

Joanna Sullivan
Inequality Essay

Over the course of my time in India, I have reflected a lot on the gender inequality I have seen here along with that which I have experienced growing up in the United States. On the surface, this reflection was characterized by feelings of distress, and the overwhelming thought of how far we still have to go. Beyond this however, a tremendous feeling of shame came over me as I began to think deeper about my ability to critique another culture, especially having only experienced it for thirty days.

Throughout my life, gender equality has continually lit a fire within me. Though it may be in small ways, I try to challenge myself daily to fight for equity, for the abolition of gender norms, and for all human beings to be able to live the life they choose despite the body that they happened to be born into. I was incredibly fortunate to grow up in a loving and supportive environment, where the people who cared for me always highlighted my strength, intellect, and ability, and truly believed that I was capable of whatever goal I laid out for myself. Despite this bubble of compassion and encouragement, I still repeatedly found myself victim to the underlying gender inequality that is present in our modern western society. I understand what it is like to be given one job and refused another due to my gender. I have experienced the confidence gap between men and women that is alive and real in education and the workplace. I have known the struggle of seeing only three other female faces in a thirty plus group of engineers. For these reasons among others, I know there is much more to be done to achieve true equality among the genders.

After already feeling a strong sense of unfairness in the United States, coming to India and observing gender inequality from my uninformed foreigner's eye, I felt

defeated. While the disparity between genders I had known in the US seemed to be subtler, it seemed that in India it was thrown directly in your face. Being an outsider, I realized that I could only know what I had experienced. I felt the stares of each man I walked by as he grabbed his friend's arm to point out the legs of the white girl who had made the mistake of wearing her running shorts into town on a crowded night. I heard the words of a popular movie referring to the future careers of men and women as givens; a daughter would be a doctor and a son an engineer. I spoke firsthand to a bright and promising engineering student who was far more underrepresented in her class than any woman I know back home and who did not even see the disparity. I noticed even the type of dress, as men were clothed in their modern western attire while women continued to don their traditional and conservative fashions.

Although I initially felt indignant at each and every one of these experiences as they spurred reactions within myself, I began to notice other emotions taking over those of inequality. I started to feel ashamed and uncomfortable. What gave me the right to critique another culture? Was I in the position to criticize a place that I know so little about? How could I feel bad for women I did not even know?

I find it a daunting task to delve into these thoughts and emotions and attempt to reach some sort of conclusion about what I am allowed to feel and what is the right course of action. Though I cannot say I have found much clarity on how I as a foreigner fit in to the discussions on equality in a society that is not my own, I appreciate that this experience has opened me up to questioning. By taking the time to evaluate my gut feelings of anger at what to me is clear injustice, I think I am better suited at approaching

situations of bias. If all we can do is criticize without understanding, then the underlying problems can never be solved.