

INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

XV National Conference on Women's Studies

Sub-theme:9

Sexual Violence and Sexualisation of Violence

The National Crime Records Bureau in India (NCRB) reports indicate a huge increase in the number of rape cases registered in the country. They rose from 22,172 in 2010m to 36735 in 2014, an increase of over 65% over the 5 year period. However, it is well-known that the unreported number of cases is extremely high due to various reasons such as fear of retribution from their abusers, lack of remedies for the victims' situation, fear of skepticism and societal stigmatization. Child sexual abuse is also on the increase, with the 2014 data showing as many as 8904 cases reported under POCSO. Sexual minorities also face different forms of sexual violence. A disturbing feature is the ruthless brutality witnessed in these cases, be it in Khairlanjee or the Delhi "Nirbhaya" case, and several others that have come to light from time to time.

Rape is often used as a political instrument to control, subjugate and terrorise marginalized and vulnerable communities. Through gang rapes, revenge rapes and communal rapes and so on, women's bodies have been continuously targeted as symbols of 'honour' of caste, class, religion and region, and used to shame, violate and create an environment of fear and insecurity. The number of incidents of sexual violence against Dalit and tribal women are steadily increasing. As women enter different domains of education and employment, they are faced with different forms of sexual harassment on educational campuses and at the workplace, including stalking and voyeurism. Date rapes and sexual harassment in cyber spaces are new forms. Declining employment opportunities in this period of neo-liberal economic policies has increased women's vulnerability to sexual violence. Trafficking of women for prostitution continues unabated. As women challenge the status quo, question patriarchal institutions and assert their identity, claim their rights and demand freedom of choice, of mobility etc, sexual violence also becomes a weapon to "teach them a lesson."

The last few years have also seen changes in laws related to sexual violence. The groundbreaking Verma Committee Report, the Criminal Law Amendments of 2013, the passage of the Prevention of Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act Place Act, increasing the age of consent from 16 to 18, amendments to the Juvenile Justice Act to increase the definitional age

of the child from 16 to 18, recent draft legislation to curb Trafficking, judgments related to S377, etc are some of the areas which have provoked intense debate not just amongst activists and legal circles but also within society at large.

Yet, ironically, stringent laws do not appear to have curtailed sexual violence, raising larger questions about the context in which this violence is taking place. Devaluation of women's work, commodification of women's bodies and its expression in different forms, strengthening of sexual stereotypes, the assertion of caste, communal and regional identities, the vast outreach of social media, proliferation of liquor and drugs, etc are some of the inter-related issues that need to be further explored as women and the women's movement in India grapple with this ever growing problem. At the same time, there is a need to examine the responses of the state, and those who make up the state – elected representatives, members of the police, administration and judiciary. Increasing conservatism, self-proclaimed vigilantism and moral policing, and “technocratic” solutions are actually increasing surveillance of women and curtailing their already meager freedoms in the name of safety and security. The trivialization of rape and sexual violence is echoed in comments and remarks by public figures and a popular tendency to hold women themselves responsible for the increase in sexual violence without examining its structural reasons.

How has the women's movement, and different organizations and groups engaged with these issues? What kind of debates and discussions have they provoked? What have been the ground level responses? We invite papers and presentations that explore these complexities of the everyday experience of increasing sexual violence and the sexualisation of violence in India.

Coordinators:

Aasha Ramesh
Gender and Development Consultant
Bangalore

Celine Suguna
Vimochana
Bangalore

aasmesh@gmail.com