

I was sexually abused as a child. I don't want a death penalty, I prefer healing for him

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[Instead of provisions for death penalty, it is restorative justice that needs to be built into the existing laws and implemented through a sensitised justice delivery system.](#) *Bhai roz galat kaam karta tha. Mummy ko bhi bataya. Mummy ne mara bhi bhai ko, par galat kaam nahi ruka. Isliye main ghar se bhaag gayi* (My brother sexually abused me every day. I told my mother. She beat him up, but the abuse did not stop. So, I ran away from home). Poonam was a brave girl who decided to act against sexual abuse in the family and refused to be raped by her brother everyday within the confines of their 'home'. Poonam was less than 10 years old and her brother just over 11 when it all started. Her case is not an aberration. Studies indicate that in more than 80 per cent of sexual abuse cases, perpetrators are known to the victim and in positions of trust, and power bestowed by patriarchy. My first memory of abuse is when I was all of six years old. Abuse by this person continued in different forms for years together and I was not his only target in the family. My mother eventually came to know and reacted the same way as Poonam's mother. She beat the pulp out of him, cursed him, tried to make him understand that this was not right. But nothing stopped him. The burden instead fell on us to keep ourselves safe, not be around him when alone. 'Being alone' is irrelevant when an act of abuse can be done within the seconds it takes to pass through corridors. When I was well into my 30s, someone asked me how old my abuser was when it all started. And for the first time, it dawned on me that he must have been about seven to eight years old during our first encounter of abuse. I could no longer see him as an abuser, only seeing someone who was a victim himself. Could either of us, at that tender age, understand this was abuse that will eventually take the form of repeated rapes over a long period of time? I have grown up loathing this abuser despite both of us having settled down in our lives and maintaining a good relationship with each other's family. But I pity him and pity myself, for living with such vengeance and unresolved, unspoken emotions. Yes, he abused me. But what made him do that at the age of seven? What made him so entitled that, despite interventions by an adult woman for years, he could not correct his behaviour? Why were there no better modes of intervention available to our families and us, who wanted it stopped? And you and I really think death penalty or harsher punishment is the answer to it? Most of us, including the state apparatus, are increasingly only gearing towards retributive, punitive justice while skirting the main issues. At a recent event in Delhi, testimonies of parents who came out and reported the abuse of their children included the failures of the criminal justice system in addressing the issue. None of them, however, wanted death penalty for the abusers, be it the father of a three-and-a-half year old abused at her playschool, the mother who showed the courage of putting her husband behind bars for abusing their daughter and is struggling to make ends meet, or the mother of the 13-year old boy who couldn't get an apology for the act that destroyed her son's confidence. [Instead of provisions for death penalty, it is restorative justice that needs to be built into the existing laws and implemented through a sensitised and efficient justice delivery system.](#) At the screening of the documentary *The Little Girls We Were...* And *The Women We Are* in Delhi, the survivors of childhood sexual abuse were asked how they would like their perpetrators punished. None of the three survivors saw the criminal justice system alone as a solution but sought restorative justice. We need empathy, acknowledgement and resolution, and that is what restorative justice is. Most of us who were abused as young children did not understand what was happening to us and how to voice it. What words could describe our experience? How do the adults in the family speak up and encourage us to speak out? Some of us have started to talk about our experiences of abuse in public and private spaces despite struggling with our fears and the attached stigma, so it may lead to opening of spaces for these conversations, to give shape to the language we have all been missing. My mother is ready to speak up today despite her fears for the family's honour as she does not want the next generation to face what hers and my generation did. Because she no longer believes it's the fate we have to endure for being born women. And we need to recognise that sexual abuse of boys is equally alarmingly high. We have had the burden of protecting ourselves and struggling with the abuse for too long. Don't shift the burden of death penalty on us now. Most of us will prefer healing to sending our abuser to the gallows. We refuse to see our abusers as monsters because we want our wounds — and the perpetrators' — and hearts healed. The abusers are also struggling with the ill-conceived ideas of power and masculinity imposed upon them since birth. The shock we exhibit on hearing about cases of sexual abuse and rape, and our reactions to brutality, need to stop, because every time we react in disbelief, what we are saying is that it is an anomaly. It is not. In making them look like isolated cases and by pushing individuals to the gallows, we might satisfy our collective guilt as a society, but push further away the spaces to engage with the real issue — of patriarchy and sexualisation. First published by

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