

Beyond the White Coat: The Dark Reality of Violence against Female Resident Doctors

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In a harrowing event that shook the medical community and the nation to its core, a young pulmonary resident doctor in Kolkata was brutally raped and murdered while on duty at RG Kar Medical College. After working tirelessly for more than 30 hours, she sought a brief moment of rest in the seminar room—a place that should have been a sanctuary but instead became the site of an unspeakable crime.

This incident is not just a personal tragedy; it is a stark reflection of the harsh realities faced by many female resident doctors across India. Overworked, under-protected, and often left to fend for themselves in an environment that is both physically and mentally draining, these women are the unsung heroes of our healthcare system. Yet, their dedication comes at a tremendous cost, as this horrific event so painfully demonstrates.

The burden of duty: Overwork and its consequences

The life of a resident doctor in a government hospital is one of relentless pressure and demands. These young doctors, fresh out of medical school, are thrust into an environment where the patient load is overwhelming, the resources are limited, and the stakes are incredibly high. For female residents, the challenges are even more pronounced. They often work continuous shifts of 36 to 48 hours, with little to no time for rest, food, or personal care. This relentless schedule is not just a test of endurance; it's a recipe for disaster.

In this particular case, the doctor had been on her feet for over 30 hours, tending to patients, dealing with emergencies, and navigating the chaos of a busy hospital. The seminar room, where she decided to rest for a while, was supposed to offer a momentary respite from the madness of her duties. But instead of the brief sleep she desperately needed, she was met with unimaginable violence.

The problem of overwork among resident doctors is well-documented. Extended working hours without adequate rest lead to increased risks of medical errors, burnout, and severe mental health issues [1]. For female residents, the pressures are compounded by societal expectations and the additional responsibilities they often carry outside of work. They are expected to balance their demanding careers with family obligations, often without the same level of support afforded to their male counterparts.

The tragedy in Kolkata is a chilling reminder that the system, as it stands, is failing these dedicated professionals. The conditions under which they work are not only inhumane but also dangerous. When a doctor cannot even take a moment to rest without fearing for her life, something is profoundly wrong.

The dark reality: Violence against healthcare workers

This horrific event is not an isolated incident. Violence against healthcare workers is a growing and deeply troubling issue in India. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), between 8% and 38% of health workers globally suffer physical violence at some point in their careers [2]. In India, the situation is particularly dire, with overcrowded hospitals, frustrated patients, and an overstressed healthcare system creating a volatile environment.

For female doctors, the risks are even greater. They face not only the physical dangers posed by violent patients or their relatives but also the threat of sexual harassment and assault. Hospitals, which should be places of healing and safety, can become perilous environments for women who are just trying to do their jobs. The tragic event in Kolkata underscores this grim reality: female doctors are vulnerable not just in society at large but within the very institutions where they work.

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) reports that 75% of doctors in India have faced some form of violence during their careers [3]. This violence ranges from verbal abuse and threats to physical assault, and, in the most extreme cases, sexual violence and murder. The underlying causes are complex and multifaceted: overcrowded facilities, long waiting times, and a lack of effective communication between healthcare providers and patients all contribute to the tension that can erupt into violence.

But for female doctors, there is an added layer of vulnerability. Gender-based violence in the workplace is a pervasive issue that has been largely ignored or downplayed in the past. The murder of this young female doctor brings this issue into sharp focus, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change to protect those who dedicate their lives to caring for others.

The plight of female resident doctors

Today, women make up approximately 40% of resident doctors in India. Despite this significant presence, they continue to face numerous challenges that their male colleagues may not encounter. Gender discrimination, harassment, and a lack of support during pregnancy and motherhood are just a few of the hurdles they must overcome in addition to the already demanding nature of medical training [4].

Female residents often report feeling unsafe during night shifts or while performing emergency duties, especially in understaffed and poorly lit hospital areas. The lack of female-only rest areas and inadequate security measures further exacerbate their vulnerability. In many cases, female doctors are expected to “tough it out” and endure the same harsh conditions as their male counterparts, with little consideration given to the unique challenges they face.

The tragedy in Kolkata is a stark example of these systemic issues. This young doctor, like many of her peers, was expected to work long, grueling hours in an environment that offered little protection or support. Her murder is a direct consequence of the unsafe and unsustainable working conditions that many female residents endure every day. It is a wake-up call for the entire medical community and the nation at large.

A unified response: Strike and agitation

The brutal murder of this resident doctor sparked a wave of outrage and protests across the medical community. The Indian Medical Association (IMA), along with various other medical bodies, organized strikes and demonstrations in cities across the country. These actions were not just in memory of the young doctor but also a desperate plea for systemic change to protect all healthcare workers, particularly women, from violence and exploitation.

The strikes saw massive participation from doctors, medical students, and healthcare workers, with many hospitals operating on a limited basis to draw attention to the crisis. The protesters demanded stricter enforcement of laws against violence in hospitals, improved working conditions for resident doctors, and immediate implementation of security measures to protect female staff [3].

One of the central demands of the protests was the fast-tracking of the Central Health Protection Bill, a long-pending piece of legislation that aims to provide legal protection to healthcare professionals against violence. The bill, if enacted, would introduce stringent penalties for anyone found guilty of attacking medical personnel or damaging hospital property, providing a much-needed legal safeguard for healthcare workers.

The government's response and future measures

In response to the widespread protests, both the West Bengal government and central authorities announced several measures aimed at preventing such incidents in the future. These included the installation of CCTV cameras in all hospital corridors and critical areas, increasing the number of security personnel, and ensuring that all hospitals have a zero-tolerance policy towards violence against healthcare workers.

Additionally, the government has promised to fast-track the passage of the Central Health Protection Bill, which has been in limbo for several years. This bill, once enacted, will serve as a deterrent against violence in hospitals by imposing stringent punishments on offenders. It will also mandate the establishment of secure and gender-sensitive facilities within hospitals, such as female-only rest areas and improved lighting in hospital premises [1].

While these measures are a step in the right direction, the medical community remains cautious. There is widespread acknowledgment that systemic change will require more than just legislative action. It will require a fundamental shift in how society views and treats its healthcare workers, particularly women. Public awareness campaigns aimed at educating the public about the pressures and challenges faced by doctors, and the importance of respecting and protecting them, are crucial.

Moreover, there is a need to address the root causes of violence in hospitals, which are often linked to frustrations arising from inadequate healthcare infrastructure, long waiting times, and perceived neglect. Improving the overall quality of care in government hospitals, ensuring adequate staffing, and addressing the grievances of patients and their families through proper communication channels can help reduce the incidence of violence [4].

Conclusion: A Call for Systemic Change

The rape and murder of this young doctor is a tragic reminder of the vulnerabilities faced by female resident doctors in India's overcrowded and under-resourced hospitals. Her death has exposed the systemic failures that have allowed violence against healthcare workers to proliferate, particularly in government institutions where the pressures of work are immense and security measures are often inadequate.

As we mourn the loss of a dedicated and compassionate doctor, it is imperative that her death serves as a catalyst for change. The government, medical institutions, and society at large must come together to ensure that the safety and dignity of healthcare workers are prioritized. This includes not only implementing the necessary security measures but also addressing the broader issues of overwork, gender discrimination, and the lack of support systems for female doctors.

The passage of the Central Health Protection Bill is a crucial first step in this direction, but it must be accompanied by ongoing efforts to improve working conditions in hospitals, raise public awareness, and create a culture of respect and support for healthcare workers. Only then can we hope to prevent such tragedies in the future and ensure that those who dedicate their lives to healing others are not left vulnerable to such horrific acts of violence.

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