

The American Medical Women's Association (AMWA) is an organization of women physicians, medical students and other persons dedicated to serving as the unique voice for women's health and the advancement of women in medicine. AMWA members were outraged by the recent brutal rape and murder of an Indian medical student New Delhi, India, in December 2012 and find it important to reinforce its position on sexual violence against women.

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.” (1) Every year an astonishing proportion of women are victims of sexual violence.

- In the United States, nearly 1 in 5 women report being raped in their lifetime, the perpetrators were (2,3):
 - 51.1% - intimate partners
 - 12.5% - family members
 - 40.8% - acquaintances
 - 13.8% - strangers

- Internationally (4)
 - 4% (Azerbaijan) to 44% (Mexico) of women experience sexual violence in their lifetime.
 - 25% of women felt it acceptable to be hit or beaten for refusing to have sex with their husbands; this number is as high as 70% in some countries.

Sexual violence against women has numerous long term health consequences beyond immediate trauma and death, which include the following (5):

- Generalized symptoms: headache, back pain, abdominal pain, GI disorders
- Ob/Gyn issues: unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections including HIV, pre-term delivery in pregnant victims
- Psychological issues: post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, eating disorders, suicide
- Child victims: increased risk of subsequent tobacco, drug and alcohol abuse

These long term consequences disempower women in numerous ways, making it difficult for them to work and care for their families and children. Therefore, the social and financial impact of sexual violence is significant. To bring an end to these tragedies, we urge local, national and international government to show greater respect for women by prioritizing legislation to accomplish the following goals:

- In efforts to promote respect and equality towards women, we advocate for:

- Changing societal norms by implementing educational and social campaigns aimed at improving attitudes towards women
- Increase educational and employment opportunities for women to allow them financial freedom from potential abusers
- Assist with the establishment of grassroots female advocacy groups
- To bring justice and healing to victims of sexual crimes, we demand:
 - Harsher penalties for crimes of sexual violence
 - Independent committees to ensure accuracy of police reports in cases of rape
 - Fast tracking cases of sexual violence in the judicial system and having an oversight committee ensuring due process
 - Establishing helplines for victims to provide counseling, social, medical and legal support
 - Immediate renewal of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act

Collaborative efforts are needed to end sexual violence against women. Social norms regarding the mistreatment and violation of women's human rights must be changed.

We must talk to family, friends, community members and legislators about ending sexual violence against women. We must hold our governments accountable for crimes of sexual violence. We must advocate for the equal treatment of women in our communities by denouncing incidents of sexual harassment and mistreatment. We must promote legislation that enforces harsher penalties for acts of sexual violence. Together we can end this global health catastrophe by changing societal attitudes towards women and in turn promoting a just society where every woman is given a chance to thrive.

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