

**Title of Project:** No Country for Women

**Country:** India

**Sponsoring College:** Brown University

**Students:** Ria Vaidya and Shreena Thakore (both from India, studying at Brown University)

**Website:** <http://nocountryforwomen.org>

No Country for Women (NCFW) aimed to kick-start effective solutions to combat rape culture in India by bridging the gap between the spaces of academia and activism through education, conversation and action. Our goal was to explore how rape is contextualized in the Indian sociocultural framework and facilitate solutions borne out of this deeper awareness of the issue.

One aspect of NCFW is education. We held workshops in 9 schools and colleges across Bangalore, India to take the discussion of rape beyond the surface level and begin raising questions on why it happens and what aspects of Indian society allow sexual assault to not only be prevalent, but to be the norm. We explained the notion that rape is the symptom of a social disease, caused by power imbalances between institutions like gender, caste, class, religion and more. Trying to navigate the bureaucracy in Indian educational institutions was difficult. School administrations were unresponsive at best and hostile at worst. We eventually tried out a new strategy of identifying passionate students and teachers within educational institutions, explaining our plan to them, and having them work out details with the administrations themselves - this proved to be far more efficient. Our workshops were received with overwhelming praise; it very much pleased us to see that we were breaking the culture of silence creating a formal space within educational institutions for free and open discussion on taboo subjects.

The second aspect of NCFW is conversation. We created a website and established a successful social media presence. Through online platforms we began a) asking people to submit stories which we would post anonymously, b) posting thought-provoking cultural artefacts (such as movie clips, ads) to spark debate, and c) rape cases that did not receive much media attention. This widened the space for discussion of taboo topics and allowed people from across the diverse country of India (and Indians abroad) to discuss what contributes to rape culture in India.

The third aspect of NCFW is action. We wanted to generate effective solutions to combat rape culture. Existing solutions in India, conceived without proper understanding of the context of the issue, are ineffective at best and harmful at worst. We held a day-long conference for 120 people at the end of August in Bangalore to hold in-depth discussions on topics such as intersectionality, gender and physical infrastructure, language and rape culture, statistical literacy, the rape narrative and common myths, etc. The conference was attended by college and high school students as well as professionals in various fields, all of whom worked together to network and brainstorm ideas. We effectively created a rich network of individuals who were passionate about the issue and could help each other facilitate and actualize their ideas for solutions, such as implementing gender sensitization in police and healthcare institutions.

At the beginning of August, a documentary was made about an NCFW workshop on gender policing, which went viral in India (850,000+ views and 100,000+ shares in 10 days). We were covered extensively by major media outlets, including Borgen Project, Policy Mic, The Hindu, DNA India, Deccan Chronicle, Bangalore Times, Social Story and Youth Ki Awaaz and more. You can see more details here: <http://nocountryforwomen.org/media>. We were approached by individuals and organizations all over India to conduct workshops and hold conferences at their institutions (schools, colleges, workplaces). We were approached by several NGOs with collaboration proposals. We have been invited to speak at several high-profile events, including TEDxLSR, Harvard-India Initiative, IIT Kharagpur's Management fest, and NIT Trichy's cultural

fest. For this reason, Shreena decided to take the Fall 2014 semester off and continue expanding NCFW on the ground. We identified team members in Delhi, Bombay and Patna to aid in expansion. We intend to develop educational material on the sociocultural causes of rape that we can distribute to institutions all over the country and provide extensive volunteer training. Because the opportunity for expansion was so immense, we set up an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign to help in fundraising. Through this we have received over USD 5000.

If we look at violence as the manifestation of (or resistance to) social power imbalances, then we can imagine peace to be the collapse of those power imbalances. Peace is the absence of hegemonic structures that oppress, where individuals are allowed to coexist with equal stature regardless of political identity. We do not wish to call our understanding of peace “idealistic” by considering a world where such equality is possible as removed from reality. Rape culture is the culmination of power structures across gender, class, caste, religion and political identity. Rape is only one manifestation of rape culture - a culture that perpetuates and sanctions rape is a culture that contributes to the oppression of minorities through normalized everyday artefacts such as movies and songs, and traditions such as dowry and *Sati*. By focusing on the long-term elimination of rape culture we strive to attack ancient institutional systems that breed violence and everyday discrimination, and replace them with a culture of peace and equal existence.

In the short term, our project has broken the culture of silence. We create formal spaces for conversation within institutions that traditionally refuse to acknowledge such topics. In doing so, we have contributed to a cultural revolution against sanctioning rape and injustice. Through our social art campaign (where we circulate and distribute stories that our followers submit anonymously), we elicit constant conversation and penetrate people’s everyday lives. Through conducting workshops and conferences, we have also educated people on the mechanisms of rape culture and influenced them to analyze the problem at the sociocultural level, instead of a mere circumstantial analysis that takes into account only victim’s clothing choices and time of night. In the long term, our project will add to the collapse of existing problematic power structures by making individuals and institutions understand them and helping them brainstorm effective solutions to dismantle these. We are currently preparing educational material to be distributed to institutions all over India that deal with rape culture and effective ways to combat it on an individual and systemic level.

The project has made us realize the strenuous nature of social activism. We regularly encountered social inertia, institutional apathy and general cynicism. These obstacles were all the more frustrating because they often came from individuals who agreed with our goals and approach. We also realized the dangers of misguided passion and misdirected action - the nation has been in a state of outrage since December 2012, however individuals and institutions armed with enthusiasm but ill-equipped with necessary analytical tools implement solutions that actually made the problem worse. The project made us aware of the importance of thoughtful passion and taught us ways to measure change - while a campaign may not lead to a direct decrease in rape statistics, it contributes to a shift in mindsets and establishes the potential for change. The project has also made us incredibly effective at navigating bureaucratic systems. We understood our own capabilities and limits and began to comprehend the incredibly complicated nature of seemingly insignificant issues.

**Shreena:** This project has taught me that ripple effect is an incredibly powerful tool - seemingly small steps can contribute to larger, immeasurable wakes of change and progress.

**Ria:** This project taught me that awareness is the greatest tool to fight social injustice. However, this awareness needs to be strategically implemented so that it can overcome cognitive barriers that people may have against social change.

