

# FEAR AND SILENCE: THE TWO PILLARS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

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"Never allow yourself to be left alone with a man, not even for a second" was one of the first social lessons I internalised as a teenage girl. My eldest sister, who I considered the wisest person at the time, had seen enough of the world to impart this lesson on to me. Arguably, it was this warning that protected me from the horrific violence that many people I knew had been exposed to as a child. I was lucky.

But was I really?

We teach our girls to protect themselves; we tell them not to wear provocative clothes, to cover their heads and lower their eyes and voices. We tell them not to be alone with men. I don't know how it feels for others to give these tips to their children, but it broke my heart to do so to my daughter.

When I became a mother, the moment I saw my baby's face, my first thought was that I had to protect her from all the bad things in the world. Soon I realised that I can't actually do that. After thinking long and hard, I've decided not to burden her growing teenage shoulders with fear and responsibility, so she can grow wings on them and use

them to fly.

As my daughter grows up, I won't teach her not to be alone with a man. I won't teach her to cover her chest with one hand, preferably with a handbag, while the other hand covers her hips from being grabbed in a crowd. I have not explained to her how she can defend herself with a key held in her fist or with safety pins. I will not ask her to cover her body enough that people can't think she is 'asking for it', and neither will I tell her to avoid alleyways, which still frighten me to this day. I will not stop her from leaving her comfort zone, from meeting new people and facing challenging situations, because I believe that these are essential for growing up.

Not sharing these 'safety tips' might put her at risk of situations that I luckily escaped. But when we teach children to avoid a dangerous situation, I believe we put a burden on them for a crime that isn't their responsibility. We also cast a shadow of fear across their soul. They learn to see their body as a liability and their appearance as a product to be consumed by others. It becomes an object that they need to protect and use,

instead of something that should be taken care of for a healthy life. Indirectly, we teach them to accept, rather than to resist, this destructive mindset.

'Safety tips' help internalise sexism in a girl's mind. They might temporarily prevent physical violence against women, but in doing so they inflict another kind of violence on women's minds. All my life, I have had to be alert every single second with every single man around. It hindered the development of my health, and put me in constant fear of being harassed, of being accused of inviting the harassment, of feeling violated, polluted, excluded, disgraced for a crime I didn't commit. It is a torturous way to live, and a culture so severe in Bangladesh that I know that the same will happen to our children. One can't grow up to be a healthy, balanced human being this way.

In the case of sexual abuse, I don't believe that prevention is better than the cure. Sexism isn't preventable because it is already everywhere like an infectious virus. If we want to prevent its outbreak, we should focus on where it has its strongest hold: the sexist mindset of our boys raised within a rape-friendly culture.

Safety measures are never enough to protect victims of sexual abuse. We know from thousands of incidents that the situation or the clothes worn by the victim are not the cause of sexual assault; the assaulter is. Most cases of abuse against children are committed by trusted people in the family. Thus, when someone faces any kind of assault, they blame themselves for not preventing it properly. And they also learn that, if they complain, they might be accused of 'asking for it' or worse, not be believed.

The prevalent rape culture is such that you will find people accusing the victim in every single corner of the world. They are forced into silence when they dare to raise their voice.

In 1977, the celebrated Hollywood film director Roman Polanski was convicted of drugging and raping a 13-year-old girl. Later, the victim admitted that the legal procedure and the media's role was more traumatic and had a more damaging effect on her life than the assault itself. She also admitted that if the same thing were to happen to her daughter now, she would think twice before reporting the case. It is heart breaking to see the rape culture win this way even when the perpetrator has been found guilty. That's how powerful the culture of victim-blaming is around the world.

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