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[Veena Gomes-Patwardhan](#)

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Social revolutions can begin only at home

The savage gangrape of a 23-year-old Delhi woman last month sparked public outrage and shamed us as a nation. Now, adding to our disgust are the insensitive remarks of leaders who should know better. For instance, Gujarat godman Asaram sanctimoniously declared that the victim was equally to blame because she had not addressed the rapists as 'brother' and pleaded with them to let her go. Abu Azmi advised women to observe a dress code and stay at home after dark.

In the recent past we had other shocking crimes, and similar biased comments and decisions. Within days of a teenage girl being molested by an unruly group of men outside a bar last year in Guwahati, the male-dominated council of a village in Uttar Pradesh banned young women from using cell phones or appearing in public with uncovered heads so that they wouldn't acquire loose morals.

Some months ago, when a young legal professional was murdered in her flat in Mumbai for resisting a rape attempt by her building's security guard, there were murmurs about how women should dress conservatively to prevent men from lusting after them.

Such responses not only unjustly blame female victims instead of keeping the focus on condemning the perpetrators of the crime, but also point to the deep-rooted patriarchal biases in our society. In almost every instance of violence against women, it is their freedom that is questioned, and this is what forms the crux of all discussions on such crimes.

Eye-opening statistics

Leaders like Mohan Bhagwat assert that rape is a phenomenon occurring only in urbanised India where people are influenced by western culture.

The truth is, rapes are on the rise in rural Bharat as well, though most of these go unreported because of the more conservative social mores there.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 2,28,650 incidents of crime against women in 2011, of which 24,000 were rapes. And these are just the official figures.

Gender equality in the home is the key

The National Human Rights Commission's consultation on violence against women, held this week in Delhi, threw up a host of suggestions including judicial reforms, police reforms and the role of the media.

The way I see it, the root cause of the problem is gender inequality. And the shift towards equality between the sexes must spring from our homes and families.

All discussions about empowering women or checking male violence against them would be in vain if we don't openly address the reality of double standards in homes.

Even today, when India is nurturing visions of becoming a future superpower, many men feel it is their prerogative to enjoy unquestioned authority and are disconcerted by even the thought of women's rights and freedom.

How many children see their mothers treated as equals by their fathers? The lessons of showing respect to women and looking at them as human beings in their own right must begin at home.

Rape is a way of asserting domination over women. Boys who are taught to respect the principle of gender equality are less likely to abuse women when they grow up.

At this stage I am reminded of Rabindranath Tagore's acclaimed poem, Where the mind is without fear. It ends with the line "Into that heaven of freedom, let my country awake". I think the great poet was not just espousing political freedom here, but an India where all citizens are free to fearlessly enjoy social and gender equality.

Veena Gomes-Patwardhan is a Mumbai-based freelance writer and science journalist.

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