

# If We Are Victims

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## Abstract

This paper is written based on the writer's experience as a psychologist who assists victims of sexual violence and discussions with the victims' companion. The writer reports that there are three problems. First, law enforcement does not empathize with the survivors, making it ineffective. Second, the psychological impact on victims or survivors is not really understood by the public because the patriarchal culture is so entrenched. Third, psychological intervention is necessary for strengthening the victims and human beings that should be responsible for their actions. In other words, sexual violence should not be the fault of the victims, but the fault and responsibility of the perpetrator. Helping subjects to reduce tension, minimizing the internalized guilt due to socialization of sexuality understanding that tends to marginalize women, and processing anger in a constructive manner is important. Sometimes the companion intends to give sympathy, but accidentally becomes angry and unable to calm down, adding to problems of the people she accompanies. Survivors then become increasingly angry, agitated, or unable to think straight. It is important to provide strength to victims to ensure justice be done on all sides. Reworking the psychological side without ensuring availability and sustainability of fair legal system would cause the situation of women to be vulnerable. Psychological reinforcement should be done under any circumstances, especially if the legal system does not provide justice for the victims.

**Keywords:** Sexual Violence, Rape, Victim, Psychological Intervention, Survivor.

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## **Rape and House Robbery**

Imagine if your house was broken into and you were robbed. You would be very surprised, and perhaps paralyzed and unable to think rationally to take immediate action. But a huge sense of shock does not need to be hidden. It is important to find someone to tell your story, to gain equanimity and calm down from the psychological turmoil that occurred. Imagine if you or your child experienced rape. Would you immediately report what happened? There are many similarities between rape and house burglary. Personal possessions are demolished without permission, and something valuable is taken from you. The person whose house is robbed is almost certainly very shocked. Indeed, not only her house is robbed, but she loses inner calmness, sense of safety, and even identity. She will start to wonder why this happened to her, and how to live life when many goods and securities are no longer hers. Rape is potentially far more damaging to the deepest identity. The rich may have many houses, and only one house may have been robbed. Moreover, houses are physical property, not an extension of our selves. Meanwhile, rape dismantles our bodies without permission, and we only have one body, so closely united with the soul and psyche. When the body is treated disrespectfully, the soul is also wounded. We can always move or buy a new house, but we will always keep the same body. A lifetime of memories will have to take what happens to our bodies and us.

## **Iceberg Phenomenon**

Gender-based violence, including rape, falls into the iceberg phenomenon: Identified and reported cases are far fewer than what actually happens. There are many underlying reasons for not reporting a rape, all of which actually boils down to how women's sexuality is constructed by society. (1) Unlike many other crimes, gender-based violence, such as domestic and sexual violence, is often regarded a disgrace. Many people choose to remain silent rather than actually obtaining incriminating response. (2) If any victim and/or her family have been free of the above stereotypes, she may not report what had happened immediately because law enforcement officials do not take

a real action to prosecute the perpetrators. The victims, rather than getting protection, become increasingly depressed. (3) The legal process can last a very long time, with law enforcement that is not necessarily sensitive to the situation of survivors. Furthermore, victims spend a lot of time finding evidence and witnesses, lowering their motivation to report the incident. (4) Since domestic and sexual violence comes with a stigma, reporting the incident sometimes also raises an uncomfortable feeling about oneself. Victims usually like to avoid publicizing what happened to them, to prevent people from talking, which might remind them of the incident over and over again. (5) Gender-based violence often has special characteristics. Most of the time, sexual violence is done by people who are close to the victims, so there are lots of things to be considered by the victims or their families to report the incident. What are the consequences for the relationship among the big family? What if the perpetrator suppressed the victim to a much weaker position? Often times the victims take pity on the perpetrator for having the potential to put them in jail or acquiring criminal status. Sometimes, she gives him the benefit of the doubt by expecting the perpetrator to understand his mistake and take positive steps to show good faith and responsibility. However, what usually happens, instead of remorse and responsibility, perpetrator sees this as a weakness that can be exploited for his own benefit. As a result, the victim is trapped in fear, compassion, compulsion to forgive, hoping of change that will continue to occur as an illusory hope alone. In short, the victim comes into the trap of violence cycle.

### **Very Favorable to the Perpetrators**

The different situations above cause only a few survivors to report their case. This creates a favorable circumstance for the perpetrators. By not reporting rape incidents, not only is the perpetrator relatively safe and unpunished, but also because of the myths, stigma and misunderstanding – not just in men but in women too often – are more likely to accept rape consciously or unconsciously, this situation of course becomes more favorable to the perpetrators. (1) Women who go out at night, do not dress according to norms of a particular group, or use public transportation, are blamed. The fact is that many women

have to work hard to provide a living for their family, and not all of them have the money to drive their own car, or access to employment that does not require night shift. In fact, women with closed dress are also at risk of sexual violence, because sexual violence is ultimately dependent on the 'will' of the perpetrator. (2) Sometimes, logic favoring to the perpetrator often takes religious justification. Society is led to blame the victim more and to empathize with the perpetrator (who is unable to resist sexual desire because there is a woman standing alone waiting for public transport in the middle of the night?). (3) Above all, the discourse that is developed does not put the responsibility on the state and public officials as representatives of the state, to earnestly carry out its role to meet the need of the community, to prevent and protect citizens from crime. To blur the responsibility of State and its officials, or simply because of incompetence, indifference or confusion, even public officials make a discourse which increasingly cornered the victims.

A common reasoning often biases and corners the victims, making the law process even more difficult to provide justice for the victims. There are more members of society, including law enforcement officers and psychologists (if not trained to understand the complex issues of sexual violence) who have a thought bias. So the questions at the police station and the court can be very painful: "Do you also derive satisfaction from the sexual relationship?; at that time what were you wearing?; Are you normally having sex or not?; Why didn't you scream or run away?; If it is true that you are raped why do you report it few months later?" These are some examples of questions rape victims get asked. If the women knew the perpetrators, the usual mindset is: "If you know each other, it is not rape. Why were you with a man or get together with many men at night?"

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## Reasoning of Female Survivors

It seems difficult to understand the reasoning of sexual violence of the survivors. Even women tend to blame victims if they had not been through similar experiences. The most powerful tool of psychology to be able to strengthen the survivors is 'empathy'. Empathizing with the survivor means mentally putting ourselves in the position, situation, and background of survivors. In order to do so, we need to break away from our own situation and background. We have to break away from our own personal situation which is probably highly educated and have access to the best jobs, able to communicate assertively and have many subordinates. Women and men, do not have to work overtime or night shifts, have own car and driver, or can stay at home with a lot of money without doing anything. Or maybe get away from the position of women in high position who often go home late at night and work outside the city, but there is always subordinate or other parties to ensure the fulfillment of our needs, even always to prioritize our interests over the interests of others. Or if we are men, we also have to break away from the socialization that invested in ourselves as men who are considered the head of the family, the leader or person in charge at work, or at least, the head of the family who may be accustomed to demand obedience from the members of his family.

First, we put ourselves in the position of different women who may be more vulnerable to become victims (going home at night because the required job, work hard and just being able to ride public transportation because they have to support a family and thinking about food and education for children). Try to imagine yourself as a teenage girl who is either in groups or alone out at night because of problems at home and look for pleasure to forget her anxiety. However we often deplore their behavior that invites vulnerability, still they did not imagine it would be a very painful experience event and victimized. They are not to blame, the ones who wanted to carry out the intent and sexual violence are. We need to realize that the one who get the social stigma 'good-bad' and also have to face the real consequences of sexual intercourse are women. Although women are just like men who biologically have a sexual desire, women are usually better at controlling their sexual desire. Although they potentially do not have a biological problem

and should be able to have sexual desires like everyone else, some women may not know their own sexual desires due to sexual taboos, or perhaps they can control it in order to maintain their reputation. If they do not control sexual desire because of wanting to keep a good name, they may think about the possibility of pregnancy, being a single parent, or having abortions (which is illegal in Indonesia), and so on. A man, on the other hand, does not have to think about this as much as women do. If their sexual partner was pregnant and he did not want to be responsible, he can easily leave the woman, or subsequently develop discourse to justify himself and blame the woman (e.g. the woman is not a virgin, so she is not a good woman and presumably not just having sex with him). There are also some men who, when required to be responsible, kill his sexual partner, as quite often reported in the media. So, compared to men, women will think more and weigh up before deciding – or having free will – for sexual intercourse.

In most cases, women experience sexual violence from people whom they knew, or even the people closest to them. The reasoning that most commonly arises is: if it is done by someone who is known, is it rape? Probably it was consensual but for various reasons the woman later reported it as sexual violence? Questions that can be raised again from the perspective of the female victims are: is it possible that we are in a disadvantaged position and experience of sexual coercion from father or stepfather, the boss at the office or a teacher? Is it easy to be very brave and resolutely face the authority or the person that we perceive much stronger than we are? When as teens we are bombarded with demands of women chastity, and on the other hand we have already ‘done’ or ‘been treated’ by the boyfriend, and then the boyfriend requires us to always satisfy his sexual desires, and threaten to leave or tell what happened to the public, it does not seem that we will easily be able to think rationally and to be assertive. There was also a debate with quite a lot of views that blame the victims, surrounding the rape of a woman on public transportation some time ago. One of the perpetrators knew the victim, and it brought the discourse that ‘this is not rape, but it is consensual, because they knew each other and met late at night’.

Very few women feel comfortable and at ease when they have to come home late at night. When they may choose, the majority of

women would prefer to go home when things are considered more secure controlled. They would prefer a situation where they still have these options: if they cannot ride public transportation, they will ride motorbike taxi (ojek) which is faster; or if the roads are jammed, they will use some alternate public transport if it is still in the afternoon. Imagine we are women who are forced to quite often come home late at night, and because of economic constraints are not able to use a personal vehicle. We are most likely to feel anxious, wary, and perform a variety of steps to ensure our situation safer. For example, we will look for much brighter place for waiting, chat with people we meet to go home together at night, to gain a safer feeling. Likewise that may happened to the woman who had experienced rape in public transportation, the fact that she has known the perpetrator simply cannot be summed up as that she reported the sexual violence that does not happen. When a woman had reported what happened to her many months later, we have to position ourselves to her. If we were her, in her position, to appreciate the difficulties of life, will we immediately report what happened? What are our considerations?

Are all women who report as the victims of a rape definitely the victims? Based on the experience of accompanying the victims, the discussions with the victims and their companion from various studies, I conclude that most of the women who reported as rape victims are indeed victims. Even more women do not report incidents that happened for the reasons that we have discussed in the previous section. Could there be a lying woman claiming to be the victim when she was not a victim? Although very few, the possibility exists, and in fact it can be identified if we have been trained to conduct interviews and observations to identify the facts of sexual violence. It is important to remember, with the allegation that the complainants lie or cover up certain facts, we still need to interview the complainant which is not cornering. There are two reasons, namely: (a) may be she is the victim, so we need to do an interview that is not to blame that even more incriminating, and (b) when she lies about certain facts, it often still can be identified from the consistency of the story, the coherence of the story with the appearance of the psychological reactions that are shown.

In the end, being incriminating does not help provide a comprehensive overview of all existing events.

### Implications of Sexual Violence

Traumatic events can and often do unsettle the security and integrity of our appreciation of self, others and the world. Recovery from an extremely traumatic event would be easier to do when the incident is admitted, accepted as facts by the victims and by other people or

society. Even in the absence of any stigma, recovery from trauma is not easy. When there is a lot of stigma inherent, the event has to be covered. Imagine if you experienced a traumatic event, but the people closest to you state that you did not experience it, or tell us to forget it, ask us assume it does not exist, or do not admit it has happened. Post-traumatic stress can appear in different forms depending on subject characteristics and support patterns. There are some immediate reactions of the clinical symptoms from experienced traumatic incidents: we tremble, feel weak or unable to control ourselves, we may become paralyzed or lose of mind for some time.

At a later stage, depending on

the characteristics of each person, there may be a shock and the pain caused stonewalling, others appeared very tense, anxious and scared. At the time and the following days may be experienced intrusion (re-appreciation of incident) such as through nightmares or the presence of sudden recollection of the details of the incident. Victims may also



"Screaming Inside"  
(Ahmad Badawi: Chinese Ink on A3 Paper)



experience: (a) difficulty in falling asleep; (b) irritability, irritable and angry because they feel uncomfortable, (c) difficulty in concentrating, (d) shows excessive alertness and responsiveness. Sometimes they perform physiological responses such as chest palpitations or cold sweats.

For many traumatic incidents, the resulting stress will generally decline over time. For example, immediately after a traffic accident, people may be afraid to drive or even be in a speeding car on the road. When a car is suddenly overtaking and speeding, or they hear a loud noise in the street, they might be very shocked and become limp. But over time, the post-traumatic stress will decrease, and they will slowly be willing to drive again. However, for special cases even less severe, including rape trauma, post-traumatic stress does not decrease over time. For some people the problems caused by stress actually interfere with their daily lives. They may be afraid to leave the house, unable to work because they cannot bear loud surroundings or being in the midst of many people, always easily shocked and limp, not willing to be left alone, suffered a severe sleep disorder and so on. If so, the individual needs to obtain the help of a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist to restore the peace of life. In the long run, trauma from rape might not affect the behavior, but also the life scheme of the victims. Those who were initially carefree and confident may lose the confidence and joy of life, always worried about the little things that they were not worried about before. They may develop a generalization of the opposite sex as being very scary and untrustworthy. Perhaps they also blame themselves strongly, or lose the closeness to God, who they think did not protect them. In summary, the scheme of life can be changed or even damaged: survivors may lose a sense of security, lose confidence in themselves, in others and the world, continue to feel helpless, or lose the ability to establish a genuine intimate relationship with others.

One of the effects that can arise from sexual violence is 'sexual traumatization'. It is pretty easy to imagine that some survivors will experience sexual dysfunction due to a bad experience and sexual intercourse associated with fear, pain and humiliation. Survivors may have a hard time enjoying sex, be afraid of sexual related matters,

or even avoid close contact with the opposite sex. But the opposite can also occur, especially when sexual violence occurred since, or in childhood, and imprinted in the minds of individuals too early in the wrong way. However humans are sexual beings, who have sexual desire, and sex is sometimes the only known individual expression, to communicate the other needs. Perhaps it can explain that in some cases, sexual traumatization appears in the form of 'sexual dis-inhibition'. Individuals, who are in childhood, or since childhood experienced sexual misconduct, have been experiencing premature sexual stimulation incorrectly. They may experience confusion: on the one hand they are mistreated and humiliated, and even abused physically; on the other hand they experienced sexual stimulation too early. They also do not know any other way to present themselves in a manner other than as they learned in sexual relationship with the perpetrator. Eventually they are even impressed to perform sex too early and show excessive sexual interest. Maybe they think about a lot of conflicts, feel guilty and bad, and in fact do not like their own behavior, but it is hard to control themselves. Women who are like this also tend to be prone to be victims of sexual violence or domestic violence in the later period, as they are easily caught up in relationships with the opposite sex that will be easy to exploit or manipulate them.

### **Psychological Intervention Principles to Strengthen Survivors**

The root of the problem of gender-based violence is often related to the system/structure of a patriarchal socio-cultural and discrimination against women. Humans, whether the perpetrators, survivors or neither, tend to internalize the patterns strengthened in such a patriarchal society. Therefore, awareness of the root of the problem needs to be disclosed. When most women are prohibited to be angry, or socialized to keep nice, the anger caused by unfair treatment experienced needs to be recognized and managed constructively. That is, instead of the men showing anger and expecting women not to, anger should be seen as a natural thing, something that should be managed to avoid further harm and disrupt the lives of survivors. If necessary, anger can be a positive energy for the survivors to spend time assisting other

women who have experienced the same thing. Another thing that is important is the principle that man is responsible for his actions. Thus, sexual violence is not a fault of the target of violence, but it is a fault and responsibility of the perpetrator. Indeed, the (adult) victim is also not a passive person who cannot take any action. She can choose to be slumped to the incident experienced, or through the facilitation of support from others and counseling, choose to take active steps to recover and strengthen herself.

Counselor or companion should facilitate self-acceptance as well as dismantling the myths of sexuality cornering and disadvantaging women. Women are facilitated to accept themselves positively, whatever experience they had gone through, and develop an understanding of the new values which are more equitable in gender. Cases of gender



Questions that can be raised again from the perspective of the female victims are: is it possible that we are in a disadvantaged position and experience of sexual coercion from father or stepfather, the boss at the office or a teacher?

based violence are often effectively treated through a group approach, like support group, where self-acceptance, self-affirmation and settlement alternatives are found in conversations and sharing in a group with people who feel 'kinship' from experiencing similar situations. It often proves more effective than conversation or providing 'guidance' by people who are considered experts, but do not experience the same problems with

the survivors. Companions should be friendly and good listeners, and normalize the response of the survivors by facilitating subject to understand that the response (fear, excessive vigilance, anger, etc.) is a very human response, which would happen to anyone who experienced the same thing. Normalizing the responses is important, so that the subject does not feel "there is something wrong with her", and over time will be able to run the recovery better.

The important thing is that companion needs to help the subject to calm down, or at least be in better psychological appreciation over time. Survivors need to calm down and strengthen themselves, to be

able to make decisions that are considered better than a lot of choices that completely contain limitations. For example: Should I inform the family? Should I report it to the police or not? Should I change my job? And many other things that need to be decided. Helping subjects to reduce tension, minimizing the internalized guilt due to socialization of sexuality understanding that tends to marginalize women, and processing anger in a constructive manner is important. Sometimes the companion intends to give sympathy, but accidentally becomes angry and unable to calm down, adding to problems of the people she accompanies. Survivors then become increasingly angry, agitated, or unable to think straight. It is important to provide strength to victims to ensure justice be done on all sides. Reworking the psychological side without ensuring availability and sustainability of fair legal system would cause the situation of women to be vulnerable. Psychological reinforcement should be done under any circumstances, especially if the legal system does not provide justice for the victims. But the absence of legal justice will cause the perpetrators continue to roam, even if the victims are cornered and blamed. In conclusion, we still have a lot of homework to do, and psychology and law workers must work hand in hand to build the legal paradigm of feminist psychology which is very conceptual as well as can be set out in concrete that can be applied in the field.

Note: In this paper the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' are used interchangeably. The term 'victim' refers to the targeted person, or become victims of sexual violence, while the term 'survivor' refers to the person who is the victim, but in a more positive connotation, she has the strength and power to rise from the situation as the passive victim, to be a person who is actively trying to recover.

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