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India's steps toward gender equality

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By all accounts, today is a sombre day. Nov. 25 marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women--an occasion for governments and citizens alike to pay homage to the victims of domestic abuse.

Like last year, and every year before that, there is no shortage of victims.

But the day is also an opportunity to highlight progress around the world. It's a chance to look at where we've come and where we still need to go in our unfinished commitment to gender equality. And this year, we can look with guarded optimism to the world's largest democracy, which has been in the news a lot lately, owing to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's recent visit there.

On the surface, India is the model of a country in development. The economy is booming, the government is stable and competent, and foreign investors are lined up at the border.

Yet for generations, women in less progressive parts of the country have faced shocking abuse, even death, for refusing to provide their husbands and in-laws with lavish dowries. And when they do, it's not uncommon for in-laws to ask for more.

In 2007 alone, the last year for which official numbers are available, more than 8,000 women were murdered for not paying up. That's nearly one every hour. In the most extreme cases, new brides are doused with kerosene and set on fire to make their murder look like a kitchen accident.

Countless other women, like a young bride named Dipti Udupure, are driven to suicide.

Her death sparked headlines last year when relentless pressure from in-laws caused Dipti to jump from her apartment rooftop, leaving behind a nine-month-old daughter. The tragic incident, and others like it, caused the Times of India newspaper to lament "the demon of dowry demand."

But India is no Sudan or North Korea. It is a rapidly modernizing nation with aspirations of being a global player. And it knows well that if it is to continue its sprint to the international stage, it will have to modernize its approach to women's rights, too.

So after decades of apathy toward gender violence, the current government under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is taking small steps in the right direction. Shortly after his re-election in May, he singled out as one of his main priorities help for the country's underprivileged-- many of whom are women.

And in its first term, Singh's government introduced the Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act. For the first time, economic harassment was included in a broadened definition of domestic violence. Brides were even offered protection against husbands and in-laws who aggressively pursue dowries.

Across India, organizations like the National Commission for Women are giving females a voice and shedding light on domestic violence. Some community leaders are now even calling for an end to lavish weddings in the hope of curtailing the demands for dowry.

Of course, a lot of work remains. Too many rural women still have few social and economic rights, leaving them entirely subservient to their husbands and vulnerable to pressure for a dowry. Many are afraid to speak up and harassment still occurs every single day.

But it's a start. And on a day like today, India's tentative steps are worth recognizing because they give hope to women around the world who can't see a light at the end of the tunnel.

It's also worth remembering today--and every day --that India is not alone, nor is violence against women limited to poor and developing nations. In fact, the UN says that one out of every three women around the globe has been abused, usually by someone she knows.

In a world where human rights, justice and equality are championed as the cornerstones of humanity, this single statistic represents one of our greatest failures.

So for whatever progress India or other countries may make, it would be wrong to rest on our laurels.

Instead, these small successes can serve as lessons and renewed motivation for tackling a problem that has no place in the 21st century.

As a global society, we have never been more advanced or well off. Yet around the world, women still fall prey to harassment, abuse, rape and murder.

If we can learn from our mistakes, identify our progress and hasten our pace, perhaps one day Nov. 25 won't have to be so sombre.

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