1980 sparked anger and debate in relation to how much control can really be left to law enforcement officers. Mathura was 14 years old when she accused two policemen of raping and molesting her in the town of Desaiganj. According to University of Bristol research fellow Geetanjali Gangoli, no court had believed she was telling the truth and one even stated, “She is a shocking liar whose testimony is riddled with falsehood and improbabilities.

She is so habituated to sexual intercourse that she could not have been so overpowered by fear that she could not resist.”

Mathura had figuratively worn a scarlet letter on her chest as the stigma of rape in India was monumental at the time. Yet, this case was one of the first to set in motion discussions about social and legal attitudes in India that saw sexual violence for what it really was: a refusal to accept the bodily autonomy of a woman.

As detailed in the documentary “India’s Daughter,” the case surrounding Jyoti Singh confirmed the perspective that sexual assault in India is not just a crime of the past, but something that continuously places fear into women’s minds and limitations of their lives. Singh was a 23-year-old medical student entering a bus at 8:30 p.m. after watching a movie with her male friend. A group of men on the bus, including the bus driver, took turns raping Singh and left her beaten, bitten and violated. One of the guilty displayed an unaffected demeanor when recalling the events as he tried to justify what had happened to Singh: “A decent girl won’t roam around at nine at night”; “A girl is far more responsible for a rape than a boy”; “She would not have died if she hadn’t tried to fight back.”

This perspective is shared by many men in India, who believe that a woman should take what she gets since a male has the power to do as he pleases: an attitude fostered by the society he grew up in. Unjust opinions on what masculinity consists of are formed for a male at a young age, as his well-being, opportunities and future are placed ahead

of females—even if they are in the same family.

Sexual assault in India is not just a legal issue, but a social one. A crucial aspect of decreasing gender-based violence is to put forth tough laws that actively work to address the crimes of sexual assault. It is imperative that these laws are present to support equality rather than the unequal distribution of power. In addition, education must be at the forefront of this issue to ensure that all individuals are able to understand the existence of violence toward women in India. A shift in the culture needs to include withdrawing from the belief that men can do whatever they want to women, and this is a belief that is important to teach at a young age. True gender equality can only occur when women are not seen as existing solely for the pleasure of men.

Gender-based crime in India has been an issue for decades, and it continues to require serious attention. Women should not be required to place limitations on their lives in order to ensure that they are not sexually assaulted. There is no sexual-assault-prevention to-do-list. Instead, there must be a system behind them that will fight for justice and assure women that they are recognized as valued, respected and powerful in any society they exist in.