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## December Diary: Where Women, Education and Violence Are Concerned, Progress Is Not Inevitable

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The trial of the accused began last week in the now world-famous rape case that transpired in New Delhi in December. The case sparked a month-long, highly public debate in India about safety for women. During that same period of December and early January, I took an administrative tour through China, Malaysia, Singapore, and India. As a Dean of Arts & Sciences I was interested in educational partnerships; as a scholar of South Asian culture I was interested in deepening some of my research ties. The rape of a woman in New Delhi occurred on December 16th, two days before I left. Her case, and cases like hers, haunted the news as I traveled. I was in Delhi in early January at the time of the massive peaceful protests to the rape, the victim's eventual death, and the inadequate political response to the tragedy.

### **Rape is a Global Issue**

The events are not in question: one mid-December evening, a young woman training to be a physiotherapist was returning from a movie, and boarded a bus that claimed to be "off duty" but which was filled with inebriated men. When she and her friend resisted the drunken advances of the men on board, she was brutally raped and her friend assaulted. She died of her injuries several days later. In response, peaceful but deeply angry protests erupted all over India to reform the rape laws; to change police practices in response to sexual harassment and assault of women; to increase the services available to women who are victims of a sexual assault, and to women more generally who must travel alone or at night.

Many Indian politicians have responded with extraordinary statements, such as: women should wear overcoats to school to protect them; women who are "painted" and go out at night must accept the consequences; women who cross a line of morality (lakshman rekha) must accept the consequences; women should say a mantra, hold the hand of their

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attackers and say they are their spiritual brothers. In response, the English language media in particular pilloried these statements, calling the political class completely out of step with current gender realities at best, and misogynist at worst.

What struck me about this case first and foremost was that, while India must deal with its own challenges internally, it is not alone and should not be stigmatized. When I left for my trip, recent elections had closed where two major American politicians had made unconscionable statements about rape -- one (Indiana Senate candidate Richard Mourdock) in which the pregnancy from a rape was something God intended to happen, and the other (Missouri Senate candidate Todd Akin) claiming that there are "legitimate" and "illegitimate" rapes. I returned from my trip to the news that a girl in Ohio had been gang-raped by a football team, carried from party to party while unconscious. As in Delhi, protests in Ohio erupted at almost the same time. There is no shortage of reports of rape in all countries, developed or developing. While the heartbreak of India is real, rape is a global issue.

### **Women and Education is a Global Issue**

There is another global issue which the Delhi case raises--one in which we seemingly have made great strides, but which also remains more elusive than ever: girls, women and education. It is a central part of the tragedy of the Delhi rape case that the young woman who was raped had moved to Delhi chiefly because of her wish to obtain an education as a physiotherapist.

We should not assume that there is only a narrative of progress when it comes to girls, women and education. Not so long ago, I believed this narrative of progress. When I was a young professor at Bard College, Adrienne Rich came to do a reading. She was everyone's role model and heroine. When I asked her what she wanted to pass on to the next generation, she said, "I hope that future generations do not forget the progress that my generation has made. I hope that they remember our contribution, particularly to women's access to education." I vowed, then and there, as I listened to her soft spoken words that day and her poetry that evening, that I would honor the previous generations and their fight for women's access to education.

But there was something unspoken and assumed in my conversation with Adrienne Rich that day. We both were speaking as if each generation would subsequently, almost effortlessly, make some kind of incremental inroads on the basic issues for girls and women: freedom of choice in all spheres of life, including access to health care, and, most importantly of all, to education. As more and more women become educated, the more we would be able to enter the public spaces of the work force, of politics, of government, of the academy. The more we would be able to walk the streets, take the subways, and climb on the buses.

In many ways, Adrienne Rich's and my narrative would be right. In many colleges there are more women than men, and this is an international trend. In many primary and secondary schools, girls are performing better than boys. More women have advanced degrees than ever before in history. And in even the difficult to crack STEM fields (science technology

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engineering and medicine), we see progress. Many entering medical school classes are made up of fifty percent women. Many biology departments have almost closed the gender gap. In some places in India, engineering colleges are seeing a sharp rise in women applicants.

And yet even with that progress in education, violence against women has not abated. There is a global backlash against this progress, this insistence that educated women are also women in the public sphere. And the backlash is in the news every day. The vulnerability of women in their struggle to achieve, maintain, and benefit from an education is indeed a global issue.

One need only register a travel log of news events as I made my way from China to Singapore to Malaysia to India in the last month to see the huge threat that women's education continues to pose to all sectors of society. When I left America in mid-December, the Iowa Supreme Court, in a 7-0 ruling, [decided in favor of a dentist](#), who judged his highly competent and attractive female assistant a threat to his marriage and fired her. The woman was well trained and well educated. Instead of simply sitting down with employee and discussing how they might change the behaviors, the woman lost her livelihood. The employee paid a high price for being both educated and attractive.

As I traveled through China and Malaysia and Singapore, to visit universities there, women's access to education came up as the number one issue of concern to educators throughout both countries. In Malaysia, I visited many progressive Muslim organizations, and all of them had, as one of their major platforms, the role of girls and women in Muslim societies. I met women who were heads of research institutes, and who had achieved the rank of deputy vice chancellors of major universities who understood that whatever their achievement was, they could not see themselves as emblems of a "problem solved." Rather, the problem was reconfigured. As one woman scholar hosting a radio show put it to me, "My accomplishments don't solve anything. They only make me realize the vulnerability and courage of all women trying to become educated and use their education wisely."

Also in mid-December, while I was in Singapore, the news reported the release of Malala Yousufzai from a British hospital. Malala was an Afghani girl who was shot in the head for insisting that girls go to school. Her release has prompted a major global debate as to whether she is simply a pawn in a political game in which women and education are simply the "window dressing" for a much larger struggle. Afghans everywhere pointed to the apathy present about women and education when the cameras were turned off. And in the meantime, Malala will continue her fight, but she and her family have elected to stay out of the country for her safety. She is even more physically vulnerable at home because she has survived the attack.

Malala's case suggests that one answer that many people in positions of power around the globe provide to the "problem" of women and education is the Talibanization of girls and women who try to go to school, or benefit from school. Cover them up with overcoats or burkhas. Fire them if they are both educated and attractive in the workplace. Even if some societies admit women might obtain an education, they seem to be doing everything they

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can to make sure you don't see them in the process. And the ensuing debate about Malala's case also suggests that another response to the "problem" of education is a peculiar form of apathy; as women make strides in some areas they are heralded, the world is satisfied, and those who are struggling are ignored.

In our short conversation 20 years ago, Adrienne Rich and I assumed that getting an education meant finally existing in a public space, speaking in a public space, claiming the right to act and choosing to act in a public space. And 20 years later, many of us have claimed and lived those rights. But she and I were mistaken that entry into the public sphere would be a seamless result of the process of education. As I watched the news events unfold as I traveled, it became clear to me that the girls and women who want to obtain, continue, or benefit from their education are vulnerable. They might be in danger simply because they wish to do so in a society that denies them this right. Some are vulnerable because they cannot use their training without having their attractiveness and not their training become front and center. Some are vulnerable because they live in a city which can provide them an education but cannot guarantee their safety.

As I left India, the debate began as to whether the victim's family should reveal her name. Up to that point, the name given to her by the *Times of India* was "Nirbhaya," which literally means "fearless," partly because she fought back against her attackers. The English language press called her "Braveheart." While her name has since been revealed, I think of her still as "Nirbhaya," not only because she fought back in the bus, but because she was brave enough to pursue her dream of an education, and to claim her right to exist in public spaces. Nirbhaya is a sobering reminder that we cannot only tell a narrative of progress in the question of women and education. Rather, more realistically and effectively, we should tell a narrative of vigilance against powerful forces of retrenchment and apathy. That might be true fearlessness.