



## Zeenia Kolah

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At 12 years of age I remember travelling alone for the first time on a Mumbai local train. It was also the first time I recall being groped in public. At 16 I was walking into a friend's building when I was felt up by the security guard stationed outside. When I was 18, two men on a motorcycle tried to grab me as I was waiting for my ride on the side of the road. Being undressed by a man's eyes while walking down the street is such a common occurrence, it often doesn't register anymore.

Growing up I was never allowed to go to sleepovers and slumber parties that my girl friends threw at their houses because my mother was afraid—Afraid of her daughter being sexually assaulted by male relatives in their homes.

Today as a 22 year old woman, I still do not take a taxi cab home alone at night.

Everytime I leave my home I am cautioned to be careful—Be careful about what you are wearing, be careful of where you are going and who you speak to—all of these cautions so as not to get raped; as if it were in my control.

For an Indian woman, these experiences are not extreme but are in fact the norm. In my city and my society, girls learn, at a very early age, to be afraid of public spaces and even our own homes, because no place is safe.

My work at SheSays started a little over a year ago with a case of a 4 and a half year old girl who was raped by a chocolate store owner in her neighbourhood. For this girl, hospital foyers replaced play grounds and police stations replaced classrooms. One year later and courtroom visits are the new normal for this child and her family.

The system in Mumbai does not function to support sexual assault victims like this 4 year old girl; it does not allow them to access proper care, justice and restitution. And, it does not take into account the emotional and psychological impacts of abuse on survivors of sexual assault.

If these systems were designed to serve the victims, we would not have had to spend six hours in the hospital trying to find someone who would perform a basic medical examination on a four year old girl, and a year later we would not still be waiting for the result of that test. The little girl would not have had to identify her attacker a police lineup and justice would have already been served so that this family and this girl could begin to cope with their trauma instead of being forced to continue to relive it.

This is why SheSays exists: to help victims know and exercise their legal rights, to connect them with resources for support and to guide them and advocate for them throughout this long and difficult process.

Unfortunately, institutional indifference is not the only thing forcing sexual assault victims to be left behind in India. One of the biggest hurdles in fighting gender based violence is public opinion and the social stigma attached to speaking out. In her fight for justice, if a woman speaks up about her assault or about the need for mutual respect and equality, she is ridiculed, viciously harassed and often made to share the blame, if not bare it entirely herself.

So at SheSays, we also work to change public attitudes and create safe spaces for people to talk about their experiences. We host seminars to train people on how to actively break the cycle of sexual violence. We work to educate people about consent and about the laws on harassment and rape so they know how to seek help, should they ever need it. But most importantly, these sessions have allowed women to talk about their experiences without a sense of shame or dishonour. Women, from 18 to 48, have approached us after the events to speak about what happened to them. Often, when they tried to tell others about it before, they were met with indifference or were told to be quiet. Even the small act of being able to speak and have someone listen is an important moment of catharsis. But we also try to go one step further, by helping these women connect with counseling services and offering financial support to those who need it.

The struggle to end gender based violence cannot be separated from the overall struggle for the equal treatment of women in society. As long as women are viewed and treated as second class citizens and not afforded the same respect as men, gender based violence will continue.

That's why, at SheSays, we have taken on the effort of pushing for a more equal society through gender advocacy campaigns. Several months ago, we launched a campaign to end the taxation of sanitary napkins as luxury items in India. This is a fundamental issue. Only 12 percent of women in India use sanitary napkins. The rest resort to alternatives such as old fabric, rags, sand, wood shavings, and dried leaves. One of the major barriers to the use of sanitary napkins is the cost.

Now let me be clear, this is not only about menstruation. It's also about education, economic participation and health. Twenty-three percent of girls in India drop out of school when they begin to menstruate. Others are not able to go to work, and the poor hygiene of home alternatives to sanitary napkins leads to increased rates of reproductive tract infections and cervical cancer. Not to mention the social stigmatisation of menstruation that causes the further marginalisation and isolation of women in our society.

This is what we do at SheSays: we work to tackle the issues of sexual assault and gender equality through a multi-dimensional approach that focuses on local solutions while keeping the bigger picture in mind.

It goes without saying that gender based violence and inequality are not only affecting women in India. In 2017 we are still living in a world where in certain countries women cannot pass citizenship to their children, spousal rape is not criminalised and women are even forced to marry their rapists. These are just the dramatic examples. The mentality that views women as objects, as lesser, as things in need of protection or as existing for the purposes of men is deeply rooted in societies the world over. And, the belief that women are and should be passive is a major part of this mentality. At SheSays, we reject passivity, and we believe that we cannot wait any longer for others to decide that we should not be left behind.