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## **'Astitva' Battles Domestic Violence**

*Bakula Ghaswala*

In this paper I am going to discuss some important matters regarding domestic violence and women and support structures, both regarding the issue in general and our experiences in this field.

I experienced the trauma of violence when my nearest relative and friend became the victim of domestic violence. During that period I did not know that violence against women is a social problem and that's why I was affected by that incident for a long time. At last that particular case ended in a divorce. But then so many questions regarding the status of women in society arose in my mind for years together and when I read the famous Gujarati novel "Saat Paglaa Aakaashmaa - Seven Steps in the Sky" I suddenly realised that violence against women is an important issue regarding women's status and existence. Women become victims of this bitter reality because of the unequal structure of society and, in a number of circumstances, the result is suicide or death. This understanding has emerged because of the work done in the field by organisations.

During the last ten years our Organisation, Astitva, has taken an interest in and worked on more than 1000 cases of domestic violence against women. So we will have a look at the important matters which we have realised.

When we think of women's issues we have to think continuously about their social environment, that is caste, class, place of residence etc. This write-up is prepared about the women from South Gujarat, particularly Valsad district, whose member of Parliament is an Adivasi and the seat has been reserved for an Adivasi representative. There are 8 talukas in Valsad district. The population of the district is 21.74 lakhs. There are 10.63 lakh women and 11.10 lakh men and the ratio of education among women and men taken together is 54.54% of which 4.93 lakh women and 6.92 lakh men are educated (Census '81).

The main occupations are farming and industrial jobs. The women work in their family fields and in industry mostly as labourers. The middle and upper class women are occupied in household work, and are mostly teachers or bank officers or government servants.

The well-known castes, Anavils and Koli Patels, who are famous for their dowry system, are the dominant castes in this area. Their customs and rituals also affect the other sections of the society.

### **Pretexts for Violence**

There are hundreds of causes of domestic violence. The principal and most important cause is to control women which has traditionally formed the basis of social relationships. Yet we will have a look at some important causes of domestic violence and the kinds of allegations made and justifications offered.

1. She speaks too much, answers back and raves.
2. She does not want to work. She does not co-operate in any matter, cooking, house-keeping, sex etc.
3. If she talks or has friendly relations with others males, the suspicious husband and in-laws always make allegations against the woman.
4. She does not show respect to the elders of the family and does not treat them properly. She does not want to live in the joint family and observe the discipline of the joint family.
5. The woman should not suspect her husband. She should not oppose the extra-marital relationship of her husband.
6. Dowry demands are a major pretext for violence against women.
7. The caste and class based customs are also one of the causes of violence in relation to the unmarried girls. The conservative society even today does not allow the young girls and boys to marry as per their wish.
8. The educated, strong, intelligent, working woman, who is conscious of her status, also becomes the victim of violence in such circumstances. She is beaten up because she is superior to her husband.
9. The superstitious belief that a woman is a witch is also one of the causes of violence.
10. Alcoholism in large measure leads to violence.

These are some of the chief pretexts to justify violence.

## **Types of Violence**

Now let us look at the various types of violence.

1. Physical harassment, beating with the hand or a stick, kicking.
2. Dragging the woman by the hair.
3. Scorching her on various parts of the body.
4. Sometimes she is not given food and is imprisoned in an isolated room.
5. Abusing her and using foul language. Actually to insult a woman and demean her by foul language is very common in this area.
6. Mostly the woman is taunted for dowry and they always make her conscious of her secondary status. "Your father is a beggar," "You are a fool," "Your relatives are like animals" - this type of language is very common and if a woman expresses resentment, she'll be definitely a victim of violence. The perpetrators of verbal violence hardly consider it violence. The taunting of a woman on her lack of looks or household skills may be carried to such an extent that the woman commits suicide.

Who are the perpetrators of violence?

1. In most of the cases the married woman is harassed by her husband, then her in-laws.
2. Her own father, son, lover and her own mother also make her a victim of violence. This is particularly true in the case of unmarried girls.

## **Women's Reaction to Domestic Violence**

During the early stage of violence the woman prefers to be silent, then sometimes she talks to her nearest relatives. She always reacts only through speech. She rarely reacts by resorting to violence herself. Rarely does she decide to take help from the police or the court. Immediate relief is what she looks for in the situation of violence, so that she can be somewhat at ease. She always looks for help from her parental family. When she gets moral support, she feels that she is empowered and then she struggles against domestic violence. This attitude is mostly seen in labour class women, whereas middle or upper class women expect somebody else to fight for them. Mostly the women endure violence for the sake of their children. This attitude is common to all classes.

## **Guidance to Women and Experience of the Organisation**

From a feminist perspective, there is no problem in the early stage of helping a deserted woman; actually the feeling of solidarity and sisterhood is aroused between the social worker or counsellor and the woman. She also feels relief and gains confidence. She sees a way out of her desperate situation and counselling of both parties also plays a good role in the process of her struggle for existence. Yet other factors are also seen during the process which affect and influence her, so sometimes we feel that all our efforts of counselling and empowering her have failed or are in vain. For instance, when a woman takes help from the Panch, some organization, the police or the court, one has to take into account the expense, time and energy involved. And if they fail to understand her problem from her angle she gets frustrated and it is not very common that they see women's issues from a feminist perspective. It is a bitter truth that even her paternal relatives also do not understand her reality and they always help her half heartedly.

Nowadays it is often maintained that I.P.C. Section 498-A provides help to women victims and if this section is applied properly by the police, court and lawyers it can be useful. But it is our general experience that nobody is sincerely interested in helping the woman, not even her own paternal relatives. Once in a while, even if they want to teach a lesson to the cruel in-laws, after some time they do not pursue the matter or they make a compromise. The other bitter reality faced by the Organisation is corruption at all levels of the state machinery. During the process of filing cases with the police or court we have received so many accounts about the particular cases in which bribes have been taken. This situation breaks our confidence and morale also and we feel frustrated. The case takes such a peculiar turn that the woman is placed in a position where she becomes the accused and she has to defend herself from false allegations. And in such circumstances all our efforts are in vain and even one experience of failure affects the image of an Organisation. Of course, sometimes when the work is done in the right way, we feel rewarded and gain credit also.

Yet we have to accept frankly that while our Organisation had taken police help and legal help very frequently in the early stages of work in this field, gradually we have restricted the attempt to involve the police owing to the delays and harassment which are the result of their attitudes. Actually one of the trustees of Astitva had a bad experience of the attitude of the police. So, believing that an Organisation would prove more effective than an individual, she took a vital interest in the starting of 'Astitva' but now we have realized that the state machinery does not help positively. When they feel that a strong group is supporting the woman, that time they have to take an interest in her case but their interest is not genuine. Actually, without the help of police and court, the

organisational efforts can sometimes get hopeful results. The District Level Committee against Violence Against Women, Free Legal Aid Centres or the Lok Adalats are also some support structures set up to help the women against violence. But we feel that they have also not succeeded because of limited resources, lack of time, proper knowledge of the root causes and of co-ordination. We are not too sure that the members of the Committee or the social workers of the Lok Adalat always understand the problem of the woman from a feminist perspective.

Even the language of the law, the procedure of the case in the court, the police and the persons who are handling the case all come from the patriarchal value-based society. So the average common woman has no chance of justice. This is the reality which is very disappointing. Yet we feel that if we can respond to the problems of the woman properly and give her moral support in her struggle, that itself is an achievement. And this optimistic attitude encourages us to continue our work in the field.

To create an environment against violence in the society, we try to arrange awareness generation programmes such as leaflet distribution, camps, seminars, street plays and songs. We also celebrate the Nari Mukti Din on the 8th March and 25th November - The International Day against Violence against Women. This year we are celebrating the whole fortnight from 25th November to 10th December (Human Rights Day). Yet in these programmes also there are some difficulties of the funds, time and commitment and other resources. That's why so many times we have to restrict our activities.

Of course no support structure gets 100% success yet none should be ignored, even the police or the court, because they are needed in many a case. Media can play a good role in educating society but sometimes the messages also create confusion and contradiction and then it creates an adverse effect. But this topic requires thorough independent discussion.

Yet when a woman comes out from the home to save and help herself against domestic violence and opens her mouth, I feel she is really a bold person and that's why we continue our work. We are also struggling in bitter reality. Yet we hope to create an awareness and to create a society which is progressive and safe. All problems should not end in suicide or divorce; some of them may be solved in other ways also. We want to educate and share our views with women this way. We even want to empower them and ourselves by getting help from family members, neighbours, paternal relatives, villagers, citizens, police, courts and the media. We hope that all of them understand the issue and act according to feminist principles.

(This write-up has been prepared taking into account the opinions of the field workers of the Organisation 'Astitva.' (1) Mrs. Suman Bali, (2) Giri Acharya, (3) Lali Patel, (4) Parul Vashi.)

Our efforts are today (1999) evoking a more positive responses since senior officials now have a better understanding of women's issues. The work we have done over the last years has also won us acceptance in society at large. Gender sensitization workshops, consciousness-raising programmes and the establishment of women's associations are the means by which we are reaching out to rouse concern about the violence done to women and to involve sarpanches and other in positions of authority in the struggle to prevent it.