

# I Am Woman,

Women of India express their burning anger and grief over the rape of Damini

— but they also voice their hope.

by AIMEE GINSBURG

Sunita Jayawant, 27, a domestic laborer in a town far from New Delhi, had not heard about the gang rape in the capital or about the death of the victim, a brave young physical therapy student who fought for her life in a hospital in Singapore until the end, earning her the passionate love and support of the entire country. Damini, an alias, was lured onto a private — masquerading as a public — bus along with her boyfriend and then brutally beaten and raped by a group of men who in the end threw her on the road and tried to run her over. Sunita was also unaware of the explosion of anger and grief that led to mass protests across the country, attended by both women and men of all classes and ages, until her sister called her from Delhi with the news.

“I am surprised to hear so many people were protesting,” she says. “It has always seemed to me that nobody cares about it.” Sunita recalls that something “very terrible” happened to her in the village, but when she told her mother, she was warned never to speak about it again. A similar “thing” happened to her sister, who was given the same order. “If anyone would know,” says Sunita, “it would be very, very bad for us. After a long time I thought to myself that *he* should be the one to be afraid, that something terrible should happen to *him* if anyone knew,” she adds boldly, “but by then I was grown and moved away. I still never told anyone about it.” Sunita says the death sentence seems appropriate, “So that maybe they will become afraid and stop just doing whatever they feel like doing without even being afraid.” Then the young woman, a sweet-natured mother of four, adds: “I can’t imagine men will ever get such a punishment for doing

something bad to a woman. But if there really were so many demonstrators, especially so many men, maybe things have changed.”

The protests that have rocked India since the rape and death of the young woman known only by the pseudonym Damini have been unusually intense, even in a country that does see eruptions over various cases of social injustice — as there are, of course, many. Increasingly over the past few years, reports of sexual violence and cases of gang rape have reached the headlines, many in Delhi and the surrounding region but in other major cities as well. Very few of these cases are ever successfully prosecuted. In the past year, several insensitive if not outrageous remarks by politicians and police officials regarding the behavior of the victims have sparked smaller protests by women’s organizations.

But as Damini lay fighting for her life, and even more so when the news of her death reached the horrified population, the outpouring of anger and grief — by many who have never been out to protest, by many who were not used to standing with others of different class or age and, perhaps most startlingly, by countless men who previously said nothing publicly on the subject — raised the hope that finally there might come a change in laws, in police behavior, and, most important, in the consciousness of the nation.

“Who can say if there is more vio-

lence against women here than anywhere else in the world?” says Devika Arora, a private nurse in New Delhi. “But I don’t think we have seen these kinds of protests against it anywhere in the world. Every woman in India knows what this is about,” she adds, echoing what every woman I spoke to during the demonstrations has repeated. “We all know we, or worse — our daughters — could easily be next. The women in India, despite what outsiders may think, are very strong and do not hesitate to show their power when they feel that enough is enough.”

I spoke to many women, and some men, during the great protests all over India. Ages 17 to 69 and from many different backgrounds and classes, they all, without exception, said that since Damini’s death, this topic has woken up the latent pain and anger that has always resided in them. They all reported having shed many tears but expressed much hope as well. Here are their voices, unedited and direct, as they were all so happy for the chance to speak directly to their sisters — and brothers — around the world.



**Malika**  
*Malika Dutt, 51, is a human rights activist, cultural entrepreneur and lawyer by training.*

*Dutt is founder, president and CEO of Breakthrough, a global human rights organization that uses the power of media, pop culture and community mobilization to promote human rights values.*

Illustrations by Marilyn Rose

# Hear Me Roar!

The last two weeks have been a roller coaster of emotions for me. As a feminist and human rights advocate who has been challenging violence against women for the last three decades, it has been a time of great optimism and hope that the reaction to the recent gang rape in Delhi is a harbinger of change. I have been particularly heartened to see the number of young men joining women in demanding government accountability for women's safety in public spaces. At the same time, I am filled with deep anger and sorrow; sorrow that this brave young woman died, anger at the levels of violence that women face at home, in the streets and in the workplace every single day. I am also angry that it takes such a brutal incident for the country to react and take to the streets. I am still puzzled by what the tipping point was in this particular case because this kind of brutality is unfortunately not rare, and, sadly, most of the time, women face violence at the hands of family members.

"One of the narratives that is really making me angry is the one that calls on men to think about women as their mother, sister, wife or daughter — as if this relational understanding will somehow lead to a change in mindset and make men allies. This kind of thinking only reinforces the relational and dependent way in which men view women. And women certainly don't experience any kind of equality as a wife, mother, sister or daughter in their homes anyway, so this line of argument doesn't even make any sense. Men need to change their mindsets and see women as fully human, as full citizens, as people entitled to human rights in their own right!

Has violence against women in-

creased in India or other parts of the world? As far as I am concerned, violence against women is the biggest human rights pandemic globally with India perhaps higher up on the list in terms of incidence. We face a life cycle of violence — from sex selection and female feticide to sexual assault, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, dowry related violence and the treatment of widows. Most of us experience sexual harassment on a regular basis and learn how to cope and navigate public spaces with the threat of violence as a constant fear. I think the violence has always been endemic but is now more apparent in public spaces as gender roles change.

Right now, though, I must confess that I am very proud of the young women and men who are out there on the streets demanding change and accountability for women's safety and security. I am hoping that this moment will mark India's transition as a country that is the worst place for women to one that led the charge for serious recognition for women's human rights the world over.

## Anjali

*Anjali Puri, 55, is a senior journalist and news editor in Delhi.*

Every woman growing up, living in and moving around Delhi, has experienced unwelcome attentions from men from 16 to 60. These range from irritating and offensive to repulsive and gross. It was like this 35 to 40 years ago,



it is still like this, especially if you are dependent on public transport. I don't get harassed now because I don't take public transport and am not in that age group anymore that gets harassed as much.

But a friend of mine who was sexually assaulted tried the legal route. Although she was rather high placed in the media and was relatively well connected, she was so harassed by the accused — who seem to have more support from the police than she did — she ended up dropping the case, as all of her friends advised her that she must look after herself even at the expense of justice.

Although I understand her decision and as her friend, support it, this is too often the case and this really needs to change. There is so often impunity for these guys. That's why men like those on the bus had no fear of the law and its consequences.

One of the most talked about rape cases in this city, which no one who lived here then has ever forgotten, was of a 16-year-old college student called Geeta Chopra, who thumbed rides to get to her destination quickly, and got into the wrong car. She was raped and then murdered, along with her 14-year-old brother, who was with her. That was 35 years ago, and there were marches, protests, headlines, calls for the death penalty, public executions, all of that.

So, am I saying what happened in the current case is nothing new, but a "normal" Delhi response to a crime of monstrous brutality? No. What is truly

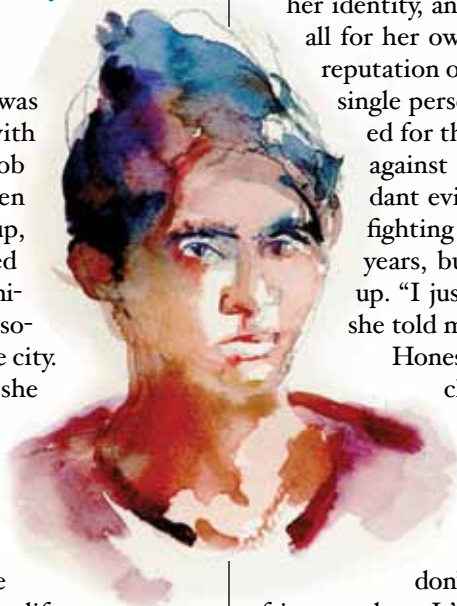
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unprecedented about the December 16th case is that the protests were so widespread and sustained and that millions have rallied around a faceless, nameless lower-middle class. [Geeta, a naval officer's daughter, was very much of the elite.] It was also very heartening that her fellow citizens became deeply invested in her hopes and dreams and desperately wanted her to live, rather than quietly fade away like rape victims do in Hindi films. Rather than being stigmatized for being raped, the woman became a symbol and a source of inspiration. Cynics wonder how long this sentiment will last. We shall see. For now, however, the blood-thirsty calls for public execution and incidents of violence notwithstanding, this deeply selfish city has displayed more evolved behavior and more empathy than I ever suspected it could.

### Jyothi

*Jyothi Karat, 30, is a successful photographer.*

A 16-year-old girl was kidnapped with the promise of a job in Cochin, and then she was locked up, drugged and raped repeatedly by prominent persons of the society in a lodge in the city. Six months later, she was rescued with the help of a very daring and amazing woman. Two decades had passed when I met her. She had been scarred for life,



with the trauma never leaving her. She had been forced to change her name, her identity, and leave her home — all for her own safety and for the reputation of her family. Not one single person has been convicted for the crimes committed against her, despite abundant evidence. She has been fighting the case for 20 long years, but was ready to give up. “I just want to move on,” she told me.

Honestly, I don't have any close girl friends that haven't experienced sexual harassment at least once in their lives. It's so common that we don't even think much of it nowadays. It's all part of growing

## The problem is ours, too!

Nicholas D. Kristof put it aptly in his *New York Times* op-ed column on January 12, 2013: “Is Delhi So Different From Steubenville?” He was referring to the Steubenville, Ohio, high school football players who are accused of repeatedly raping an unconscious 16-year-old girl. This is just one of the many thousands of acts of sexual violence committed against American women each year.

In the United States, one in five women will be raped in her lifetime and there is a reported rape every 6.2 minutes. Every nine seconds, a woman is assaulted or beaten, and a great number of these incidences are due to domestic or partner violence. There is

an epidemic of rape in the U.S. military. A female soldier in combat zones is more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire. The U.S. Department of Defense estimates there were a staggering 19,000 sex crimes in the military in 2010 alone. Only 8 percent of these cases are ever prosecuted.

Gender-based violence is one of the world's most common human rights abuses, compromising the health, dignity, security and autonomy of its victims. Women worldwide, ages 15 through 44, are more likely to die or be maimed because of male violence than because of cancer, malaria, war and traffic accidents combined. The World

Health Organization has found that domestic and sexual violence affects 30 to 60 percent of women in most countries.

The United States is helping to change the way the world confronts these issues. Hillary Clinton, for one, did a superb job trying to put them on the global agenda. In late February, Congress reauthorized and strengthened the Violence Against Women Act (see page 23). On March 1, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which had expired in 2011. This is our country's most important tool in the fight against human trafficking and modern-day slavery.

But we can do much more — in

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up. Some of my friends have had traumatic experiences. But they eventually learnt to deal with it and know how to prevent it in the future. In Kerala, my home state, men flashing their thing and even shagging in front of you is quite common. My earliest memories are of this guy who would lift his dhoti [cloth tied around the waist] to flash his thing in front of the 6-year-olds who would be playing during lunch time near our convent school gate. The management solved the problem by keeping the gate shut 24/7, keeping us locked up instead of him. Men try to feel you up in buses, movie theaters [the main reason most families don't like to send women and children to cinemas without a male escort] and trains. I didn't like to report such incidents back at home, lest that should cost me my hard-earned freedom to go about on my own.

I was 17 when I decided to take a 8 p.m. bus from Coimbatore (where I was studying) to Trichur, despite my father forbidding me to do so. I got into the bus, only to realize I was the only girl aboard. Even the "ladies seats" were occupied by men, and I took a window seat close to the driver. Soon I felt strange fingers wandering through a gap between the seat and the window from behind me, trying to feel my breast. I jumped up, shouted at the culprit and pointed him out to the conductor of the bus. There was pin-drop silence in the bus. The conductor came up to me and softly said, "Please just adjust, madam."

I cannot really explain in words what I felt right then. A mixture of helplessness, fear, disgust, anger — above all, anger. I sat down again and predictably, the fingers came crawling again. But this time, I was prepared. I had a safety pin with me, which I used to scratch his finger while catching hold of his fingers with my other hand. I didn't use the pin only to stop him from harassing me; I wanted to make sure I hurt him. I heard his yelp and he wriggled out and moved to another seat. From then on, I knew I would have only myself to count on; my fellow citizens will only look away.

Although the Delhi protests were commendable, I believe we need a more deep-rooted enlightenment, much like Gandhi's fight for eradication of untouchability. And I still firmly believe that this is a good time to be a woman in India. The Indian woman is not afraid of grabbing the spotlight anymore. She needs no looking after. I think that the attitudes of the rapists point to a deeply

seated sense of insecurity of the male psyche. So, we know that this will be a long drawn out battle, one we may not win for ourselves but for sure we will for our daughters.

### Venita

*Venita Coelho is a well-known Bollywood screenwriter, television writer, author and activist.*



I have yet to meet a woman friend who didn't have a story of sexual harassment or assault to share. Whether they were rich, poor, protected or on their own, every single woman has a story that she tells with tears. A girl child in India is brought up bound by dozens of rules that are meant to keep her "safe": "Don't wear sleeveless shirts." "Be home before eight o'clock." "Ignore what men say to you or you will encourage them."

Above all, a conspiracy of silence is encouraged. "Don't tell anyone," because if you do, it is your own reputation that will be damaged, not that of the harasser. And in that little fact, we have the basic reason why rapists get away with it.

It is pathetic that it took the brutalizing of a young girl to finally break that conspiracy of silence. I wept for Damini. But I also wept to see the people out on the streets, to see the thousands, to see mothers and daughters together marching. For the first time in a very long time, I feel that we as a nation have anger enough to do something about the tears that all our mothers,

**our homes, communities, workplaces and government. Congress has yet to pass the International Violence Against Women Act, the global version of VAWA. And more must be done to stop gender-based violence through education, awareness and prevention and protection programs.**

**Some Americans look with condescension at acts of violence against women in other countries, but the problems of domestic violence, dating violence, rape and sex trafficking are also our own. They are everybody's problem — and the battle to stop the violence must be waged throughout the entire world by both women and men.**

— Judith A. Sokoloff

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sisters, daughters, wives have shed. I think we are reaching the time when it is clear that it is up to us to take back our own freedom — to play where we wish to, walk where we wish to with whoever and whenever we wish to. I think that the realization is upon us that it is not only up to us to take our own freedom but that we can actually do it.

## Bina

*Bina Ramani, 69, is a renowned fashion designer and businesswoman.*

I'm deeply anguished about what we are witnessing in our country. Malini [her daughter, a fashion designer] and I sat in bed watching the passion that has arisen from this dreadful tragedy, and we wept for Damini and for the thousands of others who have met similar fates. I have not slept peacefully for days, and I'm just burning with passion to do something to make a difference. For now, I have initiated a candlelight vigil [in the state of Goa] on the first day of the court trial. We will demand a speedy, transparent and honest trial.

There are several changes required, but where does one begin?

In primary schools, boys and girls need to be truly educated by truly intelligent teachers about how special, unique and sacred they are, body, minds and souls. But do we have such teachers in India?

We need special education against violence inside each home. But will fathers, uncles and brothers allow

such education at home?

We need awareness on the streets, on public transportation and in public places. But do such bystanders have compassion in India, or will they continue to be cowards?

We need compassionate men and women police officers who take pride and have integrity in their jobs.

They don't exist.

We need honest and trained and compassionate medical examiners that will treat rape victims with dignity and kindness. We don't have any.

I believe that every elected official who has a criminal record — rape or otherwise — should be made to resign with immediate effect.

I believe the accused, who are always shown with their heads covered, receiving protection from the glare of the media, should, in fact, be exposed for their heinous crime. And the minute they have confessed to the crime, their foreheads should be branded with burning tongs with "RAPIST" written boldly across. But most of all, I believe that the person who has been found to molest or rape a child or minor should receive the severest of punishment as speedily as possible. I won't be wrong in declaring that at least 90 percent of females in India have been groped or molested if not raped during their lifetimes! That makes it 550 million women! When we succeed at making the change, it will not be only for women in India but for our sisters the world over.

## Chenoa

Chenoa D'costa, 17, who recently graduated high school and hopes to become a journalist, also believes a change is coming: "Since I was a small girl, I have heard unending warnings about the things that could happen to me and the things I needed to do or not to stay safe. But my friends and I always know that these precautions will be meaningless if we run into the wrong man. So yes, there is a kind of constant fear, but more than that, I'm furious. My friends and I are praying that these protests will last and

bring a real change. We are praying that Damini's death will not have been in vain. We want the potential rapists to be the ones who are afraid — not us."

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*Originally from the United States, journalist Aimee Ginsburg has lived in India for 15 years. She writes for India's Open magazine and is the India correspondent for Israel's Yediot Ahronot. When she lived in Israel for many years, Ginsburg won NA'AMAT's Ariela Yashiv Award for the journalist who had done the most to improve the status of women in Israel. She wrote "Santoshi" in our fall 2012 issue.*

