

India Sentences Accused Rapists to Death

Hello, and welcome to As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

This week, a court in India found four men guilty in the rape and murder of a young woman last December. The 23 year old student was raped and attacked with an iron stick on a bus. Her friend, a man, was also beaten before both were thrown off the bus. She died from her injuries two weeks later. Steve Ember has more.

The four defendants denied any wrongdoing. On Friday, all four were sentenced to death by hanging.

Two others were accused in the rape and death of the woman the Indian media called "Nirbhaya," a name meaning fearless.

A fifth defendant was 17 years old at the time of the attack. He was sentenced to three years of detention – the strongest sentence possible for someone that age.

Police had arrested another suspect. His body was found hanging in jail last March.

The gang rape incited protests across India. Demonstrators called for stronger measures to protect women from violent crime. The government answered the calls by ordering new anti-rape laws and creating courts to try cases quickly.

But many women say not much has changed in the past year, even with all the media attention and public reaction. Some say they do not believe major change can take place in a society that gives special treatment to men. They say Indian police have been known to ignore crimes against women.

This week, the United Nations released a study of violence against women in Asia. Ten thousand men in six countries were questioned. The six countries were Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Sri Lanka.

Nearly one-fourth of those questioned admitted having raped someone at least once. Over 1,200 men admitted to forcing several women to have sex with them.

The study found that possible reasons for violence against women included being abused as a child, alcohol misuse, poverty, and conflict.

About three-fourths of those who admitted to rape said they did it to satisfy a sexual urge. Almost 60 percent said they raped a woman for entertainment, while almost 40 percent said they wanted to punish the woman.

Study organizers say the findings do not necessarily represent the actual likelihood of rape in the six countries. But they think it will be useful in efforts to prevent rape and other violence against women.

I'm Steve Ember.

Malawi Aims to Prevent and Repair Fistulas

We have more news about women and women's health. Malawi and the United Nations are increasing efforts to prevent obstetric fistula. A fistula is a hole. In this case, it is a hole in soft tissue, either in the rectum or vagina.

The condition can happen during long and difficult childbirth. Or, sexual abuse can cause it.

Women with fistulas often experience terrible pain. They can develop long-term infections. Their husbands and communities may reject them because they develop health problems or cannot have more children.

Young mothers and poor women are especially at risk. The World Health Organization estimates that two to three million women and girls in developing countries are living with fistulas.

In one African country, Malawi, the ministry of health is partnering with the United Nations to help women with fistulas get medical care.

Gift Malunga is the acting country director for the United Nations Population Fund in Malawi. She says the UN plans to organize "fistula camps" two times a year in public hospitals. There, women with the condition will be treated.

She says the UN is also teaching women how to prevent and treat the condition.

“We started with very few patients at the beginning, because people were not aware and there were myths surrounding fistula, that it is a curse, it’s not a medical condition. And then as we also engaged the media, that they assisted us to create awareness in the communities, and then we saw more and more patients now coming to our camps to an extent that even last time we could not treat all of them in the camp.”

Gift Malunga says women leave the camp physically healed. They also leave with food, soap, and ideas about how to act if their communities reject them. She says the camps have already helped more than 600 women.

Some communities in Malawi are helping the UN and government efforts. Chief Kwataine is a traditional leader. He has pushed for laws to help prevent young women from being at risk for fistula.

“As traditional leaders, we have now ganged up to set some bylaws to stop the traditional birth attendants from conducting deliveries in their villages to prevent the fistula issue. The second one is to set stiffer penalties to bar parents from encouraging young girls to get married. We have set up 21 as age limit to make sure that every young girl or young boy should attain 21 before she thinks of getting married.”

Chief Kwataine says people who break these laws can be punished. For example, they might be required to give chicken and goats to the traditional leaders.

Community efforts are a way to prevent more fistula cases. But other issues remain. One big problem is a shortage of trained doctors who can repair fistulas. The Ministry of Health says only a few of the country's doctors perform the surgery.

Gift Malunga says that, as a result, the UN fistula camps have to use foreign doctors.

This year, the UN plans to hold its second fistula camp of the year in October. About 100 women are expected to receive fistula repair.

And that's As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly. Thanks for joining us today.

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