

From One Maternity Ward, a Growing World



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On Monday, as the United Nations Population Fund estimated the world's population has reached seven billion, we asked [Lynsey Addario](#) to photograph women giving birth in a maternity ward in India. Ms. Addario has spent years covering women's health issues worldwide, from Sierra Leone to Pakistan. She spent most of Monday traveling with [Sruthi Gottipati](#) from hospital to hospital in New Delhi, where she has been based for two years. They were given access to the maternity ward at Kasturba Hospital in Delhi's Old City. The hospital, which has about 350 maternity beds, delivers from 30 to 50 babies every day.

The assignment comes as we launch a new project on Lens, "[Picturing 7 Billion](#)." We need your help to create a photographic time capsule for these children. Make a photograph that documents how we live today. In 20 years, what should these babies know about the world they have inherited? For more information, visit [this post](#). [Submit](#) your photographs [here](#).

Nadia Sussman and Kerri MacDonald spoke over the phone with Ms. Addario, who is also expecting — she's seven months pregnant. "Photographing this story," she said, "was a bit disconcerting." Her words, below, have been edited and condensed into a narrative.

Show Them Our World

[Picturing 7 Billion](#)



As the seven billionth person enters the world, we are asking readers to show the newest generation what the world looks like today. Click [here](#) to submit your photo to the [project](#).

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I've been photographing maternal health issues for many years now. I've spent days in maternity wards all around the world, from Haiti to Africa, Sierra Leone, Congo, Afghanistan, Pakistan. So I'm quite accustomed to being in there. And actually, for years when I was photographing in these places, I always said: "I'm never getting pregnant. I'm never having a child. This is the most horrible thing."

Because you walk into these wards and women are screaming at the top of their lungs. They're in pain. There's blood everywhere. There's often blood on the floor. Last year, when I was photographing a [maternal health story in Sierra Leone](#), I actually watched a woman bleed to death on the floor in front of me. There was not a single doctor to come in and save her or attend to her. So I'm quite accustomed to seeing complicated cases and pretty dire conditions in hospitals.

We went to Chandni Chowk, the Old City, and went into Kasturba Hospital. We walked in and there was a medical superintendent present. It happened to be the biggest maternity hospital in Delhi, if not in Asia. There were 350 maternity beds. The woman was very nice. I explained to her what we were doing, that we wanted to do this project on seven billion and that I myself am seven months pregnant.

There were dozens of women in labor. Most of them weren't making much noise, but the conditions were pretty rudimentary. But the one thing that really set the hospital apart was that there are trained professionals. There were two doctors, maybe even three. They were very aware of everyone's condition. They were following people closely. Although the hospital looked pretty basic, I did feel as if the doctors knew what they were doing. That was actually quite reassuring, because in some of the hospitals I've been in there are times when there are only midwives present, and there *are* no doctors. So when there are complications, the women have nowhere to go.



Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

Usually I go into these wards, and I must seem like such an outsider. This time I went in and I'm a little more than two months away from delivering my own child, so it's terrifying, actually. The first thing I saw was a woman who had just delivered a baby while walking to her bed. I was so shocked. I had never seen something like that. I stayed in the corner, because I had literally just walked in so I didn't want to offend anyone.

It's scary to see those things when I'm about to deliver. My first reaction is: "Oh my God. I don't want this baby and I don't want to have to deliver it." But obviously, there's no turning back.

There were several points throughout the afternoon when it was just too graphic to photograph. When you're a woman, you're privy to seeing things women can see — and that means naked women and women with their legs open — things that are not appropriate for any publication. So the trick is to find a way to show that drama without actually showing what's happening. It's hard to do, and it's important to be respectful to the people that you're photographing. In a maternity ward/health story, it's hard because things are very graphic and women *are* very exposed.

Usually I'm with a doctor or a nurse or a midwife who can introduce me to the patients, and I can hang out there without necessarily shooting right away. But on Monday, I actually had to walk in and start shooting almost immediately. It's quite uncomfortable. It *is* intrusive, and that's not the way I like to work. I like to take my time and I like to really make people feel comfortable. So I went to the doctors and asked them to please explain to the women what we were doing. We did that, and we explained to all the women that the world's population was hitting seven billion, and they understood.

One woman I photographed giving birth, Vidanti Mishra, talked a little bit about delivering a child in the world today when there is such a huge population. She was saying she has concerns about feeding her children — she does have concerns about raising her child in such a poor world. That was interesting to hear, because a lot of these women don't articulate these things. Even in a maternity ward like the Kasturba Hospital, where it is so huge and there are so many women delivering, most of the women are not concerned about the world population and what's happening outside of their own worlds. Most of them are most concerned about how they're going to feed their children and how they'll provide a life for their children in a place like India.

I think that the world is always evolving; it's always growing; it's always changing. I think as human beings, we continue to adapt ourselves to those changes. Whether the population keeps growing, we adapt. So for me, that's not the bigger concern. It was just really scary actually watching these women going through so much pain knowing that I'm going to be there very shortly.

As I prepare to be in a city like Delhi, which is so dense with people, and to be in a maternity ward where all these women around me are delivering children, I realized that at the final moments, we all come down to the same thing. Watching a baby come out and watching the start of a new life is the most incredible thing that one can witness. Really.

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