

# NOTES *for* *the* MEDIA

*Ordinary Indians, on the  
reporting of sexual violence*

Notes for the Media: Ordinary Indians on the reporting of sexual violence

Edited by Chindu Sreedharan, Einar Thorsen and Asavari Singh

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First published by the Centre for the Study of Conflict,  
Emotion & Social Justice, Bournemouth University  
<https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/centres-institutes/centre-study-conflict-emotion-social-justice>

ISBN: 978-1-910042-25-0 [print/softcover]  
ISBN: 978-1-910042-26-7 [ebook-PDF]  
ISBN: 978-1-910042-27-4 [ebook-epub]

BIC Subject Classification Codes:  
GTC / JFD / KNT/ 1FKA /JFFE2

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Cover design: Quilt 365  
Editorial coordinator: Shivani Agarwal

Printed by Entire Printers, Red Hills Lakadi-Ka-pul, Hyderabad 500 034



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# Acknowledgements

Our thanks go first and foremost to the many women and men who took the time to share their thoughts on the journalism of sexual violence in India. Their insights provided us with valuable nuggets about what the people of this country want to see in the news media coverage of sexual violence. We are also thankful to the young reporters who recorded these interviews from various parts of the country.

Holding this project together were several colleagues from a number of institutions in India, who joined hands to help publish NewsTracker ([www.newstracker.maar.in](http://www.newstracker.maar.in)), a single-issue web site that formed part of the MAAR project ([www.maar.in](http://www.maar.in)).

We wish to thank the following people and institutions for their time and efforts: Professor Vaiju Naravane, Professor Hariharan Krishnan, Anunaya Rajhans, and Tisha Srivastav of Ashoka University, Sonapat (the co-publisher of NewsTracker, with Bournemouth University); Anna Thomas and Dr Farman Ali of Docfort Meducation, Bengaluru; Professor Anita Patankar, Dr Shweta Deshpande, and Ananya Dutta of the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Pune; Vidhanshu Kumar of Amity School of Communication, Noida; Professor Padma Rani and Anupa Lewis of the Manipal Institute of Communication, Manipal; Dr Parinitha Shinde and Arkadev Ghoshal of St Joseph's College, Bengaluru; Professor Anjali Monteiro, Professor K P Jayasankar, and Nithila Kanagasabai of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences; and Professor Gopalan Ravindran of the University of Madras, Chennai.

We owe much appreciation to our colleagues at UNESCO New Delhi for all their support and encouragement, as well as to the many journalists — friends, former colleagues, and well-wishers — whose kindness we drew on for this project.

And finally, our gratitude to the Global Challenges Research Fund for providing the financial sustenance that made the MAAR project possible. ➡

**Chindu Sreedharan,  
Einar Thorsen, and Asavari Singh**





# Foreword

*Vaiju Naravane*

While the question of violence against women has always been in the public consciousness, it leapt into the headlines in 2012 with the Nirbhaya rape and murder case. It must be underlined, however, that the fight against patriarchy and for improving the status of women has been part of the feminist struggle in India for a very long time. Therefore, any discussion on the extent to which the media contribute to the perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes and, by extension, to the violence against women is always a welcome one.

Nevertheless, studies on how the Indian media report on rape and sexual violence are limited. Members of the public are rarely asked what they think of media coverage or what that coverage ought to reflect. Journalists have not been questioned on the type of training or sensitisation, if any, they receive in newsrooms beyond injunctions against identifying rape victims by name or community.

So, what do the general public think of the media's coverage of these issues? Is the reporting episodic or sustained? Sensationalist, forever seeking more eyeballs; or is it, on the contrary, accurate and reliable, empathetic, and restrained? Are journalists and, more importantly, news editors content with spot news coverage, or do they attempt to go beyond the bare bones of a story to give context? And finally, do these stories communicate inherent biases; do they perpetuate stereotypes or attempt to break them?

Our conversation on what was to become Media Action Against Rape (MAAR) began in earnest in autumn 2017. I had invited Chindu Sreedharan, the lead editor of this book, to visit Ashoka University and speak to my students about new media and imaginative ways to use them — he had, after all, written an entire novel on Twitter! Chindu and I had both been practicing journalists before veering off into academia and our concerns for the state of the profession remained a perennial topic of conversation.

We lamented the loud, often abusive name-calling and whataboutism that passed off as debate on almost all TV news channels; pondered the shrinking budgets that resulted in shoddy, poorly researched reportage; and wondered how, as teachers of journalism, we could help our students write accurate,

informative, and balanced stories that were rooted in knowledge and guided by journalistic ethics. How could we impart the kind of training that would help our students produce informed, empathetic copy? And could we then draw some replicable lessons that could be transferred to aspiring journalists?

When we began documenting the general public's view of rape and sexual harassment, there were few statistics or studies specifically about the role of the media in purveying stereotypes, influencing attitudes, or bringing about social and behaviour change when it came to violence against women. That situation has changed somewhat with the publication of books such as *No Nation for Women: Reportage on Rape from India, the World's Largest Democracy* by Priyanka Dubey (Simon & Schuster, December 2018), *Why Men Rape: An Indian Undercover Investigation* by Tara Kaushal (HarperCollins India, June 2020), or *The Silence and the Storm: Narratives of Violence Against Women* by Kalpana Sharma (Aleph Book Company, November 2019).

That said, there is still no comprehensive book or report that analyses how the media in India cover these subjects and how reporters and editors themselves, through inherent or unconscious bias, perpetuate the status quo. This book, therefore, is the first of its kind.

*Notes for the Media* is a highly readable compilation of a wide cross-section of opinion on sexual violence, how the media cover it, and what needs to be done. I hope it helps young journalists to re-examine the concept of rape culture in India and reassess their approach to covering sexual violence — to go beyond spot reporting the immediate story and beyond clickbait to embrace empathy, neutrality, sensitivity, and context. The approach is neither preachy nor overly instructive. It is an attempt to hold up a mirror to those of the journalistic tribe who like to tell society what it looks like. In this book, it is journalists who are subject to scrutiny, warts and all. Let the chips fall where they may. ➡

**Vaiju Naravane**  
*Professor of Media Studies, Ashoka University*



# Introduction

*Chindu Sreedharan, Einar Thorsen, and Asavari Singh*

There was a time, and not so long ago, when the news media listened little to their audiences. Seminal works from sociologists such as Gaye Tuchman<sup>1</sup> and Herbert J Gans<sup>2</sup> outline a bleak era when journalists, projecting much passivity on to a paying public, reported on what appealed to their editors personally. Journalism, then, was about what the public *ought* to know — according to journalists.

Thankfully, the days of such hubris (and wild guesses) are over. The dazzling era of digitisation, with its mind-boggling array of audience quantification metrics, has swung the pendulum, rather feverishly, to the other end. Unfortunately, this too has a downside. News now is losing its heart, its soul, its very purpose, and becoming more mechanical, computational — algorithmic to within an inch of its short life. The irony is that the might of web analytics is being brought to bear to ostensibly serve the public better (and, yes, for news outlets to stay afloat): audience metrics that journalists now have access to *should* allow them to be closer to their communities, to discern citizen needs (what the audiences *want* to know) and civic needs (what the audiences *need* to know)<sup>3</sup> of their people better.

That is the theory. But it is difficult to convince ourselves that audience quantification, particularly our reductionist attempts to force-fit the geography of news preferences into the geometry of numbers, have yielded ‘better’ journalism. We know more — perhaps a lot more than we should — about the “people formerly known as audiences”<sup>4</sup>. We know what they look at, click through, ‘like’ and ‘dislike’. But to bestow a higher eloquence on the parlanguage of digital audiences, to read too deeply into their slacktivist responses, could lead journalists further along a troubling pathway. Truth is, our understanding of audiences remains rather simple still; we know little of what they really want. As Kim Schröder writes in *What do News Readers Really Want to Read about*<sup>5</sup>:

“[W]e have to complexify our understanding of news audience tastes and preferences. There are no simple recipes for meeting the relevance thresholds of news audiences. To the extent that journalists prioritise news stories with civic value, they should trust their instincts rather than relying on the unreliable seismograph offered by ‘Most Read’ lists.”

This logic acquires even greater significance when applied to the journalism surrounding sexual violence. Here we are indeed in uncharted territory. Incidents of rape in India, though severely underreported, are at an all-time high, and there is a growing acceptance that sexual violence needs to be also addressed beyond the confines of criminality — holistically, as a social problem underpinned by a range of cultural, environmental, and educational factors <sup>6</sup>. In this, in the heavily mediatised and highly populous Indian environment, the news media play a critical role. But, while debates on violence against women have been firmly planted in the national consciousness by the journalism around an ever-growing list of ‘high-profile’ cases, our knowledge of how audiences relate to such news is disturbingly limited.

There is not much that we can borrow from studies elsewhere, either. Inquiries into the journalism on sexual violence have largely tended to be *content*-centric, focussed on how the news media represent specific cases. It is these works that have shaped our awareness of the journalistic tendencies of, among others, sexualisation, stereotyping, victim-shaming, and victim-silencing. In the Indian context, a few scholars have gone further, delving deeper, to probe the newsroom dynamics that contribute to such problematic journalism<sup>7</sup>.

Several others, drawing on feminist theory, have looked at the cultural beliefs and social values that support and perpetuate a patriarchised news culture. As Vaiju Naravane points out in the Foreword to this edition, there have also been several monographs, including Tara Kaushal’s excellent anthropological account, *Why Men Rape: An Indian Undercover Investigation*; Priyanka Dubey’s *No Nation for Women: Reportage on Rape from India, the World’s Largest Democracy*; and Adrija Dey’s *Nirbhaya, New Media and Digital Gender Activism*. But when it comes to audience research on the subject, we draw a big blank.

*Notes for the Media* emerges in this vacuum. Questions on what the audiences think of the steady stream of sexual violence stories they see every day began to plague us when we launched NewsTracker, a single-issue web site that published ‘journalism on the journalism of sexual violence’, as part of a larger research and capacity building project <sup>8</sup>. The idea behind NewsTracker

— a joint effort between Bournemouth University and Ashoka University, in collaboration with several leading institutions in India<sup>9</sup> — was to create meaningful conversations on the reportage of sexual violence in India. A crucial part of any such conversation, we soon realised, was the people's perspectives. And we had no idea of what those might be.

So, we decided to ask them. We commissioned a series of interviews across India, with everyday people. What did they think of the news media coverage of sexual violence? What do they look for in such news? What do they expect from journalists? What would they do differently if *they* were journalists?

We published the interviews on NewsTracker, under a new section titled 'I Think'. For this, we drew inspiration from two brilliant columns — 'India Speaks' and 'Extraordinary People' — that gave voice to a variety of Indians in the now-defunct *Sunday Observer* and *Illustrated Weekly of India*, respectively, as also Cal Fussman's 'What I Have Learned' interviews in *Esquire*. In all, we recorded the thoughts of more than a hundred Indians, women and men, educated and uneducated, rich and poor, from Kerala, from Kashmir.

What you see on the following pages are excerpts from a selection of those interviews, conducted by young students. By no means are these 'voices' representative of the rich diversity that is India, nor have we made an attempt to analyse them here (though such an analysis is forthcoming). Our focus is simply to present a cross-section of thoughts as we recorded them — messages from the public, if you will.

Reading through, as journalists and media scholars, it is likely that we begin to ask ourselves more questions. On the many meanings that our audiences construct of the news of sexual violence they consume; the relevance they see for such news in their own lives; their thresholds for news fatigue and news avoidance<sup>10</sup> for this particular genre; and their motivations for reading what is clearly upsetting for most. Answers are urgently needed to reshape our news coverage so that it meets the civic needs of our society better, in a way more palatable by the people we strive to serve. ➡







# Voices

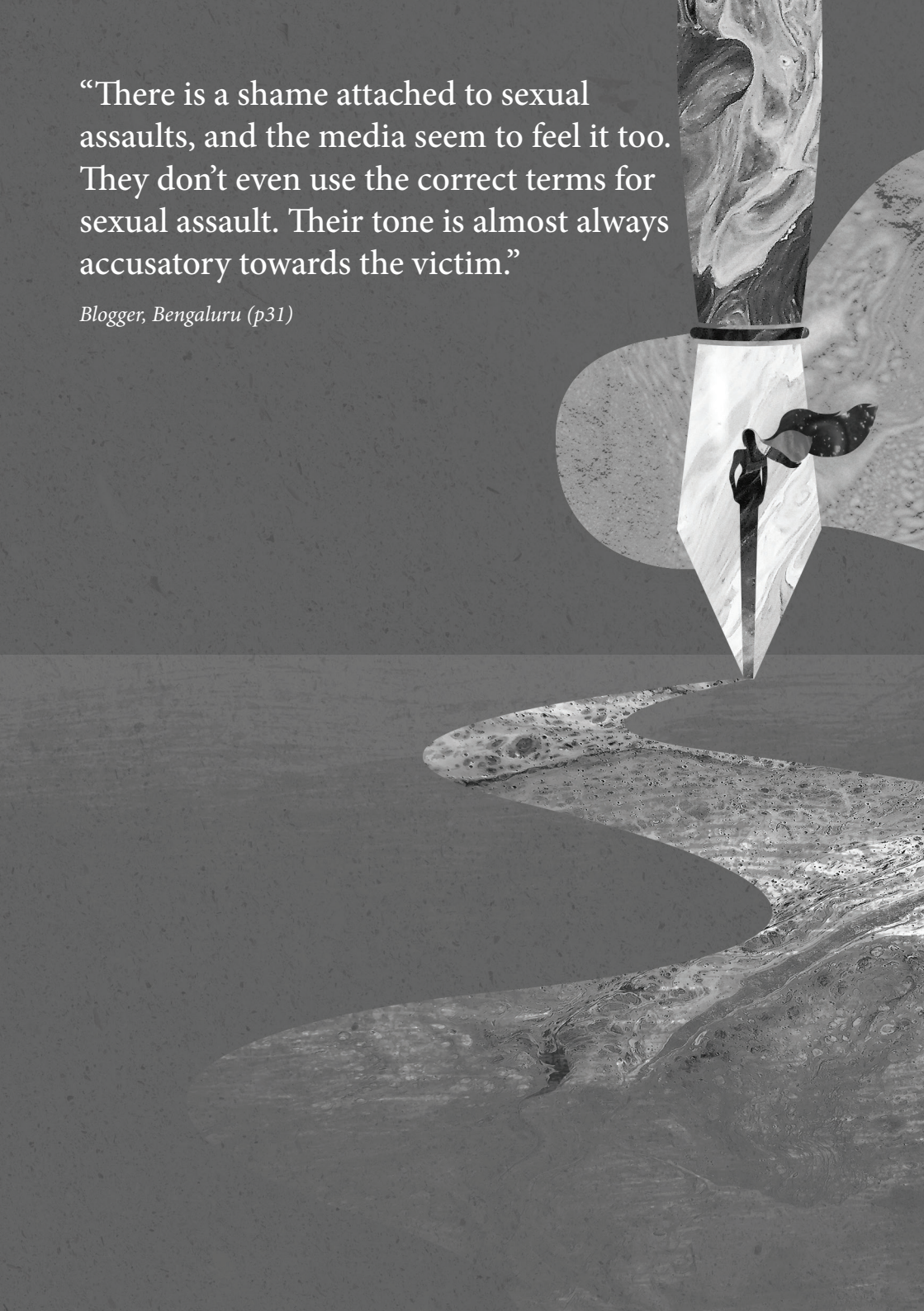
*Everyday Indians,  
on the reporting of sexual violence*





“There is a shame attached to sexual assaults, and the media seem to feel it too. They don’t even use the correct terms for sexual assault. Their tone is almost always accusatory towards the victim.”

*Blogger, Bengaluru (p31)*





# Rape is a psychological problem

*Student, female, New Delhi*

We hear even of goats and cows being raped. Can any healthy mind commit such an act? We as a society need to bear collective responsibility for rape. We are bad at communicating, as a society. We see mental health issues as *pagalpan*, madness.

The media have the ability to change this. If you find someone with a sick mentality towards women, listen to him, tell him why it's wrong. It may be that nobody cared enough to tell him that he is wrong. Every individual has the responsibility to try and change the mentality of anyone who is potentially going in the wrong direction. Just cursing or slapping him won't make any difference.

The media should conduct talk shows and spread awareness about rape as a psychological problem. It should try bringing change by giving people a platform to speak. It should present rape as a mental problem rather than a crime. ➡

# Better ethical standards are needed

*Teacher, female, Hyderabad*

In every news medium, the focus is on victim-blaming. In cases where the victim survives, very little sensitivity is shown towards the trauma that remains. A greater emphasis is placed on punishment for the perpetrator, which in itself is not wrong, but somehow creates the impression that it can heal the victim and the family's trauma. It may reaffirm faith in the legal system, but it does not address the structural flaws in society. It somehow manages to invalidate the victim's experience.

About the media's reporting, better ethical standards can definitely be maintained. Sensationalising news may prevent victims from seeking help as they fear unnecessary spotlight on them. Students of journalism must be sensitised; they could perhaps take an oath regarding professional ethics. ➡

# Fight for the victim!

*Shopkeeper, male, Bengaluru*

People blame the police for not bringing out the truth or for not giving justice to the victims, but I feel that those sitting in higher positions are more responsible. An influential miscreant will seek the help of a higher official to let him free — then what is the use of a subordinate struggling to bring the truth to light?

If I were a journalist, I would portray the incident as it happened and try to fight for the victim. The media are doing their work properly. But there are too many stories on TV. I have two sons, and I don't want them to be wrongly influenced and do such things due to the exposure to such stories, even though it is only news. The only things lacking in our country are good governance and strict laws. If these become a reality, India will prosper. ➡

# The police and courts need scrutiny

*Lawyer, male, Chennai*

The law-enforcing authorities in this country are working for affluent people. In the last incident I read about, the victim tried to lodge a complaint but the police did not register an FIR. Such officers should be punished for dereliction of duty. Rape cases should be tried within three months. If I were a journalist, I would write about the way sexual assault cases are handled by police and the courts.

Apart from reporting incidents, news media must follow up. They must use their power to see to it that law enforcement and legal actions are put on the right track. Journalists must also focus on assisting the victims psychologically.

Mahatma Gandhi said we have freedom only when a girl can walk alone at night. But freedom for women in India is still at a primitive stage. Women still must try their maximum to not invite trouble by going alone at night. ➡

# When readers feel sad, it's a good sign

*Student, male, Delhi*

**W**e don't joke about murder or terror, but we do joke about rape — or at least some men do. Even in sports, people often say that the losing team got raped. There's not enough empathy. There's a lack of understanding of the brutality, I guess.

People in power also impact certain sections of the public. Whenever a rape case gets huge coverage, politicians come into the picture. A lot of them blame the woman's dressing or 'Western' attitude.

Can the media bring about change? It's difficult to say. They can help with more reporting. But too many cases, and society starts seeing each case as just another one. But each case is a big deal. They must not be normalised. Voices need to be raised each time.

And the readers need to read. The fact that they feel sad when they read such news is a good thing. Once, a newspaper published a first-hand account of a transgender sex worker who was locked up in police stations and raped by cops. That is something that really shocked me and has stayed with me. I cried after watching the Nirbhaya documentary (*India's Daughter*). The documentary showed the rapists speak about the crime. Some of them felt they didn't do much wrong and Nirbhaya was also at fault. This shows the mindset of society — it often forces the victims to believe that they actually might have done something wrong. The victims need to be accepted and not shamed.

Sensitising kids at a young age can definitely be a huge first step. What we are taught as kids tends to stick. ➡



# The news is full of double standards

*Student, female, Idukki (Kerala)*

I primarily depend on social media for news — and I feel sick when I see how online news platforms contradict their own stance on women. For instance, one story will be a news piece on how India sympathises with a rape victim and her family, which is well and good. But the story that follows right after might carry a caption like, “XYZ actress looking hot in a backless crop-top”. Don’t you see the irony? I know that without this sort of ‘news’, advertisers won’t fund media houses; journalism is a business after all. It’s high time that there is a certain amount of censoring on social media — otherwise these attitudes towards women will continue to thrive. ➡

# India's reputation is at stake

*Financial journalist, male, Mumbai*

I don't go into the details of stories on sexual violence. You can know what the story is just by reading the headline. So, why do you need to wade into cruelty and torture?

In 2008, I was working with a news channel. Sitting in the newsroom, I saw footage being broadcast of a woman being beaten in UP. I couldn't put my thoughts together for some time. How could a cameraman shoot this? How could our society accept the fact that a woman, tied up and in torn clothes, was being thrown stones at? You don't need to go to hell. You see this happening and you know you are already in hell.

I guess there are two ways of reporting rape stories. One is to write in a very simple way. But then no one will read. When you say, "A girl was raped", it is not as attention-grabbing as, "An innocent girl of five was raped". Such headlines make you question the condition of the country you are living in. Giving a meaningful headline and writing in an attention-grabbing way is extremely important.

Yes, the media should use words carefully and not go to extremes, but the problem is that society *jaagti nahi hai, murde ho gaye hain saare* (society doesn't wake up, we have become like corpses).

However, the negative side is that the world is also reading these stories, and only these ones. They will not look at stories of success and achievement. I am not saying the West shouldn't report India's rape stories. My observation is that they are interested only in *these* ones, because they pull our country down.



# Regional statistics must be amplified

*Lawyer, female, Chennai*

I practice criminal law, and specialise in domestic violence and marriage. We need a sweeping change in cultural practices that empower men to treat women like cattle.

Rape stories are highly sensationalised for political reasons and better ratings. I cannot come to terms with some TV news channels that give their own verdicts in kangaroo-court-like debate shows. Journalists do not have a clear sense of what to say and what not to say. To them I would say: stop driving an agenda, paid or unpaid. Just report — report everything you can with your resources.

The media should start reporting region-wise statistics to put pressure on local governments. Hold them accountable for implementing safety measures. I am waiting for a scenario where the accused won't dare to seek help from those in power, and eventually won't even dare to commit a crime.

The media should also run a united campaign to educate the next generation so that they can identify the wrongdoings of their own parents and elders at home, and question our male chauvinist traditions and culture. ➡

# Ask questions to provoke thought

*Entrepreneur, female, Delhi*

Rape has always been part of our culture. It's just that people have started to talk and create awareness about it now. The system of patriarchy has been our norm. Men think that they won't be questioned by anyone, and that they are superior beings. I do not think they realise the enormity of rape.

The media have to report what has happened to people, but instead they make their own mixture of stories to gain TRPs. If I were a journalist, I would try to throw light on why rapes happen. I would leave open-ended questions for people to think about. Statements and reports on rape have to provoke thought. ➡

# Explore the mind of the rapist, his back-story

*Actor, female, Mumbai*

I was born and raised in Delhi. It is not a safe place for women. There were always men passing comments about us, stalking us: it felt normal for me. It was a way of life. Right from the time you leave home, you are practically prepared to get raped.

The rules are different for men and women. Fathers ask their daughters not to go out late. Parents send their daughters to self-defence classes. But, what about their sons? I feel a lot of men do not know what is right or wrong. And this is because of their upbringing. I strongly feel that sex should not be owned by one gender. People tend to forget that it is something women need equally. If we start respecting that, I think we will be in a better place.

The film industry has a huge role to play. The tactics used by heroes to 'get a girl' in the movies of the 1990s were the worst. And people tend to believe that the same happens in real life. There should be more films from the woman's point of view as well.

The media should be more careful about reporting rape. They should be more sensitive towards the survivor and harsh towards the rapist. The latter's name should be called out, but the survivor should be given their privacy. Their comfort should be prioritised over anybody else's. Journalists should not try and protect the accused just because he is influential.

One of my friends from the Malayalam film industry was sexually assaulted recently and the media mentioned her name at first. The story changed every day and became an entertainment spectacle.

If I were a journalist, my primary focus would be the mind of the rapist. I would really want to know his back-story, the kind of family he comes from, what he was thinking when he committed that crime. ➡



# There is a Nirbhaya in me, always

*Student, female, Delhi*

I was in class nine when I first heard about Nirbhaya. My friends and I were outraged and we even took part in protests and demonstrations. I believe there has been a considerable change in the way sex crimes are reported by the media since Nirbhaya. Back then, very few stories were given importance, but now I think journalists report on sexual violence properly.

But there remains a Nirbhaya in me, always. I still feel scared walking on a deserted street or while travelling home at night. If I am not able to freely walk in this country, I am sure there is something wrong with what we teach our boys from a young age.

The media should also tell stories that society doesn't want to hear about — like the background of people who commit such crimes. Campaigns must be organised to make people aware and to make society understand that it is not women's fault, to respect that NO means NO. Sensitisation to these issues is so important. ➡

# The media can be a catalyst for justice

*Freelance journalist, female, Delhi*

I was in high school when the Nirbhaya case happened. The incident astounded everybody — so much so that my parents even started re-considering my decision to pursue further studies in Delhi-NCR.

Since then, not much has changed. The same insecurity prevails in me and my parents. I managed to come here (to Delhi) but I had to learn to tolerate those stares. The Nirbhaya case is what made Delhi famous as ‘the rape capital’ of India, but there is so much sexual violence against women everywhere in this country.

I think that more than the media, it is the responsibility of the police to ensure justice for victims. You can dial the UP Police Women’s Helpline and see for yourselves — nobody will attend to you. Why? Is our being harassed not an issue for them? Is it that my security is just my concern? The police will have to answer that.

To the media I say, you are the biggest change-makers today — try to ensure justice for victims, rather than just reporting on rape incidents. Nirbhaya’s parents fought for justice but there are many who can’t. Be a catalyst for justice for them. ➡

# The disbelief in women's stories must change

*Performance artist, female, Ahmedabad*

**N**ews is no longer news, but has become an exercise in opinion building.

More than 50 per cent of the faces who are commenting on rape are male, when you look at prime-time opinion-making television programmes. The tone and tenor are as if they are talking about military intervention or national pride — it is the same across contexts.

Similarly, the shame ascribed to a rape victim is a media-produced response. There is an assumption that the violence which has been produced on a survivor or victim has somehow produced a loss of dignity of them. This narrative needs to be contested.

There was a lot of conversation after Nirbhaya around victim-shaming but I still feel that the tone in which rape is written about produces a certain kind of scepticism. This disbelief in women's stories needs to change.

To qualify a specific act of rape as 'gory', an enumeration of details takes place, leading to a production of image in journalism. It becomes sensational, and takes us down a dangerous path.

Since religion plays such an important part in our lives, it's important also to examine how it views gender roles. What I am increasingly experiencing as a Hindu is that women's bodies are imagined as dispensable in religion. Look at the embedded violence within religion, of caste, on women. Books of sacred value legitimise this violence and they legitimise inequality.

Having said that, reporting on rape is challenging because ethical journalism would mean you listen to the multiple voices that are involved. ➡

# Treat sexual assault like any violent crime

*Blogger, female, Bengaluru*

I blog about the everyday life of an urban Indian homemaker and her reactions to what's happening in the world around her. So, I blog against violence and intolerance, and against our use of tradition, culture, and religion to justify anything that common sense might refuse to accept.

There is a shame attached to sexual assaults, and the media seem to feel it too. They don't even use the correct terms for sexual assault. The tone is almost always accusatory towards the victim. Nearly always there is an attempt to explain why the perpetrator committed the sex crime. This reinforces the patriarchal idea that a sexual crime can be prevented by the victim, and when she fails to do so, it is insinuated she is somehow responsible.

What the media should be reporting is whether or not the assailant had a history of violence or sexual offences, and if there is no record then why is it not there? Did the police react promptly? Does the victim have support? Was she informed of her rights? This little change can begin to change the way society views sexual crimes — as violence, not as titillation.

The media should treat sexual crimes like any other serious violent crime. The trauma and violation should be stressed. There should be no attempt to justify the assault by mentioning the woman's lifestyle, there should be absolutely no judgment passed on the survivor. There should be a mention of how serious violent criminals have a history of smaller — often unreported and unpunished—violent or sexual crimes.

Also, the media should mention that, generally, sexual criminals do not expect the assault or abuse to be taken seriously. They expect the survivor to be shamed, blamed, and silenced. Only a very, very small per cent of sexual crimes are reported. The conviction rate is also very low and this too discourages survivors and their families from reporting. ➡

# A girl's family feels defamed, violated

*Autorickshaw driver, male, Chennai*

I feel that the media tend to focus more on events that happen in the cities than in villages. A working-class woman's virtue or ordeal is taken for granted and is not given proper coverage. This allows the accused to escape.

But if I had a daughter and if she went through an ordeal like sexual assault, I would not want the media to talk about it at all. It is true that it is the only way for people to get awareness, but I am still not for the detailed reports on rape that the media puts out at times. Yes, media reports do not exactly reveal a victim's identity. But the fact that they are publishing a report means that a girl's family somewhere feels defamed and violated.

I would like to tell all journalists to be sensitive while covering rape. If a girl in Kanyakumari is raped, I will not think much of it. But that won't be the case with her, her family, and neighbours. She will be ostracised and looked at by people differently. So, the media need to think twice before deciding to let the entire nation know about a girl being violated.

If I were a media person, I would probably hesitate to write rape stories. But if I were made to write, I would focus on the accused and not the victim and talk more about him so as to ensure he gets caught. ➡



# Many cases would be forgotten if not for the media

*Farmer, male, Asawarpur (Haryana)*

**T**he more I read reports on rape, the more I realise that no one is safe — not your daughters, not your wife, no one. I have two daughters and if anyone tried to harm them, I would not be able to bear it. Rich or poor, no one will be able to bear something like this happening to their daughter.

In some cases, women must share equal blame for rape with men. There is a university close to my village. Those students are lucky — their parents pay for everything for them. But the women from that college, they are all between 18 to 21 years of age, spend the entire night outside on the road, drinking and smoking. Then, what can they expect?

I think the media do a very good job when it comes to reporting on rape, although sometimes, because of pressure from the government, they distort stories. Still, the media are the first source for rape cases, and they try to help victims as much as possible — which is what they should do.

Rapists are a blemish on society and they should be hanged. The problem is that court proceedings go on forever. Then the public forgets about the case. It is only through the media that people are reminded of certain cases. If it weren't for the media, then all these cases would be forgotten completely. The media must also advocate for taking quick action and quick verdicts. ➡

# There is elitism in the reporting of sexual crimes

*Content writer, female, Hyderabad*

**W**e need to recognise that sexual violence is the norm, not a one-off. Once we address this fact, we can make progress.

There needs to be a conscious change in the way news pieces are phrased because language can affect perception. The focus should shift more on the perpetrator than the victim. It could be something as simple as, “A man has raped a woman”, instead of “A woman was raped, when she was travelling back home”, which only adds to victim-shaming. Apart from that, I think there should be a collective effort in scouting for stories of sexual violence in the areas that haven’t been covered yet.

While sexual violence is being reported more often, I believe there is elitism at play. Upper-caste, upper-class experiences are reported more often. I have also noticed that sexual violence that ends in death or that happens in the public eye is given more importance. ➡

# We no longer feel so compelled to keep ‘secrets’

*Book editor, female, Delhi*

I am grateful to the media for highlighting such a variety of cases — especially the fact that child abuse, molestation, sexual harassment are punishable crimes, not just something you have to endure quietly.

When I was growing up in the 60s, we all knew such things were happening, that certain baby molesters roamed in our neighbourhood. The difference was that we felt we couldn’t do anything about it, we were encouraged to keep secrets. Now there is a sense that these things aren’t normal, these things are criminal offences.

I have never seen any ‘victim blaming’ or overt salaciousness in the reports I read in English-language newspapers, though I suspect it may be a different story in TV channels and other types of publications. However, I wish the papers would leave out explicit details about brutality on victims. Is it really necessary? Shouldn’t some things stay between the police and the courts? ➡

# Educate, don't just inform

*General surgeon, male, Bengaluru*

Only the media and doctors can make rape an approachable topic in India, since due to social stigma the majority of us cannot discuss it openly with our friends and family.

I have seen about 400 rape cases in my career as a doctor. But 80 per cent of rapes go unreported because the survivors do not want to take their cases further. What should have become a medico-legal case is sorted out by the police, without legality, at the hospital itself.

Rape is not just a crime; it is a psychologically and physically damaging process. We have to encourage rape survivors to come out and talk about their experiences. Their stories will serve as a warning that nobody is immune to rape and that the problem must be acknowledged.

The only entity that can change or destroy rape culture is the media. There is a difference between educating people and informing them. You should start educating people. Rape should be reported in a way that people realise it is wrong. The media should change their tone from 'rape happened' to 'rape shouldn't happen'.

However, a complaint alone does not mean it is rape. Journalists must educate themselves about the tools that can prove rape cases — forensic science is the only way to prove it.

Why not register an association that specialises in health and medical journalism? These journalists can take over the responsibility of rape reporting, derive protocols, and be in touch with doctors as well. There should also be a section of the media dedicated to legalities of rape. ➡

# The conversation on the death penalty is unfortunate

*Economist, male, New Delhi*

A lot of crimes against women are committed by men in powerful positions. The reaction is muted and, in most cases, such crimes are not reported. This is a failure of society and the government — and the media are a reflection of society.

The media need to play a constructive role. But take a look at even a highly literate state like Kerala: if a woman is involved in an incident, the visual and print media tend to feast on it. The media report where they can grab eyeballs. They are voyeuristic about the details, and sometimes take a moralising angle.

There must be guidelines for the media, although I don't know how they can be implemented. Start with self-censorship. The more the media report, the more they can improve the situation.

In the Nirbhaya case, the media did a good job in terms of raising public consciousness. The sad part was the conversation about the death penalty, about what to do after the crime. It should, in fact, have been about how to *prevent* the crime. The death penalty can only take us backwards. It is not going to deter rapists. It is important to explore issues such as how the perpetrators grew up, although it should not be taken as a justification for rape. Some of the international media delved into this kind of socio-economic analysis. ➡

# Resist the language of titillation

*Professor, male, Chennai*

There is a notion that the vernacular media take a voyeuristic approach towards sexual violence and the English media do not. It is totally wrong. They just feed different kinds of readers. Both prioritise victimhood, while only marginally discussing the accused.

Sexual violence is a social problem. The sexual is also social. On one side there is increase in awareness, but on the other side there is rise of violence. The media are definitely responsible in terms of their circulation of an abundance of images and for their strategy of inculcating the desire for ‘new’ news — breaking news. The tone of news needs to be modulated.

If I were a journalist, I would try my best to resist the language of titillation and instead try to engage with aspects of culture that justify violence. To journalists I would say that it is possible to objectively report on violence and offer perspectives without succumbing to the demands of the business of media. ➡

“More than 50 per cent of the faces who are commenting on rape are male... The tone and tenor are as if they are talking about military intervention or national pride — it is the same across contexts.”

*Performance artist, Ahmedabad (p30)*

“I do not agree with detailed reports on rape... If a girl in Kanyakumari is raped, I will not think much of it. But that won't be the case with her, her family, and neighbours. She will be looked at differently.”

*Authorickshaw driver, Chennai (p32)*



“You should start educating people. Rape should be reported in a way that people realise it is wrong. The media should change their tone from ‘rape happened’ to ‘rape shouldn’t happen.’”

*General surgeon, Bengaluru (p36)*





# Sex crimes are given undue importance

*Catholic priest, male, Kerala*

The media should not highlight sexual abuse and assault. They are rare incidents, not common practice — so they should not be given too much importance. When they are made into sensational news, then youngsters think that this is usually practised or accepted and going on everywhere, so there's nothing wrong with it.

I think the media gave [the Franco Mulakkal case, in which a priest was accused of sexually assaulting a Kerala nun multiple times] undue importance. Maybe because it was a bishop, maybe because it was about the church. The media and political parties gave their support for the nuns [who were supporting the complainant]. Because of popular support, the police were pressed to investigate. And because of the complaint, the bishop was arrested. The media could have waited to see what was the truth, but they passed judgement that the bishop was guilty even before the court could. Even now, the court has not given its judgement.

But once the bishop was arrested and put in jail, of course everything subsided. The media are reporting, but when another issue comes up, their attention changes. When the Sabarimala issue came up, media people didn't give much importance to the [Mulakkal] case.

For sexual assaults, the whole community should be held responsible. The media have a role, but more than them, the parents, the elders have to set a good example. People have to live faithfully among the married and unmarried, practice sexual morality. There may be disagreements between couples, there might be temptations outside marriage. But these should not be encouraged by society. ➡

# Protests are futile

*Labourer, male, Jaunpur (UP)*

I was working at a construction site in Delhi when the Nirbhaya incident took place, and I took part in a protest rally for the first time in my life. Seeing the public outrage, it seemed to me that no woman would be raped again — ever.

But things went back to where they were. Rapes didn't stop... the police, the government, nothing changed! I became so disappointed that I decided not to read about rape cases or engage in protests. *Ye sab faltu baatein hain* (it is all futile). But I am a human being, and whenever I read about an incident of rape or molestation, I feel ashamed of being a part of this society. I thought the Nirbhaya case would wake people up, but it didn't.

The media can educate people, create awareness by publishing educational stories for young people. They can broadcast good films about rape cases and the victim's life after the incident. Our media should stop their *saas-bahu* (loud and fractious) analyses. It is highly annoying.

A lot could have changed after 2012, had we as a society realised our follies. But the problem of rape will be there as long as there is unemployment, because young people sit idle and consume dirty content from the internet. It is time for all of us to question the government — with the media leading the way — about job creation. We must shift the focus of young people on work. ➡

# There are some things you should not ask

*Rickshaw-puller, male, Delhi*

I am from Bhagalpur in Bihar. My father died when I was in the sixth standard and since then I have been working in Delhi. I have worked as a servant in big houses, as a waiter at tea-stalls, and now I work as a rickshaw-puller. I cannot read or write. So I watch TV and look at YouTube on my phone to get my news. There are some news channels that say crime in cities is the fault of outsiders. Biharis are blamed for this a lot. It is a lie... incidents such as rape and molestation rarely happen in my hometown.

In cities, the problem is huge because there is a lot of interaction between men and women. Mistakes happen from both ends. It is mainly the fault of the man, but there are some girls who lie to their parents, go out and about, and then suffer.

If I were a reporter, I would judge what is right and what is not. I would see if it is a fake complaint or a genuine one before reporting.

Journalists must remember there are certain things one should not ask. If there are questions that may hurt a victim, you should avoid those questions. If you want to ask some questions, please judge that the person is comfortable and your question is not causing harm. ➡

# Rape is reduced to a mere talking point

*Student, male, Bengaluru*

I do not think media houses have the right focus. They reduce grave matters such as sexual violence to mere talking points on panel shows frequented by misogynists.

When sexual assault occurs, I expect the media to speak to the right people. Instead of interviewing a bunch of misogynistic panellists, why not interview someone who is petitioning for change or someone who wants to garner security for women? There is also a certain sensitivity needed in the language that is used in news reports. The media should remember that their words affect not just the victim or survivor, but all women who read these stories.

The media need strong people with integrity who are not afraid to voice their opinions, for example someone like Faye D'Souza. If I were a journalist, I would focus on the policies and laws that are lenient when it comes to rape. I would call out the people and the government who fail us, who fail to keep their promises. ➡

# Some journalists are puppets in the hands of the powerful

*Writer, female, Kochi (Kerala)*

Some media houses are the mouthpieces of certain political parties. They can go to the extent of even crucifying the rape victim if the suspected culprit is from their own political party. This is what happens if a pillar of the democracy is owned by certain interest groups.

If I were a journalist, I would never inject my personal feelings into my reporting, especially when it comes to rape and sexual violence. Journalists are only supposed to inform people about facts, and strictly nothing beyond that.

But at the same time, I realise that journalists are sometimes helpless. They are just puppets in the hands of people in power. However, this scenario should not deter budding young minds. To them I'd say — take it as a challenge, a responsibility. Speak up! ➡

# We don't give the victim a place of power

*Student, female, Delhi*

I am from Assam but I live in Delhi. I think there is a huge difference between the thought process of people in Delhi and where I come from. There is this sense of suppressing women here. But there, people are more liberal. In my community, a girl does not go to her in-laws' family after marriage, the guy comes to her place.

The Assamese media do not talk much about rape or maybe people don't report it enough. Also, I come from a matriarchal community so maybe there are fewer cases. The reportage is high in Delhi because it's the capital city. *Sabki nazar isi par hai* (everyone's eye is on it).

Still, I do not like most of the news content I see. Stories are published every day, but no one is coming up with the solution. I feel that the ethics of journalism have gone missing somewhere. You cannot introduce a story and then not follow up. People have a right to know. We are not able to ask the lawyers or the judge what happened. The media should report properly till the end. I think every media house's concern is to sell — sometimes I feel like I am reading a Bollywood script. Come on, it's a very sensitive issue, don't cover it just for sales or ratings!

As a girl I am not allowed to talk about rape. If I am harassed and I want to make my friends aware, they will hush me up because *log kya kahenge* (what will people say)? When that guy was harassing or teasing me, where were these *log* (people)? We don't give the victim a place of power. Talking is the only way out. We need to help each other. ➡

# Stories about rape are exaggerated

*Security guard, male, Sonapat (Haryana)*

The media exaggerates stories about rape. They end up lying maybe 25 per cent of the time in order to sensationalise a story; they should not go beyond the facts of a case.

The media have the responsibility to bring about a change. When anyone is treated unjustly, it is the media's job to get the message across to the government. They should force the government's hand when it comes to rape so that some action is taken.

What used to happen earlier is that women would just stay at home. But now they are reaching new heights and getting educated. Times are changing, and I think there needs to be a change in people's mindsets because that is what will stop rape. While the media can encourage this change, it is in our hands. However, I do feel girls need to be careful about what they wear, as a precautionary measure. ➡

# Where are the follow-up stories?

*Student, male, Kerala*

I request all media houses to stop underestimating ordinary people. We are fully cognisant you are just highlighting rape cases for the sake of attracting readers and viewers, and nothing beyond that. The only stories we see are those with ‘*masala*’ elements that hook consumers.

Where are the follow-up stories? If the media cared, they would do follow-up stories to dig into the issue, and contribute to the nation and its people. The media are mighty enough to bring revolutionary changes, but they are not using their powers. When a court acquitted the accused in the death of two Dalit sisters, the media moved on even though the family were still demanding a CBI inquiry. Why did the media not dig into that case, and pressurise the government? Why is the media not doing anything beyond just reporting?

Only stringent laws and heartfelt media coverage can make a difference to this situation. 🖋️



# Newspapers should reach out to people like me

*Vegetable vendor, male, Chennai*

Who am I to have an opinion about news of rape and sexual violence? How can I think when my hands are always full of vegetable loads? I am just an ordinary guy. What difference is my opinion going to make? Are they going to print my opinion in newspapers? All I know is that rape is a sin.

I think newspapers should concentrate on reaching out to people like me. It is not that we are ignorant or indifferent to what is happening. It is just that we cannot spare the time to sit and read a newspaper, or watch news on TV. We survive on daily wages, time is precious for us. Maybe the media people should WhatsApp their news stories to us. We also want to be informed. ➡

# We need to understand where society is going wrong

*Student, female, Golghat (Assam)*

We are all angry about sexual violence — but the anger needs to be directed towards finding a solid solution. There is no point if all the media do is to ignite the anger of readers further, or simply complain.

If I were a journalist, I'd bring light why the incident happened — was it the alcohol running in the man's veins, was it his upbringing and mentality? We need to understand where society is going wrong.

Initially the victim must be too shattered to give out a public reaction. So, the media should give them some time to register what happened. They should let them know they are with the victim and the family. They should let them know that they have support from people all over the country — so that it gives the victim the courage to raise their voice. ➡

“If there are questions that may hurt a victim, you should avoid those questions. If you want to ask some questions, please judge that the person is comfortable and your question is not causing harm.”

*Rickshaw-puller, Delhi (p43)*





“You cannot introduce a story and then not follow up. People have a right to know. We are not able to ask the lawyers or the judge what happened. The media should report properly till the end.”

*Student, Delhi (p46)*

“There is a certain sensitivity needed in the language that is used in news reports. The media should remember that their words affect not just the victim or survivor, but all women who read these stories.”

*Student, Bengaluru (p44)*

# Let's talk about the husbands, the uncles

*Cabin crew member, female, Mumbai*

The media probably report only one per cent of the rapes and sexual harassment cases that occur. I do believe the media only pick out the stories that sell or gain them a larger viewership. They should also be bringing out the stories that happen every day — where a husband rapes his wife, or an uncle molests a child.

When it comes to sexual violence, I just want the basic facts. I don't like to watch channels where there are experts screaming at the top of their voices, saying the same things over and over again. The media can play a huge role in education and social change. News channels should focus on this — the feudal attitude of 'men are better than women' needs to change. ➡

# The aftermath matters

*Gynaecologist, female, Mangalore*

As a doctor, it is my mission to make people aware. I train teachers on how to approach sex education. I teach children about sexual violence and how to avoid unwanted physical contact.

But in the media, there is too much gimmickry. They use cases just to make one-off 'stories' and they tend to cover just a certain angle of what happened. Instead, they should try and include the whole story rather than just one version of events. They should follow up and see what justice is done. Also, they should be sensitive and not make the victim explain their experience of the event repeatedly.

Rape is not an easy thing to deal with after it happens. There is a lot of reliance on circumstantial evidence and there are also cases that are lodged for malicious reasons. The media plays a very important role in how it turns out.

My message to journalists is to be careful about how they represent rape. They should avoid graphic details since kids can easily be exposed to such news and be affected. You have to concentrate on the whys — why did the rapists do it? Why did it happen?

Sexual assault can ruin the whole life of a person. In fact, not just the person but their entire family. We can try and make the victim get back to normal life by investing in more resources for them — something like a programme that supports them after the incident. ➡

# End the stigma and secrecy

*Medical intern, male, Bengaluru*

There are so many news portals in our country, but all I see are statistics, coupled with a wild uproar and abrupt silence after a brutal incident.

We need an integrated approach to tackle this horrendous problem. Firstly, we need harsh laws and a transparent judicial system. Secondly, the media need to educate the masses, especially in rural and developing areas, about the stigma and secrecy that surrounds rape. The media also have the power to scrutinise and highlight any loopholes in our system.

My message to the media is: can we have constant follow-ups and impartial coverage that will effectively influence the masses? ➡

# Everyone must know the names and faces of rapists

*Beautician, female, Pune*

Any news on sexual harassment thoroughly disturbs me. I feel furious. It leaves me wondering how anyone could do such a thing? Who has the right to do such a thing to another person?

The victim should not remain silent about the terrible injustice that has been done with them. They should register a complaint with the police.

The press should help them get justice by publicly making the accused known and circulating their names and photos. Every woman on the street must know their faces. All women should help the victim by speaking out against these vile men.

The victim's privacy is important, though, because once their name or photos are shown, society does not treat them well. It becomes a matter of embarrassment for them. ➡



# Rallying to hang people is not the solution

*Copy writer, male, Chennai*

It's about time the conversation on sexual violence took centre stage, although it is often sensationalised to sell news. The Nirbhaya case was a turning point in this regard, even though I am sure it was not the first time something like this happened. It shed light on the issue of gender violence and brought up questions about the amendments required in the legal system.

However, I do not believe in capital punishment, no matter how horrific the crime. It solves nothing. The media can spark conversations towards better awareness of the situation. Rallying to hang people for such crimes is not a solution. Instead, we must shift focus from aggression to awareness and positive change.

The media should also focus on the societal issues surrounding rape. We need to tackle the social stigma against rape survivors, amendments to the legal system to better protect victims, and we need to encourage conversations about equality — where women are no longer looked at as inferior to or owned by men. If I was a journalist my focus would be on justice denied to victims and their families, as well as the broken households that rapists come from. ➡

# Pay attention to the role of the police, government

*Journalist, female, Chennai*

News has lost its value. Anything and everything becomes news. Trivial issues get extensive coverage and matters of importance such as crimes against women and children lose their due place.

Media coverage should be responsible and sensitive, but what we see is the normalisation of aggression and violence. The extensive coverage of rape and none of conviction may embolden perpetrators to think that they can get away with the crime. Even sexual crimes that get the attention of the public are dealt with in a way that almost trivialises the victim's experiences. They take the focus away from the main issue — the responsibility of the government and police to ensure the safety of citizens.

If I were to cover rape stories, apart from getting the facts, I would pursue different angles — how is the case being handled by the police, the court, media, civil society? Is reporting of rape to the police easy for the victim? Does the victim get psychological help? Are crisis centres helpful to victims?

Rape is not the end of life for the victim. I would cover stories of victims who overcame the trauma to move ahead in life. There was a story about a police officer who never missed a single hearing in the Nirbhaya case. We need to have more stories like that too. ➡

# People want to know about actions being taken

*Student, female, Mumbai*

**N**ews of sexual violence is not really shocking anymore, because it happens so often. But it is really sad to see.

I feel media reports dramatise some incidents, and as awful as it is, there may be more sides to the story.

Rape reports shouldn't include so much detail, it's not something people should read. These stories are already so explicit — just the concept alone — that maybe just reporting the incident is enough. You want to make people aware, but maybe tone it down a little?

These reports should include what actions are taken — people often read these stories and ask what is being done to stop sexual violence. It is so much better to hear that people care and are acting on it. And if they are not acting on it, then the people deserve to know. ➡

# Journalists need to ask more questions

*Social worker, female, Bengaluru*

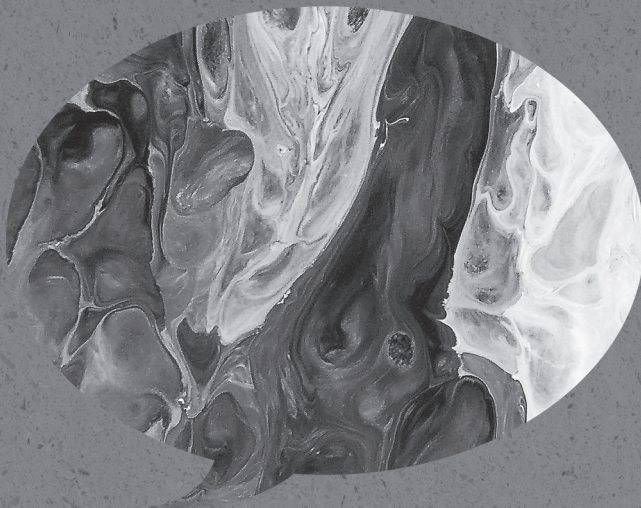
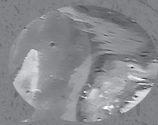
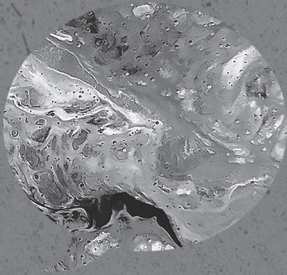
**T**he last incident I read about is still fresh in my mind. It was about a man assaulting a woman in broad daylight on a crowded street. And even after hearing her cries, nobody came to her rescue. It made me lose hope in the people of this society.

The extensive coverage of rape and none of conviction may also embolden perpetrators of rape to think that they can get away with the crime. I feel there is an increase in assaults because the perpetrator thinks he can get away with it, but if people get to know the punishment, maybe then he will not commit it.

The media have a lot of power. The way they portray incidents makes a huge difference. They should help create awareness and should work with similar-minded people to bring about change. Journalists should advocate tirelessly and encourage people to report these incidents. ➡

“What we see is the normalisation of violence. The extensive coverage of rape and none of conviction may embolden perpetrators as they may think that they can get away with the crime.”

*Journalist, Chennai (p58)*



# It's a sensitive issue: Treat it like one

*Security guard, male, Assam*

The last story I read was about two teachers repeatedly raping a blind girl. She was only 15 and the teachers hadn't been caught yet. The girl was probably facing a lot of physical and mental pain. Meanwhile, the media just reported on what happened in the case instead of talking about the rapists. If the newspapers focused on the accused, then their names would be publicly known, and this would make other people think twice before doing something so heinous.

If I were a journalist, I would make sure to name the accused. I would follow up continuously until the whole case was done instead of just reporting once about the incident and then moving on to another. I want journalists to report the crime just as it is, and avoid trying to grab the attention of readers and viewers. It is a very sensitive issue and I want it to be treated like one. ➡



# The news helps me take the right precautions

*Domestic worker, female, Delhi*

What the media have done is told us about the devils in our midst, especially after the Nirbhaya incident. Before that, we knew such things happened, but we did not think they were so common. I have observed in most cases that girls who take public transport late, who speak to boys too much, and who fall into the wrong company end up becoming victims.

The news helps me take the right precautions. So, I have given my girl a strict curfew. I make sure someone escorts her if classes are late. When she goes out with friends, I give her strict instructions to not accept cold drinks from anyone. We are always seeing stories of men adding drugs to a girl's drink and then assaulting her. Only someone with a daughter will understand how important it is to be aware and to take precautions. ➡

# Make politicians feel our pain

*Security guard, female, Muzaffarnagar (UP)*

I feel like I read about more incidents of rape in Delhi than in Uttar Pradesh. That's not to say that rapes don't occur in UP, but there just isn't as much openness about it here. An incident that stood out for me is about a girl who was set on fire after being raped.

Reading about rape usually gives me goosebumps. Sometimes, if the case is particularly violent, I find myself getting extremely emotional. I also feel extremely angry.

The media ask what happened, but they do not try to help. Instead of taking news like this to the politicians to make a difference, the media are just interested in relaying information. I want the media to make politicians feel the pain of the victims. Otherwise what is the point? If I was a journalist, then I would call for action from politicians. I would work to bring women together, to protest together, and make sure our voices are heard. ➡

# Telling half the story is dangerous

*Tailor, male, Lucknow*

**I**t seems like the news outlets keep telling us about the same incidents again and again, but only from one angle of their choice that they think will sell their papers. They focus too much on the gory details and not at all on the trials of the perpetrators and the judgements that are announced.

The last case that I remember is about a little girl from a village near Kanpur. It felt like the local newspapers and channels had turned her life into a show — for four or five days that is all they could focus on. I felt for that little girl and kept praying that something would happen to the monsters that had raped her, but as a common man, I never got to know what happened after the rape.

As a tailor, I come in very close contact with people's bodies, but I am extremely conscious of maintaining a professional distance. But what if there are others in professions like me, where they are so close to someone's personal space and they are watching the same news? They might think, "Nothing is going to happen to me if I misuse this space. Because nothing happens to any molester in the news".

I think the media need to change how they report things. The media should understand that their duty starts not when the incident of sexual violence has occurred, but before it. They should hold the local leaders, like the MPs and MLAs, accountable for the state of law and order when they stand for election. I want the media to ask them tough questions about these cases because I personally cannot. The media's duty does not end when they have told the public rape has happened, but when they have made sure that the perpetrators have not gotten away with it. ➡

# Why shouldn't rapists be interviewed?

*Journalist, female, Delhi*

A lot of us have become extremely brutalised and numb to stories of rape, especially as journalists who are in the field. Humanising the story is important, we cannot just convert it into a statistic — but then how many do we humanise?

What I think is missing from the journalistic interrogation of rape as a crime is the questioning of patriarchy. We've heard so often: "The girl's father or brother has come and spoken to the police", etc. But where is the mother, the sister or the girlfriend of the rapist? Where are these people in the narrative? We don't know. Beyond the victim or survivor and her immediate family, we don't know how she is coping psychologically with the trauma or how people around her start viewing her.

Also, why shouldn't we interview a rapist to find out what drove him to do what he did? Why is that wrong? If you don't have psychological profiles of these people, how are you going to identify them? No one is saying we want to find out to justify their crime or as an excuse for what they are doing.

But journalists cannot be the only resource for this kind of inquiry. These conversations are not happening enough. You either have the lawyers or the feminists and activists and their perspective. There is a vast spectrum in between. It will be interesting to see if the media can play a role in highlighting this because it is a catch-22. When the media do decide to question it, they are regarded as partisan and when they don't, they are blamed. ➡

# Social media has given people more power than print has

*Student, male, Bengaluru*

Sexual violence is almost a pandemic in our country. It is extremely common and occurs even in the remotest of corners of the country, making it difficult to combat on a macro scale.

There should be no discrimination when it comes to victims of sexual violence. The support circle I organised for male survivors made me realise that irrespective of who you are, the background you come from, the way you look, the gender or sex you belong to, you can be a victim or survivor of sexual harassment.

When victims come out and people say, “You are strong and brave”, we have to see the truth in that. It takes a lot of internal courage and strength to come out with a post or write about something that has possibly been repressed for years. To relive that and put it up where thousands of people can see it and read it and dissect it to their liking... that takes immense strength. Social media has given victims the power that print media failed to give them.

In our country, there is a never-ending conflict between one's personal choices and society's expectations. I think the Indian media have to be more understanding of that. In most news articles, there is no balance between the narrative of the victim and the perpetrator. ➡

# Context on caste, class, religion is missing

*Filmmaker, male, Chennai*

Everybody in society is responsible for sexual violence in India. Parents, teachers, educational institutions, religion — they have all made sex and sexuality a matter of taboo. On the other hand, the media and cinema have hyper-glamourised the female body and sex. Together, this has created the frustrated Indian male.

If the media are part of the problem, they can be part of the solution as well. There is a need to create a space for a more open dialogue on sex and sexuality.

While covering news on rape, the media should put things in context so that the audience understands the larger scheme of things. It is important to see sexual violence from the lens of religion and caste inequality too.

If I were a journalist, I would try to understand the context — social, political, caste, class, etc — in which an incident happened. It is important to try to see that the rapist is in some way also a victim of his own actions. ➡

# Hold people in power accountable

*Lawyer, male, Hyderabad*

The gang-rape of 'Disha' in Hyderabad was the last incident I read about.

I instantly noticed the incomplete reportage of the crime. The omission of certain factual details was telling: why was the police station under whose jurisdiction the crime occurred not named? Why was the name of the MLA/MLC not mentioned?

I view journalists as modern-day educators. They take on the role of teachers for adults, as people pay most attention to them. It is thus their responsibility to hold accountable those who have taken the oath to protect the citizens.

If I was a journalist reporting on sexual assault, details like where the girl was going, who she was with would form no part of my coverage. Rape is a crime, and a crime has only two facets that should be documented: one, the perpetrator of the crime, and two, the public officials responsible for preventing the crime and handing out justice. ➡



# The media fed off the Nirbhaya case

*Development sector worker, female, Delhi*

The name 'Nirbhaya' was created by the media — it tapped into something a lot of women in India feel. They are fearless at one level but also fearful about what can happen to them. It was long ago, but I remember there being a lot of follow-ups. The media's attention was on Nirbhaya for a long time.

In that case, not only was the reporting graphic but you could also feel the reporters' anger and anguish. It wasn't just about the facts, there was also an editorialising of the case. There were a lot of protests, and the government was responding. Then, the media just fed off the public attention Nirbhaya was getting. They realised that the case would be big because it had implications on policy — it wasn't just about catching the rapist and fighting for justice. ➡

# There is a responsibility to report from rural areas

*Student, female, Haryana*

**M**ore cases are being reported in the media after Nirbhaya, which is a positive step, but a lot more can be done.

Honestly, I don't know why the media focused so much on Nirbhaya. Was it because it was in a fairly nice part of the city? Maybe because it was a gang-rape? There are way too many cases that are similar to this one... so though I am glad Nirbhaya got media coverage, the others are important and deserve attention too.

I think the media have a responsibility to report cases from rural areas that are generally ignored. They should also think about the language used in reports and focus on putting the responsibility on the rapist for his actions.

If I were a journalist, my focus would be on the kind of mindset that encourages the idea that women can be raped, what structures and circumstances have led to that belief. It is a huge problem because every female friend of mine has gone through some kind of verbal or physical assault.

I think everyone has a stake in this rape culture. The government, NGOs... everyone needs to play a role in mitigating it. If our ministers in the Ministry of Women and Child Development can't even pass a law to criminalise marital rape, then I fear that the situation for women isn't going to better itself. ➡

# Sexual violence in crisis settings is invisibilised

*Development professional, female, Delhi*

The news coverage of sexual violence is deeply problematic. There is undue focus on the survivor and the violence that was done to them. The survivor is basically used to make the story more interesting, whether it is what they were doing before the attack, or their life story. How does that help? As a news consumer, I want to know more about the rapist and the legal consequences they face. What was the law and order context in which the crime took place? Could it have been prevented? What action is being taken?

There is also an inherent regional bias. For example, I am from Assam and very few of the big stories there are ever disseminated outside of the region. The national publications need to do a better job about representing the issue of sexual violence in other parts of India.

Another aspect of sexual violence that gets neglected in the media is its prevalence in crisis settings. I work on the provision of sexual and reproductive health services in crisis situations. Based on my experience, women and young girls are particularly at higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence, including trafficking. The data on such cases is extremely difficult to find and stigma is high. Usually the general public or community members are also not aware of how to prevent or manage such situations. Thus, it is critical that communities are made aware. Working with the various stakeholders — the general public as well as the agencies involved — is essential.

I would adopt a far wider lens if I were a mediaperson. I would interview different stakeholders and interrogate their role in the incidence of sexual violence in the community — I am talking about the police, the district administration, the court system. You cannot talk about sexual violence without talking about the system. ➡

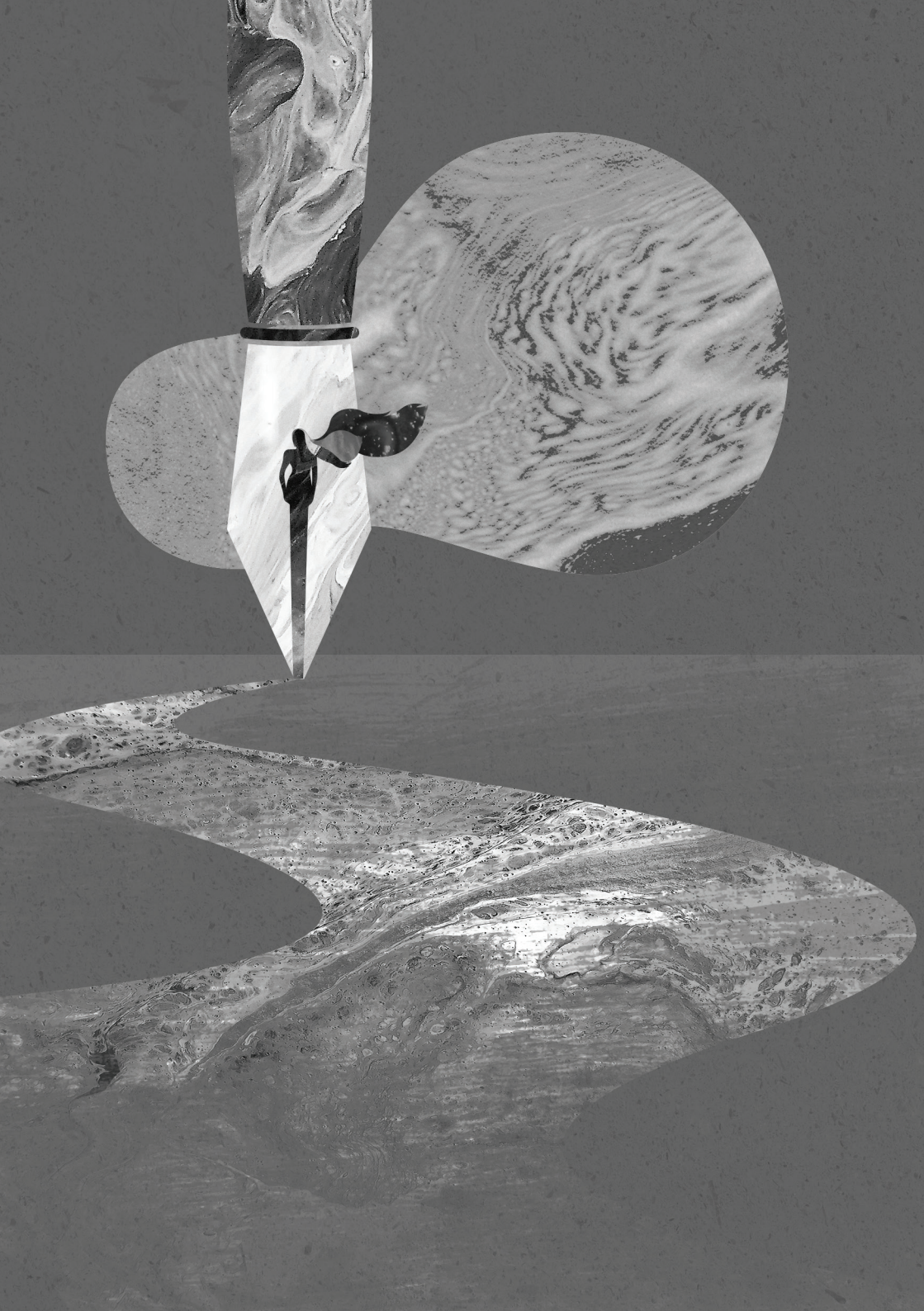
“The media’s duty starts not when the incident has occurred, but before it. They should hold local leaders accountable for the state of law and order when they stand for election. To ask them tough questions, because I personally cannot.”

*Tailor, Lucknow (p65)*

“The survivor is basically used to make the story more interesting. How does that help? I want to know more about the rapist and the legal consequences they face. In what kind of law and order context did the crime take place? Could it have been prevented?”

*Development professional, Delhi (p72)*





# Law enforcement and media need each other

*Content marketing specialist, female, Bengaluru*

I am a Keralite but I have lived all over India, as well as in the USA. One thing I noticed in India was that, unlike the US, many publications still use the word ‘victim’ rather than ‘survivor’, and ‘rape’ rather than ‘sexual assault’. In the US, you also don’t see the kind of imagery that goes into news here. Most publications tend to show a cowering girl in a corner with an aggressive-looking guy in the shadows in the front. It almost looks like titillation to me. You can skip using images unless it is a photo of a guy arrested.

What’s similar in the Indian and American coverage is that rape is about what a woman has had done to her rather than about the man who did it. The framing of stories can change: rather than saying, “X was raped”, you can say, “Y raped X”. Even if the details are the same, the tone is different.

In terms of the right messages, the media can help create awareness. Already, the ideas that I have mentioned — the media put them in my head. Of late, I am seeing a lot of articles urging people to raise their sons better, or calling out ministers when they say something wrong. There is a lot of scope for a lot of positive messaging. Society and the media are inter-dependent on each other.

When a case is reported, it helps people come forward. For example, when the Shakti Mills gang-rape case made news, other victims of the gang reported what had happened to them. You see that in #MeToo as well.

Public attention on sexual assault could energise the authorities to act. Law and order and the media need each other; the media are watchdogs here, they can put pressure on the police. That is happening a lot more of late. ➡



# Everyone is being bought off

*Homemaker, female, Sonapat (Haryana)*

People, the media, they just keep talking about rape, but no one does anything. I don't even know if one can believe that rapists are put in jail. I don't trust the media. Everyone has become corrupt — even the police. The media should do something, but they don't. Everything is being swept under the carpet because everyone is being bought off and we ordinary people don't know anything.

I think that there is only one solution for rape: shoot the rapists, or hang them. But instead, the rapists sit in jail for 10 years and then they are just let out. Once they are out of jail, they commit similar crimes again. Even when they're in jail, at least they get fed. The girl who they have raped, her life is ruined. But the rapist is always given a chance at life again. ➡

# Start advocating in your personal capacity too

*Army officer, male, Bihar*

**T**he media should report on rape extensively so that we realise that no one is safe until we change our mentality. However, the reporting should give extensive details on the culprit, while providing the bare minimum information about the victim.

For the victim, it does not end even when the culprit is punished, as society continues to remind her of what happened all her life. The media adds to that by focusing on the victim — instead, they should use their power and bring the culprit into the light so that he faces the same situation as the victim. Also, religious and caste details should be avoided.

If I were a journalist, I would start a blog in my personal capacity to share with the public, covering more than just the facts of the matter. Coming from someone with experience of covering rape, such a blog would go a long way in spreading awareness. ➡

# Police probes suffer when the media gets involved too soon

*Sub-inspector, female, Bengaluru*

Being a policewoman, I get most of my information about sexual assaults directly from police complaints, rather than from the media.

Sometimes, though, victims are hesitant about going to the police station. So they approach the media first. In such cases, we are sidelined and have to get evidence from news channels and newspapers. This is a problem because a lot of miscommunication can happen around the story — a problem that can be solved by the victim going to the police first.

When the media approach us, we give only a copy of the FIR. We strongly advise the family of the victim, or the victim herself, not to give interviews to the media, as this creates a chance for the culprit to escape.

Where the media play a crucial role is in hastening the progress of a case. They exert pressure to process the case until completion as quickly as possible.

Overall, I think the problem is not just with the boy or the girl, but also the society in which they grow up, the way they are brought up, the kinds of things they are exposed to.

The fact is, most perpetrators come from very difficult backgrounds. Many have never experienced loving relationships and have no idea of the sentiments associated with having a mother, sister, and so on. Thus, they are able to commit these heinous crimes. The solution for this problem could be in raising awareness among socially disadvantaged and deprived boys — teach them why they should not commit such crimes and how to respect women. ➡

# Are we putting our suffering on display in vain?

*Social activist, female, Mumbai*

I work at a non-profit that works to prevent serious child harm — trafficking, labour, early marriage, abuse — across India. I prefer to get my news through longform pieces, because it is frustrating to me to read about events without having them situated in their larger contexts. I want to feel like I have gained a holistic understanding rather than consumed a headline or listicle.

The news on sexual violence impacts me viscerally and my skin starts to crawl. This is why I appreciate trigger warnings immensely. But is everyone having the same reaction? Are cis, straight men who have not experienced abuse feeling their skin crawl too? Is that the goal? If so, are we putting our suffering on display in an effort to persuade the apathetic or the oppressors?

If the goal of personal stories is to allow survivors the liberation and voice to speak openly, I am on board. If the goal is to make ourselves vulnerable once again to an audience that will not be persuaded by our pain, we need to look at that choice a bit more critically.

The media can support survivors by reporting on sexual violence as a systemic issue. Cover patriarchal gender norms, political apathy, and our history as a country — some of the many factors acting upon our relationship with violence and misogyny. Each of us needs to interrogate the toxic patriarchy or violence that exists within us and do what we can to dismantle it.

My focus, if I were a journalist, would be to show my audience the forest through the trees: to investigate the larger systemic undercurrents that are part of the fabric of our society, to interrogate what we can collectively do to dismantle a system that supports sexual violence and abuse. ➡

# Emotional language has more impact

*Philosophy student, female, Chennai*

For something as violent as rape, I think it is more effective when the reportage leverages emotion to create a larger impact for the reader. They shouldn't talk about it in a matter-of-fact manner and the tone shouldn't be objective at all — they should use powerful and vivid imagery so these cases don't become normalised in our minds.

I don't read too many stories about rape and sexual violence —I will know about the big ones but not the ones that happen every day. My immediate reaction is disgust, but the frequency of the incidents doesn't leave me surprised anymore. It is also because I am not getting anything profoundly new from the news reports. ➡

# Use your heart, not just your brain

*Student, female, Kochi (Kerala)*

Every time I expose myself to the news media, it is a reality check for me. No girl is too far from becoming a silly hashtag today. I am not able to enjoy an outing with my friends and family. I am not exaggerating. Every time I go out, I become conscious of the violence done to others. ‘She had that bad experience on the train’, or ‘Oh, her body was found in a forest’, or ‘That resort was in the news for the wrong reasons’. That is me right now.

This is my message to journalists: I realise you are just doing your job, and this is your bread and butter. But stop killing victims of sexual violence again with your verbal violence. Handle sensitive issues with a bit of empathy. Report the truth, without exaggerations — use your heart, not your journalistic brain. Responsible journalism can definitely make this world a better place. ➡

# Minorities are often left out

*Student, male, Srinagar*

Rape reporting has become entirely about the identity of the victim. How much coverage a case gets is highly dependent on the caste, class or religion of the victim.

In doing so, the minorities are almost completely left out. We talk about rapes in the metros and forget the others. The Kathua and Unnao cases felt like an exception to this. They got a lot of media attention. But even in the Kathua case, there was a huge gap between when the incident happened and when it was reported.

People who have the power of reporting news should be considerate, understanding and empathetic. These are exactly the qualities I find missing currently. In an attempt to create a sensational news piece and get more 'shares', they end up de-humanising the victim and her family. This in turn creates psychological stress for the victims. It happens mostly in high-profile cases, where the affluent individual — the perpetrator — is protected at the cost of making life tougher for the victim. I am still waiting to see an honest report of an incident — a report that is not influenced by powerful government or corporate entities.

The one thing I want the media to do is to report incidents of sexual violence in a more civilised way. The victim should be treated as more than someone who is there to provide facts and details. ➡



“Avoid quotes for the sake of quotes... those that are written just to fulfill word limits. There should be a standard list of questions that must be asked of law enforcement agencies to make a rape narrative sensitive and impactful.”

*Freelance journalist, Bengaluru (p90)*



# The system is weak so there's more pressure on media

*Radio show producer, female, Bengaluru*

I am a girl first and only then a media person, so my first reaction will always be sheer anger and frustration when I hear news on sexual violence. However, as a media person, there are multiple layers to how I feel about the news coverage of such things.

The media should not report based on who has committed sexual assault. The media rule — that gang-rapes must be reported first, then sexual assault by a single stranger, then rape within a family — should not exist. Ultimately, something has been done, someone's privacy and space have been violated. Every case should be dealt with in the same way, with the same seriousness.

If our judiciary was doing great in convicting people, and if people were better equipped to report crimes, the media would not be under such pressure.

We did a campaign on the channel where we discussed these issues. We kept in mind that we should not offend anybody by passing judgements, or do anything to reduce the importance of how the victim was feeling. We let the victim talk, and we let the listeners send us messages about what they felt while listening. I think it is always right to listen first and respond carefully when it comes to sexual violence.

As someone who has been through similar experiences, it is easier for me to relate and understand the sensitivity that is needed [while interviewing victims], and avoid saying inappropriate things. But some others... they tend to ask very stark questions that offend people. I think it is also important to ask victims if they are comfortable with the gender of the interviewer.

My message to the media is, don't think of it as, "How will this get more ratings?" Instead, for those couple of minutes, be human, listen to the person as you would to a friend, and react as you would to a friend. It does seem very idealistic, but I think we can be a little human... ➡

# The police and media don't know the half of it

*Domestic worker, female, Gurugram*

When you are a poor person like me, you don't need to read the news to know that there are so many crimes against women. What do news people even get to know? How much do the police get to know? They don't know the half of it. I hear of women getting raped and killed in my neighbourhood (a slum in Gurugram) every now and then. Many of these cases get covered up. The landlords, in particular, don't want a hassle. Sometimes the women bring it upon themselves by taking lovers and running away from their marital homes, and the family doesn't want to be involved in a case. I think the death penalty is justified for rape. If my boys raped anyone, I would want them to get the death penalty. ➡

# I still don't know what is safe, and what isn't

*Marketing manager, male, Hyderabad*

I expect the media to be playing the role of an educator. I want to be able to go through the news and know if this has happened to someone, how can it be avoided. They are focusing more on the incident and details. I still don't know what is safe and what isn't.

In the Hyderabad gang-rape case, my initial reaction was shock at the coverage. I was shocked that we are talking about identities being declared (in the media), and people are not even aware of the consequences of that. Now we all know who she is, what she did, who her mom and dad are. The idea of protecting identity — no one seems to know what that is! ➡

# You can imagine the woman, but not the rapist

*Creative director, male, Bengaluru*

The primary issue I have with the reportage of rape is the way it is framed, or the stand it seems to take. Typically, there will be extensive details about the girl and then this will be followed by “was gang-raped by four–five men”, without giving any details about the men. You can imagine the woman, but you can never imagine this rapist. That is why I think reports should be more factual and representative rather than focusing on popping headlines that mention it was an 11-year-old or 13-year-old girl. They are using the information in a way that will get viewers’ attention.

The problem is that media reporting isn’t unbiased. And they are worsening the situation by not providing any insight into the rapists, what kind of men they are, what is propelling them to do these acts. Often, the reportage also becomes political — for example, if they mention a victim’s caste, it will become a Dalit issue.

I think some sort of analysis definitely needs to be included in reports on rape. Try and find out why it is happening, what are the regional factors that make rape more prevalent in certain areas, write about the rapist etc. All papers will give a mere account of the incident, but we need more than that. Right now, most articles are not much more than the headline. ➡

# It's just a race to the finish for media houses

*Artist, female, Chennai*

I cringe at the very thought of rape and sexual violence. And when it is portrayed by the media it gets worse. I feel that media houses are more interested in being the first to report a case than in being ethical or considerate. The media need to focus on the real problem: the rapist or abuser, not the victim. Media houses should also stop using graphic images... children who see such content can be adversely affected. ➡

# Very strong editorial policies need to be in place

*Freelance journalist, female, Bengaluru*

After Nirbhaya happened in 2012, there was a drastic increase in the reporting of rape. We now read about rape across ages and geographies... every kind of woman, irrespective of social background or class, can be subjected to it. As for Nirbhaya, the victim was immortalised. We made a hero of someone who was brutally assaulted.

I see a clear class distinction in reportage, in which Dalit women or survivors who are not public figures do not receive much coverage. But in a high-profile case, like the one in which a Kerala actor was charged in 2017, the approach and tone are completely different, and there are constant follow-ups.

Over the years, I have never seen one newspaper go back to a low-profile case and follow up on court proceedings, and check on what happened to the survivor. I expect at least a 300-word gist, or two columns about the aftermath of these incidents. But they remain a cold statistic.

As a woman, I feel a personal solidarity to the unknown faces of those women who have been raped. What do I do? So, I go on social media to talk about it — but who is reading about this?



Let us build an ecosystem around rape reportage — not only a report about the incident, but other conversations around it. Say, a research-based article from social scientists about why rape cases are increasing.

There needs to be a very strong editorial policy about sensitive reporting of details of the attack. Avoid quotes for the sake of quotes... those that have nothing to do about the case and are written only to fulfill word limits. There should be a standard list of questions that must be asked of law enforcement agencies to make a rape narrative sensitive and impactful. I have a problem when journalists do not follow the basics of reporting.

Organisations such as the Editors Guild, where editors and journalists come together, need to talk about how we can address rape culture with dedicated follow-ups, irrespective of the need to fill news quotas or meet deadlines. Unless the media change their tone, readers will grow numb and desensitised to rape culture. ➡

# Hyper-coverage can lead to desensitisation

*NGO volunteer, female, Mumbai*

I believe rape and sexual violence cases are being reported more often than before because victims are not scared of speaking up anymore and want to punish the culprits.

The media have helped bring rape and violence against women to the forefront. People were discussing these issues openly, but the Nirbhaya case helped garner a wave of solidarity from the public. However, by writing too much about one case, the media sensationalise it. When rape is sensationalised to such an extent, the viewer is desensitised and the victim becomes just another statistic.

If I was a journalist, my focus would be on the rapist and how ashamed they should be. More importantly, I would try to address why they thought it was okay to do such a crime, and how we can start changing these mindsets.

However, there are many people responsible for creating this situation — not just the attacker, but also those responsible for his upbringing and society at large. Since the responsibility lies with everyone, every single person must take the lead. The bystanders must speak up, victims should complain to the authorities, and, most importantly, people must be aware of the violence and power dynamics that accompany rape and no longer choose to feed it. ➡

# Exaggeration makes the wrong impression

*Homemaker, female, Ahmedabad*

When there is rape, we tend to think it is always the girl's fault, either because of her clothes or her behaviour. But in today's time, when we see girls doing as well as — or better than — boys in education and at work, we cannot think this way. It is never only the girl's fault. Men have also become devilish. We must teach them to respect their mothers and sisters.

Unfortunately, the media also present the news in a gender-biased way. This is a huge problem since the audience's notions are informed by the media. The media can do a lot for society if they present the news in the right way. But they are not doing this.

Whatever the incident, the media should present it as it is, without exaggeration. Exaggeration makes the wrong impression. These days there is also this new trend on TV — one single piece of news is repeated throughout the day. When you watch something on repeat the entire day, every day, it gets stuck in your head. How does it affect us? Negatively, needless to say. ➡

# Sexual violence is not just about rape

*Student, female, Bengaluru*

The statistics speak for themselves when it comes to how unsafe India is for women. The media are covering barely a fraction of the rapes and other types of sexual violence that take place. Be it marital rape, molestation, or harassment, it is all sexual violence, one way or the other.

The media can create a drastic change. It is in their hands to call out people and to fight the normalisation of sexual violence in society. They should convey to people how often this happens, and why it is not okay. Men should also participate in talking and creating awareness.

If I were a journalist, my focus would be on the accused, and also on how we can make changes, find actual solutions. My message for journalists would be to follow up on stories, to not use pictures of the victim, to speak for the citizens of India, to be the voice for victims. ➡

# People like reading about sex and violence

*Journalist, female, Mumbai*

Rape is one of the most important beats in journalism. Its prevalence, and the threat it poses, makes it relevant for every reader. The objective of covering sexual violence is to make the reader aware so they can protect themselves and their families, and take preventative steps.

Most rapes are committed by someone known to the victim. This is most significant in child sexual abuse. Without extensive coverage of such cases, people would think keeping kids with relatives or in a daycare are fool-proof methods of keeping them safe. Ever since sexual abuse has come into focus in the past decade or so, more people know about things like ‘bad touch’ and ‘good touch’.

Rape is also something that generates reader interest. Sex and violence attract human beings’ attention immediately, sometimes voyeuristically. And as the reader is king, stories and details that they like to consume are prioritised.

Not all cases can make it to the newspapers. Between two cases of sexual assault: one being in a posh area of a metropolis and the other being in a slum, the former will end up being published, thanks to the high interest value. This interest would lie in details such as the rape happening in a gated society with a high-end security apparatus, the accused being someone from the lower class who had his or her eyes upon a victim belonging to the upper class.

If a woman gets raped or a child is sodomised in a slum, it is seen as something that ‘always happens there’. So, such cases do not get covered often. This is where developmental journalism, perhaps, can fill the vacuum left by mainstream media.

As a journalist, I hope to bring into focus things such as gender politics and the fact that rape is one of the most powerful tools for a man to assert his masculinity. Reporting its occurrence and carrying the story forward through constructive articles and meaningful debates can counter gender discrimination and violence. I also hope for my stories to educate people about how children of both sexes are under threat of sexual abuse. ➡

# It is short-sighted to focus on the death penalty

*Software engineer, male, Gurugram*

The media are making a positive impact by reporting so frequently on sexual violence. Seeing the number of stories makes us aware of the magnitude of the problem. Earlier, these issues were ignored, and thus there was no motivation to bring about a change.

What the media get wrong is their excessive focus on the death penalty, the quantum of punishment in individual cases. What they need to be looking at is the bigger picture: the thoroughness (or not) of investigations, the unacceptably slow judicial process, the low conviction rates. Making a brouhaha over the occasional death sentence will not help thousands of victims who are waiting for their turn to be heard.

Yes, the media do have the power to impact the legislation, as we saw in the Nirbhaya case. But is that enough? We can make law after law, but what are they worth if they are not put into action? We should change the conversation to processes for justice rather than punishment. That is where you need to direct your activism.

Reporters should highlight cases that have been pending for too long, where the victims and the accused are languishing in the system endlessly. India's real 'rape problem' is what happens to victims after the crime. You see rapes happening in the USA, in Europe too, but the difference is that there you have a far more effective judicial machinery. You need to highlight that and put pressure on the government. ➡

# The English-language media have created an echo chamber

*Media entrepreneur, male, Delhi*

**M**y reaction to reports on sexual violence depends on the reportage itself. Something that is directly quoting a victim is much harsher than an article which says, 'this incident happened', and 'now this is happening'.

In terms of the manner of reportage, I prefer reading articles that take a particular case and relate it to a series of events happening or to an existing narrative. Information coming from the relatives of the victim, or the victim herself must be included in the reporting of the event. This must be done in a way, however, that doesn't put the person in a piteous state... to attract sympathy and make it a 'pity read'.

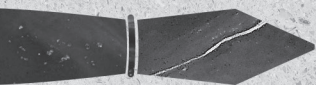
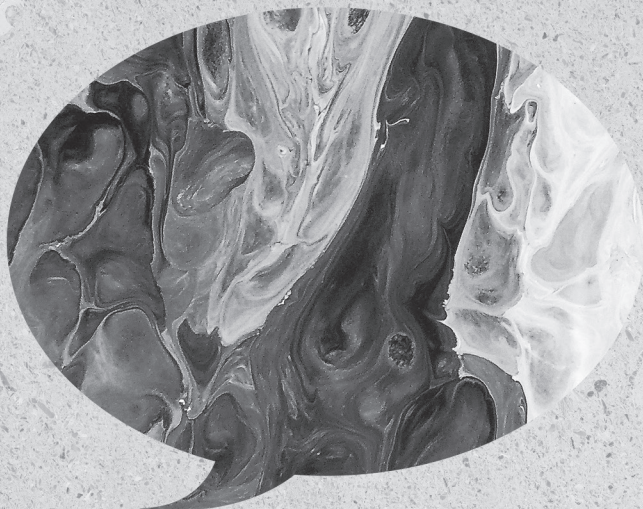
It is also important, no matter how grotesque the crime, to hear the rapist's side and publish that as well. In a way, the manner in which the crime is reported is dependent on the victims themselves, because a majority of the information is given by them.

The conversation about rape culture is dominated by the elite, English-speaking circles. There is no point in having only English newspapers talk about it. It is extremely important to bring regional news teams on board and have a coordinated attempt to create change with them. Their contribution and opinion must be included to make a difference. Otherwise, the English media are just creating an echo chamber for themselves. ➡



“What the media get wrong is their excessive focus on the death penalty. They need to look at the bigger picture: the thoroughness (or not) of investigations, the unacceptably slow judicial process, the low conviction rates.”

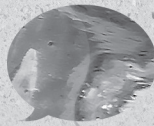
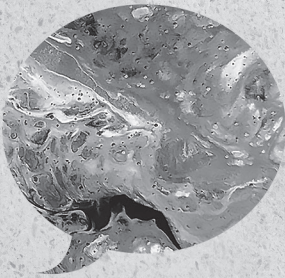
*Software engineer, Gurugram (p95)*





“There is no point in having only English newspapers talk about rape. It is extremely important to bring regional newspapers and news teams on board and have a coordinated attempt to create change.”

*Media entrepreneur, Delhi (p96)*



“We are missing rape and sexual violence reports on the LGBTQ+ community; they also matter. The media do not give the community the respect they deserve.”

*Content writer, Mumbai (p102)*

# Cover the stories that you think no one cares about

*HIV/AIDS activist, male, Chennai*

**W**e would never know if a rapist was convicted or let go if not for the media. Yet, I also think the media blow things out of proportion at times. They are so voyeuristic and sensationalise a lot of things. This can have dire consequences for a rape victim and their family. It makes me feel such anger. Following up on and showing the victim's family again and again is very wrong, and done only to gain viewership. They should leave them be.

The media should also look at what is happening in villages. If they cover just the cities and ignore rapes in villages, and later blame the government for all the crimes that happen there, it is hypocritical. The government can help only if the media do more work and broadens their horizons. I also feel that media should not make the government look quite so bad in front of the people... because the people make the government.

The last rape case I came across was in Vizhuppuram. A small child was gang-raped. And it really pained me. This particular story came in one paper, if I am not wrong. I am pretty sure it was not even considered by other channels or papers, because who is going to care? Who is going to care if someone gets raped in a place that is miles away from your home? It would make me happy if the stories that need attention come out.

I would like to advise journalists, especially the ones on TV, to stop holding debates on what is right and not right. I would ask them to get down to business and go cover that one story they think people don't care about.

If I were a journalist, I would focus a lot more on the rapist rather than the victim, and would want to make sure he gets what he deserves. But I would also make sure that the family of the accused is not made to suffer for the crimes he committed. ➡

# Victims are reporting more cases thanks to the media

*Homemaker, female, Chennai*

When Nirbhaya happened in 2012, the ordeal that the victim went through was reported very well and correctly. But there have been many brutal cases since Nirbhaya, but none have created a bigger public outcry. The fires burn, but go out after a few months.

Still, more cases are being reported because of the media. Earlier such stories stayed within families and friends. The media have encouraged better reporting by victims. More consciousness is being created by media, and parents have thus found better resources to deal with rape culture and its ramifications.

Journalists are already on the right path. It is only through media reports that people know enough to take protests to the streets. Small changes can be made — like creating safety awareness among children. Sometimes I also feel that journalists overdo brutality in their descriptions. It leaves a question in my mind as to how accurate they are. ➡

# Rapists are getting too much fame

*School bus attendant, female, Delhi*

Rape, rape, and more rape, that is what we see on TV today. It has become this way ever since the Nirbhaya case. I think men weren't as bad before that case happened, but the media's attention to it has influenced them. Now men think they will get famous if they commit rape and that everyone will know their name. They feel happy and powerful that they have done this and struck fear in people. In that sense, I think the media's attention to rape has backfired.

What the media have done right is creating awareness about the dangers facing children. They gave a lot of publicity to a case where a child was molested in a school bus recently. Because of this, our school improved its security measures. We now have more CCTV cameras on the premises, and they have been installed on the bus too.

Rather than making rapists famous, the media should report more on what we need to do to stay safe. ➡

# Provoke anger, not fear

*Content writer, female, Mumbai*

Many of the news outlets I follow have become more sensationalistic than they used to be. At the same time, they do not cover sexual violence as much as they should be. For domestic violence, in particular, the statistics are pretty shocking, which makes it clear that these issues are not given as much attention as they should be. There is a greater news focus on politics and moral policing issues. Most recently, I remember reading about the rape of a child. My honest emotional reaction to it was to push it away.

I expect a few things — one is to see more reporting and the other is to see the focus shift from the victim to the perpetrator. The focus currently is always on the victim! There are conversations about what the woman should fear for herself, rather than anger over what the perpetrator has done. The news media should also have a follow up on the legal process of what happened to the culprit. Often the coverage drops off before we get to that point.

We are also missing rape and sexual violence reports on the LGBTQ+ community; they also matter. The media do not give the community the respect they deserve.

The government and society are both responsible for how things are. The government because of what they make their agenda, and society for how it does not teach men to see women as human beings with an identity.

My message to journalists would be to focus on the culprit and to talk a lot more about how rape survivors get past what happened to them. Another message would be to make sure you are taking care of yourself, since covering stories like this can affect mental health. ➡

# Focus more on sensitisation and traumatic effect

*Clinical psychology student, female, Bengaluru*

To the news media, I say: stop dramatising and glorifying cases of rape and sexual violence. I would like journalists to try to present all sides of an issue and conduct extensive research about the subject rather than presenting only popular opinions, or opinions of powerful people. The entire news industry needs an overhaul; it is in the dumps currently.

More attention needs to be given to how the field of psychology can help. Several tests and assessments to identify prospective offenders are already in use by forensic psychologists. Apart from that, sensitisation initiatives, awareness-building campaigns, and counselling services within reach for everyone are must.

If I were a journalist reporting on news of sexual violence, I would focus more on sensitisation, awareness and highlighting all the post-trauma help that is available rather than merely detailing what happened. And I would cover any case from beginning to end, including how the culprits were caught and whether justice was brought about. ➡



# Stop hunting down the victim's family

*Theatre artist, female, Chennai*

I usually skip stories on sexual violence because I think all such news is portrayed insensitively. No matter how well covered the news item is, the attacker is not the one who is the focus of the news. There is too much emphasis on the victim. They almost act as if she is at fault.

Journalists should stop hunting down the victim's family to get details and quotes. Some media channels even create dramatisations of how things might have occurred or release evidence that leaves the victim exposed, and this is wrong. It is unethical to reveal details just to sensationalise a story.

Movies are a part of India's rape problem. Sexual violence has been fetishised through movies for a long time. The internet takes it one step further — people have easy access to rape videos that they consume for pleasure.

We all need to do our part. Actors and actresses should refuse to do scenes that depict rape. Media channels should follow ethical guidelines while reporting on sexual violence. Social media users should stop trending details of the victims. Doctors and police personnel should have a better system of dealing with survivors.

If I were a journalist, I would focus on reporting an incident factually and bringing out only those parts of the story that are relevant. To journalists I would say: do your job responsibly and ethically. Don't add to the fetish of rape and promote rape culture. ➡

# Indian media do a pathetic job reporting sexual violence in Kashmir

*Journalist, male, Srinagar*

I am originally from Rajasthan, but I moved to Srinagar to work for a Kashmiri news site. The mainstream Indian media do a pathetic job when it comes to reporting sexual violence in the Kashmir Valley. They need to realise that Kashmiris are people — not stone-pelters, terrorists, jihadis, and other things of that sort.

The situation of Kashmir can only change when the Indian media shut down their propaganda. The Indian media need to be unbiased about certain issues about Kashmir, including rape cases. Even if there are ideological differences about Kashmir, the Indian media should at least report about the human rights violations and sexual violence that occur here. But, sadly, that doesn't happen.


The local newspapers do their job better. They report on rape and sexual violence, and have credibility among the local people. The Indian media should realise that Kashmiris have many of issues that the rest of India faces. Like the rest of India, they too must be heard. ➡

# Report more on punishment handed out to rapists

*Villager, female, Asawarpur (Haryana)*

The media sometimes sensationalise the news by giving too much detail about what has happened. I don't want more details about the rape from the media. But they could write more about the rapists being sentenced in court, because it is important that we get to know that these crimes are not going unpunished.

It is difficult for girls to walk around freely now. Reading about rape makes me feel scared, but if we live in fear then how will we live? I have to go out, I have to do my work. ➡



“The media should show that crimes like these happen due to lack of jobs and education. If this can make the government build schools and give jobs to all citizens, maybe rape will decrease.”

*Sex worker, Chennai (p108)*



# Report not just on rape, but on what leads to it

*Sex worker, female, Chennai*

I have three children. My husband left us a while ago. And I got into sex work because it is the only way I can feed my children. I just tell my kids that I work at someone's house. This is good money and I am happy that I can feed my children. I sincerely hope that no other woman is put through what I am going through now.

I watch news channels from time to time. I do that so my children also learn to watch news. And yes, the media should cover rape cases — no matter how severe the violence inflicted upon the woman or child is. The media ought to be telling people that it is not such an easy world out here.

The media can do a lot of good if they manage to talk about rape cases to people on time. It is the only way people will be aware and understand the injustice even their own daughter can be subjected to.

I feel that poverty, lack of jobs, corruption, everything, contribute to rape. The media should show that crimes like these happen due to lack of jobs and education. If this can make the government build schools and give jobs to all citizens, maybe rape will decrease. The media will be a very useful tool for that.

So, apart from reporting on a rape that has happened, the media should also report on things that lead to it and help to reduce it. I hope journalists can understand that all of this stems from deeper issues than a man wanting to exert his control over a girl.

But the media can only report. It cannot kill a rapist. I feel that instead of taking the accused to court and then sentencing them, they should be punished immediately. And severely. That is when people will actually fear the system and will not dare to do something like this. ➡

# Report to redefine the role of women in the entertainment industry

*Counsellor, male, Chennai*

I feel quite frustrated, helpless, and ashamed of the way the majority of society perceives sexual violence. The last news I read was about the rape of a 12-year-old child. It made me think of the misplaced behaviour of society towards children.

The media should show conscientious objection and highlight this issue. They should also advocate for better upbringing of children — upbringing that highlights respect for others, irrespective of gender, class, and caste. Respect is an important foundation for any relationship with another individual.

The media should make an attempt to redefine the role of women in the entertainment industry, which shows the least respect to women. Women are shown as the weaker sex and are objectified. Take for example the famous dance number ‘*Yeh cheez badi hai mast*’ (roughly translated as ‘What a sexy thing she is’) — which we laugh off. Songs like this are actually a serious issue, since guys think it is fine to regard women as *cheez* (things). Media portrayal is a huge problem. The next generation are quite observant and we should set an example for them. What we portray to them is important.

Rape victims lose their self-confidence and self-esteem. Sometimes they slip into depression, which destroys their personality and turns into a lifelong problem. This happens especially in a closed society such as we have in rural India, where the victim is labelled. The existing system can be corrected only when there is a sustained attempt to instil a sense of respect for all.

There should also be a shift in mindsets in rural India. The need for respecting women should be brought to the forefront by persistent campaigning. This should involve NGOs as agents on the ground. There should be follow-ups done on their activities to ensure sustainable change.

Journalists should engage with this issue tirelessly, in coordination with NGOs. My message to journalists is that they should bring about a change in society through sustained efforts with the help of collective agents who are also up for change. ➡



# Newsrooms report stories as if they are Salman Khan movies

*Operations executive, female, Guwahati*

Recently, I read about how eight men raped a pregnant goat. I can't imagine humans doing things like this. I can't understand the state of mind of these so-called human beings. If Indian men can go to such extremes, then for whom is this country safe? It brings into question the safety of every living being.

Every other story in the news is on rape and sexual violence. Sometimes I feel like filtering out such news from my feed... it's just overwhelming. The number of rape, molestation, and trafficking cases that are reported scare me as a girl in India.

Of course, it wouldn't be right of me to say that the media shouldn't report rapes because it affects the readers. It is important for us to know the rate of rape in our country. If the media stop reporting, it will lead the country to a state of ignorance. So no, the media should keep reporting the truth, however ugly it is. Maybe one fine day, the sane ones amongst us will do something about it.

But the Indian media in general need to step up their game. Most on-field journalists are pretty average. They don't have much information to provide. Newsrooms report stories as if they are Salman Khan movies. There is no real content. The media should focus on making things more real and to the point rather than fake and dramatic.

I don't think there is a rape 'culture' in all of India — thankfully — but wherever it exists it can be addressed by changing mentalities sensitively and triggering the right emotions. The media are the most strongly placed to bring about change in the world. They can do whatever they want. But they are not doing enough.

There's a f\*\*\*\*\* up mentality ingrained in some sections of our society. It is difficult for the media, the government, or even god to change the older lot, which believes that girls are at fault if they get raped. But the media can play a very important role in changing the mindset of the younger population — the generation born after liberalisation is the future of the country. The media can stop these minds from getting permanently corrupted. ➡

# Rapes are misdiagnosed by the media

*Student, female, Sonapat (Haryana)*

I don't think the news today targets the core issue. Rape is usually spoken of as an unfortunate event but not as a symbol of a larger problem. When the larger problem is spoken of, it is not accurately diagnosed. It is often diagnosed as a problem of safety, instead of one of ideology.

Rape reports also need to avoid talking about the victims — when they do so, they often imply that the social class or background of the victim is relevant. The focus needs to be on the perpetrator instead. Reports also need to include commentary on the narrative of sex in the country — even to start talking about it would change something.

If I were a journalist, I would create a detailed profile of the perpetrator, having interviewed every person in their background and lives. And do a narrative piece on the moments that this person was taught that behaviour like this is logical. ➡

# It's not right to use someone's misery as a news piece

*Farmer, male, Jhansi (UP)*

When I see news about crimes against women, I think this should not be broadcast. What is the point of showing such news? Many who suffer do not even report it in the police station, and in any case those with power and money get away. The hooligans in my village are roaming freely. They get out on bail and then boast that no one can touch them.

The main problem with such news is the disclosure of the face and name of the victim. Society would not accept such a woman. If she is unmarried, it would be difficult for her to find a family to marry into. They must show her story but without her face or name.

The perpetrators, on the other hand, should be revealed with their photographs and names. In fact, news channels should cover how normally they live their lives after such crimes so that others fear to interact with them. And at the end, they must be punished in the same way as those found guilty in the Nirbhaya case.

Media persons should not forget their humanity. They should not make a victim's life more torturous. What is the point of toying with her life? If I were a reporter, I would not report such events because it is not right to use someone's misery as a news piece. Is there anyone who benefits out of such news? ➡

# It is their dharma to report the news

*Temple priest, male, Jhansi (UP)*

I feel really bad when I read about crimes against women. These incidents show that doomsday is not very far. Our country and our society are on the verge of ruin.

Whatever has to be covered as a news piece, should be covered. It is the *dharma* of the journalists to report the news, so they should. Of course, there might be journalists who get corrupted and work only for money. We cannot do anything about it. When there are powerful people involved, it is very difficult to get the truth out.

If I were a journalist, I would report in-depth on these issues. I would not fear anything, not even death. Even if there were people trying to silence me, I would not step back — it would be my *dharma*, just as it is to serve god and people in this temple.

I am no one to suggest a better path for journalists. I am 59 years old and with my experience, I can tell you that there is no use telling anyone to do anything. As long as people understand their *dharma* and execute it truthfully, everything will work out. ➡

# We need younger decision-makers in the media

*Skateboarder, male, Punjab*

**T**he problem of rape is as big as our country itself. But the media just latches on to it when it happens in a metro city.

The spectacle that was accorded to Nirbhaya was a media creation. Focusing on the details of any particular case will not help. Nirbhaya was not the first, and she clearly will not be the last. We are all just sitting around unless it happens to one of our family members; until then we are only going to do a candle march and that does nothing in my opinion.

The media are just profiteering enterprises. The Nirbhaya case proceedings (the verdict) are a perfect example of it. The media were more concerned with the football World Cup. We need younger people in decision-making positions within the media. When we get old, we get lazy. I want to tell the journalists to do their f\*\*\*\*ing job properly. Billions of people are counting on you. ➡

# Journalists should support and encourage survivors

*Retired administrator, female, Bengaluru*

Sexual violence is a disease that you read about everywhere — but you see nothing being done to stop it. In fact, the majority of such incidents in our country are concealed. Victims do not speak about what happened to them out of fear of being treated unfairly and labelled by society.

Media portrayal plays a major role in bringing awareness and creating change. News organisations should work with NGOs and social workers to achieve these objectives. Journalists should also support and encourage survivors to report incidents. They should focus on how society reacts to these incidents, what the victim or survivor faces after speaking out — and also, what happens if they don't speak about it. They should encourage people to have an open mind and not blame the victim. ➡



# There is no need to spice up stories

*Domestic worker & beautician, female, Hyderabad*

**N**ews about rape, like the Disha [gang-rape and murder case in Hyderabad], make me feel scared — especially since I work around the city and I travel alone on my two-wheeler.

The media's job is to report on the case with factual details. They should not try to spice up the facts of the case — it is unnecessary and leads to confusion. They should speak the truth and encourage people to stay safe.

We must respect the victim, and the media must promote this message. The victim is not to blame. Men should be taught to see women as their mothers and sisters, and women must be taught to be warriors.

It is the collective responsibility of the government and the people to take precautions against this inhuman behaviour. The government should employ stricter policies to protect women and severe punishments to punish rapists. Women should be respected. We are someone's daughters, mothers, and sisters and men should learn to see us like that. ➡

# Reporting on crimes against women is given low priority

*Teacher, female, Pune*

I am an NGO teacher, and I have been working with *basti* (slum) kids for several years. With the current events in politics, reporting of crimes against women has taken a backseat. The crime rate is high and yet you don't register it because politics demands your attention.

Media channels should focus on how these incidents occurred and how they can help the victim's family. If I was a journalist, I would go to any possible lengths to make sure that rapists are convicted.

Rather than rapists being jailed for their crimes, you often find that women are locked into their houses from a very young age. As a teacher, one of the things that you often notice is that girls are sent home from school when they first get their period. We have stigmatised periods so much that even schoolteachers won't talk about it. ➡

# Moderation, neutrality, and diplomacy are key

*Medical student, male, Bengaluru*

The sad reality is that atrocities against women have become commonplace, and when that happens, the mind struggles to remember specifics. So, my awareness of sexual violence is not focused on one incident. I'm just conscious of the countless incidents that have happened, and will be happening.

As preventive solutions, I strongly believe in the power of education, situational awareness, and complete permeability of information down to the last Indian *taluk*. Each one of us is a cog in the larger gearbox of society. We may have countless debates vis-à-vis who needs to take the initiative, but ultimately the outcome is decided by the collective.

The media are essential to any nation. The keys are moderation, neutrality, and diplomacy; they need to present cold, hard facts like they are supposed to, while keeping a neutral tone and engaging in public discussions. More often than not, they seem to have already taken a side in discussions, allowing for some pretty distorted news portrayal. ➡

# Notes

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