

Eliminating Violence Against Women: Sexism and Scholarly Responsibility

Written by Susanne Zwingel

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SUSANNE ZWINGEL, MAR 7 2013

Nobody who reads these lines can be unaware of the brutal gang rape that took place in Delhi, India, on December 16, 2012. Not only the incident itself, also the massive public protests against it – ‘it’ including the failure of several state institutions to save the 23 year old woman’s life as well as comments of religious and political officials that put blame on the victims[1] – have been covered by media outlets worldwide. Immediate reactions have often had the character of reflexes – the ‘castrate and kill them’ reflex, for example, or the ‘it’s Indian culture’ reflex[2]. Media-hyped events often disappear fast from the public’s mind, yet I think that we need a long term commitment in order to understand what this incident is an expression of and how to confront it. Academics in general and students of International Relations in particular need to take up this task.

The long term commitment I am talking about is simple: Learning to understand sexism as a pervasive global pattern. It is connected to other patterns that frame humans as disposable, such as economic exploitation, racism, or homophobia, and it has created the worldwide belief that female humans are more disposable than male humans. These structures have ended Amanat’s[3] life. They are in your life and in my life. They appear in different forms – brutal and subtle; and we are not always victimized by them – we also benefit from them, often without realizing it. The argument I want to make is that ‘we’ need to work much harder to create a pervasive norm of anti-sexism and gender equality. This ‘we’ is a blurry collective – let me address you e-IR readers as people who identify with the notion of gender equality on par with ‘the international community’ which has gotten pretty far over the last six decades in codifying human rights, including the human rights of women. As I will argue, the ‘hard work’ in this respect is about thinking in connections – this world has become too complex to give simplified answers. Concretely, let’s not file Amanat’s death as an ‘Indian incident’ we (if we are not Indians) have not much to do with, but let’s learn from it in a way that helps to destabilize the environment that has allowed it to happen. Listening to knowledgeable women from South Asia is a good start (see Kabeer and Parashar[4]), yet the point is that many more people around the globe need to assume responsibility against sexism.

Why is this idea of connecting so important? Let me introduce the framework of ‘norm translation’ here which I have come to use for much of my work[5]. For many IR scholars since the 1990s, the ‘power of norms’ has become a fascinating field to study; certainly by now it is an established if contested understanding within the discipline that ideas may be powerful vis-à-vis material interests. The underlying assumptions of IR scholarship on norms have been 1) that ‘ideas’ are somewhat morally better than ‘interests’ (norms in this sense are often seen as ideas that do not necessarily coincide with the interests of a given actor), and 2) that it is our discipline’s job to measure the power of norms by the degree of their ‘diffusion’, that is the degree to which they influence domestic politics, often equaled with state behavior. Accordingly, scholarship on human rights norms has traditionally focused on legal and de facto changes undertaken by state actors, the state being understood as the ‘powerful’ (in a material sense) actor, whereas civil society organizations are often framed as the ‘ideational actors’ that, in connection with an international standard upheld by a more or less inclusive, norm-abiding community of states, trigger state behavioral change (the famous ‘boomerang effect’). I do not deny that state behavior is relevant for the realization of substantial gender equality, but I have argued against some of the assumptions underlying the norm diffusion rationale because I think they are not useful to grasp complex and socially deeply engrained norms, and accordingly, misunderstand dynamics of normative change.

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Gender norms *are* deeply engrained norms. They are less crucially affected by state behavior than, say, the rules of diplomacy (a classically inter-governmental set of rules). Gender norms are ubiquitous, which is not to say they are static. They govern our lives with or without international conventions. They are present in all human interaction, international, national, local. How could norms of this character be influenced by international discourses? Clearly, it would be naïve to assume that international normative frameworks – such as the Women’s Rights Convention (CEDAW) or the Beijing Platform for Action – diffuse deeply into social relations. These agreements mean a lot – as Louis Henkin has long pointed out, their relevance can only be understood if we try to imagine a world where none of such agreements exist[6]. Still, they represent one standard among many others, and the degree to which they resonate depends on processes of translation, that is, on activism that is not only aware of them, but develops strategies to transmit them into real life contexts – a process that Sally Merry calls ‘vernacularization’[7]. Norm translation understood this way is not only a process from the international to the national, but it is multidirectional, including *toward* global discourses, not only departing from them. As scholarship on gender and global governance has shown, the integration of gender equality norms into international policy fields has been rather successful on the rhetorical level, but more scattered in terms of institutional commitments to gender equality[8]. The important notion in ‘norm translation’ is that it depends on how differently contextualized discourses are connected or ‘stitched together’. Who does this? What happens in the process? How do alternative visions come into play? In how far are norms dynamic or stay rather stable? These questions, I think, help us paint a more accurate if maybe uneasy picture of these complex processes.

The perspective of norm translation brings us to see that black and white assumptions along the lines ‘We respect gender equality – they don’t’ is misleading. Rather, let’s look at us in general terms of humanity, at the connections between us, at our share in allegedly faraway events. I think such a perspective is necessary to overcome the ‘reflexes’ mentioned in the beginning, and also to prevent us from pushing the real existence of sexism on our mental backburner.

Two main ways of ‘re-seeing’ result from this: First, ‘we’ may dispose of a set of international norms that promises to work for human dignity, but this set coexist with structures that disregard a great number of human beings. Sexism plays a decisive role in this. The rapists of Amanat represent these structures in multiple ways – they saw her as disposable, but they have also themselves been exposed to a ‘life in disposability’. We know that a lot of violence against women (and against men) is committed by men who feel humiliated and powerless and who try to assert power where they feel they still can[9]. Thus, a lot of women who ‘step out of their traditional place’ are faced with violence of this kind, for example Mexican women who earn their own income in the maquila industry[10], and Central American women human rights defenders who speak up against abuse[11], yet it is important to see the extremes of violence as part and parcel of an everyday culture of ‘ordinary’ (read: acceptable) violence. Also, sexism is not only an expression of male perceived loss of status, it is also one of unearned, naturally assumed entitlement: Think of the male teacher or college professor who expects sexual favors (or worse) from female students, or of sexual abuse scandals so many top politicians are involved in. Most of these incidents do not reach the public surface, because enough people who know of them consider them negligible. Thus, we literally need to ‘re-see’ sexism as one of the most pressing problems of humankind. Naila Kabeer makes this point with a view to the post-2015 global development agenda and to correct the omission of violence against women as one of the Millennium Development goals.

The second dimension of ‘re-seeing’ is to understand sexism and human disposability as a challenge produced by our present day world, not as remnants of age old traditions (the Western mind is fast in connecting what it is abhorred by to a ‘pre-civilized’ mindset). As much as we want to be enlightened respectful beings, we easily disconnect from those humans that our global way of living has marked as disposable. I recommend the movie ‘Nero’s guests’[12] in this context; it documents the suicides of thousands of Indian farmers who do not see a way to live due to the conditions created by the corporate agroindustry. Interestingly, the movie does not ask why businesses act that way, but why ‘we’ let them do it.

As humans and IR scholars, what do we need to do? Clearly, not doing any direct harm is not sufficient. The goal has to be to proactively create an enabling environment for anti-sexist human dignity. Jacqui True (2012) makes three important proposals in this regard: First, to consistently work toward empowering women economically in order to

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decrease the layers of vulnerability they are exposed to; second, to understand violence against women as a men's issue that men have to take responsibility for 'because some men's violence gives all men a bad name' (p. 10); and third, to assess all policies in regard to their effect on violence against women. Thus, supporting substantial gender equality should be a personal commitment for all of us, but also one that needs to be read into big agendas (in particular those that are constructed as gender neutral). Some guiding questions in this endeavor could be: How can I as a consumer and citizen support decent and empowering working conditions for women in the global garment (or any other) industry? How does it look, in my personal environment and beyond, when men take a proactive stance against sexism? How can I enhance this process? When I study public policy creation, how can I find out which measures increase and which decrease violence against women, and how can I let policy makers know?

Sexism is alive and kicking. Globally. Gender equality is not yet a norm that has sunk in; commitments to make it resonate have been too superficial or too few. However, the bold normative statements voiced by female and male protesters in response to Amanat's terrible fate hopefully will help all of us understand our immense responsibility.

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Susanne Zwingel is Associate Professor at the State University of New York in Potsdam, USA. Her research areas include the translation of international norms, in particular women's rights norms, gender in global governance, and gender relations and armed conflict.

[1] Kabeer, Naila 2013: Grief and Rage in India: Making violence against women history?, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/naila-kabeer/grief-and-rage-in-india-making-violence-against-women-history>

[2] For example, Time Magazine printed a photo in its January 28 edition showing the mother of the one underage member of the gang of perpetrators. The woman is depicted in her "slum" home, "cover(ing) her face in shame" with several layers of garments so that she is hidden or maybe protected from sight, in "a country still steeped in patriarchy." The multiple dimensions of othering in this representation are stunning – the woman is victimized, silenced, de-mothered (has she not failed as a mother?) and the viewer is offered no way of making a connection with her. Which parent in the world would NOT feel ashamed in a similar situation?

[3] I follow those who have named the 23-year old woman "Amanat" or treasure (see Parashar, Swati 2013, <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/11/the-delhi-rape-case-rethinking-feminism-and-violence-against-women/>).

[4] See for example Parashar, Swati 2013: *Why Amanat must live!*, <http://genderinglobalgovernancenetwork.net/comment/why-amanat-must-live/>

[5] Zwingel, Susanne 2012: How Do Norms Travel? Theorizing International Women's Rights In Transnational Perspective, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, 115-129

[6] Henkin, Louis 1979: *How Nations Behave: Law and Foreign Policy*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 22.

[7] Merry, Sally Engle 2006: *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law*

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into Local Justice. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

[8] Çağlar, Gülay, Elisabeth Prügl and Susanne Zwingel (eds.) 2013: Feminist Strategies in International Governance, New York: Routledge.

[9] For a comprehensive analysis of violence against women as a global phenomenon embedded in structures of material inequalities, see True, Jacqui 2012, The Political Economy of Violence against Women, Oxford University Press.

[10] See Staudt, Kathleen 2008: Violence and Activism at the Border. Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juarez, Austin: University of Texas Press.

[11] AWID, Women Human Rights Defenders, <http://www.awid.org/Our-Initiatives/Women-Human-Rights-Defenders>

[12] <http://www.nerosguests.com/>

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