

My time at HUMSAFAR has revealed a great deal about grass roots social activism and how people go about trying to create change. Gender inequality is deep rooted in India, from social expectations to the shocking percentage of women facing violence or abuse in their marriages, this problem permeates every caste, class and religion in India.

This internship has highlighted to me the great challenge organizations such as HUMSAFAR face in attempting to change these attitudes. My examination of case studies and case histories has illuminated how religion and social attitudes, such as caste, play a huge role in women's position in Indian society. Despite legislation, dowries and child marriage are rife and often leave women in a vulnerable position. It was also extremely striking that many women were totally unaware of their own rights, basic laws put in place for their protection remain a mystery to many women in need. Indeed perhaps more disturbing is the negligence of many police officers, often unwilling to help or provide advice. HUMSAFAR is integral in providing support to these women in a system that is distinctly unwelcoming and often unsympathetic to the suffering of women.

Confronting these attitudes therefore requires far reaching and innovative ideas. HUMSAFARs work at schools and colleges helps to confront the problem of gender discrimination among young people. This reveals the importance of education. The importance of spreading a message, confronting accepted social values, deeply ingrained religious and social caste attitudes that compound the problem. For example during a school visit we discussed the difference between "gender" and "sex". The idea of the ideal feminine qualities is so ingrained in societies round the world that at first it seems like a radical message to suggest that everything we attribute to being "feminine" is fabricated and helps sustain gender difference and inequalities. For example, when we showed an image of a figure, neither obviously male or female washing plates, a majority of the girls answered this was a girl figure. This quick presumption is a clear demonstration of how Indian society is split between what is considered behaviour suitable for girls and behaviour for boys. HUMSAFAR wishes to challenges these presumptions, why should the figure washing be a girl, why should the figure sitting at a computer be a boy?

The community visit revealed to me the importance of reaching out to vulnerable women, when we arrived in the DUDA (government housing) the women came eager to meet us. These women really look to HUMSAFAR for support. The idea that someone is willing to listen and help is extremely powerful, it is important that if a woman is facing gender discrimination, she knows she is not alone. Another community visit to a poor slum again highlighted to me the difficulty HUMSAFAR face even persuading some women of their cause, during a discussion many of the women expressed the opinion that they were unable to pass on HUMSAFARs message to their children, often due to bad treatment by their husbands. HUMSAFAR suggests that women should try to treat her sons and daughters equal, therefore the sons will grow up to respect women, and their daughters will grow up to respect themselves. However to many of the women of this community this was an impossible task. This shows the importance of persistence, support and encouragement, that gender inequality is not a necessary evil one must endure.

Indeed HUMSAFAR offers total flexibility to those in need, counselling both parties (often the husbands family or the natal family and the survivors) as much as they deem necessary. This mediation is extremely important in reaching compromises. For many Indian women who face violence or abuse do not necessarily want to leave or divorce their husbands. Family and marriage are both such strong bonds in India that often women wish for HUMSAFAR to find a solution without resorting to legal action. This is often far from straightforward.

Coming from Britain to intern at HUMSAFAR is a fairly overwhelming experience, especially if you have never visited India before, as I had not. Be prepared for total immersion in Indian culture, Lucknow is not a touristy place and people are fairly amazed to see somebody different physically and culturally. Indeed to make the most of your time at HUMSAFAR it would be incredibly useful to know some basic Hindi, if you wish to be able to speak with any of the survivors yourself it is almost vital. However you can still learn a huge amount about the running of the NGO and how HUMSAFAR operates without any knowledge of the Hindi language. Staying local family was an incredible experience and I have never experienced such hospitality and generosity.

