



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Will world unite to stop sexual violence against women?



Rights activists are hoping a new era will dawn after the horrifying French rape case of Gisèle Pelicot, whose husband Dominique was given a maximum 20-year sentence on 19 December. He drugged her, raped her and invited at least 50, maybe more than 80, strangers into their home in the Provençal town of Mazan to rape her.

Gisèle Pelicot took the unusual **decision** to allow the press and public into the trial and she has become an icon for women everywhere. Activists hope the principle of women's affirmative consent to sexual activity is taught in schools and added to the French penal code as well as lead to greater action to stop and prosecute sexual violence worldwide.

Pelicot said herself on leaving the courthouse that she hoped for a "future where women and men can live in harmony and mutual respect."

In addition to her husband, another 50 men went on trial for the rapes under sedation that Pelicot endured for almost a decade. The 50 men received sentences ranging between 6 to 9 years, lower than the prosecutor had recommended, and six of the men were freed after having already served most or all of their time in jail. At least two of the men will appeal.

Some women were angry and said these sentences were too lenient.

"This case has been a game changer in shining a light on the prevalence of rape culture in everyday society and in shifting the narrative from victim-blaming to placing the shame on the perpetrators," **said** Harriet Wistrich, director of the Centre for Women's Justice, a British non-profit. "It has highlighted marital rape and the banality of rapists who can be men from any walk of life."

The issue is global

Sex without consent is rape, says Equality Now, an activist group founded in the US in 1992 that **launched** its Consent Campaign to change sexual violence laws around the world. "Currently, only a handful of countries in the

world have consent-based rape laws that enable prosecutors, juries, and judges to examine whether a case can be prosecuted on the absence of consent, rather than on the basis of force or violence," it says.

The statistics worldwide are **heinous**. More than 370 million girls and women alive today – or 1 in 8 – experienced rape or sexual assault before the age of 18, according to UNICEF estimates released on 19 October.

When "non-contact" forms of sexual violence, such as online or verbal abuse are included, the number of girls and women affected rises to 650 million globally – or 1 in 5.

"We are witnessing horrific sexual violence in conflict zones" - UNICEF

The issue is global. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of victims, with 79 million girls and women affected or 22 per cent; followed by 75 million in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia or 8 per cent; 73 million in Central and Southern Asia or 9 per cent; 68 million in Europe and Northern America or 14 per cent; 45 million in Latin America and the Caribbean or 18 per cent; 29 million in Northern Africa and Western Asia or 15 per cent; and 6 million in Oceania or 34 per cent.

UNICEF said there were persistent data gaps, particularly on boys' experiences and non-contact forms of sexual violence. "Children in fragile settings are especially vulnerable to sexual violence," said Catherine Russell, executive director of the global organisation. "We are witnessing horrific sexual violence in conflict zones, where rape and gender-based violence are often used as weapons of war."

Illustration of everyday violence

Away from extreme settings such as combat, Gisèle Pelicot's experience was a graphic illustration of everyday violence in ordinary settings that go unnoticed and unimagined.

French media dubbed her violators “Monsieur Tout-le-monde” or Mr Every Man because they included regular men such as tradesmen, firefighters, truck drivers, a journalist and a nurse.

Her husband filmed the attacks and the videos were presented in court, helping to disabuse the men’s testimony that their acts constituted “involuntary rape”, “non-consenting rape”, “accidental rape” or “rape by body but not mind”.

Gisèle Pelicot said in court she would have liked to ask the defendants: “When you entered that bedroom, at what point did Madame Pelicot give you her consent?”

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Attitudes seem to have shifted since the #MeToo movement against sexual abuse that began in the US in 2006 met a muted response in France in 2017. The campaign met a backlash when 100 women, including the actress Catherine Deneuve, **signed** a public letter in Le Monde condemning the movement’s perceived excesses, **wrote** Megan Clement in the New York Times.

“Ms. Pelicot’s very ordinariness has been her superpower... she cannot be accused of trying to use this trial to bring down powerful men,” wrote Clement.

Backsliding on women’s rights

A recent French poll by Ifop found that 85 per cent of respondents believe the trial should make everyone, especially men, to do more to fight sexual violence. There is a steep hill to climb: only 10-15 per cent of rape complaints ended in a criminal conviction in 2020, according to a report by France’s Public Policy Institute.



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Around the world there is backsliding on women’s rights. In Iraq, for example, lawmakers are proposing amendments to the country’s personal status law that could allow marriage for girls as young as 9.

Some US states have “close-in-age” laws that can exempt or lower penalties for those who engage in sexual activity with someone under the legal age of consent. Other countries have no age of sexual consent, such as Iran, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In other countries, the age of consent is under 16, including Nigeria at 11.

The first rape laws were created in Babylon around 1900 BC in the Code of Hammurabi. Four thousand years later, the definition of rape continues to divide.