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Women and Violence: A Human Rights Perspective

Kalindi Muzumdar

India probably is the only nation in the world which exclusively enshrines female deities in artistically built temples. The Meenakshi temple at Madurai, Ambabai temple at Kolhapur and the Shantadurga and Mahalaxmi temples at Goa are ample proof of the Hindu reverence for female deities. India has also been proud of women's extraordinary ventures in the field of welfare, politics, art, literature and of late, sports. However, these women who forged themselves undauntedly in a male dominated milieu are exceptions. These women established their identity due to their special upbringing, push of circumstances, familial factors and the motivation of freedom fighters and reformers. India boasted of a woman prime minister. Currently too, we have women who have made a mark for themselves in fields hitherto reserved exclusively for men, for example P.T. Usha, the sportswoman and Kiran Bedi, the Deputy Commissioner of Police. The truth however, which -stares us in the face, indicates clearly the pitiable condition of Indian womanhood trapped in the web of sociocultural factors such as superstitious and blind faith perpetuated by male dominance. The saga of the Indian woman is riddled with cruel, inhuman and pathetic attacks on her physical, emotional, social, political, and even spiritual growth. Her struggle for survival continues from the womb to the grave without respite.

This paper attempts to state and analyse the various types of violence trampling her human rights beginning with the female foetus and going on till old age. The following rights. have been discussed - the right to life, liberty and security of the person, right to education, right to work, the right to be free from torture and the right to knowledge. The paper is country-specific, written on the basis of working in the field in India.

Right to Survival

This is a very basic right indeed and logically there should be no controversy in relation to this right. In reality, however, the struggle for survival continues throughout the woman's life beginning with the female foetus. The advent of amniocentesis in India has given yet another blow to this struggle. Prior to the Maharashtra Regulation of Use of Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Act of 1988

both the municipal and governmental hospitals as well 'as private practitioners were conducting abortions of female foetuses. Although the Act is a deterrent, private practitioners have continued to conduct abortions with a sex bias. They are safeguarded by the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act of 1971 which has legalised abortion under specific conditions such as the danger to the health of the mother and/or the child. The Government of India has implicitly sanctioned female foeticide because, apart from Maharashtra and Goa, no other state has passed legislation against female foeticide following amniocentesis. The dire need to have such a law at a national level has often been discussed at various fora but, as yet, there is no universal law banning sex specific abortion. In fact amniocentesis is propagated through advertisements which influence the psychology of parents. For instance in Delhi there are advertisements such as "Pay Rs. 5001- now or Rs. 5 lakhs later (dowry)." In Bombay, an abortion costs Rs. 60/-. It is estimated that between 1978 and 1983 as many as 79,000 female foetuses in India have been aborted.

Female Infanticide

In certain states, such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, U.P. and Tamil Nadu, female infants in some communities are murdered as soon as they are born. They are drowned in a basin of milk, poisoned by opium applied to the breasts of mothers, strangled to death or sacrificed at an altar to a god. 4 in 10 of those killed are murdered with a wet towel. It is pitiable that the mother herself is asked to do these things. No questions are asked.

In the Bhatti community in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, the sex ratio is 550 women to 1000 men, the all-India ratio being 929 women to 1000 men. There has been no 'barat' for decades in this community.

Rajendra Singh, a Congressman of Bharatpur, Rajasthan had made a statement that 34 girls in his community had been reportedly murdered soon after birth. (*India Today* - October 1988).

Right to Education

Despite the constitutional provision for compulsory education for all up to the age of 14 years, girls' education is generally neglected. The percentage of girls attending school varies from state to state, being sometimes below 20% and rarely reaching 50%.

Female literacy in India is 24.8 percent as compared to the male literacy of 46.9 percent. The right to education is indirectly related to violence against women, as it has been observed that education contributes to women's assertion of other

rights such as decision-making. The relationship between education of women and the small family norm has been established by researchers in family planning.

Right to Liberty and Security of the Person

The Indian woman is a slave to the so-called institutionalized cultural shackles. Her mobility is restricted, her self-expression is monitored and her thoughts influenced by others in her milieu. She is the victim of suspicion by her brothers, parents, husband and in-laws. The following illustration will suffice to prove the point. In Dharavi, a large slum in Bombay, a young man bashed the head of his sister because he suspected her of having an affair with a young man in the neighbourhood.

The brother intended to kill his sister but she survived and now is a severely handicapped person totally dependent on him. In marital conflict cases, suspicion of the wife is a common cause. Some wives are brutally beaten, tortured and thrown out of their homes due to the husband's suspicion.

Exploitation at the Work Place

Economic constraints necessitate that the family income, especially of the middle class family, be supplemented by the wife's earnings. Thus we find these women taking on this additional responsibility. Lower class women have, of course, always been working. In this area too, women do not have the freedom to regulate their lives. Research by Dr. Pramila Kapur indicates that earning women from the middle and upper middle classes have no control over their income. They are expected to hand over their salary to their in-laws and to abandon all their rights over it. The problems of managing both the employment situation and the home, alcoholic husbands squandering away their 'wives' earnings and the suspicions about the woman's character continue to make matters worse. There was a case of a lady doctor who was given only Rs. 2/- daily for her expenses by her in-laws. The male dominance is all-pervading and there are implicit assumptions that the wife should have a lesser designation at the work place and earn a lower salary than her husband. The gender bias at work expects a woman executive to "look like a woman, behave like a lady, think like a man and work like a dog" ("Gender Bias" *Times of India*, 2.8.1993). Junior women lawyers report molestation by male lawyers. Molestations at the work place are reported by a few bold women while others suffer in silence.

"Dalit"¹ women fall a prey to the lust of the land owners and the other affluent individuals in the rural areas. There are cases of the anganwadi workers being abused sexually or otherwise by the male senior officers. In Bombay, recently

there were two- cases of women lecturers being harassed by their seniors because of their refusal to satisfy the sexual demands of higher-ups. The case of the air-hostess molested by a senior minister is still fresh in our minds. Discrimination still continues in the matter of wages paid to male and female casual labourers. In the earthquake-affected region of Latur, women are paid Rs. 8/- per day for casual labour while men are paid Rs. 20/-.

Selection of a Career

Most of our young women have no freedom to select their careers. Elders in the family, neighbours and friends influence young women to take up stereotyped jobs hitherto reserved for women such as nursing and teaching. In the cities the scenario is different. We do observe women gradually coming out of their isolated existence. And yet, they have to work doubly hard to prove their efficiency to keep their status.

At an interview of women executives on TV three years ago, they stated that in order to keep their positions and climb the career ladder, they needed to be consistent, persevering, professional, confident, analytical, objective in interpersonal relationships, patient and continuously strive for knowledge and efficiency. The demands on male executives are not so numerous nor strong. This probably explains why only 12% of women are top executives in banks.

Choice of a Partner in Marriage

In the matter of marriage too, women have no choice. Most marriages are arranged by the families of the groom and bride. In the cities parents of a few communities in the upper middle and upper classes give the freedom to their daughters to select their marriage partners. Even so, there are restrictions based on religion, caste and community.

Despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act passed in the early part of this century, infants are married in their cradles, for instance in Rajasthan. In India the mean age of marriage for men is 23.3 years and 18.3 years for women. However, there are glaring regional imbalances with 21.8 years for women in Kerala, 16.1 years in Rajasthan. In U.P., M.P., Rajasthan, and Bihar 50% of the girls are married before the age of 16. Early marriage, frequent pregnancies and deliveries take their toll and 13% of deaths before the woman reaches her 25th year are due to complications in child birth.

Maternal mortality is the main cause of death among women in the reproductive stage. It is estimated that maternal mortality in India is 500 per 100,000 live births. The danger of death is the greatest when the mother is below 20 years and

above 35 years. The average Indian woman becomes pregnant 8 times, produces 6-7 children out of which 4 survive. It seems as if 8 per cent of her reproductive life is spent in pregnancy and lactation (Dr. Shanti Ghosh. *The Girl Child in India*, 1993).

The entire process of arranging the marriage and the ceremony itself are humiliating to the young woman. In Maharashtra the groom and his family are invited to tea by the bride's parents. The bride to be is asked to prepare snacks and tea and serve them to their guests. Her culinary and other skills are praised by her parents in order to impress the parents of the potential groom. The girl is asked questions about her education, hobbies, friends and other matters and thus the party ends. The boy is rarely asked any questions. The matter of dowry is finalised at such meetings. It is a humiliating and even traumatic experience for a girl which is worsened when she is rejected for whatever reasons.

The Problem of Dowry

Of all the cases of violence against women the problem of dowry stands out in full force as the most brutal and oft-repeated. It is estimated that a bride is burnt every two days in India, thus giving India the unenviable reputation of being the country with an unbeaten record of bride burning.

Violence due to Dowry

The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, amended in 1986, was meant to be a deterrent to this evil custom. The reality however is different. The number of dowry deaths increased from 999 in 1985 to 4,006 in 1989 (Social Welfare, Vol. XXXIV, No. 11-12, Feb.-Mar. 1993). It is estimated that one woman is burnt to death every five days in India for not bringing 'adequate' dowry. Types of violence against women in the matter of dowry are depicted in the following chart.

Year	Physical Assaults on Women	Year	Dowry Deaths
1984	34,475	1985	999
1985	37,710	1987	1,912
1987	42,541	1989	4,006
(Figures taken from an unpublished paper written by Sukla Mitra 1988)		(Indian Express - 15. 1. 1990 and 10-9-1990)	

The Current Situation as Regards Dowry

It is difficult to estimate the exact figures in relation to dowry harassment and death because many cases are not reported. Women suffer in silence as they are conditioned to do so from childhood. Parents of the bride who is burnt to death, at times, do not pursue the matter in the court. Some of the reasons for such behaviour are as follows:

Poverty: Parents, due to economic constraints, get their daughter married accepting all the conditions in relation to dowry. They are forced to borrow money from the money lender, sell their property such as land in order to 'marry off' their daughter. As a consequence, they are steeped in debt. They therefore, are financially too weak to legally pursue the matter of their daughter's death.

These parents hush up the matter saying that no matter what they do, their daughter will not come back to life. They are also worried about the marriage of their other daughters, if any.

Many parents, who are illiterate and unaware of laws pertaining to women, accept the calamity as the wish of God or as their own kismet (fate) and resign themselves to it.

Parents of the harassed or dead bride are emotionally and physically exhausted in the nexus formed, at times, between the bridegroom's family, lawyers and the police.

Many dowry deaths are registered as cases of suicide. According to the law, a dying declaration of an individual dying under suspicious circumstances has to be recorded by a police officer in the presence of a magistrate. Most women dying of burns tend to state that their burns are due to an accident or that they have attempted suicide because of the following reasons.

The victim's, husband's family threatens her that if she tells the truth her parents' family will be murdered.

The dying woman is worried about her children's upbringing in case her husband is convicted.

She also wants to avoid the stigma which her children may have to suffer if their father is convicted.

She is also afraid that if she survives, her husband and in-laws will again try to murder her.

She is afraid that if she survives, her in-laws will not take her back into their home as she has accused them of murder. She also knows that in such circumstances her parents too will reject her.

A girl in India is brought up to be obedient, docile, patient and tolerant and self-sacrificing. The famous couplet from an English poem applies ver well to her:

Theirs is not to reason why
Theirs is but to do and die.

In the urban areas girls from the middle and upper middle classes are educated and, at times, given occupational training. Some of them take up jobs before marriage. All this freedom ends at the time of marriage which symbolically represents the "lakshman rekha."³

Myths in Relation to Dowry

Most men assume obtaining dowry is their 'birth right.' The groom's parents justify dowry by stating that they have made tremendous financial sacrifices in order to educate their son. Therefore they expect to patch up the hole in their pockets by obtaining dowry from the bride.

The groom and his parents believe that the bride will be an eternal economic burden on them. They therefore demand dowry.

Dowry is considered a monopoly of the affluent classes. This is not true because the lower classes in the process of identifying with the rich have imbibed some of the unethical customs.

It is a myth that only the Hindus demand dowry. Except for Zoroastrians, all other religious groups have the custom of dowry. However, there are some sections in each religious group which do not believe in dowry.

It is the mother-in-law who demands dowry. We have often heard that woman is her own enemy. In our experiences and observations we find that this is not true. In the 54 cases of dowry harassment studied by the students placed in Sakhya, the Anti-Dowry Guidance Cell, only in 8 cases was the mother-in-law exclusively responsible for demanding dowry and harassing the daughter-in-law. Discussion with a few mothers-in-law revealed the following reasons for their role in dowry harassment.

Her family coaxes her to demand dowry, stating that since she is elderly and a woman, the bride's family will not reject her demands. This is true in most cases as elderly women are still respected in most homes.

The mother-in-law demands dowry so that she, in turn, can give it to her daughter. Who then is the cause of dowry? Only the mother-in-law?

The mother-in-law, in most cases, has herself been exploited, suppressed and victimised as a young daughter-in-law. She, therefore, nurtures hostility against those who harassed her and displaces these feelings onto her daughter-in-law. The dynamics can be understood in the theory postulated by Paulo Freire, namely, that the oppressed internalize the qualities and behaviour of the oppressor.

It is the girls who are largely responsible for dowry because they want riches ... we cannot generalise because most girls are so conditioned as to adjust to any type of life

Giving large sums of money and expensive presents assures the bride of a happy married life. This is far from true. Girls have been harassed regardless of the quantum of dowry.

Some Pertinent Facts Regarding Dowry

Dowry is not a one shot affair. It continues through the spectrum of married life. Expensive gifts are demanded from the bride's parents during festivals such as Divali, Christmas and on other auspicious occasions such as the birth of a child. Most people are vaguely aware of the law against dowry. They are, therefore, doubly careful in camouflaging their demands. They suggest that the bride's parents present a 'Honda' or a 'Maruti' car to the groom so that he can return home from work early enough to take his wife out in the evening

Most brides suffer harassment in silence for many years. They do so for the following reasons:

They are conditioned to believe that after a girl's marriage her permanent place is with her husband and in-laws.

They are conditioned to suffer in silence.

They fear that their parents would have to suffer social ostracism. There have been incidents of young unmarried girls committing suicide to protect their parents from the burden of dowry. The first such case which caused a public

outcry was that of three sisters at Kanpur, all educated, but helpless due to the dowry situation.

Men who do not take dowry are at times looked down upon in their community. Relatives, neighbours and others believe that such men must surely be physically or mentally handicapped and, therefore, agree to marry without dowry.

In dowry death cases (mostly due to burns) most women give a false dying declaration stating that the burns are due to an accident or that they have attempted suicide. This is due to their concern for their children, parents and themselves if they survive.

Physical and Mental Torture

Wife beating is generally accepted as a cultural phenomenon. Most men take it upon themselves to beat their wives to 'improve them.' Women too accept it as a part of life. It is perceived as a token of the husband's affection. The police too, especially of the lower ranks, all view it as a societal norm. The legislation against physical and mental torture (Sec. 498 A) is of recent origin. Unfortunately, there are lapses in its implementation.

Mental torture of the wife is a covert phenomenon. It may be even more devastating than the physical assaults. Taunting the wife, insulting her in the presence of the children, guests and domestic help, ignoring her completely and cutting off communication with her are the common manifestations of mental torture. In a case of a retired senior police constable harassing his daughter-in-law, a home visit was paid by us in order to conduct a family interview. The constable would not allow his wife to participate in the interview saying that she was stupid and that he was the spokesman of the family. He criticised our insistence on involving her in the interview by saying that 'Women libbers wreck families.' In another case of marital conflict the working wife stated that her husband locked up all the kitchen gadgets such as the mixer, peeler and pressure cooker so that she had to spend more time in the kitchen and consequently report late for work. This case has now been solved.

The harassed wives suffer in silence because of the following reasons:

They have been conditioned to obey their husbands.

Culturally it is assumed that the wife will silently bear the assaults.

She has no support as such. Her parental family and other relatives refuse to accept her back and bear the burden of

supporting her and the children (if any) for the rest of her life.

She is usually ignorant of the provision in the law to safeguard her rights, as well as of shelter homes run by welfare organisations and the government.

Assuming she has this information, that is, to resort to the police station, take a lawyer's advice or avail herself of facilities provided for harassed women, she is usually brainwashed to keep the 'Khandan ki Izzat'⁴ unblemished.

Rape by the husband is not as yet a cognizable offence in India. Women are conditioned to play a submissive role especially in the matter of sexual relations. Most husbands feel a sense of exclusive possession with regard to their wives. Hence in sexual relations, the wife's consent is rarely taken. Cases have been reported of deviant sexual behaviour of the husband, for example beating the wife prior to, the sexual intercourse, burning her with cigarette butts or thrusting objects in her vagina. Refusal to give in to the insatiable sexual desire of the husband is interpreted as the result of her extramarital relations. She is therefore 'duly punished.'

There was a case of murder of a young housewife in Bombay four years ago. She had been married for eight months. Her husband was impotent but this was not disclosed to her prior to marriage. In his efforts to cure his impotency, the husband forced her to have sexual relations with his friends in his presence. Gradually her brother-in-law and father-in-law too began to rape her. On one occasion when she strongly resisted her father-in-law's advances, he strangled her and then threw her out of their sixteenth floor apartment. This case would have been registered as suicide because the in-laws made a statement to the police that the woman was mentally deranged. However, the timely intervention of a casual spectator, who happened to be a nurse, changed the entire complexion of their case. Cases of cruelty by the husband and his relatives have increased from 11603 in 1989 to 15949 in 1991 (*Social Welfare*, Vol. XXXIX, no. 11-12, Feb.-Mar. 1993).

Cases of domestic violence are usually, but not exclusively associated with liquor consumption by the husband. Liquor, foreign and indigenous is freely available in most Indian states. Men drink with callousness and gay abandon. The hard-earned money of both the husband and wife is devoured by alcohol. Consequently, the wives resort to taking up extra jobs and hiding their income. Deaths due to the consumption of alcohol are increasing but there is no statistical data available. It is estimated that the number of deaths due to spurious liquor exceeds the deaths due to communal riots. Many cases, however, are not reported. The death of the husband due to liquor consumption places heavy

burdens on the wife. She has to assume the entire responsibility of supporting her family if she has no grown-up children. At times, men have been blinded as a result of spurious liquor. This too equally cripples the family.

Right to Decision-Making

"We have mouths but we use them only for crying," a young woman said in a camp conducted for rural women. The family, community and society in general, assume that Women have to be told, nay ordered, to behave in accordance with the norms of the family, community and society. The average Indian woman has no choice in relation to important events in her life such as marriage, parenthood, family planning, participation in community activities and divorce. The in-laws, especially the mother-in-law, play a strong part in the matter of the number of children that the couple has. The wife is often blamed, ostracized or divorced for her inability to produce sons or in, case of sterility. Despite India's acceptance of family planning in 1952 as a national issue, the progress has been slow in the matter of the small family norm. There are, of course, regional differences. In the family planning programme it is the woman who is at the receiving end. Men are still reluctant to undergo vasectomy or to use condoms. Women are forced to undergo sterilization despite their ill-health and protests. They are not involved either in the selection of family planning methods nor in the matter of family size.

Women, especially from the low and middle income groups, suffer from ill-health and malnutrition. Therefore, they are the' worst sufferers from contraceptive services. Women with loops inserted complain of heavy bleeding and backache. Lack of adequate follow-up services is a deterrent to the acceptance of loops and other contraceptive devices or methods. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) intended to recruit 20,000 women for experimenting with NORPLANT through the medical college-hospital even though a case registered against NORPLANT was still pending in the court (Karkal, July 1992).

Inadequate medical information supplied to patients, both men and women, causes the break-up of the family. To illustrate, when a man undergoes vasectomy he has to be advised to get his semen tested periodically to ensure that it is free of sperms. In the interim period the couple has to be advised to utilize contraceptive methods or devices, In some cases this is not done. The couple has sexual relationships without utilizing contraceptive methods or devices after the husband's vasectomy. When pregnancy occurs, the husband accuses his wife of infidelity and throws her out of the house.

Women from the low income groups have no privacy in their homes which prevents them from utilizing such as the diaphragm. Voluntary efforts in the medical field have also been geared mostly to women. While one appreciates the concern of the voluntary sector in relation to women and family planning, one wonders why similar efforts are not directed towards the males. Dr. Billing's ovulation method, though very sound, feasible and scientifically tested, cannot be utilized by all women, for example the women in the slums of Bombay. This method also requires that women have some privacy to test the vaginal mucus.

The oral contraceptive pills for women are advocated as almost a hundred per cent sure method of contraception. These pills are easily available in the market. However most women do not know that a thorough medical examination is essential prior to the acceptance of this method nor are they aware of the positive and negative effects of the pills. By and large, women in slums find it very difficult to stick to the schedule of oral pills. There have been cases when women have forgotten to take the pill for a few days and then have swallowed a whole lot of pills to make up the deficit.

At an Indo-French seminar on "An Update on Planned Parenthood" held in Bombay in December 1990, the French medical experts presented papers on their experiments with abortifacients - pills to induce abortion. The pertinent question is whether this will facilitate female foeticide following the amniocentesis test. How will the malnourished, neglected and emaciated bodies of women from the low income group react to this pill? No doubt experiments have been conducted in France and may be in other parts of Europe prior to its introduction in India. However, how do our women compare in health with those in the West? It was reported at the above-mentioned seminar that while 80% will abort, the remaining 20% will have a genetically defective baby. Besides the woman concerned will have to be under medical observation for a few months. Is this feasible in India where studies indicate that most women do not seek medical advice until they are critically ill? (*Grassroot Action*, April 1990, Issue 3).

It is stated that one-fifth of 132 sterilisation camps surveyed by the ICMR had no life-saving drugs, as a result to which there were 180 deaths in Maharashtra, 92 in U.P., 86 in Gujarat, 82 in Kerala, 76 in Orissa and 66 in Andhra Pradesh from 1985 to 1987 (*Times of India*, 27th July 1989).

In amniocentesis too women are not the ones to take a decision. Most of them are harassed for producing daughters and the choice of amniocentesis is imposed on them. Some are brainwashed to such an extent that they opt for an abortion. In a survey of 100 women at a Delhi clinic who underwent abortion following amniocentesis, most women said that they were taunted continuously by their

in-laws for having given birth to a daughter ("Licence to Kill," *Grassroot Action*, 3rd Issue, April 1990).

With a few exceptions, the eldest male in the family is still the decision-maker in relation to familial issues. It is only in minor matters such as those relating to the kitchen that the women can have their say.

Right to Knowledge

With the advent of T.V. women even in rural areas have an access to knowledge of the outside world. And yet how many utilise this opportunity? Our experience indicates that film songs and films are the two most popular programmes. Women are generally ignorant about the functioning of their bodies, especially the reproductive system. Lack of sex education and the consequent faulty attitude towards sex and sexuality increases morbidity in women.

In India contraceptive technology has made great strides since the sixties., Yet most women are ignorant of the types of contra-ceptives, their advantages and disadvantages. An incident related by an institution working in the area of family planning in Tamil Nadu illustrates how women were taken for granted in this programme. The institution spread the word regarding the loop, motivated women in rural areas and inserted loops in a large number of women. It soon observed that the number of women coming for loop insertion decreased day by day. Exploration of this phenomenon revealed that one or two women had large worms due to the loop. Further investigations revealed that the loop inserted in these women had fallen out and was viewed as a large worm! One of the reasons for such miscommunication is the fact that the doctors had not explained the process of loop insertion to the women concerned. Most of the women had not even seen the loop inserted in their own bodies!

In the survey mentioned earlier, most women who underwent amniocentesis did not know the names of these tests nor their harmful effects.

Awareness of Legal Rights

Women are not aware of their legal rights nor are they aware of the political situation and its effects on the masses. In a research study conducted by Sachidananda and Ramesh P. Sinha in 1984 in four districts of Bihar, it was found that most women knew about the right of inheritance to paternal property. The least known rights were the (MTP) Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act (among the rural and urban women of Gaya), Minimum Wages Act and Child Marriage Restraint Act (among Women of Bhojpur) and Widow Remarriage Act (among urban women of Madhubani) (Sachidananda, Sinha, 1984). If women are

ignorant of the laws passed in their interest, there is no question of assertion of their rights in respect of these laws.

The Government of India has recently passed legislation reserving 30 per cent of the seats for women in the gram panchayat (GP)⁵ and Zilia Parishad (Zp).⁶ The women's Organisation of the Yeshwantrao Prathishthan is organising orientation programmes for these women at the ZP Level. Other voluntary organisations too are doing similar work. One such programme was recently held at Beed, a district in Maharashtra. Many of the participants lacked knowledge of the philosophy of reservations for women, the procedures of GP and ZP and their role therein. Some admitted that their husbands represent them at the meetings of GP or ZP.⁷ Those who were not educated said that when resolutions are passed at the meetings of GP, papers are sent to the homes of these women members for their thumb impression. Most women representatives do not take an active role in decision-making. They are merely 'noddors' at these meetings. One representative of a GP is said to have taken a very active role in one of the meetings. She expressed her opinion on an issue very effectively and was applauded by all including her husband who was present at this meeting. When the couple returned home, the husband beat her mercilessly and asked her not to open her mouth henceforth. Some of these women have been forced to stand for the election of GP and ZP by their husbands and their participation in these meetings is strictly monitored by their husbands.

Women's Organisations

The following chart depicts a picture of some women's organisations in Bombay and their main area of work.

Name of the Organization; Focal point/objective

Majlis -- Legislation for women and its implications

Stree Hitakami -- Health and its implications for women

Prerana -- Problems of prostitutes and their children

Sakhya -- Eradication of dowry and management of marital conflicts.

Stree Mukti Sanghatana -- Women's problems in general.

Maitrini -- status of women in terms of employment.

Mahila Dakshata Saniiti -- rights, violence against women.

Women's Forum -- services available etc.

Swadhar

There are numerous other women's organizations spread all over India. SEWA of Ahmedabad concentrated on forming trade unions of women handcart-pullers and has now expanded its field to women's self-employment as a whole. Similarly, Saheli in Delhi, Sathin in Rajasthan, Stree Adhar Kendra in Pune are some other efforts towards the improvement of women's status. All these organizations have shifted from a welfare approach to a development one. Thus the improvement of women is their major thrust.

Types of Interventional Strategies

The chart above depicts the area(s) of work selected by different women's organizations. However, all of them adopt different strategies in relation to their objectives. The main ones are as follows.

Micro Level Intervention

This entails dealing with individual cases in the setting of their families and the immediate environment. It also involves dealing with various types of groups, for example groups of dowry-affected women.

The micro level is linked with the meso, exo and macro levels. The women's issues (or any other for that matter) are linked with other sub-systems of society, for example education and health. It is essential that the organizations working towards the empowerment of women study the impact of the micro-level system on women's issues and devise strategies to handle it. To illustrate, the educational system is not geared to the consistent involvement of the girl child in the education system. The onslaught of contraceptives on women in the family welfare planning programme is atrocious.

Macro-level Intervention

If all our efforts are not geared towards changes at the macro level they will prove to be futile. The policy-makers have to be galvanised into action. Changes in the age-old laws, machinery for their implementation, projects for women and their functioning have to be scrutinised and geared to women's overall development.

On the whole most of the women's organizations have been working on the above mentioned lines. The establishment of the National Women's Commission followed by the state level commission is a big step towards the establishment of our separate identities. These commissions operate at macro level but do take up individual cases if they involve a larger issue, for example rape. Recently, the National Commission is attempting to review the law against rape and to effect changes in it. The commission has consulted women's organizations in various parts of India on this issue prior to the final submission of its recommendations to the Central Government.

The village women of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have waged a war against illicit liquor. The problem of alcoholism (linked to wife-beating) is rampant in India. There are distilleries galore in slums and villages. For ages together women have suffered the demonic attacks of alcohol on their families' health, economy and happiness in general. These women have organised themselves and forced the closure of distilleries in their vicinity. They have approached the state government to enact legislation accordingly.

Linkages with International Women's Organizations

Collaboration with international women's organizations is indispensable to effect global change in the status of women. The Nairobi conference has set the ball rolling and women all over the world unite once in two years to share their experiences and interventional strategies. The India-Canada conference on violence against women held in December 1993 is also an attempt in the same direction.

Collaboration in Governmental Efforts

The Government, for its part, makes efforts to stem violence against women. The Judiciary and the police system do make efforts towards this goal. The setting up of family courts and the enactment of Sec. 498A are the concrete forms of these efforts. The role of a women's organization is that of a vigilant group to see to the proper implementation of these legal provisions. A few months ago, women's organizations in Bombay observed that cases of mental cruelty against women were not registered by the Police under Sec. 498A. The general attitude among the police was that this section is misused by most women to gain selfish ends. Consequently, the then Joint Commissioner of Police had issued instructions to all the police stations not to register such cases. Seeing that Sec. 498A was becoming redundant, women's organizations made a representation.

Collaboration with the police is a recent development in the process of women's improvement. The College of Social Work, Nirmala Niketan, initiated students'

placement in police stations in 1983. The objectives are to sensitize the police to the social issues and to their role therein so as to effect good police-public relations. The common issues highlighted are those related to the status of women, prostitution, drugs, AIDS, street children and dowry. Accordingly we give these inputs in the training of the police of various levels at different training centres. Similarly social work intervention in the area of women police constables (WPC) has also been initiated., Regular workshops are conducted for male police constables and officers and for WPCS. Small surveys are also conducted on the functioning of the police and reports are regularly submitted to the Commissioner of Police. The Tata Institute of Social Sciences has instituted a special cell for women and children in the office of the Commissioner of Police as well as in one police station in Bombay. Sakhya has been granted permission to work in three police stations in Bombay.

The state of atrocities against women prompted the State Women's Commission to plan women's security cells in each of the 72 police stations in Bombay. The Commission called a meeting of all women's organizations and explained the rationale for the Mahila Suraksha Samiti (Women's Security Cells) and has asked for volunteers to work through the police stations. The members of this Samiti will act as vigilant groups to ensure that the police deal justly in relation to women's issues, for example, dying declarations. The law states that a police officer and a Special Executive Magistrate be present to note the dying declarations of women dying under suspicious circumstances. The presence of relatives is prohibited. However, we find that this is not adhered to and the woman's in-laws force her to tell lies.

Preventive work in relation to violence against women

There is a dire need to create awareness among different groups regarding the status of women, gender bias and injustice against women generally. The perceptions of youth regarding marriage, women's status and roles in the family need to be revised and changed. Young boys and girls need to develop skills to strengthen marriage and family life. Young women should learn to assert themselves in their families of origin and matrimony. They should be empowered to take firm decisions in relation to the selection of marriage partners, type of wedding, refusal to give dowry, number of children, type of contraceptives and other familial and non-familial matters. Men, too, need to realise the dignity of women and to appreciate their contribution in various fields.

A few months ago I conducted a workshop with a group of young girls and boys between the ages of 16 to 22 years, with the above-mentioned objectives. All the participants belonged to the lower middle class. On the second day, the group of

36 boys was divided into two and the girls numbering 16 formed the third group. They were given a few topics/questions for discussion. One such question related to their reasons for marriage. The answers of all the boys indicated that they needed a wife to work at home. Their responses were as follows:

"My mother is too old to do housework and hence I need a wife". "My parents can't work on our farm any more. Therefore, I want to marry so that my wife can take over from them". "I am the only earning member in my family and my income is insufficient to support six family members. I, therefore, want to marry a working woman."

It was indeed sad to note that none of them said that they need a companion for life to share their joys and sorrows, to enjoy life's bounty together and to jointly achieve their goals in life. The girls, however, were emphatic in their decision to marry someone to share their joys and sorrows. In the subsequent session there was a mutual confrontation and the boys later stated that no one had earlier explained to them the significance of marriage.

In a class on family life education in a college in Bombay, a boy from the low income group justified wife beating by saying that if the wife does not listen to her husband he has no other choice but to beat her. Needless to say, he had to face a verbal onslaught by the other students, both male and female.

Family life including sex education should be introduced in schools beginning with the nursery. The objective of such an education should be to impart scientific facts about sex and sexuality, roles and responsibilities in the family and to shape attitudes conducive to a happy family life without a gender bias.

Women's organizations are also becoming vigilant about the portrayals of women in the audio-visual media. Except for a few art serials, the woman in most commercial movies is portrayed as a sex bomb, a cantankerous wife/mother-in-law or an obedient and dutiful wife. Remarks about violence against women need to be scrutinized. A recent film, "Damini," portrays the courage of a woman who raises her voice against rape and the unjust judicial system. However, there are two sentences uttered by the barrister in the movie which are shocking. Regarding a gang rape of a married domestic worker by the employer's son and his friends, he says: "Ladkon ne jo kuch kiya utni badi baat nahi hai. Jawani me to yeb sub kuch hota hi raheta hai." (There is nothing objectionable in what the boys have done. Such things keep happening in youth). Unfortunately this has gone unnoticed except for the letter to the Editors of Newspapers written by the present author. One would have expected the PTAs of schools, women's organizations and the union of domestic workers to raise a hue and cry.

Education of the masses in relation to violence against women could be imparted in the context of human rights. Similarly, positive experience of women in relation to men in their milieu could be publicised.

Conclusion

The focus on women as an exploited, victimised and marginalised group is a recent development in the world. It has been now recognised that despite all their rights being violated, women have been suffering in silence. In India, the concept of Seeta/Savitri (dutiful wives) is imbibed in a girl's mind from the early stages of her life. A vigorous multi-pronged and multi-professional effort is needed to establish the woman as a human being in her own right. It is time to dispel myths, superstitions and misconceptions about woman and her duties and adopt a rational attitude towards the woman as a human being.

Notes

Dalit women - those belonging to the so-called untouchables or harijans.

The central government has initiated an integrated child development scheme and the anganwadi worker is the nursery teacher.

Lakshman Rekha stands for the line of safety drawn by Lakshman for his sister-in-law Sita, in the *Ramayana*, the Mndi epic.

Family prestige.

Gram Panchayat - local self-government at the village level.

Zilia Parishad - local self-government at the district level.

Consequently a law has been passed forbidding men to represent their wives in GP meetings.

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