NGO Activism in Transforming the Rhetoric Surrounding Sexual Assault in India

Abstract

In a country dominated by patriarchal values where women have historically been considered secondary in status, the work done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists to encourage people to reassess their understanding of women's rights is crucial. While studies that prove the value of NGO campaigns that raise awareness on the issue of women's rights in India is available, the role that NGOs play as counterpublics to disrupt the affective force of patriarchy has not been thoroughly investigated. This paper focuses on a few promising social movements piloted by local Indian NGOs and similar activist organizations and illustrates the various ways in which they portray qualities of counterpublics. It analyzes how these movements and campaigns use affective techniques to encourage the traditional Indian community to reexamine their attitude towards women. With regard to praxis, an investigation that studies the ways in which NGOs apply these techniques can help us link their achievements to the reasons behind their success, allowing other organizations to adopt similar strategies, thus disseminating this knowledge on a larger scale to accelerate social change.

Keywords: activism, affect, counterpublics, patriarchy, second-class status, sexual assault.

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Traditional Indian culture has historically assigned a secondary status to women in their society (Johnson and Johnson, 2001). Indian women continue to deal with the threat of rape and sexual assault when they enter public spaces. Many face debilitating street harassment in the form of lewd comments, whistling, groping, and worse (colloquially and dismissively called 'eve teasing') on a daily basis. While sexual harassment and assaults are rampant in many countries that have a dominant patriarchal culture, it often stands out as being excessively violent in Southeast Asian countries like India. For example, many traditional families in India continue to prioritize family honor over bringing perpetrators to justice; such families have been known to murder victims of rape and sexual assault in their family in order to save their family from social disgrace (Deol, 2014). Reuters foundation, which surveyed 550 global experts in women's issues, classified India as the most dangerous country for women in 2018 (Goldsmith, 2018).

In such a culture, actions that are often taken for granted, such as walking down the street, engaging in communication in public, or taking public transportation, end up being physically and emotionally draining for women because of the level of harassment they face (Bhattacharyya, 2016). Research indicates that the stress emanating from sexual harassment has far reaching consequences on women's health; it affects academic and career achievements, self-esteem, and has also been known to cause psychological problems that imitate Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral, 2009). The unfortunate consequence can be a higher dropout rate for schoolgirls who face harassment (Prakash et al., 2017), more obstacles to vocational development, and consequently, lower financial security (McLaughlin et al., 2017), all of which can create a downward spiral of dependency for women in these societies.

Although many Indians vociferously demand justice for victims of rape, as can be seen by the large-scale protests that were undertaken all over India after a 23-year-old medical student was brutally gang raped and murdered in 2012 (Bhattacharyya, 2016), there is usually not much social outcry to protest against non-fatal assaults that are perpetrated on women's bodies on a daily basis in Indian public spaces. Perhaps as a consequence, heinous crimes on women in India continue to occur (Fareed, 2018; Gettleman & Kumar, 2018; Ignatius, 2013; Ellis-Peterson, 2019; Saberin, 2018). The consistent nature of these crimes indicates that something deeper is at play in Indian society.

Many scholars blame patriarchal culture for the recurrence of violence on women (Johnson, 1980; Smith, 1991; Johnson and Johnson, 2001; Nettleton, 2011; Yllo & Straus, 2017). Violent rapes, sexual assaults and murders of women continue to occur in India even though the Indian government has passed several legal measures to protect women, and even after the transforming forces of globalization and the Internet have brought cultures and countries closer. In fact, ever since women in India started displaying a steady trend towards financial independence (assisted by globalization), a profound anxiety has been circulating within Indian patriarchy (Desai, 2005). Traditional Indians fear that financial independence is making women rebellious and disrespectful of Indian patriarchy (Mahajan & Randhawa, 2017), and this could be another reason for the recurrence of violent crime. Evidence for this anxiety and outlook can be found in the opinions expressed by popularly elected Indian politicians[1] (Neelakantan, 2016). Their strident opposition of liberation for women who have been shackled by regressive traditions indicates a deep-rooted emotional predisposition and an alignment with age-old belief systems through which the Indian patriarchal community has continued to castigate, subjugate and control Indian women (Simon-Kumar, 2014).

In such a scenario, local NGOs working towards women's rights have been playing an important role to change this situation. This paper expands on the activism of these NGOs who act as counterpublics fighting for women's rights. I argue that these NGOs act as counterpublics to change conservative narratives surrounding women by controlling and positioning affect through their campaigns, and thus, exerting pressure on deep-set patriarchal attitudes. In communities where atrocious assaults on women continue to occur, these organizations have taken on the uphill task of changing the conservative rhetoric that surrounds sexual harassment and assault. By conducting a rhetorical analysis of the data available in news articles online, I investigate a few promising NGO campaigns and analyze the ways in which they offer a counter-rhetoric to the traditional, patriarchal Indian outlook. While one can find studies that document and prove the value of NGO-based awareness campaigns (MacPherson, 2007; Desai, 2005; Bowles, 2015), with the rare exception of the study conducted by Richards (2016), the ways in which NGOs act as *counterpublics* to the subaltern female population in India does not seem to have been investigated. With regards to praxis, understanding NGOs' role as counterpublics is important because an investigation that studies the ways in which NGOs apply these techniques can help us link their achievements to the reasons behind their success, allowing other organizations to adopt similar strategies, thus disseminating this knowledge on a larger scale to accelerate social change.

Below, I begin by providing a brief account on Indian patriarchal culture since an understanding of this history is important to appreciate why counterpublics in India are needed to regulate affect in order to generate an enduring change in outlook to women. Then, I offer an account of NGO activism in India. Following this, I clarify the concepts of the public sphere, counterpublics, and affect while simultaneously extending them to Indian traditional

communities and NGOs. To prove my argument, I provide an analysis on how NGOs function as counterpublics. Then, by illustrating the methods they use to rally affect around women's rights, I analyze their role in changing the communal mentality in India. Finally, I end with a conclusion and future implications.

Background on Indian Patriarchal Culture

In India, traditional families pray to ensure the birth of boys (Cousins, 2017). The high rate of female infanticide and sex-selective abortions in the country show the lengths to which families go to avoid the birth of girls (Kohli, 2017). The desire to not want daughters seems to stem from ancient Indian culture where men carry on the family lineage (Ansari, 2018). It is also the direct consequence of the stress most families face in having to collect money for their daughters' weddings and dowries (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). As boys are held responsible for the welfare of their aging parents, and for performing the last rites after their parents' death (Ansari, 2018), traditional Indian parents do not see any utility in raising girls and cannot wait to marry them off (Alfanco, 2017). As a result, the practice of marrying child brides is commonplace. Young girls, who are often made to forego their education and pressured into marriage, leave behind their natal homes, their identities, and their aspirations, to live with their in-laws (Sharma et al., 2013), who seemingly welcome these child brides into their household, but often abuse them physically and mentally. Married women customarily observe religious ceremonies (*varalakshmi vrath* and *karva chauth*) to pray to the gods for their husbands' long lives, because a woman's life, socially, and, in the past, literally, ended with the death of her husband[2]. Because education, progress, mobility, and even nutrition in traditional Indian families is prioritized for boys, Indian women's liberty is constrained because the patriarchal community forces them away from paths that would enable them to attain psychological, physical and financial

independence. Indian women are instead encouraged to move into a life of servitude (Sharma et al., 2013).

Getting acquainted with this patriarchal culture in India helps us comprehend how far back the mentality of viewing women as secondary in status goes3. While the severity of these practices, beliefs and behaviors may differ based on the type of family, caste, class or other intersectional factors, the overall acceptance of these beliefs leaves most women alone in their fight for freedom from traditional shackles. These rigid affective predispositions have become part of the communal subconscious and need realignment for long-lasting changes to occur. This paper tries to illustrate how NGOs act as counterpublics to accomplish that.

NGO Activism in India

Indian history has depicted a strong commitment to activism, social movements and volunteerism (Bornstein & Sharma, 2016). While NGOs have been a part of the national scene since colonial times, during the struggle for independence and since independence, India has witnessed a steady increase in local, grassroot-level movements that later solidified into non-governmental organizations (Sen, 1999). Not only do these organizations offer material aid (food, clothing, building shelters, etc.) to ailing communities, they have also taken on the critical task of representing the needs of those who are most marginalized in Indian communities, such as women and people of lower castes4 and class. To do this essential work of representation, NGOs pour time, money and effort into awareness campaigns; they have striven to raise awareness on issues such as HIV/AIDs (Finn & Sarangi, 2008), women's empowerment (Desai, 2005; Handy et al., 2006), children's rights (Puri et al., 2007), LGBTQ rights (Dasgupta, 2014), etc. in India. Representation can be defined as the ways in which NGOs communicatively convey to the public the problems and issues that their constituents have to deal with (Dempsey,

2009). Thus, through the use of representational material in street performances or televised

public service announcements, NGOs convey the lived realities of marginalized groups to the

Indian population on a large scale. Because representational material enables NGOs to circulate a

specific rhetoric regarding their constituents (Finnegan, 2003), awareness campaigns hold within

them a power to affect belief systems that are often deeply entrenched in societies (Dogra, 2007).

For example, health-based campaigns that are created to raise awareness on deadly diseases such

as polio and small pox, which encourage Indian parents to vaccinate their children, have been so

effective that these diseases have been nearly eradicated in the country (Yadav & Srivastava,

2015). NGOs that use similar affective techniques and successfully ameliorate the lives of

marginalized people are worth investigating in order to accelerate social change.

The following section explicates the concepts of public sphere, counterpublics and affect

to provide a better understanding of the role NGOs play to create affective changes in traditional

Indian communities.

Public Sphere and Counterpublics

Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere, in which members of a community

meet to discuss matters of public interest democratically, depicts the way in which the notion of

an 'ideal public sphere' was initially understood (Fraser, 1990). In Habermas's conceptualization

of the public sphere, the floor was supposedly open to all members regardless of their

differences. It was assumed that people would leave aside their differences of status and class to

discuss issues that the entire community had a stake in. Fraser (1990), however, recognizes that

the Habermasian concept of the bourgeois public sphere is inherently flawed; it is merely

theoretical as it does not accurately account for dealing with diversity of status and opinion. For

example, it does not address the lack of participation by women and individuals who do not

possess property. Critiquing this concept of the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser (1990) suggests that the original concept needs modification in the following areas for it to truly work for *all* members in the community. Firstly, members in a public sphere need to recognize that social equality is essential for true democracy. Secondly, a public sphere needs to allow all its members to voice diverse beliefs and opinions. Thirdly, a public sphere's focus should be broad enough to include issues that might traditionally be considered private in nature.

  Fraser's insistence that an ideal public sphere needs to include multiplicity of opinions, and that it must broaden its focus to include non-dominant issues affecting subaltern groups, made way for the idea of *counterpublics*. We understand counterpublics to be groups that are comprised of members from marginalized sections of the society, who rally against the exclusionary policies created by the dominant public sphere to demand *true* inclusion. Warner (2002) maintains that counterpublics stay aware of their subordinate status and do not shy away from confrontation. As dominant public spheres often neglect minority concerns, counterpublics are needed to take on the task of forcing a dialog around these issues. Counterpublics' role in defining their subaltern group needs to be transformative in nature; that is, they must not simply imitate (Warner, 2002). Counterpublics do not allow members from the dominant public sphere to define their subaltern group but instead define themselves as independent from the frameworks offered to them by those in authority. Counterpublics understand the characteristics of their group and structure demands that would truly benefit their subaltern population in the long run. Hence, keeping the welfare of their subaltern group in mind, they decline superficial inclusionary policies, which often demarcate marginalized groups and their needs incorrectly (Chávez, 2015). In doing so, counterpublics labor to build a public sphere that reflects all the sections of the community and that displays true democratic functioning.

Expanding Fraser's concept of counterpublics to conservative Indian communities and NGOs, it is clear to see how women in India, who are marginalized and traditionally considered to occupy a lower status in the deep-rooted patriarchal culture, would need robust counterpublics to defend them against discrimination in such communities. Similar to the Habermasian notion of the bourgeois public sphere, traditional Indian communities are capable of dissuading multiplicity of opinions and often propose facile inclusionary policies that do not work to women's advantage in the long run. Both these tactics - discouraging diversity of thought and offering makeshift measures to temporarily appease minority populations - reflect attributes of the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser, 1990). In such a scenario, women need the assistance of counterpublics that challenge the dominant patriarchal community's thinking and push authority at the risk of being "regarded with hostility or with a sense of indecorousness" (Warner, 2002, p.119). The earlier section on the background to patriarchy in India offered us an overwhelming amount of evidence to prove that Indian patriarchal communities have denigrated women for centuries. Indian society's deep-rooted affective inclinations towards women need the use of awareness strategies that can change their mentality. Indian women therefore need counterpublics that use *affective* techniques to create long-lasting changes in the outlook of the dominant Indian public sphere.

Affect, Affective Economies and Affective Divestment

McCann defines affect as something that "describes the inherently unstable prelinguistic intensities residing in bodies and emerging in encounters between different bodies" (McCann, 2017, p. 11). Going by this definition, one can theorize affect to be an intrinsic, elusive collection of emotional knowledge that moves between people during their encounters with each other. Intrinsic thought processes can be understood to be subliminal and difficult for people to

consciously scrutinize. It is therefore safe to assume that the process used for changing of affective inclinations residing in communities would need to be a deliberate, methodical and slow.

Ahmed (2004) has explained how affective collections of knowledge influence people who come into contact with it. Based on Ahmed's understanding of affect, we see that affect cannot be contained within one person but moves through communities and societies as a unified body of subconscious emotional information, passing presentiment that circulates hatred and fear towards those who the society fears or considers aliens requiring control and discipline.

"My argument is not that there is a psychic economy of fear that then becomes social and collective: rather, the individual subject comes into being through its very alignment with the collective. *It is the very failure of affect to be located in a subject or object that allows it to generate the surfaces of collective bodies"* (Ahmed, 2004, p. 128, emphasis in the original).

Affective knowledge of hatred and fear burgeons as the affect circulates. It increases in intensity as it moves through the bodies of people. Such deep-seated, subconsciously stored information surely needs time to alter. It is easy to see, based on historic and contemporary fear and hatred of certain groups of people, such as African Americans, Jews, Muslims, etc., the enormity of sway that wide-spread affective inclinations have on public consciousness. These subliminal emotions and attitudes continue to stick in the collective, communal psyche and influence how people can behave with those who are feared, shunned and excluded for millennia.

In the context of this paper, Ahmed's explanation of affective economies helps us understand, to some extent at least, why violence on women keeps repeating itself in Indian communities despite the national uproar against incidents of rape. In a community where people

inherently believed, on a visceral level, that the wife of a deceased husband should perform the ritual of *sati*, in which widows are expected to throw themselves into their husbands' funeral pyre, so that they can dutifully accompany their dead husbands into the after-life (Ignatius, 2013) – in such a community, the tendency to perceive all woman-kind as occupying a lower stature has become part of the affective conscience of the society. In India, an economy of subliminally derogatory thought process with regard to women has been circulating throughout the subcontinent for centuries forcing members of this patriarchal region into alliance with it for eons. This alignment with the patriarchal thought process that considers women to be not as worthy as men has repeated itself in people generation after generation to the point that the Indian society is unable to recognize discrimination against women; discrimination against female bodies has become a part of tradition and a way of life.

A public sphere is said to form when a community participates in a dialogue over circulating text of public importance (Warner, 2002). Likewise, Indian patriarchal communities, as a type of public sphere, promote their agenda by circulating information on topics that are of importance to the dominant traditional public. Here, by connecting the circulation of affective knowledge to the circulation of text in public spheres, we can postulate that communities are capable of disseminating affective propaganda that aims to oppress and exclude. In fact, in her study on Chinese immigrants in Hong Kong, Yam illustrates how the civilian population has circulated tropes about Chinese mothers to rile up the entire community in order to ostracize them (2016). Yam delineates Hong Kong's response to immigrating Chinese; she exposes the fear and anxiety that people in Hong Kong have been experiencing towards the "encroaching" mainlanders, and how that anxiety has compelled several Hong Kong citizens to use negative tropes. For example, Yam notes the use of the term 'locusts' in connection to Chinese

immigrants, which has successfully spread hatred in the citizenry about the Chinese migrants. This debasing and dehumanizing of the "invading" Chinese population allows Hongkongers to tolerate, and even welcome, strategies that could result in the extradition of Chinese migrants in Hong Kong.

When patriarchy in Indian communities is viewed through this lens of affect and affective economies (Yam, 2016), it is easy to see how these patriarchal Indian communities have worked as dominant public spheres and spread their affective propaganda through the Indian subcontinent for generations. They have systematically created a mentality where women, who are seen as secondary in status to men, are *expected* to suffer abuse and discrimination to the profit of dominant, upper-status men. Conservative Indian communities have created an affective environment which expects women to not resist being excluded from the dominant sphere or not permitted to operate as men are allowed to. To maintain the status quo, Indian communities have constructed inaccurate images of women in the psyche of their people. By comparing them to goddesses on the one hand and debasing them on the other hands, Indian communities have created an unrealistic standard of expectation that any human woman cannot meet, thus creating an affective economy of hatred, fear and anxiety towards them. It is this assortment of negative affect that enables patriarchal communities to continue to keep women oppressed, subjugated and confined to their secondary class. Therefore, only a fundamental change in the collective affect of traditional Indians can lead to a lasting change in women's lives.

One way to fundamentally change deep-rooted feelings of fear and hatred is through the development of empathy and understanding through the use of persuasive interpersonal messages (Silk et al., 2011). Affective divestment occurs when the mainstream public is unable to feel a deep sense of empathy and intimacy towards marginalized groups (Mack & McCann,

2017). Mack and McCann describe how mainstream groups filter all the events that take place at the borders of their world through their own narrow and dominant frames of reference. This leads to the dominant public mentally moving away from issues that affect marginalized populations. Affective divestment might explain why non-heinous instances of sexual harassment are trivialized by the Indian public, who encourage everyone to ignore the whistling, staring, leering that most Indian women face when they step outside their homes. Most Indian people know that women using public transportation in India risk being groped, pressed up against, and masturbated to (Misri, 2017). Despite research pointing out the level of mental and physical toll such sexual assault takes on women, people in India often resort to victim-blaming and fault the women for inviting abuse on themselves by wearing the wrong attire, or commuting at the wrong time of the day.

　　　To counter this deeply embedded misogyny, women need activists in the form of strong counterpublics to develop tactics that expose the dominant public to issues from the *women's* point of view. Subaltern counterpublics that are comprised of the members of the marginalized population are more capable of understanding and depicting their own lived reality to increase empathy and identification with victims of assault in order to initiate a fundamental change in the communal mindset as compared to organizations that consist of members of the dominant public sphere. Such counterpublics are less likely to accept tactics that merely alleviate the guilt of the dominant population and demand true change. As fear and anxiety towards a group plays a crucial role in persuading people to react with animosity and violence towards them, counterpublics like NGOs are needed to assuage the anxiety of those in the dominant public sphere who react violently towards women. The paragraphs below analyze the various ways in which NGOs activism takes the form of counterpublics.

NGOs as Counterpublics

Resisting the Abuse of the Dominant Public Sphere

In a Habermasian public sphere, where little or no diversity of opinion is present, it is the counterpublics that demand for multiplicity and plurality of opinion so that minority issues get recognition. By extending that understanding to the Indian society one can see how the present-day conservative Indian public is unable to accept ideas that portray women in positions of high status and power. Similar to the bourgeois public sphere, the majority of conservative Indian public disregards the importance of multiplicity. People chooses not to hear voices that insist on a significant break away from traditional values that view women as subservient to Indian patriarchy's machismo. Counterpublics demand a platform for their group's issues to be heard. They voice their dissent against the dominant public to the point of being considered hostile and inappropriate (Warner, 2002). Counterpublics recognize that for a meaningful inclusion of women's voices in the Indian public sphere they have to be willing to become physically and socially aggressive to resist the abuse of patriarchal Indians.

NGOs like the *Red Brigade* offer that resistance. As a local organization run by female victims of violence, *Red Brigade's* members have been known to put their bodies in the way of harm to protect victims of sexual assault. When they become aware of instances of abuse, they travel to the site, intervene and use various strategies to force culprits to back off. Initially, they try to make the perpetrators of harassment understand their wrongdoings and verbally threaten them to make them stop. They sometimes publicly shame offenders or involve their families to ensure that the harassment ends. If all non-violent strategies fail, they put their intensive training in self-defense to work (Pareek, 2015).

In a culture where families have been known to murder their own women in the name of honor, activists that empathize with the victims and train them in self-defense are revolutionary in nature. Such organizations teach women and young girls to defend themselves by imparting martial arts training. In most Indian communities any topic that is remotely sexual in nature is taboo. In such a repressive culture, *Red Brigade* urges victims of sexual assault to open up and take charge of their lives. The organization often puts victims of abuse in leadership roles (Pareek, 2015). Curbing street harassment is important because tolerating initial stages of harassment emboldens perpetrators to commit worse crimes. Even if it does not, the threat of potential assaults is damaging to women's health and mental well-being (Campbell et al., 2009). NGOs like the *Red Brigade* are curbing this behavior by bringing the perpetrators' patriarchal families into the picture and publicly shaming them. They also play an important role in promoting awareness around the issue of rape and sexual assault by highlighting the victims' plight in having to deal with the repercussions of such crimes.

Creating Supportive Groups of Subaltern Counterpublics

Another feature of Indian activist organizations that have been fighting against the culture of sexual assault and violence against women is that they are often composed of subaltern population that discursively and materially support one another. Similar to the *Red Brigade*, *Gulabi Gang6*, which was created by women who were victims of domestic violence, started as a local group of vigilantes and activists that offered a space for retaliation to crimes such as domestic abuse, child marriage, and dowry-based harassment - issues which the traditional Indian society tends to turn a blind eye to (Desai, 2014). This group of local activists strives to protect women from all sections of the society, and also teaches them self-defense. "Known for their stunning pink (gulabi) saris and refusal to shy away from physical confrontation, the Gulabi

Gang has become one of the most recognizable movements against gender violence and inequality in India" (Richards, 2016). *Dalit* (lower caste) women, who are at the very bottom of the totem pole in terms of hierarchy of power, are often doubly suppressed as they face abuse not only from men in their communities but also from people of higher castes. *Gulabi Gang* members have been known to watch out for *dalit* women's needs. They often march in groups to abusers' houses with sticks to put a stop to violent behavior towards these women.

Protecting their Constituents Against Superficial Inclusionary Tactics

Since discrepancies in power, wealth and social standing influence participation in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990), counterpublics are needed to oppose superficial inclusionary tactics that dominant publics use to appease the subaltern population. Scholars like Chávez (2015) note that dominant groups often try to pioneer intellectual work to uplift the marginalized, but they rarely understand the nature of the struggle of subaltern population. They may try to (benevolently) set up a foundation for the subjugated to construct their own identity, but this foundation often ends up reflecting the dominant groups' values, priority and structure.

The other crucial reason to oppose facile inclusionary tactics is that, when those in authority conduct emancipatory work, it becomes difficult for the oppressed and needy to criticize the handouts (Chávez, 2015). When the discourse around women's safety is viewed from this understanding of superficial inclusionary politics, we realize how supposedly well-meaning patriarchal elders the world over, who create rules meant for the "safety and protection of women", fail to focus on policies that will *truly* benefit women and instead restrict the mobility of these women (Harris, 2017). Dominant Indian groups consist of traditional men and women who continue to lay down the code for conduct by basing their ideas on traditional *sanskaari*[7] behavior that prioritizes the *izzat*[8] of the family. The emphasis in Indian community

continues to stay on what *women* should not do, should not wear, and where they should not go. Therefore, effective counterpublics are urgently needed to develop social movements independent from the framework handed down by Indian patriarchy. Those who truly believe in empowerment of women need to decline facile inclusionary tactics, and instead focus on demanding policies that will encourage women to break free from patriarchal boundaries.

Many NGOs in India have pioneered campaigns that decline inclusionary tactics proposed under the guise of concern for women. In their campaigns and representational materials, these NGOs turn the emphasis away from women and towards regressive patriarchal traditions. Media campaigns like *Dehk Le* are just one example. Created by *Whistling Woods* film school in the city of Mumbai in collaboration with *Hollaback!,* an anti-street harassment organization, *Dehk Le* is a video which shows men leering at women's bodies as they travel in public spaces. Leering is synonymous with ogling; it is not a simple look or a brief period of attention. It is a persistent, unashamed taking in of an object for one's personal sexual gratification. It reflects the subconscious conviction that women are objects for sexual pleasure (Neogy, 2015). *Dekh Le* shows women wearing different types of attires; a young woman wearing a pair of shorts is shown riding a scooter while men leer at her legs. Another woman is displayed sitting on a bus, wearing a *salwar kameez*, a conventional Hindu women's garb, resting her head on her friend's shoulder while three standing men fixedly gaze down her cleavage. Yet another woman is shown riding a train wearing a *hijab*, a traditional garment worn by many Islamic women in India. The women in the ad who notice the leering display signs of unease and distress, but that does not deter the men who continue to gawk. In the video, these men are shown mirrors that capture their leering expressions. As these men become aware of their facial expressions, they are shown in the video to acknowledge feelings of shock and

shame. Such representational material aims at enabling men to become aware of their subliminal tendencies of abuse and aggression; they push for accountability of abusers' actions.

Creating an Affective Investment in Women's Issues

NGO campaigns also work as affective tools to cultivate empathy for women in the dominant, patriarchal public sphere. As it is not realistic to expect affective changes to materialize overnight, a slow and persistent effort from those who occupy the enlightened tiers of the society is needed to move the affective alliance of people from mainstream patriarchy towards the recognition of women's rights. According to McCann (2017), affective investment is a process through which people invest time and effort to understand and improve the lives of others. This process allows for identification with those who suffer abuse. It is important for counterpublics to create an investment in women's rights as this would allow people entrenched in patriarchy to become more empathetic, thus laying the foundation for enduring change.

Breakthrough India is an organization that has been attempting to do that. Their campaigns encourage a reexamination of traditional views on survivors of assault, who are stigmatized and shunned by the dominant patriarchal society. Through their initiatives, *Breakthrough India* "hopes to change the perception of sexual violence and gender-based violence that is currently portrayed through the images used to represent survivors in the Indian media, which largely show women looking helpless, ashamed, or both" (Plummer, 2017).

Through their partnership with ad agency *Ogilvy & Mather*, *Breakthrough India* has created many social awareness advertisements. One of their ads, titled '*Popcorn*', shows a young boy teasing girls in his neighborhood by throwing things at them as they walk by under his balcony (Neogy, 2015). The boy's mother, who walks out to the balcony to dry laundry on a clothes line, notices his actions and casually intervenes. She is shown in the video to continue to

do her chores while narrating her personal experiences with eve teasing. She tells her son how a group of men harass her by throwing popcorn at her every day during her walk to work. She ends her little chat by expressing resignation: "how many men can I explain their transgressions to?" (translated from Hindi). Her son, who is shown in the ad to be listening intently, looks shocked to hear that his own mother had been at the receiving end of sexual harassment. Such campaigns initiate an affective investment in women's issues. They make people aware of the abuse women face at the hands of patriarchal societies. They make the perpetrators of sexual harassment aware of the fact that, since they are the ones who carry out the harassment, *they* are the ones who can put an end to it. It helps them realize that the women they abuse are daughters, sisters or mothers from other families who deserve respect. Such thoughts engage those with abusive mentality to look at reality from the victims' point of view. They have the potential to initiate a new, non-abusive line of thinking, one which, hopefully, with some repetition, will stick into the community's collective conscious, and bring about long lasting change in the way the society views women.

Another interesting organizational campaign has taken the form of a comic book. The creators of *Priya's Shakti* have used storytelling as a mode of communication to be able to reach children in an attempt to start changing mindsets from a young age. In their comic book, Priya, the protagonist, who was raped and ostracized by her family, becomes a dynamic hero who helps women by fighting social injustice. "The storylines in which Priya features are an attempt to defy India's overarching misogynistic and patriarchal views and help redefine attitudes and beliefs toward sexual violence against women" (Plummer, 2017). In one of its editions, the creators of this comic use stories of real-life survivors of acid attacks. Superhero Priya teams up with these survivors, who have faced immense trauma and humiliation in their lives, to defeat evil villains,

consequently offering to young minds a different image of heroes. The organization producing *Priya's Shakti* have made their content available online for free and are currently distributing the comic books to children in Indian schools. These efforts have initiated the slow, tedious process of changing people's outlook towards women.

Addressing Toxic Masculinity

Patriarchy is known to simultaneously protect and abuse women. For this to materialize, patriarchal societies portray women as dependent on men. In *Strange Encounters,* Ahmed (2000) explains how the proximity of the 'Other' helps people to define themselves. When the 'Other'- a category which could mean people who are foreign and different from the dominant majority residing in a place - come close to the dominant majority, that majority defines itself as separate from the foreign bodies using the very presence and proximity of these foreigners. Therefore, dominant groups are able to say 'we are who we are because we are *not* who *they* are'. Similarly, the presence of the minority, marginalized bodies allows the majority to develop an identity for itself through the process of distinguishing itself from the minority. It is valuable to look at the issues Indian women are facing from this point of view because it is clear that Indian masculine culture depends heavily on the supposed helplessness of femininity to define itself as macho and protective as well as abusive and controlling.

However, the past several decades have witnessed an upward trend in Indian women's power and financial independence. Several sections of the Indian patriarchal society blame globalization and the subsequent "Western influence" for spoiling *sanskaari* women, who use their newfound financial freedom to resist regressive traditions. There are tropes used in Indian society for such women; 'modern', 'westernized', 'characterless' are a few of them (Mahajan & Randhawa, 2017). Independent Indian women are stereotyped as caring about their careers and

their self-actualization over the well-being of their families. Such tropes circulate anxiety in the patriarchal community. Traditional men fear that they are losing control over their women, and this fear has been displaying itself in the form of violent assaults in public spaces (Simon-Kumar, 2014).

Through their activism as counterpublics that focus on molding affective tendencies of their community, NGOs are also helping to mitigate anxiety that the Indian masculinity has been undergoing because of their perception of loss of control over their women. Organizations like *Men Against Violence and Abuse* (*MAVA*) in India are trying to address and assuage this feeling of anxiety. *MAVA's* programs provide counseling to both men and women, which enable men to become more sensitive to women's issues. Their website is adorned with a list of exemplary men from Indian history who have advocated for women's rights and education, and who lead the fight against barbaric religious practices such as *sati* and child marriage. Another, similar initiative is being led by Bollywood star and activist Farhan Akhtar. Akhtar's movement - *MARD* - is an acronym for *Men Against Rape and Discrimination* (Sarkar, 2013); his rallies urge men to be a *MARD* (which also means macho), by promoting women's rights, thereby encouraging men to become a part of the struggle. When social movements such as *MAVA* or *MARD* are initiated by men and conducted with the support and direction of female activists, they have a high potential in making a dent in the patriarchal male armor and increasing the chances of converting men into allies for women.

Conclusion

The initiatives and campaigns conducted by NGOs and activists that have been analyzed above are urgently and assertively challenging people in the dominant Indian society to view women's rights in a more progressive manner. They are resisting deep-rooted gender dynamics

that have been at play for eons to empower women while also enabling Indian patriarchal society to acknowledge and let go of its toxic masculinity. By insisting that people need to spend more time to introspect *their* own internal insecurities, these campaigns are trying to put a stop to the rhetoric of victim blaming. The representational material and counter-rhetoric that these movements use assign the responsibility for atrocious sexual assaults that occur on female bodies to toxic masculine attitudes.

In India, a country where the patriarchal culture is infamous for abusing women, and where the political leaders of the nation are embroiled in crimes and scandals, strong, independent activism that is free from the governmental yoke is indispensable. India's deep-rooted and age-old traditional inclination to view women as occupying a lower position in social hierarchy highlights Indian women's need for robust counterpublics. Since Indian patriarchal community's circulation of affective tropes on women has a long history, there is a crucial need for consistent implementation of affective strategies to counter the influence of the abusive rhetoric these tropes have created.

This paper demonstrates that NGOs, as counterpublics, attempt to realign the affective economy of hatred and anxiety that is prevalent in the Indian public with regard to women. Through the use of awareness campaigns, local Indian NGOs and activists force the patriarchal society to look at issues from women's points of view and apply pressure on the collective affect to make it reorient itself with regard to women's rights and issues such as rape, assault and harassment. Just as Fraser (1990) insists on a modification of Habermas's vision of the public sphere to include marginal voices, so too NGO activism encourages women to abandon the pressure of maintaining patriarchal traditions and instead asks them to demand for their rights as equal members of the society. They inspire women to talk about private matters in the public

sphere to make people aware of the grave injustice and abuse they undergo on a daily basis. Thus, these groups have started the arduous process of changing communal attitude towards women to build enduring change that will benefit the whole society in the future. By applying their knowledge on women's rights to create awareness campaigns, NGOs urge the dominant patriarchal Indian community to question their conservative predisposition towards women. By learning more about successful strategies on affective alignment, the government and other organizations could benefit from replicating their methods to hasten the pace of social change. Continuing to investigate these techniques, therefore, has strong practical implications to improve the lived realities of women in patriarchal societies.

Emotions play a crucial role in determining how people interact with each other. Propagating tropes that portray women to be secondary in status rallies affect to allow misogynistic cultures to continue to subjugating and oppressing them. Activism that disrupts such damaging affect makes room for progressive, enlightened thought processes and attitude formation. Such a process has the capacity to improve the condition of the marginalized population who are often negatively stereotyped in patriarchal societies. This allows them to be viewed as people who are more than what traditionally circulated affect portrays them to be. It offers victims, and those who oppose the conservative public sphere, an opportunity to make their voices heard and participate in civic engagement.

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Notes

1. As is true of other countries where misogyny is prevalent, political leaders in India too
   have not done enough to address the Indian public's misogynistic outlook. In fact, they
   often fuel this derogatory attitude towards women by publicly criticizing victims for
   "sending the wrong signals" (Simon-Kumar, 2014). In 2013, leading political party
   member, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) politician, Mr. Mohan Bhagwat said in
   reference to rape and sexual assault, "such incidents happen due to the influence of
   western culture". Another politician from the currently ruling *Bharatiya Janata Party*
   (BJP) said that "the rate of crimes against women depended on the how completely
   dressed they are and how regularly they visited temples" (Neelakantan, 2016). The above
   mentioned quotes reflect the patriarchal mindset of most traditional Indians.

2. This is in reference to the custom of *sati*, which India is infamous for. In the past, the
   death of Hindu women's husbands translated into their own demise. The idea of *sati*
   originated in ancient Hindu texts; the custom expects widows to end their lives following
   the death of their husbands by entering/jumping into their husbands' funeral pyre while

they are being cremated. Performing *sati* was encouraged by families to maintain the honor of the family. While this horrific practice has now been banned for several years, one hears rare instances of it being followed in remote parts of the country even today.

3. Indian religious texts such as the *Manusmriti* and *Ramayana* have defined women in terms of their relationships with men (Kalkat, 2017). Women's destiny is thus tied to the men in their lives. After their birth, Indian girls are considered to be the property of their fathers initially, then their husbands, and lastly, their sons.

4. The caste system in India refers to a social stratification system that originates from ancient Hindu religious texts. This system enforced a four layer hierarchy upon the society that had implications on occupation, sociocultural and financial status, ability for religious interaction, marriage, etc. The most prestigious position is offered to the '*brahmins*', or the scholarly class who consisted of priests. The second level is occupied by the '*kshatriyas*', or the ruling class that consisted of kings, queens and noblemen. Next on the hierarchy come the artisans and businessmen, the '*vaishyas*'. The last category consists of the '*shudras*'; this category consists of people who performed jobs such as cleaning, disposing of animal cadavers, maintaining toilets, etc. Although this stratification of occupation based on castes has been outlawed, it is very much prevalent in India and continues to affect people's ability to gain access to education and occupation. People in India continue to measurement and judge each other based on the strata of caste they occupy; the society uses tropes that have been entrenched in the culture to circulate hate and animosity against those who are lower on the caste totem pole.

5. Indian society is full of paradoxes and opposing, dual opinions with regards to women. For millennia, the culture has simultaneously worshipped and abused women. On the one hand, it fetishizes women for being virtuous and "pure" and worships them for being goddesses; on the other hand, it strips them off of their rights. To meet Indian patriarchal standards, women are encouraged to behave like a goddess and deny themselves from fulfilling basic human needs. When this "ideal" scenario does not play out in reality, the sentiment of hate towards women enters the scene.

6. Pink Gang

7. *Sanskaari* behavior loosely translates to "cultured behavior". This term is used to describe behavior that adheres to traditional Hindu cultural standards which emphasizes on paying respects to elders and men of the family.

8. Honor