

Safety An Issue For Girls Living In India

BY MARK MAGNIER

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NEW DELHI — When she was a girl growing up in India's mountainous north-east, Sobhana Gazmer used to rough up boys who gave her lip. These days in the big city of New Delhi, she's scared to walk the streets, take public transportation, even sleep in her one-room apartment, with its single bed covered in stuffed animals.

Her apartment is a few hundred feet from the stop where a commuter bus picked up a young woman whose fate haunts Gazmer: She was raped repeatedly, allegedly by the driver and his friends, and then assaulted along with her male friend with metal rods. She died of her injuries two weeks later.

Rape cases have been a fixture in India's headlines for years, but the brutal attack in December hit a deep nerve. Many young women saw themselves in the victim, a 23-year-old physiotherapy student of modest means who moved to New Delhi to chase the Indian dream — and gain independence in the process.

"No matter how strong we want to be, how bold, with women power, if there are two or three guys, you just have to turn and run," said Gazmer, 29. "Since December, I hardly go out, even with friends. That could've been me. Every woman thinks that way."

Gazmer is an outgoing professional with an easy laugh who works nights in a call center in New Delhi answering credit card questions for Americans. She makes more money than her soldier father or teacher mother, and dreams of eventually starting her own business.

But her parallels with the victim of the bus attack don't stop with aspirations for a better life.

A year after landing an earlier call-center job in 2009 and renting her own apartment, she headed out to a shopping area early one evening with a male friend. As they hailed a tuk-tuk, she was attacked by several men: initially three in their early 20s, and two more who then joined in. They were intent on forcing her into a car and raping her, she said.

Because she had only recently moved to the city, she said, she was so naive that she called them brother — a sign of respect — and asked them what they wanted, which only made them more aggressive.

In a bid to drag Gazmer into the car, the attackers



MARK MAGNIER/LOS ANGELES TIMES/MCT
Sobhana Gazmer, 29, who works at a call center in the New Delhi, India, area answering calls from Americans about their credit card accounts, feels increasingly anxious since a high-profile rape in mid-December sent shock waves through the country.

said. "It's emotional blackmail. Marriage, marriage, marriage. Sometimes when she calls, I just put the phone on 'silent' knowing what she's going to say."

Gazmer, the youngest of four sisters, particularly enjoys the independence of earning her own money and buying what she wants without the second-guessing that often comes in close Indian families. Whenever she goes home for a visit, she's happy for a couple of days, then gets bored.

"I love the freedom of my life," she said. "This is the big city." But that freedom comes at a price: Her apartment is at the top of a four-floor walk-up so close to the next building you can jump to its adjoining balcony, which is exactly what some drunk guys did a few months back on a lower floor.

Since then, the landlord has beefed up security, adding closed-circuit cameras and electronic gates, the building's exposed pipes, chipped paint and dirty floors contrasting with the modern devices. Speaking to Americans for hours each night on the phone — many call centers don't volunteer that they're in India and Gazmer's pseudonym is Sonia Smith — has opened her mind, she said. Although some people on the other end express anger, say-

ing Indians are stealing American jobs, most are friendly and quite generous, she said, even telling her she sounds pretty and must have many boyfriends.

"A friend told me: In the U.S., you smile and act friendly," she said. "But here, you have to hold everything inside; there's no frankness or guys will get the wrong idea."

On paper, Indian rape statistics are lower than in many Western countries, but experts say a large number of the assaults go unreported. A United Nations report in November 2012 found just 5 percent of women and girls considered New Delhi streets safe from sexual violence. India is ranked 129 out of 147 countries on the U.N.'s Gender Equality Index, behind Bangladesh and Rwanda.

The brutal December attack left psychological dam-

age and anxiety nationwide in a society where women suffer near-daily snickers, pawing and threats that can make them feel like prey.

"Police don't care, bureaucrats are indifferent, politicians find women seductive — it's the entire regime," said Shiv Visvanathan, a sociology professor at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy in Sonapat, just north of New Delhi. "Women suffer numerous indignities, are harassed, attacked. There's the psychological impact, embarrassment, even being disowned by their families."

In response to the public

outrage after the gang rape, new laws have increased the punishment for rape, gang rape, stalking and other sex-related crimes. Gazmer said she's not sure even capital punishment is a deterrent and believes those caught should be publicly beaten and humiliated. Too many guilty people in India bribe or use political connections, she said, serving only token jail sentences.

"Some good punishment must be there, or things won't change," she said. "Girls in India just aren't safe."

SOBHANA GAZMER



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