

# “Women don’t have a right”: Reflections on translating a US intimate partner violence curriculum to India

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**Abstract:** The following narrative, written by an MSW student with the guidance of her research professor, presents an autoethnographic narrative of her experiences in facilitating a 4-day training in India. The training was to assist women and church leaders in learning how to help fellow Indians in dealing with intimate partner violence. The narrative includes struggles with translating US conceptualization of how to address intimate partner violence to the Indian culture and a discussion of how these struggles help the social work profession better plan for future endeavors such as this one.

**Keywords:** intimate partner violence, curriculum, women, domestic violence, India.

## Introduction

While a great deal of progress has been made, equality for women continues to be an international social justice issue. In the United States, there are many organizations working to help women who have experienced domestic and sexual violence as well as to change cultural norms that perpetuate these issues. While these organizations are common in many parts of the United States, many other countries do not have the same structures in place. This brings unique challenges for women who experience violence in countries such as India, where the country’s 2004-2005 national health survey found at least one third of women have experienced some form of physical violence (Yee, 2013). The International Clinical Epidemiology Network (2000) found out of 10,000 women in India, nearly 50% had experienced physical or psychological violence.

## The Situation

Knowing first hand the reality of the need for available resources and support, the pastor of a church just outside of New Delhi, India contacted an organization in Texas in hopes that he and other leaders in the church could get the knowledge and tools necessary to be able to respond to domestic and sexual violence. The organization is a faith-based, non-profit organization that offers programs specifically designed for women who have experienced intimate partner violence. After the pastor explained the needs in his community, he and the organization founder began to plan a four-day women’s conference. The conference was designed to equip the female leaders to respond to women in crisis as well as to be able to facilitate a 15-week class aimed to facilitate healing and help women overcome the negative impacts of intimate partner violence.

In order to conduct the conference, the founder knew she would need at least three other women to go with her to help facilitate the large group and breakout sessions. She contacted a woman who works in her local community’s intimate partner violence shelter to request that she join the team. She then reached out to me, as she knew of my experience from working at the local rape crisis center. The third woman who joined our team was a woman who has been a part of a number of local and international efforts to bring equality to women. Once our team was formed, we began to immediately prepare for the trip. We began to meet six months prior to the conference. Additionally, I am pursuing my Master’s of Social Work.

I contacted a former social work research professor – second author of this manuscript – to see if this could be integrated into my coursework. Together, we decided that this would be a great topic for an autoethnography. Chang (2008) and Muncey (2010) describe autoethnography as an autobiographical reflection exploring the writer’s subjective experience of a culture (as cited in Siddique, 2011). Thus, my professor asked that in order to track what I learned and how I was impacted by this opportunity, I journal my thoughts, emotions and experiences. With my second author’s/professor’s guidance, this narrative contains excerpts from my journaling as well as outlines the themes that emerged through the process and the implications of what I learned and experienced for future social work practice. Through documenting my experience and coding the journal entries using a qualitative constant comparative method guided by my second author/professor, the following four themes emerged: learning through experience, differences between two cultures, similarities between the cultures and evidence supporting hope for change. The presentation of these themes is followed by reflective discussion from my professor and me regarding how this experience informs international social work practice.

## **Learning Through Experience**

As a graduate student, I have spent a great deal of time reading about working with people from different cultural backgrounds. However, I have not gained much experience applying this knowledge through actually working with people while being submerged in their culture. While reading about doing something in preparation to do it is important, I anticipated that I would gain a greater depth of knowledge from the opportunity to actually implement what I have learned.

While sitting in the plane, on our way to India, I had a great deal of time to reflect on what we were about to do. As I thought about my ability to be culturally sensitive, I realized that I rarely have to be sensitive of other people's culture due to my experience of privilege. Being part of the dominant culture in the U.S. has enabled me to live without much thought about my culture and its impact on me. As a result, it may be hard for me to truly understand the impact of culture.

Further, my lack of personal experience with oppression and violence caused me to question my ability to work with and relate to the women we were on our way to meet. While on the plane, I wrote:

Throughout my social work education, I have been taught that we do not have to have shared someone's exact experience in order to empathize with them. So far in my work I have found that to be true. However, I still wonder if this will be true with women who have had such different life experiences than I. Therefore, as we prepared for this trip, I have been aware of my need to be particularly attentive as I listen to these women and try my best to understand them.

My experience once working with the women affirmed what I have been taught. It continued to seem true that the most important thing is a person's openness to learn from and listen to the other person describe what life has been like for her.

Throughout my time in India, I became acutely aware of how complex the impact of culture is on a person. Hearing the women share their experiences and going with them to the places where they live, study, and worship provided me with a much different understanding of their experiences than simply reading about them from a news or academic article. Additionally, executing a conference after

spending many hours working to adapt it to being culturally sensitive gave me a much different understanding of the importance of taking the time to make those adjustments than simply reading about its necessity in a textbook. The depth of learning through experience was rich and complex and something that has made a lasting impression on how I will move forward with my work as a social worker.

## **Differences Between Two Cultures**

### *Preparation*

From the beginning, we anticipated that we would encounter cultural differences throughout our work with this community of people. Therefore, we immediately began discussing what we needed to do in order to adapt the curriculum to fit the culture and the needs of the people. The church leaders helped us with our adjustments. We also discussed how important it would be for us to emphasize that while we have tried to adjust it to their cultural norms, we wanted them to feel free to adjust it as well. While we were trying to learn, we recognized that we would not be able to fully understand their culture or the challenges for their community in the same way that they do. We needed their help.

### *Different Ways to Do the Work*

In preparation for the trip, we emailed and video conferenced with the leaders of the church we would be helping. They helped us begin to gain an understanding of how the women there identify domestic and sexual violence. They also explained the current way that women often respond to abuse. We learned that there are not easily accessible agencies or shelters throughout the country like there are in the United States. Additionally, they explained that women do not often go to the police because they do not feel safe. Instead, if someone is experiencing violence, they often turn to their faith community. As a result, the church that asked us to come requested that we teach them how to help survivors of domestic and sexual violence overcome the abuse they have experienced.

They also stated that they have seen many instances where the couples they have worked with were able to continue in their relationship. They explained that this has been possible after working with the husband to help him change his patterns of abuse. This sounded extremely interesting to us, because, in our personal work with intimate partner violence survivors, we do not commonly see reconciliation. We are used to

women leaving their husbands and seeing reconciliation as something that is not an option. We are also used to formal therapeutic intervention such as a Batterers Intervention and Prevention Program. It was beneficial for us to be reminded early that not only would we need to be sensitive to the differences in their thoughts about violence, but that we would need to also be open to different practices for going about addressing it.

### *Differences In the Rights and Value of Women*

**"In India, women don't have a right."** During our first session, on the first day of the conference, we asked the women to share their expectations for participating in the conference. The women began to share openly about their experiences and the hope for change that they had for their community. I was particularly struck when one woman shared, "The problem here begins before a girl is born." She went on to describe the negative impact of the rigid gender stereotypes that are commonly reinforced. As she continued, she stated, "In India, women don't have a right." I do not think I will forget hearing her say that. I was not only compelled by the meaning of those words, but by hearing the pain and anger that she felt as a result of this reality.

I realized that before this moment I had not really grasped what the women in India face on a daily basis. It seemed that oppression and violence against women is even more prevalent than we see in the United States. This was reinforced as the women continued sharing their individual stories. Multiple women who were at the conference shared that they were currently living with abusive spouses. We were not expecting this. Due to many of the women having endured so many of these painful experiences, the four day conference became an opportunity for many of them to work through some of their own struggles.

**Designated parking spaces.** Our first full day in India, we went to the mall and saw reserved parking spaces for women. We asked the woman who was with us if that was out of courtesy for women. She said no, that it was because they think women are bad drivers and therefore, that they need special spaces since they cannot be trusted to park in the standard parking spaces. We were not expecting that to be the reason. In the United States, people often make jokes about women being bad drivers, but I have not seen a business actually put up a sign reflecting this idea. These signs seemed to be a reflection of the different valuation-or

devaluation-of women that we were learning was pervasive throughout the cultural norms.

**Women in politics.** While we drove to different places throughout our trip, we would often ask the women who guided us questions about the community or culture. During one of these conversations we began to discuss the representatives in the political system in India. I asked about the number of women who hold political positions despite the prevalence of the oppression of women. The woman explained that a lot of people think it is due to the government beginning to enforce a law prohibiting people with a criminal record from running for political office. She explained that this is thought to have caused men to have their wives run for office so that they can control them and, in a sense, continue to have the power of being in a political position. We could not have imagined this being the reason. While it was discouraging to hear, it makes sense given what we learned about the devaluation of women.

### **Concept Confusion**

The conference consisted of large group sessions and break out sessions. Each of the large group sessions was facilitated by one of the four of us. The large group session that I facilitated covered boundary setting. Despite our efforts to adapt the curriculum to the Indian culture, we did not fully prepare for the challenges that would arise during this session. During the session, the women began to hear us suggesting that women in abusive relationships should set boundaries by communicating their rights to the abusive partner. Therefore, they were alarmed and began expressing their concerns that this will put the women in even greater danger. This was not our intention.

We wanted to communicate the importance of women learning how to set boundaries in other relationships they have, such as friendships, family relationships, or even in their work environment. This is important because women who experience abuse are often impacted in such a way that they lose their ability to set boundaries not only in the abusive relationship, but also in other relationships in their lives. Learning to set boundaries with people who are not their abusive partner is a step that can be taken to empower them before addressing their abusive intimate partner relationship. While I tried to clarify what I was trying to communicate, it seemed that several of the women continued to be very concerned. By the end of the session, all four of us were working together to listen to the women and to respond to their concerns.

After we finished the session, I felt very discouraged and embarrassed. I felt responsible for the misunderstanding and confusion that erupted. Being the youngest member on the team, I already felt insecure about my level of experience compared to the other women. At first, this experience reinforced my insecurity. It made sense that it would need to be adjusted since we learned that many of the women often feel as though they do not have any rights. As a result, they are likely to have a hard time communicating their rights in any relationship. I could not believe that I did not think of this before I began speaking. Being mindful of this would have framed how I introduced the concept in a way that would have likely been much clearer. This experience reinforced the importance of diligently trying to consider every adjustment that is needed for cultural sensitivity. While I would have liked to prevent this experience, it allowed me to see the complexity of cultural sensitivity and that, even with immense diligence, it is possible for us to miss something. It also allowed me to learn how to respond if this does happen again. I was able to listen to the women, gain understanding and then adjust accordingly.

### **Similarities between the two cultures**

Throughout our interaction with the women we worked with, I realized we had so much in common with them. As we talked about their efforts to address and fight against these issues, it became more and more evident that we face the same challenges. We learned that they too face struggles getting people in their community to understand the importance of empowering women and not seeing their work as trying to teach women to be rebellious. Additionally, as with us, it is challenging for them to get people to acknowledge that violence against women exists. Once I realized this, I was surprised that I didn't anticipate this. For some reason it had a different impact on me hearing these experiences from the women leaders first hand.

#### *Similar Self-talk*

We also observed similarities in the automatic thoughts that the women identified that they often have about themselves. Many women shared that they realized they often tell themselves things like, "You're not pretty," "You're stupid," "You're fat," or "No one really likes you." It was interesting to hear that women in India are taught the same concepts about what gives them value and worth and, further, that they are constantly told that they do

not measure up to those standards. As a team, the four of us discussed how heartbreaking it is that the world is such that universally, women are oppressed in such similar ways. At times, realizations like this make it feel like the problem we are fighting against is too big, too pervasive and beyond what we can change. However, hearing the women's eagerness to discard those negative automatic thoughts and replace them with new, affirming thoughts reminded us of the resilience of women and the hope that comes with empowering them.

### *The Connection Between All Forms of Oppression*

In my efforts to end violence against women in the United States, I have learned that all forms of oppression are connected. This concept was also affirmed throughout this experience. In preparation for the trip, I read a number of news articles telling about the particular struggles that many women in India are facing regarding experiencing sexual assault. One story told about girls in rural areas not being able to go outside to use the restroom at night without facing a large risk of being sexually assaulted demonstrating how socio-economic status can create situations that increase someone's risk of violence.

Similarly, another article talked about the connection between the caste system and the rate of sexual violence. This immediately got me thinking about the violence against women in minority racial groups as well as the increased level of objectification of these women that we see in the United States. Seeing these connections in a different cultural setting supports the need for violence prevention to work to address other forms of oppression in our communities as well.

### **Evidence Supporting Hope for Change**

While we observed many heart breaking realities throughout the trip, we were encouraged by a number of signs that there is hope for change. The first area where we began to see hope was in the people in the church we were helping. Part of the conference involved us dividing the women into small groups and them preparing to facilitate part of a session. When we first introduced this idea to the women, it was evident that many of them were very nervous about this. However, many of them shared that they went home and their children, who can read and write, helped them prepare for their section. We were overjoyed hearing how proud the women were after they facilitated their practice session. Not only could we hear how proud they were through what they said, but also it was evident on their faces and through their

body language how empowering that experience was for them. Seeing and hearing this encouraged us. By the end of the week, it seemed evident that the women were beginning to feel equipped to make a significant impact in their community.

Additionally, by the end of the third day, multiple women talked about the steps they could take to begin to operate a crisis hotline and open an emergency shelter for women and children. It was evident that they felt empowered to do something about this tremendous need in their community. The church leaders' sense of empowerment was even further evident on our final day with them when they informed us that they had obtained a phone number for a crisis hotline. We were even more encouraged when they stated that they had located an apartment that could serve as the first phase of an emergency shelter if they could raise the funds to purchase it. Amazingly, the leader of the Texas-based organization that sponsored this training was able to provide them with funds that could be used to secure the facility for at least the first three months. We did not expect this kind of progress after less than a week. Their eagerness to take action and respond to their community's need gave us all a tremendous amount of hope that progress will be made.

Further, on the third day, we were able to discuss with the pastor the progress taking place throughout the conference. Through our conversation, we were able to arrange a one-hour presentation for the 20 male pastors in the church. Our team discussed how much we would like an opportunity to speak to some of the men at some point during future trips, but we did not think this would be something that would happen in any way in the first trip. We would definitely like to spend more than an hour with them and with other men in the church, but this was a wonderful starting place.

It was additionally encouraging because the pastors were incredibly receptive to the information we shared with them. They seemed very eager to support the work being done to address intimate partner violence through their church. We are very hopeful about continuing conversations with them. During our last meeting with the pastor and his wife, we discussed including men more in the conference that will be held again next summer. We were amazed because we do not get support for this information like this in churches here in the United States. Therefore, experiencing this support in India was so encouraging for all of us.

Other efforts to promote cultural shifts, also contributed to the hope that we developed. The woman who guided us throughout our trip told us that the advertisements have been changing. She explained that they are beginning to encourage independence to women in the middle and upper class who are educated. We saw one billboard that was aimed at this when we drove into one of the cities. It surprised me to see since we had been hearing the women talk so much about the pressure that the women face to be married and have children, as well as how they are not often encouraged to pursue an education. Knowing that these campaigns are happening brings hope that the social norms will begin to change, offering more options and freedom for women. Hopefully, the campaign will be expanded to include not only women in the middle and upper class. It would be wonderful to see the value of education and independence being encouraged for all women in India.

### **Samantha's Post Script**

This process was a tremendously formative experience for me. Before leaving for India, many people asked me about my excitement. As I would respond to them, I often thought about how strange it was to be excited but not really have any idea what to expect. Before leaving, it was hard for me to even imagine what it would feel like to be on the plane on our way there, or to be talking with the women at the conference, or even just to be in India. I had some sense that I would be deeply impacted, but I could not really imagine how much I was going to learn or be changed through this experience. It far exceeded all of my expectations. I am still not certain that I am even fully aware yet of how much it has impacted me.

This trip provided me with an opportunity to become better aware of my continued need to work towards being culturally sensitive. While I was focused on being sensitive to the differences between the Indian culture and mine, the realization that I had many things in common with the women reflected my lack of experience with people in other cultures. I recognized that cultural sensitivity includes not only being cognizant of the differences between cultures, but also of their shared values and experiences. Through this, I saw my need to continue to be exposed to people in different cultures so that I can continue to learn these rather simple concepts that will improve my work as a social worker.

After returning home and seeing my parents, my dad said that when we begin to hear about the exciting things happening to bring respect and freedom to all

women in India, he can't wait to say that his daughter was a part of it. We laughed about it and I reminded him that we're just one small group and that there are other organizations working there too. However, later I continued to think about this and I kept thinking about how thankful I am to have been given such an opportunity.

In my work at my full-time job, I am encouraged when I realize that the work I am doing really is likely changing the dynamics of the community. I never would have imagined having the opportunity to have a similar impact in another country. This sense that I get to be a part of something bigger than myself was one of the things that drew me to social work. Often I think about the things or ideas present in my everyday life and I think about the impact of the person who made it or who promoted the idea. For example, I think about something as simple as an intersection light. I don't know who invented it, but I am so thankful they did because it helps bring safety and order to my community. I also think about the women who advocated for my right to pursue an education. I am so thankful for their courage. Similarly, it is neat to think about the work we were able to do in India. People may never know we were there, but I imagine that they will be thankful for the outcome that our work will produce. I am hopeful that we have done work that they will be thankful for.

A month after returning from my trip, I found myself really missing the women that we worked with. I am amazed by the connection I made with them in less than a week. I am curious about how they are doing. I wonder if they have continued growing in their sense of empowerment. I also think about those who are currently in abusive relationships and hope that they are safe. We have already scheduled a continuing education conference as well as a conference to teach new women the material next summer. While I look forward to seeing them then, I wish I could see them before then. My experiences with them are really what gave meaning to the entire experience and again, I am amazed by their impact on me.

### **Regina's Post Script**

My role in this project was as that of a guide. I was quite far removed. My involvement focused on helping Samantha document her experiences and then process these in an organized way using qualitative research techniques. The goal of this for me personally was to continue to emphasize for

social work students that social work practice and social work research can and should be two sides to the same coin. This coin is currency toward the social justice values of social work where we strive to improve the human experience. However, I'm grateful to say that this project has impacted me beyond giving me the opportunity to show a future social worker how research and practice intertwine.

As a social work educator, I very much embrace "learning on the job." Field work is considered our "signature pedagogy" by the Council on Social Work Education (2014). I challenge social work educators to expand that to the classroom experiences that complement those field practicums we require of our bachelor and master level students. I emphasize this for a singular reason: as an educator, I also serve as the Chair for our School's Professional Standards Committee. This committee often reviews complaints from field agencies related to students who are not performing well in their field practicums. This underperformance often expressed in terms of violations of our Code of Ethics-is rooted in the students' lack of exposure to the field prior to the field practicum. Our students need agency experiences and exposure prior to their field practicums.

This course exemplifies a means of doing this through the service-learning approach to education. In this approach, educators and students connect with a community partner and ask how they can help. It is not a time for educators and students to say "Here's what we can do for you" or "Here's what you need." The educational experience is driven by the community partner and processed by the students through reflection assignments. In the case of Samantha's independent study course, a community entity had a need and Samantha worked with that entity and her colleagues to fulfill the need. The entity obviously benefitted based on Samantha's observations; and, Samantha is a stronger future social worker based on her experiences with that entity.

Her reflective journaling serves as not only a great place for her to process her experiences but also serves as rich qualitative research data. As she noted, we taught her much about cultural competence but it didn't resonate fully in an application sense until she had to put her knowledge to the test with another culture. And, what she learned is what I've always thought was core in social work practice: "start where the client is." I challenge us as educators in both the academic social work education setting and the agency settings to strive to create more opportunities like this one for our students learning to be social workers.

## Discussion

### *Importance of Cultural Sensitivity*

Throughout this process, the concepts that I have been taught throughout my education about the absolute necessity of cultural sensitivity were affirmed. Specifically, I observed the importance of being open minded to the way the leaders of the community were working to address violence against women. I learned the importance of asking the community leaders questions in preparation for the training as well as during. Very early on it became apparent to our team that we were not only going to teach them, but that they would teach us a great deal as well. While they asked us many questions about how we did things, it was important that we remember and express to them that things might not work the same way in their community as they do in ours.

In my work addressing violence against women in the U.S., I have studied a great deal about the importance of taking action to end all forms of oppression in order to decrease violence against women. The church that we worked with demonstrated this especially well through their many programs to meet the needs of people in their community.

We learned that they started a school in the slums where they are able to provide many children with food and an education that they would not have access to otherwise. They also began an orphanage where they provide a safe home and quality education for 22 children. Their efforts to address oppression in their community will likely continue to support the work there are doing to reduce intimate partner violence. Seeing the work they are doing challenged me to consider ways that the organization I work for may be able to partner with organizations addressing other needs in my community.

Additionally, after developing my interest in international social work, I began to read about other foreign aid efforts. As I read, I learned about many well-intentioned efforts that caused unanticipated negative consequences in the communities where they were working. While it is still too early to tell, our team worked diligently to try to reduce the chances of our work causing any harm.

The risk of causing unintended harm is likely to increase if social workers do not respect their clients' right to self-determination. From the beginning of our preparation, we were reminded that we must be open-minded to the interventions implemented by the people who invited us to help them.

For example, each of us on the team was interested to learn more about the pastors' efforts to restore relationships after abuse has occurred. As discussed earlier, this is not the commonly promoted practice in the United States. However, as we further discussed this process during our trip, we discovered that these efforts are similar to the interventions based on social learning theory that are implemented in the United States. Further, it caused the four of us to discuss the possibility of us learning from them how to better utilize our local faith communities. This experience reminded me of the importance of respecting the way that people in the community work to address the problems, rather than insisting that they conform to my knowledge of what should be done.

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