

This is offensive at so many levels it is hard to know to begin to object. For one thing, the very idea that anybody other than a rapist can be to blame for a rape should outrage any right-thinking person! To make things worse, the advertisement attempts to put the burden of responsibility on the parents of girls and women - who probably already have enough to worry about giving the state of gender violence in South Asia...

As the Indian activist Madhu Kishwar pointed out in a television interview, this is likely to feed into existing stereotypes about the "disadvantages" of giving birth to girl children i.e., that you have an endless and burdensome duty to "protect" them. Hardly do we need to encourage this kind of thinking. While any parent wants to protect their child - boy or girl - from harm, that is not quite the same thing as implying that they are neglectful parents if, God forbid, something like this does happen!

The implication of this advertisement is that if women - and their parents - do not take steps to protect themselves ("protection" here being defined as carrying pepper spray - simplistic, or what!), they have only themselves to blame if they are raped. That such an advertisement can even be conceptualised and be placed on public display says something about what advertising agencies think about public attitudes to rape...

After the other outrage generated by the advertisement, and the public demands for its withdrawal, it was eventually removed from circulation. However the second advertisement in the series also leaves something to be desired. The message in this one was that women can forget about karate and judo, because all they need to protect themselves is this pepper spray!

Some people have argued, that rather than resort to weapons like pepper spray, perhaps society should focus on creating a safer environment where women are less likely to need such "protection". Addressing negative social attitudes towards women combined with a greater focus on effective law enforcement might be more effective counter-measures against rapists than pepper spray...

Furthermore, leaving aside the efficacy of pepper spray the fact is that like guns or knives carried for protection, such a weapon can be taken away from the person who is carrying it and used against them. Karate and

judo on the other hand, equip a person with greater confidence and skills that can be used in a threatening situation - with the added advantage that these cannot be used against them! So it could be argued that pepper spray has a long way to go before it can be "sold" as a replacement for self-defence skills.

But then, it is hardly surprising that advertising agencies and manufacturers should come up with these kinds of campaigns, when one considers some of the messages coming from politicians who should know better! General Pervez Musharraf's recent comment, when he allegedly said that sometimes women get raped for money is one example. Where on earth does that kind of thinking come from?

In a country where a woman can be gang-raped on the instructions of a group of village *matbar* equivalents, as retaliation for an *alleged* act of misbehaviour committed by her 13-year-old brother (as in the recent case of Muktaran Mai), such gross insensitivity is truly unforgivable. And if the general has been misquoted, as he has already claimed, one can only suggest that he may wish to avoid making pronouncements on this sensitive subject that can even be misinterpreted to such an extent!

It has been well-documented that women who survive rape are often forced to undergo an almost equally traumatic process of violation, when they undergo the physical investigation and judicial cross questioning necessary to convict any rapist. Their private agony becomes public, and it is only the bravest survivors who will put themselves through such an ordeal. Not least because of the social stigma associated with rape, and the scepticism with which they are treated - rape still being one of the hardest crimes in the world to prove, and one with one of the lowest conviction rates globally.

But coming across these kinds of political statements - and media messages that blame the victim for the crime - it is difficult not to conclude that in fact the ordeal does not even end at the second tier of the medical and judicial investigations. It continues indefinitely at the hands of any society which allows this kind of degrading and misleading propaganda to be aired, thereby making evident its total disrespect for the pain and humiliation experienced by the victims and their families.

*The very idea that anybody other than a rapist can be to blame for a rape should outrage any right-thinking person! To make things worse, the advertisement attempts to put the burden of responsibility on the parents of girls and women - who probably already have enough to worry about giving the state of gender violence in South Asia...*