

BRIEF CASE HISTORIES OF WOMEN SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

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Thanks to all the women who have come to JAGORI for support and shared their stories.
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INTRODUCTION

JAGORI's experience in counselling and interventions in gender violence reveals the multi-faceted character of aggression against women. Gender violence is often perceived to be synonymous with domestic violence, dowry, rape, and physical aggression. The case histories documented here bring to light the encompassing reach of violence subsuming within it caste, class, religion, sexual orientation. The six cases we highlight below once again reiterate that the executors of violence could well be located within families or outside in an unfamiliar domain; in fact domestic abuse and parents' determination to safeguard their daughters' 'honour' could sometimes make homes especially unsafe, especially when they may threaten to take away the lives of their very own.

Following different trajectories in time, space and details the cases however are bound by commonalities that include: patriarchy, societal pressures, gender exploitation, insensitive administrations and the indispensability of women's organizations, communities and youths.

Each one of the cases is a testimony to the extraordinary courage of girls/women – the victims themselves who sought redressal and justice. The cases endorse the need for an active women's movement – strong presence of women's organizations acting as catalysts/mediators at various levels: engaging with families, authorities like police and most importantly as consistent support for the victim, providing her with safety, emotional sustenance and information to a safer, productive future. In fact most case histories show victims moving out of terrible situations of fear, violence to safety and independence. It must also be remembered that violence is not urban or rural specific. Cases below have come from various destinations – modern Capital of Delhi to a small town of Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh. The time span in these cases shows that far from declining gender violence continues to be a dominant phenomenon; the only difference being with the proliferation of laws and media, particularly television channels. More and more cases are now coming out in the open.

All names in the case histories have been changed; some of the locations too have been changed for the safety of the women concerned

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1. SABINA

The following incidents took place earlier this year 2009.

Nineteen-year-old Sabina who had formal education till the fifth standard used to come to JAGORI for informal classes. Keen to get her married, Sabina's parents would line up before her prospective bridegrooms but none of the matches seemed to work out till

suddenly they decided on a man more than two decades older than Sabina. What was worse Sabina was kept in the dark about the decision.

Her family situation like in many other cases was a difficult one. Father an alcoholic had no job; Mother used to do odd jobs at home. They lived in Bawana – an area where JAGORI has a strong network of community alliances and reach among the people.

It was believed one reason for arranging the match was that money had changed hands. The bridegroom, Ramesh, in his mid thirties (between 30 and 35) had given the jobless father money. Four days before the wedding Sabina saw a photograph of Ramesh. Taking an intense dislike to the man she decided to dig in her heels and say ‘NO’.

Her parents, together with Sabina’s brother, however refused to take ‘NO’ for an answer. Sabina’s sister-in-law seemed to be her only ally in the family. A war of nerves continued: Sabina threatening to commit suicide – her parents threatening to kill her. Amid this unpleasantness began the pre-wedding functions. JAGORI activists reached Sabina’s home on the day of the function. It also involved the youths in the locality to stay in touch with Sabina. “Sabina wanted to leave her home and we decided to help her”, said a JAGORI activist.

The young local women started organizing transport to whisk Sabina away – but the suspicious family, made impossible a quick exit. The plan fell though in spite of the best intentions of the community and the JAGORI activists.

Unable to get away Sabina went through with the marriage. Within a week her ordeal of physical and mental abuse began. Ramesh routinely assaulted her. Once more Sabina thought of escaping, this time putting in place a full-proof plan. Using a ruse she left for her parent’s residence, intending to flee husband’s as well as parents’ homes.

Successful this time, she headed towards JAGORI office. The organization lodged her at a shelter home. The parents registered a police case against JAGORI. The organization made its own submission to the police. Sabina clearly told the police she was not willing to return home. Her parents decided to raise a ruckus at JAGORI office. The intimidation, harassment continued 2/3 months. JAGORI sought police intervention. The police at first not helpful, acted under pressure from the Deputy Commissioner of Police, Outer Delhi district Sabina gave evidence before the police.

CURRENT STATUS

Sabina is living at the shelter home and getting on with her life. Renewing her studies (she is now in the 8th standard), Sabina is also learning the work of a masseur to earn an income.

HIGHLIGHTS

- ‘Family honour’ played a substantive role in forcing Sabina into an unpleasant marriage. Also important was the low-income status of the family and the father’s alcoholism – both of which seemed to have played a financial part since the bridegroom, in return for the marriage was supposed to have given money.
- Interestingly the abusive husband showed little interest in getting Sabina back. The task of doing so was left to the family, relatives and friends. Or may be the family took it upon themselves to restore their ‘honour.’
- The husband seemed to have lost interest as soon as Sabina made good her escape.
- The involvement of JAGORI and the grassroots community, especially the youth were crucial to Sabina’s escape and her finding a fresh beginning.
- The higher authorities in the police had to be roped in for JAGORI to make a decisive headway. Like in Anindita’s case, the lower ranks of police seemed ready to side with Sabina’s family.
- Once again we find Sabina taking the initiative to end her distress. Had she not the courage to walk out on her parents and husband she would have continued to live in a difficult situation.

2. SUMITA

This case in Delhi, that took place in 2008, involved issues of migration, abandonment, collective intervention and solidarity of women working as domestic help.

It was Mahesh’s job as a middleman getting young women for a Delh-based agency, which posted them as domestic workers in various households. Fifteen-year-old Sumita was trapped when, along with several other young girls, she decided to leave her village in West Bengal and find a job in Delhi. Mahesh was the middleman. Instead of finding her a placement, he asked the girl to live with him and she moved in with him.

In a short while Sumita was expecting a child. As her due date came Mahesh admitted her in Safdarjung hospital where she delivered a daughter. By the time her daughter was born Mahesh had disappeared. In fact he had vanished after as soon as he had got Sumita admitted in hospital.

Nowhere to go to, Sumita sat in a nearby park with the infant. An old man, serving tea in a nearby stall, offered her shelter at first and then wanted to marry her. Refusing the overture, Sumita had to return to the park, still believing her husband would return. A group of maids who used to meet every afternoon in the park noticed the mother and the infant. Hearing her story the domestic workers decided to share among them the responsibility of looking after them. Taking turns they fed them, ensuring their safety.

Among them, a woman who knew about JAGORI brought Sumita to the office. She refused to lodge a police case, believing it would ‘dishonour’ her family. *Shakti Shalini*

provided a shelter home for Sumita and her child, finding her a job. She lived there more than a year till the home was wound up.

CURRENT STATUS

Sumita has decided to go back to her village and bring up her child.

HIGHLIGHTS

*Interestingly Sumita has travelled a long way not only in terms of experience also overcoming societal barriers – the terrible and meaningless interpretations and pressures of ‘honour’ and ‘dishonour’.

- JAGORI and *Shakti Shalini* played catalytic roles in getting Sumita to surmount this barrier. A year ago it was perceived ‘dishonour’ that restrained her from lodging a police case. Now she is ready to go back to her rural home in West Bengal – a decision that clearly shows her as a stronger person, ready to face the challenges of a conservative surrounding.
- The case highlights the underbelly of the process of migrations/trafficking where agents like Mahesh are picking on vulnerable targets, exploiting them sexually, economically.
- Perhaps the most inspiring thread in the story is woven by the maids in the park who showed a compassionate nature, taking on a responsibility even when they were struggling to make both ends meet. Gender solidarity in one of its glorious moments.

3. SHAMA AND ANJALI

Same-sex relationships survive in the face of tremendous odds – hostility from family, community, law-enforcing agencies - society at large. The following case in Delhi, with two young women Shama and Anjali at its centre is a quintessential example of the difficult situation same-sex couples find themselves in.

Twenty-four year old Shama was in a relationship with Anjali, her 23-year old friend. Initially unaware of the relationship once Anjali’s parents came to know they turned the heat on their daughter, starting to abuse her. Anjali, for her part, tried to convince them but her adamant parents started matchmaking for the daughter. Though keeping in touch with Shama had become increasingly difficult Anjali managed to establish contact to chalk out a plan. Soon enough Anjali left home.

Assuming she was with her partner Anjali’s family started threatening Shama, taking her to the police station, using the usual tactics of alternately cajoling and threatening to get information of Anjali’s whereabouts. After a few days Anjali called Shama asking her to pick her up from the railway station. Pressured by continued intimidation by the family and the police Shama called up Anjali’s parents telling them their daughter was at the railway station. Shama accompanied the parents to the station, where they collected

Anjali. Her parents took her home, this time keeping her behind bolted doors, blocking her access to the outside world.

Deciding to seek help Shama took the case to JAGORI. But before JAGORI could proceed, Anjali, faced with the possibility of being married off hastily, fled home. She reached Shama's rented flat, from where they contacted JAGORI, requesting a safe shelter home. Anajali's parents were planning to move the police. Providing the girls a safe home JAGORI team contacted the DCP, telling him they had taken up the case.

The girls stayed at the safe home for nearly 24 days during which JAGORI contacted families of Anjali and Shama, holding separate counseling sessions for them. Shama's family appeared flexible; her father said he was ready to accept the relationship. Anjali's parents however were more difficult. Their fears stemmed from the likely hostility the family would face from society and community. Such relations were not 'normal' they told JAGORI - it would ruin their social status. Most importantly, they blamed Shama for manipulating and influencing their daughter.

It took intensive counseling sessions for JAGORI to break down Anjali's parents' hostility. Initially they agreed to 'think' about it. The girls had made it clear they would return on one condition – that they live together. Finally Anajali's parents told JAGORI they were ready to accept the relationship. A date was fixed for Anajali and Shama to meet their families. Accompanied by the JAGORI team the girls went to their respective homes.

CURRENT STATUS

Anjali and Shama are now staying together. Both are working and enjoying their shared life. Anjali does visit her family, spending time with them. Her mother however, still not fully giving up, tries in vain to coax her out of the relationship.

The girls are now part of JAGORI's support group, attending the organisation's meetings.

HIGHLIGHTS

*Family/community honour the recurrent theme in all case histories is perhaps most stringent when it comes to same-sex relationships, which are considered 'deviant – abnormal'.

* It would be interesting to see if decriminalizing section 377 impacts this deeply entrenched social taboo, helping to break it down bit by bit.

*Without JAGORI's help the girls would have had to take many more knocks before and if at all they eventually did manage to reconcile their families to the relationship.

*Interesting that Anajali's family from a non-negotiable position agreed to accept the daughter's relationship; perhaps a pointer that counseling, democratic forms of engagement with the family, community could go a long way in easing the situation.

4. TAMANNA

Married for ten years and with three children Tamanna, 22, was routinely abused by her unemployed husband. Working as a parking attendant in a mall she was the breadwinner in her family. The husband did not want her to work. The insufferable abuse forced Tamanna to quit her matrimonial home. With her eldest daughter she returned to her parent's home. Not supportive of their daughter's decision the parents tried to get Tamanna to return to her husband.

When Tamanna held out, her husband started stalking her at her workplace. He would create scenes in office, abusing and threatening, demanding Tamanna return home. She approached JAGORI for help in January 2009, after a scuffle with her husband. Next time he reached her office Tamanna called JAGORI's helpline. Reaching the spot a two-member team informed the police. The police took the husband into custody.

Unpleasant scenes at the workplace and the police intervention however opened up another flank of trouble. Tamanna's employer asked her to quit. As reasons for terminating service he cited regular scenes and the police visit. Tamanna turned to JAGORI. A team told the Human Resource manager that the grounds for sacking constitute a case of discrimination at workplace; and that JAGORI could initiate legal proceedings. The interaction worked.

Next day Tamanna was reinstated

CURRENT SITUATION

Tamanna has made it plain that under no circumstance will she go back to her husband. With JAGORI's help she has filed a case in court under the Protection of Women against the Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA), seeking protection, custody of her children and compensation. The husband has been served with a notice.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Like in all the cases narrated above, the family was unsupportive, negative, even if it meant hurting their daughter and putting her in the harm's way. The shadow of 'family honour' once again loomed large pushing aside considerations even of the daughter's safety.

- The case shows how domestic violence can spill over to the workplace, taking on an additional dimension of abuse. The engagement between JAGORI and the management provides an interesting insight into how jobs can be saved in situations like this. Tamanna, without JAGORI's help would have probably found it difficult to battle it out on all fronts.

5. LEENA AND RIYAZ

Inter-religious marriage is no less a trigger for bitter conflict, violence as same-sex, inter-caste relationships. The bias transcends urban/rural boundaries - economic/social distinctions.

The following case was played out in New Delhi. Twenty-six year old Leena, from a conservative Jat family, was an educated, career woman, working as a physiotherapist. In a relationship with Riyaz, a Muslim boy – Leena could avoid the pitfalls as long as her parents were not aware of her involvement. Once they got to know usual terror tactics followed – confinement at home, abusive treatment. Leena was allowed to go to her workplace but not without family escort. Her brothers flanked her wherever she went. At one stroke Leena lost her independence, her autonomy of free movement; her relationship with Riyaz seemed seriously threatened.

At the first opportunity of a couple of hours of freedom, Leena secretly married Riyaz under Muslim rites and traditions. She changed her name to Saba Khan, returning to her family with her secret. Life went on till Leena's parents started hunting for a groom. Left with hardly any other option she had to tell her parents. Violent reaction followed. Her parents beat her up and threatened Riyaz would pay with his life if Leena tried to meet him. Pressure mounted for her to marry a Jat boy. Virtually under house arrest Leena was forbidden to go to work and thrashed regularly to break down her resolve. After a 12-day confinement at home Leena was allowed to step out alone.

Going to her workplace she expressed to her employer her apprehensions of living with Riyaz since that could endanger him. At the same time she looked for an outside agency to intervene. Her employer, who ran an NGO for physically challenged children, brought Leena to JAGORI. Even as a JAGORI team decided to speak to the parents Leena called up and said a cousin had agreed to raise the issue with them. After this there was silence from Leena. Worried over the sudden disruption in communication a JAGORI team visited Leena's workplace. They found Leena a little distant. She told them her family had confiscated her marriage certificate and lodged a police complaint against Riyaz. A police team had already visited his home threatening him and his family members. Leena told the team that she could not bear if anything happened to Riyaz, not wanting JAGORI to continue with its interventions. The team spent time with Leena, counseling her - then left telling her to approach them whenever she felt the need.

Four months passed and then Leena visited JAGORI – this time with Riyaz. She told the organization that no longer was she able to withstand the continued harassment at home, inflicted by parents and relatives. She had been staying with a friend the last couple of

days since apprehensive of the fall-out - Riyaz was hesitant to take her home. Leena's family had kept up its threats and intimidations of him and his family.

A JAGORI team sat separately with Riyaz, speaking to him at length. Initially a bit shaken and defensive Riyaz in the course of the conversation said his family did not have any problem with Leena but they were anxious about the safety of Riyaz and his brother. Little by little he seemed to understand Leena's predicament, agreeing to take her home. JAGORI informed the police station concerned of the decision. A team went to the station and managed to retrieve the marriage certificate.

The next step was to schedule a meeting with Leena's family. Discussions between JAGORI and the family however did not bring any qualitative difference to the situation. The latter flatly told JAGORI they had no intentions of accepting the marriage and threatened action since the decision hurt the 'pride' of the family. A few more counseling sessions took place, helping to calm the family down. But without changing their fundamental decision not to keep ties with Leena.

CURRENT SITUATION

Leena is staying with Riyaz and her in-laws. Her family, so far, has not bothered them.

HIGHLIGHTS

*Family honour or pride – is the primary driving force behind the family's ruthless attitude towards their daughter.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchy and family honour feed each other in a negative spiral. The above experiences show the stifling hold that 'honour killing' exercises over society, determining relationships within and outside the family/community.

It is not just husbands abusing partners, parents are ready to abandon their children, put them through the most harrowing ordeals – in the name of 'family honour'. Under its overwhelming arch rests every consideration - caste, class, religion, sexual orientation. Transgressions from accepted norms of relationships, a challenge to the brahmanical, patriarchal order are not tolerated as stigma on 'family honour'. The recent debate on section 377, revolving around questions of free love, what is accepted as 'normal', how any deviation is dubbed 'apocalyptic' for the existing social order, reflected these anxieties. The cases documented by JAGORI reveal the same mind-set, its deeply embedded fears of upsetting the 'mainstream' social, sexual, economic structures.

However, though difficult, a 'other' way of life can be chosen if the survivor is ready to abandon the well-trodden path, following his/her heart and convictions. In each of JAGORI's cases the girl/woman was ready to take that risk and in the process of overcoming social, familial barriers she evolved into a stronger person. Equally clear from the cases was the fact that without the supportive intervention of an outside agency – a woman's organization in this case - the 'victims' would have found it far more difficult if not probably impossible to break out of the stranglehold of family/society. Engaging with the families proved important allowing the hidden fears to emerge out in the open and allowing space for the 'other' point of view to be articulated and heard. For instance, in Shama and Anjali's case JAGORI's counseling sessions with the families proved rewarding. Doggedly opposed to the relationship at first Anjali's family gradually came around to accepting it, though somewhat grudgingly. A seemingly insurmountable block was overcome through discussions.

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