Since then, the waves of protests and debates have continued. In both Germany and India, many questions are shaping the public debate. How do everyday sexism and sexual assault overlap? How can sexism and sexual assault be rendered visible? And how can violence against women be stopped for good? Particularly in India, people have been taking to the streets since December. This protest has drawn in great international attention, yet according to Indian feminist Urvashi Butalia, the international press coverage has often shown neo-colonial tendencies. At the panel discussion #Aufschrei held by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Berlin on International Women’s Day, she criticised that the reality of India has been misjudged. Bloggers Merle Stöver from Germany and Laurie Penny from the UK agreed with her and called for “rape culture”, whereby sexualised violence is played down and tolerated, to be seen as a global, not a regional, phenomenon. Butalia also takes this view. In an interview, she argues as to why the media battle can essentially have a positive impact on India.

FES: India has been featuring in the international media time and time again since the brutal gang rape in 2012. Recently there have been reports on the rape of a young girl and a Swiss tourist. Why is the focus still on India?

Urvashi Butalia: On the one hand, the protest is still ongoing within Indian civil society. On the other, it is because there is a strong feminist movement in India. This is creating the necessary pressure, keeping it on course and preventing violence against women from fading into the background again. Both can make a contribution towards ensuring that international press coverage continues to concentrate on cases of sexual assault in India.

FES: Does this focus lead to a distorted image of India?

Butalia: Yes, I think it does! Violence in India is nothing new. In fact, violence against women is widespread and is part of everyday reality. But India is not different from other countries where violence against women is one of the issues that people prefer to keep quiet about. We’re also not among the worst countries from a statistical point of view – but that, of course, doesn’t make it any better. The key thing is balance: as bad as the situation is in many parts of India, in many places there are positive examples of resistance and change. These need to be mentioned too!
FES: In much of the western media the current protests are being described as a new Indian phenomenon that ends with a period of turning a blind eye and ignoring violence against women. What would you say to this impression?

Butalia: Just as violence against women is not a new phenomenon, protesting against it is not a new development. Look around: there are numerous protests: Protests against the development of nuclear reactors, against big dams, against killings committed by sects, like in Gujarat, against corruption and, of course, against discrimination against women. Some are new, some are old. Equally, some make it into the international media, some don’t. Rural regions and protests by poorer parts of society in particular often go unnoticed.

FES: Does that mean there were protests even before December?

Butalia: Yes! In my opinion it is wrong to present the current protests as something new! Just as it is false to think that nothing had been done about sexual assault before. Even before the events in December, various women’s organisations brought a draft bill into parliament, which was up for discussion. But little investigation was done into it, and if it was, the key information was left out of the press coverage.

FES: Even men are joining in the protests. At least, that’s what we are reading in the media. Who is actually behind the demonstrations?

Butalia: It’s difficult to say. There are a number of people behind it, and they are all very different. For example, it involves all classes and castes, people from the country and from the cities, young and old, men and women, families. They range from the right to the left, from people that support the death penalty to those that are against it. In many cases the protests have taken place spontaneously, without a specific leading force. But generally speaking, it has primarily been student and women’s groups as well as welfare associations that have called for the protests.

FES: Is this new?

Butalia: Yes, perhaps. It is the first time that such a heterogeneous group has taken a stand for women’s issues. As a reaction to this, many women’s organisations are opening up—particularly to involvement from men.

FES: The Indian government has harshened punishments for sexual crimes. What else do you think needs to happen?

Butalia: A lot of things! Simply harshening the punishments is not a real solution. Some of the government’s measures are good. For example, police officers can be called to account if they refuse to take on a case. Other measures, however, are bad. Introducing the death penalty is a catastrophe and will not help. If anything, it will lead to fewer crimes being reported, as violence is much too commonplace in the majority of families. Or the penalty will lead to even more murders, as rapists will assume that they will be executed anyway.

FES: So what is needed?

Butalia: We need changes in medical guidelines, improvements in our infrastructure – it must be safer to get from A to B, which involves a need for better street lighting. Equally, we need more sex education. Above all, however, there must be a will to change, on both the state and societal level.

FES: And did this change that you speak of begin back in December?

Butalia: A single incident cannot change Indian society. Don’t forget: there are more than a billion people in India, tradition and religion play a central role in our lives, the majority of us do not have any access to formal education, there are enormous differences between the classes in our society. And just like in the countries of the Global North, attitudes towards women are those that fight the most strongly against change. Nevertheless: change will come, but it will take its time.

FES: India has been at the centre of international press coverage for months now: for example, UN expert Rashida Manjoo visited India in May. Will this visit contribute to the change? Or do you believe this will have more negative consequences?

Butalia: Rashida Manjoo’s visit was important. It’s good that she met so many different women’s groups and other organisations. International attention is important: it will put pressure on the Indian government to not deny its responsibility. I don’t think that there are any risks involved: if the situation is bad here, it needs to be shown accurately on an international level and if the situation takes a positive turn – through activism or through the actions of the government – then this needs to be shown too. Violence against women needs to finally get the attention it deserves: as one of the worst problems and barriers to development worldwide.

FES: Many feminists worldwide are declaring their solidarity with women in India. At our event they were already speaking of international solidarity only being possible with respect and on a level playing field. How far are we from achieving this?

Butalia: Solidarity and respect largely exist. However, terrible ignorance and prejudices against feminists are also very widespread. In particular, feminists in the Global North tend to portray “their” feminism as the superior, better version. They act as though it were a race, where we are being left behind. That is wrong. There is no race where one group lags behind and another leads. Instead, we all need to tackle this race together and fight to ensure that we cross the finish line together. We are all different – this is exactly what gives us our richness, and it should be at the focus of the race to end violence against women!

Urvashi Butalia is a feminist, historian and publicist. She founded the first feminist publishing house in India. Her publications on violence against women are well-known internationally.
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