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## *editor's insight*

Nevil Gibson | Friday January 04, 2013



# The tragedies that generate change

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It is a sad commentary on human affairs that it takes a tragedy or two to kick off enough public support to get things done.

Among the biggest stories of 2012 were those of two young women who fell victim to monstrous attacks and galvanised people in Pakistan and India into tackling their appalling treatment of women.

Those countries are not alone, of course, and by any generous account equal rights for women are missing – for both cultural and religious reasons – in most of Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

If you include all Muslim countries as well as India and China, that must account for the majority of the world's population.

Only this week, the BBC reported the bizarre case in Aceh, a sharia law state in Indonesia, where female passengers have been banned from straddling motorbikes behind male drivers.

Under the new regulation, a mayor responsible for the ban says the women are only allowed to sit "side-saddle" because straddling the bike seat violates Islamic values.

"When you see a woman straddle, she looks like a man. But if she sits side-saddle, she looks like a woman," the (male) mayor is quoted as saying.

On a more serious note, my vote for woman of the year is Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai, who is still undergoing hospital treatment in Birmingham after being shot in the head by a Taliban gunman for backing women's rights and their right to an education.

The [latest report on her progress](#) says Malala will undergo cranial reconstruction surgery in late January or early February as part of her long-term recovery.

While the case sparked a desire for change across Pakistan, Malala is not expected to return there because she is likely to secure permanent residence in the UK after her father was granted a job with the Pakistani consulate in Birmingham.

More recently, the focus has fallen on India, which calls itself the world's largest democracy and fancies it's a far more sophisticated and advanced place than Pakistan.

The [widely reported rape and murder](#) of an unnamed woman in Delhi has shocked a nation that already ranks

as [the worst G20 country](#) in which to be a woman.

### A New Zealander's experience

Not so long ago, I wrote about Dunedin woman [Lisa Scott's experiences](#), outlined in her book *Travels With My Economist*.

It's all anecdotal, though backed up by media stories, but still appalling:

*From her arrival in "slobbering humidity," Ms Scott finds it hard to adjust her feminist tendencies to the social and economic realities, which she marks off in chapters on hygiene and sanitation (non-existent), treatment of women (universally bad), the caste system (also bad).*

*Among encounters of the worst kind, she describes an indecency performed on her on a bus, a beauty treatment, the opulence of an upper class dinner party and the double standards of morality.*

*The latter includes the high level of ignorance culled from sex advice columns in the vociferous India media, "which revels in gory pictures of violent crime, accidents and self-immolation."*

If this is not enough to convince you, [the BBC has this description](#) of how India treats its women:

*Female foetuses are aborted and baby girls killed after birth, leading to an appallingly skewed sex ratio. Many of those who survive face discrimination, prejudice, violence and neglect all their lives, as single or married women.*

The report goes on to detail crime statistics before concluding:

[New research](#) by economists Siwan Anderson and Debraj Ray estimates that in India, more than 2m women are missing in a given year.

*The economists found that roughly 12% of the missing women disappear at birth, 25% die in childhood, 18% at the reproductive ages, and 45% at older ages.*

*They found that women died more from "injuries" in a given year than while giving birth - injuries, they say, "appear to be indicator of violence against women."*

*Deaths from fire-related incidents, they say, is a major cause - each year more than 100,000 women are killed by fires in India. The researchers say many cases could be linked to demands over a dowry leading to women being set on fire. Research also found a large number of women died of heart diseases.*

*These findings point to life-long neglect of women in India. It also proves that a strong preference for sons over daughters - leading to sex selective abortions - is just part of the story.*

The Economist holds out [hope for change](#):

*The reason people took to the streets is that a growing middle class is uniting to make its voice heard. The hope is that their protests will at last mark an advance for India's beleaguered women.*

### Adieu to Depardieu

Actor Gérard Depardieu occupies a place in French cinema that combines the epic stature of John Wayne, the ubiquity of Clint Eastwood and the reputation of Jack Nicholson, among other giants I could name.

Depardieu has appeared in many of France's greatest movies, not surprising considering he has more than 180 credits ([IMDB has most of them](#)).

He is [more than a legend](#) in his lunchtime for his liking of food, wine and motorbikes (17 accidents and counting). He is briefly seen in Ang Lee's remarkable adaptation of *Life of Pi* as an ill-fated ship's cook.

He is also an anti-socialist and has joined a rush of wealthy and high-paid French people who have elected to

move overseas to escape President Hollande's punitive tax plans to create a top rate of 75%. This cuts in when earnings top one million euros.

Depardieu says he has paid €145 million in taxes since he began working as a printer at age 14.

He has moved to small town in Belgium that is 800m from the French border but has since gone one better by [obtaining Russian citizenship](#) and renouncing his French passport

His remark that Russia is a "great democracy" may not be the wisest he has made but it fits a tradition that also once had actress Marion Cotillard holding [conspiracy views about the 9-11 attacks](#).

Taxes in Russia are a friendly flat 13% and as a chum and admirer of President Putin he will certainly be appearing in more films such as *Rasputin*, in which he plays the eponymous role.

Depardieu is not alone in his views – *Le Figaro* says:

"In wanting to leave his country, what [Depardieu] is denouncing is a French oppression. It is getting worse and becoming intolerable. This oppression is intellectual, with its weighty conformity; it is moral, with its institutionalised relativism; it is fiscal, with its confiscatory taxes."

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