

Screening with Sensitivity

A Prajnya resource for
television creative teams on
how to depict and address
gender violence onscreen
2015



**This resource was first compiled as part of the 2010 Prajnya
16 Days Campaign against Gender Violence.
This is a revised 2015 edition.**

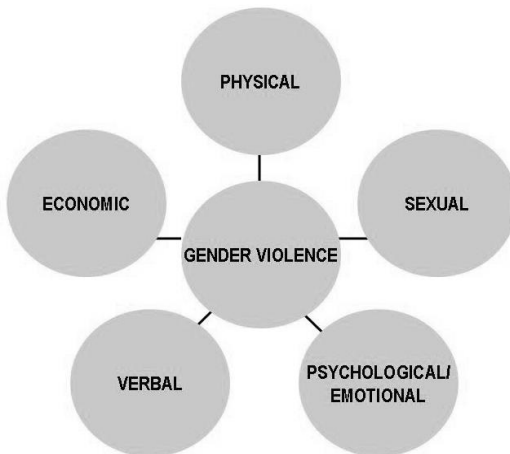
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ABOUT GENDER VIOLENCE

What is “gender violence”?

- When one experiences violence in a certain way because one is a woman, girl, boy, man, transgendered person... that is gender violence. Sexual violence is gender violence, and that includes rape, date rape, marital rape, child sexual abuse, incestuous abuse etc.
- Gender violence expresses the power that one person has or wishes to have over another. The power to decide whether a girl child will be born, for instance, is gender violence.
- Gender violence can take any form. Stalking, obscene calls, sexual harassment at the work-place, what we euphemistically call 'eve-teasing', are all gender violence.

Different kinds of violence



Gender violence takes many forms.

Pre-Natal Sex Selection • Female Infanticide • Child Marriage
• Trafficking of Girls and Women • Abduction of adolescent girls during combat • Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting • Date Rape • Dowry Death • Bride kidnapping • Crimes committed in the name of passion or honour • Rape • Physical or emotional violence by an intimate partner • Domestic Violence • Marital rape • Sexual harassment at work • Exploitation of domestic workers • Forced sterilization or other coercive reproductive practices • Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War • Acid Attacks • Street sexual harassment • Public humiliation • Custodial rape

Five myths about gender violence

Myth 1: Gender violence is not a serious problem. Some people are just trying to create an issue where there is none.

Fact: One in three women experiences violence in the course of her lifetime, but barely 15% tell anyone about it. That means in India, around 380 million women have been beaten, coerced into sex or abused but only about 57 million have ever told anyone at all. That's almost equal to the population of Tamil Nadu!

Myth 2: Gender violence is really violence against women with a new, incomprehensible name.

Fact: We now know that men and boys also face violence. Because gender violence is an abuse of power or an expression of the desire to exercise power, anyone who is in a vulnerable social or economic position may suffer violence—men in custody, boys in impoverished communities, sexual minorities or transgendered persons. Therefore, although women and girls experience violence disproportionately more often, the use of 'gender violence' or gender-based violence' recognizes the vulnerability of individuals across the community.

Myth 3: Gender violence is a problem of the working class and poorer sections.

Fact: Class, caste and educational levels make no difference to the experience of violence. Both perpetrators and victims hail from across the socio-economic spectrum and come from all communities.

Myth 4: Education and economic empowerment will eliminate violence once and for all.

Fact: Given that professional women experience workplace harassment and wealthy families abort the foetus of their daughters, education and economic empowerment on their own cannot be a solution to this problem. Awareness needs to be created across the social spectrum, so that people recognize violence as violence and we develop an attitude of zero-tolerance to it.

Myth 5: The victim was asking for it.

Fact: Gender violence is not an expression of passion or lust. It cannot be seen as punishment but as behaviour that should be punished. Those who are violent with others are essentially expressing a desire for control or trying to show that they have control over victims. The victim therefore never asks for or deserves the abuse or violence.

WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE EXPERIENCES VIOLENCE?

Perhaps we have witnessed violence. Perhaps we know someone is inclined to inappropriate behaviour. Perhaps someone tells us she or he has experienced violence. ***What can we do?***

The first step is to acknowledge that there is a problem and that we can make a difference.

Violent behavior is violence. It is abuse of power.

It is NEVER:

- Justified
- Punishment
- Passion
- Honourable
- Condoned by religion

Once we acknowledge this, it is harder to be silent than to intervene.

Small things make a big difference

We are not helpless. There are many things we can do.

- We can give the benefit of doubt to the person who tells you they are experiencing or have experienced any kind of violence.
- If we think something wrong is happening—maybe we hear sounds of struggle or violent noises, for example—we can intervene:
 - By letting them know someone has noticed—just ask, “Is everything okay?” “Do you need help?”
 - By interrupting the behaviour in an innocuous way, like the Bell Bajao campaign advocates—ask for directions if in a public place, ring the doorbell, call their phone.
- Not ignoring wrong behaviour goes a long way towards preventing violence.
 - If someone speaks offensively, we can let them know it is not acceptable to us.
 - Laughing at derogatory jokes encourages a form of verbal abuse and physical violence is only one step away.

We need to intervene because not intervening makes us a part of the problem, not the solution.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE

Helplines



Anyone who is in trouble or wants to help someone in trouble can call a helpline.

Sharing a helpline number on the screen when depicting violence is a useful off-set to what is being shown. Do check with the service provider before advertising their number and do not post an address.

Prajnya has a listing of Chennai helplines with detailed information on services online at:

<http://www.prajnya.in/chennaihelplines.htm>

In every city, there are organizations that provide services to victims of violence and many of them have helplines.

Helplines and other service providers can provide information about first responses, safe homes, about legal issues, counseling and sometimes, placement and livelihood training. Just do an Internet search for your city plus 'helpline' plus 'women.'

1098 is the national helpline for women in distress. It can be reached from a BSNL line and is answered by the police.

Indian laws and gender violence

Indian law goes much further than Indian society in condemning and punishing violence.

Women are protected by the Indian constitution and under the Indian Penal Code. There are also a number of specific laws that address violent behaviour of many sorts.

You can learn about these from a variety of sources online:

1. Family Laws in India. LegalServiceIndia.com
http://www.legalserviceindia.com/helpline/helpline_HOME.htm
2. Legal Cell, National Commission for Women
<http://ncw.nic.in/frmLegalUnit.aspx>

The laws have their shortcomings, but the real challenges lie in:

1. Social attitudes that condone or ignore abusive behaviour.
2. Poor implementation and delayed justice.
3. Challenges of livelihood and social security.

Other resources

Prajnya has over the years compiled many useful resources on this subject. See our website: <http://prajnya.in/grit.htm>

Of these, our Gender Violence reports are the most comprehensive:

- 2009
<http://prajnya.in/gvr09.pdf>
- 2010
<http://prajnya.in/gvr10.pdf>
- 2014
<https://gritprajnya.wordpress.com/category/gender-violence-in-india-report-2014/>

You can also read about this issue on our blog devoted to gender violence-related information and discussions:
<http://gritprajnya.wordpress.com>

LET'S DO THE RIGHT THING

Telling a good story

Storytelling that is fair to everyone

- Are the characters in the story stereotypical?
- Do they use words and express attitudes that are regressive?

About boys and men, heroes and villains

- What roles do men play?
- Are the men in the story sensitive and supportive?

| <i>Decoding “sensitive” and “insensitive”</i> | |
|--|---|
| Sensitive | Insensitive |
| Taking the trouble to choose words carefully. | Describing someone as stupid or using abusive words like “slut” and “whore.” |
| Showing characters as victims of violence. | Showing characters as asking for violence. |
| Showing their determination to survive in a positive way. | Showing a victim’s determination to survive and rebuild their life as proof of their deserving violence. |
| Taking a sympathetic view of a victim’s trauma, and treating a proven offender as an offender. | Justifying the gender divide and blaming women for the issue at hand. |
| Presenting an issue from all perspectives, specifically include that of the woman or victim. | Taking a narrow, superficial view, that overlooks the fact that women have distinctively different experiences. |

- Are positive characterizations restricted to fathers and brothers, or are there also good male friends and co-workers in the story?

Keeping female characters realistic

- Are the women characters portrayed in a positive light?
- Are bizarre make-up and unrealistic costumes used to signal value judgments and reinforce stereotypes about women?
- Are we showing young girls and women as only objects of desire/lust?
- Are older women characters being used to give regressive ideas in the garb of advice to younger women characters?

Not caricaturing LGBTQI characters

Gender normativity, expecting people to conform strictly to gender roles and stereotypes, is a form of violence with lifelong consequences. The acronym LGBTQI serves as a rubric to refer to several sexual minorities—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex. To learn more about these, read <https://gritprajnya.wordpress.com/2014/12/04/gender-violence-the-health-impact-gender-based-violence-and-lgbtqi-communities/>

- Are transgender characters only portrayed as victims, villains or sex workers?
- Are we using violence against transgender persons as a comedic device?
- Are over-done make-up, exaggerated and sexualized body language and stereotypical representations used to reinforce regressive attitudes toward transgenders?

- Are we using derogatory and offensive language to insult and humiliate transgender characters based on their sexuality?

When gender violence is part of the story

Gender violence in the story-line

- Why is gender violence part of the plot?
- Can the situations of gender violence be realistic?
- Are the writers showing gender violence as unacceptable and illegal?
- How can helplines and legal information be integrated into the storyline and presented to the viewer, through a ticker or through a character getting correct legal advice?
- Can service organizations that can help be featured in the storyline?
- Can we stop using repetition of visuals of violent treatment of women as an editing gimmick?
- Are we inadvertently justifying any act of violence against women?

Victim of violence, victim of storyline

- How is the victim portrayed?
- Does the victim get to tell her own story from her point of view?

Reacting to gender violence

- How do characters—both male and female—react to violence against women?

- Are they realistic, sensible and supportive to the victim of violence?
- Is it possible for one character to point out that this is a criminal act and is punishable by law?
- Do their reactions make it clear that violence against women is a criminal act?
- When a character is required to respond in a way that denigrates women, is that response condemned within the context of the same scene?
- Do we unintentionally send a message through our story and dialogue that female characters should be submissive, that victims of violence should submit to violent behaviour and accept it as their lot?
- Are we justifying submissiveness as model behaviour and therefore, discouraging women in general and victims in particular from seeking help?
- Do characters in the story extol virtues such as tolerance, patience and understanding of extreme and unacceptable behaviour of family members as the only way?

Watching one's words

- What are the words used when gender violence is described or discussed?
- Are euphemisms used instead of the actual words for violence?
- What is the impact of the words used on the portrayal of the victim and her circumstances?

The real stuff

Proper channels

- Can channels create a panel of organizations/experts who will be consultants on such issues?

Talking points

- Can the talk-show or game-show integrate important social issues like gender violence into its portfolio of themes?

Research first, writing later, filming last

- Has the writing team undertaken research on the issues portrayed/included?
- Have the writers been able to reach out to experts for their inputs and for clarifications on sensitive issues?

Getting it right

- Has the production team ensured that experts invited are the right experts for the particular topic at hand?
- Has the production team sought out social workers and grassroots NGOs to participate or advise them on the show?
- Has the anchor been given time to learn about the issue and does the anchor present the information in the right perspective?
- Will the episode show both men and women who are realistic, sensitive and sensible when dealing with violence against women?

- Do we know and are we using the right words to describe issues, crimes and individuals, so that the impact of our work is not diluted?
- Have the writers been careful to avoid stereotypical comments about survivors and victims of violence, such as those about 'shame' and 'honour'?

Featuring victims of violence

- Has the production team or channel informed the individual about the purpose of the interview, photography or filming?
- Has the team or channel made sure the individual understands?
- Has the team or channel received explicit consent for the use of the individual's name, photograph or filmed footage?
- When showing an interview with a victim, has the production team considered masking the victim's face?
- Has the team considered the option of using just the audio of an interview or a voice-over narrative?
- Can we make sure that the camera does not exploit the vulnerability of the victims for melodramatic purposes?
- Can we avoid editing gimmicks that will sensationalise the victim's trauma?
- If the production team is considering making a fictionalized account of the victim's experience, have they explained this, sought and received permission from the concerned individual?
- Can the production team make sure that the interviewer or anchor allows the victim to tell her/his story without interruption, judgment or unnecessary advice?
- Can the production team ensure that the interviewer or anchor does not ask leading questions that shift the focus

away from the victim's perspective towards the channel or programming agenda?

- Even more important, can the team ensure that the questions do not pin blame on the victim?

Oops! Did we just hurt someone?

- Does the production team correct hosts, participants and other performers for insensitive jokes and regressive opinions?
- Are the anchors, presenters or judges briefed that they can correct participants, performers and studio audience members when they are insensitive or say things that denigrate women and girls?
- Are anchors themselves using gender-insensitive words and phrases?
- Are we allowing comments by judges or anchors or performers that are gender-insensitive or unacceptable?
- Are we attacking members of any gender for thinking in new ways or choosing a different lifestyle?

It's not funny!

- Would the jokes we crack about women and girls be acceptable if they were about any other group in society?
- Are we making jokes that are gender insensitive and passing it off as comedy?

Catch them young

- Are we allowing young girls and boys to perform inappropriate adult songs and dances?

- Are we hurting impressionable young minds with tasteless insensitive remarks and jokes?
- Are we stereotyping participants of game shows and talent shows based on their gender?

Most important, where's that camera?

- Have the camera angles and lighting been chosen judiciously when girls and women are being filmed?
- Are we aware that the way we place our camera and plan camera angles reflects the way in which men look at women, and that often, this makes women objects to look at rather than human beings with thoughts and feelings?
- Could the channel and production company take responsibility to make camera crew, performers and participants to this?
- Can we be more careful when the subjects are back lit that unwittingly displays their bodies?
- Can we make sure the camera is not accidentally showing women or their bodies in an unacceptable way?
- Are close ups of body parts with an intention to titillate, or low angle shots being used when women are performing?
- Is the camera zooming into gestures/ expressions or actions that may cater to voyeuristic tendencies?



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