A collection of stories, interviews and pieces of art advocacy
I had begun an ambitious project in June 2013. I remember thinking to myself one night that I wanted to use my voice in a way that it would be heard, in a way that people would know that my voice would count, too.

I was already doing that – screaming through my own blog and whining occasionally on the kind and bountiful space that another would offer me every now and then. I had friends who shared a similar passion – and needed a little space to get out there. So I decided that I’d tie in my second book with an organisation that would be the voice of girls and women everywhere.

When I started the Red Elephant Foundation, I found myself wondering why I chose the name that I did. I’m not sure how it came to be – it just happened. I remember my memory was once likened to that of an elephant. So I decided I’d use an elephant as a reference point for the initiative since we were going to be engaged in telling stories that the world should do well to remember. I chose red – because, well, who doesn’t remember something red waving in their faces?

But that was only the initial thought. With time, I realised that there was a deeper significance to the elephantine connotation – one that life’s amazing ways found a way to make happen. And that made me realise that we have a place in the universe. This amazing web-resource put it in neat words that I quote below:

“Elephants form deep family bonds and live in tight matriarchal family groups of related females called a herd. The herd is led by the oldest and often largest female in the herd, called a matriarch. Herds consist of 8-100 individuals depending on terrain and family size. When a calf is born, it is raised and protected by the whole matriarchal herd. Elephants are extremely intelligent animals and have memories that span many years. It is this memory that serves matriarchs well during dry seasons when they need to guide their herds, sometimes for tens of miles, to watering holes that they remember from the past. They also display signs of grief, joy, anger and play.”

Unwittingly, I’d named my initiative after a symbol of matriarchy – a symbol of a world quite the opposite of ours, where the females are given the respect they deserve. So there you go. That’s why it is the Red Elephant.

This eBook is an effort to curate and retain some of the moving and powerful stories our team has brought to you. this really is our blood, sweat and tears, put together over two years. We hope to go on, telling truths and bringing real stories to you from all corners of the world.

With Peace, Love and Light,

Kirthi Jayakumar
CEO & Founder, The Red Elephant Foundation
CHANGEMAKER DIARIES

Stories of people who make a difference across the world
FEMINIST MUSINGS

An interview with Kamla Bhasin

Kamla Bhasin, a renowned social scientist and an advocate for gender equality and feminism, is a fiery force to reckon with. With a wholesome perspective of the myriad nuances of gender and feminism, her books have added fuel to the fire of many of the world’s activists. She talks about her journey so far, her vision for the future and her work as an advocate for gender equality in this interview.

What got you into gender advocacy? Your foray into the field came at a time when it was still nascent, and was not seen as a "profession" as medicine, engineering and teaching were.

I got into gender advocacy after becoming a social activist. I started working in 1972, in Udaipur, Rajasthan, as a social activist working with the poor. I was 26, then. I had grown up in rural India. My father was a medical doctor, and worked in rural Rajasthan. Once I began working with the poor, I came to understand consciously that women were poorer than the poor, more dalit than the dalit, and more discriminated than the discriminated. At the conscious level, this realization happened when I worked with the poor in Rajasthan. At the subconscious level, I guess I always knew this to be the truth. It is impossible for girls and women not to know the truth about how women are worse off. I did take to gender advocacy at a time when very few people were in the field. Of course, there were prominent people such as Gandhi and women in politics who talked of the need for gender equality. It was the general atmosphere – I was born on the eve of the partition of India, in 1946. Equality and Justice were in the air back then!

Could you talk about some of the key challenges you encountered in your journey? What were some of your strategies in dealing with the challenges?

I started working on the basic needs for the communities that I worked with. The organization said that we had to help with literacy for women and men, saying that they needed it. We tried our best, and I realized that there was no response. When the women built a fair degree of rapport with me, they came up to me and said, “Look at the place around you. Are you all blind? We are poor, and we are in the middle of a drought – what we need most is water. And here, you are all trying to give us literacy – it is not our top priority. Can you find us a way to make a well?” These were people from the Adivasi community. I went back to the organization with what they told me and asked if we could use the same resources to dig a well. It made me realize that social workers tend to come up with plans of action that pivot around their idea of the priorities for the communities they work with – which don’t align with the actual priorities of the communities themselves. I started working with the women as providers of water. Slowly, it expanded into agriculture and other avenues. Meanwhile, I started writing about women in society. I don’t remember having faced any challenges in my work, though. We were doing our work for gender equality and no one stopped us. The Adivasi women were strong and forthcoming. They were helpful all the time. It was really about going from one step to another. The main challenge that I did face was personal – it was about my having to change myself to understand them, and to dispense with my misconceptions about the poor. I suppose I managed!
As a gender equality advocate, what do terms like Feminism and Gender mean to you?
I work with women, rather than for women. As I work, I realise that I change all the time. Everyone needs to be ready to change all the time. In my work so far, the term feminism has not been difficult to comprehend. Just like we learned words like democracy, human rights, mobile, internet, and even Skype, so too, we learned the term feminism. In South Asia, we came up with a simple definition of feminism: anyone who accepts that girls and women are discriminated against in the domestic setting, in the workplace and in society, and takes action against such discrimination, is a feminist. If a man does it, he can also be a feminist! In other words, feminism is looking at the world through women’s eyes because for much too long everything has been looked at decided through men’s eyes. Feminism is an ideology and action programme against patriarchy and for gender equality. VERY SIMPLE! Feminism, as some have tended to misunderstand, does not mean that women claim superiority. It only means that we want equality, our dignity, choices, spaces and freedom. After 1947, when India gained independence, the Constitution guarantees it for us. We are, therefore, only asking for what we are already entitled to. However, Gender was tough to understand. It came up after about 15 years of working in the field. We are familiar with the concept of men and women, and not gender. Initially, I was resistant to the term gender – it came across as being very academic. Gender discrimination tends to be used to denote discrimination against women, but in reality, it can be denoted to mean discrimination against men, too.

Is gender really a social construct? Or is it much more than that?
Gender is a socio-cultural definition. I have been doing gender workshops for over 30 years now, and 50% of the people I work with, do not know how to define the term. It is not about men and women. It is a socio-cultural construction. The concept of patriarchy is very clear, and has tended to call a spade a spade. On no uncertain terms, it goes about clarifying that it is a male dominated world, in which men are considered to be superior to women. This is something that the term “gender” did not convey. We were initially resistant, but there are many advantages to using gender as a concept. The concept of gender clearly differentiates between what is biological or Nature made and what is socio-cultural and Society made. There is a big difference between the biological and the socio-cultural construction. Nature does not discriminate. These discriminatory attributes are a human creation. Since humans created it, humans can change it, too. It can be a powerful thing. Many tend to look at it narrowly, and as independent of other elements. Gender inequality ties in with caste inequality, with racial inequality and with class inequality. It is impossible to tackle any of it in isolation if we want sustainable results.

One of the biggest misconceptions is that men are only perpetrators of patriarchy, and cannot be victims of it. Could you weigh in on this statement with your thoughts?
Men do undoubtedly benefit from patriarchy. Of course, all men seem to be born with so called privileges because they are men. They have advantages – 90% parliamentary seats go to men. 95% of the judiciary goes to men. Men inherit property – and all of this, because they are men.
Simply because of these privileges, men tend to look at themselves as being in a better place. But let’s look at the other side. Although men are only 50% of the population, 100% rapists are men, 95% of the world’s suicide bombers are men. Instances of rash and drunken driving see more men as perpetrators than women. According to one statistic, 40% and another, 60% of married Indian men are violent to their wives. To me, a man who rapes is far more dehumanized than a woman who is raped. A man who beats his partner is not human. Patriarchy does not let men cry. Patriarchy forces men to become breadwinners. The fact is, patriarchy helps and serves no one. Men should recognize that they can be fully free only when women are free. Fathers and brothers have to protect their daughters and sisters, earn and put money in the bank for their daughters’ dowries. Boys in the family are forced to join the family business when they may be much happier writing poetry or doing art. We should come to a state where sisters should be welcome to join the family business, so that they can tell their brothers that they are free to pursue what they want. Women should be able to come home to their husbands and say that they will go out to work while the husband really can sit back and take care of the kids. If the roles remain fluid, it is so much easier to enjoy a happy life. I have been working on masculinity for over 15 years now, and have written a lot about it. I brought out a CD for the One Billion Rising campaign, with four songs that talk about men and masculinity – to some extent, with humour. Using slogans, workshops, art and music, I am working against the established notions of patriarchy to make people realise that it serves no one’s interests. Most of all, it is against the Indian Constitution. Patriarchy really needs to be buried or cremated now just as caste and race need to be out of our lives. This is an era of equality and these unequal and unjust systems have no place here.

Do you identify with the terminology "masculinities of violence"? Is violence inherently a masculine element? Should we worry so much about classifying violence thus?

The terms masculine and feminine are social definitions. It is not a biological definition, but rather a social definition of what men and women are supposed to exhibit as characteristics. Society defines men as overpowering, controlling and violent, and keeps teaching them to be violent. Boys are given guns to play with as their toys. All men are not masculine. Many women are masculine, too, and can be violent, too. Violence is not a biological attribute. Man is not inherently violent because he is a man: if that were so, the world would not have had a Buddha or Guru Nanak. It is important to promote non-violence and peace in the way we bring up our children. Masculine and feminine traits are a social notion of how men and women should be, and what characteristics they should exhibit. Society encourages men and boys to be violent. There is a whole industry that works overtime to encourage this – encouraging boys to fight wars in the army, play competitive games, play with guns and the like. Look at all the films that release today. Boys who are gentle are ridiculed and called sissy. In addition to our religious and cultural patriarchies today we have capitalist patriarchy: pushing for everything from pornography to the world of cosmetics. On the one hand, women are commoditised – the shape and complexion of their body is focused on. As if we women don’t have character and intellect! To add to it, since women are bodies, they effectively come with a shelf life. On the other
Religion has been seen to justify patriarchy, although a lot of this justification stems from misinterpretations of religion. How can this be tackled?

I feel in their practice all modern religions are patriarchal. The fact is that the ownership of religion is in men’s hands. The men who started these religions were extraordinary – the Buddha, the Prophet, Jesus, all of them – they were extraordinary. But, look at what is happening today in the name of their religion. Gender equality is not at all possible if we are going to continue practicing religion in the way in which it is practiced. All modern religions – and by modern religions, I mean Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and everything else – were created in a post-patriarchal setting. Patriarchy was created first, and then came all these religions. In these religions, there is a supposition that God is a He. Therefore, if God is He, He or man is God. That is where words like pati-parmeshwar, husband and swamy come up. All our stories and legends come from this hierarchy. Theoretically, most religious texts do not mention equality. All 10 of Jesus’ disciples were men. No religion has yet accepted women as heads of these religions. Therefore, they obviously declare 50% of humanity as inferior or second class. Religion and culture are huge carriers of patriarchy. Very few take up the challenge. There is a lot of work that has been done, of course, but more needs to be done. Religion creeps into life during important moments – such as during a marriage. The practice of “kanyadaan” or giving away the bride is an example. According to our Constitution, No father has the right to give away his daughter. The notions of having an ‘owner’ or pati is wrong! I remember, recently, I read an article in a newspaper about how in a Swaminarayan Temple event and a woman journalist who sat in the front row was asked to go back because the priests of this Sect are not meant to look at women. It was such a display of crass discrimination, to treat a woman thus. Another example is how a woman is not allowed to do the last rites for her deceased parents – of course, back then, a few of us did defy it, such as Mallika Sarabai and I, for instance. But the bigger issue is that many follow these things quietly. We should be questioning these things.

Could you talk about Sangat, and your role in it?

I co-founded the Sangat South Asian Feminist Network with 25 others. After working in the grass root level in India, I moved onto working at the Asian level. I was invited by the Food and Agricultural Organisation in 1975, to join them in a project where I was given the duty of handling a Regional Project on the Role and Training of Change Agents, which supported NGO initiatives. I worked on organising regional and national workshops, participatory training programmes for field level workers and decision makers mainly from non-government organizations, people’s organisations, women’s groups on issues related to poverty, development, environment, gender and human rights and to facilitate linkages and networking. The scope of my work here was centered
around Asia. For about 27 years, I continued in this position. After resigning from the UN, I moved onto founding Sangat, with 25 other women and men. So in all, for almost 40 years now, I have been working at the Asian level. My aim is to identify groups and individuals doing innovative work to promote equality, gender equality, justice, democracy, human rights ad peace bring them together for building their capacities and connect them in the process of capacity building. We organize short and long workshops. Every year we organize a one month long course in which we bring 30-40 women together from different countries and for learning and sharing. We start as early as 6:30 AM and go on until 10-10:30 PM. They start with Yoga, and end the day with films, song and dance. I teach for 5-6 days and we have other feminists who come by and teach, as well. By the end of it, these women have a massive network that they are part of, making friends in countries they never knew they would make friends in. This is, in effect, also action towards peace. Women make friends in other countries, and know enough people in other countries not to be afraid or to stereotype communities unnecessarily. For instance, in the recent Nepal Earthquake, our network was abuzz with activity as women reached out to their friends in Nepal to see if they were alright. Sangat is in effect a small organization comprising 4 people, including me. We have a network of over a thousand women.

What do you see as the future of women? What are we ignoring in our fight for equality?
The future of women lies in equality, justice and freedom. Theoretically, we have it. Our Constitution and the UN conventions guarantee these rights. Everyone who made these documents was a visionary, but the people are not visionaries. We need to have a cultural revolution, and some amount of social change. We need to be worthy of being called human.
PEACE

When I was born,
I slept in my mother’s hands...
There wasn’t a bed for us,
Someone had bombed our lands...

When I was growing up,
I did not go to a school...
They’d set the building on fire,
I was educated without the rule...

When I became an adult,
I did not have a job...
The war had left nothing in the country,
Except a helpless angry mob...

When I grew old,
I had nothing to my name...
Only bullets to count and knives to shine,
I did not even have anyone to blame...

When I breathed my last,
I lay with the other bodies curled...
Heard my soul scream at me,
At last there’s peace in the world.

By
Ashay Abbhi
SYRIA NEEDS PEACE

An interview with Rami Nakhla

Nonviolent fighter, a democratic and a Peace activist, Rami Nakhla, in the face of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, believes in a bright future to his country, Syria. He talks about his activism, the conflict in Syria and the kind of solution he believes it needs.

What is happening in Syria right now?
It is a very challenging question to answer. Not everyone will agree with any one answer. It started off as a nonviolent uprising against the dictatorship that tortured ordinary civilians. It began as a fight for democracy, and remained a nonviolent conflict for eight months. But with the element of regional interference and brutal crackdowns by the government, along with external channels bringing in weapons, the armed resistance began. It escalated into a full scale civil war between the regime and the people. The regime is a minority one, representing the Alawite population that is about 5 million people out of 23 million. The Alawite sect is supported by Iran, being a Shiite sect. The remainder of the population in Syria is Sunni. This angle makes it look like a sectarian conflict, but it has several political and regional dimensions. That said, right now as we speak, there are all kinds of nonviolent, liberal and secular activists fighting side-by-side with radical Al-Qaeda affiliated wings, against the dictatorship. It is a rather complicated state of affairs.

There is a lot of talk about how the opposition to the regime is divided in Syria – one of the factors credited as being the reason for the continued state of war. Do you agree? If it is indeed true, why is unity so elusive?
There is a huge division among the Syrian opposition. This is primarily because there was no real opposition for the last five decades in the country. The only one was the Muslim Brotherhood – and being a member of that group could well earn you a death sentence. Currently, though there is a division, the slew of leftist, secular, communist, liberal and nonviolent activists are fighting alongside with those who follow a more radical approach and want an Islamist state after the current regime. The sheer diversity among the opposing masses makes it appear fragmented. There have been several attempts to bring the opposition together – there was the Syrian National Council, then the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces – but they were all composed only of representatives that operated at the political level with absolutely no roots to the ground. Two of them operate from outside Syria, and there are many that operate on the ground as well.

What are your thoughts about a military intervention in Syria?
At any stage, you simply cannot ask the international community to intervene militarily. It is seriously unbelievable that people ask or even lobby for an external power to intervene in a domestic realm. I believe that we certainly need an international mechanism in place – something like an international policing authority – that would help keep the security of the people intact. For instance, when a dictator is slaughtering his people, such an authority could intervene and keep such conduct in check. That said, the Syrian conflict is very dynamic and therefore, very complicated. In the beginning itself,
the international community should have issued a credible threat to Syria, not intervention, but a credible threat indicating that a non-adherence to certain limits and red lines would result in an intervention. This didn’t happen. Instead, they used a red line with chemical weapons, which, in my opinion, was pointless. The Syrian regime had already killed 150,000 people without chemical weapons! In effect, it was like telling the regime that they could do whatever they wanted without using chemical weapons. The international community did not make use of the opportunity to issue a credible threat, and the Syrian regime exploited this. The international community has said that there will be absolutely no military intervention to topple the regime. But the Syrian opposition has continuously lobbied for this option. This is simply not productive and will lead us nowhere. I believe that we need to take this out of the equation, use international support to buttress a political solution that we should find ourselves, and not to request an intervention.

Can you tell us about your own story as an activist against the regime?
I have lived all my life in Syria, and I have been an activist since 2006. I used to use a pseudonym – Malath Aumran – and no one knew it was Rami Nakhla behind it all. Nevertheless, for all that I was known as, as Rami Nakhla, I was interrogated as many as 40 times by 2010, being taken for as many as once or twice a week for questioning. They would question my activities as Rami, but they didn’t know Malath was me. I was on their radar as an activist since then. In 2010-2011, the regimes collapsed in Tunisia and Egypt, and the government here decided to become wiser. They began arresting activists who might possibly play a role in creating a Syrian revolution to topple the regime. Even before things started out, I hid in Damascus for a while, and then fled to Lebanon with drug dealers. The uprising began when I was in Beirut, where I co-founded an initiative that helped to coordinate protests and spread word on the regime and its atrocities. I was their spokesperson. The initiative supported all the work it did with eyewitnesses and pictures, rallying and networking on the uprising all the time.

What kept you going? It isn’t easy being an activist, and even when you have a cause in sight, it isn’t always easy to keep the fight going...
If you had told me three years ago about the things I would see in the three years since, and tell me that I could take it, I wouldn't have believed you. But the human body is an incredible machine. At the beginning of the uprising, the most traumatic thing for me to see was peaceful protesters being beaten. When the conflict escalated, it was traumatic to see them being shot. People would bend down and pray on the streets in the face of all that violence. We changed as a people, I know I did – I never thought I would see what I did and still sleep at night. We are a traumatised nation, and we need therapy en masse after the war ends, to recover from the trauma. When the pain is too great, you stop feeling it.
Understandably so. Do you see an end in sight?
Without international solidarity and support, I don’t think we can make it. At this moment, I don’t see an end in the defined sense of a winner and loser divide. There is no possibility of a military victory for either side, but only a political solution. Every conflict comes to an end sooner or later, either with a military victory or with a political solution. But, the current situation on ground – considering both sides and the forces they have – this conflict can go on for years and years. We might just lose everything, and Syria might be wiped off the world map for all we know. It would be catastrophic. We already see so many refugee camps on the borders – all filled with people suffering in terrible conditions. We need a political solution to achieve peace. War cannot be won militarily – not this one especially. This is what I am working on currently.

What have your own personal challenges been in this journey so far?
We face challenges in our lives every day – it is as true for me as it is for you. In my time as an activist in this conflict, I will say that I went through three stages. In the first phase, I was organising protests and rallying people. I was a nonviolent activist entirely. The second stage was when the armed conflict began. Undoubtedly the non-violence still existed, but I couldn’t stick to the original plan of action – my priorities had to change. It was all about containing the armed conflict at this point. I went to Washington DC and worked with the United States Institute of Peace – where we produced “The Day After” document. The third stage came up when the conflict began escalating into sectarian considerations as they played out in Syria. My focus shifted to working on achieving a peaceful solution. Once a sectarian overtone sets in, you need to involve all the parties to the conflict in bringing a solution alive. You cannot ignore anyone. The key to that is to reconcile tensions and differences, redistributing our powers in the processes. This is what I am working on now, and I must admit that it is quite challenging. It is hard to admit to yourself that the priorities have changed and must be accommodated. I worked to topple the regime at one point, but that is no longer the priority – what we need now is a sustainable political solution. It needs courage to shift the priorities about to meet the right one at the right time.
Before she sleeps forever...

What she has given,
she hasn't taken in lieu..
the canvas of our existence,
she's filled with her ashen hue..

From the crests of life,
to the troughs of death..
she remains the same forever,
changing the pace of her breath..

Mild gasps at first,
panting deep as we move on..
she breathes life into us,
through the journey and then gone..

Through the chasms of our spirits,
into the crevasses of our hearts..
she starts at the darkest ends,
ends with the brightest starts..

She's spent teary nights,
tiring days living like a blur..
al she wants is to smile once,
before she sleeps forever.

By
Ashay Abbhi
WOMEN [& MEN] HAVE TO SPEAK OUT

An interview with Jenik Radon

When it comes to Violence against Women (VAW), many of us think that it is exclusively a matter left to the women's domain. Women should speak out against it, of course. But it is time that both men and women should fight against VAW together. Pragya Lamsal spoke to Professor Jenik Radon, an outspoken crusader in the global movement towards gender equality. Here’s what she discovered.

It was a fine morning. I was ready to join a conversation with a renowned professor. I was totally prepared, I had Googled and found some fascinating body of work by him. The appointment was fixed by my husband after I showed an interest in taking a conversation forth with the Professor. After around 20-minutes of riding through the dusty roads in Kathmandu, we finally reached Hotel Shankar. We asked the front desk officer to call Professor Radon, and in a few minutes, a jovial person walked out with a cup of tea in his hand. Here he was, Professor Jenik Radon, the founder and director of the Eesti and Eurasian Public Service Fellowship.

Oh very good to see you, he laughs as he settles down. We start our conversation in the corner of a pub (we took advantage of the morning as the pub was empty!). Currently a Professor at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), Prof. Radon has also served as a lecturer at Stanford University, where he taught human rights along with other discipline.

As an enthusiast in human rights and gender issues, I start my conversation from the same standpoint. “Women’s rights and gender rights are very important issues, but women have been unfortunately neglected,” he tells me at the beginning of the conversation. Marissa Polnerow, the Cultural Affairs Officer at the US Embassy in Kathmandu, arrives during the interview.

It’s not about Quota, It’s Right

Though good representation in South Asia, the quantity of female lawmakers in the second constituent assembly (CA) held in 2013 Nepal has fallen to 30 percent, from the earlier 33 percent representation in the 2008 CA. Professor Radon, who has involved in the constitutional peace process in Nepal and served as a drafter of the interim peace constitution, objects to the misinterpretation of the constitutional provision of 33 percent women participation in the elected body.

“Your CA is less than 33 percent women. When the law says there should be 33 percent, there should be 33 percent! If this is not followed, it means something is wrong,” he opines. Now, to some, he possibly sounds feminist. In his opinion, though, some men should technically resign so that CA gets 33 percent. The net result has to be 33 percent. I second his idea. In my own opinion, political leaders should not escape saying that they had provided tickets to 33 percent women candidates. The result has to be 33 percent - not the number of candidates.
Out of Sight, Out of Mind
Professor Radon suggests that women need to make their presence feel everywhere. Women should be visible because if people notice women everywhere, society starts accepting their presence. If they (women) are out of sight, they are out of mind”, he shares a saying. Here, according to him, the term “out of sight” means women that are not in a day-to-day professional setting. Referring to a recently held Nepal Economic Summit 2014, where he was a panellist, Professor Radon expresses his dissatisfaction over the extremely low representation of women. “If you looked at the conference, the Nepal Economic Summit, you will have found very few women participating,” he says. “I found the role of women being limited to tasks that were subordinating. Women who participated in the summit were not in the lead. So Women do not seem to be represented in professions or in business,” he opines. His observation includes the trend of Nepali society. In fact, meaningful recognition is what women have been fighting for long. “For whatever reason whether it is historic, cultural or their own approach, women are not as assertive as man and this trend has to be changed.”

Peace Comes with Representation
Professor Radon believes that if we have more women being represented, we may have a more peaceful society. “Women are generally more family oriented, and are more responsible. The more women we have represented the better we are. I adore women and I am all for having more women in all professional spheres.”

Speak First: ‘Jokes’ or Reality?
There is a joke about men, not necessarily for Nepal, he pauses. “Men speak first and think second whereas women think first and speak second.” Women are more hesitant to make their voices heard because want to be sure of what they say, and that it is hundred percent correct, he links the saying with practice. “Nobody is a hundred percent correct. So there is an issue that all people whether man or woman should speak out,” he suggests. “It was really pragmatic suggestion because when we speak out than only we will be able to identify our weaknesses and improve them. I think that the man act in a historical fashion. So, I think there has to be a cultural change.”

Socialization or Is It?
If we go by the trend prevailing in South Asia, women do not speak out because they are told not to. In most of the cases, it is not because of lack of ability but due to their upbringing. We can say due to ‘socialization’. Professor Radon seconds my idea. “Yes, I agree with your word that socialization. Times have changed and the perception should also be changed.” He floats a simple equation: “You can think, if you can think, you should be speaking out because that means you have something to contribute. And all people think so all should have equal chance to express. Women are more than half of the population, if they do not speak out you are losing half of all potential ideas, he claims. Women have to speak out whether or not men hear. It’s a challenge but possible. You have to speak out you cannot remain silent.

Yes, women should speak out. They should end the culture of maintaining silence even in adverse situation. There are so many issues women should speak out against: emotional abuse, sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, trafficking, sexual harassment at work, and murder. And it is not only women; men should also speak out against all forms of gender biases. Together we can challenge all form of discrimination.”
Unleashed Demon

Saints are forbidden to feel love,
Its disguised how love has made me a saint,
Basking in the divine truth of the world,
Its power to indulge, to sway me away.....

Attachment to my universe becomes a curse,
Questioning your soul to understand my dire need,
In the flames of ice and the burns it gives,
I feel torn between reality and my dreams.....

How can desperation infuse with a sense of belonging?
How can omens decide your path?
Tears cant wash away the sacred sins,
They are a picture of me, my resentment.....

A manifestation of my fears begin to haunt me,
But my vision seems to be stuck,
Beyond my thick visage of darkness lies a heart,
My demons are holy and I am a saint.....

Untraceable origin with a bequest of faith,
Arouses mystery with a batten of relief,
Since the devil is free and unchained is her heart,
I will unleash my demon , allow it to soar and scar.....

By
Rhea Samyal
ACTIVISTS ARE THINKERS

An interview with Cynthia Enloe

Cynthia Enloe is more than an academic: she is a living embodiment of the principles she teaches her students, and thereby, has come to live the very quintessence of feminist perspective. What better a way to be an effective teacher, than to teach by example? Having donned many hats, Cynthia has explored the perceptibly varied dimensions of Feminist Political Economics and Feminist Security Studies – and has bridled the two together to craft the wholesome perspective that we need, to be sound feminists and activists. In the following interview, Cynthia talks about her work and efforts at activism in her domain.

What got you into feminism and teaching feminism?
Feminism and teaching feminism are closely connected in my life. If I had not a teacher, I might have been slower in becoming a feminist. During my undergraduate and graduate years, I didn’t know a single person who thought of themselves as a feminist. That was in the 1950s and 1960s. Then two things happened. I began to have more feminist friends who couldn’t believe that I was not a feminist. They took me to feminist events in London and Boston, and also to feminist bookstores. I was so excited to sit amidst such smart and intelligent women at various events, and to be in the middle of a bookstore filled with ideas that I hadn’t yet discovered or been challenged by! The third thing that happened was that our students at Clark University, began to hear about a new phenomenon called “Women’s Studies”. They called all members of the women faculty together and pressed us to start offering Women’s Studies courses. It was all new to us. One of my colleagues offered Women in US Politics course at a time when there were very few women in formal US politics. Another colleague, Serena Hilsinger, offered a course on women authors in the US and UK. It was so exciting! My contribution was a course called “Comparative Politics of Women.” I looked at Russian, Chinese, US, French and the Algerian revolutions, read loads of then-new feminist histories and began asking feminist questions. Feminist historians have played an enormous part in shaping my understanding of politics of women and of gendered politics.

Given that you worked in the field when it was still new, what kind of challenges did you encounter? How did you overcome them?
I suppose that the biggest challenge was to say out loud that I was working with a feminist approach to politics. It is hard to talk about feminism when the media reduce it to a cartoon, and translate it to mean “man-hating.” I realise that there are a lot of people who are new to feminist ideas; feminist questions about politics are rarely asked in most media. I make it a point to engage with people who respond to feminism skeptically; I try to answer them honestly, and do not dismiss their questions. I am always willing to explain and share perspectives. If you are not challenged, how do you know that you are alive? I don’t despair much when people seem to have cartoonish misrepresentations. I have tried to get people to engage with me, to tell me where they get their ideas from. I prefer a down-to-earth approach, talking in terms of concrete examples so we can together have a genuine conversation.
Having worked in the field, what has feminism and gender equality come to mean to you?
Feminism and gender equality aren’t the same. Feminism is essentially a challenge of all oppression, unfairness, injustices and hierarchies. Feminists ask how – and to what extent – each has been created and then perpetuated by the patriarchal presumptions, processes and structures. Once exposed, feminists try to dismantle them. One cannot dismantle patriarchy unless one makes the serious effort to understand and challenge patriarchy in all its old-fashioned and all its modernized forms. Patriarchy can occur anywhere, mind you, not just in the more unjust, heavy handed and blatantly obvious places. Patriarchy can take root even in arenas of peace-work.

Could you share an example that you have encountered, where patriarchy subsists within activist and peace-work circles?
A lot of people teach me, and among them have been feminists in Okinawa, Japan, who were protesting militarization. They took me under their wing and showed me what it was like, to be feminists protesting militarization. There was a terrible incident in 1995 – the rape of a 12 year old girl by four US military personnel. Men and women in Okinawa tied in this incident to their protest against the existence of US military bases on Okinawa. Standing up in one of these anti-bases meetings, one of the feminist anti-bases women said that it was important for all of them, as peace activists, to take sexual assault seriously, not just sexual assault and violence against women perpetrated by American military men, but violence and abuse perpetrated by Okinawan men. Almost immediately, the feminists told me, the men in their protest group wanted to dismiss this linkage, calling it a diversion from the main cause, the anti-bases cause. It was a stellar example of how patriarchal peace activism can become, when activism against violence against women is only deemed “relevant” when it serves men’s own core narrow interest. That is instrumentalizing anti-violence against women. It’s patriarchal politics. I remember Cynthia Cockburn once telling me that many feminist peace activists in countries as different as Serbia, Colombia and India have told her that they have had to break away from their male-led peace organizations due to their male allies’ lack of support for feminist anti-violence goals, that is, because too many of those men just could not see the causal links between militarism and masculinized violence against women.

You have done some important work on the question of how women’s labour is made cheap in factories. Could you tell us how that came about?
I self-published my first feminist publication as a four page leaflet. This was in 1979, I think. I had gone to The Philippines to study the globalization of Colt’s M16 rifle manufacturing. I was not a feminist then – not that I was anti-feminist, just that I hadn’t yet conducted research from a feminist perspective. But, luckily, I by then I had feminist friends who pushed me to explore the women’s labour in factories. One of my British feminist friends, Judy Lown, asked me to tell her about the state of women’s labour in Philippines garment factories. By chance, a Filipina I was interviewing arranged for me to go through a Levi’s blue jeans factory in Manila. I took rolls of photographs with my modest Kodak camera. When I got home, I printed the photos and wrote captions for each of them. That was when I started to think about how realized the gendered division of export factory labour was causally related to the militarization of the Philippines. It was my first feminist analytical effort; I sent the 4-page leaflet out to friends and family – and to Judy, of course. Being prompted by feminist historians explorations of how gendered divisions of labour were created - and by whom and for what ends – made me suspicious of the common term “cheap labour.” I realized that no labour is inherently cheap. It is made cheap!
The more I researched factories, the more I realized that a whole stream of actors play roles in cheapening labour – husbands who don’t think their wives’ efforts are worth a decent pay and that their work is not important; mothers and fathers who do not see their daughters’ work as something important and contributory to the family’s needs. I found them to be unwitting allies of the capitalists and state managers running the factories. So an anti-neo-liberal and anti-capitalist analysis is not enough – we need to explore all the actors, all the power relationships which cheapen women’s labour. That is, we need feminist analysis.

**You have also looked into how women's emotional and physical labour has been used to support many governments' war-waging policies. Could you talk about that?**

One of the temptations these days is to separate security studies from international political economy ("IPE") studies. Things are so elaborate in academia - the courses we offer, the issues we address and the structures we follow. We have begun to create new IR silos, academic communities that don’t talk enough to each other. That’s a loss. Feminist International Political Economy and Feminist Security studies must be in constant conversation if we are going to reveal how international politics operates in the way it does. From the start of my feminist work, I’ve been interested in both, military security politics and profit-maximizing political economics – and how the two processes depend on and inform each other. For instance, armaments production managers and owners – in Sweden, in India, in Russia, in China, in the US – today wield both femininity and masculinity in order to produce missiles, drones, fighter planes and rifles. We need feminist-informed studies of specific armaments factories in varieties of countries.

**What do you see as the future of your work?**

I am not much of a forecaster. I’ve written three books in four years, and that is a lot. This year I’m writing mainly short article. I never know when the next book will begin to take shape, though, I confess, I do already know what image I want to use for the cover of the next one! I love to listen and engage in forums to which I have the privilege for being invited. I recently went to The Hague, as part of the 100th Anniversary of the 1915 International Women’s Congress – in 1915, about 1300 women, during World War I, came together in the throes of World War I to create an agenda to stop war. In all the years of my study, I had never known that this happened! Our textbooks and academic courses should really be telling us about these events! Why isn’t this taught anywhere in IR? At the recent Hague event, organized by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (which came out of the 1915 congress) I met women peace activists from Ghana, Pakistan and India, to name a few countries, and it was amazing too see how much effort is going into making peace a reality even where there is no local war. I believe that activists are thinkers – they are the ones who created most of the concepts we use in our studies today. So, to stay fueled, to stay on my toes, I need to keep listening, to stay in the midst of lively transnational feminist conversations.
The Story of Her

Her eyes are the silver lining in a storm,
  Lips the perfect stance of strength,
Her tresses the message for the winds to carry,
  Heart as pink as the lotus of life.....

        Voice not above a whisper she proposes,
        Yet will of a mountain and mind of a warrior,
        A waste of time to listen to the worlds jabber,
        She glistens in the sun and celebrates solitude.....

The world of magic she lives in becomes her sentence,
  Her tools of flying seized and caged,
  Grievously terrible was her line of work,
  And was followed by men folks blatant scorn.....

        Don't mistake her suffering for weakness,
        Forget unleashing your pity just yet,
        Its gods way of showing the non believers,
        How cursed his child was even in a blessing.....

The lights dim and its time to loosen the lever,
  The sun sets and its pull committing murder,
        An angel was deemed a witch tonight,
        This is the story of her , a game of lies.....

By
Rhea Samyal
MAKING SAYFTY REAL

An interview with Shruti Kapoor

Given the number of incidents one hears about, reads about, and watches reports of, on the news, it doesn’t take much effort to really arrive at the true conclusion: that safety is still elusive. Instead of sitting back and attempting to reach out to safety through measures doled out by another, Shruti Kapoor decided to get on the other side of the fence and make a difference for girls world over. The young lady shares her story.

Having lived in India for the first 20 years of my life, I’ve experienced sexual harassment first hand, and through my time, I understand that my experience is part of a broader social problem. I created Sayfty right after the horrific 2012 Delhi gang rape incident. The incident deeply impacted me, and inspired me to actively find a solution for this problem. I no longer wanted to be a silent bystander; I wanted to show Indian women how to take charge of their own safety. Sayfty’s vision is to make the daily lives of millions women in India safer by preparing them to take a stand against violence. Whether it’s the urban office worker, the student or the rural traveler, our self-defense workshops not only teach easy self-defense skills, but they also instill a level of confidence that can improve life outcomes for women. Gender role discussions show additional ways to address violent situations. Women emerge ready to engage, listen and participate. Self-defense products give women a quick and effective way to build their self-confidence and get out of a sticky situation. A woman’s safety is her birthright and our vision is to ensure that she feels safe and free.

The major issues that need attention with respect to activism itself are the following:

- There is a lack of collaboration amongst various organizations and activist. Each one is championing their own cause and working individually towards their mission. Sometimes many are working individually towards the same goal. What we need is greater collaboration and trust amongst organizations. We lack a desire to work together and solve social problems collectively. There is power in numbers and change will only happen when we all work together rather than against each other. This is not a race to reach to the top. I encourage collaboration and appeal for the same. Let’s not try to re-invent the wheel.
- Change begins at the grassroots. One cannot sit in a foreign country and make policy decisions without knowing the ground realities. I see a lot of organizations sitting in the west trying to make change happen in developing countries. It’s important to speak with the locals, live amongst them, understand their problem and then find practical solutions. It’s important to include the people in the process of change. Only then will it truly work and solutions will emerge.
- Today the face of activism is changing with the use of social media. You no longer need millions of dollars to make change happen. People have risen for a common cause and revolutions are happening merely with the help of social media. Adapt and adopt the current means of technology to bring about change. Be creative in your solutions and engage the crowd. Young people are passionate, creative and full of idea; use them for raising awareness, for bringing about positive change.
There are many challenges that one faces in this line of work. The first challenge is changing mindsets and age-old practices and customs. How does one break these patriarchal beliefs and rules? Forget changing men, it’s so hard to convince women too. To convince women that their safety is in their hands and they must be aware, alert and equipped to protect themselves. The second challenge lies in changing the system and ensuring that there is a zero-tolerance policy for VAW at every level of governance and implementation.

The third challenge lies in teaching and instilling the right principles at an early age in childhood. Parents need to lead by example. Education and awareness in school about VAW is important. Respecting women and breaking stereotypes must be encouraged very early own. The fourth challenge is to teach bystanders to take the right action when they see something wrong. Believe when your child complains to you about something wrong being done to him. Take immediate action. Believe when your friend tells you someone harassed her on the street and don’t ignore it, stand up against the harasser. Don’t be a silent bystander. If you see something, say something.

Shift in mindsets starts from home and starts at a very early age. Respecting people (whether women or men) should be taught at an early age. A child learns what he sees at home. If parents display violence or patriarchy and practice gender stereotypes it’s what the child also eventually learn and practices as an adult.

One cannot expect to change mindsets merely through candle light vigils and documentaries. The emphasis and teaching should start early on. Just like one teaches kids a language, it’s also important to teach this language at inception.

Change is always hard. The easier thing to do is make a documentary or march in protest. But to expect people to change their mindset, attitudes and behavior requires a lot more than a simple march. It requires discipline and sometimes doing things you don’t like. Personally, think of changing a small habit. How hard is it to make that small shift? Hence the importance of teaching the right habits in childhood!
3 Pieces of Roti

I want 3 pieces of roti
Round, crisp, golden brown
I get nothing but a frown
But I want those 3 pieces of roti.

I clean the gravy off my dupata
I wonder if my mother heard me stutter
As I called for some food.
I look for my brother’s face
In the clutter on his plate
Amongst the trillion little pieces of roti
I know my father doesn’t care
And when he lovingly stares
At the 3 dots on my shalwar
I know he is not thinking about my 3 pieces of roti

I could swoon at death’s feet
If it wasn’t for the morning feast
A lot of air, a bit of meat.
I will fold them all neat
my stains and my marks
For your rotten stars

And when clowns paraded naked on the street
Shot dead at my feet
Were being robbed of laughter
And innocence
Nothing but a few cents
They earned that night.
And all I could think about were my 3 pieces of roti.

By
Aksa Bilal
BEYOND SURVIVAL

An interview with Tiffany Williams

Tiffany Williams is the coordinator of the Beyond Survival campaign of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which works to build survivor leadership and awareness of human trafficking of domestic workers in the United States and around the world. She talks about her work and study on human trafficking and domestic workers across the United States, and the journey behind putting together the report as part of the Beyond Survival Campaign.

I started off about ten years ago. I started as a social worker and was working with women trafficked into the US nannies, caregivers and maids. They came from all over. What we did in 2010, to review all our cases. We looked to see what the impact of our work had been. While we thought we did help a lot of people and were survivor centred, we were not seeing a change in the scenario. If you took a case each from 1998 and 2008, and just changed the dates, you’ll find the case being the same. The kinds of abuse we see in our field are very much tied to issues about migration, labour rights, gender, economic inequality, climate change and foreign policy – all of which relate to issues that people are aware of on a global scale. But, somehow, it hasn’t entered the consciousness about trafficking. We decided to do something different. The cases were not different, so we had to be different. We joined the National Domestic Workers’ Alliance. It has 44 affiliate organizations and the groups are in places all around the country and their focus is on domestic workers’ issues and rights, and not just on trafficking. The situation of discrimination and exploitation that the industry itself faces – which is a global problem, not confined to the US or India. It is a condition typical to women’s work in the informal economy.

Our services are based on consent – that’s how we start. What’s interesting about the way trafficking is being addressed globally is that it is looked at as a criminal issue that requires criminal intervention. Trafficking is seen as a criminal problem – looking at it as a victim and as perpetrator is short-sighted. Many of them say that they migrate owing to family needs, climate, trade or policy. There was no safe place to stay in, and are forced to migrate into a system that is strict about migration. Migration happens outside legal channels. What we’ve seen now is that, what we are concerned about is that there is a lot of push towards court-styled intervention, which makes it a problem between choosing to go into forced services or jail. That’s true mostly for sex workers in the US. With domestic workers and immigrant labourers, the situation is deportation or sentencing. It becomes a difficult model to tackle. I work only with domestic workers – but we are in solidarity with the others in the cause, so it matters how they are treated. We start with consent. Does the person want to be in the service? Do they have the ability leave at any point? We take care of their immediate needs at first. Safety, respect, immediate needs like housing, shelter and healthcare are given first. We see our work as service providers as being a source of information and coordination. There are a lot of stakeholders in a trafficking situation – we have to deal with the NGO, the police, the government and all of the different service providers that are out there. As a social worker, the service provider is supposed to be the key. We also work on survivor-led goal planning. When we do our case management, we ask our survivor what they want to do next.
Obviously, safety and related concerns are a priority, but we ensure that each goal is led by the survivor. One of the things we do is also to tell testimonies. We believe that testimonies can be a healing process if the process is done right. We work with survivors and encourage them to share their testimonies on a consent basis. But unlike the conventional form of telling testimonies, we follow a system that goes beyond just being a survivor. Most often NGOs think of looking at telling stories as a way to position a survivor and an advocate, and then telling the survivor to keep recounting the “sad” story, and then turning to the advocate to ask them what they suggest is a way to change the scenario. Instead, we get the advocate to step back and ask the survivor to share her story with the vision she has for herself and the vision she has for policy change and for the world.

Trafficking takes away choice, and the ability to choose what you want to do at any minute in your life. We try to continually build up an environment of choice for our survivors. We also do a lot of resilience work with our survivors. When we talk about resilience, we think about our role not as saviours and not as people who have solutions to all their problems, we work to help them connect to their own sense of resilience and healing. There are things that we do and already do in our lives to heal from our pain. We try to bring that out in our survivors. Social services in the US are time limited, so we try to make sure that our survivors are on their path to self sufficiency. We start with consent. Does the person want to be in the service? Do they have the ability leave at any point? We take care of their immediate needs at first. Safety, respect, immediate needs like housing, shelter and healthcare are given first. We see our work as service providers as being a source of information and coordination. There are a lot of stakeholders in a trafficking situation — we have to deal with the NGO, the police, the government and all of the different service providers that are out there. As a social worker, the service provider is supposed to be the key. We also work on survivor-led goal planning. When we do our case management, we ask our survivor what they want to do next. Obviously, safety and related concerns are a priority, but we ensure that each goal is led by the survivor.

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Palestine’s Child

One two three
Lead uncovering his skin
Cutting through, slicing through
Meat in the dirt

Something dug a hole
Someone sighed
Cracked through the air
Left a leaking samurai

Someone laughed
Tugging at the pain
Gently pulling him in
Terribly pulling him out

Out and about they went
Like any summer day
All frail and fettered
Like any Today

At every dance and turn
The earth shook a little
Palestine incarcerated
And everything that hibernated
Woke up once again

And as sleep fell onto his eyes
He struggled just a little
Counting all the years
And one less flame

As he started to walk his walk
He left a dream toiling in the mud
A weeping willow and a whistle
A Palestine untouched.

By
Aksa Bilal
Aarefa Johari is a journalist and an activist working on fighting Female Genital Mutilation in the Bohra Community in India. Her work has touched the lives of several families - some of whom have come back to Aarefa with the self-promise to the effect that they will not circumcise their girls. Here’s an interview with Aarefa.

Can you talk about your story, and what inspired you to take to a career in gender advocacy?
I’m not sure I can say that I have a 'career' in gender advocacy, but calling out gender inequalities is definitely my biggest preoccupation most of the time. I was, fortunately, brought up to question everything, and being a journalist definitely helps keep me grounded to the issues that really matter. But I’d say the rampant sexism and patriarchy all around us is itself a constant "inspiration" for speaking out - I mean, how is patriarchy still a thing? It has been the longest-running human rights violation since perhaps the beginning of time, and it has been decades since large-scale women’s movements emerged in different parts of the world, but we're still nowhere near the end of our fight - and that's just for the basics. So I try to do what I can.

What prompted the birth of your activism specifically for FGM? How did the idea come about?
Bohra girls are circumcised when they are seven, which is too young to give consent or know what is being done to them. I began to understand the implications of my circumcision much later, when I was in my teens, and for a long time, I placed the blame on my mother for letting it happen. My mother would read articles about FGC and discuss them openly with me, but to a large extent, she used to believe that if the religious leader (the Bohra Syedna) insists on the practice, there must be a good reason for it. I don't hold anything against my mother anymore - I know she was just a part of a larger social system that thrives on religious brainwashing, and it is the system itself that needs to change. I started talking about FGC among Bohras only around three years ago, after an anonymous Bohra woman started a change.org petition to urge the late Syedna to stop this practice. The petition started getting a lot of media attention, and journalists wanted to speak to Bohra women who would talk about the practice without concealing their identities. I seemed to be among the very few Bohras who didn't mind speaking out publicly, because this practice is very secretive and controversial, but compulsory, so speaking against the Bohra establishment could mean being boycotted from the community. I am not religious or involved in community activities, so that was not a concern for me, and fortunately my immediate family has been quite supportive. So far, my activism has not been very intense - I am part of a small group of people fighting this practice (which includes both Bohras and a non-Bohra filmmaker Priya Goswami, who made the award-winning documentary A Pinch of Skin) and we have been trying to bring attention to this issue through the media and having more intimate discussions with Bohras in small groups.
Could you talk about some of the key challenges you encountered in your journey?
So far, the Bohra religious leaders or administration have not reacted at all to any of the media discussions on FGC - I suppose by ignoring dissent, they expect it to die out, whereas if they react, it will lead to a more open debate within the community, and they will realise that quite a lot of Bohras are now actually opposed to the practice but haven't been voicing their dissent. Our attempts to speak to the doctors who perform the cut on young girls in Mumbai have not been very successful, because they have been asked to remain silent on this subject by the religious heads. But we have found out that the community authorities train specific midwives and doctors to perform circumcision on girls and maintain a list of those authorised to do the cutting - a midwife or a doctor not on the list cannot cut a girl. They are trained to cut just the tip of the clitoral hood (which would qualify as Type 1 FGM by WHO standards). And there are some doctors who genuinely believe that the intention of the practice is to enhance sexual pleasure, and not moderate sexual desire (as most of the community has long accepted as the reason). The biggest challenge, I would say, is access to the community members themselves. Bohras are a very close-knit, huddled community where all activities are closely monitored by the authorities, so for those who want to belong, it is very difficult to express dissent. And this practice has been so secretive for so long, it is not easy to get people to debate this in larger groups, which is what we aim to do. We also want to make sure we don't antagonise the community by targeting a practice it holds so sacred.

What were some of your strategies in dealing with the challenges?
For now, we are trying to spread awareness by speaking to community members in small groups, and we have decided to take the path of education, debate and discussions within the community, instead of going in for any kind of litigation that might antagonise people.

What are we ignoring in our work towards Bohra women?
The Bohras pride themselves on being progressive and liberal when it comes to women, and it is true that almost all Bohra women are educated today, many of them working in different careers. But it is still the only community in Islam that practices FGC, and when you unpack this aspect of their beliefs, all the typical patriarchal attitudes towards women come pouring out - most Bohras believe that women have too much sexual energy that needs to be curbed to keep them clean and chaste. The patriarchy of the Bohras is no different from that of any other traditional community, and recently, the new Syedna has only made things more blatant by declaring in sermons that girls should not be sent to universities or be allowed to work in call centres, that they should cover up their bodies if they want to remain virtuous and that they should be encouraged to pursue cooking and stitching clothes...
The fact that this is a highly educated community that considers itself elite amongst other Muslims is a grim reminder that education is often not enough to genuinely liberate the mind. The only answer, I think, is more education, but of a different kind that focuses more on critical thinking.

Why does a practice like FGM continue to thrive? What are its key drivers?
FGC thrives because the powers that be in the community have, through decades of patriarchal social systems, managed to pull of a massive brainwashing exercise that makes women believe and accept that they are the inferior founts of social evil and sexual energy who must be tamed, so to speak, in order to maintain a virtuous society. Like any other patriarchal tradition, this is engrained deep within our subconscious minds from the time we are young, so that even if we think we are liberal, we continue the practice from mother to daughter because it's just something that must be done. What drives this practice on is an active discouragement of independent and critical questioning of anything to do with religion. It's really typical - you make religion this sacred island that must not be touched no mater how much the world around it changes, you encourage every kind of modernity but make a virtue out of preserving religion in its traditional form, and then convince people to practice all kinds of nonsense in the name of religion (because FGC is not really an Islamic practice).
We were sure Black did, too

We stood in groups
   Peering through
Fascinating as it was
   He tore her clothes
   He broke her nose
   O, how vile she was!
What devilry! What venom!
   We could all see it through
So we stood around in circles
   We were sure Black did too

What fate she deserved!
   What beating she got!
Her own father ashamed
   So we came forward
To give him a hand
   Whipped-
   Scorned-
   Slapped-
   Broke-
   Nothing really enough
So we dragged her through the mud
   Making sure she screamed

   We pushed
   We pulled and shoved
   One way and another
   Until her skin broke loose
   Her bones screamed- one then another
Whipped! Scorned! Slapped! Broken!
My nails cracked
My skin broke
I yelled for help
I begged my father
But in some roar I got consumed
Happily he dragged me through the mud
Ready to say good-bye
And as they helped separate mud from earth
There was nothing left but a sad lullaby

Stop his hands!
Stop the beating!
Don’t you hear her scream?
You the one who stares away!
Can’t you see her bleeding?
I am illiterate, a dead mother
But you? Can’t you see her breaking?
Stop his hands!
Stop the beating!

What black creature the vile girl!
Dark-skinned just like her mother used to be
Blood to blood-her mother’s lad
Never her father’s daughter

So we watched around in circles
On one rainy afternoon
And one by one
We became heroes
As we finished un-staining the world.

By
Aksa Bilal
It is one thing to choose to be peaceful in life. It is another thing to devote your life to peace, being peaceful, and to passing the warmth of peace along to those around you. Mohammed Ghabriss, a young peace worker of Lebanese origin, has changed the world around him, one person at a time. Here’s his story as a peace worker.

I believe what got me into peace work is my passion towards working with people and connecting with complete strangers and make them part of my life. That sense of responsibility towards people from different communities and religions to brighten their spirits and do the best I can to light that candle of love and self-appreciation in their hearts. For two years, I’ve been associated with a movement called Initiatives of Change, and it’s all about bringing change to your heart and inspire others through your personal change, simply by bringing peace to one’s soul by putting things right in one’s life.

It all started with the apology that I made to my father. I apologized for being rude, disrespectful and unappreciative to any of his hard work. I reconciled my relationship with him, and that unblocked something that was in my heart, it allowed more space for love within me, and more peace that made me believe that I am able to bridge the gaps between my separated communities in Lebanon and bringing people together, simply by filling the gaps in my own personal life that empowered me to look beyond. Since childhood, I grew up with a sense of curiosity. I grew up always wanting to know and to understand the world around me. In order to do so, I learned that there are some risks that are needed to be taken. I just love to meet people, understand them and get to know them, have a taste of what their lives would look like. I love the arts and literature. That repertoire includes drawing, photography, writing and reading. I am very passionate about travelling and discovering new places.

I was born in Lebanon but been raised in Saudi Arabia for almost 14 years. I studied in an international school, and was surrounded by people from different countries, backgrounds, and religions. I went back to Lebanon where I studied my 12th Standard, and did my Bachelor’s Degree in Business Management.

Soon after my graduation a friend of mine told me about a 6-months-long internship happening in India with an organization called initiatives of change. So we both applied, not knowing what to expect but knew for sure that it’s going to be an unforgettable experience. We also knew that it’s going to be challenging, yet full of learning and discoveries.
And indeed it was an unforgettable experience that exceeded our expectations. The beauty of it that it didn’t offer anything special or extra, it was what we made out of the experience and what meant to us personally. I am back again associated with an outreach-based program in India for the first year and around the world in the coming two years. Visiting places and interacting with tribal and rural people no one thinks of visiting or considering.

I think the main challenge that I faced, was myself. In terms of setting myself free from being self-centered and focusing only on my own needs. Instead of thinking of others first, which blocked my compassion and love towards others, blinding me from caring fully for others and sensing their needs and requests.

I’m in the process, constantly being aware when a certain act or behavior I’m conducting is coming out of a selfish or selfless space. And I think what makes me rise above my personal needs is that sense of satisfaction that I get when I m able make a difference in somebody’s life, by the simplest acts of kindness coming from the heart. And that is what motivates me to keep on doing what I am doing and to be constantly thinking of how can I always give my best, and what is it that I can do for others.

My dream for individuals all over the world is for them to realize their true-selves in whatever they’re doing and wherever they are. To be able to light their sparks within, and have the courage to follow their hearts, find their gifts, and give them away for others.

Imagine if every single person in this world cared for others instead of oneself only. What would our world look like?
I Remember

I remember,
When I opened my eyes,
Your sun-washed face was tense,
'It's a girl', you said,
But your sadness didn't make sense..

I remember,
When I started walking,
Your shoulders had stooped down a bit,
I thought it was to hold me from falling,
But it was the burden, wasn't it?

I remember,
When I saw my brothers going to school,
You chided me for asking for a slate,
I thought I'd done something wrong,
I should have known it was my fate..

I remember,
When you gave my brothers more food,
I ate my hunger and slept at night,
Even that couldn't make you happy,
I just could not do anything right..

I remember,
When I played with the tattered doll,
You married mine to the other,
I thought you were playing with me,
Before you gave yours to him forever..

I remember,
When he hit me, abused me, bruised me,
I thought you'd come take me away,
I knew you heard me from across the wall,
That was where I wept all day..

I remember,
When I screamed that night,
My eyes were wet but no one else cried,
Relief screamed in your silent eyes,
The night your little girl had died.

By
Ashay Abbhi
OUR ROOF IS THE SKY. OUR LIMIT IS THE SKY.

An interview with Zephania

It is not often that one leads by example, and from alongside. For Zephaniah, the brain behind Zephaniah Free Education, changing the world one person at a time was simply a matter of taking education to the masses. Here’s her story.

I was a very, very naughty child in my growing years. But I was also a leader at school – very sure of what I wanted to do. You see, I had plans of becoming a lawyer. I was thirteen when my first article on Women’s Rights appeared in a very famous newspaper in Pakistan, called Jung. I was always a dreamer and wanted to fly real high. My lifestyle, though, was a different one – though I had everything everyone else did, I always wanted to explore everything that was different.

My mother, like every mother in my country, used to tell me that one day, I would get married. This was what I was brought up on. I remember having always thought to myself, “No! God has not sent me in this world only to get married!” I was sure I had to do much more in life. My heart always told me that it wasn’t so.

As a child, I was very sensitive. In the course of my growing years, one incident changed my life forever - I left my school when I was in Grade Seven. What’s different about that? I decided never go back to that school again. I was so humiliated by what happened. One day while at school, I delivered a speech to my class, acting like a teacher. I was standing on the teacher’s chair. When our teacher came into class, she lost her temper and started beating me for my little tirade, in front of my classmates. She abused me and all the other girls made fun of me. I was just crying and crying. I was hurt mentally and psychologically. This was not the right way to teach a child who was just being a child.

In my state of mind then, I just surprised them all by leaving school then and there – and all at once, my life changed. All my dreams were over. While my parents tried to force me to join other schools, I stayed staunch and simply did not give in. But I never stopped studying. I started my own studies in the comfort of my home, privately. I taught myself - I never took any tuitions. Along with this, I decided to teach other girls – but with respect, love and care that I was not given in my school. I volunteered to have girls over - I started making home visits in my village. I made pamphlets to distribute among people. I told everyone that it will be free education. I walked even further, and went to tell people about my school in the nearby villages to convince them to send their girls. I told them that I would teach them English for free. I started visiting people with my mother on every Sunday, but no one was ready at first.

It was funny for the people around me - no one trusted me and no one was ready to join my school because I was just 13 years old. But I kept going simply because I did not want any child to experience what had happened to me. I decided that I would never use a stick in my school, and that I would make education interesting for the children.
In the beginning, there was only one student, I started it in open air and even today, there is no building. When I started, there was no pen, no copy machine and I only had a few books. In the summer, we sit under the sun, in winter we sit under blankets made as tents. When it rains, we have to shut shop. Our roof is the sky. Our limit is the sky.

At sixteen, I did my matriculation after training myself for it. I started a job as a receptionist in a telecom franchise, where I was being paid $15 a month. This was the amount I started using to buy stationery and other supplies for my school. Since then, I have continued working. I did my Masters degree in Political science in 2010, and another Masters degree, this time in History, in 2013. All this education, I continue to pursue without any institution’s help or the involvement of any teacher.

Up until now, I have taught about 500 girls. I have five centres now:
The Women’s Learning Centre: It has twenty students and we work to teach stitching, embroidery and other soft skills.
Formal Education: We have one hundred students, and we teach formal education.
English language course: We have fifteen girls as students.
Computer Centre: We have ten students and train them to learn and use computers
Beauty Salon Training Centre: We have ten students – and train them up in beauty therapy and the art of running a salon.

All this, I do as a volunteer. We provide all services free of charge. I am also doing working in a bigger organization for my students and for myself. I am the Administrator of the World Wide Women's Community Page, on Facebook. I write blogs for a few websites on women’s issues in my part of the world. I am still studying. I am learning journalism from World Pulse and World Wide Women. I produce theatrical info-dramas in my community to give them messages of peace and respect for women, and on the importance of education.

My support system is my family, and my co-workers at office. They give me moral support to carry on. Of course, my very kind and loving friends all over the world give me opportunities to explore options and ideas. In my part of the world, we need to work on improving education. It is just the beginning of my work.

Here in my part of the world, women have to suffer all their life. They are tortured mentally and physically. They are not given education. They are not empowered. Child marriage and honour killings continue to thrive, and needs to be put to an end. When I look at the condition and helplessness of many women around me, it gives me the spirit to go ahead, to never stop, and to just keep going. I know there is only one solution to all our problems: and that is education and awareness. I want every girl to be educated, empowered and protected, and for this I will keep working throughout my life.
Peace

I gaze through the clouds of smoke
his wails pierce the noises around..
And I reach, descend upon him
he’s now a tiny body on the ground..

I see them destroy her savagely
her tender heart filled with despair..
I touch her as she calls my name
it is now a silence hung in the air..

Another one cries from behind me
I turn as he falls in a pool of red..
I kneel beside his cold still body
I am finally here, I said..

He fought valiantly for it
but the final betrayal is what he chose..
They said he would live only for it
but he kisses me as he goes..

She hides behind a wall
her baby close as they wait..
Their distinct cries beckon me
I reach just a bit too late..

As unspoken prayers are etched in the air
screaming silences begin to cease..
I came in war and now look around
the whole world rests in peace.

By
Ashay Abbhi
Sometimes, the catalyst for change needn't be external: but can come from within. Sophie Otiende is a chip of an inspiring block, and is not one to be defeated by life's curveballs. An integral part of HAART Kenya, where she works as a consultant, Sophie shares her story.

I grew up with a father and mother who believed in gender equality but the society around me believed different. They thought my parents were letting a little girl run loose yet the world does not allow that. I knew from an early age that being bold and outspoken was not going to make me popular. However, I purposed at an early age that girls like me would not have to change who they are to fit in the society.

I decided to study education in school because I knew that that is what I needed to do. I knew that the change that I wanted to see would only come through education. Women and girls have to be taught how to look at themselves and see the potential that they have. They have to be taught that some of the demands that society places upon them are wrong. The only demand that we have to honor is to become true to ourselves. As a society we also have to change how we treat human beings because that is what women are. They are human beings first.

I started volunteering in organizations since I was 15. The experience has allowed me to develop into a consultant for organizations over the years. I like coming up with ideas that organizations can implement to create change in the society. Currently, I am working to end human trafficking with Awareness Against Human Trafficking (HAART Kenya). Most of the people affected by trafficking are women. I am passionate about this specific issue because I was once a victim and realizing how widespread this issue is in my country spurred me to action. I work to rehabilitate victims of human trafficking back to the society.

I suffered sexual abuse at an early age and the person that committed the act always reminded me that it was discipline. This was what happened to girls who were too intelligent and too loud. They had to be taught their place. This only made me angry since the person that abused me was not a stranger but someone close. I decided that I would not let the incident define me. I would not let him win by becoming who he wanted me to be. I was going to rebel by becoming his worst nightmare: a strong, bold and outspoken woman speaking against social injustice.

I have been through sexual abuse more than once and that leaves scars and dealing with those scars have been a personal challenge for me. I am very idealistic and that rubs people the wrong way sometimes so getting an organization that can be able to accommodate my strong opinions has not been easy. Corruption is also a challenge. Dealing with corrupt systems both in the government and in non-governmental organizations is also difficult and waters down the work that we do.
I am learning to appreciate who I am and I have sought professional help for my personal issues. Working as a consultant makes it easy for me to be independent in the work that I do while still contributing in a team. I am still learning different ways to deal with corruption. I will expose corruption when I find it in my space.

What saddens me is that the challenges that women face are mostly imposed by the society. It is her brother, father and teacher that inflicts pain to her. I think that we are moving in the right direction but there is still more to do to ensure that women are safe and they can thrive. I think what we are ignoring when discussing the gender conversation is identity. We have focused so much on what is happening to women that we have forgotten that part of the problem is that a woman has always been told who she is and who she is not.

Society expectations of women are simple to downright ridiculous. She is expected to be beautiful, submissive, weak and strong at the same time. Women do not get the opportunity to choose without being judged for their choices. If they decide to stay childless, they are selfish. If they decide to pursue a career, they are too ambitious. If they stay at home, feminists will judge her for not choosing the opposite. We demand that she becomes the goals that our project has set out. How can she identify herself when the programs that we set up also give her another identity?

I have a simple dream for women that they can be who they are and not apologize. We as women have apologized for so long. It is time for each woman to define herself and when we do that we can fully thrive. I want to meet more women who are unapologetic about who they are and are making a difference in their society.
SURVIVOR STORIES

Stories of people who rose above adversities with sheer grit and determination across the world
Surviving the Boko Haram

The story of Deborah Peters

The Hudson Institute has been involved in Human Rights work for several years now. Their Center for Religious Freedom (CRF) has worked to tell stories that needed to be told, for several years, now. The CRF brought together Emmanuel Ogebe, a human rights lawyer and US-Nigeria relations expert, and Deborah Peters, a survivor of Boko Haram violence from Chibok, Nigeria, in a recent discussion chaired by Nina Shea. The entire event is available on video. Deborah’s story alone is transcribed and presented below, with permission from the Hudson Institute.

On December 22, 2011, at about 7:00 PM, my brother and I were at home, and we began to hear the sound of guns being shot. My brother called my father and told him not to come back home because of all the firing. My father told my brother to forget about it, since this wasn’t the first time that he was coming home when people outside were fighting. He told us that he would come home, and in some time, he did. When he reached, he told us that he wanted to take a shower since it was hot. At about 7:30 PM, three men knocked on our door, and my brother opened the door for them. They asked him where my father was. He told them that our father was upstairs in the bathroom, taking a shower.

They waited for my father for about three minutes, and then went ahead and dragged him out of the shower, saying that they didn’t have any time to wait for him. When they took him out of the bathroom, they told him that he had to deny his faith. He told them that he wouldn’t deny his faith. They then told him that if he did not deny his faith, they would kill him. He told them that he would rather die than go to hellfire. He told them that God said that anyone that denied him will be denied in heaven. My father then refused to deny his faith once again, and they shot him thrice in the chest. My brother was shocked, and kept repeating, “What did my dad do to you? Why did you kill him?”

They told him to be quiet, threatening to shoot him if he didn’t quieten down. There were three men that night – one who was a leader, one that seemed to be a second in command, and a third who seemed like a servant. The servant suggested killing my brother, but the second in command said that he was too young. The leader, though, agreed with the servant, saying that he had a point – if my brother stayed, he would grow up and become a pastor like my dad, so the leader told him to kill my brother. They shot him twice on his chest and he fell. Once he fell, he began moving – so they went ahead and shot him again, on his mouth. He fell down and died. I didn’t know what was happening – they put me in the middle of my dad and my brother, and on the next day, the army came and picked us up – them to the mortuary, and me to the hospital.

Deborah Peters is fifteen, and is from Chibok, Nigeria. She is the sole survivor of her household that was attacked by the Boko Haram while on an ethnic cleansing campaign in Nigeria.
"We don’t need your bare knowledge, we need action."

The story of Ameena Sawwan

Stories from the battleground can shock anyone’s conscience. It is no surprise that the repertoire of narratives coming out of Syria can leave you with sleepless nights, as it did, for us. We recently got to talk to Ameena Sawwan, a brave young girl from Syria, who is currently outside her country. A true account from the war zone, Ameena’s story will move you to act.

My name is Ameena Sawwan. I am 23 years old. I lived in Moadomiya, a city that is on the Western Suburban Part of Damascus. My college was close to the middle of the capital city, Damascus, and I would travel by bus to study there. It didn’t take any more than seven minutes each day to make the trip to college, where I was studying translation at the beginning of the revolution. I had to leave the course midway, though, because I couldn’t handle the wronging that was going on, so I began joining the demonstration against the government. The revolution in Syria began in Damascus on March 15, 2011, and six days after that, on March 21, 2011, it began in Moadomiya. So it wasn’t really very far off after the Daraa Demonstrations.

We protested only with flowers, posters and placards. But the regime did not like that one bit. The regime began arresting, killing and torturing people that protested against it. In the beginning, they repeatedly arrested my cousins, uncles and even my father for a while. Over 2000 people were killed in my city, and still more left when the regime forced evacuations in retaliation to hunger strikes. During one such incident, twelve civilians died, one of which included my three-year-old cousin. The regime only sees the protesting masses as being against the regime: it doesn’t matter to them that the mass of civilians include children that are so young. To them, we were just liars, and we were just trying to disrupt peace.

On December 23, 2013, I left Syria illegally with my cousin. I was wanted by the regime and I simply had to escape at the earliest. I am going to tell you a part of my story during this revolution. I was working in Moadomiya as a volunteer in providing psycho-social support for children. We had three centres in Syria, and called it the Vision for Syria Project. We helped children to heal, and try to forget what was going on around them. The war is harshest on children – they cry in hunger, and simply cannot sleep because of their empty stomachs. Parents don’t have a choice but to tell them stories and sing to them and put them to sleep. Simple things that the world outside takes for granted – a slab of chocolate, a packet of chips and crisps – are such huge dreams for the children in the siege. They live under terrible, terrible trauma. I would try to help them by diverting their attention from the trauma with stories and songs.

Can you imagine how they lived, during the war? Moadomiya had no electricity for two years. It is 2014 – can you imagine a life without electricity? You cannot charge your mobile phones, no fridges, no television, no laptop, no lights – nothing! You don’t know at night if your eyes are closed or open: all you see is darkness everywhere. We relied on generators which we used to charge car batteries,
which we used to charge all our electrical appliances. You see, Bashar Assad tried to kill everything: men, women, children, beloved ones of those of us who live on. But he couldn’t kill one thing: our hope.

On the night of the Chemical Attack, August 21, 2013, I was awake until the wee hours of the morning. At 2:00 AM, I was looking through Youtube to find resources for the children. My friend had sent me a link of a series of videos of chemical attacks in the Eastern Part of Damascus. People were convulsing, shaking and trembling weirdly. I had never seen anything like it before: it was just horrible. I remember wondering how they could do it, and how they could hurt people like this. Three hours later, unexpectedly, we were attacked. We never thought it possible – the three earlier attacks had happened in the Western Part of Damascus, and here we were in the East. We actually believed that Moadamiya would not be attacked so easily because it was so close to Damascus – and that any attack on us would have a backfire on himself. Clearly, though, as we learned later, he was prepared. There were systematic evacuations of all the military points, and those that remained wore gas masks.

Within moments of the attack, I started to have shortness of breath. I went crazy – I just went and woke everyone up in my household. We lived in a basement – and there were fifteen of us: my brother, their wives and kids, my parents, my cousin Heba and I. We were most afraid for my one month old niece, Haneen, because she was only just an infant. In the attack, the regime had hit us with hundreds of mortar shells. Within minutes, there were tremendous rounds of ground to ground missiles. The Airplane MIC did nineteen shots in the civilian neighbourhood. This was not new: we faced horrible shelling since the beginning of the revolution. It was very clear that they wanted to break in from all sides of the city – and surrounded it with military points before the revolution. We were right in the middle of a mountain and flat land – and the mountains served as a vantage point for the troops to look over from, to see all that was happening on the ground. They were trained to break us from all the sides. On the day of the attack, sarin gas was released onto us, and missiles were being fired simultaneously. It was a harrowing experience: should we run upstairs and risk being shot, or should we stay down and risk the settling down of the heavy sarin gas into our basement quarters? We were doomed to die either way.

Having volunteered at a field hospital every now and then – it wasn’t much of a hospital really - it was only a 300 square feet large room in a basement. My cousin Heba and I somehow ran there at the earliest to help and to get help. People were in bad shape: there was shrapnel everywhere, people were suffocating, convulsing and were wounded. It was really, really horrible. We asked the doctors and the staff at the field hospital what we could do – but truly, there was nothing much we could do. We soaked blankets in vinegar and tried to block the noses of people from directly inhaling the chemical filled air. It was nothing really, it was no help: it felt like we were just doing this to be able to tell ourselves that we had done something to help. It was dreadful to see what was happening. 43 people had died already: their faces like those of sleeping angels. More and more people were coming in, and we needed place. We physically moved the 43 corpses into the building next door. The shelling was crazy – it was terrible. to see the streets being filled with bodies: bodies of people who were already killed with the chemical gas, but were shelled after they were dead with the missiles being fired. As we worked with the people who came to the hospital, the doctors and the staff began to feel dizzy with the effects of the sarin gas and the trauma.
At one point, I was beside a doctor who was attending to a baby in his hand – perhaps about ten months or a year old at the most. He asked me to hold the baby because he was feeling dizzy, and I did that. I held the baby, and tried to give him CPR. Just then, my cousin Heba asked me what I was doing, because the baby was dead. I just couldn’t believe it – they could all be sleeping, these poor people who had died. It was just too painful. We had lost connection with another brother of mine in Moadamiya, so we had no idea of his family and their state in the face of the attacks. Heba and I were feeling dizzy, and our eyes were beginning to burn. We didn’t want to demand time and attention from the doctors who could be well treating those in more severe need. We left the place, and on our way back, we simply couldn’t see anything before us because our eyes were burning. On that day alone, 82 civilians had died in Moadamiya.

We went home, and we figured out that my brother and his family are all fine still. On August 29, 2013, a young girl who had lost her family entirely to the attack, save for her grandparents, was to get married. Her grandparents wanted to ensure that there would be someone to take care of her since she had lost her family, and decided to host her wedding. We went to her place, as is the practice in our culture, to wait for the groom. About fifteen of us women sat beside her. We heard some mortar shells, and about two or three fell close to where we sat. We didn’t care: we were just too used to it. Once the ceremonies had been completed, Heba and my sister in law, who had also gone with me, wanted to pray there. I decided to pray at home, so I did not accompany them to the house next door to pray. About ten minutes had passed, when a woman came to me and asked if I was Ameenah. I said yes, I was Ameenah. She told me, her face creased with worry and grief, that my brother, his wife and one son were killed in the mortar shelling.

I just ran outside. I ran, screaming, crying and shouting. Women around and about over there tried to stop me, to ask me why I was crying, to ask me what had happened. I just didn’t stop. I was crying. I was shocked! When Heba and my sister-in-law came to me, I just pushed them and ran into the main road, where a car pulled up. I stopped the car and asked the driver to take me to the field hospital, where the lady said my brother, sister-in-law and nephew were. We were crying inside the car, and the kindly driver tried to console us, asking what had happened all the time. Midway, the car broke down. We walked the remainder of the distance, and just outside the field hospital, I stood to catch my breath. Nothing prepared me for what I saw next.

My brother, my sister in law and my nephew Ahmed, were all in coffins. My nephew was their second child, aged only seven. He looked like an angel sleeping. They did not allow me to see my brother’s face: I tried opening the coffin, but they stopped me, saying that the damage to his head and face was far too severe and we couldn’t take it. My brother and sister-in-law had three children – Fatima, aged 8, Ahmed, aged 7, and Mohammed Khair, aged 5. I couldn’t see Fatima and Mohammed around, and it was then that a doctor told me to come along to see the two of them. The doctor told me to breathe and to be calm, and to be strong for my mother. The doctor and the nurses tried to take me away from my brother’s coffin to be with the two children, and I went ahead. Meanwhile, they were taking my brother, sister in law and Ahmed to the graveyard. We couldn’t find my other brother, for him to come see them before the burial. I remember hugging my mother and crying – but my mother pushed me away. It was too overwhelming. She just kept touching the bodies and whispering in their ears.
They were gone. They were gone, whisked to a place where they will know no pain, no hunger, no war, no darkness. They will only know light, forever, and God, forever. It was a horrible, horrible thing for me to leave Syria. I cannot even visit my family. Everyone is still there in Moadamiya, and I am here alone. I miss my family so much.

Bashar Assad will still use weapons to kill us all. It is not just the chemical weapons. He used all kinds of weapons before, during and after the chemical weapons. He is killing his own people and the world is watching. The UN, the US, and countless other countries: they all know what is happening, and have even said so. But no one, no one is helping us. No one is doing anything for us. We don’t need your bare knowledge, we need action. We are a peaceful people and we are being killed mercilessly.
When the Arab Spring began in 2010-2011, it seemed like the conversion from dictatorial governments to democracies was really all that there was to the revolutionary movements. But with time, the impact that these movements and the ensuing civil wars had on gender dynamics soon became cause for concern. In Libya, there were many horrific reports about how Muammar Gaddafi ordered that his troops take on supplies of Viagra to engage in rape as a weapon in their war against the rebelling forces. These incidents were reflective of a continuing community status quo that preceded the revolution – where women were subjected to untold horrors in the hands of the Gaddafi regime. Laila (name changed) shares her story with us.

My story doesn’t begin with the Arab Spring, actually, but pre-dates it considerably. I was born to a conservative Libyan family in Misrata, where we lived until I was five. It was a simple life, I had a very normal childhood and that was that. When I turned five, my father managed to get a job in the government, so we had to move to the capital city, Tripoli. I was quite excited about the shift – because so many people told us plenty of things about the place, and it was such a dream.

The first few years were magnificent. I went to a school I loved, and I had lots of friends. On many occasions, Muammar Gaddafi would visit our school. The one time that he did – that remains in my memory for reasons you will soon know - changed my life for the worst. He surveyed many girls in the school campus, peering at us as if we were curios in a museum. By the time school had ended, a list of girls was rounded up. I counted six of us, all in different ages on the teenage spectrum. The next thing we know, we were rounded up and taken away.

I didn’t know what it was for, but a sense of fear did prevail over me. I was wary of everything, and I didn’t open my mouth to voice my concern to the other girls. Some of them cried, some of them were mumbling away incoherently as they tried to make head or tail of what was happening to us. We were taken into his living quarters – a place called Bab Al Azizia. I didn’t know that this would be my “home” for the next many years. In the days to come, I would be part of his harem of women – women he would rape and abuse without as much as a care. We were not the only women facing this – sometimes, there would be foreigners – beautiful exotic women who came from all over the world. They would be raped, too, but they would all be given gifts and money and sent back to wherever it was that they came from.

As for us girls – we really had nothing to do except to be there for each other. Some of us would come back nursing wounds and pain like nothing before. We would cry to each other, and find solace in the other’s reassuring embrace, remembering our powerless mothers who had to let this happen in the face of terrible force and threats. We were brutally raped, injured and forced to do terrible things to appease his filthy, lust-filled ways.
On one of the days, I got lucky. I ran away after throwing them off my trail when I offered to help go to the marketplace. I do believe they searched for me – I am not sure what came of it for the ones that were sent out to look for me. Eventually, I lived in hiding, scavenging and becoming unidentifiable. I did not attempt to reach my family – I did know that my father was still with the government and things could turn worse for him if he found me at his doorstep.

In 2011, the revolution began. I gave it my everything - participating in it with all the strength I could possibly muster. I was just in my late teens – the promise of a future without Gaddafi was a powerful and inspiring dream. At one point, though, I was thrown back into the old life that I lived – men in uniform began to rape and beat me ruthlessly, I was used over and over again, and the violence was destructive to my emotional, mental and of course, physical well-being.

I was crippled by the pain, and I recollect only vaguely: I woke up in different places, each time feeling like someone had hit my head hard. Finally, it all ended – one of the men who aided the rebellion – took me under his care. I do believe, as I am told even today, I put up a fierce resistance. The irony makes me smile even today – I did nothing to protect myself against the carnivorous animals that harmed me all the time, but here I was, the first man who tried to protect me got a horrible dose of my rudeness. He saved me from being abused even further, and kept me in safe quarters. We got married a while after it all settled.

The revolution may have changed a lot in the political landscape for Libya. It is a good thing of course, because the tyranny no longer continues. But it is still so painful that there are so many of us still in want of Justice. I don’t believe there is any closure until we have that.
The Democratic Republic of Congo has often been called the Rape Capital of the World. In the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide, the stories that came out of the DRC proved to the world that rape was never a by-product of war, but actually a tactic, a weapon, that is used in conflict to break the enemy. Divine, a thirty-three year old mother from Walungu, DRC, shares her story. Although Divine spoke without qualms about revealing her name, she was not comfortable with us sharing her photograph.

When you are forced to face adversity in life, you have a choice: to either crumble or to go on. Some say it is a choice that everyone has. But really – there is no choice. Whether you crumble or you go on, life goes on – and in that, you wind up moving on as well. Even today, as I think back of all that happened in my life after the massacre in Rwanda, my heart sinks in grief for all that could have been instead. But we must move on, we must look ahead, and we must believe that we cannot allow this to happen again.

It was a couple of months after the Interahamwe entered the DRC. They were in Walungu by the dozen, I don’t know what prompted them to believe that what they were about to do would attract no penalty – and that belief of theirs paid off because they did all that they could and got away without shame. That night, my youngest son refused to sleep. He was under a year old, and cried his throat hoarse. I was trying to calm him down, and my daughters sidled up to me in a bid to help him. One patted him gently, the other sang with me. We heard knocking, somewhere in the midst of our performance, and my husband went to check who it was.

Within moments, from then, everything changed.

About ten men had stormed into the house, and grabbed hold of my husband and me. They forced us to strip down to nothing, and then held my husband by the chin so he looked at me. They told him that that was the last time he would see me that way – for I was now going to be the wife of all the ten men. They took turns and raped me, while my husband begged and pleaded for him to stop. I vaguely comprehended them hitting him, and one of the men even raped him. The trauma was unbearable for the both of us. My daughters, who stood in the corner, watching in shock, weren’t spared either. They grabbed hold of the two girls and began to molest and rape them, when my husband and I both cried loudly, screamed and abused the men for what they were doing.

The next thing I know was that they were all silenced - I heard the gun shots, and I felt my life go out of me. The men spoke among themselves in Kinyarwanda, and raped me by turn – and at times, physically hurting me in other ways that I do not want to detail. I passed out, I think. When I came to, I couldn’t comprehend anything. I remember how the room swam in and out of my line of sight as I regained consciousness. I tried getting up, but I found I couldn’t move. I remember shrieking,
screaming for help. In the process, I tired myself even more, and collapsed in exhaustion. I woke up inside a hospital ward, and was told that I had survived a terrible ordeal – and that they had found my younger daughter having just escaped death’s jaws – even if only narrowly. My other daughter, son and husband were all killed. I could never bring myself to listen to the state in which they were found. I have chosen to be kind to myself, to remain in ignorance, just for my sanity.

In the time that followed, I struggled. Physically, I was wounded terribly. I suffered fistulae that needed many interventional surgeries. I also needed a lot of therapy to rehabilitate myself mentally – but for a long time, after I left the hospital, suffering became such a common feature in my life. I begged on the street, my daughter suffered in agony that she could not even articulate what she was going through – she had lost her vision from the injury to her head, and could barely walk. I had to scrape through to be able to provide for us. I worked hard – I fetched water for other people, I sold food that I cooked, and one day, help came to me in the form of some foreigners. I don’t know their names or the organization – but I know that they were there for me in my toughest times.

Today, though years have passed, I can’t forget the kind of pain that I suffered only because of the ill conceived behavior of so many men. I am one in many women who have been wronged this way – and this still continues in so many ways. I survived, because I fought every day, every minute, and every possible thing that struck me. But not everyone could have the luxury of resilience over suffering.

There is so much to be done to remedy this. We are not far gone, at all, as the world insists. We have hope, and we deserve hope. We need to stay strong in our fight to ensure that this does not happen again, to anyone in the world.
On February 24, 1991, Siah had just turned fourteen. She never knew of a tradition where birthdays were ushered in with a wish at midnight – in her little village, Kunan, even being aware of their birthdates were a rarity. Siah’s mother, though, had hers etched in her memory – simply because the only daughter of the family was born. On the cold night, Siah did not for a moment think that her birthday would be pockmarked with scars of painful memories. She’s name has been changed and photograph withheld in order to protect her identity.

I don’t know about this, really. I want to put it behind me, I want closure. But what closure can you get if justice eludes you? No one listens to our story, no one believes us – the government has even gone so far to say that nothing of this sort even happened.

Today, we are ostracized at every level. There is no justice for us, people ascribe us with a stigma – my sisters and I cannot get married. When we dare so much to go to school – or even our children – the ones born out of the rape – go to school, the stigma we face makes us want to be invisible. So many times, I’ve only wanted the earth below me to open up and swallow me whole.

That night, my mother, father, two brothers and I were ready to turn in. Ours was a simple life. My father and brothers would work in the fields through the day. Sometimes, my mother and I would help them, but most other times, we kept house. One of my brothers was due to get married soon – and we had planned all that we wanted to do in the coming weeks, that night. It must have been somewhere before midnight – I don’t know – when we heard a commotion outside. Within moments, the army had entered our house and dragged my brothers and father out. We didn’t know where the men of our family were taken – later, we learned that they were taken into custody. In the mean time, two men entered our house and dragged my mother and me by our hair. We were smashed against the wall, and disrobed – and …. and raped, over and over and over again. I don’t know how many times, I don’t know how many people. I was kicked many times, my hands were pinned tight. My wrists hurt as I tried to struggle. Between hearing my mother’s screams and their aggressive verbal abuse, I died many times that night.

In the days after, when my mother walked her descent slowly, I heard her cry out in agony, and yet worry for me. I will never forget her wails – it haunts me every night as I try to sleep, even today, twenty-three years after the incident. I sometimes wonder how things might have been, had we not faced this. Maybe my brother would have gotten married to that girl – and she herself wouldn’t have been raped brutally. Maybe my parents would still be alive, playing with our children. Maybe I would have gotten married, I don’t know.
Our lives are mostly full of maybes. It has always been.

I was raped and beaten, kicked and raped so many times that night, all the way until the sun rose. Over the next few days, the Army men barricaded our villages – they didn’t let us get help medically, they refused to even let us think of justice. Much later, there was one government official, SM Yasin, who visited our village, and even reported all that we had told him, to the erstwhile civil administrator of Kashmir. An FIR, or a First Information Report, as they call it, was filed immediately after. Following that, an investigation took place, culminating in the order that the arrest and identification of the culprits had to be done.

What followed that were a series of cover-ups, denials and absolute disregard for anything that we went through. Most higher ups in the administrative and political hierarchy ignored us, and even went so far to denounce what happened to us as a hoax.

A lot of efforts have been made to seek justice. The government of India has tried to shut us up, and even rejected allegations against its army – but here’s the irony. The former Director General of the paramilitary Border Security Force himself said that he has no doubt about the involvement of the Indian security personnel.

What can we hope for if this is the wall we are up against? What we do believe in, now, is ourselves, and our power of survival. We’ve faced the worst, and we’ve lived in the twenty-three years after. We have been denied a shot at life. We went to school, we went out on the streets, we tried talking to people, but as though we were the criminals, everyone threw us out of their lives because we bore the stigma of a crime they all helped happen with their silence. Let it take as much time as it will. But we will fight for it.
This story was originally told to us by a young Yazidi woman. Her identity, current location and other details have been protected in order to protect her safety. The Red Elephant Foundation has appropriately re-written the story in English only to add grammatical structure after it was translated to English. The images used in the story are purely indicative and do not depict the girl who has narrated this story. The Red Elephant Foundation, its core team and volunteers condemn the ISIS and its ruthless practices.

I want as many people as possible to know my story – this is a community story, a story that many other women in my country at this moment, with the ISIS abounding, continue to face. I will refrain from telling you my name – because that will put everyone in connection with writing this story in danger. I will tell you this much, though: I am a Yazidi woman, 27 years old and on the run.

Let me tell you a little about us Yazidis first. We are a community that are predominantly monotheistic in our faith. We believe in a religious practice that considers God as the creator of the world – which is now in the care of seven angels. The chief of those angels Malek Taus, or the Peacock Angel, is often linked with the angel Iblis, who refused to toe the line of monotheism and did not worship Adam and Eve though God commanded him to – something that led to his perception as being Satan. This has led to eons and eons of us Yazidis being perceived as devil worshippers.

The ISIS is harsh in its ideology. Well, harsh is really not the word I am looking for – but you get what I intend. Women are supposed to cover themselves. If the woman they pull up is not Muslim, they don’t hesitate to rape her to force her to follow their policies.

I come from a place called Sinjar. It is – was – no, is, my home. I will go back, someday, I hope.

We were protected by the Kurdish Peshmerga for a while until the ISIS militants began to make inroads into our lands with force. When we got wind of the fact that the ISIS had already captured Tal Afar, we decided to make a move for it - and tried to go to Dohuk, which is in Kurdistan in Iraq. We had to trek mountains and chart rugged terrain in the process of making the journey. We had no food, no water - and had to make do with absolutely nothing but our hunger. It was a terrible situation. We had death facing us on all sides - there was no food, no water on one end, and on the other, we were surrounded by the militants below the mountains we were trekking on.

There were many a round of airstrikes. It was only later that we knew that the USA had attacked the militants through targeted air strikes. There were also air drops of food packets that many of us managed to get our hands on. With all that happening, a few of us - perhaps only a few thousands or so - managed to escape from the mountains where we were hiding.
There were so many kind Kurdish men from Syria who fought for us and rescued us, and took us into Syria. In the journey, though, there were many painful things we encountered. My youngest sister could not keep up with us, and unbeknownst to us has possibly been captured. We don’t know where she is, and my heart bleeds for her when I read and hear about the things that are happening with the ISIS and their terrible persecution campaigns.

After we escaped, there were scattered instances of a few other Yazidi women and men escaping. Where I am right now, I met with two other women who managed to escape. They were not as lucky as me – they were abducted from their homes after their husbands were shot at. The ISIS had taken these women to Tal Afar, where they took all the single women away after leaving behind women who were mothers. These two, being single women now since their husbands were killed and they had no children – were raped and brutally enslaved sexually. They have been beaten almost every day in the time that they were held captive. They escaped captivity - but I cannot tell their story without their consent beyond this.

The fact is that we Yazidis are no strangers to persecution. When we lived in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, we were persecuted for our ethnic affiliations. When subsequent Sunni Muslim revolutionaries were in charge, we were persecuted – again, for our ethnic affiliations. And now, the ISIS is persecuting us, again, for our ethnic affiliations. We are being perceived as something unclean blotting the fabric of the society in the country that we are part of. And therefore, the ISIS believes, that we must be cleaned out if they want to enjoy purity of their population.

Since early August this year, my family, along with scores of other Yazidis like us, have been on the run. The Peshmerga troops have been tremendous in our journey as support. Fighting for us, they have helped us run away from the threat of death at the hands of the militant Islamic State group. Today, I have managed to escape – but the fact remains that many, many others are being subjected to horrific treatment and torture. On our journey out into the mountains through the humanitarian corridor across the Tigris from Mount Sinjar that was created for us, I cannot begin to tell you how many dead people I have seen. You might think of me as insensitive – but while charting that path, I could only think of the words “Dead Sea”. It’s what war does to you. It’s what violence does to you. You feel nothing, and everything, all at the same time.

I don’t know what to say. I really don’t know what to do. I am outside the land I called my home. I am outside the world that I knew as my own world. And in that, I am so lonely. I don’t know why there is so much hatred for, by and of humans. If we are capable of so much hate, can’t we learn to be capable of as much love and goodness?

Today, I am disheartened to the point that I stopped believing in God. I used to think that God was one – because that is what it was, always. Everyone gave God a different name – but the fact was, God was just one. But today, if this God is allowing one to turn against the other in God’s name, allowing one to kill another in God’s name, and allowing many to suffer in God’s name, perhaps there is no God at all.

But that’s not all. Do you know what the irony in all this is? I recently learned and read that Isis is an Ancient Egyptian Goddess. She was the protector of the dead and of children.
For many of us, 9/11 is an aberration in the historical road of world peace – one that sparked off a massive spurt of violence in many parts of the world. For Joe Dittmar, 9/11 is a personal story: a reality that he saw unfolding before him, a reality that he experienced up, close and personal.

At 8:48 AM on September 11, 2001, there was a slight flicker of lights in the conference room on the 105th floor of the World Trade Centre. In moments, the American Airlines Flight 11 ripped into the North Tower, just 120 feet away from it. The massive explosion it caused remained unheard inside the conference room – when just a few moments later, Joe Dittmar and his 53 colleagues were asked to leave the conference room with immediate effect because of an explosion in the other tower. Resisting being forced to abandon their conference, Joe was among the last to leave the room as he spent time shutting down his laptop and collecting his papers. His colleagues and he had barely any idea how bad the scene outside was. They began making their way downstairs, a journey where out of 54, only 6 would make it alive. While leaving the building, his colleague told him that this was nothing compared to the 1993 bombing – back then, there were no lights in the stairways. By the time they came down to the 90th floor, all of this changed.

Through the open fire door in the stairway, Joe looked through a window that faced the North Tower – staring right into the gaping hole that was left. People fell from the tower, there was fire – and the entire scene was simply too much to take. Joe found himself overwhelmed – all he wanted to do was to go home, back to his family in Chicago, or his parents in Philadelphia. He braved on, nevertheless, reaching the 78th floor where hundreds of others were waiting to get on the express elevators to the lobby. He paused briefly, refusing to stay back with other colleagues that remained there. When Joe reached the 74th floor, the second hijacked flight – Flight 175 that travelled at 600 miles per hour, blasted through floor 77 until floor 85, just three floors above where Joe was. Everyone on floor 78 died instantly – the 2000 degree fireball burned them to death. Joe recalls the scene on his floor. The staircase he was on shook, as handrails broke from the walls. Heat waves blasted over everyone, as the smell of jet fuel lingered while the building rocked back and forth. There was a stunned silence in the air – as everyone was numbed by what was happening before them.

And yet, Joe recalls, frightening as the atmosphere was, it was also the environment where the spirit of humanity shone through and thrived. Everyone helped everyone else, selflessly coaching the others around them to make it out of the building alive by banking on their own reserves of strength. When Joe made it to the 35th floor, he went through a very emotional episode. Police officers and firefighters passed them all on the staircase. They were heroes who put the lives of the civilians before their own. One look at their eyes, Joe recalls, they knew that they were going to fight a fire that they could not stop, that they were attempting to save lives that they couldn’t save, and that they were
never coming back alive. At the 18th floor, Joe heard a voice on a megaphone singing “God Bless America”. Every now and then, the voice would pause, and then encouraging everyone to keep moving and telling them that they would make it. The singer was a security guard – Joe has no idea what became of him.

When Joe got to the lobby, he was prevented from leaving the building because of the number of falling bodies. He navigated through the underground concourse, eventually making out through an exit. He passed a Starbucks outlet on the way – taking in the strange scene where people were still lining up for their coffee needs even as thousands of people scrambled out of the complex. When he walked about half a mile away, the South Tower began to collapse – the sound of concrete and steel crashing, mingled with blood curdling screams from New Yorkers remained in Joe's ears long after. Today, Joe carries this story with him as an intricate part of his own life narrative. The founder of the “Always Remember Initiative”, Joe keeps the voices, spirits and memories of the 3000-odd victims of September 11, 2001. Watch this space for an interview with the inspiring soul.
Deborah Marsh, the author of *Deliver us from Evil*, is a survivor of sexual abuse as a child. Through her recent book, she has told the painful story of abuse that she and her sister Rebecca suffered at the hands of their father. Deborah shares a few insights on her own personal journey and on her book.

**You survived sexual abuse - would you like to share your story with us?**
My story begins in Salt Lake City, Utah in 1954 when I was born. Around 1959, when I was 4 or 5 years old, my father - a Mormon bishop at that time - began molesting me. Both my sister Rebecca and I feel that the abuse started when we were babies, but that's with body memories. This is all in my book so if I tell you the whole story there will be no reason to buy the book. However I can tell you that my sister and I felt he stopped raping and plundering our bodies in 1961. He was released as Bishop and he started having affairs. So we were off the hook physically until our teen years when he started sexually abusing us (covertly out in the open) in different ways, even after we were married. Rebecca and I didn't realize that what he did with us was wrong and that we both forgot - out of sanity - forgot the abuse when we were young children, but we always had a creepy feeling around Dad and no real relationship with him either. Then he started molesting one of my children and one of Rebecca's children and then we wanted him in prison.

**A lot of people don't speak out when they face abuse. What gave you the courage to come out with your story?**
I am disabled and pretty much bedbound, I have from tolerable pain to excruciating pain every day. I am an MSW social worker and I can't do social work because of my leg pain, but I must do something to contribute to society. They now make a device to ease the pain, but never having had the device I don't know if it will help or not. Anyway, I had this dream that I could write my story from out of the emotional pain I suffered as a child and now as an adult in my recovery process. So I took some writing classes and slowly over time I became a pretty good writer. The courage came from years of the right kind of therapy - Inner Child Work - which is hard and you think your finished and then you do something that triggers you like a book - major triggering and then it is like you have another piece of to work out in your head and heart. My sister is not so brave, so I wrote her chapter and her son's chapter for them after we discussed it over and over again. She just couldn't do that and she hasn't wanted to even discuss much about her abuse. I guess I just thought it might help people and that's all I've ever wanted to do. Just help people!

**How has telling your story helped you? Do you feel that more people should be talking about the issue?**
Writing the book has helped me resolve a lot of issues I thought were resolved already. However, one of my therapists told me a long time ago that--6 or 5 years ago-not to ever go back to where I pushed
myself through my childhood again. It has been very hard but Dr. Ellsworth who writes the forward in my book and co-wrote the chapter on Therapy says you’re probably never done if you’re life is so damaged. I would not write a book for publication again, ever again. It was like ripping band-aids off on sores all over again. I think it helps to talk to friends family, whomever you can trust to talk to. Sometimes it is better to talk to complete strangers like myself as you don’t have to do it face-to-face yet they have been through it also.

As a survivor, you must have faced a lot of trials and tribulations, where you go through anger, grief, or even self-hatred. Could you talk about that? I raged, I felt guilty, I hated myself and I grieved. First came the anger that someone who said everyday how much he loved me and could turn around when I was a tiny precious 4 year old and do what he did to me. He said I was his favourite child - maybe favourite to molest. Then came the self hatred. The way I would do self talk, I wouldn’t talk that way even to my father. "If only you had been smarter you could have gotten us-my sister and myself out of there." "If only you weren't a wicked child this would not have happened to you." "If only you weren't a slut, an ugly child, a brat, anything you could have imagined I called myself. I think guilt goes along with self-hatred. I felt guilty for destroying the balance of my immediate family my husband and kids as well as my family of origin, my younger sister blames me for "Killing Mom" yet mom never died. Then there's grief which I still have. I grieve that my little child didn't get a normal childhood, I grieve that I'm not what I might have been in life, I grieve for my children who had a pretty not so great of a mom when they were little. I never could go back with them and fix them now they are angry. I still grieve. Maybe that's why I chose to spend the last 14 years doing hospice work.

What, in your opinion, should our approach be, to survivors? A lot of people hold back from speaking out or addressing the crime because of the discomfort they are forced to experience at the hands of other people. I think survivors should give themselves a pat on the back each night because they stayed alive one more day, they should say "I didn't take that dark road that leads to a spiral staircase to suicide or to self-contempt or to cutting. People who haven't been abused should be patient, kind but treat them normally. Be a good listener with them, if you are uncomfortable, listen anyway a few minutes a day then say I'm so very sorry for your losses. I will catch up with you when I'm not so busy. I need to be in a meeting or a reassuring hug that you feel awful if you all of a sudden could see them again. Just remember they had to endure it so listening to them 15 minutes can't possibly be too difficult. There are some abused individuals that haven't learned to share appropriately so be gentle and help them learn about boundaries by saying "I wish I could speak with you longer but I can't but call me and we'll continue this, or better yet find a time in your schedule (maybe lunch or coffee) that you could call them up and offer your company or time or both. What a true friend you'd be!
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Op-Ed styled articles on the goings-on around the world
Feminism is Intersectional

By Ameena Mohyuddin Zia

Patricia Arquett’s sentiments at the 2015 Oscars were not wrong. Wage equality for women is, indeed, an important campaign. Reactions of both the crowd at the event and the media were noteworthy. It is an important fight for the empowerment of society and deserves appreciation and applaud. The wrong comes in dubbing these gestures as reflections of feminism. In light of the recently fueled feminist debate, it seems that as a society we have, yet again, failed feminism. The concept, the term, the ideology, and the movement is misunderstood and its historical patterns unknown.

What is feminism? Is it gender advocating issues affecting one race over the other? One class over the other? One sexuality over the other? Is my feminism more important than your feminism? Feminism is intersectional; without stratifications. Yes, feminism is intersectional.

What Arquett passionately expressed is equality in wage. That is it. Leave it at that. Do not extrapolate it into feminism. Why? Because it deliberately alienates other races, classes, etc. It immediately places a stratified dimension into equality and leaves out the rest of what makes up feminism. Why such an uproar? It insults the rest of the marginalized women, their advancements and achievements in the movement, and more importantly, their plight of oppression.

White middle class women have historically been the face of mainstream feminism. It has neither comprehensively accounted for the economic, racial, and gender exigencies of the minority female experience, nor has it tried to. This idea of feminism, as white privilege, further relegates women of minority along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The average white female advocates of feminism are void of the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary women of minority, their challenges, stories, and links to society, how could they possibly represent and work towards their equality? (This is not such a bizarre concept since representation debate has led countries to adopt gender and religious quotas in various systems).

White women representing feminism alone is offensive to women everywhere. Why? Because in the 1960s and 1970s, the minority omissions were highlighted as feminist narratives left out the racial discourse. These led to the emergence of black feminism that viewed sexism, class oppression, and racism as inextricably bound to gender. Black feminism argued that liberation of women should entail freedom for all people, since it should require the end of racism, sexism, and class oppression. In the 1970s Alice Walker’s womanism reaffirmed the need to highlight oppression rooted in both race and gender in the feminist space – something that the mainstream feminist movement desperately lacked. It emphasized that feminism was not only a white woman’s privilege.
A decade later Kimberle Crenshaw introduced into the narrative, **a space where oppression met systems of inequality** (race, gender, class, sexuality, etc.). This concept of intersectionality cut across space to understand social positions of women (across race and class) as an inclusive concept. This very space is where systems of inequality find themselves. Similarly, Audre Lorde’s work exposed shortcomings in the field by incorporating oppression of sexuality in the field with a unique focus on identity. Other activists like Anannya Bhattacharjee, Petrona Eyles, Berta Lutz and Kishwar Naheed examined sexuality, politics of sex work, labor and migration, militarization, state repression, and other challenges of the post-colonial, globalized and modern world. **The reason feminism cannot be separated from race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, class, or disability is because oppression, domination, and discrimination intersect through these constructs.**

Society should already be aware of what feminism entails. It has been laid out by feminist scholars, activists, educators, and enthusiasts over the course of history. **Feminism is intersectional.** This lack of comprehension indicates that society has, once again failed both the ideology and the movement. It further exposes that society as a whole is either too lackadaisical to understand oppression or that it deliberately stratifies the marginalized through the hierarchical divisions. Unless we understand that feminism is the space where oppression meets systems of inequality, we will continue to offend feminism itself.

*Ameena Mohyuddin Zia is a PhD Candidate in Political Economy at the University of Missouri St. Louis and an Adjunct Lecturer at CUNY’s York College. Her work examines social constructs through both research and visual documentations. She also works as a strategic consultant for development in NYC and is involved in domestic and international philanthropic initiatives.*
Patriarchal Roots: Misogyny and Sexual Violence Against Women

By Raakhee Suryaprakash

I believe that our patriarchal conditioning is the tap root of the weed called sexual violence against women which is choking the lives, productivity, and happiness of women everywhere. It manifests itself in incidents such as the Bengali Khap Panchayat ordering the gang-rape of a girl by her neighbours in a tribal village for daring to have a relationship with an outsider. Why this complicity, tolerance, and indifference to the subjugation of the fairer sex?

Patriarchy Conditions & Condone Sexual Aggressions
On October 25th Iran hung a 26-year-old woman four years after she was put behind bars for killing a doctor who sexually attacked her. Appeals, mercy petitions, and high-profile campaigns to pardon her were all in vain. The eldest son of the murdered doctor stated that his family “would not even contemplate mercy until truth is unearthed ... Only when her true intentions are exposed and she tells the truth about her accomplice and what really went down will we be prepared to grant mercy.”

As of October 2014, 85 U.S. colleges and universities are under investigation for mishandling sexual assault cases, leading to the White House launching the "It's On Us" campaign, an initiative intended to reduce the prevalence of sexual assault on campuses and raise awareness about the issue while improving sexual assault prevention and response programs on-campus. September-October is India’s festival season where we celebrate the power of the primordial mother goddess Shakti in her myriad forms over Navratri; prosperity and the victory of Good over Evil over the festivals of Diwali and Kanda Shasti. Yet even as we celebrate the supreme goddess and the victory of Good, the plight of women in our predominantly patriarchal society is blighted by the insidious and ubiquitous evil in the form of violence against women, particularly sexual violence against women.

The same day the hanging of Reyhaneh Jabbari was reported in my newspaper there was a report in the state news page that an 18-year-old girl was arrested in rural Tamil Nadu for poisoning her father and his friends, it was reported that the girl who had just recently attained majority decided to kill her father by mixing poison in his Diwali-celebratory liquor as he made sexual advances toward her. Even worse in India’s financial capital Mumbai there was a disturbing report about the requirements for passport details. The lady advocate appearing for the foreign ministry of the Government of India, in reply to a query of the Bombay high court judges regarding a petition by a woman regarding the passport authority’s refusal to include her step-father’s name there said, “an unwed mother must file an affidavit stating ‘how she has conceived’ and ‘if she was raped’ and why she does not want the father's name included.”

My own brush with the mindless patriarchal biases of bureaucracy: as part of the visa application process while planning a European holiday for my mother and myself (both of us financially independent working women!!) we had to get a No-Objection-Certificate from my father who isn’t interested in foreign travel and wasn’t holidaying with us. Terrorists allowed but no unescorted women? This past week there was a lot of coverage about how the city of Chennai that prided itself in a negative growth (~38.6%, National Crime Bureau data 2013) in crimes against women wasn’t
hospitable to single women. Also according to the Centre for Women’s Development and Research, “between July and November 2011, 73% of single women living in the residential colonies of South Chennai faced high levels of violence both sexual and physical, from in the neighbourhood. Many of these cases went unreported as the women chose not to approach the police, fearing societal backlash.”

According to UN Women, “Around the world, 1 in 3 women have experienced physical or sexual violence, mostly by an intimate partner. About 120 million girls have been forced into intercourse or other sexual acts at some point in their lives. In 29 countries alone, 133 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation. ... More than 700 million women alive today were married as children. Almost all of the estimated 4.5 million victims of forced sexual exploitation are women and girls.” Violence against women is a human rights violation and a serious impediment to women’s progress in any area of life. It undercuts women’s health, prospects for education and productive work, and ability to participate as full members of their societies, among other consequences. Yet these human rights violations increase every day, hour, unchecked by society.

The perpetrators of these crimes are fearless and they are aware that their position is stronger for the assertion of rights or use of law by anyone, especially a woman victim, “is seen as a subversive act,” to quote Vrinda Grover, a leading advocate in the Delhi High Court. In rural India, for example, girls have no independent control of their sexuality. They are expected to get married and produce children, thus shifting the control of their sexuality from one man (the father) to the other (the husband). ... Childhood marriages amounts to sexual coercion and is considered illegal but is still sanctioned by personal laws and condoned by Khap Panchayats who decide on marriage partners in certain parts of North India.

Similarly, sexual violence is considered legitimate by young men in South Africa who also believe that mental health is negatively affected by lack of sex. Local, regional, national, international – there is synchronous symptoms of the bred-in-the-bones patriarchy: Rapes, Gang-Rapes, Sexual Harassment, Stalking, Acid Attacks, Sexual Assault, Marital Rape, Female Genital Mutilation, Domestic Violence, Honour Killings, Dowry Deaths and Harassments, Female Infanticide and Foeticide, and such else as a result of discounting women’s importance and contribution to the economy and society.

Raakhee has a Master’s degree in International Studies and a Bachelor’s degree in Chemistry but her passion remains writing and researching things that change the world for the better. Her work has been widely published both in print and online media. Raakhee Suryaprakash is in the process of launching a social enterprise SUNSHINE MILLENNIUM that aims to help India’s off-grid rural areas achieve the Millennium Development Goals by setting up of solar-powered millennium development centres maintained by local stakeholders and funded by corporate social responsibility programmes and government schemes.
Fear of the Empowered Woman

By Raakhee Suryaprakash

It has been over two and half months since “hundreds” of school girls were abducted by the Boko Haram (remember the name means Western Education is Sin) overnight from their school in Nigeria. Despite the #BringBackOurGirls which spread like wildfire on social media which finally forced the sloth-like Nigerian to accept international assistance to find the missing girls there’s been no rescue. Like the missing flight there’s no tracing the whereabouts of these teenagers and their terrorist abductors.

The Boko Haram post videos online of the girls in hijab reciting the Koran even as they threaten to sell them to recruiters as sex slaves and demand release of their members from prison in exchange. The Nigerian Muslim community leaders belatedly condemned the abduction and organised prayers for the girl’s safe return. The only result of the so-called search is that the international community is finally aware of the atrocities and terrifying dogmas that motivate the Boko Haram. Cutting-edge technology, Big Brother monitoring the Internet, international collaboration . . . yet no hide nor hair of either the girls or the terrorists! The Boko Haram continue to be active online even as they terrorise the Nigerians in the north-eastern states – their power base. In just the first ninety days of 2014 1,500 Nigerians have been killed by them in raids of villages, towns, schools and colleges. These north eastern states are run by opposition ministers who have maintained the limbo and the Sambisa forest continues to keep its secrets. In the meantime international attention and resources have been diverted to combat the ISIS in Iraq. The effect those insurgents have on international oil prices makes containing them a priority...what’s the worth of a few hundred school girls when viewed against oil! It is said that education is the most powerful weapon to empower the fairer sex.

Yet the forces against educating the female sex – girls and women reign supreme!

In the time since the abduction even as conferences happen calling empowerment and the end of rape as a weapon of war, the shameless “leaders” of India demonstrate the value they place on women and our safety. The union minister caught up in a gang-rape case is yet to resign or be fired. Business as usual, it doesn’t matter if its BJP or Congress, a woman leader or a man, misogyny is the norm with women’s issues getting low priority. The Trinamool Congress MP from West Bengal, the woman-led state that witnessed the gang rape of the tribal woman by her community members for daring to love an outsider and failing to pay the fine, is now showcasing rape as a political instrument! He is shown threatening to shoot opponents and unleashing his boys to rape their mothers and sisters. No action against him, and I have doubts it ever will! Pressure is brought on with great result in cancelling Goan politicians’ state-sponsored World Cup jaunt but no action will be taken against politicians in positions of power who are a threat to women. What inference do we draw: money is more important than securing women!
My own state is no safe haven anymore: A Dalit girl was raped and killed en route to school in a village in Tamil Nadu. The school has since remained shut with villagers not willing to risk the safety of their girls for the sake of ‘iffy’ education and noon meals! All such news are dismissed by the majority as being the nature of the beast needlessly sensitized by the media. Respected people, people in power, educated people, those who hold position of power — both men and women – have a dismissive view of women’s safety and empowering women.

“For all the hatred and violence to end we need to consciously respect each and every woman in our life starting from our respective homes to everyone in the society,” writes Pratik Mantri in The Indian Economist. Others recommend “indoctrinating” the future generations with gender sensitivity with a strict regimen in schools and colleges. Like that will happen when we have a Health Minister, a doctor, who wants to abolish sex education! Yes that’s a priority in a nation plagued by disease and poor health care infrastructure!

Actions speak louder than word. Children mimic the habits of their peers and adults. Will a child witnessing unchecked domestic abuse at home practise gender sensitivity? Will a student speak up about eve teasing or abuse when they see their teachers demonstrating their misogyny as a matter of course? It’s time to man up and find workable solution and implement it. We each one of us needs to take responsibility – call out regressive, misogynistic actions – “Be the change you want to see.” That’s the only way to empowerment and safety! Power from within, and action not just words against acts that seek to subjugate.

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Raakhee has a Master’s degree in International Studies and a Bachelor’s degree in Chemistry but her passion remains writing and researching things that change the world for the better. Her work has been widely published both in print and online media. Raakhee Suryaprakash is in the process of launching a social enterprise SUNSHINE MILLENNIUM that aims to help India’s off-grid rural areas achieve the Millennium Development Goals by setting up of solar-powered millennium development centres maintained by local stakeholders and funded by corporate social responsibility programmes and government schemes.
Recently a video released by All India Bakchod has gone viral on the internet. Keeping in view, the hot topic these days, the video deals with sexual assaults on women. The video has a humorous twist to it though, by taking on the widely spread myth/claim, that women are somehow the instigators of the sexual assaults on them. The key message from this video is that somehow we have become so numb to all the atrocities that are occurring, that we are apathetic and have somehow contrived to blame the victim instead of the perpetrators. This point is well taken. In fact the target audience for this kind of a video would not be in disagreement. Of course, it’s not the victims fault; it’s the fault of the rapist!

The video is well-made, it is short, stylish and the depiction a progressive injury-laden state on the narrators is not lost. They are speaking for the battering of the Indian woman and the notion that somehow the victim will blame herself, thereby injuring herself the most. If this video is meant to be a part of a larger series of video that will deconstruct sexual assault, I would call it a fantastic start. If, on the other hand, this video is to be standalone, then my request to the makers of this video is- DON’T STOP! Get to the heart of the matter.

**Beyond the Video**

As with any complex social evil, the root cause is often deep and sometimes so deep, that it is buried within layers and layers of prevalent social conditioning, that in turn have become conditioned over centuries. So yes, sometimes we need to go backwards in order to step forward, in this case even a single step. The video, in the very beginning briefly touches upon a key aspect. What is that you may ask? Men you say? No, it is the institution of patriarchy. This institution, in my opinion, is one of the key causes of not just sexual assaults, but a whole host of abuses that women faces on a daily basis. Please note that I’m not making a blanket statement, and nor am I saying that this must be replaced by matriarchy or any other ‘archy’.

The basic institution that is available to us all is ourselves- the single unit of creation and existence. While human beings display many wonderful attributes such as compassion, love, caring and sharing, they also display a proclivity towards subjugation. While the roots of this may remain shrouded in the mystery of human creation itself, it cannot be ignored or refuted. Throughout recorded human history, humans have warred with one another on some pretext or the other, be it land, resources, tribes, villages and later on kingdoms, countries, colonies.

We’ve seen massive colonization, apartheid, slavery, and somewhere along the way, in the middle of all this, women have been collateral damage in several ways. Women have always been identified as the weaker sex, the ones who need to be protected. Patriarchy has also taken root with this notion that women cannot take care of themselves, and hence must be protected. Over time, this social structure has spawned various cultures and traditions that have supported this notion and which have bolstered it. While, it is entirely possible that at one point, women were the prize and hence needed to be protected, it is a fact that they are now paying the price for it.
While it may seem completely logical that every human must have access to knowledge that can help enhance their own potential, it is this very notion that is questioned on a repeated basis in this country. This notion of the weaker sex has created a stigma for women even before they are born. They are viewed as a burden, from the moment they are born and they are conditioned to believe that they exist only to please others. This kind of subtle conditioning is undertaken more often than not by the women than the men. While sweeping generalizations are not fair, it is true that women are thought of or defined solely based on their physical appearance and their worth is often attached to it. This objectification is more rampant and deep in society and the only beings bereft of this objectification are mothers. Isn’t it a classical irony that the world’s second most populous country is still killing the girl child, and in effect killing its own mothers. Let us admit it, we have all attached a woman’s worth to her appearance at some point or the other, thereby creating a judgmental void even before we utter a single word.

More than Skin Deep
They key point here, is a complete lack of respect for another human being, and the inability to view that human beyond her gender, her appearance and the so called roles that she must play. The result-stereotyping, not just by men, but by a huge number of women too. Rape is nothing but the highest form of sexual assault, but women face all kinds of abuse -mental, psychological and sexual-on a regular basis; those abuses which are dismissed as evils that cannot be combated. Rape is the extreme end of the spectrum. Today’s eve-teasing can be tomorrow’s rape-today’s groping can be tomorrow’s marital rape. Sometimes, the conditioning is very benign. How many times have we heard the word woman associated with beauty? Sadly, more often than not, we hear about beautiful women, therefore identifying those who do not qualify to be called as such. We are completely ignorant to the notion that beauty lies several layers beneath our skin.

What we need is a massive level of social sensitization and intolerance towards any form of subjugation of women. The next time you see a woman sacrifice her nutrition for her children, demand that she take care of herself first, the next time you hear someone making a derogatory remark about women at your office, question it, the next time the auto-driver dismisses you for vacant fluff-head, make him listen. The next time someone says that they are worried about their ‘daughters’ encourage them to equip them to the best possible extent, but most importantly teach them that respect for another human being begins with self respect and no self respecting human being will ever commit such acts. We need to move past the blame game to ensure that women are not deprived opportunities to develop their own identities, live life on their own terms, and be free from the burden of socially accepted norms. Let us stop feeding cultural stereotypes and let that change begin with each one of us. Let us ask ourselves who is a woman in our own minds. Your answer may surprise you! Let us start by changing our own deep-rooted comfortable notions.

Ramy Padmanabhan is based out of Chennai, India. Armed with a Masters’ degree in Political Science from Marquette University (USA), her various interests include singing, writing, reading and dabbling with research. Besides these interests, Ramya’s passions lie in tennis, mythology and striving for a better tomorrow by sowing the seeds for the future in the here and the now. She believes that life should be led with a blend of love, passion and expression.
Deepti Menon writes about the trials and tribulations of what many young women across India face when it is time to be married off. Even as many girls in urban India are empowered with the best of education and careers, the sword of society's prying eyes hangs over their heads when it comes to matrimony.

The flurry begins when a girl turns eighteen and wedding bells begin to ring in every neighbouring home! Sly glances are cast, comments on complexion, education, appearance and lifestyle begin ricocheting off the ceiling. A dusty/musty horoscope is pulled out and perused by a plump astrologer who predicts the position of planets, benign and malevolent.

Matrimonial sites loom ahead, with thousands of profiles falling into one's lap like manna from heaven. That is when one realizes how many different kinds of species make up the world, and that one man's meat is another man's poison!

Luckily an uploaded photograph can be protected, if one is a paid member on the site. It is worth it to pay to keep one's picture away from covetous eyes. For not all viewers are genuine as some are out to just have fun. Like the man who claimed to be a Hindu Brahmin and wrote an enticing message, “I can see the beauty in your profile despite there being no photograph!” Very romantic and very off putting, as a person who could wear his heart on his sleeve for the whole world to see, could have very little left over in the end.

However, the rest of the profile proclaimed him to be from a different religion. Not that one has anything against any other faith, but why on earth would a Hindu mom looking for an arranged match for her daughter look for a groom from so different a background?

The girl in question does not want a Prince Charming or an Adonis - just a boy who is well settled [youngsters today are very level headed and practical!], tall [but that is negotiable!], family oriented [which includes an orientation towards his spouse's family as well, warm and genuine. And yes, most importantly, she needs to like what he looks like [no Adonis, mind you!] And her mom wouldn't mind a son-in-love with a good sense of humour, a person she hopes will laugh at her horrific puns!

Suddenly appears the perfect horoscope -the well settled boy, compatibility 8 out of 10, a well known family and the whole proposal one made in Heaven. There is no question of the girl rejecting the boy, and the family waits with bated breath for the response - which never comes! The girl finds the boy not quite her type. She does not want an Adonis, but she does need to feel a tiny bit of attraction towards him, after all! An ice rink forms, the verdict is consensual! How dare a chit of a girl reject
such an eligible boy? Who does she think she is - Miss Universe? The clucks increase, the nods are disapproving and the whispers clear, "No point in looking out for any more boys!"

The sad part is that this is the first proposal put forth by the family, not the 25th, and yet, they take it to heart. The parents shake their heads in unison. They will stand by their daughter, and hold her hand, and why not? Would such a hue and cry have been made if the boy had rejected the girl? Not really!

The heartrending fact is that no one can gauge the tender mind of a young girl as well as her parents, who have brought her up with care, nurtured her every wish and allowed her to blossom out in her own beautiful way. They have spent hours of joy and laughter, wielded control and chastisement, doled out advice and cherished very moment spent with her. They have allowed her to make her own choices in life, reposed perfect trust in her, fully aware that when the time comes, she will take the right decisions. So when it comes to the most important choice in her life, is it fair to fetter her and make their choices hers?

Deepti Menon has always believed in the power of the pen. Having done her post graduation in English Literature and her B.Ed. in English, she had the option of teaching and writing, and did both with great enjoyment. She started writing at the age of ten, long before she acquired a Diploma in Journalism. Deepti also had the advantage of being an Army kid, and later an Army wife, and loved the idea of travelling around India, meeting new people and acquiring new skills. She firmly believes that much of her personality was honed during those travels.
What is the biggest issue in front of the new government today? If the modern Pandora’s Box is opened, there would be myriad ills flying out in all directions, but the biggest and the most troublesome one of all would be that of outrages against women in our country. The latest shockers from Badaun and Etawah have, once again, proved that, in certain states, women are not even seen as second class citizens. If a woman goes missing, it is not considered significant, for she does not even constitute a ripple in the cesspool of male supremacy.

Two young sisters, aged 14 and 15, disappeared in Badaun, and when their family approached the police station to lodge a complaint, they were not taken seriously. Later the bodies of the girls were found hanging on a tree. They had been gang-raped by four men, and as if that were not bad enough, hanged with impunity. The rapists have been arrested, along with a police constable who refused the family aid. It is to be seen what action will be taken against them, for there are more acquitted rapists, than not, who go out and commit the crime over and over again, because they have been lucky the first time around!

As usual, it is a case of the stable door being locked after the horse has escaped! The whole country came alive after the heinous Delhi gang rape case, and did not rest till the death sentence had been awarded to the culprits. However, what comes out of this incident is that when severe punishment, even a death sentence, is awarded to one solitary case, and thousands of offenders get away, scot free, it is hardly a deterrent worth worrying about.

So rapes continue, unabated, as men prowl about in groups, pounce on women from the weaker sections of society, and molest them, confident that they will not be punished. Most have huge caches of wealth, family members who look upon their crimes as mere escapades, (judging by what an ex CM said, when he pronounced that boys will be boys!), and enough influence to get out of sticky situations.

On many occasions the cops are also on the pay roll of these power mongers, and do everything in their power to hush up affairs. There have also been cases when cops have turned into rapists, as in the recent case where two policemen have been booked after two years for having raped a minor.

In another case in Etawah, the family members of a rape accused mercilessly beat up the mother of the rape victim to prevent her from opening her mouth. The result was that the woman has lost her power of speech and lies in the ICU, another victim of savage brutality. No arrests have been made, and the policemen and the big wigs in the state government mouth the usual platitudes about the case being looked into. Unfortunately, the case is looked into from the angle of the perpetrators, who are more powerful, and the poor victims are further victimized and brow beaten into silence.
It was the Mahatma himself who said, “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 to me, the female sex, not the weaker sex.” Sad it is that in a country that gave birth to peaceful religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, and in the past, held women in great reverence, such atrocities are happening.

And that brings me back to where I started! What is the biggest issue before the new government? It is definitely the safety, well being and the security of women, and, hopefully, an advent into an era when women can live out their lives without being subject to harassment, eve teasing, molestation, acid attacks, rape and murder. As the chilling quote by C.J. Roberts in a piece aptly named ‘Captive in the Dark’ goes, “People often believed they were safer in the light, thinking that monsters only came out at night.” A belief that has been well and truly turned on its head!

Deepti Menon has always believed in the power of the pen. Having done her post graduation in English Literature and her B.Ed. in English, she had the option of teaching and writing, and did both with great enjoyment. She started writing at the age of ten, long before she acquired a Diploma in Journalism. Deepti also had the advantage of being an Army kid, and later an Army wife, and loved the idea of travelling around India, meeting new people and acquiring new skills. She firmly believes that much of her personality was honed during those travels.
The Urgent Need to Equalize the Treatment of Women on a Global Scale

By Lawrence R Gelber

I must disclose, at the outset, that I have a selfish interest in promoting the equal treatment of girls and women. My wife and I operate the I Declare World Peace project in New York City. Our research about world peace has led us to the inescapable conclusion that unless girls and women are treated and respected on an equal par with boys and men, peace will be almost impossible to attain. With equalized respect, peace can manifest.

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the preamble, the UN, which represents the collective consciousness of humanity, wrote the following: “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” So the human family, the entire population of the world, has expressed the easy-to-understand observation that the inherent dignity of all people is the foundation of peace in the world.

Sadly, through either misapplication of “tradition” or misreading of “scripture” or more insidious forms of misogyny, our mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, nieces – the very souls that bring us into life and nurture our existence – have been relegated in many societies to a status below that afforded to our fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, grandfathers and nephews. This inequality poses a grave danger to the entire human family.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China in September 1995, UNESCO issued a Statement on Women’s Contribution to a Culture of Peace, in which it was observed: “Girls and women constitute a large majority of the world’s educationally excluded and unreached. Ensuring equality of educational access and opportunity between the sexes is a prerequisite for achieving the changes of attitudes and mind-sets on which a culture of peace depends.”

And indeed, in a statistical report titled “Pillars of Peace” issued by the Institute for Economics and Peace, known for the well-respected Global Peace Index (GPI), the authors report that the Institute for Social Studies’ ‘Gender Equality’ index was “associated with the 2013 GPI, suggesting that higher levels of gender equality are linked with peace. (My emphasis). The strength of the association was found to be broadly consistent across geographical regions, regime types and income levels.”
In fact, according to the GPI, the 10 most peaceful countries are Iceland, Denmark, New Zealand, Austria, Switzerland, Japan, Finland, Canada, Sweden and Belgium. In contrast, the 10 least peaceful countries are Afghanistan, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Pakistan, Dem. Rep of Congo, Russia, North Korea and the Central African Republic. And while multiple reasons play into peacefulness / non-peacefulness, it is quite clear that the equality of the sexes (with respect to treatment, educational opportunity, job opportunity, social opportunity and so forth) is far higher in the peaceful countries, and largely abysmal in the non-peaceful countries.

So for the safety, well-being, growth, health and prosperity of the entire human family, the elevation of girls and women to equal status and equal treatment of boys and men is of urgent and paramount importance, and all efforts in that direction should be strongly encouraged not only by governments but by every human being.

Lawrence R. Gelber is a lawyer living in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife Rita. Lawrence & Rita operate the I Declare World Peace project, described at www.ideclareworldpeace.org.
I Love Women

By Shravan Kumar

In India, we follow the instructions, point to point, exactly as told to us by our parents. As part of a I Love Womengeneration and culture of doing what we are told, always knowing that our passion lies outside the confines of what we had been told was ‘good’ for us, each one of us would have had our own problems and issues growing up. But ultimately we urban kids did come out of this groove and follow up with our passion, but this may not be the case with everyone everywhere, especially rural women. In a society like ours, which is primarily built upon strong traditional patriarchal views, women are subject to various ridicules and hardships. They often bear the brunt of the workload. Sadly they lack the voice and the agency, the space to make their voices heard. Which is why, we, the common people, must strive to achieve equality for women in the society and stand up against gender based violence.

Let me begin by saying this – “I love women”.

Now, allow me to quantify that: I am what I am today because of women. Be it my amazing friends, or my high school lady or my boring school teacher who still cared for my marks despite me despising her, and of course the first woman I ever loved in my life – my mom. Each of them are amazing in their own unique ways and I would love to watch them reach their potential; to grow, develop and ultimately reach the stars. Quite obviously, I don’t want to see them boxed in by other people’s opinions, ignored and be leered at for being ‘just another woman’! Frankly, there’s no depth to the debate at all. I firmly believe that, a world without equality for women and girls is like flying a plane with just a single wing. To solve any issue of our day, from poverty alleviation to defending everyone’s human rights, we need to include all potential agents for a change, which includes implementing women’s rights and their equality in the society.

Women are always at the receiving end of any gender based violence. It is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men, and legitimizes the appropriation of women’s bodies for individual gratification or political ends. However, from the local to the global level, all issues are interconnected. It is necessary that women think and work together to ensure that they have a voice and make it heard. This will come through education and addressing basic needs such as health care, maternal and child care and sanitation. We cannot separate social and economic issues as we strive to uplift women. I am no businessman or a political aspirant. I think about issues in a holistic manner. And I believe that none of this can be accomplished without a government and society which strongly encourages women’s rights and denounces violence against them.

As of today, much of what has been gained for with regard to women's human rights has been due to the efforts of women activists. Despite potential risks of imprisonment, harassment and torture and sometimes even death, they’ve broken social norms and cultural taboos to speak out, leading brave and inspiring campaigns for their rights. Notable ones are Ellen Johnson and Malala Yousafzai. Given the abrasive nature and the ‘let’s mind our own business attitude’ of the general society,
unfortunately, the very notion of activism leads to negative stereotyping. By aggressively promoting change through mass speeches and advocating unconventional practices like hunger strikes, etc., activists become associated with hostile militancy and unconventionality or eccentricity. Furthermore, this tendency to associate activists with negative stereotypes and perceiving them as people with whom it would be unpleasant to affiliate with, it reduces an individuals’ motivation to adopt the pro-change behaviours that activists advocate. The society doesn’t realize that, without these activists and their so called ‘radical’ behaviour, it is absolutely impossible that changes might occur. Guaranteed, small time articles and photographs published here and there might result in some small scale changes in certain areas. However, on the long run, if you need a successful, long-lasting, working model, we need to give in a strong push to create an impact huge enough. Precisely what these activists have tried and accomplished over the years, create a dent large enough in everyone’s mind to make them aware, cause them to step up and act.

We all, at some point in our lives do realize that despite having appreciated our privileged upbringing and the opportunities that it had afforded us with, there’s more that we could do to lead a happy fulfilling happy life. Give back to the community which groomed us. This can be done in various forms, some choose education, some choose financial helping. Personally, I choose to strive hard for the social upbringing of women in our society. Stand against irrational judgements and acts against women, and fight for women’s equality rights. Not just by doing some on field work and manual chores, but also by creating awareness about the same. I want men to be men. To learn and work hard to be an amazing dad, a good husband, the awesomest brother and the ultimate friend. I urge you to regard women as how you’d treat your boss when you run onto him on the road. With respect. Women deserve as much respect as that plump local politician or that huge pot-bellied cop. Say no to gender based violence, and stand up against anyone who indulges in such actions. And only when you’ve done that, can you feel proud, and say that you are a Real Man.

Shravan Kumar is many things, and ergo could be nothing too. Let’s go with nothing, he says. Currently in his sophomore year, pursuing Computer Science in SNU Noida, despite being a going-to-be engineer by academic proficiency, he prefers to be known as the guy who knows nothing, much like Jon Snow. A foodie who loves to travel and can talk about almost all random things ranging from Arsenal to whether a guy is friend-zoned or not depending on the last seen on a girl’s WhatsApp. Shravan is good at not being good at sports, and is a geek [as seen by many], a bibliophile and a master procrastinator. Passionate about maths and quizzing, he occasionally writes. If there’s no Wi-Fi around, he is more of a philosopher and an amateur psychologist.
I still remember the day I froze as my grandpa delivered the terrifying news: Your Dhana “Akka” is no more. She went up to heaven. I was crestfallen, as she was more than a nanny. From the susurrations that followed, I learned of the ordeal she had undergone at the hands of a drunkard and her in-laws, who relentlessly tortured her for dowry. Finally, she decided to tie herself a hangman’s knot to sunder her own man’s wedding-knot. This was in my first grade.

During high school, I came across a few women, who could not be given in marriage because their parents could not afford the hefty dowry sum. I realized that something was inherently wrong with this equation. Is dowry a tax for the Indian woman, I would rue! Besides, society was brutal to these women, who were shunned as accursed, anathema, or inauspicious from all the social niceties. Some of them might have chosen the fate of my beloved Dhana Akka! Who knows? Vernacular newspapers of the 80s and 90s would carry these quotidian stories relentlessly, albeit its steady flux was hardly ever stanched.

Later after graduation, I also witnessed cases within my own circles, wherein given a chance to either quit or suffer abuse, many women victims – highly educated, I must add – for unbeknownst reasons, chose the latter over the former. Is it fear of the unknown? Are they conditioned to suffer abuse to safeguard their social status, family reputation? I could not understand. I started to extensively read about Stockholm syndrome and other topics related to survivors, trauma, and their conditioning, to gain a better understanding.

These days, I come across more gut-wrenching cases at the Juvenile Courts of Georgia, where I serve as a voluntary officer of the court. Moms undergoing rehabilitative, court-ordered programs, appear before the Court to verify their progress so that the State can take a decision on their child custody. It is an irrefragable truth that I cottoned on to, that behind every woman subject, there is invariably a sordid history of abuse. She most probably fell a victim in her own home, by her own kith and kin. And yes, sometimes by her own sibling, Mom or Dad! A victim with a case-history of drug and substance-abuse need not be entirely a result of the bad choices that she solely made for herself. Rather, the abusive environment, the concomitant trauma, and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) that she might have undergone, does rock her ship later in life. Some of them are runaways from broken-families, who were fleeing rape and abuse, only to be cruelly exposed to further rapes, abuses, and impregnation by the drug mafias, prostitution rings, and criminal gangs. It is here, where I see the crass objectification of women in the worst possible ways imaginable. When a woman emerges out of the jail on a drug-charge and has nowhere else to go, she almost always returns back to jail on similar or more serious charges.

Preceding paras show how directly I have perceived women’s issues. Countries, cultures, characters and scenes may be different, but, the ideas of crass objectification, ruthless subjugation, and an obstinate devaluation by viewing women nothing more than chattels are the common themes that tie
them. Chattel is how the traditional meme of women has always been. Even laws of jurisdiction, domicile, and property rights have bolstered that notion. As those hoary notions give way to the newer reality of equality of sexes, gender wars ensue. This is probably why, rapes and attacks are often used as instruments of war in war-zones as well as an instruments of control elsewhere.

We have laws and courts. But, are they able to provide the reprieve before the victim is besought with violence or abuse? Or is that a Utopian goal? Since the Nirbhaya rape that shocked the world, India has responded with more laws as the society on its edge, clamored more for retribution. As Lao Tzu said in Tao-te Ching, “the more laws and orders are made prominent, the more thieves and bandits there will be.” What we need is a collective, social response to supplement the retributive legal response.

Any issue affecting women, directly affects the society. The very bedrock of the society and its sustenance lies on emancipated women, their physical, mental, and moral strength. Research shows the debilitating effects even on an unborn child, when a mother suffers abuse in her own home. Therefore, I see women’s issue as not just a gender, but a social issue as well. This is why, men’s involvement is ineluctable. I loved Red Elephant Foundation’s promethean idea of involving 16 men to speak in and on behalf of women’s rights for the same reason. I hope advocates of women’s causes opt for the inclusive “AND” instead of the exclusive “OR” path, when it comes to both the sexes. Survivors do not need any more of the internecine gender wars of Kilkenny cats.

Finally, it is also equally important to underscore that existing laws be made more gender-neutral. This is one way to recognize the true strides women have made in the current zeitgeist. Some men and women are genuinely apprehensive and chafed over the contemporary trend of vexatious lawsuits to settle personal scores. For each false case that takes up the court’s time, tens of hundreds of genuine victims are left in the lurch to fend for themselves. I see this as a wasteful deterrent that otherwise keeps genuinely interested men from signing-up for these causes. I firmly believe that the issues facing women and children need a sustained, 360° response from the society, which should attract – not deflect – more men into the fold. Just as charity, respect for women’s rights too, begins at home. As a Father, I am 100% committed to the welfare and interests of my daughter. It is from this spring, I will flow as a brook to touch the lives of girls, women, and children that I will run into, every day.

Rex S. Arul is an Energy Consultant living and working in Atlanta, Georgia. He is a Child’s Rights activist, community-worker, speaker, and a micro-blogger. Mr. Arul is a voluntary Court Officer with the Juvenile Courts of Georgia. He loves his daughter Rhea Arul more than anything in life. He is also the President of his Toastmasters Club and works assiduously to lend his voice for the voiceless; namely, children and the marginalized.
Why do I support women's rights?

By Robert Kirchner

Coming from a country like Germany where women rights have already gone a long way, I experienced the social change that comes alongside women enjoying more and more rights every day. In particular, I am referring to the role of women and men in the household here. Some weeks ago, I was discussing this topic with a friend of mine at a typical men evening where we watched sports. He summarized the social change we experienced with regards to gender roles in the household in my opinion well when he said:

"Listen Robert, it is like this, my grandfather could rest on the terrace while his wife did all the work at home and maybe from time to time he had to do a bit of work in the garden. My father then had to do the work in the garden and sometimes took the dishes out of the dishwasher. And what about us? There is a reason why we know how to cook, to wash and to clean. Because we do it quite often!" Indeed, it is true that in a society where women enjoy the same political and civil rights and have the same chances for a career, men will and do eventually end up covering the same share of responsibilities at home. That doesn’t really sound very promising for us men, does it?

Well, no need to become afraid here since we talk about a good development for men as I would argue. Coming back to the households I spoke of before and especially the one I grew up in, I was never fully happy about the role that my mom and dad played in it. Honestly speaking, my mom was carrying the family as she not only worked but in addition took care of the entire household. I admired her for this and there were a lot of moments where I was wondering how much strength she must have to cope with all of her responsibilities. But then I also thought it was not fair that she had to do this much and that my dad needs to contribute more.

With this experience in mind, I am living in a household today with my girlfriend and, guess what, I cook, wash and clean to an extent that can be considered a fair share of all the household responsibilities. At least, I hope that is what my girlfriend would say too. However, the point is that this helped me find out what kind of a man I am not and at the same time what kind of a man I am. I am not a man because I enjoy privileges that rights give me. I am not a man because I follow certain gender perceptions within a society that seem to make my life more comfortable. Instead, I am a MAN because every day I proof to myself that I cover the fair share of my responsibilities at work and at home and even beyond this point if necessary. Without women rights I would have never come to realize this. That is why I support women rights.

In the end, let me leave you with a question: What kind of a man are you?

Robert Kirchner is an environmental expert who worked on sustainability strategies with and for international organisations. He just recently contributed to the green growth strategy of the African Development Bank. Before, he drafted policy instruments for regional sustainable development in rural China or contributed to a sustainability strategy for the German government.
CLOSING THOUGHTS
From us
To You.
ASHAY ABBHI
REF connects me to so many faceless heroes, to friends I would have never earned and to myself, in a way that is difficult to achieve unless one feels the pain that the stories featured here scream of, only to give way to hope in the end and inspire others to live life differently. I have found myself motivated to write for REF even when it is difficult to string words together in a sentence. At REF, words help build lives, strong in their existence and powerful in their death. Many people have defeated atrocities in brutal wars and torturous peace only to come forward and become a ray of light for millions of others, struggling through similar situations, and for those who see the light but fail to value it. In the simplest words, REF is hope.

KARTHIK SHANKAR
Feminism, especially in our country continues to be a dirty word. So when I heard about an organisation like Red Elephant Foundation which actively advocated gender equality I knew I wanted to be a part of it. What I found was an organisation that covered a spectrum of issues from menstruation to sexual violence. REF continues to astound me, each time I hear about some new initiative or impressive achievement. It's not often you're excited to see where an organisation is heading in the future. A very happy 2nd birthday to REF!
When I look at the working of the Red Elephant Foundation, I consider myself fortunate that I have been able to be a tiny part of this great initiative. There are people who strive to make the world a better place, and the volunteers of REF go that extra mile to give of themselves unstintingly. The world is growing at an amazing pace, and puts forth its own stories, where women and girls play a significant role. Issues like gender equality, and the awareness of the problems of women in conflict zones and otherwise, touch the heart and mind. REF takes these stories under its wing, and strives to change the mindset of the world by voicing the concerns of the exploited and the persecuted. It goes a step further by working as an alchemist, influencing policy makers to turn gender sensitive. After all, “Gender equality is not a woman’s issue, it is a human issue. It affects us all.” Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could live in a world free of strife and war, devoid of violence and tension? This is yet another initiative of REF, to bring about peace through dialogue, awareness and inspiration. As Nelson Mandela put it so tellingly, “If people can learn to hate, they can learn to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.” Kudos to REF for having the moral fibre and strength to work on these issues, and related topics! May the Red Elephant remain as unique as it is, and continue to inspire!
MANASA RAM RAJ
Coming from an orthodox Tamil Brahmin family, I was raised seeing the women in my family put the men above themselves. From the smallest decision of buying vegetables to taking household decisions, nothing could be done without the approval of their husbands or sons. On the other side, the opinion of the women - be they wives or daughters - was never given importance. I have always considered I was born in the wrong family, because when the women kept quiet in response to the suppression they faced, I would question it, and I would be criticized for doing it. Over the years, I have never seen that change. Each time I tweet or put up a Facebook post supporting women’s empowerment, I found it ironic that while I was on a mission to change society, I could not change the mindset of my own family no matter how much I tried. The Red Elephant Foundation came my way exactly at the time I was reaching my threshold of tolerance with the extent of male domination in my family. I sought it as an opportunity to let my family see that there is much more to life than suppressing women. I don’t blame the men alone, here. Somewhere, women have a role to play - one doesn't see you as inferior unless you see them as superior. My association with REF has helped the women in my family understand that they have as much voice as the men in the family do. The mindset in society changes only when it starts with your family and friends. The stories REF has told the world has definitely made an impact and that's definitely my start in changing society and in being the change I want to see.
SHARDA VISHWANATHAN

I started my journey onboard the Red Elephant in 2014. My strong belief in the art of story-telling as a platform to engage with the community and address social issues to create a more gender-just, equal and tolerant society was instrumental in my decision to volunteer with The Red Elephant Foundation. Being part of the Outreach and Social Media team at REF has been a challenging experience for me. Getting people to not just read the stories of change and change-makers but also reflect on them was an important aspect of our communication and messaging. Often we find that stories remain stories and are easily forgotten. But to have these stories act as a catalyst to address issues is what I have learnt at REF. Learning more about activism and work of people from across the globe (which often the mainstream media does not report) has helped me broaden my perspective and develop more sensitivity towards different communities. I have personally learnt the ways in which I can push myself and think out-of-the-box to engage and empower communities on topics which often have a skewed perception. Witnessing small but significant changes in areas of human rights and gender empowerment have made me realize how most of us often take for granted the privileges that we have had access to. For sure, it’s been a humbling experience and would love to continue contributing the little I can to REF’s efforts in empowering men and women.
RAAKHEE SURYA PRAKASH
What started as watching some films at Red Elephant Foundation’s (REF) “Six Films: One Cause” event and reconnecting with a schoolmate while participating in the 16 Days of Activism against Violence against Women in November-December 2014 has evolved into a life-changing journey!
Yes I have always been aware of the problems we women face. But I have shrugged them off and never felt I could make a difference. Yet since I started volunteering with the Red Elephant Foundation’s storytelling wing and interacted with Kirthi and other contributors to its website I’ve realised the importance of having a voice and making it heard promoting causes close to your heart. It may feel like yours is a lone voice shrieking futilely in the wilderness but each voice makes a difference. Words inspire people to act. People inspire people ... to take action. And what’s better in the case REF is that it has brought together a community of likeminded people who serve as a virtual support system that inspires one to do more and do better! An inspiring audience and a wonderful environment!
The deteriorating situation faced by women despite the many policies in place to empower got me writing but the atrocities that confront us everyday keeps me going. Being part of the REF community is a catalyst to my writing and acting for change. But women’s rights are just one aspect. The other is peace. Through REF’s Building Peace Project I have connected with lots of inspirational young people. Through its first season I have made friends with some wonderful people in both India and Pakistan and in the second one I have had the opportunity to connect with young change-makers from many more countries.
The fact that the Red Elephant Foundation has managed to connect with so many youngsters working to make a difference and even just taking the time to connect to learn about the “Other” is awe-inspiring. Through the various activities of the Red Elephant Foundation I get a chance to connect with wonderful role models and heroes. Be it organising relief supplies for the Nepal Earthquake or conducting virtual sessions and organising activities that “keeps the juice flowing” ... being around REF is like being around a livewire.

Thanks for the opportunity to volunteer with REF and beyond! Being a part of the Red Elephant Foundation has incubated my evolution into a better person. So... Thank You! And keep doing what you do so well. You are changing the world for the better! We need more people and organizations like REF to move into a more enlightened and peaceful future!