



Fighting for Women in India

Even with as many as 100,000 rape cases pending in India's courts, the recent rape and subsequent death of a 23-year-old woman in New Delhi somehow managed to shock the conscience of this South Asian nation. Massive street demonstrations ensued. Commissions were established. And new laws were passed to deter violent crimes against women.

Rutuparna Mohanty is an Indian attorney and human rights activist who represents abused women and their families. She is also the founder of a shelter in her home state of Odisha for rehabilitating sexually exploited women and girls; it's called Maa Ghara (Hindi for Mother's Home). In September, as a guest of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace & Justice in San Diego, Mohanty spoke with *California Lawyer* editor Martin Lasden. Here are edited excerpts from that videotaped discussion.



Rutuparna Mohanty

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Q. Before the trial of the four men accused of brutally raping that young woman on a New Delhi bus last year, the lawyer who represented three of the defendants told a reporter that no respectable woman in India is ever raped. He said, "I have not seen a single incident or example of rape with a respected lady." Would you say that sort of thinking—if you can call it thinking—is still prevalent in India today?

Yes. Because of culture, because of social stigma, the rape victim is repeatedly victimized by the society and by her family. There is no support system at all. When I accompany a victim to the doctor, the nurse also looks at her as if she has done something wrong. The police also behave like that. Even if a woman is from a respectable family, if she is raped people will look at her in a different way.

But it's not as if women haven't obtained positions of great power and influence in your country, starting with Indira Gandhi, who won four elections and ruled India for something like 15 years. Yet according to one 2011 survey, India is the fourth most

dangerous country in the world for women—slightly better than Afghanistan and the Congo, but actually worse than Somalia. How do you explain that incongruity?

Indira Gandhi was not prime minister because she was a woman. She became prime minister because she was from the Nehru family. You see, promoting leadership from the grassroots level is one thing. And promoting the leader's child as leader is a different thing.

Do you fault the women who've obtained power, whether in the courts or in politics, for not working harder to make the lives of ordinary women better?

I think so. Of course, India is a big country with 1.27 billion people in it. And it's a country that's made up of different languages and different cultures. So bringing everyone together is very difficult.

But of course everyone can vote in India, and in many regions of the country women vote in as high or even higher numbers than men. So are they voting against their interests?

No, not against their interests. What's

happening is that political people are buying votes. They are giving bribes. You see, everywhere in my country there's corruption. And that creates a certain mindset. You say to yourself, I'll compromise with the system. And that is how human character is shaped.

Plus, you have to remember more than half of the women in India are still illiterate. I have visited many rural villages. Thousands of women come to hear me speak and I ask them directly: "Do you know what legal protections you have? Do you know what government programs and projects exist to help you?" Only three or four women will get up and mention a couple things.

I understand that as a child you aspired to be a Bollywood star. Is that true?

In my childhood, I was in a dream

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