

Sexual assault survivors need long-term support

Prevent secondary victimisation by dealing with their emotional traumas and social ostracisation



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Though states have come up with victim-friendly laws to encourage participation in the criminal justice process, many survivors of sexual assault feel further traumatised by the way justice is dispensed. This reduces their willingness to come forward and report these crimes. A case in point is the recent one of a woman raped by three men, who also killed her 8-month-old child by throwing her out of a moving vehicle. The woman could only tell her family about her assault much later, and reported it to the police after that.

In fact, even those cases that get as far as criminal proceedings often see the process itself becoming the source of another kind of victimisation. In legal parlance, this is called secondary victimisation. An important thing to consider in this regard is whether the survivor is satisfied with the severity of punishment meted out to the perpetrator. There is nothing worse for a victim than to feel that the perpetrator has got away lightly. In fact, survivors often feel that they are being treated worse than the perpetrator when it comes to dispensing justice. This is especially true in cases of sexual assault.

Agencies set up to assist the survivors, ironically, also have policies and procedures that lead to further or secondary victimisation. The first logical step in case of a sexual assault is to approach the medical agencies. But the questioning procedure and tests the victim is put through can be more traumatic than the offence itself.

The next step is approaching the police; there have been several instances of debasement, and insensitive remarks against the survivor (for example asking what kind of clothes they were wearing at the time of offence) that lead to secondary victimisation (the police's refusal to file the case saying it is not serious enough, or worse, casting moral aspersions on the survivor).

SURVIVORS OF VIOLENT CRIMES LIKE SEXUAL ASSAULT OFTEN BECOME PARANOID AND SEE THEMSELVES AS COMPLETELY VULNERABLE; THEY MAY ALSO LOSE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL STABILITY

Clearly, more often than not, the remedy is worse than the disease. It is therefore important that we pay due attention to secondary victimisation that takes place very often. Compensation should not only encompass monetary relief, but should also focus on soothing the mental and psychological trauma resulting from the crime. This is lacking in the discourse on sexual assault today. It overlooks the fact that the crime affects the survivor's social relationships—with friends, family, colleagues—and brings about a change in the survivor's psyche. Survivors of violent crimes like sexual assault often become paranoid and see themselves as completely vulnerable. This adversely affects the quality of their life. Survivors also tend to lose personal and professional stability, leading to reduction in financial capacity as well. But this aspect is generally ignored. Quantifying emotional effects is complex and problematic.

We need to devise policies and methods to reduce this victimisation. This could be done by sensitising policy makers and making them realise that trauma associated with an offence extends far beyond the actual commission. The government has some provisions for addressing the concerns of victims, but these are hardly adequate and often leave out those from poor socio-economic backgrounds. What we need is to address the difficulties faced by survivors and prevent secondary victimisation. These policies should keep in mind the main causes of secondary victimisation—(1) the acceptance of stereotypes about offences that lead to treating survivors in an insensitive manner; (2) officials refusing to provide assistance and contributing to delay, and (3) assistance offered is insensitive and invasive.

Secondary victimisation can be prevented by supporting and empowering survivors in all possible ways. This can be achieved by prioritising and targeting efforts. It is essential to involve the survivors in post-victimisation intervention as it gives them a framework for their recovery process. In fact, their non-involvement results in further victimisation. Lack of sensitivity by officials may influence the survivor's willingness to report crimes. Therefore, the need for sensitisation training for officials. But none of these attempts at preventing secondary victimisation is possible without the active support of people in power. They have to be the agents of change. They must work closely with the community and society. The focus of the victimisation prevention must be on the well-being and social integration of the survivor.

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