Protesters in Kolkata, India, decry violence against women following the death of a twenty-three-year-old woman who was gang-raped and beaten on a bus in New Delhi. Activists in India later criticized U.S. feminists for reproducing colonial discourse in their responses to the attack.

AP Photo/Bikas Das

Violence Against Women

We Need a Transnational Analytic of Care

BY ELORA HALIM CHOWDHURY

When gender-based violence occurs in the Global South, how should feminists in the Global North respond? Sometimes feminists in Europe and the United States say nothing, fearful that their attempts to speak out about gender violence in South Asia, Africa, Latin America, or other formerly colonized regions will reproduce colonial dynamics. At other times they do speak, and their language echoes imperial narratives about needing to "rescue" downtrodden women from "backward" cultural traditions. To move to a more constructive place, we need to foster a transnational analytic of care: one that is not defensive, reactionary, or silencing. We need an analytic of care that is cognizant of the local *and* global processes that create conditions of vulnerability for women and form the asymmetrical planes in which cross-cultural alliances and solidarity practices must happen.

The urgency of our need for more constructive forms of transnational feminist solidarity became particularly apparent in December 2012, when feminists across the globe took to the pen and the streets in response to the gruesome gang rape of a young woman in New Delhi, the capital of India. The twenty-three-year-old woman was returning home after watching the film *The Life of Pi* with a male friend in a shopping mall in South Delhi. She and her companion that night tried to hail public buses and auto-rickshaws to

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A narrow focus on sexual assault can obscure how the structural violence of the global economy is also a central source of women's suffering in the Global South. This photo, *Death of Thousand Dreams* by Taslima Akhter, captures the final embrace of two workers killed by the April 2013 factory collapse in Bangladesh.

no avail. Eventually, a private chartered bus stopped to picked them up. There were six men on the bus, including the driver, his younger brother (who posed as the conductor), and four others who worked in various low-skilled jobs in the city and were economic migrants from neighboring states. The bus did not have a permit to be on the roads after-hours; investigations later revealed that the traffic police had been bribed in order for it to pass through security checkpoints. The men on the bus, apparently on a "joyride," beat the young woman and her friend. When the woman and her friend resisted, they dragged her to the back of the bus and took turns raping her. The assault lasted several hours as the bus plowed through the city streets, and involved the insertion of a metal rod into the woman's body, which caused her intestines to spill out. Afterward, the couple was stripped naked and thrown off the bus. The driver tried to run over the woman, but her friend managed to pull her out of the way.

The young woman's ordeal did not stop there: for nearly half an hour, passersby ignored the pair's cries for help. When the police finally arrived, instead of transporting the woman and her friend immediately to the nearest hospital, they argued over jurisdiction. The woman fought for her life for two weeks and finally succumbed to her injuries in a hospital in Singapore. Even though the government ostensibly flew her to Singapore for better care, many in India were critical of the move as her condition was too fragile—they saw the move as a gesture by the government to dampen the public outrage and massive protests in Delhi and all over India. The men accused of this brutal crime are currently standing trial in a fast-track court.

In the face of mounting civil protests, the government set up a committee that brought representatives from diverse constituencies in India to put forth a set of legal and social recommendations to deal with violence and discrimination against women. Even though feminist groups found these recommendations inadequate, indeed a "mockery," some believe that the changes underway in legal and social policy may set the stage for transforming structures and attitudes around women's rights, access, and citizenship.

Feminist Responses

Amid the avalanche of feminist responses to this particular event, a debate ensued around the question of the appropriate terms of engagement with women's oppression in the Global South. Crudely speaking, many feminists in the West were either called out for not being critical enough of patriarchal social structures in India that contribute to violence against women or blamed for casting Indian men and culture within a colonial mindset that sees misogyny as an inherently Eastern phenomenon. By extension this mindset obscures a long history of using the status of women in a society as the measure of its progress, which aids colonial and imperial missions. At the same time, while many responses in the Indian media were powerful in pointing out apathy and misogyny in India's state machinery and public attitudes toward women's roles in society, some of these narratives also engaged in problematic class-based assumptions about the "natural link" between poverty and violent masculinity. These responses fell short of shining light on globalization and the structural inequalities that play a role in producing both victims and perpetrators of violence. Focusing on poverty in a narrow sense, they failed to discuss the global economic conditions that make poor women and men especially vulnerable to extreme violence and suffering.

This kind of skewed narrative supports the continuation of an imperialist feminism that seeks to "rescue" downtrodden women from backward cultural traditions and misogynist states and men. At the same time, it can obscure the fact that violence is not confined to any particular group in society but rather cuts across class, religion, ethnicity, and region. The imperialist baggage in feminist perceptions about women in the

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Global South is further reflected in a policy task force entitled "Beyond Gender Equality," which was set up at Harvard University following the New Delhi gang rape and is preparing to offer recommendations to India (and other South Asian countries). In response to this initiative, a group of prominent Indian feminists published a sardonic piece in the online publication *Kafila* detailing the decades-long, painstaking work of feminists in India advocating for justice for victims of sexual violence. These feminists, infuriated by the task force at Harvard, wrote, "Perhaps you will allow us to repay the favour, and next time President Obama wants to put in place legislation to do with abortion, or the Equal Rights Amendment, we can step in and help and, from our small bit of experience in these fields, recommend what the United States can do."

Such patronizing U.S. attempts to offer guidance to women in India appear hollow when we consider that the United States is one of the few nations that have not ratified the UN Convention for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (placing it in the company of states like Sudan, Somalia, and Iran—countries that the United States does not hesitate to condemn as part of an "axis of evil"). It is astonishing that UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement calling on Indian government leaders "to do everything in their power to take up radical reforms, ensure justice and reach out with robust public services to make women's lives more safe and secure" when no such statement has been directed toward the U.S. government, despite the fact that there is a reported rape in the United States every 6.2 minutes, and one in five U.S. women will be raped in her lifetime. Ultimately such posturing over moral ground also overlooks how first world neoliberal policies contribute to a climate of insecurity and vulnerability for women (and men) in the Global South.

Overlooking the consequences of neo-liberal policies is, of course, not strictly a Western phenomenon. Speaking to this point, social activist Vandana Shiva was critical of the Indian prime minister's suggestion that "loose-footed migrants" are contributing to the problem of violence against women. Because the Delhi rape involved migrants on both sides (both the victims and the perpetrators were migrants), Shiva points out:

> The rapists were all living in slums in hugely brutalized conditions, thinking that brutalization is the norm. The [young woman's] father had sold his land because farmers aren't being allowed to make a living. Two hundred and seventy thousand Indian farmers have committed suicide in recent decades. The rest are hanging on the margins of existence. He [the young woman's father] moved to Delhi to load luggage at the airport to be able to survive and send his children to school. . . . Mr. Prime Minister, they are a product of your policies. They are refugees of your economic policies.

In another strand of the debate, political activist and author Arundhati Roy observed that there was nothing inherently exceptional about this case—it was made exceptional by the unprecedented nature of the citizens' uprisings that it sparked. She criticized the response to the event as highly selective and drawing in mostly the middle and upper-middle classes because they could relate to the "victim," to whom Roy mistakenly assigned a middle-class identity. Even though the young woman herself came from a family that had migrated to Delhi for better opportunities, and she worked at a call center at night to help finance her education as a physiotherapist, these facts were overshadowed in many readers' minds by the choice of the movie she and her friend had seen, the location of the mall they had visited, and the initial reports about her career aspirations—all likely signifiers of a middle-class identity. Roy's larger point perhaps was that rape is not exceptional but routine in most parts of India. Also her point that similar protests have not been sparked by routine, everyday violence against minorities in India—for example, the rape of Dalit women by upper-caste men or the systematic rape of women in conflict zones by the Indian Army—is a point well taken. Roy was right to raise concern about selective empathy and the selective exercise of responsibility and care across borders.

Factory Collapse: Another Form of Violence

Western feminists often move from describing women's suffering in the Global South as a consequence of patriarchal oppression to suggesting that women in the Global South can be empowered through neoliberal economic ventures that create opportunities for self-reliance. But the April 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh came as a powerful blow to the image of the "self-reliant" third world woman worker—the backbone of the national economy and the transnational supply chain. The factory collapse killed upward of 1,100 workers in the ready-made garments industry.

In the last three decades Bangladesh has become the second-largest supplier (trailing China) in the global apparel industry, employing nearly 4 million workers, most of whom are young women. Eighty percent of exports in Bangladesh are in this sector, constituting a $19-billion-per-year industry. Despite being the "golden goose" of the economy, the workers in this sector face dismal working conditions and compensation. The flagrant disregard for their humanity could not be more apparent than when the owner of the Rana Plaza building and the supervisors of its factories forced the workers back into the premises the day after it was declared an unsafe construction. They were not going to be paid their monthly salary, the managers informed the workers, unless they went to work. In sharp contrast, the employees of the bank and shops also housed on the premises were asked by their employers not to report to work.

The flagrant disregard for the worth of workers' lives was further apparent in the government's decision not to accept external assistance in the recovery efforts, in order to project to the global community an image of "self-reliance." Equally shocking were the bizarre statements of government representatives who minimized the seriousness of the situation and many Western retailers' refusal to sign on to the building and fire-safety contracts. In the end it was ordinary civilians from all corners of Bangladesh who rushed to coordinate and carry out the monumental task of pulling out bodies of dead and injured workers, facing great risk to their own well-being in the process. The stories of Shahina Akhter, who remained buried alive for five days before finally succumbing to her injuries just as rescue workers were drilling to get her out, Kaikobad, a construction worker who toiled to pull twenty-six workers out of the rubble before dying from severe burns from trying to operate a drill machine, and Reshma Begum, the miracle survivor who was pulled out alive after seventeen days, will be forever etched in the minds of those who followed this entirely avoidable catastrophe.

No other image, however, has captured the gravity of the disaster as powerfully as Taslima Akhter's photograph *Death of Thousand Dreams* (see page 10), which was named the most haunting depiction of the tragedy by the photo editors of *TIME*. The photograph shows a man and a woman in a loving embrace in the last moment of their lives. We know neither who they are, nor whether the couple shared a relationship outside of their death embrace. Perhaps they sought comfort, feeling a profound connection to each other, humanity, and the divine, as the plaster, steel, and concrete came crashing down on them like a deck of cards.

The image defies a number of social and cultural norms in depicting physical contact between a young man and a woman in an ostensibly "public" embrace. The enormity of what was about to happen perhaps made those considerations for modesty, shame, and honor immaterial. The man is seen to be covering the woman's torso in a protective embrace even as his own trauma is signified by blood—resembling a tear—trickling down from the corner of his closed left eye. While not minimizing the reality of male violence against women, I'd like to propose that this photo poses a visual challenge to Western feminist narratives of the "downtrodden third world female" and her "violent and oppressive" male counterpart. It expands our understanding of women's oppression beyond the lens of "male violence" to one of structural violence and encourages an analytic of connectivity as the root of deep solidarity.

Death of Thousand Dreams also draws our attention to the structural inequality of globalization, colonial relations between supplier and buyer nations, corporate greed, corrupt state machinery, and disregard for the poor workers—male *and* female—in each tier. All of these structures of power contribute to the exposure of certain populations in the Global South to extreme violence and suffering. And the image also illuminates the kin, community, and human connection that is at the base of all of our existence. At the very least it should urge us to rethink some of the outdated, tired, and prejudicial paradigms that continue to limit the scope of our understanding and inspiration to practice more egalitarian, just, dignified, and humane interactions with one another. ■