



Just Girls:

Conversations on resistance, social justice and the mental health struggles of women

by Shelja Sen



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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, my work with young women dealing with experiences of trauma, gender-based violence and pressure to conform to patriarchal definitions of success took the form of a journey metaphor that could be used across age, class, language and culture. The Courage Map brought a sense of movement and hope in times of despair and immobility. This methodology helped to render visible, externalise and politicise acts of social injustice, turning the gaze back on normative judgment and acknowledging micro-acts of resistance, care and protest (individual or collective). It invited personal agency and counter-stories, documenting, collectivising and inviting contributions to build solidarity. In this paper, stories of two young women illustrate how conversations that start in the therapy space can create ripples in our sociocultural and political contexts.

Key words: *feminism; resistance; the gaze; personal agency; counter-stories; solidarity; narrative practice*

Resistance to indoctrination

In our society, a typical response to dismiss girls is 'just girls'. As if they do not matter, and their voices can be silenced. In my work with girls, I am struck by the repeated themes of gender injustice and violence. Girls are pushed into a rigid binary of being either a 'good girl' or a 'bad girl' – a *Devi* (goddess) or a *Dayan* (witch). Their worth is measured by patriarchal ideas of beauty and success. Foucault (1979) described how modern power operates on social control through normalising judgement. Women are indoctrinated into this subjugating self-surveillance from a very early age. However, as Foucault explained, 'where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1979, p. 95). Women are not passive recipients of suffering (M. White, 1995), and therefore I acknowledge stories of survival, acts of resistance and solidarity against generations of patriarchy.

There are exquisite and powerful stories in India of women who have led social movements including Justice for Nirbhaya, Narmada Bachao Andolan, Pinjra Tod, Besharam Morcha and Shaheen Bagh.¹ As Hare-Mustin (1994, p. 22) has reminded us, 'the therapy room is like a room lined with mirrors. It reflects back only what is voiced within it. If the therapist and family are unaware of marginalised discourses, such as those associated with members of subordinate gender, race, and class groups, those discourses remain outside the mirrored room'. As therapists we can be a bridge between the social justice work being done in the community and our therapy rooms.

This paper tells the story of my work with Rhea and Amrita using the Courage Map to make social injustices visible, turn the gaze back on normalising judgement, invite contribution and build solidarity.

Rhea: Unbuttoning fear

Rhea, a 14-year-old girl from a little town in India, was referred to me by her school for 'anger management' and 'treatment for behavioural problems'. She shared with me that a boy in her class had sent her a WhatsApp message commenting on her body in graphic detail. When she made a complaint to the principal, he told her, in front of the boy, that she was overreacting, that she should take it as a compliment and that maybe she had 'invited it upon herself' by leaving the top buttons of her school T-shirt open. In no time, this 'juicy rumour' started spreading in the school and on social

media. There was no mention of the boy, but she was called '*besharam*' (shameless), a 'slut' and a 'whore'. That was the first day Rhea cut herself and the day she wrote this poem:

Kind eyes

Maybe if I saw myself through more kind eyes
Everything they said would turn into lies
Am I not an ordinary human being
with your dirty eyes, who are you seeing?
Why do you judge me on my grades?
that makes me think about blood and blades.
I remember being called characterless
because you didn't know I was going through this mess.
They repeatedly called me a slut,
have you ever noticed this painful cut?
If it is a taboo to talk about periods
Why do they frankly comment on our body, these
Idiots?
In the end, it is only you
Have faith in everything you do.

She had emailed the poem to me after our first session, and I was struck by the pain in her words, which was a testimony to what she held precious, what was important to her and what she valued in life (M. White, 2011). I wrote an email to her using the principles of outsider witness practice (M. White, 2007).

Dear Rhea

I read your tender poem so many times, and it touched me in a way that I might not be able to explain in words, but I would like to try.

The words 'dirty eyes' stood out to me and I wondered who the carriers of these dirty eyes are – is it society at large, which dictates how girls should behave, what clothes they should wear, how their bodies are to be commented on, how their worth is valued, what they can talk about and what they have to stay silent on? I reflected on whether these 'dirty eyes' also like to convince young girls that 'it is only you', isolating them from other girls and from people with 'kind eyes'.

The image that came to me was of many young people with kind eyes coming together and standing up to dirty eyes. I wonder, what would that look like?

Having grown up in a society where dirty eyes follow us everywhere, your poem resonated so much with me. I think it speaks for and about so many girls and women who live with this in our society.

Your words remind me that we have to stand up to the dirty eyes. What I will cherish and take with me is how if we learnt to look at ourselves and others through what you exquisitely called ‘kind eyes’, there would be a unique solidarity that we could foster together. Again, I wonder what that would look like.

Shelja

Exposing the ruse

Cheryl White (2016) wrote about the feminist challenge to therapy:

How the problem was defined, the analysis, and the response were all personal *and* collective ... We were considering questions such as, ‘whose body is this?’, ‘whose life is this?’, ‘whose story is this?’ It was profound for us to realise that we weren’t actually in charge of our own bodies ... we had been taught not to think of our bodies as our own. (C. White, 2016a, pp. 48–49)

White’s words and Rhea’s poem reminded me of Foucault’s use of Bentham’s panopticon as a metaphor for modern power. In the panopticon ‘persons are incited to perpetually evaluate themselves, to police themselves and to operate on their bodies and forge them as docile’ (M. White, 1992, p. 138). Michael White further explained that ‘the source of power is invisible to those who experience it the most intensely’.

Therefore, while deconstructing young women’s experiences of trauma, gender-based violence and/or pressures to fit into the society’s gendered definition of success, it becomes important to:

- make visible what has been made invisible; externalise what has been internalised; politicise what has been privatised
- turn the ‘gaze’ back on “‘normative judgement’ to ‘expose the ruse’ (Foucault, 1988, p.18; as cited in M. White, 1992, p. 137–139) of how it works at negative identity conclusions and isolation.
- invite contributions and build solidarity.

The following table shows how my email to Rhea was used to ‘expose the ruse’.

Therapist’s task	Example from email to Rhea
Rendering visible, externalising and politicising acts of social injustice	I wondered at who the carriers of these dirty eyes are – is it society at large, which dictates how girls should behave, what clothes they should wear, how their bodies are to be commented on, how their worth is valued, what they can talk about and what they have to stay silent on?
Turning the gaze back on normative judgment and acknowledging micro-acts of resistance, care and protest (individual or collective) to invite personal agency and counter-stories	The image that came to me was of many young people with kind eyes coming together and standing up to dirty eyes. I wonder, what would that look like?
Documenting, collectivising and inviting contributions to build solidarity	I think [your poem] speaks for and about so many girls and women who live with this in our society.

Table 1. Exposing the ruse

Fault lines

I first met Rhea in early March 2020, shortly before India went into a lockdown due to COVID-19. Arundhati Roy, an Indian activist and writer, described COVID-19 as the X-ray of our times ‘exposing the fault lines of a society which is built on indifference and injustice’ (Haymarket Books, 2020).

As I started online work with many children and young people, including Rhea, I realised that I needed a metaphor and a methodology that:

- could be used across age, class and culture
- could bring in a sense of movement and hope in the times of despair and immobility

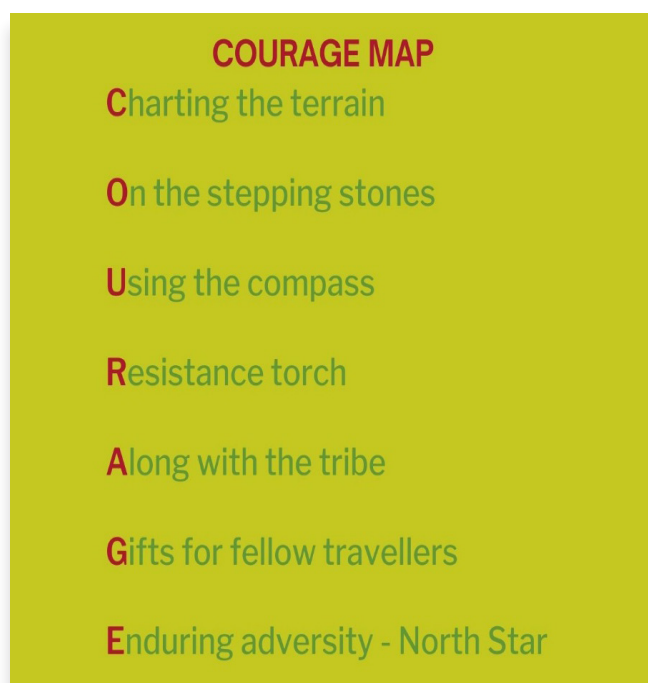
- was transparent, collaborative and playful
- would be able to receive stories of suffering, pain and hardship without being re-traumatising (Denborough, 2018, p. 53).

I was also looking for a metaphor that could navigate the 'just steps' of young women.

Courage Map

As a narrative practitioner, I have enjoyed using the metaphor of a 'journey' in my work (see Denborough, 2018; Sen, 2018; M. White, 2007) as it inspires exploration, excitement and a spirit of adventure. In words that resonate with these COVID times, Michael White wrote that 'When we sit together, I know we are embarking on a journey to a destination that cannot be precisely specified, and via routes that cannot be predetermined' (M. White, 2007, p. 4).

Through co-research (Epston, 2001; M. White, 2007) and collaboration, the journey metaphor started taking shape as an exciting way to invite engaged conversations. One girl suggested that I take the acronym COURAGE², which I had used in my book, *Reclaim Your Life* (Sen, 2018), to map the journey as she had found it very helpful.



Charting the terrain: charting of the landscape of hardships; double listening (Freedman & Combs, 1996; M. White, 2007) to stories of distress, pain or frustration as absent but implicit testimony (M. White, 2000) to what is held to be important.

On the steppingstones: tracking the regular everyday actions that take us from the 'known and familiar' of the problem to what it is 'possible to know' (M. White, 2007), including preferred stories and the histories of actions, skills and abilities.

Using the compass: understanding the intentions, values, beliefs and principles behind identified actions or 'just steps', and contextualising and historicising these to build counter-stories and identities.

Resistance torch: deconstructing patriarchy and inviting personal agency from young people to take a position against normalising judgement and identity conclusions. These could be political (with a small 'p') daily acts of resistance, or protests and responses to hardships.

Along with our tribe: because operations of modern power work through isolation, a therapist's role is to 'contribute to a multi-voiced sense of identity, rather than a single voiced sense of identity', and to emphasise 'a mutuality of contribution' (M. White, 2007, pp. 138–139). These multiple voices can include travelling companions: people living or passed on, legacies, spiritual figures, mentors, writers, legacies, pets and characters from movies or books.

Gifts for fellow travellers: standing up to isolation and normative judgement by building a collective through which young women can make contributions to others who are traversing the same fraught terrain. Contribution can be enabled through letters, photos, songs and contributing to collective wisdom.

Enduring adversity: staying connected to what young women value, their hopes, dreams, commitments and preferred directions – their North Star.

When I met Rhea online for our second session, she shared with me that after reading my email, she had broadcast a message to all the girls in her class to a *morcha* (protest). As a mark of solidarity, many girls in the school – over 250 of them – came to school the next day with their top buttons open! I introduced the Courage Map, and Rhea responded to it enthusiastically. Here is the excerpt of my email summarising our conversation:

I was very curious to know how 'shaming' tries to convince you that you are 'not good enough'. I wondered whether 'shaming' about bodies has a tendency to mess up girls' lives much more than boys', and you agreed and said that it was 'unfair and unacceptable' to you. I asked you

what it took to walk up to the principal's office to make that complaint – what helped you and was there anybody else who supported you in this? I was really interested to hear that it was a 'sense of fairness' or what you also described as 'what is wrong is wrong' that got you to take that step, and how your friend C walked with you to the principal's office as she also stands for 'solidarity'. I asked what name you would give to the act of 'not taking that nonsense' and making a complaint to the principal. You told me that it was important to 'speak up against the injustice towards the girls' and 'being kind'. I wanted to know what you would call the action when you messaged the girls at night to rally a '*morcha*' and what all of you managed to do the next day. You said, '*dar ka button kholna*' (unbuttoning the fear) and that you were '*saath saath*' (in solidarity). Do you think it was in any way linked to your poem 'Kind eyes?' I have a vision of all of you walking around the school

together with 'unbuttoned fear'. I wonder what message that sent to the boys who were used to silence from girls and buttoned up fear. I am also thinking of the little girls in your school – what would they have noticed that day? What would they have gone and told their friends in the neighbourhood? I wonder what this act of yours might have done to unbutton their fear in future. I imagine it as a ripple spreading from your class to different corners of the town and beyond. I am really curious to know more about steps you have taken in the past to stand up to injustice. What hopes do you have of 'unbuttoning fear' in the future? Apart from your friend C and other friends, who else do you think would not be surprised that you took this action? Looking forward to discussing this next week!

The following table shows how the Courage Map was used in the emails to Rhea to expose the ruse and scaffold just steps.

Map point	Exposing the ruse	Example
Charting the terrain	Making visible, externalising and politicising acts of social injustice	I wondered whether 'shaming' about bodies has a tendency to mess up girls' lives much more than boys', and you agreed and said that it was 'unfair and unacceptable' to you.
On the stepping stones Using the compass Resistance torch	Turning the gaze back on normative judgment and acknowledging micro-acts of resistance, care and protest (individual or collective) to invite personal agency and counter-stories	I asked you what it took to walk up to the principal's office to make that complaint – what helped you and was there anybody else who supported you in this? I asked what name you would give to the act of 'not taking that nonsense'. I wonder what message that sent to the boys who were used to silence from girls and buttoned up fear.
Along with the tribe Gifts for travellers Enduring adversity	Documenting, collectivising and inviting contributions to build solidarity	Was there anybody else who supported you in this? I wonder what this act of yours might have done to unbutton their fear in future. I imagine it as a ripple spreading from your class to different corners of the town and beyond. What hopes do you have of 'unbuttoning fear' in the future?

Table 2. Courage Map

It is important to highlight that conversations using the Courage Map are free-flowing and meandering. As you will see in the second email to Rhea, we zigzagged through from

$C + U \rightarrow O \rightarrow U + A \rightarrow R \rightarrow G \rightarrow U + E \rightarrow A$.

And as happens in conversations, this pattern could be changed within the span of one session. Along with the zigzagging, the conversations also zoomed in to focus on the individual and zoomed out to focus on collective (see Denborough, 2008). I resonated with Kristina Lainson's (2016, p. 12) description of work with young girls: 'each element acts as warp and weft, in and out, crossing one another, supporting and reinforcing each other, gradually weaving a rich counter-story that has resonance and validity – one that both strengthens and dignifies'.

While I was working with Rhea, I started online work with a 13-year-old named P. She was struggling with suicidal experiences and wrote a tender poem about it.

The girl who liked to fly

They called me a whore
Did they not want to know more?
I was the girl who liked to fly
Sing, dance and never care for their eye
Now invisible pain tells me to die
It shouts at me that everything is a lie
All alone, no one to hold
Death is becoming ever so bold.

With P's consent, I emailed this poem to Rhea and asked if she would like to write back to P.

Dear P

Thank you for sharing your poem with me. When I was reading it, I realised how many girls go through this, and I wanted to share my letter to 'shaming'.

Dear Shaming

I know you have special tricks that you use to convince girls that they are dirty and worthless. You have been telling us since childhood that we have to be 'good girls' and that 'good girls' do not laugh loudly or dress up in a way that attracts boys to think we are 'loose' or 'characterless'. You hold us down so that we have no voice and no say. I want to

tell you that I am not going to follow your rules of being a 'good girl' anymore. I am not alone. I have my friends and my mother, and we all believe that it is extremely unfair that we have been made to believe that we are less than boys and that we are responsible for their actions. So stop spreading rumours about us and talking about us behind our backs. Even if you do, it does not matter – we have learnt a way to mute you: 'Stop spreading lies and slut-shaming! We do not believe you'.

No need to keep a watch on us. Watch out for yourself!!

Rhea

Dear P, I hope this letter shows you that you are not alone. You wrote:

I was the girl who liked to fly

Sing, dance and never care for their eye

What is the song you would like to dance to?
What song would you sing? If you tell me then maybe I could sing and dance the same one too.
See, you are not alone!

Rhea

And just like that, another rich conversation started.

Amrita: Just and not just nice

Amrita was a 20-year-old woman who I met online for 'treating social anxiety'. In her first session, we deconstructed how 'people pleasing' and 'being nice' were some 'burdens' she had carried from 'an early age'. She felt there was 'something wrong' with her and that she was 'messed up'.

In our second session, Amrita tentatively asked me if she could talk about 'sexually predatory behaviour from men'.

Amrita: After our last session, I have been thinking of it. It has troubled me a lot from the time I was little. I developed early compared to my classmates. I think I was 12 when I asked my mother, 'Why are men always staring at me?' I was told, 'it is because of your big breasts'. I really thought it was an illness and

was so ashamed of my body. I remember we had gone for a holiday once and a man touched me in a shop, but I could not tell anybody.

Shelja: I am thinking of you as a 12-year-old going through that experience and wondered if the 'ashamed' was also another 'burden' you had to carry from an early age?

Amrita: It was a burden! But I could not speak to anybody, except my journal [this act of self-care was explored in another session]. The reason I wanted to discuss this with you was that three months ago, a friend in college asked me if we could 'hook up' after a party. We were both very drunk, and although I was repulsed by the idea, I agreed as I could not say 'no'. I think he knew that and used it against me. It was horrible, and I felt dirty and used. I tried talking to a friend, but then something kept me silenced. The social anxiety kept growing, especially when I am around guys.

Indian sociologist Deepa Narayan (2019, p. 34) wrote, 'When a woman rejects her own body, she has nowhere to live. Her entire existence is built on a shaky foundation. She concludes she is the problem. This serves society's goals. Insecure women do not take up space. They do not demand change'. Narayan's indignation at the injustice of this resonates with me; however, as a narrative practitioner, I align with the idea that people are not passive recipients of hardships and they do resist.

Freedman and Combs (1996, p. 46) emphasised deconstructive listening, which opens 'spaces for aspects of people's life narratives that haven't been storied as yet'. Therefore, Amrita and I deconstructed and examined this 'silence' (Heath, 2012), and I invited her to take a position on it. Amrita articulated that it was 'not fair at all' that men were seen as 'players' and women as 'sluts' for the same actions. She started questioning the demand for girls and women to 'stay silent' at the cost of their own safety: 'I will not accept when out-of-control men try to objectify my body, or expect that I will be constantly available. I am not there to fulfil the needs of men, to help them along in their development or be a secondary character in their movie'. She named this act 'standing up for myself! Being a feminist and not shutting up about it!'

I shared a quote from Indian writer Sohaila Abdulali (2018, p. 29): 'Anyone who thinks it's not brave to speak out hasn't faced disbelief, derision, or that most unsavoury of all responses—titillation'. I asked Amrita whether the word 'brave' would apply to the step she had taken, to which she responded, 'Maybe not right now!'

In our third session, Amrita talked about her passion for filmmaking and how it 'transports you ... it is a mirror of society. It can make people think'. I asked, 'if you were to make a movie, what would the protagonist stand for?' Amrita was quick to point out, 'I am not really interested in being an actor. I want to be a director. The film world in India has been too male-dominated!' She informed me about gender politics on film sets, and about her hope to bring about change, especially after interning with a woman director whom she greatly admired: 'She opened up a new world of possibilities for me, and made me even more committed to being a filmmaker and making a difference'. She told me with a big smile, 'I want to be seen as smart, well informed, just – and not just nice (I liked the pun there)!'

Memories are shaped by storyline

Amrita and I used the Courage Map to 'expose the ruse' and navigate 'just steps'. Here are some examples of the questions I asked.

- **Charting the terrain:** 'Do you think silence is demanded much more from girls than boys in our society?'
- **On the steppingstones, Using the compass, Resistance torch:** 'What allowed you to stand up to silence and speak up?' 'What do you think you are challenging by speaking up?'
- **Along with the tribe, Gifts for travellers, Enduring adversity:** 'What did she recognise in you that others might have missed?' 'Do you think in any way your commitment reinforced some kind of commitment for her?' 'What hopes do you have for a more unsilenced life?' 'Might this find its way into your films in the future and what it might look like?'

Amrita made a short film at home during the lockdown, and it was shortlisted for an international filmmaking competition. It explored 'the dark side of sexism and classism in our homes'. In my last session with her, Amrita mentioned something that I found really tender and significant: 'I was forgetting so many things about

myself'. This made me recollect David Denborough's words, 'Memories are shaped by storyline' (D. Denborough, personal communication, 2019).

Co-creation of possibilities

Through Rhea's and Amrita's stories I have highlighted how the Courage Map can be used in ways that are transparent, and in which there is a collaborative spirit of journeying together. Tilsen (2013, p. 8) emphasised the significance of transparency in 'making the conversational and relational process (and what I am experiencing within that process) visible and available to others so that they may not only understand the process, but also influence it'.

In our work together, Rhea and I moved from rendering visible and turning the gaze on to the totalising accounts of 'dirty' and 'messed up' that so many girls are pushed to carry. This reminded me of Carol Hanisch's words: 'Women are messed over, not messed up' (1970, p. 87). This visibility created space for counter-stories of resistance and of what Rhea held precious, contributing to the life of others and building solidarity.

Trinocular vision

Rhea had been referred by her school for 'anger management' and 'not listening'. As a therapist, I could have unwittingly become a complicit partner in supporting the patriarchy in silencing her voice, thereby obscuring injustice and the ripples of the resistance that started in her school that day against the girls being kept buttoned up. Instead, I joined with her in a way that politicised what is continually privatised and brought forward Rhea's agency 'to return the gaze' on the discourses that were telling her that she was 'dirty' and were trying to silence her, calling her a slut or pushing her to cut herself.

When we work with children and young people, it is crucial to invite families or carers to be part of this 'journey' to build a multi-voiced collective that can contribute to broadening each other's identity (Denborough, 2008). As the Indian economist Amartya Sen described, 'our identities are robustly plural' (as cited in Denborough, 2018, p. 20). 'Shaming' had recruited Rhea's mother (a solo parent) into echoing its voice. It would have been easy to transfer the blame to her. By inviting Rhea's mother into our collaborative team, we were able to deconstruct 'shaming' and

document some funny, innovative ideas about how to stand up to the problematic notions of the 'good girl' and the 'good mother'. Rhea's mother took her own step of resistance by helping Rhea in her response to P.

Narrative therapy makes us question whether, in some ways, we are colluding with neoliberal ideas that manage to make themselves 'invisible by becoming common sense' (Sugarman, 2015, p. 1). If I had accepted and 'treated' Amrita's 'social anxiety', I would have rendered invisible and medicalised her discomfort after a transgression through which she was rendered 'silent'.

As Michael White (1995, pp. 45–46) put it, 'without doubt, the psychologist and psychotherapy play an entirely significant role in the reproduction of the dominant culture' and 'we can take a vantage points, perhaps at the margins of culture, from which we might review these dominant and taken for granted ideas and practices'. I like to visualise Michael White's vantage point as a place where I perch along with the young women, and together we use 'trinocular vision' to render visible acts of social injustice, turn the gaze back on normative judgment, acknowledge micro-acts of resistance and document, collectivise and invite contributions.

Just Girls collective

In the last 10 months, our organisation, Children First, has started many collectives, including a 'Just Girls' collective. Resources have been uploaded on our website³ and there are plans to start a podcast. Just Girls has invited conversations on collectivising experiences so that problems are not seen as personal failings but as issues of social justice, in response to which people can come together to cross-pollinate their insider knowledges and skills of living through letters, documents, poems and songs. I like to visualise it as a micro-social movement that started in the therapy space and has started creating tiny ripples. We hope to create an online gathering where women of all ages can contribute, find and offer support, and form a 'rhizomatic' social movement to create change (Reynolds, 2012).

At the core of the Just Girls collective is a belief that healing and justice go together. In the words of Ibuka workers (Denborough, 2010), 'We see in our work how justice is a form of healing and how healing is a form of justice'. We are cultural receivers of stories of suffering

(Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003) and while engaging with these stories, let us hold on to the possibility that the healing can go beyond the individual to create ripples and address larger issues of social justice.

In December 2019, the Indian Government passed two bills – the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act – which are seen as anti-Muslim because they deny immigrant Muslims citizenship. As soon as they were passed, there was immediate resistance from the community, largely led by women and students. This soon grew into a social movement across the country. Interestingly, at the protests I participated in, I met many of the young women I work with. There was no awkwardness. It seemed as if we were continuing our conversations on social justice from the therapy room to the street, in solidarity.

Notes

- ¹ *Justice for Nirbhaya* is a nationwide response to the brutal rape and murder of 23-year-old 'Nirbhaya'. *Narmada Bachao Andolan*, led by Medha Patkar, is a campaign of Indigenous people, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against a number of large dam projects. *Pinjra Tod* is a movement started by women students that aims to resist gender-based restrictions in college residences. *Besharam Morcha* (slut walk) is a movement with the slogan 'Our life, our body, our rights'. The *Shaheen Bagh* protest was a peaceful sit-in led by women in response to the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act.
- ² Please note that Ncazelo Mliilo has developed a form of narrative practice that uses the acronym COURAGE (www.phola.org/courage/). My use of the acronym COURAGE is not related to Ncazelo's although I recommend people engage with and learn from her beautiful work.
- ³ Just Girls website: www.childrenfirstindia.com/just-girls/

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