A criminal trial is under way in India. The proceedings are centred on five men accused of committing a brutal gang rape of a 23-year old female student on a bus in New Delhi on December 16, 2012. She died as a result of the massive internal injuries inflicted upon her in the attack. Only days after this heinous crime, Punjabi police reported the arrest of seven more men for the gang rape of yet another young woman, also on a bus. As the lone passenger, she was driven to an isolated location and repeatedly sexually assaulted by the driver and six friends throughout the night.

Shocked and outraged responses to these atrocities began to pervade the global media almost immediately. Impromptu protests both in India and elsewhere indicated intensifying recognition that the state of sexual violence in that country must be addressed. Although just one item on a continuum that includes trafficking, forced prostitution, domestic violence and acid throwing, scholars, Gundappa and Rathod,1 note that in India rape and sexual abuse are among the most frequent forms of violence against women.

Following initial reaction to the New Delhi incident, condemnation of India’s ‘rape culture’ broadened to critiques of other regions of the world. In an article posted in The Guardian, Amaka Okafor-Vanni underscored the ubiquity of sexual assault in Nigeria, despite the fact that the ‘infamous Absu gang rape’, the widely circulated videotaped hours-long sexual assault of a female student at the Abia State University, was one of the very few that had received some degree of public attention.2 Similar to the disturbing case of a 16-year old girl the police stated was drugged and repeatedly raped in British Columbia, Canada in 2010,3 the more recent sexual assault of an unconscious teenager at a party by subsequently convicted high school football players in Ohio, USA, which was circulated on the internet, has caused a media frenzy.

Across this type of coverage, two points are apparent. First, the problem of sexual violence is clearly not confined to developing countries. Although notoriously underreported, sexual assault is a common insidious human rights and public health issue that affects the lives of millions of women worldwide, regardless of geographical location, age, race, marital status, sexual orientation, ability or socio-economic status.4 Among the countries that participated in the recent International Violence Against Woman Survey, the percentage of those women who reported life time sexual assault by a man was 6% in the Philippines, 14% in Hong Kong, 17% in Poland, 24% in Mozambique, 25% in Switzerland, 28% in Denmark, 34% in Australia, 35% in the Czech Republic and 41% in Costa Rica.5 A 2010 population-based study in the USA revealed a life time rate of rape for women of 18%; 27% of women had experienced other forms of unwanted sexual contact.6

Secondly, the incidences of sexual violence that tend to grab headlines are the seemingly most atrocious and extreme in nature. Such cases typically involve stranger and/or multiple assailants, especially depraved sex acts, brutal physical injuries and/or humiliating public violations which are often further exploited through social media. Although such appalling experiences are the reality for some, as evidenced in these latest high-profile rape cases, these types of assaults, relatively speaking, are rare. The data worldwide suggest that the overwhelming majority of sexual assaults are committed by a single male assailant, at least 65% of which are perpetrated by men known to the victims, often husbands, ex-husbands or common-law partners.4,5 Even in India, where the current narratives seem to suggest random multiple stranger attacks, according to the National Crime Records Bureau in 2011, of the 24,206 reported rapes in that country, 93% (22,549) were committed by someone the victim knew.7

The research also indicates that most sexual assaults do not result in serious bodily injuries.4 However, even without obvious physical damage, the harms inflicted can be significant and include sexually transmitted infections such as HIV, unwanted pregnancy, depression, suicidal ideation and attempts, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.4 Victims may be rejected by their families, ostracized by their communities, forced to marry the assailant and even murdered to preserve family ‘honour’.1,4 As one survivor recently commented, the act of sexual assault also constitutes an ‘intimate theft of human dignity’.8 Studies suggest that the cost of such violence against women globally, including medical treatment and other efforts to assist victims, is
billions of dollars annually.\(^9\) In the smaller state of Iowa alone, in 2009 this figure for female victims was 4.5 billion.\(^10\)

Compounding the impacts of such pervasive and destructive violence is the fact that women are frequently held responsible for their own sexual victimizations—suffering accusations that they asked or deserved to be raped.\(^4\) Indeed, the defence lawyer for several of the New Delhi case accused almost immediately turned his focus to the character of the victim, stating, ‘I have never seen a “respectable lady” raped in India’,\(^11\) while members of the public have called the teenage girl in Ohio a ‘whore’ and blamed her partying for having precipitated the assault. Although sex without consent is sexual assault, period, a recent study of American college students found that 41% believed that a woman who was raped while drunk was responsible.\(^12\) What is critical to understand is that the acceptance of such rape myths is strongly associated with hostile attitudes and behaviours toward women,\(^13\) as well as a lack of willingness to intervene,\(^14\) behaviour evident in the Canadian case, where the police reported that at least 12 youths stood by and watched the alleged assault.\(^15\)

Although in these instances the media may have provided a service in making visible that which is often neglected, such attention can become problematic when the representation of sexual violence is not fully reflective of its realities. We must recognize that, as Shannon Sampert has demonstrated, ‘[j]ournalists do not operate in a vacuum. They are subjected to the same myths and stereotypes to which the rest of society is exposed. [Moreover], they work in an environment that requires stories that are novel, contentious, and scandalous’ (p. 327).\(^16\) This does not mean that the news media should not document these more horrific occurrences of sexual assault but, as in the New Delhi case, a woman should not have to be savagely beaten, raped and killed for journalists and the world to care. ‘Everyday’ victimizations, such as being sexually assaulted on a date or raped by one’s husband, should not be eclipsed.\(^4,5\) They too must come into view; fuel on-going protest and bring about fundamental policy change.\(^17\) And, they must remain in the public eye, in both developing and industrialized nations, until the routine rape of women is no more.

Addressing the issue of sexual assault can seem insurmountable given the ubiquitous and insidious nature of the problem. Changing long-entrenched problematic attitudes and erroneous beliefs about rape and raped women, however, could be facilitated by more far-reaching media reporting. It is incumbent upon those of us in the field of women’s health to assist journalists in more accurately reflecting the true nature and multitudinous psychological, physical, social and economic costs of all types of sexual violence.

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