

# India's New Focus on Rape Shows Only the Surface of Women's Perils



Riders struggled to enter a women-only compartment of a train in Uttar Pradesh, India. Women in New Delhi and throughout India say that their gender makes them vulnerable to attack.

By GARDINER HARRIS  
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NEW DELHI — Harassed for years by her husband and his relatives, an Indian woman was finally kidnapped, raped, strangled and tossed into a ditch.

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Violence Against Women in India

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For more than a year, the woman's father has tried without success to get the police to arrest those accused of killing her, including her husband, who were charged but remain at large. The father, Subedar Akhileshar Kumar Singh, an army officer, says he believes his daughter was killed because her in-laws were not satisfied with her dowry, according to an [article](#) on Thursday in The Indian Express.

Such crimes are routine in this country, where researchers estimate that anywhere from 25,000 to 100,000 women a year are killed over dowry disputes. Many are burned alive in a particularly grisly form of retribution.

While a horrific gang rape in New Delhi has transfixed [India](#) and drawn attention to a violent epidemic, rape is just one facet of a broad range of violence and discrimination that leads to the deaths of almost two million women a year, researchers say. Among the causes are not only sexual violence but also domestic violence,

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Protesters demanding increased security for women in India stormed a police barricade in New Delhi after the rape of a student.

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Saurabh Das/Associated Press

A woman whose face was disfigured by acid in an attack joined a protest in New Delhi last month after a student was gang-raped and fatally beaten

family disputes and female infanticide, as well as infant neglect and poor care of the elderly that affect girls and women far more than boys and men.

Women have made enormous strides in India in recent decades. Their schooling now matches that of men, and they have moved forcefully into many industries, although their participation in the work force is still far less than that of men. And women have become leaders in Indian politics.

But women in New Delhi and throughout India say that their gender makes them vulnerable to attack from a vast and growing sea of unattached and unemployed young men who view women's success as the reason for their failure.

"Women are breaking through and advancing toward greater attainment — but in a society that continues to be patriarchal, that is increasing tensions," said Dr. K. Srinath Reddy, president of the [Public Health Foundation of India](#). "And one of the manifestations of that tension is increased violence against women."

In a [column](#) in The Hindustan Times, Sagarika Ghose, an author and commentator, wrote, "A profound fear and a deep, almost pathological, hatred of the woman who aspires to be anything more than mother and wife is justified on the grounds of tradition."

That tradition has for centuries been especially deadly for women who fail to live up to its ideals or reject them altogether. Using techniques pioneered by [Amartya Sen](#), an economist who won the [Nobel Prize](#) in 1998, researchers estimate that there are as many as 100 million "missing women," as Mr. Sen called them, in India. These are women who would be alive if they [died at the same rates](#) relative to men as women die relative to men in more developed countries, and their ranks grow by nearly two million each year, [studies](#) by an American and Canadian research team concluded.

Some of these lives are ended before they begin: Indian women are far more likely to abort female fetuses than male ones. Still, such birth selection accounts for, at most, 12 percent of the figure, the researchers found.

The official explanation for many of the deaths of "missing women" is that they died from accidents or injuries, but there is little reason to believe that Indians are especially clumsy or accident-prone, the researchers said. Instead, they believe that in many cases the official explanations mask deadly crimes.

"Our guess is that a lot of these deaths are due to the dowry phenomenon, but it just doesn't get reported that way," said Siwan Anderson, an associate professor of economics at the University of British Columbia and an author of the studies.

As many as 100,000 women are burned to death each year and another 125,000 die from violent injuries that are rarely reported as killings, according to government figures and other data analyzed by the research team.

Beyond violence, Indian girls may suffer from subtle neglect that can have profound consequences. Research has found, for instance, that Indian mothers tend to breast-feed boys longer than they do girls, Ms. Anderson said. And once their sons start eating solid food, they may get more of it than their daughters. Families may also invest more in the protection of boys' health, buying them mosquito netting to ward off malaria and [dengue](#).

These differences in nutrition and care may account for the substantially greater share of

girls under the age of 4 who die of infectious and respiratory diseases in India than elsewhere, the researchers found.

Deaths in childbirth, long considered a plague here, account for the fatalities of about 130,000 Indian women a year. An even greater number results from an increased relative risk of heart attacks, which may demonstrate that the poorer quality of care provided to women continues throughout their lives.

As girls age, the strict controls that many families have over their daughters cannot protect them from rape and sexual assault, since most of those crimes are committed by people known to the women, studies say. But even so, such controls have some benefits, public health experts say. Indian women have, on average, no more than two sexual partners in their entire lives, and most are virgins when they marry, surveys show. This absence of promiscuity is probably an important reason that AIDS never became an epidemic in India.

"Tradition in this case is not a bad thing," said [K. Sujatha Rao](#), a former health secretary of India and a crucial figure in the fight against AIDS. "You take marriage here as a much more sacrosanct thing."

Trying to determine how to protect women in India while preserving the country's traditions has led to a very public debate in recent weeks.

[Asaram Bapu](#), a popular Hindu guru, said that the New Delhi rape victim could have saved herself if she had simply "held the hand of one of the men and said, 'I consider you as my brother.' " Some conservative politicians and commentators blamed skirts, revealing clothing, a lack of overcoats on girls, junk food, astrology and the decisions by some wives to work outside the home.

For many Indian women, having more police officers on the streets is no answer, since many view them as every bit as dangerous to their safety as criminals. On Thursday, the police in South Delhi put up posters advising young women to go straight home after their classes in school or college.

Tradition in India also results in considerable acceptance of violence. A [2005 government survey](#) found that 54 percent of women in India said that husbands were justified in beating their wives, with the most common justification being if they failed to show proper respect for their in-laws.

Still, Indian husbands beat their wives far less than men in many other developing countries, according to [comparable surveys](#) done in multiple countries. Domestic violence levels are far higher in Colombia, Egypt, Peru and Zambia than in India, the surveys found.

But discrimination against women is so endemic and wide-ranging in India that deaths from domestic violence account for only a fraction of the overall risk of unnecessary death. "Other aspects come into play, like female infanticide, mistreatment of young girls in terms of access to resources, maternal deaths, unequal access to health care and so forth," said Ms. Anderson, the economics professor. "Indian women face more dangers."

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