Why An International Exchange is Essential to Movement Making

Puja Dhawan
DIRECTOR FOR NOVO FOUNDATION'S INITIATIVE TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST GIRLS AND WOMEN
NOVO FOUNDATION

Originally Posted November 7, 2013  Share:

Here at Move to End Violence, a program of the NoVo Foundation, we are making preparations for the program’s second international learning exchange—a ten day trip for Movement Makers to connect with policy advocates, grassroots organizers, politicians, and artists working to end violence against girls and women in India.

As we wade through visa applications, agenda planning, flight booking, and childcare arrangements, we need to remind ourselves why we have asked 17 Movement Makers with organizations, jobs, and families that depend on them to trust us with nearly two weeks of their lives.

We are doing this because we firmly believe in collaboration and co-learning between advocates at home and our allies around the world.

Violence against girls and women may (sometimes) look different in New Delhi, Steubenville, and Damascus. But this universal problem also has some universal causes: patriarchy, political apathy, marginalization and inequality of girls and women, to name only a few. We have a lot to learn from and much to share with advocates all over the world who are trying to dismantle these same entrenched systems, and undoubtedly we are stronger together than we could ever be apart in this work.

Move to End Violence focuses on strengthening the movement to end violence against women and girls in the United States – and one of the key ways to end violence in our own backyards is to join, contribute to, and learn from a global movement to end violence. Unfortunately, it is all too easy for advocacy work in the United States to be carried out in isolation from the broader global movement working for a world free of violence. We believe that isolation results in missed opportunities for learning and collaboration.

During our trip to India, Movement Makers will meet with advocates who mobilized many thousands of women and men around the country to call attention to and demand accountability for the brutal gang rape that occurred in New Delhi on December 16, 2012. They will learn how such a public outcry came together and how it resulted in the Verma Committee Report – the country’s first holistic policy response to violence against women– and the implementation of its recommendations.

Movement Makers will also spend time with advocates based at Apne Aap, a human rights NGO using a community-organizing model to address commercial sexual exploitation of girls and women. They will have the opportunity to meet with leaders in impacted communities that are demanding better lives and more meaningful opportunities for themselves – for their daughters – and for their
communities. Perhaps the particular vulnerabilities these leaders have faced and the strategies they are deploying will resonate with Movement Makers who work with very marginalized girls and women in the United States.

We cannot plan everything we will learn in India, or predict how the connections we make will reverberate and shape our work. But we hope these and other meetings will provide Movement Makers with the opportunity to share their work, prompt imagination and creativity around what is possible at home in the United States, and maybe even lead to transnational collaboration.

Solidarity takes work and is hard to quantify. But Move to End Violence has committed to investing in this movement for the long term, and learning exchanges like this one provide opportunities for U.S.-based advocates to be part of a robust global response to violence against girls and women. By building trust, sharing ideas, visioning, and strategizing together we claim our place in a global struggle to end violence against women and girls. And in building this trust and breaking our isolation, we build collective power — taking us one step closer to a world where girls and women are able to claim their full human rights and live free from violence.
We’re Off

Emily Napalo Cavanaugh
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

Originally Posted November 12, 2013  Share:

Our bags are packed. We have our passports, journals, and sensible shoes. We’ve considered what questions we are bringing with us to India for our international learning exchange – and what we hope to learn and share. We’ve thought about how we’ll travel in order to take care of ourselves. We definitely know why we’re making this journey. And we have all prepared in our own ways, too.

Now, it’s time to head off – and let go of all those expectations. On this convening, we bring with us a mantra: “Anything is possible, and nothing is certain.” We will approach this trip as you would any other movement activity: we have planned as much as we can, and now we will improvise, improvise, improvise.

If all goes to plan, we will soon have the chance to learn about Gandhian philosophy from the woman charged with preserving his memory and legacy at Gandhi Smriti. We plan on breaking bread with women in Kolkata who established their own canteen and catering company in order to create a dignified and sustainable livelihood for themselves. We will engage with an activist theatre troupe and learn about Indian social justice movements – including the spontaneous outcry after the December 2012 Delhi gang rape – at the rally-grounds where thousands in India have hoisted banners and chanted for justice and peace.

All of this is possible, and so much more. Whatever we do during our time in India, we’ll tell you about it here, at On the Move. We will be posting regular updates over the next two weeks. You may not be boarding a plane right now to India – preparing yourself for the hours-long journey – but you can still come with us. We’d love to have you along for the ride! And, please, feel free to comment or ask questions on the blog or on our Facebook page.
This morning — at the very beginning of our first day in India — our beloved travel guide Vishal told us that November 14 is National Children’s Day in India, a very auspicious day to begin our journey. The country’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru established Children’s Day on his own birthday, drawing attention to the promise that future generations hold.

Perhaps because it was Children’s Day, but images of children, especially girl children, jumped out throughout the day. At Gandhi Smriti, the ashram where Mahatma Gandhi spent his final days and was assassinated, we had an extraordinary panel with Professor Ruchira Gupta and Abhilasha Kumari of Apne Aap Women World Wide, Dr. Mani Mala of Gandhi Smriti, Dr. Ruth Manorama, and Asha Kowtal, General Secretary, All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM). The conversation focused on caste and the plight of the Dalits, or “untouchables.” A theme surfaced of “the last girl” — the guidance that Gandhi offered Nehru:

“I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and...
destiny? In other words, will it lead swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away.”

Speakers/panelists from left to right: Dr. Ruchira Gupta, Apne Aap; Asha Kowtal, AIDMAM (All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch); Dr. Mani Mala, Ghandi Smriti Museum; Dr. Ruth Manorama; Dr. Abhilasha Kumari, Apne Aap

Our speakers elaborated on this quote, saying that the last man was always seen as a Dalit. Then, applying a gendered lens, the “last man” was actually the Dalit man’s wife. Now — the speakers told us — we know that the “last man” of Gandhi’s famous quotation is actually the last woman’s daughter, who struggles for control of decisions about her life, body, and future.

After an enriching conversation with our speakers and some time to wander around Gandhi Smriti, we traveled to the Jantar Mantar rally grounds, a key site of political and public protests for many Indian social justice movements. There, Budhan Theatre, comprised of members of a denotified tribe or criminal caste known as Chaara, performed a street performance highlighting the struggles of the Chaara throughout India.
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The piece could be at times devastating, depicting scenes of violence and trauma, as well as uplifting and empowering, through the use of rhythmic drumming, chants, and resistance messages. Equally as challenging, however, was watching the audience of many young girls taking in the world that was being depicted. For some, it was an eye-opener, but surely for others it was much too close to their reality.

Today was a full day — sparking many thoughts that deserve more exploration. We will write again tomorrow, with more reflections after some time with Action India to learn about the mahila panchayat model, and those involved in the changes to India’s criminal law following the December 2012 gang rape in Delhi.
Day 2 in India: Think Globally, Act Globally

Emily Napalo Cavanaugh
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

Originally Posted November 21, 2013  Share:

We only have to listen to the amazing people we have met with, many of whom have been influenced by learning journeys of their own, to be reminded of the significance of a global learning journey. Today, we met with Gauri Choudury, one of the founders and the director of Action India, a voluntary organization based in Delhi that believes in the power of people to change society through education, awareness, and collective action. Her work is entirely local — she is so grounded in the community and has been since she began her work in 1975, that in response to a question about mobilizing, she could only say, “If you want to know how to get a group together, come live with us.”

Her work, however, has been influenced by other countries, including our own. She told stories of attending the Michigan Womyn’s Festival and finding connection and energy there as volunteer conferences in India were getting increasingly expensive and difficult to put together. The community health work of Action India is based on the Boston Women’s Health Collective model and she referred to “consciousness-raising groups” — a familiar concept in the U.S.’s feminist history — to describe the study groups that helped shape her political analysis.
As we left Action India’s space, there was a buzz in our group. Some cohort members saw clear connections to the work and models that they implement in the U.S., while others left with more questions than they started with. On our first day, too, we heard stories of global learning. Dr. Ruth Manorama, a leader of Dalit (lower castes) women’s rights and the president of the National Alliance of Women, reflected on the experience she had in global exchanges — exploring racism in the U.S. and apartheid in South Africa. She raised her fist as she said, “You say Black is Beautiful — we say Dalit is Dignified!” Throughout our conversation, the influence of Black feminist thought on her was clear, and the connection back to our culture was powerful.

Asha Kowtal, General Secretary, All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM), also on yesterday’s panel, spoke to the ability to see things with fresh eyes when we put ourselves in a different context. We can read about violence, but it is a different thing entirely to travel internationally and seek out the experience of the most marginalized. With that information, we can see our own world anew.
We concluded today with a session focused on the December 16, 2012 Delhi gang rape. Maya Krishna Rao opened the session with a performance of “Walk,” a dance and spoken work piece rooted in the experience and performed dozens of times for groups of students and at protests against sexual violence. Then, Ruchira Gupta of Apne Aap; Shomona Khanna, a supreme court lawyer; and Bhuwan Ribhu of Bachpan Bachao Andolan–Save the Childhood Foundation reflected on how, in three months, the country was able to mobilize after a horrific event in order to bring about policy change.

In the coming days, we will continue to bring our inquiries and ponder how we can learn from our Indian colleagues and bring the experiences back to our work. We will continue the tradition of cross-pollination across borders and oceans, in service of a shared vision.
Day 3 – Final Day in Delhi, India

Emily Napalo Cavanaugh
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

Originally Posted November 22, 2013

On our final full day in Delhi, the Movement Makers split into groups based on their interests and connections. One group met with Manisha Gupte and Dr. Ramesh Aswathi, co-founders of MASUM (Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal) to hear their story and reflections on social change. In the 1970s, these two had moved to a rural village in hopes of gaining a greater understanding of how social change happens. MASUM was founded out of their experience in the drought-prone Purandar block of Pune district. MASUM fosters an integrated community approach, with the core belief that people can resolve their own problems collectively with some external support.

Contemporaneously, others in our group met with labor organizing movement leaders Sonia George, Self-Employed Women’s Association Union Secretary, Madhu Birmale of Alliance for Waste-Pickers in Mumbai, and Savita Kambale, a domestic worker. With translation assistance, these three shared powerful stories of their leadership in action. Madhu shared about the Hard Working People’s Organization, which is organizing for respect for domestic workers. They help domestic workers take pride in their work and to demand respect and recognition from their employers and their government. This vibrant community organization’s model involves one community member supporting 25 others, serving as their advocate, problem solver, and mediator as needed.

Madhu also shared the story of a powerful and symbolic protest against the lack of action by the government to protect domestic worker, activist domestic workers declared the government “dead to them” and prepared symbolic funeral rites, including having some women ritually shave their heads to publicly mark them as widows. This proved quite strategic—the targeted government official pleaded with the activists not to take such dramatic action and the act was passed!
Sonia from SEWA (Self-Employed Women’s Association) offered a theoretical framework that complicates the notion of the so-called informal sector as a mirror of the formal sector. She described initial resistance from domestic workers to identify as workers in the context of complex, intimate and sometimes intergenerational relationships between employers and employees. The pivot towards seeing the home, whether one’s own or another’s, as a workplace proved to be powerful. SEWA began offering skills training to domestic workers, effectively treating their labor—whether housekeeping, childcare, elder care, nursing—as skills that could be practiced and taught. This was another powerful pivot, from “women’s work” to “work that women do.”
In the afternoon, the Movement Makers gathered together to meet with Jaya Jaitly, the founder of Dilli Haat. Jaya shared the story of founding Dilli Haat which provides a way for individuals to create sustainable livelihoods through the sale of handicrafts in Delhi. [The first cohort of Movement Makers also met with Jaya Jaitly. Read more about their experience and watch video clips of Jaya Jaitly.]

Before leaving Dilli Haat, Movement Makers had time to do some shopping. They loaded the bus with bundles and packages–lots of scarves, some children’s toys, purses, art, and a bottle opener for an avid collector on our trip.

Debbie Lee (Futures Without Violence) expresses appreciation to Jaya Jaitly

Scene from Dilli Haat

It was a full day and our experiences are feeling rich, challenging, and enlightening. As we go into the next chapter of our trip in West Bengal tomorrow, many of us are filled to the brim. We’ll be checking back in again soon.
Movement Makers in front of Dilli Haat
On November 17, we traveled to Kolkata. Our group rose early to catch a morning flight from Delhi, and kept the cabin abuzz with our thoughts, stories, and wonderings. We anticipated that the next day and a half would be challenging; after a chance to get settled in Kolkata, we would meet with two experts on sex trafficking before spending some time with our host organization in Sonagachi, one of Asia’s largest red light districts.

The afternoon opened with remarks by Malini Bhattarcharjee, the president of the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) and a former member of the National Commission for Women. Dr. Bhattarcharjee spoke to the current legal debate around prostitution, and how the two “camps” of pro- and anti-legalization engage with each other and today’s current law. Rather than advance the conversation, she argued, the entrenched debate only distracts us from the exploitation and oppression of women who lack the agency to make true choices. From there, Ratnabali Chattarjee, a former director of the Women’s Studies Research Centre at the University of Calcutta, shared her perspectives on the current social constructions around prostitution, and how they have been shaped by British colonial perceptions and policies.
Following the talk, our group met with our hosts at Apne Aap to witness the reality of prostitution and exploitation of girls and women in Sonagachi and visit the community center that Apne Aap has established within the red light district. There, our group was able to meet with some of the women that Apne Aap serves.
Sitting in circles with Apne Aap program participants


Members of Sonar Bangla, an Apne Aap self-empowerment group who have found dignified livelihood in food service, serve lunch
The next day offered a stark contrast. In the morning, our group joined some of the girls and women who work with Apne Aap at a local park. There, we had the chance to get to know each other, play, and dance. We learned about Apne Aap’s four rights model and the impact it has women’s lives. For lunch, Sonar Bangla, one of the self-empowerment groups cultivated by Apne Aap, provided a nutritious meal. This was a powerful demonstration of the alternatives women are able to create for themselves free of prostitution.
The next stop on our journey was Shantiniketan, a hub of social, political, and cultural activity in India. A two-hour train ride through rural farmlands delivered us to the Bolpur railway station from Kolkata.

Shantiniketan was made famous by Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. He used his prize money to establish a university that would value the expertise of traditional knowledge and wisdom. His philosophy was grounded strongly in non-violence and experimentation, and the openness of the institution attracted people who both sought to teach and to learn.

We opened our stay at Shantiniketan with one of Tagore’s famous poems, Where The Mind Is Without Fear:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high

Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments

By narrow domestic walls

Where words come out from the depth of truth

Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way

Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit

Where the mind is led forward by thee

Into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.

The vision Tagore communicates in this poem resonated with a concept our group explored the evening before. When we were visiting Anu Kapoor and her Kolkata-based organization SWAYAM, which works to end all forms of violence against girls and women, we talked about “violence-free zones.” There was commiseration about the struggle to actually achieve a zone truly free of violence, a term that was part of SWAYAM’s work and had also been used in one cohort member’s California-based work. To all of us – this picture painted above of a mind without fear could have been defining violence-free zones.

Move to End Violence in an open-air classroom at the university in Shantiniketan
During the afternoon, we met with Dr. Amrit Sen, a professor of English and Tagore studies. He gave us a walking tour of the museum and school campus, sharing the importance of the open-air classrooms, which our group was able to use later in the afternoon for a critical conversation amongst ourselves.

That evening, we were invited to the Mitali Homestay, a family home that is now used as a guest house and meeting place. There, we met with intellectuals, academics, and activists from Shantiniketan, including Prof. Asha Mukherjee, Prof. Aparajita Mukherjee, Manisha Banerjee, Ayesha Khatun, and Swagata Nandi. Prior to dinner, we were able to introduce ourselves to each other and learn a bit about our work. Then, over a delicious meal, we had the chance to engage in lively conversation.
Asha Mukherjee, a professor of Philosophy at Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan

The following day, we spent a leisurely morning in Shantiniketan, before catching our train back to Kolkata. After a day of experiencing the power and unique environment that was established and inspired by Rabindranath Tagore, it was a powerful space to strive to be in authentic relationships and partnerships with each other.
Our Final Day in India

Emily Napalo Cavanaugh
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS
MOVE TO END VIOLENCE

Originally Posted December 12, 2013   Share:

On our final day in India, we were called back to our purpose in making this long journey. We had traveled across continents and ocean to learn from and with advocates and organizers who do similar work. We came with big questions – about movement building and social transformation – and were excited to explore them fully. Our new allies were working in different contexts and environments, but were the underlying root causes they face all that different from the systems that keep violence against girls and women alive in the United States, including patriarchy, colonialism, and economic injustice?

Over the course of our convening together, our questions continued to develop and grow and there was appetite for deeper engagement. We spent our last morning in Kolkata, and many moments leading up to it, in conversation with our hosts from Apne Aap Women Worldwide. Some topics were present all along: how can we partner across context and boarders? How can art be a strategy to inform and catalyze culture change? What is the role of men in ending men’s violence against girls and women, and how can we change what that engagement looks like? What will it take to end violence – and what’s the movement we need to do that?
Other questions came from a week of experiences together – How have race and caste, colonization and class shaped both of our societies? What does survivor leadership and engagement look like in action? Beyond changing laws, how do you fundamentally change society and culture? What would a transnational movement to end violence look like?

Having the space for this conversation was invaluable, but it left most – if not everyone – in the room craving more. We are eager for the new relationships we have seeded to continue to grow, blossom, and – hopefully – bear fruit.
Trina Greene thanks Vishal Bhasin of Indian Excursion for his unparalleled support and care of our group

This experience would not have been possible without the hard work and dedication of many. On behalf of Move to End Violence, we would like to thank everyone who spent time in conversation and trans-national learning with us, the dedicated women and men of Apne Aap Women Worldwide who hosted and facilitated the entire journey, and our friend and travel guide Vishal Bhasin who kept us well-fed, happy, and healthy.