

## Interview – Dipali Anumol

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Dipali Anumol

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**This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.**

Dipali Anumol is a PhD Candidate at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University where she specializes in Gender and Human Security. Her doctoral work aims to understand the relationship between feminist activism, practices of care, and responses to sexual violence in India. She also serves as the co-director of Ecologies of Justice, an interdisciplinary initiative aimed at exploring civic activism, environmental (in)justice, and intersectionality. Prior to Fletcher, she worked in development consulting across a range of projects on education, child rights, gender, and urban development. Dipali previously studied International Relations at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Development Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras (IIT-M). Dipali is the co-editor of *Challenging Conceptions: Children Born of Wartime Rape and Sexual Exploitation* (Oxford University Press 2023). Dipali's writing has appeared in leading publications such as *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Comparative Political Theory*, and *Feminist Perspectives*. Her Twitter handle is @dipali17.

**What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking and/or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?**

I've always been interested in politics and international relations since high school, but my understanding of the 'international' has evolved with time. During my undergrad, I took every IR class at my university, but it focused primarily on the traditional Western canon of IR – state-centric power politics, realism, and liberalism. During my graduate studies at LSE and later at Fletcher, I moved towards critical approaches to IR. I have been greatly influenced by feminist thinking in deepening and widening my understanding of the 'international.' With the help of feminist theorists such as Cynthia Enloe, Sara Ahmed, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Chandra Mohanty, I've learnt to unsettle so-called facts and truths of IR, and to go beyond the binaries of domestic/international, masculine/feminine, thinking/feeling, hard/soft power.

My doctoral research stems from my prior work experience. Before I began my PhD, I worked in development consulting in India. One of the projects was an assessment of attitudes and behaviors around domestic violence across the country for an international NGO. As we designed our surveys and questionnaires, I understood the need for an intersectional lens to research – we could not just ask respondents if they accepted domestic violence and count the number. The context mattered too – how questions were phrased, who asked them, and who else was present while surveys were administered. I realized that we need rich ethnographic data to understand the specificities of domestic violence and to enact meaningful policy change.

**In the article *Care conversations*, you conclude with an interesting question: “Does IR care?” What are the little spaces of hope that you notice in the field that would lead to a better and more caring IR?**

I see this working at two levels. First, in terms of the growing academic contributions to critical, intersectional and decolonial scholarship. Such perspectives are more attuned to addressing power relations, structural dynamics, and the social constitution of meaning and relationships. This necessitates a kind of discourse *with* others, not merely

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*about* them, and involves speaking *to* rather than speaking *for*. Traditionally, IR has been very west-centric in scholarship, theory and praxis. There's been a recent (and necessary) push towards more representative work from the Global South and other marginalized communities. This has also consequently meant the introduction of new avenues to present, publish and discuss such work, like the Global International Relations Section (GIRS) at ISA.

Second is how the field views itself, how we are becoming more reflective in the reality of academia and the toll it takes on individuals vis-s-vis the institutions they are embedded in. Though small but growing, there is now some space being created for students, ECRs and scholars to come together and imagine a version of IR that is more caring and empathetic, both to people within IR and those we engage with in our praxis and research.

**For your PhD, you are focusing on the relationship between feminist activism and practices of care with respect to sexual violence in India. Could you elaborate on the specific link you find between these areas?**

Feminist activism and movements are long because change is slow. Movements are built both around issues and the activists that sustain them. I believe there is not a lot of attention paid to the latter. Activists can suffer from burnout because movement building is a long and tiring task. This work can also take a toll, especially when there is a possibility of secondary trauma from graphic and spectacular violence, which is sadly common when you study sexual violence in India. In response, activists have come up with necessary alternatives such as mutual aid and communities of care, while engaging in their own practices of care to preserve themselves. My guiding question is how these practices of care impact the approach and success of the movements and the kind of change in policy and public opinion they can affect.

**How have formal laws in India failed to reduce sexual violence? Have you found that legal reform is only undertaken in response to highly publicized incidents of rape and sexual assault?**

Formal laws in India have failed to have the desired impact because the patriarchal nature of Indian society and state is reflected in how law is framed. While the law has been constructed around gender equality and freedom, its interpretation and enforcement are subject to gendered prejudices. If society subordinates women and places a premium on women's chastity, then no matter how progressive the framing of laws, its application will continue to be patriarchal. There is a distinction between the enactment of progressive laws and its potential positive effects as opposed to its actual social effects. The true emancipatory potential of law can only be realized if it – a major entity in the state apparatus – acknowledges the patriarchal nature of society, and designs jurisprudence that actively accounts for this nature and undermines these parochial considerations. The status quo, by failing to do this currently, is complicit in upholding patriarchy and its slow violence. As a result, the incidence of sexual violence continues to remain high even with stringent legislation that punishes perpetrators. The problem is that law focuses on individual punishment of perpetrators rather than protection of the victim and prevention of rape at a societal level. Legal reform without social change deals with the consequences of sexual violence rather than the causes.

Seen through the lens of slow violence, the patriarchal nature of sexual violence, the state and the law are unspectacular. Its workings are not sensational or hyper-visible. It is an everyday reality that affects the lives of women. It is not considered a violent threat. The only times patriarchy and the patriarchal nature of the law receive attention is when its impact is sensationalized. This is illustrated by the aftermath of famous instances such as Delhi (2012), Unnao (2017), and Kathua (2018). It is precisely because of the violent and gruesome nature of the gang rape that it received media and public attention. This contrasts with the numerous other instances of sexual and patriarchal violence that go unnoticed.

Consequently, these high-profile cases and moments of public outrage continue to lead to deterrence narratives focused on the criminal acts of individuals, rather than addressing the broader social structures that reproduce patriarchal beliefs and practices. This individual focus obscures the fact that most sexual violence in India is a daily occurrence, largely ignored by the headlines and relegated to banal crime briefs or statistics.

**What are you currently working on?**

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My primary focus right now is writing and fieldwork. I presented some of my preliminary writing at a workshop in London in June. At Fletcher, I also co-direct the Ecologies of Justice program with Prof. Kimberly Theidon. The program aims to understand the relationship between intersectionality, civic activism and environmental (in)justice. We're hoping to expand the program – our speaker series, course offerings and partnerships. Additionally, along with Prof. Dyan Mazurana, we recently released an edited volume on children born of wartime rape and sexual exploitation. We're working on sharing the findings of the research with relevant governments, organizations, and activists, and hoping to have a formal launch of the book in the coming few months.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?**

A PhD can be a very lonely and isolating journey. It can become very tempting to work all the time because academia and its related institutions are very competitive. Build a life outside it – invest in a hobby, spend time with friends and family, take time off, care for yourself. The PhD, and academia by extension, is only one part of your life, it's not the only part.