

Overcoming the Conspiracy of Silence

Violence against girl children has increased by a staggering 336% in the last decade. But are we honestly trying to make it a better place for our children?

Before the dust of mass anger kicked by the dreadful incident of 15th April that left a five year old girl in East Delhi struggling to survive a brutal rape case has come to settle down, another equally bizarre incident took place in South-East Delhi. Within a fortnight after the first incident, a six-year-old girl was found sexually assaulted and bleeding from wounds all over her body in a men's public toilet in Badarpur area. In a similar incident, a five year old girl was strangled to death after being raped in Doranda, Ranchi. She was found lying in the pool of blood when her mother along with her relatives recovered her body near their house. In yet another incident on the same day, two minor girls were allegedly raped and thrown into a well with their feet tied with bricks in Jamtara in Jharkhand, 300 km from Ranchi. And finally, a minor girl was gang raped and murdered at Ranigunj, West Bengal, on her way back home from school, leading to violent protests by locals who set on fire three vehicles and damaged several others, including one belonging to the police, demanding that the two youths allegedly involved in the crime be handed to them.

One can drag on the list unendingly. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) statistics show that a total of 48,338 child rape cases were recorded from 2001 to 2011, and India saw an increase of alarming 336% of child rape cases from 2001 (2,113 cases) to 2011 (7,112 cases). Among the states, Madhya Pradesh recorded the highest number of child rape incidents with 9,465 cases (from 2001 to 2011) closely followed by Maharashtra with 6,868 cases. Among the Eastern states West Bengal recorded 744 cases; while Odisha, Bihar and Jharkhand reported 736, 519 and 218 cases respectively.

And of course this is only the tip of the iceberg as the large majority of child sexual abuse cases are not reported to the police while children regularly become victims of rape and other forms of sexual assaults too. A 2007 Government Survey found that, among abused children, only 25 percent had told anyone, and only in 3 percent of the cases the police had been informed in time (*Breaking the Silence: Child Sexual Abuse in India by Human Rights Watch*). Writing in the introduction to the survey report, Renuka Chowdhary, the then Child and Women Development Minister of India (MCWD), said that child sexual abuse in India “is shrouded in secrecy and there is a conspiracy of silence around the entire subject.”

Most of these shocking incidents, however, might well have been avoided and the victims would have suffered a lot less, if the cases were reported in time to the police and they had

responded quickly and fairly the moment they received the complaint from the victims' parents. It is the lack of prompt action from the police especially in the context of missing children which often makes or mars the life of such child victims.

Another set of data presented by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Govt. of India (*Children in India 2012: A Statistical Appraisal*) shows that in 2011 crimes against children reported a massive 24% increase from the previous year with a total of 33,098 cases of crimes against children reported in the Country during 2011 as compared to 26,694 cases during 2010. In 2011, among the IPC crimes, an increase of 43% was registered in kidnapping and abduction, while rape cases were increased by 30% and female foeticide reported an increase of 19% over 2010. An increase of 27% is observed in crimes related to procurement of minor girls, ie.862 cases in 2011 compared to 679 cases in 2010. West Bengal has reported 298 such cases, indicating a share of 34.6% at national level followed by Bihar (183), Assam (142) and Andhra Pradesh (106).

To be honest, nothing is more despicable than violence, in whatever form, against children. It is absolutely unforgivable. One can only imagine the incredible physical and mental agony the victims of sexual assault or other forms of violence must suffer. It is also significant to note that in majority of cases of abused children are reported from poor areas where migrants live; thus reflecting the lack of a protective environment for marginalised children growing up in these areas.

If we look at the scenario from a sociological context, we come across the multi-layered socio-political dynamics that encourages gender injustice. According to Ms Indrani Sinha, Director Sanlaap, a partner NGO of CRY – Child Rights and You, "We belong to a gender biased society where the women and girl children are not respected. Historically and culturally speaking, women are treated as sex objects and meant for child bearing. The increase in number of child marriages with the support of the society and family, are evidences of such practices. Sexual violence against a married girl is accepted socially and thus sexual abuse of girl children irrespective of marital status remains unabated."

Having engaged with the issue of sexual abuse against girl child across several states of West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand, the challenges appear to be the same as far as dealing with cases of abused children are concerned. When the parents attempt to file an FIR, often the police send them away after making a Daily Diary or DD entry! A report in the DD does not require the police to take action immediately and do the necessary follow up. More over, all reports of the DD don't count in the criminality statistics and so the district does not appear as a 'High Crime Zone'. Our experience has also shown how in some cases the parents of missing children had to go every day to the police station without any effect.

For the police the issue of missing children is perhaps one among the other many priorities that they are confronted with in their everyday lives. However, this is an issue which calls for immediate action, as a missing child could potentially be exposed to numerous violations of rape, abuse, trafficking, etc; the lag of time at the different stages of registering and FIR, to disseminating information about the missing child to taking an overt action has often cost the victims dearly.

To address this we need two things, one is the enactment and implementation of effective legislation, and secondly, creation of a positive and proactive mindset vis a vis the girl child

and gender discrimination... where we are still failing. A standard operating procedure to deal with cases of missing children needs to be put in place and ensured strict adherence to. Convergence between stakeholders such as the police and the child line or other civil society organisations too may be of significant help in not only tracing missing children but also in their recovery and rehabilitation subsequently; similarly there is a need for a central database of missing children and efficient systems to be put in place for disseminating information about missing children. Most importantly, much more concerted efforts are needed to build a protective environment for children in our society today with a view of preventing such incidences from taking place.

Article authored by **Atindranath Das, Regional Director East, CRY – Child Rights and You**

Note to the Editor:

CRY - Child Rights and You (formerly known as Child Relief and You) is an Indian NGO that believes in every child's right to a childhood - to live, learn, grow and play. For over 30 years, CRY and its 200 partner NGOs have worked with parents and communities to ensure Lasting Change in the lives of more than 2,000,000 underprivileged children, across 23 states in India. For more information please visit us at <http://www.cry.org/>

For Further information, please contact: Child Rights and You (CRY) email abhik.bhattacharya@crymail.org or phone +919051668304.