

We too are responsible for juvenile offences

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act 2012 lays down the various kinds of sexual crimes that can be committed on children, showing that the law recognises that there are multiple kinds of sexual encounters. But how many of us really know the distinction between these categories?

The reason this question needs to be asked is to draw attention to how little we ourselves understand of unwelcome sexual encounters. There is certainly no ambivalence in the experience of a sexual abuse survivor, but there is a great amount of collective ignorance of these experiences and what causes them. For instance, we barely talk of the importance of consent for sex within marriages. We don't think of pleasure as an essential component in the sexual experience of a female-bodied person. If we understand sexuality in such unequal and uninformed terms, how can we expect children to know any different?

We don't talk to adolescents about sexuality at home. Schools too are loath to talk about sexuality. A few Indian states including Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Goa have balked at allowing sex education for adolescents in schools. Children, like adults, need to understand their sexuality as part of their whole personality and how sexual behaviour has an impact on the welfare of society. All we are doing at this point is punishing them for abusive behaviour, without offering an alternative model which is premised on consent and respect.

Our shrill outrage has caused the Centre to respond with an ordinance that will introduce the death penalty for sexual assault of girls below the age of 12. This needs to be tempered with a holistic view, which recognises the role that we play in creating juvenile offenders. The solution, as always, begins with us.

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