

Gender Equality – A Comparative Study
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May 20, 2015 – two days before India – New York City

It's dusk and I'm strutting down 7th avenue like it's my runway. I'm alone but I know that in ten minutes I'll be in a crowded restaurant surrounded by my friends. I'm wearing Doc Martens (heels, of course) and a bright blue cotton dress ending mid-thigh. My lips are painted an obnoxious shade of crimson. I just flipped my middle finger to a six-foot tall white man for whistling at me, or rather my body. I remain calm and strong and hope he doesn't get too angry. I tell myself that he can't hurt me – even though I know he very well could.

June 22, 2015 – just arrived in New Delhi

I'm sitting in the third row of a bus on the way to a hotel. Dr. Ganguly picks up the microphone and clears his voice, the way he does when commanding attention. He says, *"We are now in Delhi and Delhi is dangerous. Girls, cover up, please. Never walk around without a male friend. Stay in groups of threes or fours, the more the better. Guys, help out your girl friends. This place is not safe."*

I shudder.

When I think about equality, or lack thereof, gender flies into my head with full force. My life as a woman and my time here in India has allowed me to reflect on the inequality of the sexes. I believe that gender inequality is more than only having one security line for women at the airport in Mumbai, or not speaking up when a businessman cuts you in the line at Café Coffee Day. It is even more than a blushing Indian mom-to-be

unable to legally ask her doctor the sex of her child because the pressure of female feticide ominously hangs over the shoulder of a nation. Though the aforementioned instances are pervasive in sexism, one facet seems to be the most cross-cultural and foreboding: fear of sexual assault. In fact, if we fail to discuss rape culture when premising gender inequality, then we might as well not discuss it at all.

I've felt a fear of rape (like many women, if not every woman who's ever lived) for my entire post-pubescent life. In India especially, I experienced an overwhelming apprehension of the feminine figure. If I became too overheated to bear the weight of my cardigan in 30°C, I received immediate unwanted stares at my shoulders and chest. Even when I wore the most conservative of clothing, overly sexual glances had me gripping the arms of my male friends. This type of attention always leaves me feeling more than uncomfortable; it leaves me feeling afraid. My mind instinctually travels to the worst of possibilities – rape.

But this feeling hasn't just occurred to me in India. At home in the United States, I hear stories of college girls my age getting raped all the time. They seem to always be "asking for it," even when intoxication leaves them stuttering at best. Months before coming on this Dialogue, I heard of a woman getting killed on public transportation in India after attempting to resist a sexual assault. The culture of rape is ubiquitous.

I grew up in a conservative Greek-American community where the expectations of women are as clear as the Ionian Sea. Women are expected to have children, clean, cook, and support their husbands. Women are also expected, however, to epitomize strength, to be matriarchs, to demand security and respect. My grandmother reminds me of a Greek saying that is to be spoken right after marriage: *"You are smaller than your*

husband is and your arms are twigs to his branches, but you, the wife, now have four thousand eyes.”

With my grandmother’s wisdom, I can see a million ways to end rape culture worldwide: the promotion of feminism, compulsory education, boys having stable and gentle role models, balanced female presence in school and in the workforce. These sound fantastic in an ideal sense, but there is no guarantee of their implementation or effectiveness. I have a strong belief that when both men and women can learn to admire the female body as a miraculous, life-giving entity rather than pieces to be devoured, rape will end. The termination of rape culture will happen slowly and painfully. And there’s no doubt that more women will suffer before changes are made.

I hope to bring a daughter into this world one day, as selfish as that makes me. Until then, I can hope that she will have the same proclivities that I have now; I can hope desperately and relentlessly that she’ll flip someone off on 7th avenue one day and smile at her audacity.