

The Term: “Rape”

The word rape refers to a type of sexual assault, usually involving sexual intercourse or some other form of penetration, without the consent of the victim. The word is sometimes also used interchangeably with sexual assault.

The term *rape* itself is Latin in origin. The original word, *rapere*, means to “take by force” or “violent seizure”. This is one reason for connecting the act of rape with dishonor. In most societies, especially in the Eastern part of the world, the rapist is considered to “snatch and take off” with the victim’s honor, leaving the victim’s family dishonored and vulnerable to social scorn and ostracism.

What is Rape?

The definition of rape differs in different parts of the world, depending on social and judicial perception. While in most countries, rape is still defined as sexual intercourse against the victim’s consent; some countries, such as Germany, have widened the scope of the word to make it more inclusive and not necessarily requiring penetration.

The act of rape is considered a crime against humanity in all parts of the world. When committed on a widespread scale during conflict, it is considered a war crime. It is also recognized as a tool during genocide, when used to target a specific ethnic group. as a means to destroy that particular group of people.

Rape is usually committed as *a show of power and oppression* against a ‘weaker’ individual. In Pakistan, rape is usually used as a tool to suppress women in the country. According to official statistics, a woman is raped *every two hours* while a gang rape takes place *every eight hours*, in the country.

There are several social and legal factors that condone the act of rape in Pakistan. The most common of these include the perception of family honor and sexual purity; ideologies of male sexual entitlement and weak judicial support systems for survivors of sexual violence.

Perception of Family Honor and Sexual Purity

This concept refers to the worthiness and respectability of a particular family in society. The actions of individual members of a family reflect on that family’s name and honor, thus determining its social standing and respectability. Sexual Purity of women is a major element of this honor, especially in patriarchal societies, where the male is considered the ‘protector’ and head of the family. If it is rumored that a woman from a certain family is

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sexually active outside the bonds of marriage, it is considered a slight on the family honor and a grave disrespect of the patriarch. In most cases, forced marriages take place between the victim and the rapist, in order to ensure the family honor remains intact.

A severe lack of literacy is to mostly blame for such thinking. The absence of gender sensitive education encourages patriarchal tendencies towards men, who, in their ignorance, think women can be treated as chattel and sexually exploited for personal gains. Such perceptions are not only limited to the lower classes however, and can also commonly be found among educated families.

Ideologies of Male Sexual Entitlement

The different privileges afforded to males and females in patriarchal societies are at the crux of such perceptions. Male Sexual Entitlement is the belief that men are “owed” sexual gratification on account of their being men. Social attitudes that covertly reinforce such beliefs (such as men being “friend zoned” or women “giving up” their virginity/sex) are widespread and a major factor for the rape culture which is so predominant in most parts of the globe. It is also common to find panchayats in Pakistan sentencing individuals to gang rape or rape as a form of punishment (Example: Mukhtar Mai). Victim blaming is another extension of Male Sexual Entitlement, where the victim of the sexual assault is blamed (either in whole or partly) for provoking the male from “doing what comes naturally”.

Weak Judicial Support Systems for Survivors of Sexual Violence

Most countries – regardless of whether they are developed or under developed – do not have legal support systems for survivors of rape and sexual violence. In some countries, the concept of family honor triggers cold blooded murders of survivors of rape, in an effort to stem the social embarrassment and stigma. Such perceptions make it next to impossible for survivors of sexual violence to file complaints. Those who are brave enough to do so, face numerous challenges in getting their attacker behind bars – from reporting the attack to hostile police, unsympathetic (and usually incompetent) forensic examinations and a lack of counseling to shoddy investigations and weak prosecutions.

When it comes to survivors of sexual violence in rural areas of Pakistan, however, they are unable to reach out to the arm of the law for help. Here, jirgas / panchayat systems are responsible for passing out sentences to cases. These jirgas consist of village elders – usually all male – who give out sentences that are as patriarchal as they are insensitive; and almost always in the favor of the man, regardless of his involvement in the crime.

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Reporting of Rape

In majority of the cases, the survivors do not file reports with the security agencies. The reasons behind this can vary from perceptions of family honor and social stigma to psychological trauma as a result of the suffering.

Most rape reports which are made are limited to male-female forms of rape. Reports on male-on-male and female-on-female rapes are very rare. In Pakistan, it is also rare for women to file reports against rape, due to the extreme social stigma cast on women who have been raped. While there are several NGOs working tirelessly to get justice served, the conviction rate in a majority of the cases is 1 out of 9 times. This is why the statistics of rape in Pakistan are mostly unreliable; as the actual numbers are staggeringly high and a large number of rapes go unreported.

The new Anti-Rape bill, passed by Parliament in early 2015, is an attempt at alleviating the obstacles faced by survivors of rape and sexual violence. Unfortunately, no such laws are in place to help victims of pedophilia or same sex violence. While the reforms introduced by the new bill are a step towards the right direction, Pakistan still has a long way to go before victims of gender based violence can start to feel safe enough to put their trust in the law.