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POLICY/SOCIAL CONTEXT

These Young NGO Leaders Bring Depth of Experience to US Nonprofits

WRITTEN BY RICK COHEN CREATED ON THURSDAY, 18 SEPTEMBER 2014 13:51



A chance encounter with almost any of the Atlas Service Corps fellows would lead you to ask for their resumes and offer them jobs on the spot. These young women and men from countries around the world bring their impressive NGO experience to U.S.-based nonprofits, where they will spend the next year expanding learning new tools and skills to bring back to their home countries. Our bet is that their American NGO employers, if they're smart, will be the beneficiaries of an infusion of talent that they will be thrilled to have stumbled onto.

But for us, there's another dimension of learning to be gleaned from the Atlas Corps fellows: their motivations and intentions for being in the nonprofit sector. Talking to a handful of fellows, mostly from the current class about their expectations of this year's assignments, a number of themes emerge that might surprise.

Realistic about what they face

Most young-people fellowship programs come replete with an excess of rah-rah boosterism, especially from their U.S. nonprofit sponsors and hosts. However, these fellows, many from conflict zones or from ethnically and religiously divided nations, showed themselves to be clear-eyed realists about the nonprofit sector, what they might learn here, and what they will return to.

Trina Talukdar is a 26-year-old from Kolkata, India, who will be spending the next year with the American Express Foundation. She's no wide-eyed millennial; when she was 18, she began working on gender empowerment issues with commercial sex workers. Four years ago, she co-founded a nonprofit in Mumbai to provide education, counseling, and leadership training to commercial sex workers to help them escape a horrific life that some of them began during their adolescences and not by their own choosing.

Although infused with positive energy, Talukdar is no ingénue about the challenges ahead of her, sometimes revealed through what she learns from her Atlas Corps peers:

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in Uganda, the rise of sex-trafficking in Brazil because of the FIFA World Cup, corruption and funds embezzlement in reputed international nonprofits—the more overwhelmed I am by them. I want to work my whole life to make this world a better place for everyone.”

“But,” she asked in a brief presentation she delivered at an Atlas Corps gala in Washington earlier this month, “where do I start? Gender inequality? Human rights violations? Sexual abuse? Political Corruption? So, rather than be inspiring and motivational, my work in the nonprofit sector often makes me pessimistic and depressed.”

But for Talukdar and for many of the fellows, it is that awareness of the realities they and their NGO colleagues face that makes them so remarkable a class of activists. As one of the fellows from the sixteenth class of Atlas Corps fellows, Talukdar explained what keeps her in the game and generating creative and powerful solutions to the problems she confronted in her Mumbai-based nonprofit. Amidst a gathering of the Atlas Corps fellows, she discovered she “was surrounded by young leaders from around the world, who were working to bring equality and justice in the Middle East, empower communities to be disaster resilient in Latin American, end human trafficking in South Asia. I and my actions might be small and insignificant. But all of us put together, surely we amount to something. Surely, together, with all our little insignificances, we will add up to a better world that the world will remember us for.”

It is a different perspective than the attitude purveyed by too many social entrepreneurs that somehow their individual initiatives, due to some unique skill or insight that they happen to possess, supersede an appreciation for collective action. In India, Talukdar had also been part of [Ashoka](#), whose graduates sometimes see themselves as having a mandate to create something new on their own. One might imagine Talukdar’s cofounding of Kranti as another example of a young social entrepreneur compelled to create something new merely for the sake of newness, but that was hardly the case.

“I’m confident that no one else in India does what we do,” she explained to *NPQ*. Her research revealed that anti-trafficking organizations in India sometimes provided girls with skills with which they might earn money outside of commercial sex work, but the money involved was usually so minimal as to be insufficient to help them escape the sex trade. Some organizations advocated repatriation of girls back to their families, but that often resulted in girls returning to the “same vulnerable environments they came from,” Talukdar said. Her nonprofit focused on a different escape route out of the sex trade, offering the girls support and training to become more than marginal producers and sellers of handcrafts, opening up possibilities for them to think of themselves as more—musicians, economists, teachers—and thus to become more.

“No one was thinking of the girls as we do,” she added, “as leaders.”

Perhaps Atlas Corps fellows will find themselves driven to create new organizations when they go back, but their statements to *NPQ* suggested they were fundamentally interested in seeing themselves boost and advance the nonprofit sectors in their countries, not fulfill the needs of their egos.

Coming from South Sudan, perhaps the newest nation in the world, having split off from Sudan, but still rent with internecine strife, Lucy Poni worked with the Voice of America as a stringer in the past and is spending her fellowship at VOA as well. Previously, she was a producer for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting project in South Sudan, engaged in “training young women journalists and empowering them through training in gender sensitive radio reporting skills.”

A realist and an impressive journalist-activist, Poni talked about the lack of freedom of the press in South Sudan, the self-censorship that is required in a troubled political environment, the topics that she said are actually “taboo” for journalists there, and the multiple barriers faced by women in journalism there. Her work at the Nairobi-based Institute was in part “telling women about their rights and roles...especially where women have no rights...[and] going to the field to train women to do their radio programs.” Poni wants to be in a role where she encourages women to go into journalism as a career, asking, “How do we let women know their rights, help them speak out, and even speak on radio to share their experiences?” What seems most important about Poni is her self-presentation as part of a cause and a movement, as a servant to a cause that she knows faces substantial political and cultural problems.

Building democracy

When Trina Talukdar talks about the empowerment of girls, it isn’t just a matter of escaping the sex trade, but taking control of their lives and of society as leaders. Many of the Atlas Corps fellows who spoke with the *Nonprofit Quarterly* cited interest in leadership development, but it came across as much more than the traditional use of the concept in the U.S. When Lucy Poni addresses empowerment and leadership development, she is talking about providing platforms—in her case, through radio and other media—for women to tell their stories and to take action, despite inordinate obstacles limiting their rights.

That’s not just leadership development, but building democracy. Younas Alam Chowdry is a young Pakistani who is actually being hosted by the Atlas Corps itself. Only 26, Chowdry founded a street theater group, the [Laal Theater](#), in 2009, which the Atlas Corps describes as “a community-oriented street theater group that has trained children and adults from underprivileged communities to highlight social issues through performing arts.” To *NPQ*, he described his technique as “theater of the oppressed,” an approach that he said emanated from Brazil. Our recollection of the concept is that the [theater of the oppressed technique](#) was developed by Augusto Boal, consistent with the techniques of education and mobilization developed by the iconic Brazilian educator Paulo Freire.

To do that kind of work in street theater, Chowdry, like Poni in journalism, has to navigate the shoals of what

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will and won't be accepted by political authorities. He told us of Pakistani authorities shutting down the Facebook pages of various groups, including the Laal Theater, for having crossed into realms of politics that the government didn't find comfortable. ([Pakistan's Facebook shutdown was widely reported in the U.S. press.](#)) As Chowdry noted, in order to maintain the Theater's work—which integrates poetry and music with theater—without getting it shut down, whether directly or lumped in with others, the challenge is to continue “doing hard hitting work, but also doing work that is not very political in order that the effort continues.” It is the real life of democracy, or the limits of democracy, in places like Pakistan and South Sudan.

Another Pakistani fellow, Prem Sagar, is working in areas of social protest that put him and his colleagues in conflict not only with government authorities, but international NGOs as well. Prior to becoming an Atlas Corps fellow and being placed at the Sindh Community Mobilization Program of International Relief and Development, a U.S.-based NGO, Sagar was working on field teams in the Sindh province, addressing maternal, newborn, and child health. He'd previously worked as a project manager with Save the Children, providing health and education services to 86,000 children working in Pakistan's cotton fields.

That work took him directly into the arena of public policy. He noted, for example, that there are 157 laws (he called them “legislations”) on the rights of children in Pakistan, including child and maternal health, but only a handful are being implemented. Sagar added that the International Labor Organization has banned 43 occupations for children, but children are employed in many of those industries throughout Pakistan. There is no simple answer, but the comprehensive structure of what is needed is obvious—advocacy.

Women's rights

It may be coincidence, but a strong theme of the work of many of the Atlas Corps fellows concerns advancing women's rights. Trina Talukdar getting girls out of the sex trade in Mumbai, Lucy Poni's work empowering women to tell their own stories as journalists in South Sudan, and Prem Sagar's activities for child and maternal health are just three examples. For some time, many people have suggested that the cutting edge of social change worldwide is going to involve changing the fundamental circumstances of women. The Atlas Corps fellows may implicitly carry that message forward, but that kind of change requires an understanding of the different circumstances that women around the world face.

Smiti Gahrotra, 28, had been working in India on women's issues, particularly with children in the family courts, and saw the limited options present for women. Without a doubt, her background presented tremendous opportunities for knowledge and insight to her U.S. host, the Nike Foundation, which has a strong commitment to women's issues around the world. The analysis that Gahrotra shared with *Nonprofit Quarterly* makes it clear that she understands women's issues in a way that will be hugely valuable to Nike:

“In India, when you are a woman, you are pretty much looked down upon. Your place is to be at home and tend to the family. We don't have this concept that the male counterpart will support you in raising the family. If you want to go outside and work outside, you still have to take care of the family; that comes first. You can never take decisions independently, and there's no concept of discussing your issues or problems outside of the home.”

She added a devastating critique of politicians' attitudes to the longtime but [recently highly publicized problem of rape in India](#). Some politicians, she said, look at rape cases as “boys will be boys, they should be forgiven for their acts, the women were provoking the boys.... For women, it will still be your fault.”

As a result, Gahrotra said, “With these pressures, we have a very high rate of suicides, especially among adolescent girls. There's no support structure.” She added, “I want to help these girls. My aim is to help girls realize their potential, that they have a potential, that they're there not just for bearing children, but they are also individuals.” Her role with Nike adds cultural competency to Nike's women's programs, especially as they relate to the needs of the 73 million adolescent girls in India and girls throughout the subcontinent. But her analysis of helping girls points to the importance of advancing women's rights as a response to overall issues like poverty and oppression. “How can you have a program that works for girls and doesn't work for others?” she asked. Of course, the lesson is that helping girls helps society overall.

Like some of the others, Gahrotra doesn't seem to have fallen prey to the siren's call of social entrepreneurship. “For me, I don't want to be a social entrepreneur,” she noted. “I'd lose touch with the field, I'd would get stuck in all the administration. I'm a field person, a project person.” Even if Gahrotra isn't an entrepreneur, she brings an innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial mindset to the work by necessity, due to the scale of the challenge of the needs of girls and women in India—work that is likely to occur within a large organization.

Learning from the network

It is difficult to interview these young men and women serving as Atlas Corps fellows and not feel like they are powerful teachers that have much more to teach than they realize. But like Gahrotra at the Nike Foundation, part of what they have to contribute to their U.S. hosts is the diversity of their knowledge from around the world, addressing issues that U.S. NGOs may not appreciate as readily as they should.

As for the fellows themselves, as they participate in Atlas Corps trainings and webinars, they all look toward a significant additional benefit from their experience in the Corps: access to 300 other fellows, a network of contacts, and expertise they plan to draw on throughout their lives. In Trina Talukdar's words, “What happens after the fellowship...so much happens after you've gone back, as well. This network of fellows remains with you for life. Now I feel like I could go work in and consult with a project in any part of the world and I would have a network to fall back on.”

That may be the untapped story of the Atlas Corps. It isn't that they've generated a program of placing young talented activists from countries in varying states of development with U.S. NGOs, where they can learn whatever Nike, Voice of America, and IRD can teach. Rather, the Atlas Corps is linking people from around the world who are committed to women's rights and democracy. It isn't, as Trina said in her talk at the Atlas Corps gala, just that the work of individual fellows will add up to something good. It is that they are building a network that will become an infrastructure of allies committed to democracy and social change.

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