



# VOICES FROM THE SOUTH

HIGHLIGHTING VOICES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH WHO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES TO THE DOMINANT PARADIGMS OF POWER, DISTRIBUTION, AND DEVELOPMENT.

*In this month's "Voices from the South," Leila Passah, National General Secretary of the YWCA of India, reflects on the chilling gang-rape case of a young medical student in New Delhi, and the culture of violence and discrimination against women everywhere.*

*"Enough is enough," she writes. "Now is the time that women's and girl's rights must be protected."*



New Delhi, 27 Dec. 2012. Photo by Nisha Sharma

## Safe Space is a Woman's Human Right

Reflections on the New Delhi rape case and global systems of violence and discrimination against women

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On 17 December 2012, the world awoke to the news of a chilling crime against a young woman living in New Delhi, India. While traveling home from the cinema, the young medical student was assaulted, gang raped, and brutalized in a moving bus in the heart of the city. She later died as a result of the attack.

Reports show that the culprits were drunk, and were looking to have some "fun," which to them meant targeting a vulnerable girl, and sexually

assaulting her in the most gruesome way. Such violence is not just an attack on an individual, but acts also as a deterrent to women's mobility and right to safety and freedom in public places.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB) shows that in 2011 alone, there were 522 rape cases within the city of New Delhi, the highest in any metro city within all of India. In 2012, the reported cases crossed the 600 threshold.

These numbers point to the complete lack of safety for women in the national capital of my country,

and is sadly not isolated. It is part of a rising incidence of heinous crimes against women in the region and the world, being committed at a disturbing frequency.

This state of affairs cannot be allowed to continue. The police and governments must send out a strong message of zero tolerance on cases of violence against women. The current situation points to the sad state of law and order, and the general apathy and insensitivity that the system has towards women.

### Urbanization and Violence

More than half of the world's

*Photo: Thousands of protesters, including those from the YWCA India movement, gather outside the government buildings in New Delhi, India in support of the victims of rape and violence.*

21 December 2012

Courtesy of Nisha Sharma, YWCA of India



population — approximately 3.4 billion people — live in cities today. This number is projected to increase to 69 percent by 2050. With this rapid urbanization come increased risks for the citizens of urban areas, especially women and children. Between 2002 and 2007, approximately 60 percent of urban residents in developing countries reported that they had been the victims of crime. Many of these are women and young girls, facing sexual assault or harassment on streets, public transport or in their own neighbourhoods.

A recent study addressing issues of safety for women in cities, conducted by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), found that 99 percent of the women in the state of Kerala alone felt that cities were not safe. This was due to a number of concrete factors such as the lack of street lights and high raised walls around residential houses on both sides of the road. Respondents also noted that activities such as ‘eve-teasing’, sexual remarks and jokes in bus stops and roads, exhibitionism, staring, and attempting to take photos through mobile cameras, all led to unsafe conditions. The study also revealed that women hardly speak about this kind of harassment. Only 5-7 percent of women reported incidents to the police, while 19 percent did nothing at all when they were sexually harassed.

### Creating a Safe Space

It seems only appropriate, therefore, that we continue to speak boldly about creating a safe world for women around the world. Civil society and human rights organizations can begin by providing an ideal platform to address issues of gender-based violence, sexual violence and crimes in communities and work places. This should not solely be the role of “women’s” organizations. It is crucial that both

young men and women are sensitized to the flaws of patriarchy which often blame women for how they choose to dress and forbids the mobility of women after dark.

Creating a safe space and world for women also means enabling women to contribute to their full potential, by assuring that they have equal representation in decision-making. The demand for 33% representation for women in Parliament in India, for example, will

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**“The world must ensure that women can live their lives free from violence and with peace in our homes, communities, public places, in cities and villages.”**

LEILA PASSAH

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at least ensure that women’s voices and concerns are heard, and their input in decision-making is counted.

The work of the women’s movement across India and across the world continues to be significant, as they have brought about changes in policies and laws on issues ranging from *sati* (killing oneself after the death of a husband), dowry, domestic violence, sexual harassment at work place, and the PCPNDT Act (which bans prenatal sex determination). All such efforts have led to creating a safer world for women and girls.

A movement like the YWCA, which I represent, was founded on the principles and vision of providing a safe space as well as empowering women to be leaders in their own right. The YWCA continues to be challenged, as we need to become more and more relevant and responsive to the changing needs of our society. A special emphasis therefore needs to be put on encouraging youth leadership and addressing their concerns.

YWCA is driven to listen to the voices of young women who are becoming increasingly concerned about issues of Peace and Justice – such as working with women in Kashmir and Manipur, justice issues in Palestine, the rights of Dalits, tribals and Adivasis, the rights of children, sexual reproductive health rights of young women, and HIV/AIDS. They are committed to this and have shown leadership on developing issue-based programmes, and they want to create and ensure a safe world for their peers and excluded communities in our society.

Today, let us all pledge to create a safe world for women by;

*Protecting women & girls from any kind of violence*

*Speaking about violence inflicted on anyone*

*Intervening and try to stop violence, wherever and whenever it is being done*

And let us pledge to end this spiral of systematic discrimination and violence worldwide, by declaring that enough is enough. Now is the time that women’s and girl’s rights must be protected. The world must ensure that women can live their lives free from violence and with peace in our homes, communities, public places, in cities and villages. ■

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