

Shedding light on Indian gang rape attacks

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University of Birmingham spearheads research into multiple perpetrator rape



The gang rape and subsequent death of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi last month, and a second similar attack on a woman in Punjab this week, has focused the attention of the World's media. Most commentary on these cases has been empathic towards the victims and there have been a number of large scale protests in India demanding justice for the victims but also calls for the country to develop effective responses to violence against women. The impact has also been felt outside India with vigils being held in the UK, USA, Canada and many other countries.

Reporting on these incidents has included the asking of pertinent questions, such as what are the causes of 'gang rape' (or Multiple Perpetrator Rape [MPR], the preferred term of academics)? Is there always a leader in such groups? How should we deal with these cases when they arise?

In response we have seen some expert commentary, however, beyond individual opinion, what does the empirical research on this topic suggest for developing policy and taking action to combat this form of sexual violence? It may surprise you to learn that, until recently, MPR has been largely neglected by the academic world. However, in 2010, the Universities of Birmingham and Middlesex were awarded a grant by the British Psychological Society to jointly host a series of seminars bringing together expert researchers and practitioners from across the globe to form a network of professionals dedicated to advancing knowledge on this important topic. These seminars allowed us to consolidate what we currently know about MPR, as well as identifying priority areas for further investigation:

MPR is not a uniform phenomenon. The media tends to select cases for reporting that are stereotypical (e.g. the rape of an 'innocent' victim by a stranger), inter-racial, or extreme in their nature (e.g. where the victim is scarred with acid or dies) therefore presenting a distorted image of what MPR is. Like other forms of sexual violence, most victims are female and most perpetrators are male (adults and juveniles). However, women and girls can also be perpetrators or can facilitate the commission of an MPR for a number of complex reasons. MPR occurs in a wide range of contexts and despite the common usage of 'gang rape' it is often not associated with gang activity.

We don't really know how common MPR is. This is because crime statistics on sexual violence do not differentiate between rapes committed by lone perpetrators and those perpetrated by groups. A comprehensive study of the incidence and prevalence of MPR is needed in the UK so we can assess the scale of the problem.

MPRs are more violent than rapes committed by lone perpetrators. This includes the sexual violence forced on the victim, as well as the physical violence they experience at the hands of their attackers. We do not yet know why this is the case. There are several possible explanations: for example, the perpetrators of MPR may have a propensity to be violent—they are violent individuals anyway and violence stems from their coming together en masse; alternatively, group dynamics (such as feeling anonymous within the group, peer pressure, the enhancement of existing pro-violence norms) encourage the expression of violence. Members of our MPR network are investigating these possibilities at present.

In most groups who commit MPR it is possible to identify an individual who wielded greater influence over the other group members (i.e. a leader). However, this is not always the case. Also, where there is an identifiable leader, our practitioner colleagues caution against allocating greater blame to this individual, since followers by their own actions allow that person to lead and therefore should share in the responsibility for the crime.

Research across several different countries (including the USA, and South Africa) has associated MPR with unequal gender orders, male sexual entitlement, and social structures that are permissive of MPR. Crucially, this means that it is insufficient to just target men and boys in efforts to prevent MPR; instead, much broader interventions are needed.

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