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## **Taking Action: The Desiring Subjects of Neoliberal Feminism in India**

By Hemangini Gupta<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper reflects on an emergent brand of feminist activism in India that responds to everyday sexual violence against women in public. I focus specifically on the efforts of middle class women who organize through online media to conduct interventions in urban Indian public spaces. I review these recent feminist interventions and locate them within a historical review of the women's movement in India to suggest that contemporary feminist organizing embodies and reflects India's turn to neoliberalism in the 1990s. While neoliberal reforms have been analyzed within the terms of political economy, this paper extends existing research to consider how neoliberal subjectivities shape a new feminism. The contemporary feminist interventions under review draw from individual testimonials to form the basis for activism, affirm the agency of participants to transform their urban environments, and foreground desire and consumption as central gendered rights. In sum, this feminism shifts its attention from legal redress and state intervention to cultivate entrepreneurial activists who adopt responsibility for their experiences of urban space as agentic actors.

*Keywords:* Neoliberalism, Feminist Activism, India

### **Taking Action: The Desiring Subjects of Neoliberal Feminism in India**

In December 2012, a 23-year-old student, Jyoti Singh Pandey, and her male friend were on their way home from watching a movie in India's capital city New Delhi, when they both were brutally attacked on the bus they were riding. Pandey was gang-raped and later died from injuries sustained during it, and her companion was severely beaten. This incident caused widespread national protests, and focused media attention on public sexual violence in India. Thousands of protestors in different parts of the country expressed their anger over the lack of safety for women in public spaces and their disapproval over state apathy in handling cases of violence against women (Burke, 2012). International media sustained coverage of the incident and represented Pandey as "professionally successful and consumer-oriented," symbolizing new India "in a way that fits easily into a growing consumer-oriented, neoliberal economy" (Roychowdhury, 2013).

Feminist commentators have marked the stark contrast between the widespread public mourning at Jyoti Singh Pandey's death with another recent death—the passing, in 2015, of Suzette Jordan three years after she was raped (Agnes, 2015). Jordan was also a middle class woman who was gang-raped following an evening of leisure after she left a pub in Kolkata's Park Street. Feminist lawyer Flavia Agnes remarks on the difference between public reception of the two women's cases: Jyoti Singh was christened "Nirbhaya" ("Fearless") by media and created as

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an “icon,” India’s rape laws were reframed following her death, government schemes were instituted, marches taken out, and public vigils held (Agnes, 2015). Suzette Jordan, on the other hand, had her soiled panties held up on a stick at her trial, and faced a series of humiliations while fighting her legal battle (Roy, 2015). Flavia Agnes analyzes the divergent responses to these two incidents, suggesting, “We hate those who survive to tell their tales of their violations<sup>2</sup>” (2015). The figure of the middle class woman circulating around the city in the context of leisure (as both women were) is a contentious one, easily blamed for violence inflicted upon her, brutalized for protesting it<sup>3</sup> and shamed for not conforming to public expectations of propriety for middle class women in India.

This paper analyzes recent feminist interventions in India that center the figure of the middle class woman, her desires, practices, and aspirations, as the subject of their feminism. Jyoti Singh and Suzette Jordan represent gendered consumption—and its consequences—amongst India’s middle class<sup>4</sup>. The body of the middle class woman that symbolized Indian tradition during the nationalist struggle now represents the consumer-citizen guiding economic transformations initiated in the 1990s (Lukose, 2009). In this vein, Pandey’s representation in media is of a “new kind of ‘Third World woman’” whose demands for physical and sexual rights are tied to the yoke of capitalist development as an agentive middle class actor (Roychowdhury, 2015, p. 285). Krupa Shandilya’s analysis of the media representations in the New Delhi rape case points to the construction of Pandey as “everywoman,” the normative Hindu, middle class, upper-caste woman as the de facto subject of Indian feminism (Shandilya, 2015).

India’s economic reforms in the 1990s included a rapid opening up of international trade, the loosening of bureaucratic regulations and a growth in private businesses creating consumption-led growth dominated by emerging middle classes (Menon & Nigam, 2007). They were also undertaken in the spirit of neoliberalism and it is the connection between the spirit of neoliberalism and an emergent feminism that is the subject of this paper. As an economic and political project, neoliberalism is understood widely as:

... a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade (Harvey, 2007, p. 2).

Not only is entrepreneurialism a market-related ethic—*individuals* are exhorted to take responsibility for themselves and to produce themselves as entrepreneurial citizens, exhibiting initiative to cope with precarious times. Nandini Gooptu suggests that the ideal neoliberal “enterprising self” is “... one who is optimistic, creative, takes initiatives, embraces opportunities, and seeks autonomy and self-fulfillment” (2009, p. 45).

This article extends contemporary understandings of neoliberal ideologies to understand how their desires and practices frame an emergent type of activism. I draw from three feminist groups and initiatives in India’s post-Liberalization period of the 1990s to relate the confluence of India’s entry into neoliberal market privatization with resultant consumer citizenship practices, and their role in shaping contemporary middle class feminism in India. The sentiments and desires

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<sup>2</sup> Since this article was written some of the men named in Jordan’s case have been convicted in a Kolkata court.

<sup>3</sup> The film “India’s Daughter” by Leslee Udwin features an interview with one of the men convicted of raping Jyothi Singh, the physiotherapy student. He claims that her resistance to the rape enraged the attackers further (Roy, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> See Baviskar & Ray (2011) for an understanding of the broad demographics of the middle class in India.

that are expressed and embodied by members of neoliberal India's "consumer-oriented new middle class" (Baviskar & Ray, 2011) shape and define recent feminist activism.

As a final introductory note I should emphasize that neoliberal feminism—via its well-known manifesto, Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) *Lean In*—has been widely cautioned for its emphasis on the power and ability of the individual to effect positive transformations at the expense of a wider, structural critique of neoliberalism (Fraser 2013; Huffer 2013; Rottenberg, 2014). In this paper however, my emphasis is on understanding *how* it is that contemporary middle class activism emerges from a wider landscape of neoliberalism to articulate its strategies and efforts. Focusing on middle class women allows me to train an analytical lens on the confluence of market reforms, forms of consumption and public leisure, and an emergent brand of media-driven activism—it is not to suggest that middle class women experience more violence than others.

### Methods and Outline

The rape cases with which I began this piece represent some examples of the multiple forms of public violence faced by middle class women in India who navigate public spaces for leisure. These range from the demeaning everyday practice of street sexual harassment known colloquially as "eve teasing," and addressed in the Indian Penal Code as actions "violating the modesty of a woman," to other forms of street harassment that have led to death<sup>5</sup>. The width and range of public attacks against women in India has been recognized by the state, following the protests against the December Delhi rape case, through an amendment to the criminal law that calibrates its punishment for these atrocities (Baxi, 2014).

India's notoriously politically apathetic middle classes (Mazzarella, 2005, p. 4) have come out on to city streets to protest sexual violence against middle class women. Their activism results not as much from a desire to seek recourse to the law (Kapur 2012, p. 334) but via an affirmation of what Ritty Lukose (2009) might term "consumer citizenship:" a broad anthropological understanding of citizenship that explores "how the changing practices and discourses of consumption, generated by globalization, are reconfiguring the dynamics of public life in India" (p. 9).

This paper outlines three recent middle class initiatives in India to reclaim public space, primarily drawing from a journalistic assessment of the first, the Pink Chaddi ("panty") Campaign, my own participation in the second, Blank Noise, and my notes from an ethnographic encounter with the third, The Friday Convent<sup>6</sup>," during a 15-month period of fieldwork examining public culture, class, and gender in India from 2012–2013. The Friday Convent group is a network of professional and entrepreneurial women who invited me to join their meetings and social events as an ethnographer. I write here about a public action that I attended in 2013.

I term the street actions that I witnessed—and participated in—as examples of contemporary feminist activism even though not all participants explicitly identify as feminist or activist. This is because the interventions that I describe here explicitly intervene within prevalent forms of public culture to challenge entrenched patriarchal ideas of middle class women's

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<sup>5</sup> In October 2011 two young men in Mumbai were stabbed to death after they protested the molestation of their female friends (Sahni, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The group offered Suzette Jordan financial resources following her rape and accompanied this with a care package including cosmetics, clothes, and shoes gifted by members to affirm Jordan's right to live as she pleased, irrespective of the shaming discourses that blamed her lifestyle for the violence she faced.

“appropriate” public conduct and decorum. Comprehensive studies of contemporary feminist activist movements are available in detail elsewhere (Roy, 2013; Loomba & Lukose, 2012).

Here I focus on these interventions as *representative* of a particular neoliberal moment of feminism in India. I begin by tracing a brief history of the women’s movement against sexual violence in India through a period in which it was an autonomous women’s movement and later largely supported by NGOs. The current fragmented landscape of individuals connecting on social media, through hashtags and via blogs is what I call “neoliberal feminism” and it has been produced—and deeply shaped by—contemporary forms of marketization that link rights to consumption with feminist freedom<sup>7</sup>.

### **Tracing the Changing Contours of the Indian Women’s Movement**

Accounts of the women’s movement in India often present a narrative of “waves”: a popular framework, even in the US, despite its critics (see Kapur 2012, Weeks, 2011). Some historians of Indian feminism offer three waves: a first wave which corresponded to the mass mobilization of women during the nationalist struggle; a second wave in the 1960s, which involved women in popular protests and the formation of autonomous women’s groups; and a third wave dominated by city-based Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) around issues of rape, dowry and domestic violence (Gandhi N. & Shah N., 1999).

The first wave—corresponding with the late colonial period of the late 1800s—included moves to reform practices such as *sati* (the practice of widow burning) and child marriage. Yet despite the revolutionary fervor of the times, colonial proposals such as those attempting to legislate the age of marriage were viewed as efforts to “undermine native authority in the ‘private’ arena” (Kapur, 2012, p. 334). Rather than emerge as a force for radical change, several all-India women’s organizations advocated for ‘women’s upliftment,’ arguing for women’s distinctive roles as self-sacrificing mothers and dutiful wives to make a valuable contribution to the public sphere (Kapur, 2012, p. 335). Organized groups of women began to work collectively against male supremacy at the beginning of the 20th century, by systematically linking patriarchal practices and making the case for a broad-based feminism.

There was a lull in the women’s movement following India’s independence from British rule in 1947 as the newly-formed state launched developmental projects including women’s commissions and proposed to induct feminists into the government (Kumar, 1999, p. 343). Gradually, however, the economic policies adopted by the ruling classes appeared less committed to women’s progress, leading to a revival in the Indian Women’s Movement (hence IWM) movement in the 1960s (Menon, 1999, p. 18). By the early 1970s, the Left movement splintered to yield independent feminist groups, drawing members from the urban educated middle classes (Kumar, 1999, p. 347).

The first campaigns of the “third wave”—often considered the contemporary IWM—were directed against rape and dowry. They included one protest of some 2000 people in Hyderabad and another one of over 22,000 people over the rape of a working class woman by policemen in 1978 (Kumar, 1999, p. 352). Similar isolated movements against rape and dowry-related violence were organized in a dispersed manner until the case now known as the “Mathura Rape Case” drew national attention to women’s issues and united different arms of the women’s movement. Police had raped a teenage lower-caste woman, Mathura, in a police station (Dave, 2013, p. 102). Under much pressure from her family and villagers a case was finally registered against the policemen

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<sup>7</sup> Since I wrote this article, two of the groups have formally registered themselves as organizations.

involved. When the case was pushed up to the Supreme Court, the policemen were acquitted in a verdict that drew on the stated claim that a young woman, who had a boyfriend, would be “habituated to sex” (Murthy, 2013).

The Mathura judgment resulted in a widespread movement pushing for judicial reform, and uniting various hitherto disparate strands of the IWM (Dave, 2013). Networks of feminists coordinated national actions, urging for the case to be re-opened (Kumar, 1999, p. 353). Activists pushed for the burden of proof to shift from the prosecution to the accused, and advocated that during a rape trial the sexual history of a woman should not be used as evidence (Phadke, 2003, p. 4568).

Legal theorists Ratna Kapur and Brenda Cossman suggest that the demand for legal rights has been a cornerstone of the women’s movement in India (Kapur & Cossman, 1996, p. 19). While many of these campaigns were successful in galvanizing the state to enact new legislation or reframe its assumptions, laws have also fallen continually short of the demands from women’s movements. The legal process incorporates critiques of the law even while maintaining its biases, and the connections between legal demands and the actual implementation of laws also begin to appear dubious (Kumar, 1999, p. 356).

Most recently, the incident now referred to as the “Delhi Rape Case” caused widespread outrage and protests across India. Several thousand protestors gathered in New Delhi over a period of ten days chanting slogans and demanding greater accountability on the part of the government. The state government responded to the sexual violence in the form of compensation to the young woman’s family and a special fund for the protection of women—but what attracted the most public debate was proposed legal reform. When passed it introduced, *inter alia*, an expanded understanding of what constitutes legally recognizable rape (Bhattacharyya, 2013).

To summarize, feminists across the political spectrum have frequently sought recourse to the law as an authoritative—not the only—discourse (Gangoli, 2007, p. 8; Kapur, 2012, p. 334). The IWM has privileged the law as an integral, even subversive, site for reform (Kapur & Cossman, 1996; Menon, 1999).

### **Contemporary Feminist Interventions**

In the last decade new forms of feminist activism in India have emerged around the desires of middle class women to occupy public spaces safely, without harassment and the threat of violence. As middle class women increasingly commute in the city to access professional workspaces and for leisure, their experiences of urban spaces forms the basis of their activism articulated as “rights to the city” (Phadke, 2013) While earlier waves of the IWM focused on addressing patriarchal practices through the law or via appeals to the state, contemporary feminists emphasize their own rights and desires as entry points to their activism.

New feminisms have emerged in and around public spaces using art, media, and performance to mobilize women, producing a highly visible and sometimes sexualized feminist public. Middle class women in the initiatives that I will describe experience their first involvement in any kind of feminist organizing not via traditional engagements with the IWM—rallies, sit-ins, petitions—but through fragmented and spectacular forms of public intervention. A crowd of women appear and disappear on zebra crossings, pink panties are sent to a right-wing conservative group that has demanded that women stay out of pubs, and women “loiter” in public spaces affirming their rights to the city.

As an economic rationale, the contemporary moment of neoliberalism is believed to subsume all aspects of contemporary existence: “not only is the human being configured exhaustively as *homo economicus*, all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality” (Brown, 2003). Thus while contemporary accounts of India’s turn to market privatization have focused on the neoliberalization of urban planning (Coelho et. al., 2013), political engagement (Gooptu, 2012) and new forms of middle class consumption and self-making (Srivastava, 2009), feminist activism too emerges within a moment of neoliberal initiative and self-making.

Neoliberal activism offer the feminist as a central player who “accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care” (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 420). Activist interventions emerge from middle class women’s own experiences and desires, rooted in what Lata Mani explains as the imagination of freedom as a personal right to navigate the city without constraints and constrictions (Mani, 2014). The next sections detail some of these new feminist interventions, tracing a period from 2005 to 2015.

### **The Pink Chaddi (Panty) Campaign**

In February 2009, TV screens across India began streaming video footage from a pub called Amnesia in Mangalore where a group of young women had been celebrating a friend’s birthday over lunch. Right-wing activists unexpectedly rushed into the pub to assault the women—protesting their “Western” clothes of jeans and T-shirts and their presence in mixed-gender company (IANS 2009).

The video footage showed the women screaming and crying as they were dragged out of the pub by their hair and clothes. The attackers claimed membership with a right-wing local political organization named the *Sri Rama Sene*, or “Army of Lord Rama<sup>8</sup>”. They stated that they were offended by the presence of young Hindu women in the Western attire of jeans and T-shirts at a pub interacting with men whom they were not related to.

In response, a young journalist in New Delhi formed a whimsical Facebook group to reclaim and affirm the practices being criticized by the political activists. “The Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose, and Forward Women” was launched online and in days gathered thousands of online members. The group coordinated nationally to send a collection of pink panties (colloquially “chaddis,” hence the group’s name) to the *Sri Rama Sene* headquarters, unapologetically embracing feminized consumption and desire (Susan, 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> Rama: A major Hindu god.



Figure 1: Pink Chaddi Campaign by Tactical Technology Collective<sup>9</sup>.

The symbolism of a *chaddi* is manifold. The panty is a feisty sign of irreverence: the symbolism of a pink panty further reclaims and celebrates the consumption-oriented desire of women who frequent pubs. Secondly, the word *chaddi* is used more broadly to describe a *type* of political person: the conservatives of India’s primary right-wing organization on whose principles many smaller groups base their actions. Delivering pink *chaddis* to them simultaneously referenced the right wing as intended addressees of the campaign; articulated feminist freedom as sexualized consumption; and challenged right-wing expectations of appropriate behavior for Indian women with the visible reminder—through pink panties—that Indian women were embedded within global circuits of consumerism.

In a few days, the group had over 50,000 members and several chapters in Indian cities where collection points were set up for panty collection. Media reported widely on the campaign and ultimately some 2,500 panties were posted out to the *Sene* office. The campaign was defiantly sexualized—an “intimate politics” offering democratic citizenship as a lifestyle, rather than one restricted to the domain of the “public” and therefore functioning in an impersonal manner (Jenkins, 2006, p. 244).

The use of pink addressed the imagined feminist subject of emancipatory consumption: an association of freedom with the unfettered mobility of a desiring self, able to choose “his or her own path, partner, and forms of consumption” that feminists have recently cautioned against (Mani, 2014, p. 27). A later campaign was the “Pub Bharo” campaign, spearheaded by the daughter of the then Minister of the Department for Women’s and Child Development, Renuka Chaudhury. Literally meaning, “Fill the Pubs,” this campaign was enacted on Valentine’s Day 2009, and consisted of young people visiting pubs and being photographed and recorded by media news.

Despite its self-representation as located within a historical women’s movement (Susan, 2009), the campaign embodied a particular contemporary urban sensibility and style that differed markedly from the larger IWM. Its color, tone, irreverence and messaging all speak to a new

<sup>9</sup> Printed here with permission from a Creative Commons License.



generation of urban activists, building alliances based on similar lifestyles, values, and outlook—hence the “Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women,” a name that centers the practices and desires of its members rather than their cause. In summary, the rights to consumption and lifestyle—as key pieces of a neoliberal project—are centered here to constitute a form of consumer citizenship.

### **Blank Noise: You Never Ask For It**

The Pink Chaddi campaign attracted considerable media and popular attention, but it was not the first feminist action to emphasize the rights to circulate around the city and consume pleurably without fear of violence or retribution. Some years before the Pink Chaddi campaign was conceived, a volunteer public collective called Blank Noise<sup>10</sup> was formed to address street sexual harassment in India. Early campaigns drew from the individual experiences and testimonials of volunteers to articulate gendered and classed desires to be seen and not touched, and to circulate around the city during day and night without danger. It is the emphasis on inviting individual reflection on women’s experiences of the city and their dreams for its future that I am reading as an example of how neoliberal agency is asserted and articulated.

I joined my first Blank Noise intervention while covering it as a journalist, on a windy evening in 2005. A solemn line of ten men and women arranged themselves across a pedestrian signal on a crowded street in Bangalore, India. Red reflective tape formed English alphabets across their chests. When the traffic signal turned red we assembled on the zebra crossing staring back silently at waiting commuters. Together the letters on our chests spelt a question for onlookers to ponder: “Y R U LOOKING AT ME?” The signal turned green in some minutes and we dispersed, mingling with crowds on the sidewalk to disperse pamphlets about street sexual harassment and reminding people it was an offence punishable by Indian Penal Code.



*Figure II: “Why Are You Looking at Me?” by Jasmeen Patheja, 2005<sup>11</sup>.*

<sup>10</sup> As I mentioned earlier, it has registered as an organization since the writing of this article.

<sup>11</sup> Printed with the permission of the photographer, Jasmeen Patheja.

Jasmeen Patheja, then a design student, formed the group in 2002. She had recently moved cities to begin college and was encountering public spaces without the routine sheltering (private transport, strict schedules and chaperoning through public spaces) that many middle and upper class families in India afford their daughters. Patheja was struck by both the routine nature of street sexual harassment, evident when she took public transport, and by her classmates who regarded harassment as an *expected* public experience. Blank Noise emerged from a series of public “interventions<sup>12</sup>” performed by volunteers on city streets. Participants are called “Action Heroes” and are invited to:

Give us your strategies. Your interventions. The time when you subverted a situation, flipped it on its head and gave the perpetrator no chance but to stop what he was doing. Give us your success story. Tell us which action hero you are (Blank Noise, 2007).

The emphasis on the successes and heroism of participants lends the campaign an individualist bent that resonates with neoliberalism’s emphasis on cultivating entrepreneurial selves who take responsibility for themselves. Individual stories form an archive from which the activism draws to curate “public interventions” using different media—sounds, video, digital platforms (Blank Noise, 2007). In one called “role playing,” for instance, volunteers imagine what they would wear on a street in a utopian world without street sexual harassment. The photograph below is of one of the interventions that I participated in and in which I chose to wear a shimmer two-layer top, revealing skin on either side. Volunteers fan out to occupy spaces usually filled with loitering males; as the intervention progresses, an entire sidewalk that might have been filled with men lingering by the railings is now filled with women dressed provocatively in party wear, or elaborate saris, draping themselves casually against walls and railings. There is no speech or performance; women stare back at passersby, making eye contact and refusing to break their stare.

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<sup>12</sup> These are strategic actions that are either curated or that evolve spontaneously but are organized around an aspect of gendered everyday public life.



Figure III: “Role-Playing” by Blank Noise<sup>13</sup>.

Several Blank Noise interventions solicit individual testimony, experience, and dreams for how participants would like to explore the city, using these as the basis for future street actions. For instance the intervention “Dear Stranger” collected women’s personal testimonials of street sexual harassment, collated these into generic letters addressed to the public and invited volunteers to hand them out on a busy street. The “I Wish” campaign asked volunteers to imagine how they wish to “be” in the city and organized a one-day event enacting their wishes in a public space of a park.<sup>14</sup> Participants shared their wishes on the Blank Noise blog and the experiences and desires of individual members framed an intervention that resolved to reclaim city spaces in keeping with the projected utopias of team members. These were some:

“I wish i could dance in the middle of where ever i was when i heard a good song...”

“i wish i could kiss my BF without having 50000 eyes peering at me..thinking im a **loose woman** with no morals”

“i wish i could stand on MG<sup>15</sup> doing nothing ..without fear that someone would recognise me ..or think of me as a pick up”

“i wish i could go to a tea/paan/cigarette stall at any time of day or night n not have only men flock around it n make me feel like im intruding their space”  
(*op. cit*, BN 2007).

Women’s desires for how they wanted to occupy public spaces became the basis for an activism centered on the personal wish and the individual desire of transformative experiences with public urban spaces. Blank Noise interventions are built on the individual dreams of

<sup>13</sup> Printed with the permission of the collective Blank Noise.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://blog.blanknoise.org/search/label/i%20wish>

<sup>15</sup> MG (Mahatma Gandhi) Road is a central road in Bangalore.

participants, inviting them to express their desires and to use these as the bedrock for future interventions. The emphasis of the collective is to engage in moments of disruption and play on city streets that build an archive of individual testimonials (related to street harassment and utopic visions of urban space) and use these to design activist interventions.

### **The Friday Convent**

During ethnographic fieldwork in Bangalore's emergent entrepreneurial economy I encountered a group of middle class and middle-aged women who met every few weeks to socialize, network, and support each other emotionally and logistically. The members of their active Facebook page—where meetings and events are planned and lively conversations take place—are admitted on the basis of professional status and orientation, and expected to contribute to discussions and to attend events.

I attended an unusual “loitering” intervention organized some months after the Delhi rape in December 2012. Group members planned the intervention to affirm their right to “be” without purpose in public space, meeting at 8 pm by the wall of a women's college that had been recently painted with graffiti by a local feminist artist. We were instructed to take public transport and to wear our most risqué clothes.

The group trickled in, exclaiming in excitement at seeing each other. They hugged, kissed, and greeted, charging the space of the dark street with femininity. When about fifteen of us finally huddled together to begin, the group's founder explained the plan for the evening. She announced that new T-shirts printed by the group were now available for purchase—the profits would be donated to charities that the group supports. She then handed out sheets of paper embossed with the group's letterhead printed with the words to Maya Angelou's poem *Phenomenal Woman*.

We recited it together, reading from the light of our mobile phones. It ended with a loud cheer and then a member loudly announced that it was time to take photographs. The group assembled by the wall with feminist graffiti, amidst shouts of “Warning for high heels! Holes!” that drew attention to the uneven sidewalk we were gathered on. As we arranged ourselves along the wall, members reminded each other to “Loiter!” “Look ‘loitering!’”

Later as some of the women lingered on to smoke on the street, I talked to them about the intervention. One of them explained that it was liberating to smoke in public on the street in India:

It makes me feel like I'm in some other country, y'know? It's nice! Nice not to have to worry about what people think of you as a woman smoking. I think if a man lights up—no problem! You know, you can light up anywhere, wherever you want but if a woman... But a woman? They have these certain notions of you if you smoke (Interview, April 19, 2013).

This desire to affirm one's rights to everyday gestures and practices—smoking a cigarette, loitering on the street—underlay women's reasons for participating. Another told me that just walking on the streets was “Fabulous, fabulous! It's freedom, it's freedom... it's something I've never done in India” (Interview, April 19, 2013). For the desiring subject(s) of neoliberal feminism, the self draws on its imagination, resources, and experiences in order to intervene and act agentive in public spaces.

The group's Founder explained that the event was “just to claim (my) space; for me the change has to come from within... this whole ‘victim’ role that Indian women have started playing

in the last few years... centuries... I have a huge problem with that and I saw myself playing that role a few times... so, self-reflection, therefore correction..." Women accept the current climate of fear surrounding public spaces, she said, and needed to rectify that by asserting their presence in public space. She elaborated on what she meant by "victim role:"

... always saying someone else is stopping me from doing it, because that means you yourself are not taking decisions for yourself. Because people only can stop you if you let them stop you. So there is a "you" somewhere in that role. So if you let that "you" die, then how are you going to give someone else the blame for it? (Interview, April 19, 2013).

The Founder's emphasis on the words "you" and "yourself" reflect a neoliberal reliance and focus on the individual to assume responsibility for the self and effect transformation (see Tokomitsu for a similar analysis of Steve Jobs' language, 2014). By not letting people stop you, the Founder of the group echoes Catherine Rottenberg's analysis of contemporary neoliberal feminism<sup>16</sup> in which professional women are called upon to "internalize the revolution" by working on their internal obstacles to gather the self-confidence necessary to overcome their fears (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 425). Professional women perceive structural discrimination and violence as addressable by transforming themselves and overcoming what they view as personal shortcomings or failures. Similarly, the Founder of The Friday Convent expressed a belief that the women in her group (professional, middle class, well-traveled) could work on themselves to overcome personal anxieties about occupying public spaces, and begin to create opportunities for themselves in which they could overcome playing the "victim role" to smoke in public or linger on a street after dark (to use examples drawn from the group).

In their interviews, participants described public spaces in India as particularly biased against the circulation and mobility of women, as others too have shown (Phadke et. al., 2011; Phadke, 2013). They explained that transforming themselves was a first step to transforming their relationships with public spaces by placing their sexualized and feminized bodies forcefully on the dark streets and expressing their own classed and gendered desires—to wear high heels, risqué clothes and smoke a cigarette, "unfettered" (see Mani, 2014). By connecting with her own untapped reservoirs, the individual can overcome the material and symbolic constraints placed on her circulation in public.

### **Loitering Ladies and Other Interventions**

In addition to these campaigns, there have been others that similarly foreground the desire to circulate freely in urban spaces. These include the global *Slutwalk* campaign, staged in India's capital city, New Delhi, in June 2011 (Babbar, 2011). The campaign was begun in Toronto, Canada, following a police official's warning to women college students, that if they dressed "like sluts" they would invite sexual violence upon themselves (Babbar, 2011). Women staged protests in cities around the world, dressing to intentionally provoke bystanders and reclaim the word "slut." New Delhi hosted its own event amidst protests from right wing political parties who warned of a backlash.

In India, the *Please Mend the Gap* campaign was also formed in 2011 to address gender discrimination on the New Delhi metro system that reserves a car for women commuters. *Please*

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<sup>16</sup> Rottenberg's analysis is based on the tenets of neoliberal feminism outlined in Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (2013).

*Mend the Gap* (a riff on the metro warning “please *mind* the gap”) volunteers rode the metro with bright yellow T-shirts camouflaged under their regular clothes and then broke into a flash mob at a designated metro station (Bhambri, 2011). They conducted online campaigns, signature petitions and metro-based flash mobs to signal their rights to travel without trouble.

More recently through the last few months of 2014, women in different Indian cities have responded to a call from the authors of *Why Loiter*, a book detailing women’s experiences of public space in Mumbai to articulate a “right to the city” as a fundamental right of all people (Phadke et al. 2011). Middle class women have been relaxing, lounging, commuting, and generally “loitering” in different public spaces, and posting photographs of themselves with the hashtag #whyloiter.

In general, newer forms of feminist protest in India gain traction on social networking sites such as Facebook where they rapidly accumulate large numbers of like-minded followers. Mainstream media coverage around the early interventions of this nature was tentative and sometimes openly critical. For instance, reporters wrote disapprovingly of new feminists who fought for their rights while dressed in “spaghetti strapped tops” (for a review of conversations around this and other articles, see the comments in Patheja, 2006). Media coverage is far more supportive now, given both the recent publicity around sexual violence against women in public and increased enthusiasm for civic participation amongst the new middle classes.

## **Conclusion**

Recent forms of gender organizing in India suggest an imperative for individuals to “take responsibility” for themselves and to “be action-heroes,” as the Blank Noise initiatives encourage or “not to play victim” (which suggests passivity) as the organizer of The Friday Convent explained. While both groups cannot be conflated, they express an understanding of neoliberal entrepreneurial self-making that foregrounds citizenship and consumption. As Paul Heelas argues, the enterprising self is a chief character in a neoliberal cast including the sovereign consumer and active citizen (in Gooptu, 2009). The example of India’s gender activists here suggest that they are in fact all three characters rolled into one: the enterprising consumer citizen. Rather than conceive of the consumer citizen as a depoliticized and privatized elite withdrawn from the state, it is more productive to view consumer citizenship as a form of cultural politics as Lukose (2009) has suggested—middle class women are included within the civic, yet excluded from the political (p. 10).

New middle class feminist responses to public sexual violence position themselves outside an explicit appeal to state interventions. Interestingly this aspect of their activism resonates with Krupa Shandilya’s analysis of Dalit (lower caste) feminist collective organizing that, she says, differs from the rallies and marches of the organized women’s movement and are wary of legalistic procedures and appeals to a state which has long ignored their existence. In contrast, when middle class women shape their activism as a distancing from appeals to the state they do so not in response to being marginalized by the state, but as forms of action that may be more efficient and in their control than appealing to the notoriously procedural and bureaucratic apparatus of the Indian state. Emergent forms of entrepreneurial activism work on the self to cultivate action-heroes that are immediately responsive to women’s own imaginations and desires for the public spaces that they inhabit.

Feminists have been urged to pause and consider their demand for what Lata Mani calls a “signal-free corridor:” a neoliberal imagination of freedom based on a desire to circulate freely,

without constraint, across different sites (2014). This desire is captured in the energetic exaltation of the Friday Convent participant who responded to the event call to wear risqué clothes and loiter on the night streets: “Fabulous, fabulous! ... Something I’ve never done in India!” Neoliberal activism is premised on an entrepreneurial initiative to pursue one’s desire to circulate as one wishes, where one wishes, when one wishes as the basis of feminist freedom.

The excitement and enthusiasm powering recent activist interventions comes from doing that is which is not “expected” from the intersectional identities of gender and class with which these women identify. Another participant at The Friday Convent intervention was smoking on the sidewalk as part of her street action and explained her sense of exhilaration to me: “It’s not really something that’s a done thing, to be honest.” In other words, it was a kind of “risk-taking” behavior that is at the heart of what scholars analyze as a neoliberal mode of self-making. It is part of a larger selfhood and engagement that eschew formal party politics, implying not a benign apolitical orientation, but a sense of “responsibility, autonomy and agency of the self-driven, enterprising individual” (Gooptu, 2009, p. 54).

Neoliberal feminism in India addresses a diverse public to engage spectators, victims and perpetrators of street sexual violence, but it does so by foregrounding the self as an entrepreneurial and capable actor. While a more mainstream feminism continues to appeal to legal reform and mass public protest as vehicles for protest, middle class women formulating a neoliberal feminism assume individual responsibility to transform public spaces by emphasizing their personal desires and dreams as the basis for their articulation of feminist freedom.

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