

India Ends Silence on Women's Issues As It Is January 14, 2014

From VOA Learning English, welcome to As It Is. I'm Steve Ember.

On our program today, we travel to India to learn about changing conditions for the nation's millions of girls and women. The changes came after a group of men raped a young student in late 2012. The victim later died. Her death led to widespread street demonstrations and calls for action.

Women's issues were at the center of a public debate in India last year. Indians began talking about the problem of violence against women after a deadly gang rape in the capital, New Delhi. The 23-year old victim was traveling with a friend on a bus when she was attacked by six men. The woman later died from her injuries.

In the year following the attack, India has taken steps to strengthen laws for violence against women. At the same time, reports of sexual wrongdoing have raised the issue of sexual misbehavior in the workplace.

In New Delhi, six women now have the job of answering telephone calls from women in trouble. The government set up the special hotline service after the 2012 gang rape. More than 1,500 calls come in every day. More than half the callers report sexual harassment or violence in the home. About one in five calls is a “red” color code. That means it involves a serious crime like grievous hurt or rape.

Khadijah Faruqi is a women’s rights activist. She heads the telephone hotline project. She says sexual abuse is not new. What is new, she says, is the end of what she calls the “conspiracy of silence.” This means social conditions in which men do not have to worry that their abuse of women will get them in trouble.

Until recently, she says, women have been afraid to report rape. Rape victims often fear that a report will bring blame to the victim and her family – instead of action against the rapist.

“The good part about my experience is that women have become very assertive. They have shed that taboo, which was there, that I should not talk about being sexually abused, because that will give me a bad name.”

Deadly attack in 2012 causes protests

Many young people took part in unplanned demonstrations across India after the 2012 gang rape. And the strength of the protests marked an important turning point in the way the country deals with sexual abuse.

The launching of the telephone hotline provides evidence that violence against women in India has not stopped. Reports of rapes and even gang rapes continue to come in. Another huge concern is domestic violence, or violence within the home. But under a new law, sentences for rapists are stronger. And, following and spying on women are now considered crimes.

Ranjana Kumari is a member of the National Commission for Empowerment of Women. She says India is a conservative country where, for years, women accepted the treatment they received. But she has observed a small change in the way people think.

The majority of Indian women live in rural areas. Ms. Kumari says these women still face all kinds of social and legal pressure not to report rape. But she says educated women who live in cities have grown much stronger.

“So this is the kind of beginning of change where you do see voices coming forward. And, also, some kind of leadership has to come from middle class, educated, more confident women. And that is what we are seeing happen now.”

In the streets of Delhi, many people confirm that rising sense of confidence among women.

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Two well-known men accused of sexual attacks on employees.

In recent months, Indian media have reported on two cases of sexual harassment in the workplace. One case was the arrest of Tarun Tejpal, an official with a leading magazine. He was accused of sexually attacking a young female employee at a hotel in Goa.

The second case involved A. K. Ganguly, a retired Supreme Court judge. He was under investigation for sexual misbehavior after an accusation by a law intern. He denies the accusation.

Women's activists say both cases might never have become public before the 2012 gang rape. But the activists believe the attention the two cases received was part of a new sympathy for women's issues in India.

In the days to come, these cases will also test the new laws that were enacted for dealing with violence against women. However, the time it takes for a case to come to trial is still a big concern.

The public reaction after the gang rape case led to judgment for the attackers in a court that acted in a timely way. The men were given the death sentence. But for thousands of other victims, the wait for justice may be painfully slow.

Women's activist Ranjana Kumari says that in the past year, the government has not put systems in place to speed up justice in all cases.

"There is a huge amount of delay in dispensing justice to women victims of sexual assault."

She criticizes what she calls "a total lack of political will" to change that -- unless the justice system can be made faster and more effective.

But sociologist Dipankar Gupta says the demonstrations against sexual crime by young people were a hopeful sign. And he says the changes could go beyond just women's issues. He says they could create what he calls a different kind of politics.

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Face lift for the Capitol Dome...

And finally today, we tell about how the United States Capitol is getting a face-lift.



The dome of the US Capitol with, in foreground, that of the nearby US Botanic Garden (Photo by Steve Ember)

The Dome of the United States Capitol in Washington, D. C. is being repaired. The upper levels of the building where Congress meets are in the process of two years of restoration. Officials say the dome suffers from 1,000 cracks, water leaks, and other problems.

Architect of the Capitol Stephen Ayers says that, from a distance, the building looks very good.

But he says a closer look shows that age and weather have damaged places under the paint. Mr. Ayers says that, if the dome is to last, repairs must be made.

Well, happily, most work is being done on nights and weekends. So visitors are welcome to enjoy this historic building, as always, in the daytime.

But, you know, even with the restoration in progress, it looks pretty spectacular at night.

And, with music by Jerry Fielding from the Otto Preminger film "Advise and Consent," much of whose action took place in the US Capitol, we conclude our program for today.

As It Is is a production of VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember. Thanks for joining us.