

## #standwithpriya

[Nazli Pulatmen](#) looks at the impact of the comic, Priya's Shakti, and its representation of rape victims

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Image: Ram Devineni

The epidemic of female rape and gender-based violence in India has come into view of the international eye in recent years through many high-profile rape cases. While such crimes are uniquely heinous, the treatment of victims who come forward is equally as worrying. Victims of rape differ from victims of other forms of assault, in that their stories are often questioned, their innocence scrutinised, and many who do report their rapists are themselves blamed.

Often, discussions are more preoccupied with what the victim was wearing, where she was, and what business she had for being there, rather than how to address the issue of a growing and extremely harmful rape culture. The treatment of rape victims who go public intimidates women into staying silent, and perpetuates a society in which rape goes unpunished.

Instead of making an example of the rapists, it is often victims who are publicly shamed. The most worrying thing about rape culture, however, is that it pervades all countries and cultures. The way in which cartoonist, Ram Devineni, has responded to the growth of gender-based violence in India is truly unique.

The creation of Priya's Shakti, a comic book about Priya, a gang rape survivor, and the Hindu goddess Parvati working together to put an end to rape and victim-blaming, has given Indian girls and women worldwide the superhero they desperately need. Priya's experiences of rape challenge current views on victims and provide inspiration and representation for young girls and women who have experienced sexual violence. She is empowering while remaining entirely human and relatable. In the comic, Priya faces victim blaming from her parents. She is then thrown out of her home, a sad reflection of the social isolation that real rape victims face in India. The pervasive attitude towards the importance of female chastity and purity, and the subsequent treatment of sexual abuse survivors as dirty and impure make rape victims even more vulnerable to honour killings or isolation from their communities. Priya's strong response to her own victimhood not only sets an example for fellow survivors, but also for their communities who might otherwise feel the need to shun victims.

Devineni wants his comic to reach audiences as young as 10 and has made it available for free in its entirety online. The distribution of 6000 printed copies has already begun in schools across India. In portraying Priya as a strong and unbroken survivor, Devineni is giving all women who are victims of gender-based violence a positive and encouraging role model. While deeply rooted in Indian mythology and culture, his work demands an end to sexual violence and victim-blaming, a universal statement that urgently needs to be heard and responded to by cultures across the world.



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