

Violence and Women: The Way Forward

Diverse speakers address 'deep and systemic' social ill



MUMBAI, February 7, 2013 — Following the horrific December 2012 rape in New Delhi and the strong and immediate response that reverberated around the world, Asia Society India Centre presented a forum for diverse speakers (profiles provided [below](#)) to share their views on what needs to be done to change the prevalence of deep and systemic issues of violence against women.

The discussion started with Asia Society President Emerita **Vishakha Desai** explaining the need to make lawmakers and law enforcers more accountable, and the need for citizens to take responsibility to do their part. She called for a freedom movement, begun by women, for women.

Duru Shah explained the need to sensitize doctors about how to deal with rape victims, and regretted that many doctors turn away victims because of the legal process that goes along with tending to them. She also explained the need to withdraw the "two finger test" to check rape victims, and her part in the movement to stop this practice. Drawing on her own work in educating children about their bodies, she stressed the need for such programmes.

Flavia Agnes said that this is an omnipresent problem that we have to recognize, even in our homes, and that more needs to be done to inform children about how to survive and deal with rape. She emphasized the need to dispel the stigma associated with being a rape victim, and the need to make security and legal protocols clearer and more accessible.

Actress **Poorna Jagannathan** spoke about the complicity of the silent and the need to speak against perpetrators of such violence. She also argued that the seriousness of these issues should not be tamed with soft words, as this rewrites history. She told the audience about The Nirbhaya Project, a play that she is working on inspired by the December 2012 rape incident in New Delhi, to move people and inspire them to take action against this societal malaise.

Meera Isaacs said that a collaborative effort is needed among schools, teachers, the parent body and society. As a Principal, she looked to practical solutions along with the guidance of experts in arenas such as anti-bullying and sensitizing teachers to identify subtle signs of students. Children, she said, should be empowered and compassionate, and both men and women should not tolerate and ask for gender-discriminating practices such as dowry and female infanticide.

Shubhangi Shinde stressed the importance of respecting women, however they choose to express themselves. She told the audience about the organization she works for, Arpan, which runs programmes for children to prevent child sexual abuse. Under Arpan's teaching module, boys and girls are given sex education lessons together. This, they believe, makes boys and girls respect and understand each other and the boundaries of their bodies. Care is taken to inculcate empathy towards the opposite gender and their bodies. Children, she said, know these basic tenets, but they need to be nurtured at an early age.

Anami Roy explained that instead of controlling women and telling them how to behave, men who behave inappropriately should be shamed. He said that we need to consider shifting the burden of proof onto the accused for certain crimes, including rape, with adequate safeguards. He also spoke of the need to establish strong and rigid protocols to deal with the issue, and to continuously sensitize officials who deal with victims. He recalled that over 80,000 cases are pending trial in India, and that special measures need to be taken to reduce the level of pending rape cases. Finally, Roy said that mindsets need to be changed so that victims are treated with respect during the process of finding justice, and

that we should have an absolute zero tolerance level for such crimes, no matter who the perpetrator.

Nalini Malani recalled that women had a poor position in the art world when she started her career, and explained her own efforts to promote women artists. Today, she said, female artists in our society have much more opportunity, but that arts shows that focus on the situation of the female are much-needed.

Hussain Syed lamented attitudes that favored male members of families and the abuse of women by their families. He also spoke about how many girls from municipal BMC schools are withdrawn from school when they reach puberty because their families are afraid that girls will fall in love with a boy and run away, and because staying at home will better equip girls to be housewives when they get married. He proceeded to talk about stereotyping of men and women in text books, wherein men are shown in office suits and women are depicted doing household chores.

Mala Ramadorai sang classical music to demonstrate how women themselves can be violent towards other women, commenting on how such traditions reflect societal mindsets and allow for expressions to be shared by both men and women.

Roopa Purushottaman spoke about the economic costs of violence against women. Concerns for safety of women result in certain professions being male-dominated, and hiring women can be more expensive because of particular security arrangements that women may need. She said that many reforms, from financial to legal, need to occur simultaneously to deal with discrimination and violence towards women. She called for more educational programmes for adolescent boys and girls, as this is the time when people become who they are and when cultural norms can be established. Specific programmes are also needed to target girls to address current gender imbalances, she said. Women's shelters need to be expanded and coordinated with other resources such as security and counseling. Finally, she stressed the need to curb alcoholism, a major cause of violence by males against their female partners.

Makarand Kshirsagar represented the corporate voice and spoke about the measures his company has taken to protect its women. This includes organizing self-defense workshops, life skill workshops covering aspects such as how to lodge a police complaint, and coordinating travel arrangements for women. Further, swipe cards are reviewed to identify late-comers and to offer flexible timing solutions, and an emergency response system is being developed.

Rahul Bose talked about the need to involve men in the effort to achieve gender equality. In particular, he said that men who are "secondary victims of violence," that is male family members of rape victims, should be helped as they deal with their issues of anger and

shame. He suggested that they be made crusaders against violence towards women. He explained the need to raise boys differently, citing studies that have proved that boys who are exposed to the arts and crafts become more gender sensitive. He emphasized that all sectors, including the police, need to take the initiative and sensitize their communities to this issue.

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