



Responses to Domestic Violence in India: A Study in Karnataka and Gujarat

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Women in all cultures, religions, classes, and ethnic groups suffer from violence perpetrated against them. India, a diverse nation, is no different; the few studies available show that from 22 percent to 60 percent of women surveyed have experienced violent acts, most commonly at the hands of spouses or relatives (Mahajan 1990; Rao 1997). Despite this, violence against women has not garnered concerted legal or political attention. Because the control of the male head of household has rarely been questioned, acts of violence against a wife or child have been perceived as disciplinary and essential for maintaining authority.

In the last two decades, however, the growing strength of the Indian women's movement has contributed to greater public awareness of violence against women. Activists have mobilized to demand changes in the criminal code and police procedures with regard to dowry deaths, custodial rape, abductions of women, *sati* (the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre), sexual harassment, sex trafficking, and prostitution. These campaigns, while vital, have largely focused on acts of violence that occur in the public sphere. Except for a few sensational cases, day-to-day physical abuse of women in their own homes remains largely hidden.

Grassroots organizations in India increasingly work to bridge the public-private divide in responses to domestic violence.¹ In a recent project, the Research Centre for Women's Studies (RCWS) at SNDT Women's University has examined this growing trend in the Indian states of Karnataka and Gujarat. Established in 1974, RCWS conducts theoretical and policy-oriented research on women's issues, disseminates publications, and operates an extensive library and documentation service.

Objectives

The focus of the RCWS/SNDT study was to provide documentation of domestic violence and responses to the problem. Specific objectives were to:

- ▶ Evaluate both state and voluntary organizations with regard to their

ideological principles (particularly those related to social change and gender), organizational structure, decision-making processes, staff morale, and intervention strategies.

- ▶ Prepare case studies to facilitate in-depth analysis of organizational responses to domestic violence.²

The Research Process

The study sites were selected because of their histories as centers

of social organization. Innovative women's groups focusing on literacy

and microenterprise, as well as domestic violence, have originated

¹ Domestic violence is defined in this study as acts of mental, emotional, financial, and physical abuse of a woman that may force her or her family members to seek support outside of the family and kin group.

² Based on the data, organizations were classified into five categories: historically significant organizations; government initiatives; organizations that work closely with the government; feminist organizations; and community-based organizations. For details on specific organizations, see SNDT's final report.

in Karnataka, while Gujarat has a long tradition of reform, with roots in Gandhi's independence movement. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in both states were chosen for the study based on a detailed questionnaire mailed to nearly 500 groups working on women's issues. Sixty in Karnataka

and one hundred in Gujarat responded. Evaluation of the responses and discussion with project consultants ultimately led to the selection of ten organizations from each state. Data were then collected in the field through interviews with the leadership, staff, and beneficiaries of each one.

Small group discussions were held with personnel; practices and interventions were observed; and available reports and records were examined. Upon completion of this fieldwork, participating personnel discussed findings and provided feedback to researchers in workshops held in Ahmedabad and Bangalore in January 1998.

Results

Both the state and the voluntary sector have actively promoted interventions in a few key areas, as discussed below.

Public Policy

Section 498A (an amendment to the Dowry Act of 1983) defines domestic violence as a criminal offense and thereby offers women some support in taking legal action. National and state agencies have undertaken advocacy programs to improve implementation of this and related laws, for example, lobbying efforts by the Women's "Vigilance Committee" in Gujarat. However, this strategy has not yet proven effective in Gujarat and has not been tried in Karnataka.

Law Enforcement

All Women's Police Stations (AWPS) were initially created to underscore the criminal nature of domestic violence, to make police stations less intimidating to women, to facilitate the investigation of crimes against women and children in a gender-sensitive manner, and to provide mediation, counseling and forensic services. Further, officers may collect and use evidence to arrest and charge offenders. In Gujarat, the *Mahila Suraksha Samiti*, was also formed as a statutory body to monitor and enforce police investigation of crimes against women.

Case studies of AWPS revealed poor quality services and low rates of utilization. Reasons include the long distances that women have to travel to reach the stations, inadequate infrastructures, discriminatory attitudes among officers, and an emphasis on family reconciliation regardless of the severity of cases. Researchers also found that even female officers often perceive domestic violence as a private matter and ignore investigative procedures. At the same time, female officers often face gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, together with the low wages, long working hours, and insufficient training that plague the police force in general.

Family Counseling

Family-counseling cells (FCC) exist nationwide in or near police stations and are run by both the state and voluntary organizations. The official FCC mandate is to facilitate reconciliation in cases of domestic violence and "marital maladjustment" and to prevent unnecessary legal actions. Cells provide preventive, referral, and rehabilitative services.

Case studies show that FCC services vary with regard to quality of services, approach to domestic violence, the relationship between local cells and law enforcement, and

level of credibility in the community. Overall, counselors at FCCs established by the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) view domestic violence as the result of a loss of control, spouses' different opinions, lack of education, extra-marital affairs, and alcohol abuse. Reconciliation is the primary solution sought, using joint counseling, written agreements, and intervention by community elders; if these methods don't work, individuals may be referred to family courts or NGOs. Every effort is made to keep the family unit intact.

In contrast, FCCs that are not funded by the CSWB and operated by women's organizations approach domestic violence as a systemic problem and believe that interventions should fit an individual woman's needs and circumstances. Counseling is viewed as a lengthy process that requires an atmosphere of trust, enables women to vent distress, and helps individuals identify their own solutions. Family reconciliation is considered an option only if it benefits the woman.

Shelters and Short-Stay Homes

NGOs provide temporary housing for women and their children with the help of government grants. These facilities provide an alternative place to live until women are able to



either return to their families or obtain some other form of housing, with a general limitation of approximately three to six months. During this time, residents participate in skill-building, vocational, and educational activities and may receive housing and employment assistance.

Although widespread differences exist among facilities, residents at many shelters reported a lack of child care and uncomfortable living conditions. Negative attitudes toward residents and social stigmas about domestic violence on the part of personnel and members of the community further compromised women's efforts to gain self-respect. In addition, residents were found to live under strict regulations with regard to their hours, visitors, and activities.

However, some shelters define themselves as partners working with residents to address a widespread social problem. In a few instances, shelter residents have been encouraged to participate in or initiate public awareness and education campaigns within the community, and even to become staff members. Facilities that provide childcare, primary school facilities, vocational training, libraries, and comprehensive counseling were also found to be conducive to women's rehabilitation and growth.

Self-Help Collectives

Some projects in Karnataka and Gujarat seek to increase political and cultural consciousness through *sanghas* (collectives). These foster new chances for women to improve their educational and economic opportunities, which are in turn

viewed as avenues to accelerate development for the community as a whole.

Researchers noted situations in which *sanghas* intervened in individual cases of domestic violence or pressured *panchayats* (councils of elders) to respond more effectively to dowry harassment, suspicious deaths, extra-marital affairs, and physical abuse. Some collectives also monitor violence in particular households. Although *sanghas* are often facilitated by NGOs and given technical and economic assistance by the state, they are expected to become self-governing.

Overall, *sanghas* are an innovative and effective method of addressing domestic violence against women, particularly in rural and impoverished communities. However, some collectives are isolated and resistant to ideas about violence, gender, and mental health. In addition, a lack of consistent responses and entrenched respect for local authority may compromise women's safety and interests.

Conclusions

The study found that many of the state-initiated responses to domestic violence in Karnataka and Gujarat are short-term and reactive. In contrast, the majority of NGO responses are preventive and long-term, pursuing consciousness-raising sessions and the economic and social empowerment of women, underscored by the goal of gender equality and the prevention of domestic violence. While such innovative interventions are increasing, domestic violence is still often viewed as a breakdown in an otherwise just or necessary system.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

The following recommendations can help improve the quality of interventions:

► **Keep records.** It was often difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of specific programs because of a lack of documentation. The monitoring of cases and the documentation of information and procedures is essential to helping organizations identify effective strategies. A cohesive database would facilitate this process.

► **Improve access to basic services.** With few exceptions, intervention programs lack methods to address physical and emotional trauma. Collaboration between hospitals and family counseling centers, the education of medical professionals on the signs of domestic violence, and greater attention to mental health problems should be an integral part of service provision.

► **Reach the offender.** Efforts to work directly with batterers are practically nonexistent. Dialogue about violence and gender should be initiated at workplaces, in *panchayats*, with labor organizations, and at

other sites where men gather. In addition, community leaders, counselors, and activists should meet and work with the partners and families of battered women.

► **Create a hotline.** Organizations should establish local hotlines or crisis referral services that can take calls from women or concerned family members and neighbors and answer inquiries about legal, medical, and psychological services. Such services would both help women who are unable or unwilling to appear at organizations in person and encourage individuals to speak on their behalf.

Some lessons were learned through the research in Karnataka and Gujarat that are applicable in other settings, as follows:

► **Staff development is key.** A lack of training and low morale was observed among staff at many organizations, in particular in the state sector. Organizational personnel should be encouraged to initiate new programs and take on new responsibilities. Networks among activists, state officials, and organiza-

tions, as well as improved contact between the voluntary and state sectors, could help improve the quality of programs and foster public awareness.

► **More people need attention.** Intervention strategies are primarily oriented toward individuals who are able to initiate the search for help outside the home. This reactive type of response has an impact on only a small percentage of those in need. Efforts should also be made to reach women who cannot come forward to complain of domestic violence. For example, job training and education programs could provide a venue for discussions or counseling on domestic violence.

► **Culture is vital.** Sustainable and effective responses to domestic violence depend upon balancing traditional beliefs about family and community relationships with new consciousness about human rights, gender equality, and nonviolence. Sensitivity to social norms can also spur the involvement of community members in efforts to combat domestic violence.

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