



Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Examining Violence Against Women in India: Changes, Challenges, and Futures

The Delhi gang-rape and subsequent death of medical student Jyoti Singh Pandey in December 2012 sparked an unprecedented discussion on violence against women in India. While sexual violence against women is a long-standing issue in India, relentless media coverage of this particular incident has elevated the conversation to both the national and international level. At a discussion on “Examining Violence Against Women in India: Changes, Challenges and Futures” convened by the Sigur Center for Asian Studies’ Rising Powers Initiative on April 12, 2013, panelists outlined the socio-cultural and economic factors perpetuating sexual violence in India and highlighted opportunities for moving forward on the issue.

Participants included:

- Kavita Daiya, Associate Professor, Department of English, GW
- Deepa Ollapally, Director, The Rising Powers Initiative, GW
- Mary Ellsberg, Director, Global Women’s Institute, GW
- Zain Lakhani, Graduate Fellow, University of Pennsylvania
- Daniel Moshenberg, Director, Women’s Studies, Associate Professor of English, GW
- Aruna Rao, Practitioner-in-Residence, Global Gender Program, Institute of Global and International Studies, GW

A Widespread Culture of Violence

A number societal norms, attitudes, and behaviors contribute to a widespread culture of violence against women in India. Noting that most women in South Asia feel vulnerable to sexual violence, Aruna Rao asserted that a ‘so what?’ or ‘chalta hai’ attitude that blames women as instigators of sexual violence prevails in the region. Moreover, India’s feudal, patriarchal roots perpetuate a deeply misogynistic culture where those at the bottom of the social hierarchy are viewed as ‘others’ and afforded little by the way of dignity, rights, and respect. In addition to women, Rao cited Dalits as another group that has been ‘othered’ as a result of India’s hierarchically stratified society. These societal undercurrents are apparent not only in the Delhi gang-rape, but also in the numerous unreported incidents of sexual violence across India.

India’s feudal, patriarchal roots perpetuate a deeply misogynistic culture where those at the bottom of the social hierarchy are viewed as ‘others’ and afforded little by the way of dignity, rights, and respect.

While public outcries appear to lament the growth of violence against women, Mary Ellsberg asserted that the Delhi gang-rape was neither new nor unique for India. The *Hindustan Times* reported in December 2012 that 78% of women had experienced harassment in the past year, while other studies have shown that 4 rapes a day occur in India. Ellsberg noted that on a global scale, research indicates that at least 1 in 3 women will be raped, beaten, or abused at least once in their lifetimes, and that most acts of rape are not by strangers; rather, women are more at risk for rape by people they know. If the Delhi incident was no different from other

acts of sexual violence that occur daily, why has it received so much attention?

Mobilizing Response

The panelists agreed that a number of factors contribute to the sensation and high-visibility garnered by Pandey’s murder. An unprecedented public outpouring unseen in other incidents stemmed from the sense of vulnerability felt by other women- the notion that “it could have been us.” Additionally, for the first time, men constituted a significant population of those protesting the rape. For many, the incident exemplified the consequences of the widening economic chasm brought on by “shining India”: the rape

victim represented the upwardly mobile lower-middle class that has benefited from India's economic growth, while the male perpetrators stand in the shadows with those left out of the Indian growth engine. Additionally, Daniel Moshenburg suggested that Pandey's death also raised the issue of what violence against women means in a broadening global political economy with regard to domestic workers and other transient, marginalized populations. Given the mobilization generated by the incident, Zain Lakhani suggested that the momentum needs to be used to examine how sexual violence is defined more broadly.

While the Delhi gang-rape has galvanized local and international pressure against sexual violence, it has also placed in the public eye a set of assumptions about what rape looks like. Lakhani cautioned that mobilizing action around violence against women through such

Responses to violence against women need to be holistic, integrating informal and formal approaches at both the individual and systemic level.

extreme and isolated events can act as a double edged sword, since most acts of violence against women do not occur in public and/or gang-rape scenarios. Rather, many daily acts of victimization, particularly within the domestic context, occur within a marginalizing sphere that denies women control over their own bodies. The danger of understanding and defining rape as an isolated incident that can be recognized as a singular event can result in policies that do not accurately reflect the reality of sexual

violence against women. Thus, allowing a conception or definition of sexual violence to prevail risks further marginalizing women that do not fit within the definition to get lost in the discourse. Lakhani noted that society should "Encourage the dangers of foreclosing or restricting our definition of sexual violence to those that lend themselves easily to these sensationalized events but also open up the possibilities of discussions about violence against women that can happen through these isolated incidents. We should pay attention to the multiplicity of voices, even if they are no louder than a whisper."

Moving Forward

Looking ahead, what lessons can be learned from Pandey's death? According to Rao, responses to violence against women need to be holistic, integrating informal and formal approaches at both the individual and systemic level. On the formal end of the spectrum, this means increasing access to resources and opportunities while strengthening laws, policies, and accountability mechanisms.

Informal approaches need to place greater focus on changing attitudes and collectively held beliefs on sexual violence, capacity building for security forces and police, and engaging with men on the issue. In general, Rao noted that more work has been done on the formal side: expanding services to victims, increasing access to justice, and building resources and networks. While national laws and policies combatting violence against women are essential for making progress on this issue, Ellsberg pointed out that localized efforts such as the “Ring the Bell” campaign can be equally effective at targeting attitudes about sexual violence. Neighbors and bystanders are encouraged to ‘ring the doorbell’ under the pretext of anything from borrowing a cup of sugar or asking for directions in instances where an act of domestic violence is occurring. Thus, the campaign informally but powerfully promotes the idea that any sort of abuse or violence is unacceptable and should not be allowed to continue. The Ring the Bell effort encourages individual and community action to challenge the habits and norms that perpetuate violence. Ellsberg added that changing cultural norms, values, and mindsets is considerably harder because they are so deeply rooted and engrained within a society. Nonetheless, the Delhi incident has demonstrated that challenging these norms can potentially elicit significant change both at the individual and systemic level.

By Winnie Nham, Research Manager, Rising Powers Initiative, Sigur Center for Asian Studies

This discussion was sponsored by the Rising Powers Initiative’s Asian Economic Challenges series, the Department of Women’s Studies, the Global Gender Program, and the Global Women’s Institute

About the Sigur Center for Asian Studies

Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

Sigur Center for Asian Studies
Elliott School of International Affairs
The George Washington University
1957 E St. NW, Suite 503
Washington, DC 20052

TEL 202.994.5886
EMAIL gsigur@gwu.edu
<http://www.gwu.edu/~sigur>
<http://www.risingpowersinitiative.org>