

ART ART

# Franziska Greber's work highlights the survivors of violence

**Sebanti Sarkar**

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## 'Women in the Dark,' Swiss artist Franziska Greber's work throws light on the survivors of violence

**F**or a while public anger raged on every kind of media. There were throngs at the gate of the school where a four-year old girl had been raped by two teachers. Then the assurance of justice, reports of investigations and arrests helped everyone to “move on.” Only the little girl, who the news reported as “weeping incessantly, clinging desperately to her mother” remained with the burden of surviving in our society. Would she care to reach out to us ever again or would the shadow of fear, shame and hurt keep her in mute isolation like so many other women and children?

An exhibition like 'Women in the Dark' by Franziska Greber seemed to hold out hope. This was a feminist art project that resulted in three site-specific installations titled, 'Wave,' 'Resistance' and 'Echo.'

Standing inside the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata's iconic colonial monument, one was faced with a tsunami of voices. A Wave built out of white and red dupattas towered above the viewers in a curve as though about to come down with crashing velocity. On closer inspection, one found one could read the red-ink script on the dupattas.



Messages to Society written by 216 Indian women, all survivors of violence, about their experiences, their suffering and feelings of injustice, fear, sorrow and loneliness. The narrative of discrimination and exploitation of women, common to India and the world.



In another room, the fabric 'wave' frothed and swirled. On the ground a grovelling woman, apparently hidden under blood red linen, seemed to reach out a hand for help. But almost

at the same time the hand seemed to discover in its own shadow the strength for Resistance.



Women in the dark, an art exhibition, by Swiss artist Franziska Greber

And the wave of voices raced up a wall and leapt out of a window. Outdoors, the wave of dupattas cascaded down. A gash of blood-red shocked the people moving up the grand stairs to the entrance. There was something deliberately impolite about the limp rag hanging there against the walls. Even though most of it was whiter than the old marble, it was like a declaration of that which we like to cover up or ignore. As if all those voices were asking us what we choose to do about it.

## Cloth as a medium

Franziska Greber, an artist and psychotherapist from Switzerland, launched the project in Zimbabwe in 2016. She had been counselling women and suddenly realised that as an artist she should be able to give these women an opportunity to come out from the festering inner darkness and address society. On an impulse she bought a load of white blouses and red permanent markers.

“In my project, I use clothes as an art medium, because they are laden with social, historical and cultural implications. Female garments also reflect gender biases. The writing with red permanent markers, which run like a bloodline over the white space remind of violence, torture and other painful pictures. But red also represents love and life,” said Franziska in Kolkata.



Swiss artist Franziska Greber

In Zimbabwe, Franziska reached out to local women through a friend, who is herself a ‘woman in the dark.’ The whole approach was on an intimate level, “the women felt they

were being taken seriously and liked being involved.”

In Kolkata, Franziska collaborated with Swayam, a 22-year old support group for women survivors of violence. The group led by Anuradha Kapoor expanded the title of the project to “Voices of Courage and Sorrow – WOMEN IN THE DARK Speak Out.”

This was a project that needed sensitive handling, so Anuradha urged the artist to use red bordered dupattas to make the project culturally more acceptable to the women of Bengal. Swayam then organised workshops of its women survivors in Hazra, Metiabruz and Diamond Harbour.

After several days of interaction, in which the women were encouraged to exchange memories of their past joys and sorrows, the dupattas and red markers were given to them so that they could write and communicate, (anonymously if they liked) with the community at large.

## Striking messages

And so 216 striking dupattas in four languages – Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and English were created. Some women narrated the stories of their lives, some asked for help and understanding. Many were monologues: about not giving in, about keeping self esteem by remembering how beautiful and strong they are, pledges of not letting the assaults and discriminations perpetuate and affect their children. Some dupattas were beautifully embellished with drawings.

But Franziska used many more dupattas, blank ones for all those women she was not able to reach, or those who were still not able to bring themselves to speak out. In China such blank scarves were the majority. Franziska's project attracted only five written blouses. So she created a huge globe of white empty blouses and a red cord like a blood vessel leading to five blouses on the ground with messages in red ink. When the show ended Franziska found a sixth blouse with writing in black ink that had been secretly left by a visitor. Reactions to her show can be quite unexpected. “At Victoria Memorial, there was this man who felt we were desecrating the monument by organising such a show. And another dragged his wife away because he believed the show might corrupt her, put ideas in her head,” said Anuradha, who is trying to find the funds to take the show to other parts of India.

Franziska is happy at the freedom the VMH authorities gave her to select spots for her installations. The project of collecting messages on white blouses and scarves through various organisations is on in Switzerland, Mauritius and the US. So look out for more such unusual exhibitions in 2018. And the project will culminate with installations with messages from all over the world.

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