

The Aziz Ansari Syllabus for South Asian American Communities

Why this Guide?

The allegations against Aziz Ansari have been met with a wide swath of reactions, including in the South Asian community. You may already have a particular viewpoint on the [story](#) recounted by Grace about Ansari, or you may have questions and concerns about what you are reading and hearing. We put together this guide to spark greater awareness among South Asians in particular about the range of issues that have arisen in the aftermath of the story about Aziz Ansari. The guide also includes resources for additional reading and sharing.

We are a group of South Asian American advocates who work on issues related to racial, immigrant and gender justice. We developed this guide as a starting point, and welcome any additions/clarifications to it. For more information, please contact Nadiah Mohajir at HEART Women & Girls (nadiah@heartwomenandgirls.org).

It seems like Grace had the agency to leave but she didn't exercise it.

Grace did ultimately leave. Grace also states that she “was taken advantage of by Aziz” and “was not listened to and ignored” despite expressing her discomfort and saying no several times during the encounter. In such situations, when women are expected to diffuse a situation, politely say no, save face for themselves, rectify the behavior of the abuser, or deny the severity of what is taking place, a number of calculations are going through their minds. And, this might result in staying longer than they would like. In fact, it is normal for our bodies and minds to go into auto-pilot mode, numbness or disassociation when we feel threatened or afraid. We must be careful not to shame how people respond as they are processing an uncomfortable or threatening encounter.

It's also important to remember that Grace's choice to willingly stay does not entitle another person to take advantage of her. Nor is it a reason for us to justify her mistreatment as somehow deserved or wanted because she should have known better. Perhaps you may have acted differently. Perhaps you think that Grace's actions shouldn't be excused. But, it is important to keep in mind that a person's histories, past experiences, and feelings of safety and control can all contribute to the choices and decisions they make in a given moment. A victim-blaming approach leaves no room to understand, empathize, reflect or discuss any of these factors.

Finally, questioning Grace's agency, or lack thereof, is an incomplete analysis of what happened. Let's ask why Ansari didn't stop. Grace recounted that Ansari would stop when Grace expressed discomfort, make her feel at ease, and then escalate the situation and continue testing and then disrespecting her boundaries. What were Ansari's responsibilities in the encounter and how could he have exercised them differently?

It seems that Grace consented to the encounter given her own actions.

Consent lies on a spectrum and it is always evolving, not static. Informed consent means that individuals are having meaningful and honest conversations about what they agree to and what they don't when it comes to sexual activity. Consent can be given and taken away as well, even during the course of a date. Just because one may consent to something up to a certain point does not mean that one has consented to everything that follows. Respecting a woman's agency around sexuality and sex means respecting consent as a process.

Coercion is easier to spot. It includes pestering someone for sexual activity and ignoring or dismissing their cues (verbal and non-verbal). It includes making another person feel safe one moment and then asking them to go further than they would like. It includes making physical and emotional threats. It includes becoming angry or impatient. These (and many other) behaviors can seem coercive in a situation.

The story surrounding Aziz Ansari is an opportunity to discuss coercion and consent with your families, partners, and potential dates. It is also an opportunity to reflect on your own understanding of consent and coercion, and how you may express consent.

If we believe Grace was sexually assaulted, then all of us are victims of sexual assault.

A situation does not need to rise to the level of illegality to be destructive, wrong, unethical, or painful. Focusing solely on whether an encounter meets the legal definition of rape or assault limits our understanding of sexual violence, and leaves us ill equipped to handle disclosures and reports that don't center a criminal justice process.

It is also important to keep in mind that situations like the one that Grace endured happen often, especially in today's environment of rape culture. We see [rape culture](#) manifested in the sexual and physical objectification of women's bodies, the dismissal of women's stories and attacks on them when they speak up, the messages men receive about their entitlement to the bodies of women, and the normalization of sexual violence. [According to RAINN](#), someone is sexually assaulted in America every 98 seconds. As survivor-centered advocates, we respect an individual's choice to name and identify their experiences, whenever and however they choose to, including Grace.

This is not what the #MeToo movement is about at all.

The #MeToo movement is an individual and collective declaration that women share experiences and struggles around inequality, harassment, and violence. It is not limited to workplace harassment or sexual violence. It is not limited to the stories of white Hollywood actresses. Instead, it is a movement that is broad and inclusive, one that can hold the experiences of Grace, the workplace discrimination faced by farmworkers, domestic workers, and home care workers, the sexual violence experienced in marriages or dates, and the abuse inflicted on students in athletic programs. The #MeToo movement provides us with the opportunity to have conversations and dialogues about pay inequality, gender violence, consent and

coercion, street-based harassment, marital rape, child sexual abuse and more issues that occur in all communities.

Let's also remember that one of the key lessons of the #MeToo movement is to believe, validate, and trust women's experiences, even if we may have acted or reacted differently. We should exercise compassion and concern for harassment, assault, and inequity that women and survivors face - and not withhold those reactions unless the incidents rise to the level of rape or violence.

Why is this woman taking aim at Aziz Ansari? As one of few brown men that Americans know, I worry about his reputation - and how brown men will be perceived.

The onus of Aziz's problematic and abusive behavior is his own personal responsibility. We cannot place the onus of protecting the community's image on victims of sexual assault and gender-based violence.

Additionally, let's move away from the notion that we have to protect people in our communities, especially if they are in positions of prominence in industries that are not diverse. It is dangerous to believe that South Asians can and should represent our communities' needs and interests, although we should hold people accountable to high standards especially if they highlight their ethnic affiliation and community connections. While it is important to advocate for greater representation in every sector, we don't need to blindly advocate for individuals who "make it" in non-diverse sectors just because they are from the same ethnic background or faith as we are. Also, the notion that brown men like Ansari need protection is hypocritical unless we see the same sort of concern for brown men who are not wealthy, privileged, or famous as he is.

What about South Asian men? What should they be doing?

A lot. Men need to be involved and engaged as participants, not merely as listeners. South Asian men can:

- Take steps to fully understand sexual violence and gain a better understanding of a broad variety of issues including gender norms, social constructs of masculinity and sexuality, privilege, power dynamics, consent, and healthy intimacy. Start with the resources below.
- Use this knowledge to perform an unbiased self-analysis of how you and others intentionally and unintentionally lend support to rape culture (for example, what are some things you believe, say, or do that are actually rooted in demeaning stereotypes about women and girls?)
- Identify and dismantle the messages you receive around the entitlement to women's bodies.
- Disrupt conversations that objectify and dehumanize women and girls. You could gently ask, "Is that how you truly feel?" or provide examples of the impact of misogyny and sexism.
- Deconstruct so called "religious and cultural values" and understand how they are informed by patriarchal stereotypes that further perpetuate victim-blaming rape culture.
- Be active and engaged allies to women who tirelessly work to dismantle rape culture. Understand that being a passive bystander is just as detrimental as partaking in victim-blaming. Receive in-depth training on [bystander intervention](#).

- Identify support for the trauma and abuse you have experienced, and identify positive ways to address shame, rejection, and anger
- Talk with younger men and boys about rape culture, especially within student organizations, mentorship and leadership programs, summer camps, and places of worship.
- Begin to understand the differences between gender identity, gender expression, sex, and the experiences of queer and trans communities.
- Find additional resources at <http://www.mencanstoprape.org/>.

What can I do?

- Reflect on your own experiences and histories. What felt empowering to you? What made you feel unsafe or uncomfortable? What are the parameters and boundaries that feel right for you in dating, flirting, and sexual activity?
- Pledge to have honest and open conversations about consent, coercion, and power in your relationships, even if it feels challenging and scary. This is your pledge to center yourself, your body, and your needs.
- Learn about the environment of rape culture, the #MeToo movement, and other topics that have been highlighted via the Ansari story. You'll find a brief list of resources below that can help you get started.
- Talk to your family members about the Ansari story to open up conversations about sex and sexual expression. These issues are still taboo topics in many South Asian families. Use this opportunity to have honest conversations about sexuality, coercion, and the balance of power among people of various genders in your family.
- Get involved with organizations in your area that support survivors.
- Dismantle the stereotypes and myths that exist in South Asian communities around sexuality, gender expression, and queer and trans communities. Raise awareness about child sexual abuse and its long-term effects on children, adults, and families. Raise awareness about the extent and impact of marital rape.
- Participate in activities during [Sexual Assault Awareness Month](#) that takes place every April to raise awareness on sexual violence, an organizing effort that began in 1975.
- Seek out support, therapy and help if you have experienced sexual assault.
- Take a break and disengage if you are being triggered from engaging in conversations about sexual violence. It's not your individual responsibility as a survivor to change people's perceptions.

Resources

- [Here's Why Aziz Ansari's Behavior Matters](#) by Emily Reynolds
- [Aziz, We Tried to Warn You](#) by Lindy West
- [How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women](#) by Amanda Hess
- [Aziz Ansari, Consent, and the Difference between Okay, Fine and Yes](#) by Giselle Au-Nhien Ngyuen
- [Does Aziz Ansari Deserve his #MeToo Humiliation?](#) An interview with Deepa Iyer on Rising Up with Sonali
- [#MeToo, Aziz Ansari, Sexual Coercion: Are we asking the right questions?](#) By Nadiah Mohajir
- [Believe her](#) by Alia Azmat
- [Consenting to Normal](#) by Hyejin Shem
- [Message on Gender-based Violence](#) by Nadiah Mohajir

- [Reflections on GBV in Muslim Community](#) by Sameera Qureshi
- [Ask before Touching](#) by Sahar Pirzada (on marital rape)
- [The problem with Boys will be boys](#) by Nadiah Mohajir
- [Mirror Memoirs](#): oral history project centering the narratives, healing and leadership of LGBTQ survivors of color in the movement to end child sexual abuse (founded by survivor-activist Amita Swadhin).
- Resources from HEART including [Myths about Sexual Assault in the Muslim Community](#); from Sakhi for South Asian Women on [South Asian specific direct services on domestic violence and assault](#); and from the [Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence](#).
- [Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-Sexual Violence Movement](#) by Jennifer Patterson - Book on Amazon available [here](#)
- [Dalit Women, Sexual Violence and the Geography of Caste - An interview by Sonia J. Cheruvilli](#)
- [#DalitWomenFight](#) is a transmedia art project that exposes the issue at the core of India's rape crisis: caste-based sexual violence. [Short video here](#) and [website](#)
- [Body Evidence: Intimate Violence Against South Asian Women in America by Shamita Das Dasgupta](#)
- [The Ahimsa Collective](#) by Sonya Shah offers non-punitive approaches to addressing harm
- [The Neurobiology of Trauma](#) by Dr. David Lisak for the Arkansas Coalition Against Sexual Assault (Video interview)
- [Online Video Lecture on Neurobiology of Trauma and Sexual Assault by Jim Hopper](#)
- [Trauma and Recovery](#) by Judith Herman. Full PDF version [here](#)
- [Changing The Paradigm: Addressing Our Role in Perpetuating Rape Culture](#) by Darakshan Raja
- [Continuum of Sexual Violence](#)
- [Men Can Stop Rape - Organizational Resources](#)
- Annotated [Bibliography of Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women](#) of South and East Asian Origin

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