

Stop victim-blaming and find a better way to respond

By Shiza Shahid

Violence against girls and women is an international emergency. Many videos have been shown all over the media of women and little girls being harassed by men. Without a second thought or even listening to the victim's story the immediate reaction is to

blame the victim and somehow name it as their "fault". Why did she dress like that? Why was she out so late? Why was she asking for "it"? These are all common questions that victims have to hear.

In Pakistan, it has gone so far that even authorities are blaming the victim and saying that it is their fault that they got raped and that they put themselves in that situation that allowed rape to happen. Umar Shaikh who is the police chief in Lahore, Pakistan blamed a woman who was simply taking her children to Gujranwala from Lahore. She was attacked at night when her car broke down and she pulled over to see what happened. Moments later unidentified assailants had raped her and robbed her before her innocent children's eyes. Later, Umar Shaikh made clear statements that she should not have driven late at night if she did not want that to happen and she should have protected her children by bringing a male with her instead of holding the rapist accountable for his actions. Victim blaming is such a common practice in Pakistan that even prime ministers of the country have blamed victims rather than holding people answerable for their actions.

1 in 5

victims of sexual assault—both women and men—felt blamed for their own victimization.¹

Another example of victim-blaming was in Canada when a woman in her third year of university was raped regardless of denying sex multiple times. She had continuously told him the answer is no. He went to the extent of tricking her into coming over for a movie night with some other friends as well. When she went no one else was to be found and she tried to remove him from her body multiple times but the situation was no longer in her control, she had done everything she could have done. She then went to the hospital and got a rape kit done but no further action was taken there. When the hospital did nothing she went to her university's Human Rights and Equity office where she told her story but was rejected any action done against him because "he has rights too". Everyone she was supposed to go to help was the same people who blamed her instead of doing something to get it reported and have some action taken against the man. YMCA has created a graph to visually represent how many assailants just walk free.² Greece would be yet another country where victim-blaming is so widespread. A woman stayed in an abusive relationship for more than a year in hopes that it would work out and that her boyfriend would change for the better. After a year of him still abusing her even in public, the woman was no longer able to handle it so she went to the authorities and told her story. When she told officers her story rather than believing her they sided with the boyfriend and asked her questions like "what did you do to make him that way?" "why did you make him mad?" She even had her community like neighbours blaming her as well when they were not even aware of the full story. This just goes to show how widespread victim-blaming is and it is not just in certain parts of the world but rather an issue globally.

These are just some specific examples but so many women have the same or very similar stories. Far too many girls and women have had to go through this in their life for us to continue the same habit of victim-blaming. We need to speak up for the victim rather than shut them down. We need to believe them and listen to the entire story before being so quick to judge. So many women have shut down and never told their story in complete fear of being blamed for it. The #MeTooMovement on social media is a great example of how we can help the victims feel comfortable telling their stories. Thousands if not millions of women and men were opening up about their experiences with sexual harassment and

abuse. It simply went to show how many people have gone through similar experiences and how widespread the problem is. We should applaud the strength of those people who come forward and shared their stories not only to have it out but also to help others feel comfortable sharing their stories.

Victims already feel pressure and so much self-doubt after harassment or rape that we should not be another burden on them by blaming them for actions that were out of their control rather we should be the first to trust them. Many women struggle with self-questioning like “why did I not try harder to make it stop?”, “did I deserve this to happen to me?”, “was it me who caused it and was I the problem?”. Guilt, shame, self-blame are all very common feelings that arise in a victim's mind after going through such a horrific experience. As a society, we may blame the victim because it eases our stress and anxiety thinking about the people in our life like our wives, daughters, mothers, sisters and more. We believe that if it is the victim's fault then they had control and could have stopped it but to be clear that is never the case - **it is never the victim's fault**. Robert Uttaro said it best in his book for survivors in which he states,

If you have been raped or sexually assaulted and you have been blamed, or fear that you may be blamed, I just want you to understand this: You are not to blame.

There is nothing you did to make someone hurt you, nor is there anything you could have done differently to prevent or stop it”³

- Robert Uttaro -

We need to move forward together as a society and change these beliefs and heal from them. We will never be able to move past the need to “blame the victim” until we accept and change where this belief came from and why we feel the need to believe it is the victim's fault. We need to constantly remind ourselves that is not the

victim's fault as the situation is not in their control and it is wrong to blame the victim. This will help us move on to a more appropriate response which would be to confront and stop the abuser.

1. Cotter, Adam, and Laura Savage. "This Juristat Article Provides an in-Depth Analysis on the Experiences of Inappropriate Behaviours in Public, Online and at Work, as well as Information on Experiences and Characteristics of Violent Victimization. Using Data from the 2018 Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces, This Gender-Based Analysis Fills a Critical Gap by Measuring Behaviours That Have Not Previously Been a Focus of Other Surveys." Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 5 Dec. 2019, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00017-eng.htm>
2. Allin, Joy-Ann. "Why Do We Continue to Blame Victims of Sexual Assault?" *YWCA Saskatoon*, 24 Mar. 2016, <https://www.ywcaskatoon.com/why-do-we-continue-to-blame-victims-of-sexual-assault/>
3. Goodreads. (n.d.). *A quote from to the survivors*. Goodreads. Retrieved February 14, 2022, from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/961431-if-you-have-been-raped-or-sexually-assaulted-and-you>