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## **Campaigns against Gender Violence (1977-1993)**

*Vibhuti Patel*

The women's movement in India launched campaigns against rape, domestic violence, sexism in advertisements as well as against state repression during caste and communal riots in the early eighties. Before that, during the post-emergency period of 1977-1980, small groups of women's rights activists in Hyderabad, Bombay, Delhi and Madras had started taking up individual cases of custodial rape, deaths of housewives under mysterious circumstances and excesses by the state enforcement machinery during caste/communal riots which had increased in number and intensity of violence. The mass of poor women involved in the struggles of the tribal people, the industrial working classes and the Dalit movement faced misogyny from the members of their own Organisation, social ostracism and violence perpetrated by the police, military and paramilitary forces. With these kinds of experiences of individual, institutional and systemic violence, newly emerging women's groups felt the necessity to put violence against women on the political agenda. While building up systematic campaigns in different socio-cultural contexts and among women of different economic backgrounds and political persuasions, they had to evolve day-to-day tactics to be effective and long-term strategies to carve out more space for women to gain gender justice within the system.

### **Evolution of the Campaign Culture**

The decade of the eighties was marked by the campaign culture in which women's groups with different priorities and ideological positions had to evolve a network amongst themselves to combat powerful patriarchal forces operating within the institution of family, state and civil society. Among the political groups and civil liberties groups, violence against women became a hotly debated issue in the post-emergency period. Excesses by the authorities on women political prisoners (nearly 5000 in number) had generated new awareness about the question of gender violence. The democratic rights organisations had started highlighting rapes of poor and helpless women by the policemen in Delhi, Ludhiana and Hyderabad. Detailed reports based on first-hand information collected by the investigation teams instituted by the democratic rights and civil liberties organisations in Delhi, Bombay, Hyderabad and Calcutta resulted in petitions and public interest litigations against violence

against women by powerful forces. Newly emerging women's groups learnt a lot from these organisations, but at the same time found them inadequate because they refused to highlight violence against women perpetrated by men of the oppressed community, the oppressed caste and the working class. The issue of domestic violence created a major rift between the male-dominated progressive groups who refused to accept it as a public issue and the women's groups who came out with a slogan 'the personal is political.' While the progressive groups talked of world peace, the women's groups retorted by shouting 'peace begins at home.'

### **Campaigns Against Systemic Violence**

Clarity in perspective was a must to build up campaigns against systemic Violence. Issue-based study-circles, circulation of hand-written or typed copies of papers, small-group discussions, resulted in different trends of thinking on gender violence on the following lines:

For the liberal activists in the civil liberties groups, sanctity of the individual was an issue of prime concern. Hence any citizen who was violated had to take recourse to Constitutional means of redressal for justice, by approaching the existing judicial system.

The democratic rights organisations represented the views of the far-left groups and gave a call for direct actions which confronted the state.

The religious and puritanical groups were perturbed by the violation of 'chastity' and the 'purity' of women.

The feminists saw violence against women as an outcome of the subordination of women - a weapon to terrorise, intimidate and humiliate women.

On an issue-to issue basis, representatives of these four trends either came together or campaigned from their own platforms. Initially, there was a tremendous aversion to dialoguing with the representatives of the state apparatus - the police, the legal machinery, the Law Commission and the bureaucracy. But in course of time, they realised that there was no other way of getting redressal for the women victims of violence but to activate the existing judicial system and to work in collaboration with the police, the courts and the medico-legal machinery.

## **Campaigns Against Violence Against Individuals or Groups of Women**

Building up campaigns in an atmosphere of large-scale ignorance about women's Constitutional rights forced the women's groups to approach the print media. The English press responded immediately, but the regional language press - in the beginning - made sensational use of the issue. Publicity for the campaigns in news- papers, periodicals, radio and television generated a sympathetic atmosphere for women's groups and played a crucial role towards educating the public. To combat the pernicious tendency to bait the victims of violence, women's groups and individual activists (men and women), put up poster exhibitions, slide shows, street-theatre and musical ballets. The use of the folk-medium in the cultural programmes enhanced the effectiveness of the campaign. Role-play as an instrument to highlight the message and shatter myths about rape, domestic violence, double standards of sexual morality was found to be extremely effective. Thus street-theatre, intimate theatre and the audio-visual media were given prime importance by women's groups.

In 1982, they organised a 15-day national level cultural workshop in which the women activists learnt the skills to make audio-visual resource material to build a campaign. In the Indian women's movement, the songs against violence against women have motivated many -women to be actively involved in campaigning. Women discovered their own creativity while writing skits, plays and songs and their own tradition of folk-songs and dance while talking to women of their mothers' and grandmothers' generation.

## **The Empowering Influence of Shared Experience**

In the initial period of campaign-building, the most empowering influence was that of sharing of experience of violence in one's own life, in the neighbourhood, in the community and at the workplace. This broke the isolation brought about due to guilt and helplessness in which women find themselves when confronted by violence. The common experience of gender violence which cuts across class, caste, religious and cultural boundaries created a bond among the women to come together for collective action.

Initially, there was a total aversion to the idea of counselling by experts such as psychotherapists or professional social workers. The women's rights groups believed in mutual counselling where two or more women with similar experiences talked to each other in an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality and decided on the line of action. An understanding exists that without the victim's consent, no information should be published. The demand for public action and political campaign must come from the women concerned.

In four national conferences of the women's movement (during the decade 1980-1990), violence against women has been a continuous theme. Rural, urban and tribal women evolved a wide range of methods to combat violence. While poor women in Rajasthan fought against sexual advances of the contractor or supervisor by parading him naked, the rural women of Uttar Pradesh declared a strike from housework to protest against beatings by drunkard husbands. Tribal women from Dhulia and Uttarakhand broke pots of liquor to prevent domestic violence. Women slum-dwellers of Karnataka decided to strip themselves in front of the police station to protest against sexual harassment by police constables in their areas.

### **Methods of Discussion at Workshops, Seminars and Conferences**

It is found that relating incidents of violence against women is a totally ineffective method of conveying one's message. The women's groups have discovered that narrating an actual incident of violence in story form, reciting poetry describing dowry-murder or gang-rape, evolving songs on domestic violence, or slide shows on gender violence evoke better response from the audience. Analysis from the women's perspective of epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharat of incidents of violence is done by Madhubani painters in the form of a series of posters on a long piece of cloth which is displayed at conferences, workshops or seminars.

In the context of rising religious chauvinism, this kind of exhibition makes a powerful statement about gender violence condoned by institutionalised religion. Documentary films or docu-dramas on selective abortion of female foetuses, bride-burning, sexual assault, sati and coercion in family planning programmes have sensitised large sections of society - from school and college-going students and teachers, media-persons, legal experts, police officials to citizens at large.

It is necessary to deal with the issue from a multi-faced angle. The operational dimensions dealing with myths and reality of gender violence are many - how to approach the judicial system, the setting up of help-lines, the education in techniques of counselling which involves a sympathetic hearing of the victim without sitting in moral judgement, whether to go for media publicity or not, precautionary measures when one pays home-visits, the importance of winning the confidence of the neighbours, when or how to mobilise public opinion, the need for appropriate songs, slogans, posters and the code of conduct to be observed.

## **Leaflets and Pamphlets of the Women's Movement**

Publicity material generated by the women's movement in cases of violence against women is marked by a mix of emotive-poetic language and a militant stance. Most of the urban-based groups prepare their leaflets and pamphlets in the local language and a link language. Material for campaign building is generally written in a lucid, jargon-free language, and the slogans which represent the demands of the group are usually catchy ones. Issue-based pamphlets such as on rape laws, dowry laws, domestic violence, the Deorala sati incident, report of the National Conference on Rape, amniocentesis tests and selective abortion of female fetuses, contraceptive techniques, reports of investigation teams on different cases of violence have proved to be very useful to educate the public. They provide much needed resource material for training workshops, for scholars and journalists and for making films and other audio-visual materials. There are very few books or special issues of serious periodicals focussing on gender violence. In this context, leaflets and pamphlets on the subject published by different non-government organisations, human rights organisations and women's groups, both in English and regional languages of India, have proved to be very useful for new entrants to the cause. It is sad that there is no educational material on gender violence from a psychological or behavioral science perspective. Sexual abuse of children and pornography are other relatively untouched areas.

## **Women's Rights Advocates and the Audio-visual Media**

Initially there was a communication gap between the women's groups dealing with gender violence and the media personnel. Women's groups were wary of the instrumentalist use of women's tragedy by the media barons working for commercial concerns. Media personnel have their own stereotyped understanding of causes of gender violence. Journalists and film-makers tended to trivialise the victims of violence by the voyeuristic use of camera angles, sexist humour, sensational titles which made the women's groups extremely chary of dealing with them.

Several campaigns were launched against the degrading portrayal of women in films and against newspapers for reports on victims of violence which concentrated on their looks, dress or nature. Dialogues with media persons through letters to the editors of national newspapers, through lectures initiated by the mass communication institutes and through panel discussions have helped to create an atmosphere of trust and many suggestions of the women's movement have been incorporated in the unwritten code of conduct of the communication media. An increasing number of women joining journalism or film and theatre direction has also helped the process. Many women's rights

activists have overcome the initial antipathy towards writing for mainstream newspapers or magazines and participating in radio and television programmes. Women's groups have published their newsletters and periodicals in regional languages to reach out to their sympathisers.

### **Campaigns by the Political Parties**

Violence against women has proved to be an effective bogey for the political parties to silence their adversaries. When they realised that the Indian women were serious about the issue, they also joined the bandwagon. For the opposition party, it became a law and order issue which could be used to defame the ruling party. Coming in the wake of the publicity which surrounded Maya Tyagi, charged with dacoity, and gang-raped in a police station in 1980, the nationwide anti-rape campaign initiated by the autonomous women's groups made the political parties aware that women were a constituency. The incident was capitalised upon by the opposition to prove how inefficient the ruling party was. All major political parties have been guilty of making opportunistic use of cases of gender violence.

Women's groups in Pune and Bangalore have demanded that all candidates standing for election (from the village council level to the Parliament level), should be boycotted if they had records of ill-treating women. Vimochana's campaign in Bangalore against such candidates resulted in all of them losing their seats in the last election. The Forum for Women and Politics (Delhi) and Women's Liberation Co-ordination Committee (Maharashtra) have made similar demands. In rhetoric, the parliamentary parties have included the issue of gender violence in their election manifestos. But in praxis, they have come up with contradictory positions; for example some leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party advocated voluntary sati. Only on the issue of antenatal sex determination tests, the All-party Parliamentary Committee had a consensus, but when it came to passing the bill, none of them demanded prompt action.

### **Campaigns Against Gender Violence by the State Apparatus (The Information and Broadcasting Department of the Government of India)**

The initiative of the campaign against gender violence came from the Government of Maharashtra around the end of the 1975-1985 UN decade. It sponsored the poster exhibition prepared by a Pune-based feminist group and circulated it nationally. The same government passed an act to regulate antenatal sex-determination tests. After the Government of India signed the charter on media of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategy (1985-2000 A.D.), the government-controlled media is giving top priority to the issue.

Legal awareness about the Constitution to deal with gender violence is given major importance by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry of the Government of India. The scripts for films or serials, panel discussions and educational programmes on the theme of gender violence have received top priority in recent times on the electronic media. The unequal sex-ratio (929 women to 1000 men), the lowest in the history of the Census, has shocked the policy makers into realising that violence against women is the root cause that affects the survival of women. The first comprehensive document on Indian women, *Towards Equality*, published in 1974, had ignored this issue, but the latest document, the National Perspective Plan for Women (1988-2000 A.D.), had incorporated the demands of the women's movement in India. The National Commission for Women set up by the Government of India has taken up several cases of violence against women perpetrated by the custodians of law and order in different parts of India.

### **Conceptual Understanding and Campaigns**

To build up an effective campaign, it is very important to concentrate on cadre-building and generating material that creates conceptual clarity about underlying values in each act of gender violence. Women's groups have so far given major importance to preventive measures - evolving support structures to help the victims of violence, filing legal cases, helping women rebuild their lives. But women activists are increasingly realising that this is not enough and we must strike at the root cause of violence. What needs to be changed is the value system and the existing structures that engender violence against women. So far, women's groups have shunned discussion on the subject with men. But it is increasingly felt that men should be involved in the process of combating violence against women. Women's sexuality is socially constructed and given the patriarchal control over their existence, it becomes imperative that men are drawn into the process of rethinking. The power equation that exists between men and women needs to be deconstructed through an honest exchange of ideas. Deep-rooted notions of 'the good woman vs. the bad woman, ' 'she deserves it', 'today's women expect too much,' need to be discussed in an atmosphere where men need not be defensive. In this context, organisations of men against gender violence should not be laughed at. Instead, the women's rights activists should hold dialogues with them on issues such as what we mean by objectification of women, violation of women's dignity, the terms sexist and sexism, indecent portrayal of women vs. aesthetically appealing portrayal of a human being.

### **Networking for Effective Campaign Building**

To reckon with the multifaceted dimensions of violence against women, networking at the local, national and global levels is a must. In any cultural

context, patriarchal control over women's sexuality, fertility and labour manifests itself in physical and psychological violence against the relatively powerless section, namely children, women, ethnic minorities, oppressed castes and religious minorities. We need to contextualise gender violence within this ideological matrix, so that we can identify the forces with whom we need to network.

In every section of society, due to multiplicity of contradictory discourses, the women's movement manages to find its tactical allies. A very patriarchal husband may turn out to be a compassionate brother or a father who is prepared to stake his all to get justice for a victimised sister or daughter. This can become an entry point. The younger generation of men who have grown with the women's movement are attuned to the women's rights perspective. Honest and sincere, hardworking and altruistic elements within the state apparatus - police, judges, administrative officers, medical social workers, psychiatrists who are also social workers, personnel officers in the corporate world - have supported women's rights organisations while dealing with individual cases of violence or by sponsoring their campaigns. Many of them have taken the initiative in organising gender-training programmes in their institution. Effective and purposeful networking with these elements can result in making the campaigns against gender violence more meaningful by bringing immediate changes in women's lives.

### *Widening Horizons*

Conflicting interests in cases of gender violence generated due to identity politics have forced women's rights activists to question traditional forms and methods of campaigning. Certain militant slogans used by women's groups in the past have been used by the jingoist forces to escalate violence against women of minority groups. The imagery of fire, Kali or Durga as destroyers of evil, the Shakti cult has been used to generate propaganda against the Muslims. In this context, there is a lot of rethinking going on about the appropriate slogans and symbols, images and language.

Another important issue is the juxtaposing of women's plight in terms of 'our women' and 'their women.' Women's rights organisations have always opposed the criminalisation of politics that provokes men and women from opposing camps into using women's bodies to settle accounts with each other. In the recent past there have been several incidents where women from the majority community have actively participated in escalating violence against the women of the minority community. Fundamentalist and chauvinistic forces all over the world have been supported by an equal number of women as they are supported by men. These experiences have put the feminist discourse on a totally different

plane where the concept of universal sisterhood needs to be re-examined. In the final analysis, we come to a perspective that gender violence is a violation of human rights that needs to be combated by both men and women who believe in justice for all citizens irrespective of their class, caste, racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds.

### ***International Campaign Building***

In an era of globalisation, the campaign against gender violence has also acquired a global dimension. The efforts of women's organisations all over the globe have culminated in a campaign to get the clause "Violence against women is violation of human rights" included in the UN charter on human rights. Women's groups in India have taken this campaign initiated by the Centre for Global Issues and Women's Leadership quite seriously. In the UN tribunal on Violence Against Women - Rape as a War Crime, many feminists made presentations on the Indian situation. Any minor campaign built up locally has its limitations. Unless it is connected globally, it does not make much impact in terms of legal provisions, response of -the state enforcement machinery, code of conduct of the military and paramilitary forces, media and political parties. The women's movement in India has gained a lot in terms of successful campaign-building from resource material from the International Women's Tribune Centre, New York, literature from Rape Crisis Centres and Battered Women's Homes in the USA, Canada and Asian countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. In the multi-cultural context of today's existence, with the electronic media penetrating the remotest corner of the global village, international campaign building, with the perspective of "Think globally, act locally", is the only answer to newer and newer forms of violence against women that are marketed from different parts of the world.

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