

**CHALLENGING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA:  
A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT THE WORK OF INTERNATIONAL  
NATIONAL, AND LOCAL-LEVEL ACTORS**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Political Science with Distinction

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cried and danced our way through our last year of college, and I am so grateful for every moment.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the fearless women of India and the activists who work to empower them. They continue to survive and thrive despite all odds, and they inspired me to write this. I've never been more proud to be an Indian woman.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper will examine the efforts of international, national, and local-level actors as they attempt to challenge violence against women in India. When feminist activists strategically present violence against women as a human rights issue, they are able to influence international organizations and the Indian government in provoking change. Furthermore, they are able to mobilize the country's local grassroots NGOs in combatting instances of rape, domestic violence, and other forms of female oppression. This is a culmination of my research on all three levels: international organizations as they bring abuses such as rape and domestic violence to public attention and global discourse, India's government and state-level actors as they use their sovereign powers to protect women by way of legislation and law enforcement, and lastly, local NGOs in urban, rural, and tribal settings, as they individually work with victims of violence. All of these organizations—when tied together under the same overarching framework of human rights—follow a chain reaction and influence one another in the greater crusade for social change.





## INTRODUCTION

*“You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.”<sup>1</sup>*

*—Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister*

*“I want to live.”*

These were the last words said by Jyoti Singh Pandey, the victim of a horrific 2012 gang rape in India’s capital of New Delhi. Pandey, a physiotherapy student, was beaten, raped, and tortured by six men on a private bus on her way home one evening.<sup>2</sup> As the grotesque details of her injuries unraveled, the entire country grew enraged. Women, men, feminists, students—a multitude of Indians came forward to voice their anger, demanding a systemic change in society’s view of females.

The subordinate status of women, as we know, is not unique to India. But the nation’s societal norms, attitudes, and behaviors, along with its deeply embedded misogynistic practices, have contributed to a widespread culture of violence against

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<sup>1</sup> "Saarthak: Initiatives of Relevance." *Saarthak*. Saarthakindia.org. Web. 10 May

<sup>2</sup> Mosbergen, Dominique. "Delhi Bus Gang Rape Victim Has Intestines Removed As Shocking Details Of Assault Emerge." *The World Post*. The Huffington Post & The Berggruen Institute, 20 Dec. 2012. Web. 10 May 2016.

women. In order to understand why India is affected on such a large scale, we must first examine the country's complex societal customs. Dating back to the advent of Hinduism, India's society was built on patriarchy: with the man as the head of the household, and the woman as the dutiful wife, mother, and caretaker. The expected lifestyle of women was purely a domestic and conservative one. In today's world, Indian women are constitutionally deemed equal to men—they are being offered more opportunities in a variety of fields and becoming successful in their own right. However, India remains to this day a male-dominated society, and discrimination is still prominent in many rural and urban areas. Misogynistic practices are disguised as "tradition" and contribute to the marginalization of women. The dowry tradition for weddings calls for the bride's family to present the groom's side with gifts or money. While the practice was declared illegal in India in 1961, the law has been difficult to enforce, with dowry gifts still common in many arranged marriages. This has led to cases of dowry-related violence and deaths, unique to India, in which brides have been punished for inadequate payment.<sup>3</sup>

Also stemming from Hinduism is India's sacred caste system, a social hierarchy based on division of labor. Over time, it has led to grave inequalities, segregating low-caste "Dalits" from the others. Through community pressures and expectations, Dalits are prevented from socializing with others and limited to lowly

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<sup>3</sup> "Saarthak: Initiatives of Relevance."

jobs—and perhaps the most suppressed within this caste are the females.<sup>4</sup> Rape, domestic violence, forced child marriage, son preference, female infanticide, honor killings, human trafficking and forced prostitution are all manifestations of oppression still prevalent in India.

It is evident that the plight of Indian women is systemic in nature—to evoke change, there must be a change in the mindset of people, its government, and its core values and beliefs. Above all, bringing that change to a country with a roughly 1.2 billion population—the second largest in the world—is no easy task.

But feminist activists and relentless media coverage have pushed the international community to become more involved, as organizations such as the United Nations and Human Rights Watch have invested in programs to promote the safety and security of women. At the national level, many government-affiliated programs in India have been implemented in attempts to evoke policy change, specifically to enforce stricter punishments for perpetrators of violence. In India's cities, villages, and tribal communities, grassroots-level organizations have taken a bottom-up approach, furthering the status of women by providing individual support, education, and critical resources to victims. This thesis examines the role of these three types of actors—at the international, national, and local level—in combatting

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<sup>4</sup> "What Is India's Caste System?" *BBC News*. BBC, 25 Feb. 2016. Web. 10 May 2016.

violence against Indian women and empowering them, which is paramount in promoting gender equality.

In their book, “Activists Beyond Borders,” political science scholars Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink examine the work of transnational women’s networks in combatting violence against women. For years, feminists and women’s rights activists struggled to bring the issue of women’s rights and violence to the public agenda, feeling rather isolated and ignored. But once they framed women’s rights as basic human rights, they were more successful in winning support from international organizations and states. Keck and Sikkink argue that when states see violence against women as a human rights concern, they are convinced to set up further protections for women. The “preservation of human dignity” and the “prevention of bodily harm,” they note, have a surprisingly transcultural value.<sup>5</sup> Violence against women, and women’s rights in general, do not have the same effect when they stand alone. By way of this ideology, international organizations and activists are also able to overcome cultural differences, disposing of theories that criticize women’s rights as an example of cultural imperialism by western nations.<sup>6</sup> In India, there are simultaneous social movements, local governments, and intergovernmental organizations that are

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<sup>5</sup> Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998. Print. Page 165.

<sup>6</sup> Keck and Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*.

influenced by this very concept. By accepting VAW as a violation of human rights, they are pushing themselves to overcome an issue that has plagued Indian women for generations.



## Chapter 1

### THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL & TRANSNATIONAL ACTORS

*There is one universal truth, applicable to all countries, cultures and communities: violence against women is never acceptable, never excusable, never tolerable.<sup>7</sup>*

*—UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon*

While violence against women in India is certainly one of the nation's most detrimental human rights issues, its pervasiveness has rendered it a global epidemic. Commonly abbreviated as "VAW," the term refers to brutal acts that are committed against women and girls; the most common ones being domestic violence, rape, and sexual and physical harassment.<sup>8</sup> Transcending culture and plaguing societies worldwide, VAW is not confined to merely one country, political system or social class—but rather, it is present in every level of society in the world. UN Women, an organization targeting gender equality throughout the world, released statistics showing at least one out of every three women around the world will be raped, beaten

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<sup>7</sup> "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls." *Resources for Speakers on Global Issues*. United Nations. Web. 13 Oct. 2015.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations. UNiTE to End Violence Against Women. *Violence Against Women*. United Nations. Web. 13 Oct. 2015.

or abused in their lifetimes.<sup>9</sup> India, the primary focus of this thesis, illustrates such trends. In 2012, the *Hindustan Times* reported that 78 percent of Indian women had experienced some type of harassment or violence the year before, while other studies have concluded that an average of four rape cases occur on a daily basis throughout the country.<sup>10</sup> These types of statistics, having been reported more frequently in the past several years, are inevitably grabbing the attention of the international community. Because the problem is so expansive in nature, the involvement of global actors and the international community has become crucial in combatting gender-based violence and empowering women across borders—by educating the general public and inspiring women to fight for their rights. The first step in solving this problem is the most simple: to merely acknowledge its existence. Organizations like the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and the Global Fund for Women are just a few that have taken the lead in opening up an international conversation and addressing the societal implications of VAW.

To extend their reach across the international spectrum, IOs are attempting to eliminate the divide between women's rights and human rights, instead promoting them together. As Charlotte Bunch notes, the promotion of human rights is a widely

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<sup>9</sup> "End Violence against Women." *Field Office ESEAsia*. United Nations. Web. 14 Oct. 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Nham, Winnie. "Examining Violence Against Women in India: Changes, Challenges, and Futures." *ASIA REPORT MAY 2013 20* (2013). *Sigur Center for South Asian Studies*. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.



accepted goal, and therefore, it is more likely to draw other countries.<sup>11</sup> In their discussions and pleas for change, IOs are framing VAW as an issue that affects the lives of people globally. And by doing so, they are not only propelling networks of women's rights activists and grassroots organizations, but they are pressuring the Indian government, at its institutional core, to create further protections for women, which will be discussed in further detail in chapter two of this thesis.

While the international community has long mobilized against issues of human rights, even women's suffrage, equality and discrimination, the discussion of VAW came much later in 1975 during the UN's "International Women's Year." The 1975 UN Global Women's Conference in Mexico City formally marked the beginning of international efforts in empowering women, and set the tone for similar conferences in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985), and Beijing (1995).<sup>12</sup> During this "UN Decade for Women" and subsequent years, many emerging international women's rights networks gained momentum as they fought for legal protections for women and recognition of gender inequalities in their respective countries. The UN conferences were imperative in bringing together international women's networks from such countries. For example, the North East Network (NEN), a women's advocacy organization based in India's northeastern state of Guwahati, was formed in 1995 in

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<sup>11</sup> Bunch, Charlotte. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights." *Human Rights Quarterly* 12.4 (1990): 486-98. *The Johns Hopkins University Press*.

<sup>12</sup> Keck and Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*.

anticipation of the Beijing World Conference.<sup>13</sup> The NEN and many other organizations used the conference as a platform to voice their dissatisfaction with the Indian government, and to publicly denounce its lack of effort in combatting VAW.

A few years earlier in December 1993, The UN General Assembly held a plenary meeting recognizing women's rights as fundamental human rights, citing its connection with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UDHR, adopted in 1948, gives a broad definition to human rights. Although it does not mention women's subordination, Article 2 states that all are entitled "to the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion," etc.<sup>14</sup>

The absence of specific protections for women prompted the GA to call for effective implementation of women's rights, creating the "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women."<sup>15</sup> In Articles 1 and 2 of the resolution, violence against women is, for the first time, defined in concrete terms as "any act of gender-based violence that results in the physical, sexual or psychological suffering of women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty,

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<sup>13</sup> Sharma, Shilpa. "About NEN: Vision & Mission." *North East Network: A Women's Rights Organization*. NEN. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

<sup>14</sup> "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights." United Nations. G.A. Res. 217A (III), adopted 10 Dec. 1948. Web. 10 May 2016.

<sup>15</sup> "Work of the General Assembly on Violence against Women." *UN Women*. United Nations. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

whether occurring in public or in private life.” This encompassed battering, sexual abuse, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation, and any such forms of violence occurring in the general public. Article 3 of the Declaration clearly states all of the fundamental human rights women are entitled to—including the right to life, equality, liberty and security of person, equal protection under the law, freedom from all forms of discrimination, just and favorable conditions of work, and the right not to be subjected to degrading treatment or punishment.<sup>16</sup>

While such UN conferences were a crucial forum for the human rights frame, it was Charlotte Bunch who was the key figure in spreading the “women’s rights as human rights” idea through her 1990 article. She mentions that through such rules, the UN was able to redefine human rights abuses to include the degradation and violation of women. The Declaration made women’s rights more visible on the global platform, and provided Member States with a much-needed clarification and framework in the broader goal to protect women.<sup>17</sup> It also helped foster a discussion of the social strategies and actions necessary in combatting VAW. The resolution called for countless other meetings and seminars to raise awareness, and encouraged

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<sup>16</sup> "A/RES/48/104. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women." *UN General Assembly*. United Nations. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Bunch, Charlotte. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights."

coordination between the bodies of the UN and its sister organizations in working towards the same common goal—to finally take women’s lives into account.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, which took place in 1995 in Beijing, delegates went a step further and prepared a “Platform for Action,” which was aimed at achieving even greater equality and opportunity for women by giving national governments specific guidelines. Member States recognized that violence against women was inhibiting them from achieving true equality, and in turn, it was becoming a social, health and economic burden for the entire population. Therefore, they decided to take more measures to prevent and eliminate VAW, to study its causes, consequences, and the effectiveness of preventive measures, and to eliminate trafficking and assist victims in need. The platform also included a more expansive list on what constituted violence and human rights violations. Governments were told to condemn such acts and refrain from invoking any custom or religious tradition to avoid their obligations in eliminating VAW. They were encouraged to adopt and implement legislation to protect women from being harmed. It would ensure the prevention of more violent acts, prosecute the offenders, and give victims access to justice, remedies, compensation, and indemnification. On a societal level, the plan recommended that nations adopt educational practices to change the conducts of men

from childhood—to teach them the appropriate behaviors, and eliminate prejudices and customary practices that deemed women inferior to men.<sup>18</sup>

Since the Beijing “Platform for Action” was first put in place, two-thirds of member countries have enforced laws to end domestic violence.<sup>19</sup> Keck and Sikkink credit international conferences such as Beijing for having legitimized issues of VAW, and for bringing together women’s groups around the world. Such encounters, they say, created a steady flow of information and common concerns among women, who used these interactions as a platform to create transnational networks.<sup>20</sup> Advocates and activists around the world have now risen—expanded even, hoping to spread awareness on issues regarding women’s safety. The UN General Assembly has adopted bi-annual resolutions on VAW—the most recent one reaffirming that armed conflicts are a massive impediment to its goals (as VAW is often a weapon of war), and stressing the importance of States’ obligations to protect women above all else, in spite of such situations.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995." *UN News Center*. United Nations. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

<sup>19</sup> "12 Critical Areas." *UN Women*. United Nations. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Keck and Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Page 169.

<sup>21</sup> "[Http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/67/144&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/67/144&Lang=E)." *United Nations Official Document*. United Nations. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

Conferences and meetings such as these have greatly benefitted international organizations in jumpstarting programs and initiatives. The UN has listed “promoting gender equality and empowering women” as one of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): a well-known and comprehensive list of problems plaguing poor countries (including poverty, hunger, low education, and poor health, among others) as well as systematic goals to eradicating them within a period of time.<sup>22</sup> It has inspired IOs, including the UN’s own sister organizations, to increase awareness of violence against women. This chapter will delve into three such organizations and their campaigns: “UN Women,” the UN-sponsored “UNiTE to End Violence Against Women,” as well as “Breakthrough,” an Indian-American-specific coalition. All of these organizations align with the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women” at their core—by advocating women’s rights as basic, human rights, and utilizing a variety of methods to prevent and challenge acts such as violence and rape. By using their status in the global community, they focus on two main goals: increasing public awareness and deepening international outreach. And to do so, they have strategically started to employ multimedia technology to spearhead international conversations and eventually, to provoke a change in the mindsets and attitudes of global leaders and individuals.

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<sup>22</sup> "Violence against Women & Millennium Development Goals." *UN Publications*. United Nations. Web. 5 Nov. 2015.

But these organizations are no strangers to criticism. Feminists and scholars argue that while the efforts of the UN have been laudable, their personnel policies, structural inequalities, and underrepresentation of women prevent it from effectively promoting change<sup>23</sup>—which will be discussed later in further detail.

### **UN Women**

Created in 2010 by the United Nations General Assembly, UN Women, or the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (formerly known as UNIFEM) has been at the forefront of international organizations challenging VAW. Its principles are simple: human rights violations and discrimination against women not only hinder economic growth, but also lead to more social problems, as 50 percent of the population is denied access to education and employment.<sup>24</sup> By involving its own Member States in carrying out its goals, UN Women supports inter-governmental bodies in forming global policies and gender norms, helps its members in implementing those standards, and gives financial support to the nations that request aid in building programs. The organization claims it has

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<sup>23</sup> Defeis, Elizabeth F. "The United Nations and Women - A Critique." *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* Article 5 17.2 (2011): 395-433. *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository*. Web. 10 May 2016.

<sup>24</sup> "About UN Women." *UN Women*. United Nations. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

been at the forefront of advancing women's legal rights, promoting accountability among countries, and monitoring each country's progress.<sup>25</sup>

While UN Women strives to make an impact in a multitude of issues in regard to women—including economic empowerment, peace and security, humanitarian action, national planning, and sustainable development, it has created a specific campaign to increase women's access to safety and justice. And while VAW is a very broad issue, UN Women reports data on all of its forms, including child marriages and abuse, human trafficking, and domestic violence—all of which are prevalent in India. Research on “vulnerable groups,” such as low-caste women, those living in extreme poverty, or groups in conflict and post-conflict areas, show a higher vulnerability to violence, according to the UN's website. India is home to nearly 80 million Dalit (low caste) women, who repeatedly experience high rates of sexual violence committed by men of a higher caste.<sup>26</sup> The International Dalit Solidarity Network reported that in a three-year study of 500 Dalit women, 54.8 percent of them faced physical assault, 46.8 percent faced sexual harassment, and 43 percent and 23.2 percent were victims of domestic violence and rape, respectively.<sup>27</sup> Due to the pervasive nature of the caste

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<sup>25</sup> "Women." *Global Issues at the United Nations*. United Nations. Web. 10 May 2016.

<sup>26</sup> "Human Rights Violation." *UNiTE to End Violence Against Women*. United Nations. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

<sup>27</sup> "Dalit Women in India." *International Dalit Solidarity Network*. IDSN. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.



system, India faces great difficulty in making a drastic change, especially amidst the corruption that exists in its government and police enforcement. Like many countries, it has passed laws and policies against violence, but real implementation often takes too long. UN Women attempts to step in by taking measures to train government and police officials, as well as judges and attorneys, in implementing laws and adopting effective protocol. It holds them accountable for increasing cases, pressing them to follow through with investigations. Furthermore, it supports female politicians, social workers, and political activists—giving them a chance to succeed as they keep VAW at the top of their agendas.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, UN Women works with global health partners to increase accessibility of services to victims of physical and sexual violence. Together, they provide health care for their injuries, post-rape care and counseling at a global level. Vulnerable groups in India, such as women in villages, have very limited options in attaining basic support services. UN Women seeks out independent experts and medical practitioners in increasing access for rural women, while mobilizing members of the community. In 2013, the organization extended its arms to the district of Dungarpur in Rajasthan, India, where volunteers set up a “mahila sabha”—a “women’s meeting,” in which district officials were told to attend and listen to the

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<sup>28</sup> "Increasing Knowledge and Awareness." *UN Women*. United Nations. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

women's concerns.<sup>29</sup> The women felt welcomed and spoke openly about the daily violence they faced, the water shortage in their village, as well as the pressing need for a primary school. After the meeting, UN Women ambassadors and volunteers worked together with the district officials to create village-specific projects, one of which was an education initiative. Twenty women were given the opportunity to send their daughters to work in urban areas, where they were able to receive an education and return upon receiving their degrees.<sup>30</sup>

UN Women has a repertoire of cases proving its effectiveness in providing aid and mobilizing civil society, but perhaps its biggest strength is its public awareness campaign. By claiming that gender discrimination and violence against women is a deeply rooted societal flaw, which is difficult to erase in many conservative countries, it calls upon individual members of society to come forward with their problems. Those who have never been given the chance to question the gender roles and attitudes of their communities will never change—and women who aren't aware of their own rights are unlikely to report what happens to them.<sup>31</sup> Hoping to receive funds from government contributors, businesses and foundations, national committees and

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<sup>29</sup> "Rajasthan's Pride: The Exemplary Functioning of Mahila Sabhas." *UN Women: Asia & The Pacific*. United Nations. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

<sup>30</sup> UN India. *A Life Free of Violence and Discrimination Is the Right of Every Woman*. UN India. Print. Page 2.

<sup>31</sup> "Increasing Knowledge and Awareness." *UN Women*. United Nations. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

goodwill ambassadors, UN Women has tried to establish a network of global connections. With its financial power and infrastructure, it claims that it maintains an online database which tracks governments on the measures and initiatives they have taken towards eliminating VAW. UN Women reports that its funding also supports studies that calculate levels of violence experienced by women and girls, collects data on causes and consequences of violence, as well as men's behavioral patterns and attitudes in individual countries.<sup>32</sup>

In 2014, UN Women initiated a solidarity campaign called “HeForShe”—in an effort to change the mindsets of men and boys, and to encourage them to take a stand against inequalities faced by women. Across the world, men—both famous and otherwise—have publicly expressed solidarity through social media, condoning violence and mistreatment of women.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, UN Women appointed the renowned Indian actor, Anupam Kher, as one of the celebrity ambassadors for the “HeForShe” campaign. His subsequent social media posts helped the campaign gain many fans and

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<sup>32</sup> "Increasing Knowledge and Awareness." *UN Women*. United Nations. Web. 05 Nov. 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Elliott, Stuart. "U.N. Women's Rights Group Seeks Men's Support." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 2014. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

followers in India.<sup>34</sup> And the initial involvement of Hollywood actors Emma Watson and Kiefer Sutherland<sup>35</sup> have helped catapult the campaign into the public eye.

Despite appearing relatively effective in its campaigns, UN Women and its strategies have been criticized by many scholars, who examine its declining funding and lack of political will from Member States. In her critique of the entire United Nations and its women's rights campaigns, scholar Elizabeth Defeis argues that for many years, the UN has not been as effective as it reports, especially in its mission to promote equality for women. Although it has been a key player in setting gender norms, Defeis says it has failed to enforce such principles in its own workplace. It has mishandled sexual harassment allegations by female employees, failing to own up to several accounts. Furthermore, women have expressed that they are underrepresented in nearly all branches of the UN. Although female employees have requested that the UN increase the number of women in decision-making positions, the organization has failed to do so. The solution, Defeis says, would be to hire more female high-level advocates who can advance equality and keep checks on the workplace.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Zaki Iqbal, Aidil Ikram. "Anupam Kher Appointed UN Ambassador of 'He for She' Campaign for Gender Equality." *India.com*. India.com, 19 Aug. 2015. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.

<sup>35</sup> "Emma Watson: Gender Equality Is Your Issue Too." *UN Women*. United Nations, 20 Sept. 2014. Web. 06 Nov. 2015.

<sup>36</sup> Defeis, Elizabeth F. "The United Nations and Women - A Critique." *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* Article 5 17.2 (2011): 395-433. *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository*. Web. 10 May 2016.

Charlotte Bunch further critiques the UN, arguing that in many branches within the organization, human rights are still considered to be more important than women's rights. The UN Human Rights Commission, she says, has more power to hear and investigate cases than the Commission on the Status of Women. The former has a larger staff and budget, and more tools for research and implementation.<sup>37</sup> This proves that the issue of human rights draws more importance and consideration than women's rights. In order to bring any attention to the issue of VAW, it must be considered part of a greater human rights violation.

### **UNiTE to End Violence Against Women**

*"We must unite. Violence against women cannot be tolerated, in any form, in any context, in any circumstance, by any political leader or by any government."*

— *Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General*

Established in 2008 by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the UNiTE campaign also works to rally governments, individuals and women's organizations in raising public awareness about VAW. Similar to #HeForShe, it has a vast social mobilization network, which utilizes male leaders, global youth, artists, celebrities and business leaders to spread the message that everyone is responsible in

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<sup>37</sup> Bunch, Charlotte. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights."

challenging societal norms and ultimately ending gender-based violence.<sup>38</sup> UNiTE is not quite a campaign that provides direct humanitarian aid to communities, but rather, it focuses on creating conversation around the issue of VAW, and has also started raising money for the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women.

Ki-moon, the face of the organization, has mobilized a vast group of male activists around the globe—fathers, brothers, husbands and friends of women. In a recent interview, he said the main goal of creating UNiTE was to mobilize young men, primarily because that demographic is predicted to be the solution in ending VAW. Most young men and boys, he said, do not agree with the violence that they see happening to women. However, social pressures make it difficult for them to speak out and break the silence. Often, they grow up surrounded by outdated male stereotypes: that because men are physically and financially powerful, they should practice dominance over women when they see fit. Ki-moon claims his organization strives to reverse misogynistic ideals, instead promoting healthy models of masculinity and encouraging men to speak out against VAW to make it a frequent topic of discussion. Older men, he says, are emboldened to set examples on what “real” masculinity is—to be a man actually means to look out for the wellbeing and human rights of women.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> "About UNiTE." *UNiTE to End Violence Against Women*. United Nations. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

<sup>39</sup> "UN Secretary-General on the Role of Youth in Ending Violence against Women." *YouTube*. Say No To Violence, 21 Nov. 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2015. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SRSnrSRHcYk>>.

And by teaching young men to rethink harmful actions and speak out against instances of VAW, Ki-Moon hopes they will help set new trends—ones that teach respect towards women, and ensure that their human rights are not imposed upon future generations to come.

In 2009, a year after he created UNiTE, Ki-Moon launched the *Network of Men Leaders*, comprised of male politicians, youth activists, and community leaders who promised to take specific actions to end VAW, and raise public awareness in their spheres of influence. They still advocate for laws supporting women, hold governments accountable, and regularly set up meetings with young men and boys.<sup>40</sup> The Network continues to expand today, as hundreds of men, both powerful leaders and ordinary men, have joined in on the cause.<sup>41</sup>

Another network indispensable to the UNiTE campaign is its group of global youth ambassadors. Because future generations are the biggest catalysts for change, UNiTE has declared them the driving force of their campaign, as they are able to challenge gender stereotypes and influence their peers simply through social media and the Internet. In May 2012, youth activists from around the world flocked to the Global UNiTE Youth Forum, which held workshops and learning sessions for participants. Youth members shared their experiences, ideas for change, as well as

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<sup>40</sup> "The Secretary-General's Network of Men Leaders." *UNiTE to End Violence Against Women*. United Nations. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

<sup>41</sup> "Ending Violence Against Women and Girls." *Resources for Speakers on Global Issues*. United Nations. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

their passion for women’s rights and human rights. Together, they formed the Global UNiTE Youth Network, which continues to act as an “agent of change.” The organization’s young leaders carry forward their enthusiasm by organizing events in their respective communities and by volunteering at shelters to help victims of violence.<sup>42</sup>

UNiTE’s goals, as stated on its website, could be argued as ambitious: 1) “Adoption and enforcement of national laws to address and punish all forms of violence against women and girls, in line with international human rights standards,” 2) “Adoption and implementation of multi-sectorial national action plans that emphasize prevention and that are adequately resourced,” 3) “Establishment of data collection and analysis systems on the prevalence of various forms of violence against women and girls,” 4) “The establishment of national and/or local campaigns and the engagement of a diverse range of civil society actors in preventing violence and in supporting women and girls who have been abused,” and 5) “Systematic efforts to address sexual violence in conflict situations and to protect women and girls from rape as a tactic of war and full implementation of related laws and policies.”<sup>43</sup> In her critique of the UN and its women’s rights programs, Defeis refers to UNiTE as merely an awareness campaign—with much less infrastructure and funding required

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<sup>42</sup> "The Secretary-General's Network of Men Leaders." *UNiTE to End Violence Against Women*. United Nations. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

<sup>43</sup> "About UNiTE." *UNiTE to End Violence Against Women*. United Nations. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.



by UN Women. And its goals of raising awareness have been generally successful, she says, as it has involved the help of the Security Council and other UN bodies.<sup>44</sup>

### **Breakthrough**

Founded in 2000 by Indian-American human rights activist Mallika Dutt, *Breakthrough* is an international human rights organization that focuses on community outreach and group training efforts to address gender-based violence in India—all of which are done via multimedia campaigns. Launched with the release of “Mann ke Manjeere,” meaning “an album of women’s dreams,” Breakthrough used pop culture and media as a way to highlight social injustice and appeal to the masses. Using similar tactics to focus on Indian domestic violence, Dutt continues to build Breakthrough in an effort to engage citizens, especially men and boys, in standing up to patriarchal norms and fighting VAW in their daily lives. Through its well-known motto, “*Human rights start with you,*” Breakthrough aims to teach individuals to make violence against women something that will be “completely unacceptable” over time.<sup>45</sup> With centers based in both the United States and India, Breakthrough has

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<sup>44</sup> Defeis, Elizabeth F. "The United Nations and Women - A Critique." *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* Article 5 17.2 (2011): 395-433. *William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository*. Web. 10 May 2016.

<sup>45</sup> "Mission & Theory of Change: Human Rights Starts with You." *Breakthrough US*. Breakthrough. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

successfully used multimedia campaigns, provided digital toolkits and training, and created important international partnerships to help combat violence.<sup>46</sup>

At the Clinton Global Initiative's annual meeting in 2012, Dutt emphasized one of Breakthrough's award-winning multimedia campaigns, "Bell Bajao!" (meaning "Ring the Bell!" in Hindi), urging men and boys to take action to break the cycle of domestic violence against women—in India and beyond. A viral campaign of short documentaries and commercials, "Bell Bajao" has reportedly engaged 130 million Indians, and reached more than 40 million people in 140 other countries.<sup>47</sup> Each of "Bell Bajao's" public service announcements depicts a typical scenario of domestic violence—a husband beating his wife behind closed doors. Another man, who overhears the abuse happening, takes the initiative and goes up to ring his doorbell, asking a simple question to deflect the husband and "diffuse" the situation. The action represents a subtle, yet heroic attempt at interrupting the perpetrator in moment of conflict, and to make him understand that he is being heard.<sup>48</sup> One Breakthrough advocate admitted that many people believe it is wrong to interfere in the domestic matters of other families. By being involved in the campaign, he said, community members are learning that is far beyond a mere "personal issue" when someone's

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<sup>46</sup> "Our Current Programs." *Breakthrough US*. Breakthrough. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Dutt, Mallika. "Ending Violence Against Women with the Clinton Global Initiative." *Mallika Dutt*. Creative Commons. Web. 10 May 2015.

fundamental human rights are being violated.<sup>49</sup> And in fact, “Bell Bajao” ads imply that bystanders of domestic violence have the power to do something—to ensure the safety of women without having to directly get involved in marital dynamics and personal relationships. According to Dutt, who continues to serve as Breakthrough’s CEO, the “Bell Bajao” campaign undermines the notion that “abusive husbands are the most preeminent authorities within a household”—by representing the bystander as a mechanism for social change, these ads are speaking to thousands, even millions of Indians watching the PSAs on their television and computer screens.<sup>50</sup>

Breakthrough’s digital tools and messages have inspired other nations around the world, including China, Pakistan and Vietnam, to adapt their own versions of such PSAs. The campaign has also won copious awards and accolades, including the Silver Lion for Advertising at the Cannes Film Festival in 2012<sup>51</sup>, as well as the 2014 Social Media for Empowerment Award for Communication, Advocacy & Development Activism. And by utilizing almost every social media outlet including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram—Breakthrough has been applauded by many world leaders, who cite its innovative methods of spreading awareness a critical aspect of its

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<sup>49</sup> "Bell Bajao: About the Campaign." *YouTube*. BreakthroughTV, 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbZi\\_hXGQi8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbZi_hXGQi8)>.

<sup>50</sup> "What Is Bell Bajao (Ring the Bell?)." *YouTube*. Breakthrough TV, 2012. Web. 10 Nov. 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etSUUw\\_gphw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etSUUw_gphw)>.

<sup>51</sup> "About." *Bell Bajao: Bring Domestic Violence to a Halt*. Bell Bajao, 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

success in an increasingly globalized and modern age.<sup>52</sup>

The organization's collection of digital content, including radio, music and video messages, has encouraged individuals to launch anti-violence campaigns all across the country. By reaching out to millennials and young community leaders, Breakthrough has created specific agendas to equip advocates to change preexisting attitudes across society.<sup>53</sup> Its current programs involve ideas to eradicate four widespread international problems: sexual assault on campus, sexual harassment in public, violence against women in pop culture, and of course—domestic violence. Each year, its staff members travel across the world to share and collaborate with other nations and governments, leading panel discussions on culturally appropriate strategies to combat against such violence.<sup>54</sup> In a small town in the Indian state of Karnataka, a group of teenagers, after watching Breakthrough's Bell Bajao campaign videos, realized their neighbor was abusing his wife on a daily basis. As a solution, they decided to watch television in their neighbor's home every evening as a method to stop the man from regularly beating. The average Indian lower-middle-class citizens, who were once oblivious to cases of domestic violence or lacking in power and interest to stop it, are now becoming active participants and catalysts of change.

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<sup>52</sup> "Annual Report 2013-2014." *Breakthrough TV*. Breakthrough. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

<sup>53</sup> "Breakthrough, Google Impact Challenge in India" *YouTube*. Breakthrough TV, 2013. Web. 10 Nov. 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB0x-2D\\_51Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QB0x-2D_51Y)>.

<sup>54</sup> "Annual Report 2013-2014." *Breakthrough TV*. Breakthrough. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

Many of them have even gone on to design media-based campaigns and teach in local schools. In one of Breakthrough's PSA videos, a female college student said she became involved because she wanted to learn how to create awareness for others at her school. The training, she said, informed her about HIV/AIDS, as well as condoms and sex education—topics that are not usually taught to young girls in Indian society.

<sup>55</sup> As a result of this, young women tend to be too shy to engage in conversations regarding sexual wellbeing and health. Through the training program, she was taught to address these issues openly and in a comfortable manner, making her confident in her ability to teach, influence, and inform others about it.

Aside from its training programs and campaigns, Breakthrough has leveraged the support of many other international organizations, including the Clinton Global Initiative, United Nations Human Rights Council, The World Bank and Oxfam—all of which are groups that encourage global discussions on social and economic injustice. Breakthrough has established partnerships with many advocates to spread its mission and message. Its web of hardworking human rights activists, who are able to contribute their own strategies in eradicating violence against women, have transformed Breakthrough into an effective organization that changes the mindsets of people. And by working with another popular Bollywood actor Boman Irani, and starring him in its campaigns' PSAs, Breakthrough is able to attract the attention of

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<sup>55</sup> "Bell Bajao: About the Campaign." *YouTube*. BreakthroughTV, 2011. Web. 10 Nov. 2015. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbZi\\_hXGQi8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbZi_hXGQi8)>.

thousands of Indians who regard movie stars as influential role models. Furthermore, working in conjunction with United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and aligning with the aforementioned “UNiTE to End Violence Against Women” campaign, Breakthrough has formed many positive and beneficial partnerships, increasing its presence and importance on the international stage.

Overall, the organization’s impact on the Indian and global community has been mostly positive, as shown by statistics. An estimated 2.7 million people in hard-to-reach areas saw Breakthrough’s campaigns through video vans that were driven by volunteers throughout major cities such as Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Chennai and Hyderabad. Approximately 1,800 official advocates of the organization currently exist, and have mobilized thousands more. And after watching the “Bell Bajao” videos, 43 percent of Indian women in a survey reported that they would protest against their husbands if abused, compared to 29 percent before watching the video. A higher number of women are becoming educated about the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), and their rights to receive residence and compensation should they choose to leave situations where they are the victims of violence and rape.<sup>56</sup>

In adopting the attitude and belief that violence and abuse against women is *completely unacceptable* (in any form), and held in the same regard as human rights—Breakthrough’s ideals could be argued as lofty, especially for a country so deeply-

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<sup>56</sup> "Annual Report 2013-2014." *Breakthrough TV*. Breakthrough. Web. 10 Nov. 2015.

rooted in a culture of misogyny. However, simply by challenging these norms that perpetuate violence, and calling upon community members to change their attitudes and fight for equality in their daily lives, Breakthrough has spoken to the hearts and minds of millions. By instigating and transforming national and international dialogue, it has called for everyone, including men, to “be that guy”—to take equal responsibility in ending it violence where they see it and empowering women when they can.

### **Critiques of International Actors**

Keck and Sikkink argue that when organizations bring up the idea of women’s rights in developing nations, their actions are often brushed off as “imperialist impulses.” Women’s rights seem to be a way for Western nations to impose their foreign beliefs in third world countries. However, by alluding to VAW specifically, and by referring to it as a universal human rights issue, activists are able to break cultural barriers. For example, by showing that wife battering in the United States falls under the same category as female genital mutilation in Africa, and dowry-related violence in India— western organizations are able to reach common ground with other activists, and involve them in prevention programs.<sup>57</sup> Keck and Sikkink also argue that

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<sup>57</sup> Keck and Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Page 197.

inequalities between such networks will continue to exist, for example, the “funding flows and resulting strategic dominance of U.S. and European organizations and individuals.” But by creating advocacy groups around the issue, and by involving as many countries as possible in the fight against VAW, change is inevitable.

Complications and differences in opinion will continue to exist, but this illustrates how women’s rights networks and their organizations are profoundly political in the way they work.<sup>58</sup>

Also, in order for international actors to be more efficient, it is essential for them to look at factors that cut across national boundaries as well as nation-specific actors that increase risk of violence.<sup>59</sup> In her cross-nation study, “Attitudes Toward Violence Against Women,” feminist scholar Madhabika Nayak states that understanding the common causes of VAW in several countries will not only save time, but also prevent international organizations from duplicating their efforts to address victims’ needs. By studying root causes, she says, the organization can create a universal prevention program for worldwide implementation, rather than just helping one country. Differences in culture, religion and society are inevitable—and there will always be differences in attitudes toward violence against women. “Increased

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<sup>58</sup> Keck and Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Page 198.

<sup>59</sup> Nayak, Madhabika B., Christina A. Byrne, Mutsumi K. Martin, and Anna George Abraham. "Attitudes Toward Violence Against Women: A Cross-Nation Study." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 49.7 (2003): 333-42. *Springer Link*. Web. 14 Nov. 2015.



migration, globalization of economies, and the rapid cultural diversification of nations have made understanding sociocultural differences even more imperative,” she says. This is particularly true for the United Nations, an organization that involves several countries and heterogeneous sociocultural groups within one nation. Violence prevention and interventions strategies must address culture-specific factors that support continued violence against women.”<sup>60</sup>

While there is always room for improvement, international organizations have generally proven to be proactive and innovative in their approach to combatting VAW by framing it as a human rights violation. Their effectiveness, on a global scale, is not easily measurable. In utilizing their funding, resources, and strategies, their success relies on how much they are able to influence countries in taking action. And progress of IOs in provoking national governments to improve the safety of its own women, to improve its own human rights record. In the next chapter, we will look at how national, or state-level actors are affected by the work of international organizations, and how they use their roles in combatting violence against women.

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<sup>60</sup> Nayak, Madhabika B., Christina A. Byrne, Mutsumi K. Martin, and Anna George Abraham. "Attitudes Toward Violence Against Women: A Cross-Nation Study." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 49.7 (2003): 333-42. *Springer Link*. Web. 14 Nov. 2015.

## Chapter 2

### EFFORTS OF NATIONAL & STATE-LEVEL ACTORS

*“The pace of progress in providing the desired level of safety and security to our women needs to be hastened through better enforcement of legislation towards this end. There is an urgent need for all our people to be more conscious of their attitude and demeanour towards women. I cannot emphasise enough that all women must be addressed and treated with due respect and courtesy.”*<sup>61</sup>

—President Pranab Mukherjee, *International Women’s Day 2015*

The advent of conversations surrounding violence against women in the 1970s also marked the rise of women’s rights activists in India, who began advocating against a longstanding patriarchal society and forced the government to take action. In the late 1970s, Indian police raped a young woman in custody, and the court ruled the officers were innocent because the woman was of “loose morals,” while in 1979, a young Delhi woman admitted moments before her death that her in-laws had killed her because her parents failed to meet their dowry demands.<sup>62</sup> These incidents were some of the first to bring public attention to the issue. Fast-forward to December 2012, when a 23-year-old physiotherapist was gang-raped on a bus in Delhi, and died a week later

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<sup>61</sup> Press Trust of India. "International Women’s Day: Equality and Dignity Women’s Sacred Right, Says Pranab Mukherjee." *India.com*. India Web Portal Private Ltd., 8 Mar. 2015. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

<sup>62</sup> Keck and Sikkink. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Page 181-182.

of fatal internal injuries.<sup>63</sup> The incident, reported as one of the most gruesome of its kind, propelled the world into a political and social frenzy of new heights. It was a revelation of the routine abuse of women in India—the abuse of human rights— and a reminder of just how long it had been prevalent. Following weeks of national unrest and condemnation from international organizations like UN Women, the Indian parliament was under pressure to re-frame its human rights laws to give further protections to women, ensuring their security with new policing reforms. Cases of VAW have damaged India’s image on the international platform through extensive media coverage, giving negative press to a country that is otherwise on the path to modernizing and globalizing.

But the greatest challenge of all remains in the application of new legislation, as women continue to face violence in both the public and private sphere. Bunch notes that one approach to presenting “women’s rights as human rights” at the state-level is by making existing legal mechanisms against violence apply to women as well. Expanding the state’s responsibility in the matter is crucial—“it must enforce measures that allow women to fight for their rights within the legal system,” she says.<sup>64</sup> But as we know, anti-rape legislation can only make an impact in India if it is enforced effectively, and for that, there must be a revolutionary change at the nation’s

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<sup>63</sup> Burke, Jason. "Delhi Rape: How India's Other Half Lives." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 2013. Web. 18 Feb. 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Bunch, Charlotte. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights."

institutional core. As previously discussed, international human rights organizations have attempted to spread awareness on VAW, thereby pressuring the Indian government into taking responsibility and implementing effective criminal laws. However, the reach of the United Nations and transactional organizations can only extend so far; in order for awareness to catalyze into concrete change in policy, the Indian parliament itself must take the initiative.

When Narendra Modi became prime minister of India following a landslide victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, his administration vowed to improve criminal laws surrounding VAW and pledged to enforce a “zero tolerance” policy for perpetrators of violence. His presidential counterpart Pranab Mukherjee gave a speech to the parliament outlining a vague plan to tackle the national surge in VAW by focusing on the “corrupt and inefficient criminal justice system.” However, in the same week two senior officials from the same BJP party prompted public outrage with their comments on sexual violence. One of them was a politician from India’s central state of Chhattisgarh, who quoted, “no one commits rape deliberately,” while another from state of Madhya Pradesh defined rape as an act that was “sometimes right, sometimes wrong.”<sup>65</sup> Such statements prove confusing and detrimental to Indians, who consistently hear promises of change and gender equality on a larger scale, but fail to see it executed by the lawmakers themselves.

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<sup>65</sup> Burke, Jason. "Indian Government Vows Zero Tolerance over Violence against Women." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 09 June 2014. Web. 18 Feb. 2016.

Indian law enforcement has had its own fair share of issues. Rape victims often find that Indian police do not mitigate their situation—rather than investigating the crime, they spend more time reconciling the attacker and the victim. In December 2013, an 18-year-old woman from Punjab committed suicide after police officers failed to arrest the men who gang-raped her a month before. Instead, the officers told her to marry one of the men and avoid the long trial process.<sup>66</sup> Police investigations tend to be few and far between, and this is exacerbated by the ratio of police officers to the country's general population. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reported that India has a total of 1,585,117 officers to protect 1.2 billion people—equivalent to 130 officers per 100,000 people. Of these officers, 95 percent are male, receive low wages, and are easily susceptible to political influence, depending on bribes for an extra source of income to feed their families.<sup>67</sup> Many officers are indifferent to the situation, and in worst-case scenarios, they misuse their power and help perpetrators of violence get away with rape or sexual abuse. In light of increasing attacks, Delhi officials have made a commitment to station at least one constable at more than 300 bus stops throughout the city, hoping it will deter potential rapists. However, this security measure seems to be a temporary solution to a much larger

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<sup>66</sup> Harris, Gardiner. "For Rape Victims in India, Police Are Often Part of the Problem." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 22 Jan. 2013. Web. 05 Mar. 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Harrendorf, S., M. Heiskanen, and S. Malby. "International Statistics on Crime & Justice." *European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control*. United Nations. Web. 05 Mar. 2016.

issue. According to Vrinda Grover, a human rights lawyer based in New Delhi, “the last thing a woman in distress will want to do is to go to the police.”<sup>68</sup>

So, what can a nation do when the presence of police officers makes women feel even less safe? In many parts of the country, police treatment of women has become such an immense topic of concern that Indian laws now prevent officers from arresting or bringing women into police stations for questioning at night. Many state governments have also taken action in hopes to combat the situation. According to the 2012 World Development Report in Gender Equality, India’s southern state of Tamil Nadu “introduced 188 all-women police units to cover both rural and urban areas and to focus on crimes against women.” The results of this have been primarily positive—women have become more comfortable in approaching the police and making formal complaints.<sup>69</sup> Other police reforms have been proposed for decades, but they are rarely carried through because they involve making officers less susceptible to political influence—something politicians and lawmakers would rather not change in interest of their own personal motives.

For a country that appears to be perpetually stuck in a closed loop of power and corruption, effective government action seems somewhat out of reach. But there is

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<sup>68</sup> Harris, Gardiner. "For Rape Victims in India, Police Are Often Part of the Problem." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 22 Jan. 2013. Web. 05 Mar. 2016.

<sup>69</sup> The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Publications, 2011. *Google Books*. Web.

always room for change. In her study on women's empowerment in India, Jessica Brown Cavas cites economist Amartya Sen's suggestions on galvanizing the government's involvement in combatting VAW. Violence limits efficiency of development and hinders participation of women, according to Sen. And when women are viewed as a resource for development and progress, it would be an economic loss to prevent them from exercising their rights. Essentially, by presenting violence against woman an economic issue, the government will work harder to prevent it, in the interest of saving public resources.<sup>70</sup> In other aspects, the government will need to challenge VAW from a top-down approach, encouraging influential figures at the highest levels of authority to condemn violent sexual acts against women. Politicians who promise change and refuse to act upon it must be held accountable, and officers must be monitored for their actions and perhaps even commended for the criminals they arrest as a motivation tactic to move in the right direction. Prime Minister Modi, in his quest to transform India into a more progressive country, has expressed support in challenging VAW by building upon existing laws and by increasing funding for national programs.<sup>71</sup> But only time will tell how effective the new administration is,

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<sup>70</sup> Cavas, Jessica Brown. *Voices Against Violence: Empowering Women to Access Informal Justice in Rural India*. Thesis. University of Oregon, Department of International Studies, 2013. Web. 5 Mar. 2016.

<sup>71</sup> "World Report 2015: India." *Human Rights Watch*. Human Rights Watch, 2015. Web. 6 Mar. 2016. Women's Rights.

and a closer look at India's current laws and recent parliamentary decisions will show the extent of government effort in recent years.

### **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005**

One of the most widely cited Indian laws regarding VAW in India has been the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA). Enacted by the parliament in 2006 to protect women from domestic violence, it is a civil law aimed at providing relief for millions—wives, mothers, daughter, and female live-in partners across the country. Indian tradition calls for married women to live with their husbands as well as the husband's immediate family. Living in shared or joint households brings a higher risk of abuse from not only the spouse, but also from his mother, father, siblings, etc.<sup>72</sup> PWDVA was the first act to acknowledge the presence of domestic violence and provide a concrete, albeit broad definition—"actual or threatened abuse against women in their homes, including those of a physical, emotional, verbal, sexual or economic nature."<sup>73</sup> Unlawful dowry demands, which often lead to thousands of cases of dowry-related abuse and deaths yearly, are also covered under the Act. The PWDVA clearly identifies the legal rights and types of

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<sup>72</sup> Rew, Martin, Geetanjali Gangoli, and Aisha K. Gill. "Violence between Female In-laws in India." *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14.1 (2013): 1-15. Bridgewater State University. Web. 13 Mar. 2016.

<sup>73</sup> "Domestic Violence." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.



relief to which women are entitled. It guarantees that when affected by any sort of domestic violence in her home, the victim can reach out to a government-appointed Protection Officer, who will help her in accessing a shelter home, health care, and free legal services if need be.<sup>74</sup> Under the PWDVA, the victim can also file a domestic violence case through a “Direct Information Report,” which would then be presented before a magistrate in court. The resulting court orders are normally enforced by the Protection Officer in order to prevent the offender from committing further acts of violence. The Act also grants the woman the right to remain in her shared residence without eviction from family members. She can claim damages or compensation for any mental and physical injuries she has sustained, and the magistrate court can also grant her temporary custody of her children. The existence of this legislation is critical in India, as nearly eight out of 10 married women are predicted to be victims of violence, ranging from domestic battery, dowry-related abuse, or in worst cases—death.<sup>75</sup> The fact that this violence occurs in the privacy of the home and away from the public eye makes the victim less likely to complain. By providing such options and services to women could perhaps increases the chances of them speaking out. The PWDVA also states that any further abuse by the perpetrator after an initial report has

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<sup>74</sup> Ganesamurthy, V. S. *Empowerment of Women in India: Social, Economic, and Political*. New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2008. Print. Page ix.

<sup>75</sup> Bunch, Charlotte. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights."

been filed, including any violation of court orders, can result in a jail sentence of up to one year and a fine of 20,000 rupees (equivalent to \$300). A new law also gives the victim the right to some of her husband's earnings and property, including any medical costs that incurred through violence.<sup>76</sup>

To the dismay of many Indians, the PWDVA is not a criminal law—but merely a civil law that calls for protection orders. It could be scrutinized for not being forceful enough; it requires the accused perpetrator to commit a second offense before any criminal sanctions (i.e. arrest and imprisonment) can be placed. However, lawmakers stand by the initial goal of the PWDVA and say it was put in place to provide “rapid and flexible relief” for the victim. Men’s organizations such as the Save Indian Family Foundation have opposed the law on various accounts, arguing that it gives women too much power to misuse it for settling small disputes. They argue that the law overlooks another important aspect of household dynamics: the practice of women abusing other women (i.e. rifts between the mother-in-law, daughter-in-law or domestic servant) for seeking vengeance or “settling scores.”<sup>77</sup>

Pooja Parvati of Oxfam India, in her study on the national implementation of the PWDVA, refers to its progress as virtually “insignificant,” as it faces many challenges at the bureaucratic levels. In order to strengthen the Act and make it

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<sup>76</sup> "The Law (PWDVA) - Bell Bajao." *Bell Bajao*. 2012. Web. 13 Mar. 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Pandey, Vineeta. "Government Reviews Dowry, Domestic Violence Laws." *DNA*. Zee News, 19 Sept. 2008. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

effective, she says the government must allocate more funding and human resources towards it, and release funds in a timely manner with clearly specified guidelines and protocols for agencies that are involved. It must also improve coordination between participating agencies, and develop effective monitoring mechanisms. For the latter, the government must conduct periodic surveys to monitor violence against women, and even separate data by age groups and social categories. And state governments, she says, must monitor and document cases of domestic violence and provide statewide assessment reports.<sup>78</sup> For the time being, the PWDVA remains a merely a complement to existing criminal laws—set up to provide immediate relief to women, but lacking the infrastructure and institutionalized process to follow up on cases.

### **Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013**

An answer to some critics of the PWDVA is perhaps the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 2013, a provision to the Indian Penal Code put in place following the 2012 Delhi gang rape and its subsequent protests.<sup>79</sup> Of the many cases falling under domestic violence, rape has been one of the most widespread. According to the country's National Crime Records Bureau, 36,735 rapes were recorded in 2014—three

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<sup>78</sup> Parvati, Pooja. "Implementing the PWDVA: Safeguarding Women from Domestic Violence." *Policy & Practice*. Ed. Ranu K. Bhogal and Oommen C. Kurian. Oxfam India, 26 Oct. 2015. Web. 11 Mar. 2016.

<sup>79</sup> "Prez Pranab Mukherjee Promulgates Ordinance on Crime against Women." *The Indian Express*. The Indian Express Ltd., 3 Feb. 2013. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

times more than in 2012. However, just 28 percent of those reported cases turned into convictions.<sup>80</sup> The 2012 rape case was so high profile that it has paved the way for more victims to come out and file complaints. It has spurred a wave of other changes—the discussion of rape is no longer taboo in Indian society, but rather, it is reported on a much larger scale: on television, in newspapers, and now discussed in public. The incident was condemned by UN Women, who called upon the government of India and municipality of Delhi to “do everything in their power to take up radical reforms, ensure justice and reach with robust public services to make women’s lives more safe and secure.” Public protests in Delhi and across India also pushed the parliament to take immediate action. On December 22, 2012, 10 days after the incident, the government appointed a judicial committee to suggest amendments to criminal law dealing with sexual assault and rape cases. The committee received 80,000 suggestions and petitions from various jurists, lawyers, NGOs and women’s groups, many of which were considered before creating the new ordinance. It broadened the definition of rape as “penile and non-penile penetration in bodily orifices of a woman by a man, without the consent of the woman.” The amendment was officially passed on March 19, 2013, and laid out updated punishments for rape, acid attacks, sexual assaults, voyeurism/spying, and stalking. Imprisonment for rape in most cases could not be less than seven years, and could extend to life imprisonment

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<sup>80</sup> Agrawal, Ravi. "What Nirbhaya Rape Case Says about India." *CNN News*. Cable News Network, 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

as well as a fine, depending on how severe the injuries were. In the case of a “gang rape,” those involved could be punished for at least 20 years to life in prison.<sup>81</sup> The law went on to state that if a person facing an acid attack happened to kill the accuser in the process of self-defense, then she would be protected under the self-defense clause. Furthermore, to tackle the problem of law enforcement, it was decided that only a female police officer would be allowed to take the official statements of victims of sexual crimes.<sup>82</sup> Although female police officers are still underrepresented in the Indian police force, to give them more authority is a decent start on behalf of the government.

The Criminal Law Amendment Ordinance has garnered mixed responses. The BJP party has welcomed it with open arms, regaling it as a quick fix under Modi’s new administration. Women’s rights and human rights organizations have criticized it for not including stricter measures on marital rape, which, for the most part is not illegal in India. Lack of change for juvenile punishment continues to draw in critics.<sup>83</sup> Currently, the maximum prison sentence for any minor cannot exceed three years, no

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<sup>81</sup> "Criminal Law Amendment Act (2013)." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 3 Nov. 2015. Web. 23 Mar. 2016.

<sup>82</sup> "Prez Pranab Mukherjee Promulgates Ordinance on Crime against Women." *The Indian Express*. The Indian Express Ltd., 3 Feb. 2013. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

<sup>83</sup> "Prez Pranab Mukherjee Promulgates Ordinance on Crime against Women." *The Indian Express*. The Indian Express Ltd., 3 Feb. 2013. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

matter how severe the crime may be.<sup>84</sup> Consider the 2012 rape case—of the six rapists, one committed suicide in prison, four received the death sentence; but the sixth man, who was 17 years old at the time of the rape, was released after spending just one year behind bars. Situations like this make the Indian people wonder if justice was served at all, and if the government is actually doing its best in trying to deter men from committing acts of violence against women.

By contrast, smaller, local authorities have been slowly working towards change. The Delhi city police department has installed GPS trackers on public buses and auto rickshaws throughout the city as an extra security measure against potential rapists. A women's taxi coalition has been created in various cities including Delhi, through which female cab drivers provide safe transportation services for urban women.<sup>85</sup> And these urban, educated women are making their way into the workforce, getting access to smartphones with safety apps and easier ways of contacting their family and friends in cases of emergency.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Agrawal, Ravi. "What Nirbhaya Rape Case Says about India." *CNN News*. Cable News Network, 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Harris, Gardiner. "For Rape Victims in India, Police Are Often Part of the Problem." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 22 Jan. 2013. Web. 02 Apr. 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Agrawal, Ravi. "What Nirbhaya Rape Case Says about India." *CNN News*. Cable News Network, 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

## Government-sponsored programs

The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) is a program that was launched by the Indian government on International Women's Day in 2010. Also called "Mission Purna Shakti" (meaning "woman power" in Hindi), it was created in hopes to empower women socially, legally, and economically, and to erase gender-based crimes by working with various Indian ministries and departments. NMEW serves as an "umbrella mission" of sorts —coordinating with all of India's women's welfare and development programs and raising money to distribute to various non-profit agencies. Dozens of Indian ministers (equivalent to cabinet members) are involved in the mission, and advise in the distribution of funds to NGOs and grassroots level organizations. In return, these organizations must be able to prove their advocacy efforts in helping women with emphasis on health, education, finance, and ending violence.<sup>87</sup>

One of its main branches is the Ministry of Women and Child Development, which oversees a repertoire of initiatives for women empowerment. Swadhar Greh, a scheme for "women in difficult circumstances," was developed in 2001, and is meant to provide rehabilitation and temporary accommodation to women who have left home. Many of them seek refuge from domestic violence, human trafficking, and

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<sup>87</sup> National Mission for Empowerment of Women. Ministry of Women and Child Development. *Press Information Bureau*. Government of India, 8 Mar. 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2013.

prostitution, often ostracized by their families and societies as a result of their situation. Along with shelter, food, clothing, and healthcare, Swadhar Greh aims to help women live in “dignity and conviction”—which is often lost when women are exploited in such cases. While Swadhar Greh is outlined and designed by the government, many government agencies are encouraged to implement it on their own. Women Development Corporations in state governments, Departments of Women and Child Development and civil society organizations including established NGOs, are just a few that can seek monetary assistance and provisions under the scheme.<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, the effectiveness of a government-sponsored organization like Swadhar Greh depends on the individual agencies, the amount of resources allotted to each of them, and most importantly—the level of integrity and efficiency they have in handling such funds and distributing aid to women.

### **Female participation in politics**

Another strategy deployed by the Indian government in empowering women amidst a patriarchal society has been to increase female participation in politics. For example, the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Acts of 1993 to the Indian Constitution

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<sup>88</sup> Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, “Swadhar: A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances,” 2015.



reserved one-third of municipality seats for women<sup>89</sup>—laying out a strong foundation for their political development. Years later, a 2009 constitutional law mandated that half of those elected into local government (the *Panchayati Raj*) should be female.<sup>90</sup> By instituting gender quotas and engineering elections to the advantage of women, the government has given women the opportunity to play a greater role in decision-making at local levels. After studying the experiences of women in Panchayati Raj in the South Indian state of Karnataka, scholar Neema Kudva found the results of this strategy to be mixed. She said it made women more visible, decreased levels of corruption in local government, and increased the self-efficiency of women representatives. Although it has been a positive step, Kudva found little change in the institutional priorities of states. While more women were in positions of power, not all of them focused on women's rights and violence against women while making legislative decisions.<sup>91</sup> By leveraging their position to address critical women's issues, female politicians have the capacity to do more and influence their male counterparts.

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<sup>89</sup> Ganesamurthy, V. S. *Empowerment of Women in India: Social, Economic, and Political*. New Delhi: New Century Publications, 2008. Print. Page 222.

<sup>90</sup> "Receive In Asia Updates." *In Asia Indias Elected Women Leaders Push to End Violence Against Women Comments*. 18 Dec. 2013. Web. 25 Mar. 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Neema Kudva, "Engineering Elections: The Experiences of Women in 'Panchati Raj' in Karnataka, India," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 16 (2003).

They can build safer cities for women, create programs to effectively train police officers, hold speedy trials for cases of VAW—making the environment far more beneficial for the female population.

### **Critique and Further Action**

While the Indian government and its states have certainly made an effort to challenge violence against women in the past decades, the issue is still a long way from becoming a top priority—as the advantages are not obvious. As Bunch states, “no government determines its policies toward other countries on the basis of their treatment of women.” However, some aid and trade decisions by western nations are frequently based on the human rights records of certain countries. If human rights violations can encompass the abuses against women, then countries would be forced to change.

Additionally, the creation of fast-track courts (another outcome of the 2012 rape protests) to rapidly prosecute rape cases has been a positive measure, but India needs more such courts—and judges—dispersed throughout each state. On average, India has 14 judges per 1 million people, which is a staggering number for the second most populated country in the world. A United Nations study ranks it one of the lowest on a list of 65 nations, just ahead of Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Kenya.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Timmons, Heather. "Rape Trial Challenges a Jam in India's Justice System." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 23 Jan. 2013. Web. 02 Apr. 2016.

Building a varied, efficient justice system, and reducing corruption in police enforcement will go a long way.

Aside from challenging VAW through stringent laws and enforcement, the government must do more to tackle India's deep-rooted problems of inequality. The pervasive caste system and economic disparity have negatively affected the status of women and limited their opportunities in nearly all aspects of Indian society. The World Economic Forum's 2015 Gender Gap report ranks India as 136<sup>th</sup> for labor force participation, 127<sup>th</sup> for literacy rate, 115<sup>th</sup> for representation in the parliament (not to be confused with ministerial positions), and an appalling 143<sup>rd</sup> out of a total 145 countries for its female-to-male sex ratio.<sup>93</sup> This illustrates how gender discrepancies start from the womb—sex-selective abortion and female infanticide are disturbingly common. These statistics remind us that India has a long way to go in terms of progress—in order to prevent VAW, the country must change the mindset of its people. On pushing gender violence onto the public agenda in India, Mary Katzenstein makes an interesting argument. When “body politics” (cases of rape, dowry death, and wife-beating) become a part of national conversation, it is usually a result of the work done by women-initiated community organizations rather than the government itself. While state-initiated actions are successful in creating change in areas like women's economic welfare, they cannot do the same for spreading awareness of gender-based

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<sup>93</sup> *Global Gender Gap Report*. Rep. World Economic Forum, 2015. Print. India.

violence.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps then, where the Indian state fails in bringing about concrete change and progressive action against VAW, local actors and civil society may have a chance at succeeding.

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<sup>94</sup> Katzenstein, Mary. "Getting Women's Issues onto the Public Agenda: Body Politics in India." *Samya Shakti: A Journal of Women's Studies* 6 (1992): 1-16. *Institute of Development Studies*. Web. 14 Nov. 2015.

## Chapter 3

### EFFORTS OF LOCAL ACTORS & CIVIL SOCIETY

*"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*<sup>95</sup>

—Margaret Mead

Given the plethora of bureaucratic challenges faced by the Indian government in ensuring the safety of women, combined with the often limited reach of international actors in monitoring human rights violations, much of the pressure in challenging VAW lies on the shoulders of non-governmental local organizations. Indian civil society actors, including grassroots organizations and a vast network of feminist activists, have played a significant role in making up for shortcomings at the state level. Legislation against VAW has not led to a quick and lasting eradication of gender-based violence in India. As we have learned, change imposed from the top-most levels of government often fails to succeed when it is not met with enthusiasm and implementation from below, especially in the areas of law regulation and

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<sup>95</sup> "FAQ about Mead and Bateson." *The Institute for Intercultural Studies*. The Institute for Intercultural Studies, Inc. Web. 3 Apr. 2016.

enforcement. Saba Ghori, a senior advisor at the U.S. State Department for South Asia women's issues admits, "There is a pressing need to pay attention to the local level, where action for India's women is changing gender norms."<sup>96</sup> Careful intervention at the grassroots level, including local women's rights projects, can often lead to big changes. Keck and Sikkink also note that when international human rights organizations first began to take on the issue of women and human rights, they focused only on scenarios where states (rather than individuals) were perpetrators of abuses. However, with pressure from women activists, they began to realize the true potential of local organizations in fighting VAW from the ground.

The power of local activism in India can be traced back to British colonialism and India's long struggle for independence. Indian nationalists initially began to acknowledge rape, when it occurred, as an example of "imperialist barbarism"—rather than defining it as an act of violence against women, they considered it a direct violation of community and national honor.<sup>97</sup> In 1947, India's independence and sudden partition (the creation of Pakistan by the British) led to one of the largest migrations in modern history. It resulted in years of violence between Hindu and Muslim communities, displacing nearly 12.5 million people and killing hundreds of

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<sup>96</sup> Dale, Claire. "Female Political Empowerment in India: Hope at Last?" *Development in Action*. Development in Action Programme, 5 Mar. 2015. Web. 30 Mar. 2016.

<sup>97</sup> Radford, Jill, Melissa Friedberg, and Lynne Harne. *Women, Violence, and Strategies for Action: Feminist Research, Policy, and Practice*. Buckingham: Open UP, 2000. Print. Page 175

thousands of women, many of whom were uprooted and abducted from their homes on both sides of the newly-created border. It was a frenzy of confusion and mass violence, and certainly one of the most dangerous times for women. At that point, rape had become “a political act—a spectacular ritual of victory,” in which it was used as a tactic of aggression and revenge to dishonor the enemy community.<sup>98</sup> The main problem with this ideology was that women were considered symbols of honor, rather than human beings with the same fundamental human rights as men. In the violent battlefield of Indian partition, the abuse of women was one of the many ramifications of “settling scores” with the enemy.

*“Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity, the female sex.”<sup>99</sup>*

—Mahatma Gandhi

During the general struggle for Indian independence and self-development, Mahatma Gandhi and his followers advocated for gender equality, claiming it was key to social harmony and a balanced and sustainable Indian society. By forming “ashrams”—temples and shelters welcoming those in need—Gandhi hoped to protect

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<sup>98</sup> Radford, Jill, Melissa Friedberg, and Lynne Harne. *Women, Violence, and Strategies for Action: Feminist Research, Policy, and Practice*. Buckingham: Open UP, 2000. Print. Page 176

<sup>99</sup> Pidd, Helen. "Why Is India so Bad for Women?" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 23 July 2012. Web. 3 Apr. 2016.

women and girls from rape, child marriage, and negative consequences of the regular dowry system, which he also worked to abolish.<sup>100</sup> Considered to be some of the first modern NGOs in India, these networks of ashrams were primarily formed in the state of Gujarat where Gandhi was from. They were run by local activists and political workers of the Indian National Congress (INC party) who ran “rural development activities” for the villagers.<sup>101</sup> In a sense, they provided an example of effective community mobilization for helping those in unfortunate situations, which would be needed in later years when combatting VAW became a priority.

Local women’s organizations that exist today are similar in structure—behind them are activists who work tirelessly on behalf of victims to improve their living conditions. They provide women with counseling, legal aid and health services and—at times of crisis—intervene and negotiate with family members to resolve disputes. By hearing victims’ stories and problems firsthand, these activists have the motivation and skillset necessary to invoke change. This sets them apart from international and national actors, who are more focused on agenda setting and policy-making while seemingly disconnected with the “human” aspect of the human rights violation. And

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<sup>100</sup> Kaushik, Anupama. "Gandhi on Gender Violence and Gender Equality: An Overview." *Gandhi on Gender Violence and Gender Equality*. MKGandhi.org. Web. 4 Mar. 2016.

<sup>101</sup> Nanda, Nitya. "The Emerging Role of NGOs in Rural Development of India." *Social Change* (2000): 37. Web. 5 Apr. 2016.



the mission statements, projects, and strategies employed by such organizations vary from region to region. Their effectiveness relies on how they solve problems specific to their locality. Women's rights organizations in rural areas must concentrate on a different set of issues than those working in urban slums. Furthermore, NGOs promoting women's empowerment in the more developed southern states should differ greatly from the programs initiated in the north, where rates of VAW tend to be higher. In Chennai, the capital of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, recorded crimes against women have decreased tremendously over the past several years. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 4,037 incidents recorded in 2000, but in 2013, the number of such crimes had reduced to 838. Meanwhile, in Delhi (located in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh), there were 2,122 reports of crimes in 2000, and by 2013, the number shot up to 11,449 incidents.<sup>102</sup> Of course, such a difference can be attributed to the sheer number of women who came forward and filed complaints, and there is no existing scholarly research on the north-south divide. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge the different direction that the South has taken, whether it is through an increased police sensitization and presence, more grassroots activism against VAW, or increased levels of education and counseling for women. And in the northern states of Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, where child marriages are most common, there are higher rates of domestic violence. But even

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<sup>102</sup> Jaiswal, Nimisha. "What Delhi Can Learn From Chennai on Women's Safety." *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, Inc., 16 May 2015. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

there, prevalence of VAW varies, with 6 percent of women in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh reporting they faced partner violence, compared to 59 percent in Bihar.<sup>103</sup> Such complexities and differences in culture and region, augmented by the caste system and varying level of economic success throughout the country, make India such a unique case in studying VAW. But as we have seen through recent bouts of violence that have made international news, violence against women is not limited to just one region of India. In order to improve the situation for the entire female population, local actors in all corners of India must become the driving force for women's development and safety. They must initiate programs that promote the ideals of Gandhi—one of India's greatest human rights advocates.

This chapter will explore two such local NGOs in rural, urban, and tribal communities working to empower women in India, and examine the work and participation of some of the activists behind them. Each organization tackles VAW with its own set of methods, providing services to better address the specific needs of its respective region. We will first look at the *Nari Samata Manch*, a developmental organization that started in the 1980s in a suburb of Pune in western India—one of the first in the region. And *Sneha*, a health organization based in Mumbai, is an anomaly because it is multi-faceted in its approach to helping women. It provides a variety of

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<sup>103</sup> Sabri, Bushra, and Jacquelyn C. Campbell. "Intimate Partner Violence against Women in Slums in India." *Indian Journal of Medical Research* (June 2015). *NCBI*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

services within the parameters of one of the world's largest and most populous slums. By individually examining and comparing the strategies and outcomes of these grassroots NGOs, we will see how certain activists and volunteers provide aid, mobilize community members, and utilize existing laws at the local level. And eventually, we will see how they are influenced by the same ideology adopted by women's networks across the world: women's rights must be considered human rights. By framing their motives in such a way, these organizations are able to attract the support and funding they need to empower victims and bring lasting social change to the fight against VAW.

### **Nari Samatha Manch**

*"In the beginning we wanted to do something about women's rights and domestic violence. We had no particular vision and we did not have particular projects or funding in mind. We just knew we had to do something."*<sup>104</sup>

—Vidya Bal

In 1980s India, increasing feminist activism led to the creation of many new NGOs fighting for women's rights and equality. One such organization was the Nari Samata Manch ("Equality for Women"), created by activists Sadhana Dadhich and Vidya Bal. While the two were always active in the women's movement, they decided

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<sup>104</sup> Handy, Femida. *Grass-roots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Print. Page 107

to form the organization in 1983, years after the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women brought worldwide attention to the abuses and plight of women. Their organization epitomizes Keck and Sikkink's main argument: how the transnational campaign on violence against women started to come together on the basis of human rights—a concern that was applicable to all nations and the activists within them. India was a particularly difficult situation, because traditional Hindu culture seemed to allow practices in which women were easily oppressed. Dowry-related abuse, domestic violence, and public and private rape were running rampant. Groups of social activists had been advocating for laws banning such violent acts and outdated customs, but Bal and Dadhich felt that protests and public demonstrations were not enough. They wanted to directly help women who suffered from abuse, and more importantly, they wanted to create a systemic change—“to make a difference in the thinking and behavior of the society that mistreated women.”<sup>105</sup> After the highly-publicized murders of two upper class women by their husbands, Dadhich and Bal came to the realization the poor and illiterate weren't the only ones prone to VAW. Women of all backgrounds and all different walks of life were involved, and there was a pressing need for change. So, they formally organized their “cooperative” in the

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<sup>105</sup> Handy, Femida. *Grass-roots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Print. Page 106

town of Pune along with the help of eight other activists, comprising of both men and women.<sup>106</sup>

Dadhich and Bal continued their social activism and advocated for new laws concerning dowry, rape, and domestic violence. But they also used their collective to start programs that directly helped oppressed women. One of the first was called “Speak Out,” a forum where women could share their experiences with one another, give each other mutual support, and regain confidence and self-respect after they had been victimized. The volunteers of Nari Samata Manch developed a counseling center to provide these women with emotional support and legal assistance. Over the years, the organization launched new programs and projects, almost spontaneously, evolving with the needs of its victims. According to scholar Fermida Handy, its programs grew “organically—a bit like mycelium, the underground mass of interwoven thread-like filaments that create vast living networks that eventually fruit as mushrooms.”<sup>107</sup> Through the counseling sessions, victims of domestic violence made it clear they needed a safe shelter, so they could escape the perpetual cycle of violence they faced at home. Upon receiving numerous requests, Nari Samata Manch sought funding to establish the first short-stay shelter in Pune, calling it “Aapla Ghar” (meaning “our home” in the local language of Marathi). It received funding from the Ford Foundation

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<sup>106</sup> "About Us." *Nari Samata Manch*. Nari Samata Manch, 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Handy, Femida. *Grass-roots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Print. Page 108

in 1997 and the MacArthur Foundation in 1998, and used the money to build the shelter and initiate various health and educational projects. Aapla Ghar housed nearly 25 women and children at a time for a period of six months. Aside from being an “interim residence,” it provided victims additional counseling, education and vocational job training. Women who were coming from abusive environments, and those who were completely dependent on their husbands and families, were able to leave with the confidence and skills to lead independent lives.<sup>108</sup> In 2003, the shelter was forced to close due to new licensing rules and increasing expenses. However, in its 12 years of running, the shelter had helped 400 women and 125 children escape from daily violence,<sup>109</sup> giving them an opportunity to start over in both a personal and professional sense.

Dadhich, Bal, and the other trustees realized that the need for their programs extended far beyond the town of Pune—they decided to expand their cooperative to serve tribal areas and rural villages in the region. They began a rural village training center, a dairy farm, and a women-run bank, employing recent victims of violence to help run them and perform administrative duties. Volunteers continued to educate women and youth on personal human rights, national laws, the importance of education, how to stand for election or open up their own companies. With assistance

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<sup>108</sup> "Projects." *Nari Samata Manch*. Nari Samata Manch, 2011. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Handy, Femida. *Grass-roots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Print. Page 109

from the Nari Samata Manch and a partnering NGO, several women were able to set up small businesses selling oil and herb products in their respective villages.

Consequently, the women were able to make their own living and reported that they felt a newfound respect from their families and fellow community members.<sup>110</sup>

The Nari Samata Manch is an example of an NGO that has focused on empowering women at the individual level. Through its personalized programs and projects, it starts by building a general awareness on issues pertaining to women, and then creates education and training programs to further that awareness. It also equips victims with the necessary tools to become completely self-reliant. Giving women knowledge and skills is an important step in rural areas, where lack of education forces them to become dependent on their husbands and families, and thus, more susceptible to violence and oppression.

Scholar Fermida Handy analyzes how the Nari Samata Manch works at both the “macro” and “micro” levels. At the macro level, she says, the organization focuses on advocacy, education, training, and public awareness programs—all of which are done in hopes to increase intolerance for VAW at the societal level. Its women’s leadership program works to improve gender relations by including both men and women in collective activities. These can take the form of self-help groups, credit banking, formation of credit groups, group counseling and educational meetings.

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<sup>110</sup> Handy, Femida. *Grass-roots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Print. Page 110

These programs are overseen primarily by the original founders and trustees of Nari Samata Manch. Micro-level programs, run by professionals and volunteers, are support services geared specifically towards the protection and rehabilitation of victims. These are aimed at directly assisting individual women, giving them emotional counseling, but unfortunately require significant amounts of financial support.<sup>111</sup>

Originally, the Nari Samata Manch was built with the overarching goal of delivering direct assistance to *individual* women and victims of violence. While it is indeed a noble cause, focusing on individuals can often prove time-consuming and increasingly expensive, especially in India where millions of women are victims of violence or assault. For every woman that is given assistance, it may seem like there are 10 more waiting for their turn—making progress difficult to measure. And all of Nari Samata Manch’s programs, which are funded by foundations or foreign NGOs, come with their own stipulations, rules and regulations. When funding comes from external sources, an organization cannot function fully as a “collective”—it must establish policies and procedures to meet the requirements of foreign and government donors, who often have motives of their own. So, how can an NGO that was formed primarily to help victims of VAW, make a bigger impact without being bogged down by either strict regulations or rising costs? We will look at another NGO that has

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<sup>111</sup> Handy, Femida. *Grass-roots NGOs by Women for Women: The Driving Force of Development in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006. Print. Page 111-112



utilized funding from their sponsors to expand their focus areas; combatting a variety of issues such as maternal health, education, and youth empowerment.

### **SNEHA**

Nestled in the outskirts of Dharavi, one of the largest slums in Asia, SNEHA (Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action) is a Mumbai-based NGO that focuses on maternal health and safety. It is apparent that Indians who dwell in urban slums are plagued with low socio-economic status, unhealthy living conditions, and little access to clean food and water. But beyond the squalor lies the hidden issue of domestic violence, which can be heightened by the difficult living circumstances. In her study of intimate partner violence in Indian slums, Bushra Sabri defines slums as residential areas that are unfit for human habitation “by reasons of dilapidation, overcrowding, lack of ventilation, electricity or sanitation facilities.” The neighborhoods, she says, are so densely populated that domestic violence, usually a private matter, is often seen and acknowledged by neighbors. However, the act of intimate partner violence has become so accepted by community and family members that it is accepted, and rarely reported. The National Family Health Survey reports that the prevalence of VAW in various slum areas across India is between 23 and 62 percent. According to Sabri, many factors can propagate such violence in slums: early marriage, dowry practices, alcohol use by the husband, and increasing women’s

employment and success.<sup>112</sup> While VAW has been established as a national (and international) epidemic, it could be argued that women in slums have a particularly difficult time in overcoming it, as they face more barriers in obtaining support and services, leading to poor health. Few women's NGOs exist around the sole purpose of helping women in slums, but SNEHA is one of the exceptions in the Mumbai area.

Created in the late 1990s by neonatologist Armida Fernandez, SNEHA was originally a plan to break the cycle of maternal and infant mortality in poor areas. Fernandez noticed babies were dying largely due to the condition of their mothers, who had limited access to healthcare, and very little knowledge about nutrition, hygiene, and contraception. After deciding to take action on a more preventive level, Fernandez led her team of doctors to the slums of Dharavi, where they educated groups of women on the basics of prenatal care, immunizations, and contraception. They would monitor child growth, promote appropriate feeding, and safe childbirths, encouraging women to give birth in hospitals instead of the unsanitary slums. Over time, SNEHA increased its staff to nearly 350 workers, volunteers, doctors, and human rights lawyers. At its core, SNEHA is a health organization, working to progress both women and children by offering them medical services for free.<sup>113</sup> By

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<sup>112</sup> Sabri, Bushra, and Jacquelyn C. Campbell. "Intimate Partner Violence against Women in Slums in India." *Indian Journal of Medical Research* (June 2015). *NCBI*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

<sup>113</sup> "The SNEHA Story." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

investing in women's health and wellbeing, it hopes to progress the entire slum community. Several years after its creation and a dozen international partnerships later, SNEHA has started targeting other aspects of public health and safety. It has developed programs to prevent and combat instances of VAW in slums, to empower women and adolescents and educate them on sexuality and health. By working with health care providers and employing slum-dwellers to become catalysts of change, SNEHA is creating a sustainable and safe environment for women in these communities.

In its Prevention of Violence Against Women & Children (PVAWC) program, SNEHA utilizes three specific methods to respond to gender-based violence in urban areas: crisis intervention, sensitization of public sector workers, and community mobilization. Each brings the participation of a different member of society in facilitating change. Its first level of impact happens at the individual level, through its crisis intervention centers, where immediate and long-term counseling is provided to survivors of violence. With 11 crisis centers sprawled across Mumbai and deep inside Dharavi, counselors handle cases of violence one by one. They speak to the victim, analyze her situation, and give her the necessary medical and legal services or help in filing a police complaint. Counselors comprise of social workers and some clinical psychologists, who work on improving the mental health of women and children, as violence often affects them mentally. Before and after each session, the stress levels and self-esteem of the victims are monitored in order to measure the impact of SNEHA's counseling. Furthermore, necessary protocol is taken to get in touch with

the perpetrator. He or she is contacted either through a third party messenger/volunteer who lives in the community, or by formal letter. The husband or family member is requested to come to the counseling center so his side of the story can also be heard. The counselors then talk to the perpetrator alone and later have a joint meeting with the victim before offering their solutions.<sup>114</sup>

At the community level, SNEHA works to mobilize a network of women volunteers, called “sanginis,” who live in the slums and identify cases of violence that they see or hear about firsthand. Currently, there are 210 sanginis in Dharavi, who attend educational sessions at crisis centers where they are taught about violence, sexuality, and decision-making skills. To help monitor cases of violence, sanginis are given cellphones with a mobile app, enabling them to discreetly report and map cases of violence.<sup>115</sup>

Lastly, SNEHA works to sensitize public sector workers, including police officers and hospital staff. Officers are trained to communicate with violence victims without judgment, and they are told take cases of VAW in a timely manner. Public healthcare providers (including hospital workers, doctors and nurses) are trained to effectively detect violence victims among other hospital patients. Victims of violence are often too scared to admit that they have been raped or abused, due to societal

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<sup>114</sup> "Our Work: Domestic Violence." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

<sup>115</sup> "Little Sister project to map domestic violence." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

implications or threats from perpetrators. SNEHA works to develop and implement protocols for public sector workers in such cases, emphasizing the need to provide women with adequate and timely care.<sup>116</sup>

In April 2011, a woman named Anamika from Dharavi had come to the SNEHA crisis center after being brutally beaten by her alcoholic husband, Raja. She was seeking legal and medical help for her and her three daughters, and circumstances prevented her from going back to her father's home. Volunteers at SNEHA brought her to a local hospital, gave her a temporary place to stay, and invited her husband in for counseling. He refused, prompting SNEHA to file the case under the PWDV Act in the local court. After the first hearing Raja asked to reconcile with his wife and children, but he was told to wait until a court settlement was reached, so he could sign the consent terms. Four months later, Anamika was back in her home with her daughters, and expressed finally having "rightful existence" in her house where she was no longer being humiliated by her husband on a daily basis.<sup>117</sup>

Such stories, although shared by the organization to call attention to their own impact, have some meaning. Taking legal action in India and filing a case of VAW is usually an ordeal for regular citizens. Even with the PWDV Act, endless amounts of red tape, and lack of knowledge and money can prevent people from doing so. In these

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<sup>116</sup> "NGO Approach to Public Health." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

<sup>117</sup> "A Voice From A Client." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

instances, volunteers and lawyers associated with SNEHA can bring their skillsets to bear, and help victims of violence achieve justice through the complex bureaucratic and legal process.

Through its multi-faceted and three-pronged approach in combatting VAW in Dharavi, statistics show SNEHA has indeed made a positive impact. Since the creation of its counseling center in 2001, it has addressed over 6,000 cases of violence, trained and sensitized 4,500 police officers in Bombay and taught nearly 2,100 doctors and nurses to identify symptoms of violence. According to its website, SNEHA also reports having provided health education to over 10,000 teens and youth, while giving vocational training to over 2,000 people.<sup>118</sup>

In essence, SNEHA could be described as a liaison between health care providers and the slum women—with the mutual goal to make services easily accessible to those who are often denied them. In her research, Sabri also states that health care providers are the main institutional contact for women in abusive relationships. Consequently, she says, “health care settings should play a significant role in reaching out to slum women who are at risk of or affected by intimate partner violence.”<sup>119</sup> By providing legal and health services, empowering women through

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<sup>118</sup> "Prevention of Violence Against Women & Children." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 25 Apr. 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Sabri, Bushra, and Jacquelyn C. Campbell. "Intimate Partner Violence against Women in Slums in India." *Indian Journal of Medical Research* (June 2015). *NCBI*. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

education and employment, and by giving them the confidence to overcome difficult circumstances, grassroots NGOs like SNEHA have done good work and successfully utilized their resources.

However, for empowerment to work in the long run, these organizations must consider challenges at local levels of administration, and build smart partnerships to work efficiently. In maintaining a good relationship with local governments, they could leverage the power of politicians and administrative officials to help an even greater number of women. Furthermore, more focus needs to be put on mobilizing future generations. Prevention education for youth, especially in challenging India's patriarchal cultural norms, can lower the risk for future violence and marginalization of women. NGOs must employ their feminist strategies in classrooms and educational settings, so progress can also be monitored by how many adolescents are becoming agents of change.

Nonetheless, the efforts and outcomes of Indian NGOs have been commendable. They have latched onto the "women's rights as human rights" framework and taken it the furthest, perhaps because they've needed it the most. Soma Chaudhuri of the Research Consortium on Gender-Based Violence says grassroots women leaders have used their greatest resource—their decision-making skills—in empowering women and making sure they receive the same rights and opportunities as men. Bringing about individual and social change in the fight against VAW has been no small feat, but these activists have generally done the best they can with the resources that they have. And by calling upon international human rights organizations

to help them in their crusade, they are framing VAW as a human rights violation that needs immediate attention. SNEHA in particular has secured partnerships with the World Health Organization, The Asia Foundation, and the United Nations Development Program as some of its main donors and supporters.<sup>120</sup> This relationship between global and grassroots organizations comes full circle—it shows how international actors instigate change at the local and state levels, and vice versa—all with the end goal of reversing a grave human rights violation.

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<sup>120</sup> "Our Partners." *Society for Nutrition, Education & Health Action*. SNEHA. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.



## CONCLUSION

*“Women aren’t the problem, but the solution.  
Girls aren’t tragedies, but opportunities.”<sup>121</sup>*

*—Nicholas D. Kristof, “Half the Sky”*

Despite its richness of culture and diversity, India is filled with innumerable problems and societal issues that contribute to the oppression of women. As Charlotte Bunch puts it best, VAW is a politically and socially constructed war on women—governments must work to end it, rather than continuing to perpetuate it.<sup>122</sup> In this study of international, national, and local organizations, we have seen how certain actors are able to combat VAW, how they succeed, and where they fall short. And this is observed in the backdrop of an Indian political scene that is plagued with corruption and bureaucratic failures. This is not to say that the situation for Indian women is not improving. The International Business Times reports, “People have become a lot more conscious, the media has taken on the responsibility of reporting these cases, the

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<sup>121</sup> Kristof, Nicholas D., and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. Print.

<sup>122</sup> Bunch, Charlotte. "Women's Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights."

police are filing the [reports] ... Sexual abuse has always been around, but the mood in India has changed.”<sup>123</sup>

The mood has changed primarily because the Indian public is finally realizing the extent to which violence against woman is a real human rights issue. This is something that women’s networks have long hoped to accomplish by bringing VAW to the public agenda. It is evident that the silver lining lies in the efforts of such activists and feminists, who have masterfully decided to challenge VAW by defining it as a more universally relatable concept. For international and grassroots organizations, there will always be obstacles and longstanding Indian traditions that make their goal tough to accomplish. But as long as there are individuals and groups fighting for women’s rights, change will come in due time. Violence against women is a complex case, but it has a simple solution: it needs to be taken seriously by India and other nations—only then will the road to achieving gender equality become a clear one.

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<sup>123</sup> Arakali, Harichandan. "Rape In India: 'Epidemic' Of Sexual Violence Against Women And Children, Rape Laws Aren't Enough, Experts Say." *International Business Times*. IBT Media, Inc., 27 Oct. 2015. Web. 10 May 2016.



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