

Global Violence Against Minority Communities

INTRODUCTION:

In the wake of the George Zimmerman/Trayvon Martin trial and the issues of race and discrimination it brought up, I could not help but look into other instances of violence against minorities around the world.¹ The instances are many, the manner in which they are committed atrocious and the reasons behind these acts even more difficult to comprehend. While Trayvon Martin was a single instance of violence, it is not difficult to see that the motivation behind his death was the product of a system of racial prejudice.² Everyday we are inundated with news about violence, both from within our own communities and from far away places. Often these instances of violence are intangible and therefore seem unreal. We cannot fathom the atrocities being committed against nameless and faceless populations because we are completely unfamiliar with and unaffected by it. We cannot fathom what motivates people to treat each other so unjustly.

Minority communities face violence for a host of contrived reasons. They are targeted based on race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, religion and a myriad of other classifications. Sometimes singling out such populations is politically motivated, other times there is a deep-rooted historical reason, many times prejudice and violence become a social norm where populations are born and raised into a cycle of violence that they themselves do not understand.

Though it often gets brushed under the rug or forgotten about, people still face bigotry, still suffer from discrimination and still perpetuate hate and violence. In order for us to grow as a

¹ Lauren Rankin, *George Zimmerman Trial: Just Further Proof of our Racist Justice System*, POLICYMIC (June, 11 2013). <http://www.policymic.com/articles/47559/george-zimmerman-trial-just-further-proof-of-our-racist-justice-system>.

² *Id.*

society and to move beyond petty differences, which incite hatred, it is important to know what causes people to turn on each other when the differences between them are as shallow as color and religion. It is important for us to know what causes our fellow human beings to overlook very real and large similarities in favor of minute differences and then translate these differences into acts of violence. Though there are many instances of violence against minorities across the world I've limited my research to a handful of current conflicts.

RELIGIOUS MINORITIES: Indonesia

Discrimination and violence against religious minorities is hardly a new phenomenon. It occurs all over the world through various levels of atrocity. Sometimes the discrimination is systematic and is rooted in government, other times independent groups take it upon themselves to exact violence on minority communities. More often than not it is a combination of the two. In Indonesia both the government and independent militant groups are targeting the Ahmadiyah, Christian and Shia communities.³ The Indonesian government seems to have turned a blind eye to the violence and desecration inflicted upon these groups and their places of worship.⁴

Indonesia is one of the more ethnically diverse countries in the world with more than 300 local languages spoken and a wide-ranging social and economic class structure.⁵ Since 1998, when public outcry toppled the long-standing authoritarian government, Indonesia has transitioned into a democracy.⁶ In recent years, Indonesia has seen a rise in Islamic militarism

³ *Indonesia: Religious Minorities Targets of Rising Violence*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Feb. 28, 2013), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/02/28/indonesia-religious-minorities-targets-rising-violence>.

⁴ Sara Schonhardt, *Officials Turn Blind Eye as Religious Tensions Rise in Indonesia*, N.Y. TIMES (July 18, 2012), http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/19/world/asia/indonesia-turns-blind-eye-as-religious-tensions-rise.html?_r=0.

⁵ *Indonesia Profile - Overview*, BBC NEWS, (June 19, 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-14921238>

⁶ *Id.*

from fringe groups that advocate religious intolerance.⁷ Though the majority of Indonesia remains a moderate population, the majority has become silent, leaving room for these fringe groups to have a real impact on the religious minority populations.⁸

In 2010 there were 216-recorded violent attacks on religious minorities, 244 in 2011 and 264 in 2012.⁹ Perpetrators of this violence have primarily been Sunni militant groups, which according to Human Rights Watch, have been acting with either implied or overt government support.¹⁰ These occurrences are not just a local problem, isolated to a single province, but a national one. Indonesia's current laws and regulations protect only six religions and give local majority populations considerable leverage over minority communities.¹¹ As a result, while Sunni populations oppress minority communities in many Indonesian provinces, in Christian majority provinces of Indonesia, Sunni Muslims also face reactionary discrimination.

The injustices suffered by these communities include the implementation of discriminatory laws, verbal and physical intimidation and assault, halting of construction as related to houses of worship as well as arbitrary arrests.¹² Indonesian police often refuse to investigate reports of violence and injustice or turn around and blame the victimized communities.¹³ Perpetrators of the violence face little to no consequences and are free to continue to harass the Ahmadiyah, Christian and Shia communities.

Though some national figures have come out in support of religious minorities, many

⁷ *Indonesia Profile - Timeline*, BBC NEWS, (Sept. 12, 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-15114517>

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Thin Lei Win, *Militant Violence Against Indonesian Religious Minorities Worsens*, REUTERS (Feb 28, 2013), <http://www.trust.org/item/?map=militant-violence-against-indonesian-religious-minorities-worsens-report>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Laws and Institutions that Facilitate Discrimination and Abuse*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Feb. 28, 2013), <http://www.hrw.org/node/113848/section/8>.

¹² *World Report 2013 – Indonesia*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/indonesia>.

¹³ *Id.*

government officials have taken a decidedly discriminatory stance. In 2010, Indonesia's Minister of Religion, Suryadharma Ali, failed to speak out in support of the targeted religious minorities. Instead the Minister accused Ahmadiyah Muslims to be in violation of regulations and deemed them not Muslim at all.¹⁴ He further called for the Ahmadiyah sect to be immediately disbanded otherwise "their problems would continue."¹⁵ In 2012 the Minister also called for Shia Muslims to convert to the Sunni sect of Islam.¹⁶ He was not reprimanded in any way for either of these comments.

The Indonesian government's failure to take steps against the rising violence against religious minorities is a violation of the religious freedom guaranteed by the Indonesian constitution as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ratified by Indonesia in 2005). Human rights groups are calling on the Indonesian government, specifically on Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, to adopt a "zero tolerance" policy when dealing with these militant groups.¹⁷

TARGETING MINORITIES DURING POLITICAL STRIFE: Bangladesh

When nations go through political upheaval and tensions run high, certain communities come under fire for a multitude of reasons. Often minority communities become scapegoats, targets upon which the frustrated masses relieve their tension. Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971 was a violent and difficult ordeal, which was then followed by 15 years of military rule. The nine-month war for independence left between 1 million and 3 million people

¹⁴ *Minister Calls for Ahmadiyah to be Disbanded*, THE JAKARTA POST (Aug. 31, 2010), <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/08/31/minister-calls-ahmadiyah-be-disbanded.html-0>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Phelim Kine, *Putting a Smiley Face on Indonesia's Religious Intolerance*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (Aug. 20, 2013), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/20/putting-smiley-face-indonesias-religious-intolerance>.

dead and hundreds of thousands of women raped.¹⁸ Many of these atrocities were committed by Pakistani forces trying to maintain control over Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan) as well as by civilian collaborators, many of who later rose to positions of power in Bangladesh's new political system. Although democracy was restored in 1990, the political situation in Bangladesh remains volatile. Bangladesh's political climate, which is wrought with bitter rivalries as a result of its struggle for independence, as well as corruption in both the government and in law enforcement has worsened the situation.¹⁹

Political analysts say that the antagonism between Bangladesh's main political parties is a reflection of the personal animosities between party leaders and only very loosely related to ideological differences.²⁰ These political tensions have turned violent in recent years when hundreds of people have been killed in targeted attacks of opposition rallies and public gatherings. Bangladesh was originally founded as a secular state but the rising religious intolerance has caused much of the country's minority Hindu population to flee for their safety as well as raised concerns of a rise in religious extremism.

In 2010 Bangladesh's government created a war crimes tribunal to deal with those accused of "collaborating with Pakistani forces who attempted to stop East Pakistan [as Bangladesh was in 1971] from becoming an independent country."²¹ The special court found several leaders of Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, guilty of atrocities committed during Bangladesh's liberation from Pakistan in 1971.²² Among these leaders were

¹⁸ Elizabeth Yuan, Saeed Ahmed & Farid Ahmed, Seeking war crimes justice, Bangladesh protesters fight 'anti-Islam' label, CNN (Mar. 1, 2013) http://edition.cnn.com/2013/02/27/world/asia/bangladesh-protests/?hpt=wo_c2

¹⁹ Bangladesh's law enforcement has a reputation of corruption that worsens the situation for minority communities

²⁰ *Bangladesh Profile - Overview*, BBC NEWS, (Dec. 12, 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12650940>

²¹ *Bangladesh War Crimes Trial: Delwar Hossain Sayeedi to Die*, BBC (Feb. 28, 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-21611769>

²² Saif Khalid, *Bangladesh Minorities Bear Brunt of Violence*, AL JAZEERA (Mar. 24, 2013) <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/03/201332472510585942.html>

Delwar Hossain Sayeedi, Abdul Kader Mullah and Abul Kalam Azad, senior leaders within the Jamaat-e-Islami party. All three, as well as other party leaders, were brought before the tribunals on charges of mass killing, rape, arson, looting and forcing Hindus to convert to Islam during Bangladesh's 1971 liberation war.²³ When these party leaders were found guilty of the charges leveled against them mass demonstrations broke out throughout Bangladesh. On one side, supports of Jamat-e-Islami clashed with police forces and protested the tribunals, calling them biased and politically motivated. On the other side, hundreds of thousands of people called for death sentences of the convicted, seeking what they believe is justice more than 42 years after the 1971 war.

The demonstrations, though mostly peaceful, have occasionally turned into rioting, which eventually led to violence against the Hindu community, the primary community targeted by Jamaat-e-Islami leaders during the 1971 war. Jamaat-e-Islami supporters were blamed for much of the violence against minority communities in addition to supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) whose own leaders were facing war crimes charges.²⁴ As of March 2013 there were more than 40 temples destroyed, 100 people killed and hundreds of Hindus were rendered homeless as a result of arson.²⁵ Attackers often target the Hindus for the purpose of taking their property though Hindu women are also often targets of violence.

Human rights groups based in Bangladesh have criticized the government for poorly handling the violence and have blamed police for shooting at protesters, activists, women and children.²⁶ Both the Hindu and Buddhist communities have logged complaints against the government for failing to protect them. Hundreds of Jamaat-e-Islami protestors were arrested for

²³ *Supra*, note 21

²⁴ *Supra*, note 22

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Ben Doherty, *Violence Roles on in Cutthroat World of Bangladeshi Politics*, THE AGE (Aug. 2, 2013), <http://www.theage.com.au/world/violence-rolls-on-in-cutthroat-world-of-bangladeshi-politics-20130802-2r37r.html>.

their alleged involvement in the violence against the Hindu and Buddhist communities but the political party denied any role in the attacks, claiming the government is targeting their supporters because of a political vendetta and called for an impartial judicial commission to look into the attacks.

GENDER VIOLENCE: Women In Latin America

Gender based violence is a global problem. From North America to South East Asia, women are often targeted for the sole reason that they are women, because they are seen as weak, less human, as property. Gender violence takes on many forms; rape and domestic violence are two of the more obvious ones but child abuse, sexual harassment and human trafficking fall into the category as well. Each of these types of gender-based violence has far reaching individual and systematic effects. On an individual level, these actions have long lasting effects for the women who are targeted. They face any range of consequences from more violence to societal stigma, simply for being the victim. On a systematic level, gender violence is perpetuated when the system fails to set up deterrence for the behavior, when the media sensationalizes sexist attitudes, when public figures fail to condemn misogyny or go so far as to endorse such behavior.

Sometimes an instance of gender violence catches wide spread attention. Earlier this year the United States was consumed with the Steubenville, Ohio rape case and the world watched as India dealt with the public outcry over the gang rape and subsequent death of a young woman simply riding a public bus. It is rarely, however, that mainstream media acknowledges these instances to be part of a wider systematic problem. Instead these instances of atrocious violence are looked at as abnormal, the perpetrators of these actions are sometimes villainized, and more

often humanized while the media questions the actions and motives of the victims. Regardless, for a little while these instances catch attention and then they fade away and the over-arching issue of gender violence is forgotten. But so few countries are really highlighted in this area. It is rare that we focus our attention where the media is silent.

Media coverage in Latin America is most often focused on economic issues or drugs, we very rarely hear about gender violence. In countries such as Peru, Bolivia, Paraguay and Ecuador numbers indicate that at least one of every three women experiences some form of gender based violence. The majority of these women come from rural areas and are often indigenous women who have little access to governmental, or even non-governmental, services. Many of these violent crimes go unreported because of language or cultural barriers and therefore they also go unpunished. Central America, especially countries like Honduras, ranks as one of the most dangerous areas for women due to the crime associated with illegal narcotics trading.²⁷

Studies throughout South America have shown that the situation for women improves if women are given access to education and to credit.²⁸ Such simple autonomy allows women to support themselves and their families and gives them a voice in their communities. This then has a trickle down effect to younger generations. Such social gains only work when there is a strong commitment on the part of the community or government to combat violence against women. Judicial systems and law enforcement must work together to combat the issues that effect Latin American women most seriously; rape, domestic violence and human trafficking.

BOLIVIA:

Bolivia has the highest rates of domestic violence in South America according 2011 data

²⁷ Carl Meacham & Johanna Mendelson Forman, *In Latin America Women Still Confront Violence*, CSIS (Mar. 8, 2013), <http://csis.org/publication/latin-america-women-still-confront-violence>.

²⁸ *Id.*

and also has some of the highest recorded rates of femicide.²⁹ Between 2007 and 2011 almost half a million cases of domestic violence were brought to authorities and less than 30,000 of those cases were taken on by prosecutors, and less than 10% of those cases that did enter the legal system resulted in any sort of guilty verdict or plea by 2012.³⁰ Though Bolivia is taking legislative steps to raise awareness and consequences for rape and domestic violence, the results have yet to be seen. Part of the problem is that the Bolivian justice system operates inefficiently. Over 100,000 domestic violence cases were opened in 2012 but of those only 57 were closed by February 2013.³¹ Such inefficiency in the system makes both law enforcement and the judicial system ineffective because perpetrators of violence have little fear of the consequences of their crimes. As a result, victims of violence lose faith in the system because the system cannot protect them from their assailants.

Another problem that stands in the way of combating rape and domestic violence is that public officials in Bolivia are among the perpetrators of rape and domestic violence. The system defines and seeks to redefine “rape” to suit their purposes. For example, in December 2012 in the area of Chuquisaca, Bolivia a legislative assemblyman was caught on tape raping a government employee while she was unconscious.³² While the incident was publicly condemned, the assemblyman made a statement denying the incident was rape at all because he was too intoxicated to be aware of his actions.³³ Despite public outcry, prosecutors were reluctant to

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Violence, Femicide and Women at Risk*, LA RAZON (May 22, 2012), http://www.la-razon.com/suplementos/la_gaceta_juridica/Violencia-feminicidio-mujeres-riesgo_0_1618638182.html.

³¹ *100 Thousand Cases Reported Only 51 Cases Have Bugs*, ERBOL (Feb. 13, 2013), http://www.erbol.com.bo/noticia/politica/13022013/de_100_mil_denuncias_solo_51_casos_tienen_fallos.

³² *Domingo Alcibia, Bolivian Lawmaker, Allegedly Rapes Woman in Legislature, Caught by Security Camera*, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 18, 2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/18/domingo-alcibia-bolivia-rape-legislature_n_2507230.html

³³ *Domingo Alcibia, Bolivian Lawmaker in Alleged Rape Video, Arrested*, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 22, 2013), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/23/domingo-alcibia-bolivian-lawmaker-rape-video-arrested_n_2533172.html.

prosecute because as the Minister of Justice explained, in Bolivia the crime of rape is a crime between two parties, meaning the victim has to take action against the perpetrator for the case to be opened.³⁴ Though prosecutors did eventually move forward with the case, the victim continued to face abuse. She was brutally beaten by her husband and thrown out of her home for being raped.³⁵ This culture of victim blaming, which exists not just in Bolivia or South America, but also across the world, further hinders victims from seeking the help of an albeit flawed system.

GUATEMALA:

Similar to Bolivia, Guatemala also has a high rate of femicide, though its issues of gender violence seem to predominantly effect young girls and older women.³⁶ Despite legislation in 2008 regarding consequences for femicide, Guatemala is still ranked third in the world when it comes to the murder of women.³⁷ Between 2008 and 2011 rapes and sexual assault of women increased by 34% and 90% of perpetrators are never punished for their crimes.³⁸ Guatemala's justice system has seen some positive changes recently with the appointment of a woman as attorney general in 2010. Attorney general Claudia Paz y Paz declared violence against women a priority issue for the Guatemalan government and created a criminal court for femicide and violence against women, giving women better access to the system when it comes to prosecuting their assailants, however there is still a large problem when it comes to getting women to report their assailants at all as there is a very real fear and likelihood of retaliation.³⁹

COLUMBIA:

³⁴ *High-Profile Gender Violence in Bolivia: Horrifying Impunity and Legal Responses*, CARWIL WITHOUT BORDERS (Apr. 5, 2013), <http://woborders.wordpress.com/2013/04/05/gender-violence-bolivia/>.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Meacham & Forman, *supra* note 25.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

Like Bolivia, Columbia also has a high right of crime and violence though much of Columbia's hostile climate is due to the illicit trade of narcotics. The culture of violence and misogyny that was borne from this constant conflict created a near constant threat to women and girls.⁴⁰ Acid attacks have become popular in Columbia, especially in situations of domestic violence. Between the years 2011 and 2012 the number of reported acid attacks against women quadrupled.⁴¹ While these attacks rarely kill their victims, the acid does leave women with severe physical scarring which then has social and psychological effects. Though laws exist in Columbia to prohibit and punish rape, sexual assault and domestic violence, abusers rarely face consequences. Like Guatemala, a large reason for this is because victims do not come forward for fear of retaliation as well as the system just being inefficient when handling such cases, to the point where victims don't consider the risk of coming forward worth it.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SEXUAL MINORITIES: Russia

On June 30, 2013 Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a bill that further limited the rights of Russia's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community.⁴² The unanimously passed bill bans "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to minors" under the guise of protecting children but is actually just another layer of legislation that already infringes on the LGBT community's constitutional rights.⁴³ Previous legislation has banned gay pride parades in Moscow and other major cities as well as large fines for gay rights groups and denying nongovernmental organizations from registering. The increasing governmental hostility against the LGBT community has made violent attacks and discrimination against LGBT people

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Innokenty Grekov, *Russia's Anti-Gay Law, Spelled Out in Plain English*, POLICY MIC (Aug. 8, 2013), <http://www.policymic.com/articles/58649/russia-s-anti-gay-law-spelled-out-in-plain-english>.

⁴³ *Id.*

the new norm. State sponsored programs have linked homosexuality with serious crimes like pedophilia and other such accusations that rely upon assumptions that are very obviously propaganda.⁴⁴

The Russian government uses flawed reasoning to justify its actions to the international community. The government has labeled "propaganda of non traditional sexual orientation" as a threat to Russian society and has labeled those trying to combat this new legislations as extremists looking to incite hatred and that they threaten "Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁴⁵ Though Russia cannot be trusted to give accurate accounts of the discrimination its LGBT citizens face, international courts have held Russia accountable. In April 2011 the European Court of Human rights fined Russia for violating articles of the European Convention when they banned a total of 164 pride parades and marches between 2006 and 2008.⁴⁶ Though Russia paid the fines they continue to ban pride events and Russian courts continue to rule against LGBT rights.⁴⁷

With no support from the system the LGBT community is facing a large increase in anti-gay violence, much of which goes unreported. This new ban applies to Russian citizens as well as non-citizens and to all forms of television, radio and Internet media. The Russian LGBT Network has reported an increase in violent and fatal attacks motivated by homophobia, including attacks against activists/protestors.⁴⁸ Despite recommendations from international courts as well as the United Nations Human Rights Council to repeal the laws banning

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Katie Halper, *Russia Anti-Gay Bill: Russia Passes Radical Family Values Bill While President Announces Divorce on TV*, POLICY MIC (June 14, 2013), <http://www.policymic.com/articles/48411/russia-anti-gay-bill-russia-passes-radical-family-values-bill-while-president-announces-divorce-on-tv>.

"homosexual propaganda", Russia has continued its anti-LGBT legislation.⁴⁹

The international response to Russia's anti-gay legislation has been tremendous. Since the ban on "gay propaganda" applies to both Russian citizens and non-Russians, it raises questions for the thousands of athletes and spectators that will participate in the 2014 Winter Olympics that will be held in Sochi.⁵⁰ Gay athletes, activists and visitors have raised concern on what this new legislation will mean for them while they are in the country and are calling for boycotts of the games. Despite rumors of staying the implementation of this legislation during the Olympics, Russian politicians have come out to assure opponents of the law that regardless of who breaks the law or when, all enacted legislation will be held up and implemented.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

Violence and discrimination against people who go against the status quo is not limited to any single part of the world or to any specific type of society. It occurs just as prevalently in our own communities as it does anywhere else in the world. Communities perpetrate discrimination and violence within themselves for small differences like religious sect or skin color just as surely as they do against other communities for larger differences. It is often difficult to see when such acts are perpetrated in our own communities because such discrimination becomes more pervasive and part of our norm. As a result it is easy to condescendingly point a finger at the other and make ourselves feel better because we may not act or look the same. However, upon introspection we may realize that our own biases do affect our behavior and that our behavior is genuinely debilitating towards a population of people for maybe no other reason than

⁴⁹ *Russia: Drop Homophobic Law*, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH (June 11, 2013), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/10/russia-drop-homophobic-law>.

⁵⁰ Laura Smith-Spark & Phil Black, *Protests, Boycott Calls as Anger Grows Over Russia Anti-Gay Propaganda Laws*, CNN (Aug. 4, 2013), <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/01/world/europe/russia-gay-rights-controversy/>.

⁵¹ *Id.*

because they are different.

Moving a population past prejudiced beliefs is not an easy feat. It often requires education, economic stability as well as time for generations to evolve. Lack of education and economic stability are usually contributing factors as to why violence against minorities occurs in the first place. As a result it is hard for communities to spot the problems that exist within them at all because though they seem like problems to an outsider, to the effected and perpetrated community such attitudes and actions become a part of the norm. It often takes a catalyst from within to being the process of change. One needs only to look at the instances of America's own civil rights movement, South Africa's struggle against apartheid, or India's current predicament in relation to rape and sexual assault to see that such catalysts come with a price and though they spark the process they must be carried forth on the momentum of people's outrage with their own situation.

While researching and writing this piece I came across harrowing situations and personal stories from all over the world. It was extremely difficult to pick such a brief sampling because these few instances do not even begin to touch on the depth of suffering the people of these countries face let alone to be truly representative of the violence minority communities face around the world. However I'm hoping that shedding light on these few instances of injustice will help us better recognize injustice within our own communities as well as in others and motivate us to bring about change wherever we can.