

How women in India are programmed to remain silent about sexual abuse

Most women are victims of child sexual abuse, they fear speaking up against men in positions of power even later in life.

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The [Harvey Weinstein](#) case of serial sex abuse of the who's who of Hollywood female actors including such [A-listers](#) as Angelina Jolie, Gwyneth Paltrow, Cara Delevigne and Ashley Judd among others has brought in a storm in the US film industry but the fact remains that many of the victims choose to remain quiet for decades.

If this is the case in the US, where women are known to be more empowered, the situation in more conservative societies is bound to be worse. The problem worsens when someone who has been abused in their childhood is sexually assaulted.

A Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) survivor is especially unable to stand up against abuse and has big issues with setting boundaries particularly when the person making advances is in a position of power and authority such as a professor making advances to a college student.

Well-known Bangalore based psychiatrist Meenakshi Kirtane, also the founder of Maanas, a counselling and psychotherapy centre said, "We see several cases of young women who are unable to speak up against sexual assault and

molestation by their professors or people in positions of authority like their bosses. Many of them are victims of CSA and therefore have boundary issues."

The problem is compounded by the fact that in India over 47 per cent girls are victims of CSA, as per the study of [Child Abuse: India 2007](#) commissioned by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, government of India.

In conservative cultures, like in India, children are taught to respect elders and their authority. This culture prevents children from being able to speak up against abuse but this is also the reason why many women are unable to speak up against sexual assault and rape, especially if the man in question is powerful and well-respected. The more a molester or rapist is accomplished, the more difficult it becomes for someone to speak up against them.

Women fear that speaking up would invite criticism and many would not believe the victim, which we often see. With the increase in trolling on social media, the scale of the problem has increased manifold. For instance, when rape charges were levelled against senior journalist Tarun Tejpal, the first reaction from many was [disbelief](#). Powerful men have kept women quiet for years in this way.

We have also seen the case of [Dr Rajendra Pachauri](#). Due to his standing in the world, the allegations of sexual harassment by his female colleague were not taken seriously in the beginning. People even jump to defend a powerful person completely discrediting a woman who has mustered up all the courage she could to speak up. Delay in reporting also adds to people not taking a victim's words seriously.



Women have internalised the myth that it is their responsibility to prevent rape, in case of sexual abuse the onus is on them.

Jamila Koshy, Chennai-based psychiatrist said, "This is the bind that women are in. Right from childhood, women are taught that the onus is on them to prevent rape, whether it is by covering up properly or by avoiding travelling alone in the night or various such precautions, they are told that it is their responsibility to protect themselves. This has been internalised by women. They often think that they need to prevent being sexually assaulted or raped. If they are raped or assaulted, they blame themselves. They think of ways in which they could have prevented the attack on them. Maybe they should have not gone out, maybe they should have done this or that. It is endless."

She said that till women absolve themselves of this guilt they will not be able to speak up against sexual assault or rape. "You can only speak up boldly when you are sure you are not to blame for the sexual harassment or rape," she said.

In a patriarchal society such as India, it gets very complicated. First you are taught to respect elders and people in authority. Then if the accused is a person

who has also been involved in doing good works in society or has some other accomplishments, it becomes difficult for people to believe that he could be a sexual predator, like we have seen many, many cases both in India and abroad.

Recently, [Ronan Farrow](#) wrote about the scandal of his family when one of his siblings Dylan Farrow accused their father and acclaimed film-maker [Woody Allen](#) of sexually molesting her when she was seven. The female actors, who were asked why they continued to work with him, replied that these were only allegations which were not proven and that it was a family matter.

Just like in Weinstein's case, Woody Allen's public relations machinery went into an overdrive to discredit both Dylan and her mother Mia Farrow is what Ronan said in his articles. Similarly, in Pachauri's case, the defence has been that his personal computer, mobiles and laptops were used by someone else and that he didn't send the emails harassing his female colleague.

In the case of Mahmood Farooqui, accused of rape, the court observed that the complainant had not sufficiently communicated her unwillingness to Farooqui and so he was acquitted of rape. Again Farooqui's movie *Peepli Live* was highly appreciated and his efforts to revive the art of Dastangoi has been much appreciated so he is also a person whose work has earned his much acclaim and bringing charged against him would require courage on the part of the complainant.

Another issue which has been observed in the Harvey Weinstein case is that though the female actors were sexually abused, many of them continued to maintain relationship with him for years and one even said she had an affair with him later. This continued friendship with a sexual predator also discredits the accusers in the eyes of the public, which doesn't see that a powerful person has many ways to get his victims to comply with his wishes and also to make them believe that nothing actually happened. Some of them felt guilty but they also doubted themselves and most importantly kept quiet for years fearing that their careers would be ruined.

But the bottom line remains that no one can be seen to be above sexual aggression just because of his achievements and society has to get over such misogyny. We need to start teaching men that women's bodies are not

something that they can grab whenever the desire strikes them. Their willingness or otherwise has to be respected.

Parents and society have to start teaching boys and men that they need to start respecting women and their bodies. They need to stop being the predatory cavemen of a bygone era.

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