Surviving Internet Rape

Think you're always safe behind the screen? 16-year-old Shirleen found out it’s not always that simple.
Even though investigations are still underway, Shirleen* has agreed to share with us her traumatic experience in the hopes of alerting other girls to the very real danger of Internet rape.

Brought up in a strict Catholic family, 16-year-old Shirleen has been described as a well-behaved and disciplined student, and is a typical teenager who enjoys hanging out with her friends and surfing the Internet. There was something irresistible and liberating about the way she could just come home from school, throw her real identity out the window, and take up whatever persona she liked online. Whether it was “cutecookie” or “sweetgal6”, Shirleen never had a shortage of online friends who liked chatting with her.

Her favourite friend, though, was soon “bikerboy2000”, who was always sweet, considerate, and knew exactly what to say. They exchanged personal information, and she soon found out his real name was George* and that he was 29. In return, she divulged her own name, school, and contact number without a second thought—all she knew was that he sounded decent, sensitive, and mature, and she wanted to be his girlfriend. Shirleen was on cloud nine—she couldn’t believe how lucky she was to have a man like George by her side.

Shirleen was so smitten that on the third date, when George asked her over to his place, she had no qualms whatsoever and hurried over, full of anticipation. Everything was fine until he dimmed the lights and started to get physically close to Shirleen. When she pulled away and asked what he was doing, he literally fell on her and started attacking her. Through her dazed confusion, she realised that she had been forcibly raped. It could have been five minutes, or even 20 minutes—she wasn’t sure—but after it was over, she dashed out of his house and ran straight home.

Grappling with feelings of worthlessness and shame, as well as the fear of pregnancy and parental rejection, Shirleen’s grades soon plummeted as she withdrew from her friends and family. Close friends who were concerned kept asking her what was wrong, until one day, Shirleen couldn’t hold it in anymore and opened up about her dreadful experience. They were very helpful and encouraged her to seek counselling, after which Shirleen turned to Care. Eventually, her parents were informed, as well as the police. George was identified, and investigations are still underway at this point in time.

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GIVING VOICES TO THE UNHEARD

Moved by the plight of silent victims and concerned with the issues that youth face today, seven students from Singapore Management University worked with Care (Children At Risk Empowerment Association) Singapore to highlight several real-life cases of marginalised youths. Shirleen’s story is but the first in an ongoing series. Through interviews with brave youths who have learnt the hard way, this group of students, who call themselves Historias (the Spanish word for “stories”), hope to shed light on these social issues and impart some valuable lessons through their experiences. Learn more about how you can help at www.care.sg.

Shirleen shares: “My family was distraught upon hearing the news, especially my Dad, whose warnings about the Internet I did not heed. I later learnt that I was not the only girl George has raped so far. As the experience sank in and the fear subsided, I became very angry. I kept asking: Why me? How on earth did I let this happen? How could I have been so stupid? I am still learning to cope with the post-rape trauma, but learning to focus my attention on other positive things has helped. Victims need to know that all hope is not lost as there is help available from counsellors and family members. They can provide guidance as they’re more experienced and mature. Ultimately, don’t be afraid to report the incident to the authorities, and never keep it to yourself. When it comes to unfounded sex, girls have legal rights. Even if sexual intercourse is consensual, the law states that it will be considered rape if a man, or even a young boy, has sex with an underaged girl. It is therefore important to know the consequences and understand the reasons, and let your loved ones know.

There are also many ways that you can avoid becoming a victim. You should never reveal your identity or address on the Internet, as well as information about your school, mobile number or online profile (such as Friendster, MySpace or Facebook) as your identity can be traced very easily. Look out for people with seemingly innocent nicknames who approach you online. If you are already conversing and the person seems very eager to meet up, find excuses to leave and log out. Ultimately, do not meet up!”

*Names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.