

The Pamphleteer

The women's news flyer delivered to your doorstep.

How Do I Talk To My Children About Rape?

A few years ago while conducting a seminar for young girls on sexual violence, I asked them to share what they feared most about the environment in which they existed. Several of the young women shared that they feared they would be raped someday. One of them said specifically that thinking about the fact that the juvenile accused in the Nirbhaya gangrape case had been released made her feel anxious to walk the streets of Delhi because she felt like he might be anywhere around her, watching her, and she could be his next victim. A part of the seminar was to ask the young women what they thought rape was and based on their answers it became increasingly clear that they were unaware of what even sex actually entails.

Think about that for a moment.

In our country, right now, there are young girls (and boys) who have learnt about rape before we have even had the chance to give them a sexual education. The first information they have received about sex is evidence of rape around them and warnings that it might happen to them. There are adolescents walking around in fear of being raped, without even knowing what rape might actually entail. There are young girls whose lives are governed by the rules that are extended to them in the name of safety and they don't even know who it is that might attack them, for what or why. It gives me pause each time I consider this. I understand how this happens, I am a parent, and I know that these issues may be difficult to discuss with our children. While part of the problem is that we have been told repeatedly by various layers of social messaging that sex and all allied subjects should be shameful and difficult to discuss, the problem is actually bigger than that. In many ways in the past five years, rape culture has been forced onto our dinner tables whether we like it or not. We have had to something to our children as silence becomes less and less of an option, but what do we say? That is the bigger problem. Many of us would love to have the discussion with our children, but how do we do it?

How do we discuss rape and sexual violence with our kids?

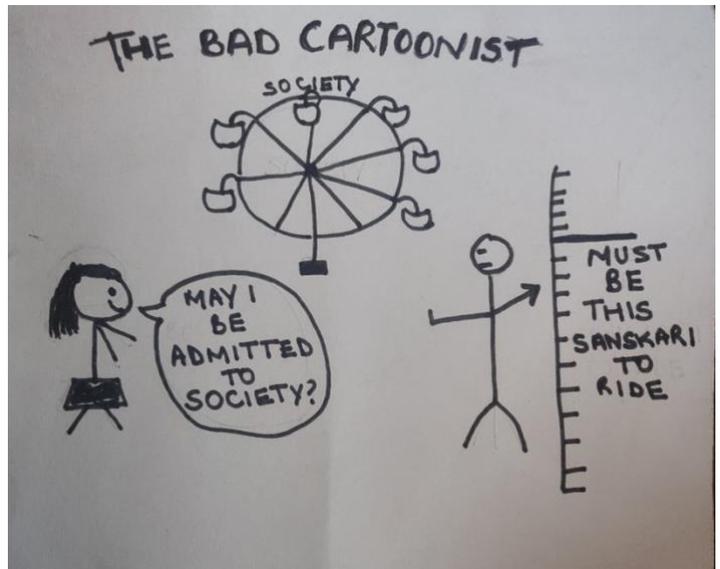
Talk about sex before you talk about violence. A child's formative sexual education should not contain ideas of violence because that like will become associated with their understanding of their own sexuality. Don't tell them, as many of our parents did, that this is a difficult discussion to have and as much as you can try to work past your own discomfort on the subject to keep it from passing on. Often children learn to understand situations by body language and tone, and of they pick up on your discomfort they will memorise sex as an uncomfortable subject. Try to end the cycle of shame.

Introduce rape and sexual violence as a subject that is a valuable part of discourse as opposed to a subject they need to understand to keep themselves safe. Introduce it like you would any other criminal activity like theft or murder, and not as something that "just happens" in society. Teach them to be wary, not terrified of the world. The semantics of gendered violence necessitate that you must discuss the patriarchy, misogyny and sexism with your children and ultimately it is better for them if you have these discussions than if you tell them not to wear short skirts.

Don't limit the subject to a single discussion. Don't sit your kids down for one monumental discussion, instead open up a discourse on the subject which allows them to internalise things, develop ideas and come back to you with questions.

Don't let their first information about rape come from the news, and if it does address it more regularly at home from that point onwards than they might encounter in the news. Rape is a difficult topic and to a child who may not have a physical measure of sexuality yet, it can be difficult to understand the impetus for this crime and the nature of this violence. It is even more difficult for them to understand how politics might be connected to various highly publicised cases of rape, delink these things so the child may comprehend these things without bias.

Be careful as to how you explain the why of rape. Any child is bound to wonder, but why does this happen? This is an important question and it is vital to teach them how to place the onus of responsibility for a crime. Rape happens because the criminal intent exists to commit sexual violence fuelled by the mostly-male entitlement to the female body. This is the why of rape.



Represent the victims of rape more thoroughly and fairly than you do aspects of violence, law, safety or the media. Don't tell children that victims of rape are "broken" or won't ever be "whole again". Victims of rape have undergone trauma and a confiscation of their physical autonomy, they are not broken. They might be dealing with trauma but they are not un-whole. It might have severe effects on their mental health and may cause PTSD that lasts for years. It is important to use the correct terms so your children learn to empathy for victims as opposed to fear of predators.

Don't teach your kids to blame victims. Even in subtle ways, this can be dangerous. Statistically, rape victims are just as likely as society to blame themselves or the circumstances of rape for what happened as opposed to the predator.

Teach your kids how to identify predatory behaviour and red flags. Instead of teaching them karate (though of course, teach them karate too, just because it's awesome and cool), teach them how to know when someone is making them uncomfortable and that they have the power to speak up and remove themselves from the situation. Sexual predators tend to prey on women and children who seem not to have an open outlet for discussion or a stable home life. They will make their victims feel special, try to alienate them from friends, take an active interest in their lives and test them by asking them to hide things or keep small secrets. Teach them to speak openly the moment they feel uncomfortable in a situation and believe them when they tell you about it. If you are in a position to do so, take action against this behaviour towards your child immediately so that your child knows that they can speak up anytime there is cause to do so and the situation will be rectified. Make sure your children know they are supported.

Learn together. There are many gaps in our knowledge of sexual violence. There is a tendency amongst adults to only study subjects when they are fed to us by the news or pop culture, and while we may know major cases of rape that have occurred around us, we are often without real resources. Find out more about rape culture, misogyny, rape law, victim services and redressal process alongside your child. Introduce them to women's organisations that have worked in this field for years and learn alongside them. Centre for Social Research, Delhi, has been working for 50-years and has a vast report of information on their website.

Know the law. Teach the law. Empower your children, not with pepper spray, but with rights. Cover everything from age of consent to the process for medical examination to the Rape Bill 2014.

Teach consent actively and routinely. A great way to do this is with tickling (if you are the kind of family where you play tickling games, that is). Ask your kid permission before you tickle them, each time you do it, and encourage them to ask your permission to do it before they do it to you. Explain to them that they are entitled to rights over who touches their body and that those rights extend to everyone.

Created by Aarushi Ahluwalia of The Pamphleteer

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Tweet: @the_pamphleteer | Instagram: thejadedpamphleteer | e-mail: thejadedpamphleteer@gmail.com

Deconstructing Outrage: Is our timed outrage to only brutal cases of gangrape like Hathras part of the reason why we are losing the fight against rape culture?

"How do you think the Nirbhaya case changed your life?" I asked her.

"I think the main thing is that now we talk about it," she said adjusting her white headband, "Before this we didn't used to talk about rape and violence, even when it made us angry it was on the inside."

I wondered how much a fourteen-year old could remember of rape cases before that one.

"What made you most angry about it then?" I asked her.

"The way they treated her... It makes me so scared to live in this city thinking about how much rape there is," She said, clearly still traumatised like many of us by the details of the case even though it had been almost five years, "The violence and the cruelty, how can we allow women to be treated this way?"

It's a good question, one I have continued to ask in more nuanced forms as I grew older. It's one I find harder and harder to answer, but the young girl I was talking to seemed convinced that the reason this treatment of women has continued to this day is because we hadn't been talking about it until then. She is right to a certain degree, we overwhelmingly agreed as a country after December 16, 2012 that the events of that day were going to end the silence. The discussion of rape was going to be brought out to the dinner tables, intersections and drawing rooms of the country. The answer to the question of whether things have gotten better since then remains ambiguous. It would be foolish to deny that legislative change has taken place or that awareness of women's rights and issues has been expanded. It would also be naïve to discount that a movement that openly and dedicatedly counters women's liberty has also become more active in response to women's voices taking the fore instead of our silent suffering. However it is not possible to say that rape has decreased in our country nor that the possibility of a death penalty has made rapists less brazen in their use of violence. Since Nirbhaya, we've risen up in arms as a country a few more times, with Mumbai, Badaun, Unnao, Kathua, Hyderabad and most recently, Hathras. Each one of these cases has a few things in common — They are all cases of gangrape that got a tonne of media attention, unnatural levels of brutality and violence were applied in each case and in many of them the victims succumbed to their injuries.

The nature of each of these cases begs the question: Is it rape culture that makes us angry or individual instances of horrific violence?

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 32,033 cases of rape were registered in the year 2019 and while the exact number of cases that involved battery is unknown, only a handful of these cases gained national attention. In 2017, NCRB also reported that only 6.9% (of the 30299) cases reported that year were cases of stranger-rape, in 10, 553 of these cases the victim and the rapist were friends, partners or living together. Only a small number of these cases led to hospitalisation and a minuscule fraction to death, and while the cases involving murder have risen over the past five years (by almost 30%), they are still, as the statistics go, "rare" cases. However these rare cases of rape are the ones that are more often discussed, protested and serve as the hook into a discussion of rape culture. From a certain standpoint, it makes sense. The cases of gangrape, which average roughly 16% of rape cases reported in 2019, tend to be more violent and have a higher tendency to result in death. In these cases of violent rape and murder, it is also harder for the victim to choose not to report the incident because they might have already been reported missing, died or in need of medical treatment. The press can report on all cases of rape, and sometimes do, but because of the train-wreck syndrome the ones that get more attention tend to be these cases where gruesome violence has been committed. It's the ill of a news peg too, without it we wouldn't be able to ask young schoolgirls about their feelings on rape.

As a trigger reaction we protest to demand justice in the case at hand, something that absolutely should be delivered, and as a long-term reaction we internalise the fear of how unsafe our surroundings are and teach our girls more techniques of being safe. Even when we understand that putting the onus of safety on the potential victims is counterproductive, we still do it because we are scared. We are scared for our friends, our daughters and our partners and we believe we can arm them with whistles and keys against a culture that objectifies them. While gangrape is certainly not a scare-tactic, it works well as one, and it paints a certain picture of rape in our minds. I often ask people to try this: Paint a picture of what you think rape is, visually, in your head and then describe it. Overwhelmingly, the victim is female, there is more than one perpetrator and there is an escalated level of physical violence. Due to the nature and timing of coverage and outrage in response to rape in India, we have painted a monolithic narrative when it comes to rape. We have narrowed it to a specific image but how does this happen?

"There are organisations that work on these issues all year," says Ranjhana Kumari of Centre for Social Research, a group dedicated since 1973 to creating a society free of gendered violence, "The cases that get attention are the ones that are picked up by the media or politicised by the local authorities, and those issues get the limelight either because of the extreme brutality or because politics takes over the issue. Everything else continues to get pushed into the background."

Ultimately this image and this metered, timed outrage might be part of the reason why we are unable to tackle rape culture as a whole in this country. We have built an image of a rape victim which reduces them to only a helpless, broken creature that has been attacked or killed, an image we can both comfortably rally around and politicise, and because of that when we are confronted by victims who do not fit the narrative, we are not only less likely to believe them, we are also more likely to question aspects of their behaviour and personality to determine why or if they were raped. There are various forms and types of rape. A woman might be raped by a person she trusted and loved, but when confronted by this, we might question the veracity of her claim because after all, wasn't she already seeing him and maybe this is just a lover's spat? A young girl might be coerced by a boy she met online and grew to like, but if she is raped, will we outrage or decided we need to keep young girls away from computers? A woman may be raped by her own husband, something our law refuses to recognise as a crime. A woman might be raped by a man because she tried to end her relationship with him. A woman might be kept silent not by way of violence but by threat of exposure or fear of being disbelieved. A woman might be raped for years by the same man, and even end up married to him. In most of these instances, if they do come to light, we are less likely to believe victims, more likely to shame them and much, much less likely to lead a protests around town. Does that mean these forms of rape are less serious or more likely to be the woman's fault? The greatest impediment to speaking out when faced with sexual violence is the environment and we live in an environment where one's experience must be measured, qualified and fact-checked by an archaic methodology before being ratified as the truth. There is base-level qualification, in that if something we consider "minor" happens, like an uncomfortable interaction with your boss or men calling out to you in the street, we tell the victims to ignore it. That is best and safest. If someone touches you or "outrages your modesty", the most common advice is to cut off contact and increase the safety measure you apply everyday. If you claim to have been raped, and you choose to report it, you must prove that claim. That makes sense however unless you go have yourself examined immediately, which apparently is what any decent Indian woman would do right after being raped, there are fewer chances of evidence being found on or in your body. However one can be raped without their body or genitals showing signs of distress, it is medically proven that a woman might display clinical signs of arousal during rape and that is why a woman's vagina is not where we should be looking for proof of consent. Also not all rape involves battery or confinement, in fact most rape doesn't, and it is not necessary we will find signs of violence on the body of the victim. Legally, the deck is stacked against the victim in a manner reminiscent of the social environment.

"A medical examination of the victim is conducted as soon as the police are notified of rape however there no necessary psychological evaluation by a qualified psychologist or psychiatrist, a "reasoned" report must be prepared by the investigating officer who should give precedence to whether the victim was consenting or not, as well as an evaluation of the physical state," says high court lawyer Sumit Chander, "Section 164(A) mandates that a note be taken of the mental condition of the victim but no psychological evaluation is mandated by law, it would be very hard to prove a case where there were only psychological signs of rape and no physical signifiers."

Legally a conviction is more likely, but not guaranteed, in cases where there is physical proof of rape and that remains part of the reason why rape reporting as well as rape-convictions in our country have historically been abysmally low. Even legally, unless a rape victim is able to fit into the medico-socially drawn out narrative of being a rape victim, their chances at justice are slim. Convictions for crime against women stand at 19% according to the NCRB data in 2016, it is part of a culture of minimising the value of a woman's voice and ensuring the male-entitlement to female bodies continues unchecked when we are no longer feeling the urge to go down to India Gate and scream. At the end of the day, outrage and protest have their purpose, and in this case the purpose has been determined to ensure swifter justice in cases of brutal, murderous rape and call out blatant violations of legal protocol. Outrage is not an efficient or complete method for tackling rape culture as a whole because outrage minimises the nature of rape, the narratives of victims and the socially sanctioned environment created by the patriarchy to allow gender based disparity to continue, ultimately creating an environment that is socially and legally less trusting of victims and less likely to work in their favour if they do not meet the standard requirement of qualifying as a victim. Systemic legal and social change comes from constant effort, the rapes don't stop once our candles burn out and we return to our homes, they continue, quietly conducted without physical "harm" by people who often know us. The rape victims don't stop screaming, then why do we?