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## **Feminist counselling and its methodology**

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### **Feminist counselling**

#### **Counselling**

Counselling as commonly practised in Gujarat's Family Counselling Centres puts family at the centre of the counsellor's concerns. 'Family has to be saved' was the motto and so all efforts were directed towards that. In a dispute (i.e. a case) brought to the centre the parties were asked to arrive at a compromise. The husband was asked not to batter his wife and the wife was advised to be careful about serving him so that he was not annoyed. In the process largely the woman was asked to improve her behaviour, the husband was asked to promise that he would not torture her. Once the compromise was arrived at the parties went home, some counsellors followed up some couples for some time. Ms. Charumati Yodha, who initiated the system of rescuing tortured wives and restoring them to the family after getting promises from the in-laws, was full of remorse about the process during the last months of her life. She kept saying that the promises were not kept and the wives committed suicide soon after.

Apart from the concern for family the other important concept was that 'a case' had to come to the counselling centre to seek counsel. 'This could happen only when there was information among the public about their existence. Moreover only those women could approach who had the support of their natal family and were provided the means to do so. This was largely lacking so the cases brought by men were also registered. After all a man's marital problem involved a woman also!

#### **AWAG's approach**

When AWAG started running a counselling centre all this came up as a challenge with the first case registered. The women who came up asked the first question whether AWAG considered woman equal to man and if so, would AWAG ask a woman to accept battering from her husband. 'The answer to the first question was in the affirmative; the answer to the second was negative. The 'case' had come to AWAG as a rebound from another local counselling centre.

She wanted the custody of her child whom her husband, after separation, had stealthily taken away from his school. The first counselling centre, after a number of sittings had told that the husband could keep the child and if she wanted to be with the child, she must accept occasional beatings. The woman did not agree with the 'judgement', so she came to AWAG.

Upholding the woman's dignity as equal to man within family is as important as saving a family. So in AWAG the major concern is the woman, her perception of her predicament is seen as vital to the solution of her problem. She is asked to think of alternative solutions that she could accept and then is helped to achieve what she considers best for herself. This kind of counselling is certainly woman centred. Most women want to go back to the marital family if they are treated equally (that means: they are not beaten) so the counselling process ultimately bring about compromise and saves the family. The difference lies in the treatment of the case and in the outcome. The woman is assured that she could reject the compromise as soon as she felt that she, was not treated well. Many women keep coming back for organisational assistance and support even after they go back to their marital homes.

The incidence of deaths of young women has not decreased anywhere in India. In Gujarat also this has been rising disturbingly year after year despite as many as 52 Family Counselling Centres located in Gujarat. This could be arrested only when young wives feel secure in their surroundings. In family centred counselling the emphasis is on the family so the woman does not have reassurance about herself. Her status remains subordinated. Put graphically it would look like this: M

F

Children.

When the family centred counselling process gets under way the resultant product is either the same, i.e., M

F

Children.

Or it varies: The F dies prematurely in mysterious circumstances and the Male head of the family takes another female to continue the family. This can be seen as: M M

(F-dead) F I

Children Children

Feminist counselling does not agree with this.

It hopes to establish the family as

M F  
Children

This is brought about when the counselling process inspires confidence in the counselled's mind that she was right in complaining against the treatment meted out to her, that she need not survive as a persecuted being but that she could live as an individual and that she would get support from the organisation if she had trouble again.

Briefly speaking, the feminist counselling process challenges the subordinate status of the woman in her family by rousing her own individuality. Her marital family gradually accepts this, as the continued organisational support to her becomes evident to them.

In order to reach out to the poor slum-dwelling or rural women, AWAG started holding Awareness-raising workshops among them. The women, whose perception of their individuality is raised, start asking questions about being battered. They realise that they need not have suffered so. When AWAG's field workers are around they approach them and ask questions or when a field worker notices a woman in trouble, she reaches out to her. AWAG's field workers are trained in 'primary counselling' so initial help is provided by them. When a woman finally decides to take any step to get away from her predicament, she is helped by the field worker to reach out to the counselling centre of AWAG.

### **The method**

AWAG has documented the established procedure evolved in our experience. The intervention process is divided in three parts. However, they may overlap at times.

### **The first meeting and the initial phase**

Intake procedure requires the counsellor to take down the particulars of the counselled such as age, sex, income, caste, etc. Then the women are asked to narrate their concerns and later, to give applications specifying their expectations from the agency. This serves the dual purpose of clarifications and of focusing on

the problems of the helpees as well as expectations and often writing details about self has a cathartic effect for the women.

The counselling process includes establishment of rapport and establishment of structure. The counsellor provides space to the woman helpee to express herself and builds conducive atmosphere for establishment of rapport. The counsellor establishes structure such as information about the agencies, time of the meeting and the meeting places. The counsellor also outlines the goals of the counselling and the process. She assures the helpee of confidentiality.

The goal of the helpee woman in the initial phases is to explore her experiences, behaviour and feelings relevant to the problems in her life. The woman also explains the way in which she feels she is being violated or feels helpless. The woman specifies the help that she needs from the agency. The helpee also has to work out resistance, if she has any, to external help.

The goal of counsellor is to respond to the counselled woman and listen to the content and nonverbal messages with respect and empathy. The counsellor seeks to work towards building an effective and collaborative working relationship. In order to facilitate the counselled's self-exploration the counsellor has to deal with the resistance of the counselled and be self-aware that it does not affect herself as a counsellor. The counsellor provides attention and communicate understanding.

The skills used by the counsellor are listening, questioning, (especially open-ended question) clarifying, summarising and assurance facilitating ventilation, reflecting possible feeling, etc.

## **Second Phase**

In this phase, the counsellor helps the counselled to identify the problem and focus on it. For instance, at times, a counselled woman may be so bogged down with problems that she could be jumping from one to another. The counsellor while acknowledging her problems helps her focus on the most pressing one and helps create goals.

The counsellor's role is towards integrative understanding of the individual in her situation. The counsellor begins to piece together the data produced by the counsel in self-exploration phase. She sees and helps the other to identify behavioural patterns, to-see the larger picture of reality. She teaches the counsel the skills of going about this integrative process herself. Often, the counsellor shares insight gained during the procedure in order to enhance self-awareness of the counselled. The counsellor also changes the counselled's perception of problem. Environment modification is also interlinked in the process.

For instance, a woman approached AWAG for the help to get maintenance from her husband. During the second phase of counselling, the woman admitted to herself that while she needed financial help from her husband, actually what she feared most was the marital rape.

Environment modification in this woman's case was at several levels consisting of confronting the husband and thus, raising the issue of his violent behaviour. It also included helping the woman to get training and work towards financial independence as well as initiating legal procedure.

The goal of the counselled is dynamic self-understanding. The gradual clearing of perceptual reality makes the counselled see the need for change. The counselled learns from the counsellor the skill of putting together the larger picture herself. The counselled identifies her resources, especially unused resources.

It seems necessary to explain a fraction of the process with the field illustration. For instance, violence against women in the family is socially sanctioned and involving external agencies is seen as dishonouring the code of silence and pointing fingers at the "family honour" by the concerned family, as well as the society. Women internalise it and as a result, while talking to the counsellor, they may not mention the violence, or minimise it, acknowledge guilt, feel unrespectable, even try to justify it. The counsellor challenges these concepts of 'friendly honour,' their silence, guilt, etc. The counsellor also helps women trace the pattern of violence. On the perpetrators and the silent, supportive or indifferent spectators. The counsellor helps them come out of the sense of victimhood, too. The counselled women gradually learn to identify their support systems and work towards building other support systems.

The counsellor uses skills such as reality orientation, correcting perception, guidance, suggestion, probing accreditation to the helpee, reflection of possible feelings, paraphrasing & interpretation, etc.

### **Third phase**

In this phase, the process focuses on identification and assessment of action plan, its implementation and dealing with the consequences of these.

The counselled woman's goal is towards facilitating action and following up these actions. The counsellor collaborates with the counselled woman in working out action programme, and helps the woman to act on the new understanding of self. She also explores with her a wide variety of means for engaging in

constructive behavioural change. Also, she gives support and guidance to action programme. To explain, once a woman decides that she would not let her partner violate her, the strategy of how to counter violence from her partner is thought through. The counsellor invites suggestions on possible issues an instance, they arrive at three countering tactics, often used by AWAG counsellor. One is to say 'no' to violence, the second to hold his hand, or hit back and the third members of the community to pressurise the m counsellor helps her in her process to confront and face consequences of the actions. Thus, by learning to respond to and control the environment, the counselled changes conflictual situation in a self-satisfying manner.

The counselled woman's goals are to learn the skills to handle the social-emotional dimension of life. She learns to change self-defeatist and self-destructive attitudes and learns to use emotions constructively. To explain in a case when a man has deserted his partner, to be with another woman, the deserted woman often entertains the idea of revenge, makes vengeful suggestions, causes disturbance in his 'other' family etc. The counsellor works with the woman so that she is better able to accept the separation, integrate and change distressing feelings through re-education and reordered thinking about negative feelings of helplessness, powerlessness and anger and helps her channelise it in constructive activities. The counselled woman's goal is towards developing new resource, strengthening positive bonds and nurturing other relationships.

The counsellor uses techniques such as anticipatory guidance, encouragement, accreditation to the counselled, interpretation, summarising, paraphrasing, etc.

### **Family intervention**

While individual counselling is beneficial to women, the counselling process is not in isolation, but lined with the social environment of the counselled. The pro-woman counsellor also works towards challenging individual woman's oppression, exploitation or violation in the family, as well as in the community.

The process of counselling begins with the woman when she gives an application. If the woman wishes to involve her family members or the perpetrators of harassment or significant others, the counsellor contacts those persons. The counsellor makes home visits to access the situation, as understanding the family.

Dynamics and the social milieu of the counselled, goes a long way in effective intervention. Home visits are important tools of assessing the social environment. of the counselled women. The counsellor can observe the number

of people family hierarchy, physical and emotional space that the members have within the house, family environment, division of labour between the family etc. The counsellor can understand parent--child or in cases of marital discord, the inter couple relationship, especially in a joint family. She can assess the counselled's interaction with other family members, she can pick up the dominant, weak or enmeshed relationships, identifying strong and co-operative bonds. Certain creative and practical solutions such as partition of house etc. can be worked out, based on the information.

When both the parties come together in joint meeting to discuss their concerns, to identify the problem and to work towards desired goals, the facilitative efforts remains towards reaching mutually agreeable decisions. Theoretically, the decision making process in joint meeting is as follows:

1. The parties determine the concern to act upon.
2. They project possible alternative action.
3. After that, they review possible consequences of action and choose the best alternative.
4. The parties decide on the best alternative and how and when to implement it.
5. Implement.
6. Evaluate the result, and determine whether future planning will be required.

However, many other stages also come during the process. In the first stage of the joint meetings, the counsellor paraphrases versions of both the parties and introduces key conflict areas for discussion.

The pro-woman counsellor also safeguards the woman's rights to present her case and to determine the course of action. Often during the joint meetings, the woman is silenced by her/his family. The counsellor helps the woman to overcome these pressures and encourages her to speak out. It is observed that many a times parties come with conflicting versions and during these Joint meetings, facts are verified. There are times when the person complained against, is resistant to the process. The counsellor has to deal with that and help the counselled to counter

There are instances where one person interrupts, does not look at the woman counsellor while talking, does not respond, tells the other person what she "should" feel, uses derogatory language, etc. The counsellor helps the counselled to understand these and assert herself. Many a time, during the course of the joint meeting, men try to hurl abuses at women or cast allegations of "bad" character on the women. The counsellor helps the woman to understand these deliberate attempts to break her support system and does not let them affect his/her judgement while handling the case. The counsellor helps the woman then to draw boundaries to prevent/curtail these displays of violence. Taking a step further, she helps the woman devise strategies to take it outside, so that she builds up her support systems.

In initial phases, especially in cases of crime against women, the perpetrators tend to deny the crime, justify it or trivialise it. In fact, if it is domestic violence, they may not even label it as crime, because battering a woman is socially sanctioned. The counsellor helps the woman confront these denials. The counsellor questions their justification, challenges the falsifications, too. At times, the counsellor also plays an advocacy role.

The pro-woman counsellor challenges the male expectations based on the traditional role models and stereotypes of women. To take an example, some men claim that their wives are not good housewives, do not look after the children etc. At such times the counsellor introduces counterculture and different ways of looking at these stereotypes, presents before the couple the alternative of men sharing the household duties and thus challenges the sexual division of labour within the family.

The counsellor, often with the help of different exercises helps the counselled to identify negative responses that create communication blockages and gives practical suggestions to improve their communications.

Significant others of both the parties are almost always involved in the intervention process. For instance, in a case of marital discord, between a couple, two responsible persons from the husband's side come to attend the joint meetings and act as guarantors so that that harassment does not recur after reconciliation.

The skills used by the counsellor are stimulating involvement questioning, probing, verifying facts, interpretation, paraphrasing, sharing insights, reflecting possible feeling, assurances, encouragement, correcting perceptions, guidance, suggestion, classification, facilitating ventilation of feelings, etc.



## **Community intervention**

The feminist vision to create an environment wherein women can lead lives devoid of fear and violence cannot be realised without community involvement. Involving community in individual woman's struggle, to question, challenge and counter family violence is necessary. The change after all, has to take place in all the units of society.

In AWAG, while casework is done at the curative level, the community involvement is an important aspect of the preventive work that is undertaken.

AWAG holds workshops in many urban slums of Ahmedabad. The awareness raising workshops attempt to conscientise women towards opposing oppression in their daily lives and provide a platform for dialogue on women's issue. Information on women's organizations is also shared. As a result, women who have attended the workshops or who have got information through the women who had attended the workshops often tend to approach the AWAG field worker for help.

AWAG believes that field workers from the same background as women helpes would, if trained, be more effective as they understand the social milieu of the helpee women. Besides the field workers come to the communities daily and as a result, a follow up and monitoring of these cases is easy. Their presence at the field level causes pressure for the perpetrators of violence. Besides, since the discussions and meetings take place at the field level, the involvement of the women of the community also increases.

There is also further advantage. Some women, who attended the workshop, show an interest in the work of the organisation and want to be active. These women form their groups and act as pressure groups and help women at the community level. For instance, the women who are part of community pressure groups would provide temporary shelter to an elderly woman thrown out of the house. Or a group would confront a husband beating his partner/wife and challenge his violent behaviour.

Women who come for counselling are often invited to meetings of women's group, morchas, training programmes, film shows, etc. Their involvement in these activities helps in overcoming isolation. Women also relocate themselves in different relationships, besides the family and community based relationship.

Since the counselling centre is geographically located in the area where AWAG works at the grass-root level on other issues, helpee women tend to know one another. As a result, follow up and monitoring are easier for the counsellors.

The community, in terms of the civil society, often acts as a coercive force. At times, the community pressurises women and the counsellors to conform to the societal rules. For example, in case wherein a Hindu girl married a boy from another religious community an sought shelter from family opposition and harassment, political parties such as BJP threatened the AWAG workers too.

The experience of workers, especially women workers in dealing with violent men during the course of family counselling is that often the violence that a counselled woman faces, is also extended towards them. Some men tend to abuse the counsellor and engage in disruptive behaviour. While most men do not engage in blatantly violent behaviour, they initially tend to show contempt, derision or resistance to being called to the office, to be answerable to their wives or to be held accountable for their misdeeds by mere woman. Some men even try to hurl insults on their women family members to show that they were not afraid. The social hierarchy placing the man above women makes men balk at the thought of women counsellor labelling their perceived normal behaviour as 'aberrant'.

Thus, community, be they caste, religious or others, can at times be anti-women, for the social definition of a woman, her role and status is ingrained in our social psyche. However, while AWAG questions and challenges the community oppression of women, it also works towards creating counterculture, communities or groups of women, who create new spaces and new sense of belongings, a little away from traditional expectations.