

LMAAGS 2017

GENDER FRAMES

Edited and compiled by
Dr. A. L. Sharada, Revathi Asokan,
Malavika Goyal and Maggie Paul



laadi

Celebrate Her Life
An Initiative by Population First

GENDER FRAMES



Celebrate Her Life

An Initiative by Population First

Edited and compiled by
Dr. A. L. Sharada, Revathi Asokan,
Malavika Goyal and Maggie Paul

FROM THE EDITORS DESK

Gender Frames is the fourth volume of the award winning entries of the Laadli Media Awards and contains 38 articles from the present edition of the awards, a few from the previous edition and a couple of articles which missed the award narrowly. Our aim was to ensure that we present a variety of issues and perspectives our readers.

I express my sincere thanks to Aarya Nagre and Shruti Pendharkar from Rachna Sansad Design School for designing the book at such short notice, Spenta for printing it in record time and my team in the office Ujjwala, Meenal, Sneha, Raina, Venu and Leela for helping us in innumerable ways throughout. I thank Revathi, Malvika and Maggie for ensuring that we meet the deadlines. My sincere thanks to our award winners without whose support the book would not have been possible.

The earlier three volumes 'Sense and Sensitivity', 'Through the Gender Lens' and 'Breaking News' are being shared extensively with media students, media and advertising professionals and with media leaders and are much appreciated. The objective of publishing these compilations of award winning work is to instruct and inspire more and more people to frame their reporting and programming within gender frames to play the role of influencers of public opinion, show mirror to the society and be a watch dog to call out whenever the programmes, policies and their implementation are falling short of ensuring an inclusive and a gender just society.

A look at the selected work shows that even in the most difficult and cynical times there is hope. There is hope because there are many who are being true to their profession, showing great sensitivity and compassion, raising critical questions about gender inequalities, discrimination and violence. Each one tells a story, raises an issue, questions the current state of affairs and shows mirror to the misogyny, biases and discrimination that pervade our country.

Media could play a significant role in perspective building particularly with regard to gender and how it influences our behavior and attitudes. Often we do not realize how casually and unintentionally we reinforce gender stereotypes through our behaviours, attitudes and social institutions. Shweta Ganesh Kumar decodes the phrase 'Boys will be Boys' to reveal how it normalises gender stereotypes. She says "Every time, we reinforce a female's supposed frailty we are teaching our boys that the only way forward for him, if he wants to identify as male is to be stereotypically masculine - to be loud, unconcerned about invading someone else's space, to take risks, play rough and be wary of expressing gentler emotions, for fear of being a 'sissy'.

The inherent gender biases in our social institutions also need to be called out to initiate change. Jyothi Shellar details the gender discriminatory practices among Parsis, an otherwise liberal community. Arefa Johari and Aysha Mehmood bust the myth that Female Genetal Cutting is limited to the Dawoodi Bohra community and reveal how it is being practiced among local sects of Muslims in Kozhikode. The ad campaign, Sindoor Khela breaks the taboo over widows, sex workers and transgender persons from participating in the Sindoor Khela festivities in Bengal. All the above uncover the gender discriminatory practices which go unnoticed.

Trafficking is an issue which is increasingly receiving media attention in India. The exhaustive investigative report on trafficking by Sarita Santoshini brings together hard hitting data, blood chilling personal accounts of victims of human trafficking while TS Sudhir's documentary highlights an important cause behind trafficking – migration of parents for work. Uma Sudhir, on the other hand exposes the racket of selling newborn girls in some tribal areas of Telengana. All expose the inaction, connivance and at times active promotion by the law violence and exploitation.

There was considerable focus on the Transgender bill in the media last year. Yet 'Asexuality' does not generally figure in any conversation on sexualities. Shreya highlights the experiences of men and women who are asexual and the general lack of understanding about the same. The YouTube channel AA EE Anjali is yet another interesting initiative driven by transgender persons to promote greater understanding about transgender persons.

It is a known fact that women in sports is a topic that does not get as much space as it deserves. We bring to you two inspiring articles. Bhavya Dore's article on the female soccer coaches which talks about the challenges and triumphs of women coaches in a male dominated sport – Soccer and Adrija Bose's article on how football is transforming the lives of girls and women in Haryana. Amazon's ad 'Toofani' also narrates the story of a sports woman but from the perspective of how motherhood robs woman of her own identity. There is a definite need to move beyond the routine stories to look at woman and sports through a gender lens.

Women in conflict areas face different kinds of issues and are vulnerabilities. While Chitrangadha tells us about the sexual assaults during military operations in Bastar, Urvashi Sarcar brings to us the lives of widows of Sundarban's reserved forests who are left without support after the loss of their husbands to the wild animals. Both sets of women are faced with the uphill task of fighting against the system that is biased against them.

Though women contribute more to agriculture than men, reporting on woman farmers is negligible. Aheli Moitra tells a heartwarming story of women who have not just revived the local crop millets but also reclaimed their status as farmers in society.

Women and health could be reported from various perspectives and the collection of articles presented touch upon plethora of issues. Starting with Ujjwala Shenoy asking why ailments of women are not taken seriously to the expose` on unethical practice of forced hysterectomies by Vikhar Ahmed, the articles cover a large number of issues. Adrija writes about the mental illnesses that are festering among women in Kashmir due to the long history of conflict while Aliya exposes the poor water and sanitation conditions and their impact on the health of women in Kashmir. Rupsa on the other hand tells us how difficult it is for a woman to get a female condom because of deep rooted prejudices while Priyanka raises the question what killed Swati Jamdade, putting the case of the maternal death in the centre of deep seated gender biases, son preference medical malpractices and violence.

Do women really have the freedom to exercise their political rights? Aarefa and Anima tell us that politics is still a male domain. While women in Gujarat are denied the choice and agency to even have an opinion on politics, the imposition of minimum educational qualifications by the government has in one stroke disempowered a number of female Sarpanches doing laudable work for their communities. The insensitivity of the political establishment is further highlighted by Vinaya who says that most political parties are not compliant with the requirement of having Internal Complaints Committees (ICC) to address sexual harassment at work places.

Why is the workforce participation of women decreasing in spite of the increasing women's education and economic growth in the country asks, Namita Bhandare and identifies gendered mindsets, unsafe work spaces and the poor infrastructure facilities as the cause for women opting out of the workforce. Abdul Rahoof exposes the gender bias faced by women cops. Yet at the same time we have instances of women who are silently making space for themselves in male bastions like the idol makers of West Bengal and the women quazis as profiled by Shoma and Adrija respectively.

Do our law schools prepare us for the trauma of dealing with gruesome child abuse cases? Priyangee shares her experience of vicarious trauma and underlines the need to build the skills of professionals working on such cases to deal with the trauma .

Pooja, Surya, and Leena write about the poor response to sexual harassment complaints at the organizational level and also at the level of policy implementation. Ragamalika flags the inherent gender biases that sometimes influence not only the prosecution but also dispensation of justice which re-victimize the woman seeking justice.

We have some heart warming stories as well. Sheena assuages our fears about the use of social media by young girls by highlighting their coping mechanisms to deal with online safety threats, Basudev paints an optimistic picture of putting a stop to child marriages in Odisha and Nidhi assures us that eco-friendly toilets could be an option for the future.

If you thought film reviews are only about the hero we have Lakshmi reviewing a film from the female protagonist's perspective.

The articles are not placed in any specific order to allow you to explore them at your pace and as per your choice. We are sure Gender Frames makes riveting read and hope you enjoy reading it.



Dr. A. L . Sharada
Director, Population First

SCOPE OF LAADLI MEDIA AWARDS

- Cover 28 States, 6 union territories and Bangladesh, Mauritius, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- 13 languages
- Entries increased from 120 in 2007 to 1700+ in 2017

MEDIA

Advertising: Print, TV, OOH, Radio, Digital, Direct Mail

Print: Newspaper, Magazine and Feature Service

Electronic: TV, Radio

Web

Other Media

CATEGORIES

Service, Product and Public Service

News Features, Features, Investigative Reports, Editorials, Op-Eds and Columns

News Features, Features, Documentaries, Serials, Radio Plays, Topical Programmes and Issue Based Programmes

News Features, Features, Articles, Blogs and Columns, Special Editions

Dance, Theatre, Feature Films, Cartoons, Multi-Media, Books

CONTENTS

1. No compensation for sex abuse survivors for ten years
Laxmi Prasanna Ajai
2. 'There's someone else just like you': inside India's asexuality networks
Shreya Ila Anasuya
3. Flung outside the ring
P. Anima
4. Poor sanitation and lack of clean water threatens maternal health in rural Kashmir
Aliya Bashir
5. Why Indian work places are losing women : Our Nationwide Investigation Begin
Namita Bhandare
6. There's a secret Kashmiri women are keeping from their families
Adrija Bose
7. India's pioneering women Qazis ask Muslim men: Have you read the Quran
Adrija Bose
8. In this Haryana Village, there is a woman footballer in nearly every home
Adrija Bose
9. Why Mumbai's women won't buy a condom
Rupsa Chakraborty
10. Manodhairya : a landmark scheme with flawed execution
Puja Changoiwala
11. Breaking the male bastion of Kumartuli
Dr Shoma Chatterji
12. In two districts of Bastar, Adivasi Women report sexual assaults by security forces during military operations
Chitragada Choudhury

13. Clueless political parties unsafe for women members
Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
14. What schoolgirls in India can teach us about social media
Sheena D'lima
15. The ranks of female soccer coaches are growing, but not without pushback
Bhavya Dore
16. Ms. Representation: What Aruvi means to u
Lakshmi Krupa Ge
17. Dealing with vicarious trauma: what law school did not teach me about working on cases of sexual violence
Priyangee Guha
18. Sexual harassment on campus: Follow 'due process' or make a list?
Surya Harikrishnan
19. Ecosan Toilets are making it safer for rural Bihar's women to defecate during floods
Nidhi Jamwal
20. The backstory: On the poll trail searching for Gujarat's missing young women
Aarefa Johari
21. Female genital cutting is being practiced in Kerala too : Sahiyo investigation
Aarefa Johari and Aysha Mahmood
22. Shaming of the mother in Pascal child abuse case shows all that's wrong with our legal system
Ragamalika Karthikeyan and Theja Ram
23. Privacy issues haunt Bihar's flood hit woman
Imran Khan
24. Why the phrase 'Boys Will Be Boys' is damaging our sons - teaching our boys to be safe
Shweta Ganesh Kumar
25. Time's up, Age-Old Beliefs! Odisha is saying no to child marriage
Basudev Mahapatra

26. How Sumi village in Phek dist revived millets and became gender wise
Aheli Moitra
27. The highs and lows of women drug users in Manipur
Sindhuja Parthasarthy
28. The murky case of Mangalam TV and the questions it raises about the gender problem in Malayalam journalism
Leena Gita Reghunath
29. Telangana women cops face bias
Abdul Rahoof KK
30. A natural instinct for weaving helps patch tattered lives
Rakhee Roytalukdar
31. The price of Life
Sarita Santoshini
32. Widowed by tigers, abandoned by the State
Urvashi Sarkar
33. A tale of exploitation
Vikas Ahmed Sayeed
34. The conflict within : Parsis and gender rights
Jyoti Shelar
35. Why is illness in Women more likely to be wrongly diagnosed and treated?
Dr Ujwala Shenoy Karmarkar
36. What killed Swati Jamdade? The preference for a son, a sonography error or an illegal abortion
Priyanaka Vora

Advertising Awards

Other Category Awards

Laadli Special Awards

1. NO COMPENSATION FOR SEX ABUSE SURVIVORS FOR 10 YEARS

January 11, 2017 | The Times of India

Centre sets up VCF with Rs 200Cr Under Nirbhaya Scheme

Sex abuse survivors in the state, including the woman from Suryanelli who was abused when she was a minor, eligible for compensation from the Victim Compensation Fund (VCF) have been denied the same for the last 10 years.

The VCF with an initial corpus of Rs 200 crore was set up by the central government under Nirbhaya scheme. The funds have not been shared with Kerala because the state is yet to align its policy with the guidelines of the VCF set up by the Centre and also provide compensation for crimes listed under Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

“Child survivors of sex abuse have not been compensated for the last 10 years. Unless the court issues a verdict, the victims will not receive any relief. In the Suryanelli case, the victim is yet to get compensation. A six-year old abused by her father is yet to receive any compensation from the government and the child has lost her home and childhood,” an official with the Social Justice Department (SJD) told TOI.

The VCF announced by the Centre in August 2015 is routed through the state police to the Kerala Legal Services Authority (KELSA) which disburses it to survivors through the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). Kerala government also announced its VCF in 2014 which depends on funds sourced through budgetary allocation, fines imposed on the convicts under Section 357 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) and donations and contributions from individuals and organisations. The central scheme has no mention of routing fines imposed on the convicts under section 357. But, if fines levied under section 357, including for POCSO cases, need to be added to the state VCF, it needs more clarity.

This is because fines levied by the court verdict is based on individual cases and DLSA has no role as the amount is directly collected from convicts. Because the procedures are long the timely release of relief money is next to impossible and it hardly reaches the deserving victim, except in a few cases.

Kerala State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (KeSCPCR) chairperson Shobha Koshy told TOI that they had recommended to the state government to create a Separate Revolving Fund; for the Nirbhaya victims and to ensure that KELSA operates it directly in the disbursement.

“Kerala government need to align its policy with Central VCF guidelines and in the matter of providing compensation for crimes listed in POCSO Act,” she said.

KeSCPCR member J Sandhya said compensation amount offered by the State VCF and the Central VCF cannot be compared. “In the central scheme, a Nirbhaya victim needs to be paid a minimum relief of Rs 3 lakh, while that is the maximum that can be paid to a victim under the state scheme. Under the POCSO Act, there is no cap on VCF and it depends on individual cases. The state is expected to submit a statement of the fund-utilised by March for reimbursement from the Central VCF, but that is hardly done”.

KeSCPCR member Fr Phillip Parakkat also said that they have recommended the state government to ensure timely release of funds under Nirbhaya scheme through proper coordination between home department and KELSA.

KELSA member secretary K Sathyan said, last year, by third week of March, around Rs. 50 lakh was released by the police department and about Rs 25 lakh was disbursed to the Nirbhaya victims through DLSA.

“Further, a proposal for VCF requirement of Rs 1.78 crore was submitted and the police department has approved about Rs 90 lakh for disbursement. Recently ,Rs 3 lakh was disbursed to DLSA in Palakkad to be handed over to a rape victim. Instead KELSA can be made the chief controller for release of funds, so that victims will receive compensation on time,” he said.



LAXMI PRASANNA AJAI

Laxmi Prasanna Ajai is a Special Correspondent with The Times of India (TOI), Trivandrum. She sees journalism as a medium to reach out and bring a positive social transformation and is dedicated to the pursuit of truth backed by proof to bring justice for the vulnerable mainly women and children. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Investigative Story (Southern Region).

2. 'THERE'S SOMEONE ELSE JUST LIKE YOU': INSIDE INDIA'S ASEXUALITY NETWORKS

January 11, 2017 | www.deepdives.in

When Naqshpa* was a teenager, her friends swooned over Hrithik Roshan's toned muscles and papered their walls with posters of Rahul Dravid. Meanwhile, they called Naqshpa a 'kid' because she didn't feel that way about anyone. But her friends assumed that she'd catch up to them eventually, and have a crush of her own someday.

Years passed, and that day never came.

At the age of 16, Naqshpa accidentally read about sex in a children's encyclopedia. 'I was immediately shocked and disgusted,' she recalls. 'I also realised then that I had never been attracted to anyone.'

Sure, she'd thought that some people were good-looking, but her feelings had never gone deeper than that.

The feeling that she was somehow different persisted, and she wanted to figure out what made her so. It bothered her that romantic relationships were seen as central to people's lives, and that close friends and even siblings could 'become secondary, when people started having romantic partners'.

She went online to look for information a couple of times, but to no success.

Seven whole years later, aged 27, Naqshpa read the word 'bisexuality' in an article online. One search led to another, and soon she was reading about something called asexuality.

'Asexual: a person who doesn't experience sexual attraction.'

And just like that, she had a word that she could relate to. It had taken her over a decade, but Naqshpa finally discovered what she 'was'—and that she wasn't the only one who felt this way.

* * *

In India, the crushing weight of sexual love is everywhere—and so are efforts to control it.

Most blockbuster films show some variation of girl-meets-boy (which often translates into boy-stalks-girl): they fall in love, they overcome obstacles, they end up together. At the same time, others screech about 'love jihad', how sex education will lead young people astray, and that nobody can help you if your love crosses caste-lines and you're killed by your family in the bargain.

Queer people are forced into heterosexual marriages. Sexual violence is dismissed because 'boys will be boys'. People who have disabilities are not supposed to be sexual at all. Neither are women, at least until they get married, after which they have to start popping out babies (for which they presumably have sex, but shh, let's not talk about that. Let's watch a journalist attempt to tear down Sunny Leone instead).

We've been so busy doing our best to control people's sexual impulses, that we have left no room for people who might not experience sexual attraction at all.

That's where access to the internet comes in handy. For people who identify as asexual, the internet has both answers and the space to ask questions. For people who've felt different, confused, or alone all their lives, it opens a door into a community.

Like Naqshpa, Avinash also spent his teen years without having a single crush. He comes from a conservative, religious family, so for the longest time it didn't strike him at all. Plus, he went to an all boys' school. 'Chasing girls was out of the question,' he says.

When his classmates talked about sex, Avinash just played it cool. 'I would laugh and talk to them as usual. You know how teenagers are.'

But conversations and jokes about sex made Avinash curious. The best time he watched porn, he was with a group of friends. The experience was awkward for everyone, including Avinash, who said it felt 'very weird'. But when he explored porn on his own several years later it was to get on. 'Raging teen hormones will turn you on, and of course, you act accordingly.'

Despite his forays into porn, though, Avinash still wasn't interested in another person—either romantically or sexually. The fact that he was single raised lots of questions, which he had no answers to. By the time he reached his late twenties, he was acutely aware that he was a virgin who had never been on a date. He began to wonder if there was something wrong with him.

That's when he went online. 'I googled key phrases like Not able to fall in love and Why am I not interested in sex,' he tells me. As he made his way

through the search results, he arrived at a long Tumblr comic that begins with a speech bubble: 'Hello, I'm Adri, and I'm asexual'.

Adri, a cartoon representation of its creator, goes on to bust tons of myths about asexuality, such as 'asexuals are cold and loveless' or 'asexuals have a history of sexual abuse'. The colours of the comic mirror the asexuality e.g.: black (for asexuality), grey (for grey- sexuality and demisexuality), white (for non-asexual partners and allies) and purple (for community).

Thanks to Adri, Avinash was overcome by a sense of familiarity and relief.

He no longer felt like anything was 'wrong' with him.

* * *

Sheldon Cooper is sitting in his favourite spot in the living room surrounded by his best friends. One of them, Howard, refers to a 'friends with benefits' arrangement he's got going on with a woman. Sheldon looks confused. 'What exactly does that expression mean, friends with benefits? Does he provide her with health insurance?'

His roommate Leonard responds: 'No. Look, imagine you maintained a friendship with someone you had sex with, but you were free to date whoever you wanted.'

'I'm sorry, I can't imagine any of that,' says Sheldon.

Cue laughter.

The hugely popular US sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* revolves around a group of scientist friends, including theoretical physicist Sheldon Cooper. Sheldon does not want to date, have sex with, or even touch other people. His discomfort with intimacy is one of the major plot points of the show, and we, the audience, are constantly reminded via a pre-recorded laugh track to find this hilarious.

Eventually, Sheldon begins a romantic relationship with a neurobiologist named Amy. Five years into their relationship, involving a great deal of reluctance on Sheldon's part, they end up having sex.

This was a Big Event in the trajectory of the show, and entertainment websites responded accordingly. 'Sheldon and Amy finally have sex!' they screamed, as though a great wrong had been righted.

They finally did it. This inevitability points to a cultural imperative where

being sexually active is ideal; an end goal. But it becomes a really big problem when this standard is imposed on people who identify as asexual.

Take 26-year-old Ritinkar, for instance. He figured out that he was gay pretty early on. His first crush was on a straight boy, and in college, he fell in unrequited love with one of his friends. But several years later, when Ritinkar first got physically intimate with another man, he was disappointed by the experience.

As Ritinkar learned more about asexuality from the internet, he figured out that he was 'grey-asexual': somewhere on the spectrum between being sexual and asexual.

Explaining this to other people, though, was a nightmare. 'If repetitive coming out was not annoying enough, here there is the added annoyance of the long explanations expected of you,' he says. He lists some responses he's gotten over the years: 'You mean like an amoeba? Are you abstaining? Waiting for the right one? Afraid of committing sin? Are you a virgin? Wow! So pure! Are you impotent?!'

As Ritinkar grappled with being grey-ace, one truly alarming experience he had was finding someone with the same orientation online. He met a woman via an asexuality Facebook group, and when they began chatting, they realised it was the first time either of them had spoken to another grey-ace.

'Before talking to her, everything seemed to be theoretical, rather than an actual possibility. We talked about our experiences and our specific sexual desires—what's ok with us and what's not.' Ritinkar believes that the conversation helped them both realise that what they were feeling was alright.

'There is immense relief when you see that there's someone else just like you.'

* * *

Mohana knew she was asexual since a young age, but she was confused about the specifics. Could she like-like someone without wanting to sleep with them? Did that even 'count'? 'I couldn't stand the mainstream media idea of what's romantic—holding hands, having a candlelit dinner, celebrating Valentine's Day... I'd probably barf,' she tells me.

Mohana recalls how she had an intense crush on a straight woman friend when she was 19, but couldn't ever imagine having sex with her. 'Even if I tried to [imagine it], I would get the feeling that something's wrong.' She also spent years feeling left out after her friends started experimenting with sex.

One day, Mohana heard a professor use the word ‘asexuality’ in a classroom. She went home and looked it up online. ‘It was a kind of eureka moment for me when I found AVEN,’ she recalls.

AVEN, or the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network, was created by American ace activist David Jay in 2001. Today, it describes itself as ‘the world’s largest online asexual community’, home to tons of resources, personal stories and forums, through which aces from all over the world are able to talk to each other.

For Mohana, this was life-alarming. ‘The online space is definitely the only space we’ve had where we can have conversations safely. People who are not out as asexual to their friends and families are able to talk to each other about it.’

For many aces, online spaces have been crucial in their ability to provide human connections. Nadia, a 19-year-old non-binary ace from Karachi, says she grew up with a lot of ‘nervous panicking about why I didn’t feel straight, while also not feeling gay.’ When she was 17, she figured out she was asexual via a series of online searches, and today she derives a great deal of comfort from the virtual spaces she’s found for herself.

‘In all honesty, it’s a space that’s very meaningful for me because I don’t have any other way to be in touch with other asexual people,’ says Nadia. ‘So it’s very reassuring and comforting to interact in a space where you know that everyone else can relate to you, at least somewhat.’

The ace community is as diverse as its large, loose membership, and Mohana says that this is one of the biggest lessons that the internet has taught her: that asexuality—like gender, and like sexuality—is a spectrum, rather than a fixed point.

Some aces experience attraction, some don’t. Some are repulsed by sex or don’t masturbate, while others find pleasure in porn and erotica, get aroused, and may even have sex for various reasons. Some can only have sex after they’re emotionally attached to somebody, while others only experience romantic feelings, not sexual ones.

‘Each one of us is different, and none of us are on the same page about every single detail,’ Mohana says. ‘People are often confused about where they stand on the spectrum. Talking to each other helps us understand that it’s okay to be confused.’

* * *

Nine months ago, two Indian aces decided to get together and launch Asexuality India: the first ever web resource for Indian aces.

One of the founders, Praveen, tells me, 'I went on a Reddit forum once and read about an [Indian] ace woman who had been forced to marry. I wanted there to be a space for people to reach out if they needed to figure out why they felt the way they did. With awareness, they would perhaps be more able to fight back if they found themselves in these kinds of situations.'

The Asexuality India website has a delicious looking homepage—the background is a huge picture of a colourful cake topped with pink icing. The welcome text on the page says: 'Where anything is better than sex, but we prefer CAKE!...every Ace is unique and different. So if you identify as one or are still figuring things out, welcome home'

Inspired by AVEN, Asexuality India already has 79 active members, as well as resources, forums and articles. The blog has a number of news updates as well as posts from members, including stuff like 'Inside the head of an aromantic asexual' and 'Asexuality needs to be recognised as its own, unique orientation.'

Spread across Asexuality India, a number of closed Facebook groups, and other social media platforms like Twitter, the online Indian asexual community is also a crucial space to help aces deal with the stigma and stereotyping they routinely face.

Shambhavi, a 23-year-old writer who identifies as ace, says that moderators of ace Facebook groups in India usually vet people's problems before letting them in. 'Most spaces are aces-only,' she tells me.

Naqshpa met a few Indian aces online, and after chatting with them, decided to form a closed Facebook group. 'It took me 11 long years to know the term asexual. Online groups made me realise that many people don't know they are ace and try to fit into society's norms, which makes them feel emotionally distressed. And with the arranged marriage scenario in India, it's very important that there is awareness.'

A page on the Asexuality India website reads 'As the Indian youth tumbles into...marriageable age, that's when the "real fun" begins. Getting married is an extremely important milestone for Indians...and the thought of not wanting to be married or not starting a family can be as scandalous as talking about sex.'

This is precisely what many Indian aces are up against: a society in which marriage and the family unit are seen as critical.

Ritinkar says that although he's perfectly content being single, he is open to having a romantic relationship in the future. Naqshpa, Avinash, and Mohana

on the other hand, say they aren't looking to get married at all. Avinash's family has started putting pressure on him to get married soon. He is trying to buy time by telling them he needs to focus on his career right now, but he knows that this argument won't work forever.

Shambhavi explains that things often get uncomfortable when she tells someone that she's not having sex or that she doesn't want a partner or a child in the future. 'The unasked question is: "Well then, what value is your life?"'

Another common misconception is that asexual people just have to 'try it out' and they will magically turn into sexual beings—something lesbian women also often hear in relation to having sex with men.

'I have been told that this is "just a phase" which will pass—because, again, everyone has to be sexual,' says Ami, a 22 year old student living in a large Indian city. 'I used to feel incomplete or broken when I only felt emotionally [and not sexually] connected with a person.'

For Ami, who identifies as grey-ace, the online ace community has been a crucial space to help her counter these remarks. She says that being able to explore her grey-ace identity with members of the Indian ace community has helped her not to feel 'abnormal'. She cherishes the community's work of raising awareness around asexuality, and has herself taken part in this by writing anonymously about her own experiences as part of Asexual Awareness Week. 'I always find the asexual community the most inclusive community because it believes in fluidity,' she writes.

Whether it's articles, blog posts, or forums, online spaces have proven to be hugely important for several aces. But the large digital divide in India means that many others who could benefit from being part of this community miss out on what it has to offer. This is a problem that Praveen has tried to tackle.

'We've tried to organise online meet-ups, but very few people show up,' he says. 'There are a number of constraints we have [to overcome] before reaching a much larger number of people. Plus, a lot of the content is in English, and there's very little media coverage around asexuality.'

Given that it is still very difficult to speak openly about any sexuality in most physical spaces in India, the internet is the only place where digitally-connected aces can safely (and anonymously) speak about their experiences.

Like Shambhavi says, 'If you're having a shitty day and some bigot has just told you your orientation is not valid, you can reach out to your community and share your story and people will get it and give you the support you need.

It's that one place where you don't have to be on the defensive about who you are and that is incredibly comforting and liberating.'

***Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individual.**



SHREYA ILA ANASUYA

Shreya Ila Anasuya is an independent journalist on gender, sexuality, culture and politics. A former reporter and news producer with The Wire, her reportage and essays have been widely published, on platforms such as Scroll.in, The Hindu Business Line, Mint Lounge, The Print, Deep Dives, Helter Skelter, and more. She is also the managing editor of Skin Stories, India's first digital publication dedicated solely to narratives on disability, gender and sexuality.

3. FLUNG OUTSIDE THE RING

The Hindu Business Line

When the Apex Court dismissed the petition filed by ,uneducated Kamlesh Kaimri and two others, it dismissed lives spent in grassroots engagement of the kind few schools can teach.

“ Mein yeh maanti hoon ki anpadh nahi hoon mein (I do not consider myself illiterate),” Kamlesh Kaimri intones softly, in her unhurried Haryanvi drawl. Lack of school education had not really hindered her work. When she went to the Supreme Court, it was to retain her right to contest the panchayat elections from Kaimri village in Hisar, Haryana, regardless of the number of classes she had passed. She lost.

“ Yeh aas hai hamari toh... hum ladenge, hum jeetenge (It is my wish to fight and win),” she says. A fortnight ago, the SC had dismissed the petition filed by Kamlesh, Rajbala and Preet Singh against the Haryana law that allows only those with a prescribed ,minimum educational qualification to contest panchayat elections. It also barred those without toilets at home and those who had pending electricity bills or bank loans.

Kaimri, a village of 8,399 people, is not far from Hisar town’s bustle of hospitals and residential sectors. The centrally air-conditioned Aryan School slips past on the road to Kaimri, so too a railway gate, a canal, markets and bakeries. The template changes when we enter Kamlesh’s lane. The brick road is hemmed on both sides by open drains. Strolling buffaloes share space with children hurtling down the path. An all-woman meeting is on in Kamlesh’s courtyard. Her mother-in-law naps on a string cot under the lone tree in the courtyard. Her young daughter-in-law, in a shimmering pink salwar-kameez, dutifully goes around collecting blessings from the guests. At one corner, the door to the toilet is ajar. Shirts hang from a line inside the two-room brick house. Gleaming steel vessels are left to dry in a tray under the tree — a central character in Kamlesh’s courtyard.

As Kamlesh and her team of around 10 women belonging to the Akhil Bharatiya Janwadi Mahila Samiti (All-India Democratic Women’s Association) sit around on cots and plastic chairs and talk, the dominant feeling is one of a battle lost but a war that must go on. They nod vigorously when Sakuntala Jakhar, state president of AIDWA, which filed the SC petition for Kamlesh and the others, asks them to carry black flags when leaders visit their village.

None of the team's core members can now stand for a panchayat post. In a society fissured along caste lines, this 'team' is an aberration. "We have meals together. Something that did not happen a few years ago," says Kamlesh, the group's leader, who is a Dalit. Believed to be around 45 years old, she grew up in Jooyi village and had attended school briefly, far short of the Std V pass needed to qualify her for the panch's post. Her teammates who belong to other communities, too, do not meet the educational qualification prescribed for them. "None of us are matric (Std X) pass," says Ramvati. So, who will now fight in their place? The women mumble about daughters and daughters-in-law. Kamlesh too has younger, 'qualified' women at home. "But I wanted to fight. Everybody in the family wanted me to fight," she says.

Savita, joint secretary of AIDWA Haryana, says the educational criteria alone will eliminate 83 per cent of Dalit women like Kamlesh from the electoral process. Had she been able to contest, this would have been Kamlesh's third election. In 2005, she had fought to be the sarpanch. "As a Dalit woman she found it difficult to break in," says Jakhar. In 2010, she stood for election to the block samiti and lost by 11 votes. "Kaimri overwhelmingly voted for her, but the block included the neighbouring Gangwa panchayat, where she got active a bit late," Jakhar adds. A day after the SC stayed the Haryana law in September, Kamlesh had filed her candidature and the village elders had lent their support.

That acceptance, however, was not easily gained. Nirmala, a retired primary schoolteacher, remembers meeting a young Kamlesh 20 years ago. She had walked into school barefoot as she was mourning the death of a family elder. "I told her that walking around barefoot would not take her anywhere," recalls Nirmala, who is also the district president of AIDWA. She then introduced to Kamlesh the ongoing literacy programme. "I told her if you want to study, I will teach you. She would come every day with four to five Dalit women and I would teach them for a couple of hours," Nirmala recalls. Kamlesh now reads newspapers, keeps accounts for her team and records the minutes of meetings. "My mind is agile," she says. As a young mother who couldn't count, she remembers struggling once to pay the doctor's fee.

The road to literacy opened to her many other alleys — leading to mentors and friends and social causes. Jakhar mentions a protest that Kamlesh had led in 2004, which had instantly de-linked her from the image of a typical ghunghat-wearing bahu of Kaimri. A pond was being dug in the village and the then sarpanch had deployed a tractor for the work. Kamlesh and several other women wanted him to assign the work to them instead. When he refused, the women approached the police and the district administration directed the sarpanch to halt the tractor. The story, however, did not end there. "At night we heard the tractor running, and we went and lay on the ground, asking him to run it over our stomach. We ended up getting work for 20 days," Kamlesh concludes on a triumphant note.

In Kaimri, Kamlesh is defined by her work over the past two decades. The once timid woman who pleaded with Jakhar and Nirmala to accompany "

on visits to the police station, has all but disappeared. “Now she gets a chair to sit on at the police station,” says Jakhar. After she stepped into the police station for the first time, however, her father-in-law had been ridiculed in the panchayat. “Tumne to naak katwa di (You brought us disgrace),” he told her afterwards. When she intervened in cases involving domestic violence in upper-caste households, the men of her house bore the brunt. “Tum marvaogi (You will get us killed),” her father-in-law and husband chorused. “Then I would stay home for a few days,” she recalls. Her husband, Satyavan, works as a labourer. Despite the threats, however, he never stopped her from her work, says Kamlesh. Other men in the village were unable to stomach her active role outside the house. An upper caste man had even offered to buy Satyavan two buffaloes to keep Kamlesh engaged at home. Her father-in-law had in the past chided her for appearing in public without the veil. Years later, when she stood for elections and her home buzzed with people, he was a changed man, telling her, “Beta, you are fighting elections. Why do you need the ghunghat? Take it off.”

Ask Kamlesh and the women what they do in Kaimri and their answer is a cryptic, “Hum ghar basate hai (We fix broken homes).” Often, men drop into her house with their wives and request her to mediate in issues ranging from domestic violence, dowry and alcoholism to property disputes. “The other day, a pandit family had come to meet her,” says Jakhar. Young girls seek her out when they want to go to school. Convincing their parents becomes Kamlesh’s job. “The government gives bicycles to girls who live within 2km from school. Parents often don’t know about the scheme. We go around the village telling them. We also keep a watch when the final bell rings at school and make sure the girls reach home safely,” says Kamlesh. As far as she’s concerned, fighting an election and winning are merely the means to bring about change. Having fought for quality ration, common toilets and drinking water, she says there is more work to be done — to access other existing schemes and introduce newer ones. “Sarpanch has the power to bring change. Dekhte hein, madam (Let’s see),” she says, exuding steely resolve.

BOX

Preet Singh

Ask Preet Singh for his phone number and he writes it slowly, in his tiny hand. The 62-year-old from Bhambhewa, in Jhajjar, has never been to school but can read and write. “I read six to seven newspapers a day. As children we were asked to take care of the cattle and the farm,” he says. Singh had been a panchayat member in the 1990s and is now the vice-president of the All India Kisan Sabha. The third petitioner in the case against the Haryana government, he says almost 70 per cent of his village is unhappy with the SC judgement. Singh also has an outstanding bank loan, which he has to repay over five years; but it effectively disqualifies him from contesting.

Rajbala

Hers is the name by which the case is known — ‘Rajbala and others Vs the

State of Haryana'. The 35-year-old from Matana village in Fatehabad, Haryana, won the very first time she stood for elections in 2010 and became a block samiti member. School didn't feature much in her early life in Sundarpura. "I might have attended for a couple of years. My village had a primary school. The bigger school was in the next village," she says.

However, a significant step the outgoing block samiti took was to sanction two acres to expand the primary school in Matana.

Over the last few years, along with her growing involvement in panchayati politics, Rajbala has been making efforts to educate herself. Her husband Rajkumar, a former block samiti member, says their two sons — aged 18 and 12, respectively — are her teachers. "After coming back from school they teach their mother. She is literate, she reads newspapers," adds Rajkumar. Rajbala says the past five years have given her confidence. "I had never met a person in authority before. Paav mein taakat nahi thi (I didn't have the courage for it)."

Being a block samiti member changed all that. "Four days ago, she went to the police station with a woman who was being harassed for dowry," says Rajkumar.



P ANIMA

P Anima writes on gender issues and human rights. She also brings to light stories of people who are marginalised and occasionally writes on theatre



4. POOR SANITATION AND LACK OF CLEAN WATER THREATENS MATERNAL HEALTH IN RURAL KASHMIR

July 6, 2017 | KASHMIR INK

Kanyari, Bandipora — At a nearby river bank, Zareena Begum, 30, is struggling to fill some clean water in a corrugated aluminum bucket. In her background, two school-going kids are roving a shikara to reach to their school. The boat is the only means of transport to this forgotten piece of land and it carries everything: daily essentials, ill to hospitals and children to school.

As she leans to refill the bucket with clearer water, Zareena yells at the kids and asks them not to throw biscuit wafers into the water. But, they mock at her and run away.

The wafers are a new, glossy addition to an-already floating debris in the river.

Zareena's utensil then takes one last dip and out comes a bucket full of water, the color of mud. And that's what her family is going to drink for survival.

Tucked behind many makeshift sheds in Kanyari village of north Kashmir's Bandipora district sits a small wooden shack, covered with cheap blue color tin sheets and a dented roof.

It is Zareena's home. She lives with her husband Ghulam Mohammad Khosa, 35, a fisherman. Inside the small shed, there are two partitions, one acting as kitchen and another as bed room. On one wall made of wooden planks are studded iron nails on which clothes are hung; besides a storage trunk, a mattress is stacked on top of a blanket.

The cramped conditions at Zareena's home doesn't upset her that much as she is overjoyed with her six months baby bump, as she has become pregnant after three years of marriage.

Recently when she missed her monthly menstrual cycle, she was spotted by a female neighbor and taken to a sub health centre, few minutes away from her home. The sub centre was closed and she rushed to a nearby private lab for a urine examination, after rowing a boat herself and then walking around three kilometers by foot.

“I get a lot of stomach aches,” she says with desperation. “The water is very dirty as it makes me sick. But, I have no other choice.”

Kanyari was hit by massive flooding in September 2014. The local population suffered badly due to the lack of basic facilities since the flood water submerged the main road to the households, cutting them entirely from the rest of the neighborhood. Kanyari is originally an island – from north it is surrounded by Wular Lake and on its south half a dozen water channels flow which submerge it from all sides during the rise of the waters.

The slum infrastructure in this hamlet has not remained sufficient due to the failure of the government policy to resettle the poor who are mostly associated with the fishing trade near the banks of river Jhelum. The government considers them as “illegal” settlements.

“We blocked the main road many times to protest for our rights,” Zareena says. “But, a poor is always considered a burden. No one listens to our pleas.”

Anemia, low birth-weight and malnutrition are some of the reasons for poor health among women in rural areas who are often averse to discussing sanitation and other pregnancy health issues. These women mostly look after their household chores and help men in their family agricultural activity which is considered an additional household duty. They usually don't get any separate share for their contribution in the businesses and have to mainly depend on men for their financial needs. However, during the past many years the trend is slowly changing among the new generation.

“We don't have any cleanliness here at all,” Zareena says. “Even if we try our best as individuals to keep the environment around us clean, but everyone defecates, drinks and washes in the same water.”

In absence of any toilets, Zareena either defecates in the open or sometimes uses a dilapidated wooden toilet of a neighbor outside her house. The waste from the toilet directly goes into the water despite the river being the only source of drinking water for the villagers. However, to lessen the hazard, people in the area boil the water to make it drinkable. That too, however, has not been of any help.

“I don't feel safe there,” Zareena says. “The pot is mostly full as there are no water taps to clean it. One has to collect water first and then use it. The open air is easier behind the dense forests.”

Zareena has done one ultrasound scan at Sub-District Hospital Sopore for the free of cost. The district hospital Bandipora is too far for her – 35 kilometers – while as Mother and Child Health Centre at Sopore in Baramulla district, which many of the expectant mothers in her area visit, is just seven kilometers.

"I always feel nausea, even after boiling the water," she says. "I don't feel like eating anything. My entire body aches with pain and irritation whenever I take a bath."

Zareena also complains of frequent urinary tract infection. She has grown used to holding her bladder and bowel till she gets a chance to urinate somewhere safely.

"I can't even eat properly," she says. "The doctor always advises me to keep my body hydrated as my body is often dehydrated. But, we try to avoid drinking this dirty water as much as possible."

Zareena's neighbor, Kulsooma Shafi, 28, is also six months pregnant with her third child. She also complains of frequent cough and fever due to the consumption of muddy water. Kulsooma had a severe abdominal pain last week. Her husband took the loan of 1000 rupees from a neighbor and took her to the MCH Sopore where the doctors advised blood test, ultrasound scan and a urine test.

"I was writhing in pain. I had no patience to wait in long queues and wait for my turn or delay the treatment," she says. The doctor suggested her to take tests at a private laboratory and also prescribed some medicines.

Kulsooma found it unaffordable to carry out the prescription of the doctor completely. So, she only did a urine test and purchased few medicines.

"My husband purchased one medicine for Rs 250," she says. "We went in sumo and had to pay around Rs 300 for the fare and also purchased some iron and calcium supplements."

Kulsooma's hemoglobin is 8.5 grams and she has visited the MCH Sopore at least six times in the past six months.

"I have spent around Rs 10,000 on my pregnancy in these months," she says. "I haven't been well due to frequent worm infection, diarrhea and stomach aches."

Kulsooma says that her doctor always enquires about her health. "We over-boil the vegetables and at the end there are no nutrients left. Water is also stinky and there is usually no appetite left for food after drinking water," she says.

Her two sons and husband, who is also a fisherman, are also not keeping good health due to lack of safe water source and poor sanitation.

Her elder son, who studies in first grade, misses most of his classes due to skin allergy and frequent cough as he plays hide and seek in rubble and dirty water outside his home in tattered slippers.

A girl barely six hides herself behind a tree pulls down her shalwar and urinates quickly, leaves the place and washes her hands in the river.

The families like that of Zareena and Kulsooma mostly suffer from the sewage-borne infections and water-borne diseases, as they either run into the trees to defecate openly or in the makeshift toilets, putting all the human excreta into their only source of water – the river Jhelum.

“I will go for permanent birth control after my delivery,” Kulsooma says, with a mixture of sadness and confidence. “We can’t put our lives at risk in this contaminated atmosphere.”

Afroz Ahmad Danthoo, a community health worker in the area, says that the exposure to unsafe water and poor sanitation complicates the health of pregnant women with adverse pregnancy outcomes and affect the well-being of their children.

“We have unsafe water, unimproved sanitation as well as poor waste management system in the area which increases the risk of infection,” he says.

A vast majority of expecting women in the area is anemic who often complain of stomach aches, urinary tract infection, low birth weight, delayed growth among children, vomiting and preterm birth, Danthoo says. These problems, he says, are some of the common outcomes that he has noticed frequently in last five years of his service.

The distance to the Bandipora district hospital is not the only problem, Danthoo says. These problems, he says, are some of the common outcomes that he has noticed frequently in last five years of his service.

The distance to the Bandipora district hospital is not the only problem, Danthoo says. “But, what adds to the miseries of the people is less transport facility due to bad roads,” he says. “It is convenient for women to visit Sopore hospital than their own district hospital which doesn’t even have a basic blood bank facility.”

According to the Baseline Survey 2012 of the Union Ministry of Drinking Water & Sanitation, “Jammu and Kashmir is among the worst states with poor sanitation with more than 54 per cent of more than 1.2 million households without toilets and the 2014-15 target for household latrines falling short by 86 per cent.”

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s national campaign, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, was started in 2014 to build individual and community toilets and solid waste management in consideration with local cultural practices and sensibilities. The campaign puts emphasis on behavioral change intervention to strengthen its implementation for the elimination of open defecation, conversion of unsanitary toilets to pour flush toilets and eradication of manual scavenging.

Like Kanyari, another village, Banyari, in Bandipora district, almost 15 kilometers far from it, has also agonized villagers especially pregnant women and children. Few years ago, there was an outbreak of cholera in the village due to the contaminated water sources and lack of proper sanitation.

“Due to the lack of proper healthcare facility, we have to travel longer distances for even a simple treatment,” says GulshanShiekh, 50, auxiliary nurse midwife (ANM) in the area. “It gets quite difficult for pregnant women as they are mostly poor and cannot walk during illness.”

Gulshan remembers the incident when she was rowing a boat during a heavy rainfall. Her niece died in her seventh month of pregnancy along with her baby due to severe fever on way as she couldn't reach the hospital on time.

“Many women in the area have died in the past from preventable causes relating to pregnancy and childbirth,” Gulshan says. “The contaminated water, poor sanitation and hygiene make their immune system weak and they are quite vulnerable to infections.”

Things are slowly changing due to National Health Mission, encouraging women for institutional deliveries, she says. “We cannot do much in construction of toilets or ensuring drinking safe water but we try to educate expecting mothers in monitoring their pregnancies,” she says.” “At least now women don't die in absence of information that they ought to know before they give birth.

”However, she admits, the lack of resources and unavailability of doctors in the primary health centres, sub-centres and other district-level institutions are still lagging behind to help pregnant women with at least transport facility.

“The most important facility that a patient in a rural area wants is to reach hospitals to give birth, instead of being stranded in their villages,” Gulshan says. “But, there is a long way to go.”

She says no one has ever visited the village to test the water. But, many women were advised by the ASHAs and ANMs to buy the chlorine tablets during the floods which helped many women fight infection.

Access to clean water and sanitation is also one of the Sustainable Development Goals of the United National Sustainable Development to ensure that diseases associated with poor water, sanitation and hygiene are not overlooked. But, the entire Kashmir region is battling with this problem, especially rural population due to poverty and negligence by government to create sustainable policies and infrastructure along with manpower to fight the problem.

In an article published on India Spend titled, “96% of J&K Swachh-Bharat

Money Unspent,” it has been reported that “J&K, a state of 12.5 million people, did not use about 96% of the money granted by Delhi for the sanitation programme for 2014-15, using Rs 4.66 crore of Rs 121.52 crore.”

The article further cites the figures that the state has failed to implement National Rural Drinking Water Programme, with Rs 310.15 crore unspent in 2014-2015 and more than 60 per cent of the target unmet. “The lack of toilets and safe drinking water leads to outbreak of diseases, especially among pregnant rural women,” the report suggests. According to USAID, investing in water, sanitation, and hygiene for maternal and newborn health (WASH) is one of the most effective and efficient choices that one can make for global nutrition, child health, education, and empowerment of women.

Dr. Nisar-ul-Hassan, former president of Doctors Association Kashmir (DAK) who has been working in different areas of rural Kashmir on various free health awareness programs, says that people in villages mostly depend on nearby streams and ponds for water. These ponds and streams, he says, are a breeding ground for the bacteria.

“Pregnant ladies and children are most susceptible to diseases due to unsafe water and poor sanitation,” he says. “It not only complicates the pregnancy but also affects children with diarrhea, infections, malnutrition, and stunted growth and can even cause death.”

He says that untreated sewage is channelized into water bodies without any filtration treatment which contaminates the water. In 2015, DAK issued a press statement citing that, “Around 70% of the population in Kashmir is infected with H pylori which cause most of the gastro duodenal diseases due to consumption of contaminated water.” “The government needs to take serious measures both in hospital as well at community level through implementation of various programs and schemes to control infection and poor sanitation,” Dr. Hassan says. “As an individual, one should take utmost possible care not to provide conducive conditions for resistant deadly microorganisms to emerge, spread and persist.”

ALIYA BASHIR

Aliya Bashir is an independent journalist covering Kashmir with a focus on human rights, gender justice, women's issues, the environment, healthcare, education and minorities. She is the winner of the 2015 Schizophrenia Research Foundation-Press Institute of India “Media for Mental Health” award for best reporting on mental health issues in India and is also a 2016 International Women's Media Foundation grantee. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Jury Appreciation Certificate.

5. WHY INDIAN WORKPLACES ARE LOSING WOMEN: OUR NATIONWIDE INVESTIGATION BEGINS

August 5, 2017 | Indiaspend.org



In the first four months of 2017, a nugget of information went by unnoticed: While jobs for men increased by 0.9 million, 2.4 million women fell off the employment map, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), a think tank.

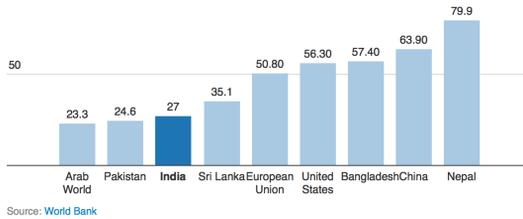
“Only women suffer when there’s an employment problem,” said Mahesh Vyas, CMIE managing director and CEO.

The trend for this year points to a continuing story of Indian women increasingly clocking out of the workplace.

It might not seem like it at first glance. You see women employed everywhere, in ad agencies and start-ups, on construction sites and in fields, in shops and restaurants, in schools and anganwadis, flying airplanes and driving taxis.

Yet, if the number of women who quit jobs in India between 2004-05 and 2011-12 (the last year for which census data is available), was a city, it would, at 19.6 million, be the third-most populated in the world, after Shanghai and Beijing. Only 27% Indian women are currently in the labour force. Among G-20 countries, only Saudi Arabia is worse, IndiaSpend reported on April 9,

Global Female Labour Force Participation (%)



2016. Within South Asia in 2013, India had the lowest rate of female employment after Pakistan. In over two decades preceding 2013, female labour force participation in India fell from 34.8% to 27%, according to an April 2017 World Bank report .

India's female labour force participation (FLFP) rate is highest among illiterates and college graduates in both rural and urban areas, according to this March 2017 World

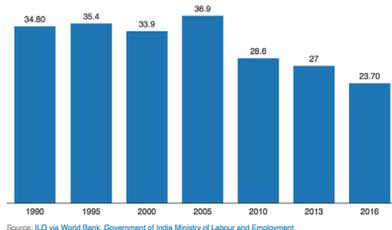
Bank report, which analysed government data from 2004-05 to 2011-12.

These two groups, illiterates and those with college education, are also the groups that experienced the largest drops in FLFP rates over this period.

There are no indications that it's getting better.

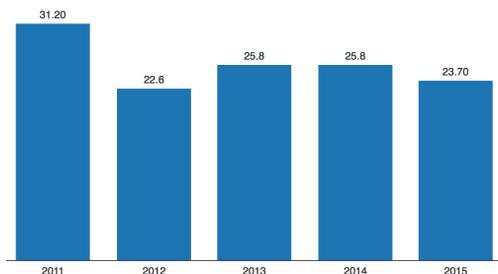
Much of this slide has come in the post liberalization years, when you would imagine that a growing economy would fling open doors of opportunity. At roughly the same time that women were quitting jobs, an additional 24.3 million men went to work, according to an April 2017 World Bank report, Precarious Drop: Reassessing Patterns of Female Labour Force Participation in India.

Female Labour Force Participation (%)



Even more inexplicably, women went missing from the workplace at precisely the same time that girls were making massive advances in education. The enrolment rate of girls in elementary education is nearly 100%. In higher

Higher education female enrolment ratio (%)



Source: AISHE

education, it's nudged up from just 7.5% in 2002-03 to 20% in 2012-13.

Over the next few months IndiaSpend will track declining female labour force participation through on-the-ground reports that seek to understand the various constraints that inhibit their employment and participation in the workforce.

Education should lead to jobs, but that's not happening in India

The logical link that education should lead to jobs is broken in India. In rural India, 67% of girls who are graduates do not work. In towns and cities, 68.3% of women who graduate don't have paid jobs, says a 2015 report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Women's Voices, Employment and Entrepreneurship in India. "More girls are being educated than boys," said Pronab Sen, country head for the International Growth Centre's (IGC) India Central Programme and the country's first chief statistician. "You have to ask, 'where are they going and what are they doing?'"

Why should we care?

If women participated in the economy at par with men, India could increase GDP by up to 60%, or \$2.9 trillion, by 2025, according to a 2015 study by the McKinsey Global Institute, a think tank. At present, women contribute a mere 17% to the country's GDP, well below the global average of 37%.

Women's earnings are also linked to their personal well-being. Quite simply, a woman who brings money into the house is likely to have greater clout and status in that family. Improved labour market prospects for daughters and daughters-in-law could lead to greater investment in their education and health.

But perhaps, most important, it matters because women want paid jobs. The 2011 National Sample Survey found that over a third of women in urban India and half in rural areas who engage mainly in housework want a paying job.

So, if women want jobs, why are they quitting? What's holding them back?

The power of choice, the shame of a working wife: Complex reasons

Ongoing research and **IndiaSpend's** own on-the-ground reporting suggests a complex web of constraints that keep women away from the workplace.

Chief amongst these is the issue of women's agency.

A man is expected to have a paid job. When he seeks one, he needs nobody's permission. Girls and women, on the other hand, almost without exception must have the permission of their fathers, brothers, husbands and in some cases even village panchayats in order to work or even learn skills that will make them employable.

In Haryana's Jhajjar district, Jyoti Kadian, currently employed in a steel factory, will be getting married in November to a navy man who has told her he has no objections to her working – but only in a government job. "I'm trying to get one, but it's not easy," said Kadian, conscious that time is running out. Mumbai, Naseema Sheikh, the daughter of a plumber, joined a four-month beauty training course after completing 12th grade in school. When she received a job offer from a beauty salon, her brother said there was no need for her to work. "He says, 'I am providing for you so what need is there for you to go so far to work?'" she said.

In an Aurangabad slum, a truck driver tells me why he refused permission to let his 19-year-old daughter work in a restaurant after she completed a two-month hospitality course with Pratham Institute. "Next thing you know, she will be running off to have a love marriage, and I will not be able to show my face anywhere," he said. In the small one-room house where he lives with five daughters and a son, his wife said not a word. Asked what she felt about a working daughter, she shrugged her shoulders and then got up to make tea.

When her husband got transferred to Mizoram, patent attorney Priyadarshini Gauri found herself without a job after working for nine years. "I would have liked some remote working opportunities in my field but there were none," she said. While she waits for his three-year posting to end, she has had a baby, enrolled in a masters in history and is learning to play the guitar.

"I miss those good old days when you know you've done terrific work," she said in an email interview. "Being employed gives you a validation that no amount of 'home-making' can."

Patriarchy, cultural and social attitudes exist all over India. But in many states in the north, there's a feeling of 'shame' if a man's wife works, said Pronab Sen. Unsurprisingly, Bihar, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab report the lowest rates of female labour force participation, whereas hill

'states such as Sikkim and Himachal Pradesh where men have historically migrated out for work, leaving women in charge of village economies, female labour force participation or FLFP to use a brief acronym for a distressing trend, is high

Family and responsibility for household work are other serious constraints. Women either don't accept jobs, or quit because of 'family reasons' found a 2016 study of young, single women by Evidence for Policy Design, a team of Harvard faculty researchers from the Harvard Kennedy School. In the end, it's difficult to find a job if you can't leave home alone'

Social norms about appropriate behavior for women and the enforcement of these norms by parents, in-laws and husbands dictates their ability to seek employment. The 2011 Indian Human Development Survey finds that a sizeable number of women need to take permission from a family member to even go to the market or health centre, said Rohini Pande of Harvard Kennedy School. "In the end, it's pretty difficult to look for a job if you can't leave the house alone," she said.

Even when women are 'allowed' to work, there are conditions that must be met. Is the job close to home? Are there fixed working hours that will allow her to be back in time to cook the dinner and put the kids to bed? Is safe and inexpensive public transportation available?

Safety is emerging as a key concern, said Farzana Afridi, associate professor with the Indian Statistical Institute. Public spaces are dominated by men. Moreover, there's a dire shortage of infrastructure that would enable women's participation in the workplace - hostels for working women and crèches for their children, for instance.

"Managements will often tell you how women make for very reliable employees with low absenteeism and attrition rates," said Afridi. "But not many are prepared to provide the infrastructure that would enable their fuller participation."

Medha Uniyal, programme director of the Pratham Institute was more blunt: "When you have women on the payroll, you are legally required to provide facilities like a crèche. So, a lot of employers have a clear mandate of not hiring women."

The role of companies in nurturing gender diversity certainly calls for scrutiny. After women manage to convince their families to allow them work, they often encounter yet another hurdle: companies that don't want to hire them. "There is a clear case of discrimination by companies that give women a raw deal," said CMIE's Mahesh Vyas.

Finally, women themselves seem inclined to choose trades that are traditionally 'women oriented': beauty and healthcare for instance. "Social norms and a lack of information often limit women's opportunities to so-called "traditional" jobs, closely linked to typical ideas of what women can and

cannot do,” said Clement Chauvet, chief of skills and business development, UNDP.

SECTORS WITH FASTEST GROWTH, MOST JOBS ARE DOMINATED BY MEN

Unfortunately, sectors with the fastest growth and maximum hiring – telecom, banking and the core sectors – are dominated by men. In telecom, 83.84% of all employees are men; 78.79% in banking, financial services and insurance and 74.75% in core sectors like oil and gas, power, steel and minerals, according to the India Skills Report 2017. Women themselves show a clear preference for trades that are traditionally ‘women oriented’: beauty and healthcare for instance, said Clement Chauvet, UNDP’s chief of skills and development.

An obvious solution is skilling. The prime minister’s Skill India Mission is targeted to train over 400 million people by 2022.

But there’s a mismatch between vocational skills programmes, aspiration and the job market. “It’s important that we make sure we skill young people to meet what industry demands,” said Chauvet.

Moreover, existing skilling programmes are simply too small to count, said IGC’s Sen. The bulk of skilling programmes take place as apprenticeships with ustads or in small-scale industries that are male dominated and where fathers and husbands do not like sending their girls and wives.

Another solution would be to make it incumbent upon companies to disclose gender diversity in hiring employees. “I’m not suggesting there should be reservation. But companies that function on shareholder money and bank loans should be made to disclose the gender breakup of their employees,” said Vyas.

All women work. Much of it – fetching firewood and water, cooking and cleaning, taking care of children and the elderly in India – is unpaid and unrecognized.

Very often, women seek employment when there is poverty and they must contribute to the household income just to survive. But when household incomes increase, they might consider the option of quitting paid work. Typically, when economies expand and the services sector grows, they get back into the workforce.

This upswing of what economists call the ‘U-curve’ hasn’t happened yet. When it will – or even if – is the big question.

NAMITA BHANDARE

Namita Bhandare is a journalist with nearly 30 years of reporting experience on gender issues for various publications including India Today, Mint and The Hindustan Times. She was India's first gender editor for Mint and continues to write a fortnightly column on gender and social issues for The Hindustan Times. Bhandare has a master's degree in journalism from Stanford University and was Katherine Howard Miller leader-in-residence at Scripps College, California in 2015. Recipient of SALMAAGS 2017 Best e-Magazine (IndiaSpend).

6. THERE'S A SECRET KASHMIRI WOMEN ARE KEEPING FROM THEIR FAMILIES

23 September, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.in

SRINAGAR, Kashmir — Jana's* hands tremble as she talks. You don't need to look very closely to see the criss-crossing tracks of scars on her forearm. The 23-year-old has, for years, cut herself because, in her words, "it was a pain that felt good".

"I fumble a lot, so please forgive me," she says, her head covered with a floral scarf. Her eyes slowly fill with tears as she starts to tell her story.

She was barely six years old when her uncle raped her. It continued for years.

"I don't exactly remember when it started, but I know I was very young and didn't know what he was doing to me," she said. At around 13, Jana started cutting herself with a blade whenever she felt anxious. Her parents — who reside in Anantnag, a district about 55kms from Srinagar — did not seek any medical help and decided to take her to a peer (spiritual healer) instead.

"They thought I have been possessed by a 'djinn'."

Jana was taken to 25 peers, and each abused her in some way or the other.

"They used some dirty tricks on me. Some of them would spit water from their mouth on my face. One put insects on my body," Jana recollected years of torture at the hands of spiritual healers even as she pleaded with her parents to take her to a doctor, telling them she was not 'possessed'.

"These peers would often tie me up and rape me," she said, her voice breaking as she tried to choke back tears.

"These peers would often tie me up and rape me."

In the Valley, where half of the population suffers from some form of mental health disorder, the stigma attached to going to a psychiatrist plays a major role in treatment being denied to women who need it badly — young girls struggling to adjust to shrinking spaces of self-expression, mothers whose sons are missing, young widows of slain men accused of militancy. There is



no easy way to access doctors and hospitals — there's just one hospital for mental health in the state capital, and most people don't even know where exactly it's located. Meanwhile, successive governments have done little to improve the condition. Jana was taken to a psychiatrist only after she consumed poison in 2015 — a final cry for help. Her brother was the first to find out. "He rushed me to the hospital. If not for him, I would have been dead," she said. However, things still didn't improve for her. A local psychiatrist informed her parents that she is 'mad' and would need electric shocks. Jana ran away from the hospital.

A Kashmiri patient speaks with a member of medical staff as she waits to be seen during a trauma and depression out-patient clinic, held by Dr Arshad Hussain.

While mental health is a major issue that's not much spoken about anywhere in the country, for Kashmir, the numbers are very high. The underlying cause is the conflict, that leads to a world of living in fear and paranoia. Dr Yuman Kawoos, who works at the government psychiatry hospital in Srinagar, narrates a heartbreaking story of a 16-year-old boy who had once gone out to pelt stones with his friends. "He was chased by the police and they would often visit his home to interrogate him and his family members even months after the stone pelting incident," she said. The 16-year-old stopped going to school because he felt he was always being 'followed'. "He was paranoid," Dr Yuman said. After two weeks of treatment at the psychiatry hospital, when he was released, he pleaded with the doctors, asking them to allow him to stay in their care. The doctors couldn't have let him stay in the hospital, so his family took him home. "I haven't heard from since then. It's been six months," she said.

This is the reality in Kashmir. Living in fear may have become the norm, but at some point, it takes a toll on the mental health of the people living there.

SECRET IDENTITIES ON FACEBOOK

Dr Arif Maghribi Khan who runs the Sehar Welfare Trust — an NGO that works on mental health issues of people in Kashmir, especially of women —

says it takes a lot of convincing to get people to even reach out for therapy — not uncommon in other parts of India as well, given the stigma and limited information available about mental health.

“There was this young girl who found out about my work through an article I had written for a newspaper. She then set up a new Facebook profile with a man’s name to send me a ‘friend request.’”

“There was this young girl who found out about my work through an article I had written for a newspaper. She then set up a new Facebook profile with a man’s name to send me ‘friend’ request,” Dr Arif said, reflecting on how women try to protect their identities till they find a safe space.

Every time she would visit the doctor, she would use a different name.

The self-practitioner has set up three clinics in three different areas — in Batamaloo, Kralpora and Rawalpoda. When you enter his Kralpora clinic, you will not know that it’s a counselling centre. The board says in bold letters, ‘High blood pressure, diabetes, joint pain, heart palpitation’. Below that, in tiny font, it says, ‘depression, anger, anxiety’. Shelves are packed with boxes of medicines for fever and diabetes. Dr Arif says it’s a potent way to masquerade a counselling centre as a pharmacy.

Only when you look behind the curtain, you will find a table and three chairs where patients regularly come when they are severely depressed.



An Indian policeman checks an identity card of a woman during a curfew in Srinagar.

In a society where a large number of women still stay indoors while their husbands take on the role of breadwinner, Dr Yuman Kawoos — one of the only two female psychiatrists in Kashmir — says it becomes difficult for women to

express themselves because of societal expectations.

Dr Yuman herself faced opposition from her family and friends because she chose to be a psychiatrist.

“Paagal ki doctor banogi? (You will be mad people’s doctor?)” she was often asked by her relatives, who kept telling her that she should choose gynaecology instead — “respectable” stream of medicine women in patriarchal India are still expected to opt for, since it involves interactions with mostly women patients.

Iqra, one of Dr Yuman’s patients, visited her at the Psychiatric Diseases Hospital, the only government hospital in the entire city for mental health, after she lived with depression for four years.

“When I would ask my parents to take me to a psychiatrist, they would say that I should engage myself in activities. They would tell me that no one will get married to me if I go to a paagal ki doctor,” she said.

Years later, she found the courage to secretly visit the hospital during her college hours.

When Dr Yuman prescribed her medicine for depression, she told her that she won’t be able to take them at home. “I was scared my parents will find out, and they will not like it,” she said. Dr Yuman finally managed to convince her father to continue her therapy.

A ‘SECRET CLINIC’

Jana, who was diagnosed with PTSD, also had to secretly find a way to get therapy. “It’s been a year since I am on therapy and medication, my parents are still not aware,” she said.

Dr Arif pointed out that mental illness mostly affects women between the age of 18-37.

“If the patient is of marriageable age, many of their family members choose not to go to a doctor because that would mean neighbours, relatives and prospective grooms finding out,” he said.

“In our neighborhood there is a lady who is completely mad, and her family is fed up... they are preparing to take her to the mental hospital. But we don’t even know where the mental hospital is.”

Dr Arif has found innovative ways to treat them. Besides the counselling centre masquerading as a pharmacy, he has a “secret clinic” at Rawalpora

— an hour’s drive from Srinagar — where he sees about 2-3 patients every Sunday.

“I make sure their timings don’t clash. This was opened far away from the city so they can come without being worried about families and relatives finding out,” he said.

Out Patient Department of the Sri Maharaja Hari Singh, SMHS, hospital.

The doctor also points out that domestic abuse, which he believes is one of the major causes of depression among women, also stems from conflict and militancy. He says that often, Kashmiri men feel humiliated at the hands of security personnel, and express the anger at home, affecting their wives and children. “Many of them suffer from PTSD and depression, and because it remains untreated, it results in them affecting their families too,” Dr Arif says.

The self-practitioner says doing normal things like going to buy groceries is difficult in a place like Kashmir. “The Kashmiris often get into confrontations with the CRPF men for petty reasons like not carrying their identification card,” he said. This, he says, leads to them feeling a sense of being ‘bullied’. “They go home and vent out their anger,” he said.

BLIND FAITH

Fozia and Shaik Shafiq are siblings, born two years apart. They are both autistic. For several years, 25-year-old Fozia, who also has schizophrenia, was taken to peers to solve her “anger and hallucinations”.

Hasseina, 45, Fozia and Shaik’s mother, had to leave their home in downtown Srinagar and move to Kralpora after their neighbours and their children constantly harassed her “mad” children.

“I didn’t know what was wrong with them, so I took them to many peers,” she said. After years of harassment from neighbours and the pressure of handling two autistic children, Hasseina, too, is going through counselling for depression.

Hasseina is worried about her children’s marriage: “This is all I think about. Who will marry them?” Almost instantly Fozia reacts to her mother’s worry and says, “Ye tchen darith!” (What marriage? Throw it in the dustbin!)

In this photo taken on November 20, 2015, Kashmiri patient Masrat Naz, 45, and who is suffering from symptoms of schizophrenia, lies on a bed as she periodically shouts to medical staff after being brought by relatives to the casualty ward at the Psychiatric Diseases hospital in Srinagar.

It’s the same with almost all the patients who queue up every Thursday at the SMHS hospital to meet Dr Arshad Hussain, a leading psychiatrist and associate professor at Government Medical College in Srinagar. In the last

17 years that Hussain has worked as a psychiatrist, he has only seen patients seek help when the illness gets “severe”.

However, Dr Arshad says that he doesn't see alternative healing as a bad thing.

“For some people, faith is important. And alternative methods can play a role,” he said. But in most of these cases, they eventually come to the clinic when the alternative methods fail.

“Of the 92% who need help, only 7% actually go to a doctor,” he said. The statistic is a tragic reminder that despite mental trauma, a lot of Kashmiris still don't get help.

A survey conducted by medical humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in 2015 covering 5,428 households in 399 villages across ten districts in the Valley showed that there's a long way to go before more people get medical help for mental health.

Dr Himanshu Mohan Kumar, Epidemiologist at MSF India, who was a part of the team that conducted the survey, says a 'mental hospital' is “often **SO FEW DOCTORS, ONE HOSPITAL**

Every Thursday at the SMHS hospital, Dr Arshad barely gets a chance to get up to drink water. On an average, 300 people visit him between 11am-3pm. He says the crowd is a little less at the psychiatry hospital, but it's still a lot for him to deal with alone.

Dr Arshad says there are about 16 psychiatrists and six therapists operating in the government hospital. Given that about nearly 1.8 million adults in Kashmir suffer from mental ailments, it's not even close to enough.

“I can't deny that it's not an ideal situation,” said Dr Arshad.

To put things in perspective, there are more than 70,000 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) in the Valley. How is mental health of people living in one of the world's most militarized zones not important enough for the government to employ more doctors and build more hospitals?

In fact, there's not even any health care facility available for women.

Shazia*, 45, doesn't talk much anymore. “I only have bad thoughts all the time. I don't want to smile, do anything,” she says. Shazia has been diagnosed with severe depression as her concerned husband, Muhammad, asks the psychiatrist, “When will she get better? My daughters in-laws often complain, and tell her that she will turn into her mother.” It is these kind of problems, the shame that comes with mental health issues, that make peoi,

ple avoid treatment altogether.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

Dr Yuman says there's a massive number of under-reported domestic abuse cases that people refuse to talk about. "In Kashmir, families and relatives live very close to each other. It's a social embarrassment to talk about issues at home. And who do you even talk to?"

Freny Manecksha, a journalist from Mumbai, writes in her book 'Behold, I Shine: Narratives of Kashmir's Women and Children' that the conflict has also played a role in resulting in constriction of spaces where women would meet and talk to each other. She quotes Dr Arshad Hussain in her book, where he says that women stopped stepping out after the 90s as traditional spaces like yaarbals (washing ghats) and baadamwaris (almond gardens) eroded due to conflict and urbanisation. This meant that women had fewer spaces to talk to each other and release pent emotions.

"A lot of women can't tell the male psychiatrists about their problems, especially when it is about marriage. That is why there's a need for women psychiatrists in Kashmir," says Dr Yuman.

Two years ago, the government medical college had started a women's ward after reports of unprecedented rise in psychiatrist illness among women. The ward would address issues on menstrual dysphoria, postmenopausal symptoms, and psychiatric illness in pregnancy and delivery. It was to provide counselling for marital problems after the rise of incidents of domestic violence. However, it's been shut for eight months now. Dr Yuman says her requests to keep the ward running have fallen on deaf ears. Often, the men in Kashmir feel humiliated at the hands of security personnel. So, they express the anger at home, affecting their wives and children.

Self-practitioner Dr Arif says often he meets women who are severely depressed after tolerating abuse for 10-15 years. Dr Arif has special sessions for widows and 'half-widows' where he gives them therapy for free.

As per government estimates there are about 1,500 'half-widows' in Kashmir still waiting for their husbands to return. "In Kashmir, a lot of women have seen many deaths. Losing your sons and husband aren't easy. And, sometimes, for years, they keep waiting for them to come home. This leads to a lot of traumas," he says.

There's more to this.

The very nature of war puts women in crisis, while the actual political conflict is a confrontation between states, militants and security forces.

Two women and a girl make their way along a street littered with rocks

thrown by protestors in Srinagar as the city remains under curfew following weeks of violence in Kashmir. In fact, conflict is the underlying cause to most of the mental health issues in Kashmir.

Poverty and unemployment are major factors that lead to mental health issues — often a result of the decade-old conflict. The MSF survey notes that for the past 27 years, the ongoing political situation in Kashmir has restricted the development of private industry and curtailed a once-flourishing tourist industry, which served as an important source of income for many households in the valley.

“Conflict destroys social and economic structures in communities, leading to a breakdown of the social and material fabric. Poverty, unemployment, underemployment and loss of social support networks all have a negative effect on mental health. The impact of daily stressors on mental distress in conflict-affected populations should not be underestimated,” says Dr Himanshu Mohan Kumar. Dr Kumar emphasizes the need for counselling services at district level.

“I only have bad thoughts all the time. I don’t want to smile, do anything.” As Dr Arif rightly points out, “The tragedies never end here. We just keep waiting for peace.”

(*Names have been changed to protect the identities of the women.)



ADRIJA BOSE

With over seven years experience in journalism Adrija Bose has written extensively on issues relating to gender and the intersections between gender, class, and caste. She started her career at Firstpost and has worked at NDTV and Huffington Post India. She is currently working with CNN-News18 as an Associate Editor. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Northern Region).

7. INDIA'S PIONEERING WOMEN QAZIS ASK MUSLIM MEN: HAVE YOU READ THE QURAN?

18 August, 2017, www.huffingtonpost.in

Iqra's world fell apart in six months.

In her telling, it began, as it often does, with marriage. The 23-year-old's marriage to Ali was an exchange programme of sorts. Ali was her cousin, son of her khaala, her mother's sister. In turn, Iqra's brother married the same khaala's daughter. Her khaala also became her mother-in-law. Such marriage between first cousins is commonplace among Muslims in South Asia.

Two months later, Iqra's sister-in-law ran away from home. Her parents had apparently forced her into the marriage against her wishes.

The sister-in-law's flight to freedom imprisoned Iqra. Her mother-in-law, upset with her own daughter's running away, took out the anger on Iqra. "Khaala would abuse me at every chance she would get. She would give me gaalis till I would break down. She was angry with her daughter, and she would direct it at me," she said.

One day, her husband asked her to go back to her parental home. "He told me he would come to take me back when his mother calmed down a little," Iqra said.

Soon thereafter, Iqra found out she was pregnant. She called her husband to give him the 'good news'. He sounded happy too. Her husband and her mother-in-law soon took her to a doctor who gave her a medicine. The doctor told her that since she needs to avoid sex, she should continue staying with her parents.

The office of Jahan Ara and Afroz Begum is never empty. A few weeks later, Iqra had a miscarriage. "I don't know if they had a hand in this, but my husband never came back to take me home. He stopped taking my calls and responding to my messages," she said.

As she dealt with the trauma of the miscarriage and the betrayal, two burqa-clad women emerged as her support system. It is in their office, in

Jaipur's busy Johri Bazaar, that Iqra related her harrowing story to this correspondent.

The women, who are present this day, are 45-year-old Jahan Ara and 43-year-old Afroz Begum. They are Rajasthan's first women qazis, or clerics, social and religious adjudicators in Islam, mediating in family disputes. "She had already filed a case with the police before she came to us," said Ara, "So we couldn't interfere in the matter between the families. Otherwise, we could have called her husband and her in-laws and told them it wasn't the right way to treat their bride."

MUSLIM, WOMAN, QAZI

The job of a qazi has been an exclusive male preserve till recently in India, as it is in most parts of the world. In recent years, activists and organisations within the Muslim world have pushed for the inclusion of women as qazis, and pushing against patriarchy and orthodoxy, more women have taken to the vocation in recent years.

It was only in April this year that Jahan Ara and Afroz Begum received their Qaziyat certificates, after completing their two-year training from Darul Uloom-i-Niswan in Mumbai, an institute established by the social organization Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan. They graduated along with thirteen other women, who went on to become qazis in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha.

Every day, they see people like Iqra, who seek advice and adjudication, at the office of the BMMA in Johri Bazar. Nishat Hussain, the BMMA's Rajasthan convener, set this office up ten years ago.

"We have ourselves seen women being subjected to violence since childhood. My father used to beat my mother," says Jahan Ara. "There would be no one to help her. The male qazis, whose role as an Islamic judge is to counsel and help, always support the men. They will just say it's 'Allah's choice'. No, it's not. And we need to tell women in our community that the Holy Quran does not differentiate between a man and a woman."

Jahan Ara, who grew up in Jaipur, went through an abusive marriage for years before she finally decided to leave her husband about 10 years ago. After the divorce, she says, her husband didn't let her meet their children, paid her no alimony, and refused to give her the customary 15 grams of gold Muslim men must pay their wives if the marriage ends. "The local qazi refused to help me get my rights," she says.

The male qazis, whose role as an Islamic judge is to counsel and help, always support the men. They will just say it's 'Allah's choice'. No, it's not.

She knew she had to change her situation. She started working with a wom

en's rights organization and went on to start a Madrassa for the children in her locality. "I started thinking what is the right kind of Islam, the one that's taught in the Quran or the one we were practicing?" she says. That led her to enroll for the course to become a woman qazi.

Jahan Ara and Begum have faced a lot of opposition from male qazis and other members of the Muslim community. Lately, things have begun to change. "The other day a qazi came and congratulated Jahan Ara for the work she's doing. This is progress. Gradually, society will start accepting that women can be empowered," said Nishat Hussain.

WHEN MEN FEAR WOMEN

"The role of a qazi is marriage, divorce and intervention against injustice. Male qazis have a certain world view--they want us to believe the husband has more rights. But the Quran doesn't say so. Women becoming qazis will change that patriarchal mindset," says Zakia Soman, one of the BMMA's founding members.

According to her, triple talaq (the controversial Islamic practice of instant divorce) has ruined a lot of women's lives. It is unconstitutional, she says, and not valid as per the Quran. "We no longer need to accept the treatment that's been meted out to us for decades," she said.

Qazi Afroz Begum echoes her words. The 43-year-old says that though there's support from her family, her husband and her five sons, it's still a long way before Rajasthan starts accepting women as qazis. She says unlike the male qazis, who simply indulge in "dukandaari" (business), they will follow the requirements of Muslim personal law that are often overlooked.

The women qazis need to be given a month's notice for a nikah. They will then check all the documents--the bride and the groom's qualifications, proof of income, medical reports and divorce certificates, if any, before they approve of the marriage. "Until women know what their rights are, how will they demand them?" asks Qazi Afroz.

Jahan Ara and Afroz Begum have solved about 60 cases, of which 25 pertained to triple talaq. As Afroz explains how they are going to bring about change, Jahan Ara receives a call. "Aap kal tashrif layenge? (Will you come tomorrow?)" she asks in a curt manner.

It was a man they have just sent a notice to. His wife came complaining to the women qazis one day of his alcoholism. Most nights, she said, he doesn't return home. She suspected multiple affairs. "We sent him a notice, and now he's scared," says Jahan Ara.

"Allah has never wanted us, women, to live in deprivation. Men and women are same in the eyes of Allah."

Since April, after they received their final certificate, Jahan Ara and Afroz Begum have solved about 60 cases, of which 25 pertained to triple talaq.

Durdana Khan, 29, a local reporter in Jaipur, says it's due to the constant support from these two women over the last year that she's no longer scared of anyone. Durdana was married to a well-to-do family in Jodhpur in 2008. Six months into her marriage, her father-in-law started making sexual advances towards her. "He would keep touching me and would ask me to visit his room," she said. When she complained to her husband, his response was, "Deal with it. This happens in our family." Durdana was shell-shocked, and tried to run away several times. But each time, her husband and his family members would find her and beat her up. In 2012, her husband finally agreed to give her talaq (divorce).

"Allah has never wanted us, women, to live in deprivation. Men and women are same in the eyes of Allah. So why should we have to tolerate the subjugation of men?" Durdana asks. The 29-year old's plight did not end with the divorce. After she returned to Jaipur to stay with her parents, her brothers started harassing her and their father, scared that they will lose their share of the property. Ara and Begum helped her resolve the property dispute, negotiating with her family members. "A male qazi, more often than not, grants property rights to the sons alone. We are trying to change that," she says.

The women qazis have also set up a team of about 15-20 women who work in different parts of Jaipur and its outskirts. "Every leader is responsible for their area. When they find a case of violence, they report it to us. We then approach the victim and help her," she said.

WAITING FOR THE FIRST NIKAH

Arbitrating disputes of property and marriage is the easy part. The difficult part is conducting marriages. Since they received their certificates only in April, they are yet to be approached by anyone to perform a nikah.

Safia Akhtar, 61, the only woman qazi from Bhopal who graduated with Jahan Ara and Afroz Begum, says that none of them have performed a nikah yet because men feel women should be under 'purdah' and cannot go to a mosque where the ceremony usually takes place for the groom. "Muslim marriages are male-dominated events. Now that we have our qazi certificates, they are asking us how will we conduct it in a room full of men."

Safia says she constantly receives death threats from men. "Someone just informed me I'll be removed from Islam for being a qazi," she says. But the 61-year-old isn't scared. "They want me to shut up, but I won't. If they can prove I am wrong, I'll leave Islam myself," she says.

32-year-old Nasreen, who has recently become the first woman qazi in Karnataka, says it's mostly the women who come to her with cases. "A lot of

people don't want to accept that I am a qazi. They constantly ask me how a woman could be a qazi. And my response to them is, 'Have you read the Quran?' Nasreen says only women qazis can understand the discrimination a woman faces in the community. "Men usually don't come to us, and that says a lot about their mentality," said 35-year-old Aslam Banu, the woman qazi from Odisha.

About a year ago, when news of the country's first 15 female qazis was announced, the All India Muslim Personal Law Board did not approve of the idea, declaring that female qazis were not permitted in Islam and could not be appointed. Tahir Mahmood, a former member of the Law Commission of India, which oversees adjudication over Muslim personal law, disagreed with the AIMPLB, as did the Darul Uloom Deoband, the influential Islamic school in Deoband, UP.

UNISLAMIC?

Khalid Usmani, Rajasthan's chief qazi, also thinks women qazis are un-Islamic. "If I tell you I am Lord Raam, will you believe it?" he asks. Usmani says women qazis don't know anything about Quran or Islamic laws. "How can women be qazis? They are not meant to do all this. They have a role in society, and they should let men perform their roles," he said. The chief qazi says that people have 'rejected' these women as qazis. "They can't go to a mosque. It's not allowed in Islam. They are just fooling people. And that is why people don't go to them either," he said.

Khalid Usmani, Rajasthan's chief qazi says whatever you might think of Usmani's views, he's definitely wrong about the last part. People certainly go to them. The Jaipur office of Ara and Begum is never empty. There are women who come to them to register cases against their husband for domestic violence, some come with property disputes, and others to save their marriages when the husbands have uttered triple talaq. Some women come just to sit and listen, to learn how they could stand on their own two feet after their husbands have left them.

People used to go to Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, for advice and guidance.

The chief qazi's views on the subject don't find universal acceptance. Akhtarul Wasey, who has taught Islamic studies at Jamia Millia Islamia, and is now the President of Maulana Azad University in Jodhpur, says the Quran doesn't say anything to prevent women from becoming qazis. "Our holy book doesn't differentiate between men and women. Whoever's calling the appointment of female qazis un-Islamic, is wrong," he says.

Wasey says people used to go to Aisha, Prophet Muhammad's wife, for advice and guidance. "In fact, we attribute one-third of the Sharia law to Aisha.

If Aisha could do it, then why can't women be qazis? This is what I would like to ask Usmani saab."

According to him, if women are educated and know Islamic laws and the Constitution, nothing can stop them from becoming Islamic judges. "Forget nikah, there are so many other things that a qazi does, and a woman can do all of those," he says.

"One day women will even become Muftis and teach the Quran," says Qazi Afroz, "We know it's a long journey."



ADRIJA BOSE

With over seven years experience in journalism Adrija Bose has written extensively on issues relating to gender and the intersections between gender, class, and caste. She started her career at Firstpost and has worked at NDTV and Huffington Post India. She is currently working with CNN-News18 as an Associate Editor. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Northern Region).

8. IN THIS HARYANA VILLAGE, THERE IS A WOMAN FOOTBALLER IN NEARLY EVERY HOME

21 August, 2017 www.huffingtonpost.in

The narrow road that leads to Alakhpura, in Haryana's Bhiwani district, is mostly empty on this sultry August afternoon. The clouds above portend heavy showers. The farmers are returning from the fields, leading cows back into their shelters. And just as the village's day is drawing to a close, you can see some two dozen young girls kicking a ball around in a big field, right next to the village's only government school.

They are warming up.

This non-descript Haryana village, with a sex ratio worse than the state average (Haryana has the ignominy of the worst sex ratio in the country) is the ground zero of an incredible and heartwarming footballing success story scripted by its women. More than 300 women train regularly in this village, and among them are 11 who have represented India and several others who have represented the state across age groups.

Footballing success here means a ticket to a better livelihood for their families. A move from a mud home to a concrete one. And as such stories have played out repeatedly, the status of young women in this village have transformed--they are now seen as being just as capable of changing a family's fortunes as a male child.

TRICKLE BECOMES A FLOOD

Even as it begins to rain heavily, and the field turns in parts into muddy slush, the girls don't stop playing. The roads from their houses to the field are now flooded. But the field keeps getting more crowded.

"We practice everyday, Storms and rains can't stop us from playing," says Poonam Sharma. The 18-year old started playing about seven years ago. Last year, she went to Vietnam to represent India at the Asian Football Confederation Under-19 qualifiers.

The girls from Haryana shot into the limelight when the players of the AI

ment--in 2014. The girls managed to reach the finals in 2015, and win it back in 2016. The Alakhpura girls have also been a part of the Haryana U-14, U-19 and the national teams for over a decade now.

It all started in the year 2002. The school's physical education teacher Gordhan Dass, 49, used to train the boys to play kabaddi. One day, the girls went to him and said they wanted to play too. Gordhan, a qualified kabaddi coach, decided to give the girls a football that was lying around in the school premises. During recess, these girls simply kicked the football around. "There was a time when the girls would sit with a punctured football. We didn't have money to get a new one. Those girls are now playing for India," a beaming Dass told HuffPost India.

Alakhpura government school's PE teacher Gordhan Dass with the team coach Sonika Bijaria and her husband, who is a boxer.

Within two years after the girls started playing football, the villagers got together to turn a road into a field. "They put in their money and got sand and mud to cover the place," he said.

A decade later, there are around 300 girls from the village who train in the school's adjoining field every day. From this cohort, champions emerge routinely.

There was a time when the girls would sit with a punctured football. We didn't have money to get a new one. Those girls are now playing for India.

Last year, the girls formed Alakhpura FC in their effort to participate in the first Indian Women's League (IWL), initiated by the AIFF (All India Football Federation). The team won the regional qualifiers in Haryana to be one of the 10 teams to qualify for the second round of the IWL. They lost to Manipur's Eastern Sporting Union in the semi-finals. But they had made a mark. Alakhpura FC's 6-2 victory against Aizawl FC in the group stage was one of the most talked about matches in the league.

"At least one girl plays football from every household in Alakhpura," said Sonika Bijaria, the head coach of Alakhpura FC.

Bijaria, who has represented Haryana at the senior nationals, started training these girls in 2014 when she was deputed by the government. "There were so many difficulties. We didn't have proper training facilities. But these girls are extremely talented," she said.

Home to about 2,000 people, the village mostly has farmers and daily wage labourers. The census data shows that the average sex ratio in the village is 849, lower than Haryana's state average of 879. But the women's football team is making sure that their village is known for something else.

“Now people know the village because of our football. Game is our life,” said 19-year-old Jyoti Yadav, who has played the Subroto Cup and in the IWL.

BEND IT LIKE THE ALAKHPURA GIRLS

Sanju Yadav, 19, was named as the AIFF Emerging Player of the Year in 2016 for her performance in the National Women’s Football team. What started as just another game in her school recess became her career.

“I don’t think I would be anything but a football player,” she said. Sanju, daughter of a farm labourer, has just returned from Malaysia after India won the friendly championship against the host country.

Last year, the girls didn’t get any league sponsors and that’s when 2,000 villagers of Alakhpura came together to donate Rs1.5 lakh so they could take part in the IWL.

Sanju has been playing for the last 8 years. She first played for the U-14 Indian team in 2011 against Sri Lanka. But she shot to fame in a match against Bangladesh in February 2016. Playing for the senior team, she scored in the 74th minute as India won 5-1 and moved into the finals. India then went on to defeat Bangladesh 3-1 to win their fourth consecutive SAFF Women’s Football Championship title.

Eldest among three siblings, Sanju started playing football at the age of 10 when their school’s physical education teacher just handed them a football. “We would run to the other village, some of us bare-feet because we couldn’t afford shoes,” she said. This was a practice method to build stamina.

Till last year, all they had was a set of bricks in place of goalposts. The pitch was barren.

“Once the girls started winning tournaments, the government came forward to help,” said Bijarnia, Alakhpura FC’s coach. The pitch now has grass, and the girls have shoes. In the next six months, the girls will have another field to train. “We have been allotted Rs 2 crore by the Haryana government to develop this field,” she said.

Sanju’s family has only one acre of land and her father works as a labourer in the fields of others to make ends meet. They lived in a house made of mud bricks. Every day, Sanju would wake up at 5 am to train and then she would help her father in the fields. She would then go to school and return to training in the evening.

Once Sanju started playing, she realized that the game could help her get scholarships and prize money that could help her parents run the family. “For the last four-five years, she got around Rs 2 lakh scholarship per year and with that (money) we have constructed a two-bedroom house,” said

Sanju's mother Nirmala Devi. It's been three months since the 19-year-old got a job with the Railways, thanks to football.

"My parents have never discouraged me from playing. At my age, most girls usually get married, but they have never asked me to. They want me to win matches, and not wear a ghunghat (a traditional veil)," she said.

This year, along with Sanju, 20-year-old Ritu Bagaria from the same village had gone to Malaysia for a national camp. "I learnt a lot there," she said. "I will now teach the girls in the village learn some of the tactics I learned there. I hope more and more women from Alakhpura play international," she said.

Aneybai, 15, has played the Subroto Cup in 2016.

15-year-old Aneybai has helped her family in a way her mother had never dreamt of. Aneybai lived in a mud house with her mother and two brothers. Her mother Maya is a safai karmachari (cleaner), and her brothers are in school. Her father passed away when she was four years old. "With the scholarship money that she got from playing football, we have built a brick house and a toilet," Aneybai's mother said.

Inspired by the girls, the boys from the village who hadn't taken much interest in the game till recently, have now started training. "The boys have just started training, they want to achieve what the girls have. They have a long way to go," Bijaria said.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE...

Prakash Singh Jakhar, a member of the village's Panchayat Committee, recounted how the villagers got together to ensure lack of facilities doesn't come in between these girls and their dreams. "There was no ground at the village for girls to play and so we requested the government to help us out, but no one helped," he said.

So, the villagers decided to dry out a nearby pond by filling it with sand, to create a place for girls to play and train.

Last year, the girls didn't get any league sponsors and that's when 2,000 villagers of Alakhpura came together to donate Rs1.5 lakh so they could take part in the IWL.

Dass, the PE teacher who had initiated this football revolution in the village, said that the girls' success in football has won around Rs50-60 lakhs in scholarships this year. "Whenever Haryana's women team plays a game, there are mostly girls from this village," he said.

"The girls' parents try and fund whatever little they can. Some give Rs100, and some Rs5,000. They don't want the girls to stop playing because of

lack of funds,” Bijarnia points out.

All of this might sound like scenes from an idyllic village movie where everyone just gets along. But that wasn't always so.

Like in most Haryana villages, the girls here used to be married off before they turned 16. Dass would often have to visit the girls' homes, to try and convince the parents to let their daughters come to the field.

Often, the villagers would refuse to listen to Dass. So, he came up with an idea and decided to pose a question to the unwilling villagers. “My daughter used to play football. I would train her too. Every time there was difficulty from a girl's house, I would visit the parents with my daughter. I would tell them that I have a daughter the same age. If it isn't disrespectful for the school teacher's daughter to play, how is it disrespectful for anyone?”

Anjali, 12, Sandhya, 10, Sneha, 9, Niyati, 6, Ritika, 5, Kafin, 3, are sisters. They all play in the football team.

That wasn't all. Before Bijarnia, the club's only female coach, came on board, Dass wasn't sure how to travel with the teenage girls for tournaments. “The villagers wouldn't be happy about this,” he said. So he would leave his cows to his brother's care and take his wife along with him. “My wife took care of their personal needs, while I continued with the training,” he said.

Dass believes that the game has changed these girls' lives. “Now the girls' parents want them to play, not get married,” he said. He said that if this change could come in a small village like Alakhpura, it can happen in every village of the country.

THE HURDLES IN WOMEN'S FOOTBALL

Alakhpura might have a success story to tell, but the wider state of women's football in the country has been a sorry one in recent years.

The Indian women's football team has seen a steep decline from a period of glory in the 1980s. At the 1980 Asian Women's Championships, held in Calicut (now Kozhikode), India had entered not one but two teams. One of these teams returned home with silver.

Till last year, all they had was a set of bricks in place of goalposts. The pitch was barren.

But since then--the FIFA ranking of the women's national team has gone down every year. Now, India is ranked at 60 while China, a country that established a women's team a couple of years after India, has left India far behind, ranking at 11.

“Now people know the village because of our football. Game is our life.”

There are very few friendlies that are organised. In fact, the women's team have played so little, that in 2009 it was dropped from the FIFA rankings. It was only last year that the first league tournament was played.

Aditi Chauhan is something of an outlier in this bleak landscape. She became the first Indian woman footballer to play overseas professionally when she was picked by England's West Ham United Ladies in 2015. She also plays for India's national team. In a telephone interview, she told HuffPost India that Indian women's football had a long way to go. "There are definitely a lot of things that still need to be improved--the league needs to be longer, running at least a couple of months in the year. All Indian Super League (the national league organised by AIFF) clubs should actively get involved and set up a women's team as well."

The goalkeeper says that there's no lack of talent in the country, but women's football has suffered because "we don't have a professional set-up and a proper channel for the youngsters to progress". Chauhan feels there's just one solution. "Someone needs to step up and take the responsibility, get the corporates involved to invest in women's football at the grassroots and also in a longer-duration league," she said.

Meanwhile, AIFF has begun the pre-qualifiers for the next IWL. The qualifiers are planned sometime in November this year and the finals are likely to take place in March 2018. Kishore Taid, COO for AIFF told HuffPost India that the federation has a lot of focus on women's football in the next couple of years. "From organising grassroots tournaments for girls to education of women coaches and referees to improving our international performances, we have a well-defined strategy to improve women's football in India," Taid said.

"But we have to take one step at a time as our resources are limited and the road is long," he added.

The head coach of the Alakhpura team, however, feels that the government also needs to push a little more. Bijarnia believes that if their village gets more facilities and adequate support from the government, it can become the hub for football in India. "They put money in wrestling and other sports, but football is still not given importance," she said.



ADRIJA BOSE

With over seven years experience in journalism Adrija Bose has written extensively on issues relating to gender and the intersections between gender, class, and caste. She started her career at Firstpost and has worked at NDTV and Huffington Post India. She is currently working with CNN-News18 as an Associate Editor. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Northern Region).

9. WHY MUMBAI'S WOMEN WON'T BUY A CONDOM

9 November, 2017 | Midday

Our reporter's attempt at buying a packet of female condoms from medical stores in the city made her the subject of mock and ridicule, even as she was fleeced.

NOBODY buys female condoms. Take the male condoms instead," this was the unanimous claim of staff at 24/7 medical stores across the city, when mid-day sent its reporter in the wee hours to pose as a customer, seeking just one thing — a packet of condoms for herself. Said to be the most effective means of HIV prevention among women, the internal condom, also known as the female condom, is considered both empowering and liberating.

However, this is clearly not the case in the megalopolis of Mumbai, which, according to the 2011 census, boasts of a population of over 60 lakh women. During a test drive at 12 medical stores across South Mumbai and the suburbs, this reporter's unusual requirement was either met with awkward stares or outright refusal, enough to make any woman in the city think twice before contemplating to use one, let alone buy it. The stigma aside, finding a female condom at any of these stores, was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

SUBJECT OF SPECULATION

If you ask for a female condom at any crowded medical store at night, you might become the subject of speculation with the staff either sizing you up or throwing awkward stares. A few staff were also taken aback by the brazenness of this reporter to ask for a female condom.

One shopkeeper at Royal Chemist at Byculla, said, "We don't keep such products." When this reporter asked for a reason, he agitatedly said, "I don't know the reason, we have never kept it. Please go and check with some other store." The reporter had similar experiences at several other stores.

According to women's right activist Archana Mehra "shopkeepers need to be sensitised when dealing with female customers". "No one takes offence or speculates if a man comes to buy condoms. But, the same people raise their eyebrows when a woman asks for it. If women aren't made to feel comfortable, they will never go and buy it," said Mehra.

DUPING FEMALE CUSTOMERS

The staff at Grand Medical Store, opposite JJ Hospital, claimed they had only two packets of female condoms. The MRP on the box was R55. However, when this reporter asked for a packet, the shopkeeper tried selling it for R110 each. The staff was alerted when the reporter threatened to file a complaint, and eventually settled for R55. At Metro Medical Store in Bandra tried, the staff tried to palm off a local female condom-brand as an imported product. It was being sold for R200.

Commenting on the issue of 'overcharging' Anand Patwardhan, an expert in medical ethics and treasurer of Council For Fair Business Practices said, "Even if the supply is less, no one can charge over and above the MRP. This is exploitation. In such cases, one can file a complaint with the Legal Metrology department."

Another reason why women choose against buying condoms is the marked difference in pricing. While a packet of male condoms vary anywhere between R8- R12, female condom packets are being sold for anything above R60, almost three times higher. "The lack of demand has also affected the supply," says Ravishankar Joshi, who has been working at a medical store in Worli for nearly five years. "We only order one or two boxes of female condoms every week. Compared to that, we sell 10-15 male condoms daily," said Joshi.

"Young unemployed women can't afford such expensive condoms," said Dr Rekha Daver, former head of gynaecology department at JJ Hospital. "Also, female condoms are bigger in size and hence, women think twice before using it. These issues need to be addressed."

Also, unlike male condoms that are provided free of cost at government and BMC-run hospitals, female condoms are given at a discounted rate, and is mostly targeted at sex workers. National Aids Control Organisation too doesn't have any provision for female condoms. "As far as I know that there is no provision for female condoms under NACO as it's difficult to use and needs training. It may be distributed at a few areas only," said Dr Shrikala Acharya, project director of Mumbai Aids Control Society.

Gynaecologist Dr Nikhil Datar said, "In the US and the UK, the demand for female condoms is really high. Considering, the population of working-independent women in Mumbai, authorities need to encourage its use further."

HOW TO USE IT?

A female condom is much wider than a male condom. They come in various sizes, depending on the shape of the woman's vagina. Male and female condoms cannot be used together. Choose a position that is comfortable for insertion, gently insert the closed end of the product into the vagina. Place the index figure inside the condom and push the inner sponge up. Be sure that the sheath is not twisted. The outer ring should remain on the outside of the vagina.



RUPSA CHAKRABORTY

Rupsa Chakraborty is a Senior Correspondent with Mid-Day, Mumbai - having an experience of over six years in the field of journalism. She covers issues related to health and gender sensitivity. She is passionate about delving deeper into issues which affect the right of women to live with a sense of equality and independence. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Investigative Story (Western Region).

10. MANODHAIRYA: A LANDMARK SCHEME WITH FLAWED EXECUTION

June 12, 2017 | The Hindu

Drafted to provide immediate relief to victims of sexual assault, its effectiveness is hampered by committees which reject and ignore petitions.

Pooja Gaikwad* stood behind the door of the living room of her house. The 17-year-old had paused, smiling, as she went about her household chores, as she heard her little sister Aarti*, aged 11, chat with a neighbour. In a few seconds, she froze. It wasn't idle chatter of school or the locality she was hearing. Aarti was telling their neighbour that she had been raped and tortured by her older brothers.

Pooja knew she had to speak. She went into the room, and, weeping, let out her own secret: their brothers had been raping her too, for the past four years. Worse, their mother knew about it. Not just that, when Pooja asked her mother to make it stop, the woman had burnt her with red-hot iron rods. Aarti broke down too, and said that their mother had burnt her too, on her hand and cheek, only a week ago. The neighbour, overwhelmed by the girls' anguished story, rushed to the nearby police station, and got the boys and their mother arrested.

This was in early 2015.

Soon after the arrests, the sisters were moved to a children's shelter in Mumbai, where they still live. The State has done nothing to help them with their ordeal, or to rebuild their lives. The tragedy is that Maharashtra actually has a scheme designed for just this: the support of victims of sexual assault. And while the Gaikwad sisters' plea for compensation was entered in the proper way, there hasn't been even a reply, let alone the granting of what is due to them.

"For a victim of sexual assault, rape is not their greatest tragedy," says Audrey D'mello, advocate and also Programme Director, Majlis Legal Centre, a women's rights forum which has provided social and legal support to over a thousand victims of rape in Mumbai. "It is surviving that assault, one day at a time, every moment at a time. There's need for a great deal of mental and physical rehabilitation. With these minor sisters, that hasn't been the case. The girls' father works as a butcher. Their family is poor. Had they been awarded the compensation, which they duly deserve as per the norms of the scheme, the girls could have availed of better schooling, better standard

of living, and perhaps, a better future. But now, even two years after the complaint was registered, they haven't received the compensation, and the committee, which awards the amount, hasn't even told them why. They just haven't responded."

The compensation that Ms. D'mello refers to is part of a programme that the Maharashtra government introduced in 2013, the Manodhairya Yojana (literally, self-confidence scheme or plan). It is meant to help instill self-confidence in survivors of sexual assault. It provides monetary compensation of between 2 lakh and 3 lakh to girl children and adult women, as well as other forms of support, legal, medical, psychological and vocational.

The Gaikwad sisters are not the only sexual assault survivors who have been denied their rights despite the scheme.

Sujata Shinde*, a 14-year-old from suburban Mumbai, was raped by a man who promised to marry her. (There can be no concept of consent from a minor: even if she had explicitly agreed to sex, it is still statutory rape.) She made an application before the Manodhairya Board, but wasn't awarded compensation. She petitioned the Bombay High Court in early March this year.

The HC Bench came down heavily on the State government for its „ruthless and „insensitive; attitude. Ms. Shinde was granted a compensation of ₹1 lakh. When the HC asked the state government why she was not paid the maximum amount, ₹3 lakh, the lawyer appearing for the government, told the court that the case was of “consensual nature.” Irrked, the Bench stated that a 14-year-old could not be expected to understand or take such mature decisions and realise the consequences. “We don't like how the government is approaching the issue,” the judges said. “This is a very heartless attitude. It is the government's obligation to help such victims. [The victims] are not beggars, and this is not charity. It is their right. We are surprised at the laxity on part of the officers, and pained at their attitude.”

A LANDMARK SCHEME

The Manodhairya scheme came into being in the aftermath of the brutal gangrape of a photo-journalist in Mumbai's Shakti Mills in August, 2013.

The Manodhairya resolution implemented by the WCD Department in October 2013 states that a relief and rehabilitation board would be set up in every district of Maharashtra to grant compensation to victims of sexual assaults and acid attacks. The requirements are simple: the victim must file a first information report (FIR, a document prepared by the police when they are informed about a cognisable offence). An application can be rejected only if the date of the offence is before October 2, 2013, or if the charges in the FIR are not covered by the scheme.

Ujjwal Uke, former principal secretary of the State's WCD Department, who was instrumental in drafting the scheme, said, "If you read the government resolution, the committee has no discretion to decide on the merit of a case if the basic criteria are met. Their role is formal: they only have to ensure that the amount reaches the victim's bank account."

The Yojana's SOP reads: "The Committee (while awarding compensations) should not ask for any other evidence such as medical reports, statements of witnesses, panchanamas [a document prepared by an investigating police officer], CA Report [Chemical Analysis report] etc. as these are part of the investigation. The Committee should not scrutinise the FIR to check for inconsistencies or contradictions. This is the function of the judge at the time of the trial."

According to the resolution, each district committee is headed by the respective district collector and its members comprise the police superintendent, the district medical officer, a chief public prosecutor, a woman social activist who has worked for the empowerment of women and children, and the district women and child development officer. In short, the scheme ensures that the committees have important stakeholders and authorities who can ensure that victims get the requisite assistance immediately.

ARBITRARY DECISIONS

According to RTI data from the state's Women and Child Development (WCD) Department, 276 cases were referred to the Manodhairya Board in Mumbai city between October 2013 and March 2017. Of these, only 155, or around 56%, survivors were granted compensation. The WCD Department, Mumbai city, in its RTI response, has not mentioned the reason for these rejections despite being asked about them categorically.

While matters aren't perfect in other parts of the State, the statistics are markedly better there. In Jalgaon, Sangli, Osmanabad, Bhandara and Nagpur, the average is around 86%.

Women's rights activists and NGO workers say that what the HC called the State's „heartless attitude' is only one of several reasons why the Manodhairya Yojana, on the surface a landmark rehabilitative effort, is now failing in execution.

The Hindu reached out to Pankaja Munde, Maharashtra's Minister for Women and Child Welfare, for comment on the execution of the scheme. Ms. Munde and her office did not respond to repeated calls and text messages.

Ms. D'mello says, "Unlike the procedure mentioned in the scheme, the Committee calls for case papers, the investigating officer, pieces of evidence. They are scrutinising, judging, and rejecting compensations, even in cases where the two basic criteria are met. You can notice that in the case of the 14-year-old girl, who approached the Bombay High Court. The Committee has put the judge's robe there as well, declared that the girl doesn't deserve

the maximum amount because she had consensual sex. They don't realise that they're not on the Board to moral police or to judge. Judgement is the court's job."

Instead of providing immediate relief to victims, activists say, the Mumbai Board is arbitrarily denying compensation. "Victims should be awarded the amount as soon as these criteria are met," says Pouruchisti Wadia, Associate Programme Director at Mumbai-based NGO Sneha. "But that's not happening. Very often, the decision on these compensations is subjective. We are not in favour of the committee deciding whether or not a victim deserves compensation."

According to sources privy to Manodhairya Committee discussions in Mumbai, compensation is usually rejected because the Board either concludes that the victim doesn't deserve it (usually in cases of consensual sex) or that she doesn't need the amount (usually in cases where victims come from a sound financial background).

A Mumbai-based women's rights activist, who asked that her name not be used as she interacts with Manodhairya Committees, says, "They do not usually give reasons for rejections. They know that if they did, they would have to argue against the law. So, whenever they feel that a case doesn't merit compensation — irrespective of the criteria — they simply don't respond. We assume that a plea has been rejected if we do not hear from them for six months." She cites the example of a four-year-old girl raped by a neighbour in the eastern suburbs, in August, 2015. Despite an application and several follow-ups, there has been no response from the Board. Even more frustrating, she says, "There is no room for reprieve. The victim cannot file an appeal before the Board. The only option is to approach the High Court."

"The Manodhairya Yojana is unique," Ms. D mello says. "It provides immediate relief to victims: within 15 days of an FIR being registered. This is to ensure that victims get instant financial assistance along with other systems of support. But this is seldom practised. The cut-off date is hardly respected, and compensations are not usually awarded in the designated time period. We have to do several follow-ups so that the victims receive the amount."

Asked why compensation was so often not granted and replies not given, Deependra Singh Kushwah, Collector for suburban Mumbai — who was summoned by the Bombay High Court over Ms. Shinde's petition — only said, "We are not rejecting compensations arbitrarily unless there are too many issues."

QUANTUM OF COMPENSATION

The Bombay HC, addressing the petition filed for Ms. Shinde, stated that the compensation given to sexual assault and acid attack victims is "insulting." The petitioner's advocate had informed the court that while Maharashtra offers Rs 3 lakh as the maximum compensation amount, Goa has provisions

for Rs 10-lakh compensations. Responding to the advocate's concern that Ms. Shinde was from a poor family, the court asked to State to look into revising the amount to Rs 10 lakh. "There is no application of mind in deciding the scheme," the Bench said. "The amount is inhuman and comes across to be a mere formality. Is Rs 2 lakh, that too in a city like Mumbai, enough? The child will not even get proper education. The amount is shameful, and needs to be re-looked at."

Not all agree with the HC. Ms. D'mello, for instance, feels that though other states award higher compensation, Rs 3 lakh is practical, implementable, and can provide the requisite help to a victim.

MORE THAN THE MONEY

According to the Yojana, the Board, depending on the victim's needs, should provide the victim and her legal heirs with shelter, counselling, psychological expert service, medical help, legal assistance, educational support and vocational training. The aim is "to secure for them restorative justice." Victims are also eligible for support under any other State government scheme, for example, employment assistance or help with starting a trade or business.

But this doesn't happen either. "Even the other forms of assistance — counselling, psychological expert service — are not in place," Ms. Wadia says. "For minors who have been sexually assaulted, the Children's Welfare Committee arranges for counselling. But for adults, there is no such provision, although these forms of support have been clearly prescribed."

(This is not just in Mumbai. According to RTI data, in Sangli district, none of the 169 cases referred to the Board could avail of the supplementary assistance; in Osmanabad, only one of 52 survivors got immediate medical support, and in Bhandara, nine of 129 survivors got ancillary support.)

Manoj Patankar, district WCD officer for suburban Mumbai, argues that minor victims get every form of support they need under the supervision of the Child Welfare Committee. The poor statistics for adult victims, he said, is because "most of such survivors want to keep their identities protected because of the social stigma associated with sexual assault. It's because of this that even if WCD officers try to establish contact with the victims, they often choose not to reciprocate."

FATAL FLAWS

Before this scheme, activists say, there was no government support for victims of sexual assault. It was the result of social activists raising the alarm, and a lot of thought and research was invested in drafting it.

Another women's rights activist, who also asked not be named because she interacts with Manodhairya committees, condemned what she called

the “unjustified insensitivity” of these committees. “The scheme is meant to restore the dignity of these women and children, help them overcome the physical and mental trauma they’re haunted with after the incident. We cannot afford losing this idea to judgemental committee members or their lackadaisical approach.”

Ms. Uke, one of its architects, concurs: “The committees should perform their function effectively because this is the only scheme which goes beyond monetary relief. It provides manodhairya to such survivors, the will to go on. And it does that by providing immediate relief on basis of a complaint, not a trial or judgement. We do not want the survivor to wait for years before the court judgement arrives. We want her to get the relief when she needs it the most: immediately after the offence.”



PUJA CHANGOIWALA

Puja Changoiwala is an award-winning independent journalist and author. She writes about the intersections of gender, crime, social justice and development in India. Her writings have featured in The Guardian, BBC, The Washington Post, South China Morning Post, Stanford Social Innovation Review, The Hindu and Mint among others. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Western Region).

11. BREAKING THE MALE BASTION OF KUMARTULI

October 10, 2017 | Indiatogether.org

Women are making a mark in a profession almost entirely dominated by men. Shoma Chatterzji talks to the women idol makers of Kumartuli to find out about their struggle and success.

People crowding the pooja pandals around Kolkata, the suburbs and across India, might be surprised to know that around 4000 idols of Durga are created in the 450-and-odd narrowly built workshops or studios in Kolkata's Kumartuli, the hub centre of idol makers whose idols of Durga, her four children, her lion and Mahisasura travel across the world.

This cottage industry, also scattered in different parts of the city and the state of West Bengal, continues to be a space dominated almost entirely by men. Women, born or married into the families of these potters/artisans, are not encouraged to join the trade. In some families, the girls and young women are stopped from becoming idol makers just because they are women. So, at the most, we have not more than a dozen women who have broken all barriers not only to become idol makers but have also flourished in the business through courage, conviction and commitment.

Among these less than dozen women artisans, three or four have gained prominence through the media while the rest continue to remain invisible to the rest of the world. The media highlight has begun only since 2011 though some of them have been crafting beautiful idols of the Mother Goddess and her family for around two decades.

During the Puja season, the male artisans hire extra hands from across Bengal because making the idols of Goddess Durga is a grand affair. But they do not want women "invading" their space. They do not express this in so many words but action proves their stand. Fortunately indirect channel of 'encouragement' has come through the back door from an unexpected quarter. Many of the artisans' sons who are born into this hereditary trade are unwilling to take on the family craft creating opportunities for women stepping into this world.

The name Kumartuli or Kumortuli has its origins in the Bengali 'kumhor' or potter, and 'tuli' or small space. It is as old as the city of Kolkata, reportedly created by the East India Company by building settlements in a few scattered villages. New neighbourhoods came into being and were dominated by a specific trade or craft. Kumartuli's unique workshop area in the older

section of the city has become a tourist hub. Today, entry tickets have been introduced to regulate the pre-Durga Puja rush. Travel operators offer special curated packages only for Kumartuli.

Mala Pal, China Pal and Kakoli Pal may be considered the first three women to have broken the male monopoly among Kumartuli idol makers. They are the most prominent among the few peers they have. They had to be more hardworking than their male peers because it took a lot of time for their male colleagues to accept them within their fold.

China's life changed when her father, noted idol maker Hemanta Pal passed away in 1994. "Though my father did not like me to enter into this profession, I quit school and began to manage my father's studio. Ironically, he had begun to train me under him a few years before his death," she reminisces. China is popularly known as Dashabhujā Ma (10-armed goddess) among fellow artisans for her ability to multi-task. She manages her home and studio equally well. She is in her mid-forties now and has a team of 12 people working with her.

"We work with cement, plaster, bronze and copper because public tastes are ever-evolving. A truckload of sand now costs more than Rs.2000 while wet clay is priced approximately above Rs.800 per truckload. Clubs and collective organizations that place orders for idols often slip up when it is payment time. Many of them scoot off when we ask for payment. So, I have settled for family pooja orders because they are very good paymasters in terms of time," says China who has been in this business for the past 24 years and has gained a good name for herself.

"I like to place Maa Durga and her entourage in the same wooden plank, and that's how I make them, unlike others, who have fallen to new designer ways of making idols," China says. "I have not fallen prey to capitalism; for me, my workers are all the same and when we are done with making idols, we all take a vacation and travel together in the month of November." She follows her father's school where the Goddess and entourage were ekchala – under a single roof. China has received the Rajyapal Puraskar. Among her well-known works is the ardhnarishwar idol of Shiva and Durga commissioned for Kolkata's first transgender Durga Puja pandal in 2015. It was an androgynous sculpture for the transgender community, one of the first such idols in India. Media praised the radically different move. "We wanted a woman to make this idol for us so we approached China-di and she took it up without reservations and sculpted it personally," says Bhanu Naskar, spokesperson of the transgender community. Mala Pal specialises in making miniature idol. Pic: P.C. Chandra Jewellers, Kolkata Mala Pal can be seen working at a jet-like pace to meet Durga Pooja demands, supervising her labourers, obliging photographers and tourists, and would look after her ailing mother who lived in a cramped room behind her studio in the potters' hub. Mala, who has won several state awards for her craftsmanship, specialises in miniature, 'foldable' Durga idols that are exported to Europe, Australia and Canada where pujos are organised by the Bengali diaspora.

This 47-year-old took over the reins of making idols when her father died in 1985 as her older brothers did not help and were not interested in carrying on this heritage. “I have gone through financial hardship, but now I have received some recognition and the business has been good,” says Mala. Every year, she decides that she will stop this business for good. “My workers are like my family and as soon as Saraswati Pooja arrives in January or February and orders begin to pour in, my adrenalin rises and I give up my resolution,” she says.

Kakoli Pal does not have an exclusive studio space and shapes the idols inside a temporary, make-shift space in a narrow Kumartuli lane lined with shanties, public toilets and studios belonging to male artisans. All her appeals to the authorities for the allotment of a permanent space have received no response even on rent. “I did not get any financial help from the state government either.” Circumstances pushed her into this art and business when her husband died suddenly 13 years ago of a sudden brain stroke. “As I belong to Nadia district, I had no clue about this craft and when I was married to a Kumartuli idol maker, I became familiar with the art but only as an outsider. I have an average order of around 25 idols every year mainly for family festivals who are very good and regular paymasters. But the going is getting tougher every day because the price of raw materials and labour is going up sharply and as women artisans, we counter problems the men do not,” she says. “The studio has been my home of peace and creativity. I have expanded the business. My husband could barely manage to create five to seven idols, I have to deliver 22 idols of the Goddess this year,” she sums up.

Kanchi Pal is one of the most sought-after new-generation artisans in Kumartuli, who offers tough competition to her male rivals in the trade. “My mother, Archana Pal taught me the art because she stepped into the trade when my father died.” She is a one-woman army—crafting the idols, supervising her labourers, and taking care of finance and the business aspects. “There is no difference between a male and a female idol-maker,” stresses Kanchi, whose husband works in Kuwait.

“There are only five to six women artists in Kumartuli,” says Ranajit Sarkar, Secretary, Kumartuli Shilpi Samity. His list does not include Namita Pal who lives and works in Potopara near Kalighat which is like another Kumartuli in miniature. Shipra Ghodui and Shibani Pal have their work units in Andul, some distance from Kolkata. Alpana Pal specialises in making small idols for her Marwari clientele. She learnt it from her mother, Geeta Rani Dinda when she was just a teenager. She does not have a workshop and works from home. “My son studies at an art college and designs zardozi and bead ornaments for the decoration. “I picked up the skill from my shashuri maa (mother-in-law),” says another idol maker, Arati Pal.

“Twenty years ago, there was just one woman artisan but today, there are around 10 who are totally involved in this profession,” says Babu Pal, a

former secretary of Kumartuli Mritshilpo Sanskritik Samiti. Veteran artisan Dileep Pal says that males of the younger generation, including his son, are reluctant to enter the business. "It is a very good sign to see women take up the baton," he adds.

A few women also add their creativity as ancillary artists who support the bare bodied Goddess and her children. Parul Rael hails from Nadia district and her marriage brought her to Kumartuli. She makes accessories like jewellery for the Goddesses with sequins, zardozi beads and small mirrors. "It takes me about three days to make a single set of jewellery for a Kali idol but the business side is taken care of by my husband", says Parul. Nivedita is only fourteen years old. She excels in creating flowers out of pencil shavings that are used for decoration. She is training under her mother Shrabani Pal who makes small idols for the market. Minakshi Pal, who took up the trade in 2011 after her father died, says, "I took it to keep my father's name alive." That very year, she was scared about whether she would be able to supervise and deliver more than 20 idols. Time and experience has given her the confidence not only to carry on but also to expand.

Each Durga 'family' takes around two months to complete and is priced in a range of Rs.10,000 to Rs. 2 lakhs. Orders from abroad must be completed and shipped by April- May mainly through reputed couriers. They are packed in plywood boxes shaped like cupboards and locked for security.

China Pal, Kakoli Pal and Mala Pal were felicitated by P.C. Chandra Jewelers, Kolkata with a golden chain each and a tribute was paid in the form of a five-minute documentary on them called "Daughters of Clay" (Kanya Rupeno) streamed on YouTube recently. But a lot needs to be done. More women need to step into this predominantly male space not just because they are women but more importantly because they are creative, artistic, focussed and determined to carry the family flag across and ahead. "The image of Durga vanquishing the demon gives me constant courage," says China with a smile.



DR. SHOMA A. CHATTERJI

Dr. Shoma A. Chatterji is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author based in Kolkata. She has won two National Awards - 'Best Film Critic' in 1991 and 'Best Book on Cinema' in 2002. She has authored 24 books, out of which 12 are on Indian cinema and contributes to around a dozen print media and online publications across India and abroad. She has also been a jury member at several film festivals. Recipient of SALMAAGS 2017 Consistent Reporting on Films from a Gender Perspective.

12. IN TWO DISTRICTS OF BASTAR, ADIVASI WOMEN REPORT SEXUAL ASSAULTS BY SECURITY FORCES DURING MILITARY OPERATIONS

24 January, 2016 | Caravan

For over ten days, authorities in the Bijapur and Sukma districts of South Chhattisgarh delayed or have simply refused to file First Information Reports (FIR) in two separate cases of sexual assault. These include the alleged gang rapes of 13 adivasi women who are subsistence farmers by security forces earlier this month. The sexual violence and assaults are reported to have taken place when security forces conducted anti-Maoist military operations in Bijapur's Nendra village between 11 and 14 January, and in Sukma's Kunna village on 12 January. The police reluctance is despite a Supreme Court ruling and a 2013 amendment to India's anti-rape laws, which makes it mandatory for the police to file a case as soon as a complaint of sexual violence is brought to them.

In Bijapur, the police finally relented and filed an FIR late on the night of 21 January, over a week after the alleged violence in Nendra village took place. By then, a group of women activists who had first brought attention to these instances had been urging the police to take action for three days. In Sukma, villagers reported the violence to a senior official in the administration on 15 January, but the police has not filed an FIR yet. The two heavily militarised districts are at the epicentre of the deadly, decade-long, state-Maoist military conflict, which has claimed close to 7,000 people already, a third of whom are civilians.

These two complaints come on the heels of allegations of sexual violence by security forces between 19 to 24 October in five remote villages of Bijapur district. In that case the police registered an FIR on 1 November 2015. They did so only after the victims, aided by a fact-finding team (comprising members of a civil society group, Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression), travelled to Bijapur town—the district headquarters, and narrated the violence to the district collector, Yashwant Kumar, who asked the police to file an FIR immediately.

Over a month later, I visited four of the affected villages, located deep in the forests, and 18-25 kilometres from the nearest road. The police had made no arrests in the case nor formally questioned the men who were a part of the security operation. At that point, officials were yet to visit the villages in which the violence had allegedly taken place, or collect evidence from

there. In late December, the National Human Rights Commission took cognisance of my reportage for the Hindustan Times to ask the union home secretary and Chhattisgarh's director-general of police AN Upadhyay to submit detailed action taken reports within a month. As of this time, over 100 days since the alleged rapes, the police has still not made any arrests.

The two latest cases from Bijapur and Sukma bear several similarities to the bout of violence by security forces, which was reported in November. On 17 January, a fact-finding team from Women Against Sexual Violence and State Repression and another civil society organisation, the Committee for the Protection of Democratic Rights, visited Nendra after a villager alerted them about the situation. According to Shivani Taneja, a Bhopal-based educationist who was a part of this group, several women were initially inhibited about speaking to them. "The women in our team then spoke to them in smaller groups," she told me over phone, "Supported by other women villagers, they gradually opened up, and narrated being gang-raped and assaulted by the forces."

The men from the security forces, the women told the fact-finding team, had stayed in Nendra from 11 to 14 January. On 19 January, I spoke to a schoolgirl from Nendra over the phone. She told me that the security forces were present when she had come back to the village from her residential school on the afternoon of 14 January. This young student had helped translate the accounts of the victims for the fact-finding team and had accompanied the villagers along with members of the team to meet the officials in Bijapur. "Several women said that galat kaam (wrong deeds) happened to them," she told me, before going on to describe these deeds. "Men from the force sat on them, removed their clothes. Others said they were chased and beaten (maar maarke bhagaaya)." Money, oil, flour, spices were taken from many homes, she said.

From 18 to 20 January, the adivasi women from Nendra, some cradling infants, camped at the Bijapur district headquarters in an attempt to get an FIR registered. According to the members of the fact finding team and Isha Khandelwal, a Bastar-based human rights lawyer who had accompanied them, the police refused to do so. Instead, Kumar, the Bijapur collector, asked the women, all of whom are Gondi speakers, to provide formal statements through a translator to his deputy, the sub-divisional magistrate Rajeew Pandey.

Khandelwal, who was providing legal counsel to the women told me that police officials told them, "We first need to do an investigation, then we will file an FIR." Although Khandelwal and other members of the fact-finding team repeatedly reminded the policemen of their legal obligation to file the FIR, "they kept evading the issue, saying their seniors are not in town"

It wasn't until late Thursday night, the police in Bijapur finally lodged the FIR. On Thursday and Friday, according to Bastar-based human rights lawyer Shalini Gera, a group of men who identified themselves as victims of

the fact-finding team, and shouted slogans, calling them Maoist supporters. Gera said, “They did this in the complex of the circuit house and the police station, without being stopped by authorities. They crowd directly threatened the women saying they should not file the FIR and should leave Bijapur. The women villagers felt scared and intimidated.”

On 18 and 19 January, Pandey, the sub-divisional magistrate, recorded the statements of 13 women who said that they had been gang-raped. All these women, most of them in their twenties or thirties, are subsistence farmers. In their statements to the magistrate, the women named four men that they had been able to identify from the group that had assaulted them. Taneja told me that the police officials who registered the FIR refused to include these names. Instead, they filled the field for the “Description of the Accused” in the FIR by writing, “Police bal aur suraksha bal (police and security forces).” The FIR invokes several sections of the Indian Penal Code including a new provision 376.2.c, that was introduced into law after the amendments to the anti-rape laws in 2013. This provision deals with sexual crimes by armed personnel.



CHITRANGADA CHOUDHURY

Chitrangada Choudhury is an independent multimedia journalist and researcher, and a volunteer with The People’s Archive of Rural India. She has worked in the newsrooms of the Indian Express, the Hindustan Times, and the Guardian, and contributed to publications including Caravan, Columbia Journalism Review, Down to Earth, Economic and Political Weekly, Mint and Outlook. Recipient of LMAAGS 2015-16 Best Investigative Series (Eastern Region).

13. CLUELESS POLITICAL PARTIES UNSAFE WORKPLACES FOR WOMEN MEMBERS

April 02, 2016 | The Sunday Gaurdian

The recent allegation of sexual harassment against the former Mumbai unit BJP Yuva Morcha chief Ganesh Pandey has highlighted the apathy of the lawmakers towards the implementation of legislation they themselves make. None of the political parties The Sunday Guardian talked to in Mumbai, has an Internal Complaints Committee as mandated by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013. In fact, many parties claimed they were not a workplace at all, and so, the law did not apply to them. This has raised questions about the safety of women who have political aspirations and who long to walk the uphill path of obstacles to hold positions of power. Women leaders in politics opined that it was high time parties woke up to the reasons behind the dwindling representation of women in political life.

Appeals by the National Commission for Women and Maharashtra State Commission for Women for the implementation of the law have fallen on deaf ears for over a decade now.

According to recent data released by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) in February 2016, India already ranks an abysmal 144th on the global scale of 191 countries in terms of women's representation in Parliaments. IPU works in close cooperation with the World Bank. According to the data, Indian Parliament's Lower House has only 12% women representatives. In contrast, Finland has 41.5% women representatives and stands at number 10. Nepal has 29.5% women representatives (47th rank), Afghanistan has 27.7% representation by women (50th rank). China ranks 70th with 23.6% women representatives, Pakistan is 84th with 20.6% women representatives, Bangladesh stands at 88th (20% women representatives).

"The message to women with political aspirations in India is loud and clear, 'Enter at your own risk. If anything goes wrong with you, there won't be a systematic mechanism of redressal. Depending on the situation existent during the time of complaint, it will be dealt with in an arbitrary manner.' The picture is very grim and depressing," said Anagha Sarpotdar, an expert working in the field of prevention of sexual harassment at the workplace.

“There is no doubt that women party workers are exposed to sexual exploitation. But there is pressure to get tickets. Women know that the male political leaders are the ones who will issue tickets. So, they don’t speak due to this pressure. If you notice, the number of women in active politics has gone down considerably. It is a great concern for women across party lines. They don’t feel safe. Therefore, they stop engaging in political activities. There is a threat to her in her work environment,” senior Congress leader and women’s rights activist Nirmala Samant Prabhavalkar told The Sunday Guardian.

Notably, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013, states, “Sexual harassment results in violation of the fundamental rights of a woman to equality under Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution of India and her right to life and to live with dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution and right to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business which includes a right to safe environment, free from sexual harassment. The protection against sexual harassment and the right to work with dignity are universally recognised human rights by international conventions and instruments such as Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, which has been ratified on the 25 June 1993 by the Government of India.”

The Parliament passed it with the intention of making women’s work environment safe. “If you look at the spirit of the law, it is applicable to political parties too. After all, women go there to work, though the nature of work is voluntary. It is the political parties’ responsibility to provide safe work environment. Though there is no employer-employee relationship, the political organisations are a workplace nonetheless. The law too doesn’t mandate an employer-employee relationship when it comes to defining the aggrieved,” Anagha said.

“Unfortunately, no political party acknowledges this. The concern has been growing in politics for over a decade and a half now. Women don’t feel safe. So, they stop participating in any voluntary activity. Earlier, there was a line of women’s leadership in the state. Today, only a handful of women leaders can be seen in politics. The political parties need to ask this question to themselves that why do women find it better to stay indoors than to participate in political activities?” asked Samant Prabhavalkar. She pointed out that the rise in the number of women representatives at the local level was also because of the reservation granted to them.

She also said that women’s local leadership rising out of reservation was occupied mainly by women belonging to families of established political leaders. Many women leaders in the state are a part of a political dynasty. “Forget aspiring to become the Chief Minister of a state. Women have to think twice before seeking positions like mayor, councilors, MLAs. The odds are stacked against them,” she said.

Shiv Sena leader Neelam Gorhe too admitted that women are likely to get exposed to such situations once they start climbing the party ranks. “Unfortunately, it also depends on the group one belongs to, and the group the perpetrator of the crime belongs to. Factional politics plays a part during such complaints,” she said. But she also opined that the formation of an Internal Complaints Committee might not be a solution to it. “It is important that women deal with this within the political party and raise their grievances on political platforms within the party,” she said.

Till now, the National Commission for Women and the Maharashtra State Commission for Women have written to all national and regional political parties at least twice to form the Internal Complaints Committee. But the pleas have only fallen on deaf ears.

“In 2002-04, when I was in the Maharashtra State Commission for Women, I had myself written to all the national and regional political parties in the state to implement the Vishakha guidelines and form the Internal Complaints Committee. But not a single party responded,” Samant Prabhavalkar said. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was passed by Parliament only in 2013. Before that, the Vishakha guidelines issued by Supreme Court were followed to deal with such cases.

After the passage of the law in 2013, the NCW had issued letters to all political parties and held consultations with them. It had also directed all State Commissions for Women to pursue the matter in their states. But the parties refused to budge.

This time on, when the BJP Youth Wing woman leader leveled allegations against Ganesh Pandey, no party left any stones unturned to gain political mileage out of the issue. All the parties protested in the ongoing Assembly session as well. But none of these parties, including the ruling BJP-Shiv Sena alliance, have ever formed an Internal Complaints Committee.

None of the party offices the correspondent visited had any public notice for its women party workers about any grievance redressal mechanism for sexual harassment. In fact, a senior leader of the ruling party went on to say that they were not a workplace, so the law was not applicable to them. “There is no employer-employee relationship here. People come to work on voluntary basis,” advocate Madhavi Naik, president of Maharashtra BJP Women’s Wing told the correspondent. Giving information about the current incident where the party’s youth wing’s deputy chief had levelled sexual harassment allegations against the former chief, she said that the BJP had appointed a three-member ad-hoc committee to look into it.

The names of the three members are: Manisha Choudhari, Smita Wagh and Shobhatai Fadnavis. All the three women are BJP leaders. There is no single independent assessor in the committee.

Many women party workers and leaders The Sunday Guardian talked to, admitted that there is a threat of sexual harassment as a woman party worker rises through the cadre. But they emphasised on the need for the party leadership to take note of it.

“In the face of such threats too, the political parties which form the legislature and make laws, do not themselves implement these laws. This only shows a callous attitude of the parties towards their women workers. How seriously do men take women who work in public spaces for political aspirations?” asked Anagha.

Many prominent leaders in the state this correspondent talked to were men. They were not aware of the need for an Internal Complaint Committee under the prevention of sexual harassment legislation. They redirected the queries on redressal of sexual harassment complaints to the women’s wing. When asked if the Nationalist Congress Party had any Internal Complaints Committee in place, NCP chief spokesperson Nawab Malik said, “These things are looked at by our women’s wing. They would know what mechanism has been put in place for it.” He redirected the correspondent to talk to Chitra Wagh, the women’s wing leader of the party. Despite several attempts, she could not be contacted.

While seeking police action against not just Ganesh Pandey but also the state Cabinet Minister Vinod Tawde, Nawab Malik did not even know the mechanism within his own party to deal with complaints of sexual harassment.

When a Congress spokesperson was asked the same question, he said that a general disciplinary committee set up by the party looked at all the disciplinary issues. The Shiv Sena spokesperson said his party does not believe in committees and paperwork. “We only have the orders of our leaders. Udhav Thackeray and Aditya Thackeray personally look into any such allegations,” he said. It is difficult to know how a grassroots woman party worker can reach top leaders with her grievances.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act was passed by Parliament in 2013 after immense lobbying by women’s groups. Activists working in the field have maintained that even after the passing of the law, its implementation has been shoddy. But that the very lawmakers who pass legislation for the safety of women are trying to squirm away from its implementation is a new low, they said.

Not just that, it goes against India’s position at international level. India is a signatory of the UN Agenda 2030 which consists of Sustainable Development Goals. India has committed to ensuring women’s participation in State-building. Agenda 2030 spells out 17 goals. One of them is the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

“To ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life,” the document elaborating on Sustainable Development Goals states.

It further says, “Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. Women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels.” India had adopted the Sustainable Development agenda last year.

VINAYA DESHPANDE PANDIT

14. WHAT SCHOOLGIRLS IN INDIA CAN TEACH US ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

April 02, 2016 | www.DeepDives.in

In most Pune schools, the new term is under way. Activities are in full swing and tests have already begun. Students wake up as early as six in the morning and the school day hums along amidst ringing bells and slamming lockers. Extra tuition classes take up the afternoons. And so it goes.

But wait. Something has happened at school that needs to be discussed right now. Two best friends take the long route back home, walking slowly so they have more time to talk. At the dinner table, a heated WhatsApp conversation ends only when an exasperated parent confiscates the phone. Everyone has at least one selfie on Instagram. Is it time to unfriend your elder brother yet? You know how brothers are. Somebody's crush has just uploaded a picture of himself with a guitar. Like. Thumbs up. After dinner, it's time for homework or bed. Phones are plugged in to charge overnight. The rhythm of life is steady; quiet but exciting.

Or is it?

A newspaper report found that children in tier-two cities (of which Pune was, until recently, one of the largest) openly flout Facebook's under-13 rule, making their way to the popular social media platform in droves. In 2014, an article claimed that one in three children in Indian cities had been at the receiving end of cyber bullying. This was also the same year that McAfee released data suggesting that 70% of Indian teenagers online put themselves at risk by posting personal information. To add to the mix, a study by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences found that 73% of Indian teenagers suffer from behavioural and psychological problems due to 'internet addiction'.

Most conversation on children and the internet suggests a dark and sinister world filled with cyber bullying, character assassination, and abuse. The platform for this abuse is almost always a social networking site, and the victim is, by default, a girl. In a recent Times of India report from Nagpur, a lawyer is quoted as saying, 'The biggest mistake girls make on social networking sites is that they do not apply rules of [the] real world.' Ah yes, the real world. The dark street is now an Instagram account. The predator lurking around the corner now comes via a friend request from a stranger.

What hasn't changed, though, is a moral code that puts girls in their place and tries to control their activity. One that tells them: be a good girl, or you'll only invite trouble.

Social media, so it would seem, is a trouble-inviting place. And since being a good girl involves speaking only when you're spoken to, there's one crucial set of voices missing from the debate: the girls themselves.

Which makes me wonder, how big a deal is social media in the lives of schoolgirls anyway?

'I like to stalk people and look at their profiles,' says 15-year-old Nitya*. 'Those people who are socially active online keep posting pictures all the time, but they are really good for nothing types.' Nitya herself stays away from posting statuses, and her Facebook profile has very few pictures, except those she's been tagged in. 'I never express myself online. Even if one person is talking politely, some other person will abuse. And you know, that's not how you talk. People keep expressing their views over Facebook. Why not do it in a debate?'

I meet Nitya, Kavita and Sachi in Kavita's living room, where we chat over the incessant cheeping of the family's pet lovebirds. There's plum cake and laughter going around. Sachi is 15, opinionated, and on the school debate team. 16-year-old Kavita comes off as shy, but I know better. Before the other two arrive, Kavita's mother insists she play the baby grand piano for me. As her fingers fly over the keys, her reserve falls away and her clear voice fills the room. Nitya, leading the conversation, is the most talkative. They are next-door neighbours and fast friends, and share weekends filled with sleepovers, movies, and the occasional game of rain hockey (I asked. It's exactly what it sounds like).

'I've just joined Facebook, so I only post pictures sometimes. I don't really use it for anything else,' Kavita tells me. Nitya, on the other hand, has been on the popular platform since she was in Grade 5. And over the last month alone, Sachi has deleted her account, re-activated it and then deleted it again—out of sheer boredom. Despite their varying entry points to social media, they are all silent observers online, perpetually on the lookout for stuff to gossip about. And there's always plenty of gossip.

'People in our class were caught for posting controversial pictures and using bad language. You don't publicise that kind of stuff! I mean, what kind of person are you?' asks Nitya. It's perhaps out of a desire not to be labelled 'that kind of a person' that ask.fm, a popular website with an estimated 150 million users worldwide, has found its fans in teenagers across the world. The site is premised on the ability to ask fellow users a question—any question. The thrill of it lies in askers having the option to remain anonymous,

even if they know the askee in real life. The questions, Sachi breezily tells me, 'Can be anything from PAP to OOTD.' Say what? 'It's Outfit Of The Day. And PAP is Post A Picture.' Not all questions are quite so innocent though. 'Oh ya, there are a lot of pervy guys, but if you block them then their questions don't come up on your feed.'

Speaking of guys, 15-year-old Khursheed has some stories to tell. I meet Khursheed and two of her friends at their swanky gated apartment complex in Kalyaninagar—the kind that has manicured lawns, tall glass buildings, 'I like fashion,' says 13-year-old Maria simply. That's not all she likes. She plays basketball, is on the school's boxing team, and she's just tried out the role of Annie in the school play. When I ask Maria whether there's such a thing as an online versus an offline self, she looks confused. Facebook is incidental in her life—something she joined to get access to a game she wanted to play. Her classmates have only just joined Facebook too, and she can't conceive of someone being different online than who they are offline.

Yet (and there is always a yet with these girls), her Instagram moniker is Tara, a name that she has always liked and wishes she could use in everyday life. Is there a difference between Tara and Maria? 'Maria prefers gaming and Tara is into beauty and makeup stuff,' she giggles. She's not self-conscious at all about this dual identity, whereas girls who have been on social media longer are quick to condemn the odd friend who presents an unrecognisable version of themselves online. For instance, 13-year-old Shruti says of one of her friends, 'In real life, she's so jolly and always laughing. But on Facebook she puts up these posts that are all deep. There are many people like this. They just want to show that they're cool.' Shruti is quick to affirm that she herself is not party to the machinations of what it takes to be cool.

But via her gleeful laugh, Maria takes the sting out of the accusation. Who cares about what's cool or not? She's just having fun, and perhaps along the way, figuring out who she wants to be.

In an arresting scene from the American TV show *Louie*, comedian Louis CK and his teenage daughter Lily are watching a play. While Louie responds with tears and laughter, Lily appears unmoved. At one point, she whips out her phone and becomes engrossed in it. Afterwards, when an outraged Louie demands that his daughter give him her phone, Lily reveals that she was actually reading about the play while watching it. Did Louie know, for instance, that the play was banned in both Russia and Israel? She looks up at him: 'Just because I can appreciate something on two levels, doesn't mean I don't deserve to have my phone.' Boom.

Back in Pune, the tussle between generations is much the same, but tinged with a doomsday vibe of imminent danger. Parents who speak to me after I talk to their daughters mention vague, disturbing things they have read about the internet in newspapers. The younger girls I speak to, some of

whom are not on social media yet, echo what the adults say—that the internet has ‘things that are not for our age’. One mother says when I call, ‘Yes, yes please speak to my daughter. She’ll be glad to tell you what a big Hitler I am.’

To help me understand the real versus imagined risks of the big, bad internet, I meet Shweta Chawla, a private investigator who assists the Pune Cyber Crimes unit. Along with investigating cases, Shweta conducts training programmes in cyber safety for both children and working professionals. ‘It’s very important for parents to know what their child is doing online. They need to set ground rules.’ A big part of what Shweta does in her workshops with children is try to ensure they have an adult they can turn to if they are ever in trouble online.

The picture, according to her, is grim. ‘We’ve been in touch with a number of organisations abroad and the feedback they’re giving us is that India is steadily becoming the location for paedophilia.’ Just a couple of months ago, *The Hindu* warned parents against posting pictures of their children online after sexual predators were discovered on Facebook.

Other reports also mark India as one among many sites where foreign nationals may prey upon children, but whether or not the internet has anything to do with it is unclear.

Contrary to popular opinion, though, it’s not that girls are more at risk than boys. Shweta tells me, ‘What makes a difference is how children deal with it. Girls are more likely to talk to an adult if they get into trouble. Boys display more shame, so admitting that one is being abused is more difficult.’ Shweta also notices that girls tend to be selective about their friends online, whereas boys are perfectly happy being friends with a whole bunch of people.

In her book *It’s Complicated: the social lives of networked teens*, author Danah Boyd explores the relationship that American teenagers have with social media. In a chapter titled ‘Danger: Are sexual predators lurking everywhere?’ Boyd comments on a culture of parental fear that is steadily being exploited by software companies, popular culture, and mainstream media. She writes, ‘They [parents] are afraid because terrible things do happen to children. And although those violations most commonly take place in known environments—home, school, place of worship, and so on— the internet introduces an unknown space that is harder to comprehend. Nothing feeds fear more than uncertainty.’ Does a similar language of fear exist in India too? If it does, according to Shweta, it’s not scary enough.

I wonder if these girls, so full of confidence and energy, know when they’re being had? Do they know how to deal with an adult who starts out befriending them and then moves on to something more sinister? The thing about talking to teenagers is that they always sound like they’re in control. But are they?

For the most part, the girls I met have no problem with parents looking over their smartphone activity, and they don't put up their addresses or phone numbers online. But besides that, they also have a network of friends who've got their backs. 'This one time, I clicked something on Facebook and my number went up by mistake. A friend of mine called me and told me to take it down,' Sachi recalls. Once a stranger sent a message to Maria over WhatsApp and she thought it was one of her friends. When she realised she didn't know the person, she blocked him immediately. In turn, Nitya has changed her WhatsApp settings so that only her friends can see her profile picture. It may be trial and error for these girls with social media, but then again, so is life.

14-year-old Neha worships at St Paul's Church, where the congregation comprises a close-knit group of families whose children all attend Sunday School together. Neha is one of the few girls I've spoken to whose Facebook activity consists of more than uploading the odd picture. 'I do post about politics,' she tells me. 'Especially about things that bother me.' Earnest with budding feminist sensibilities, Neha is free and easy with opinions online—except when it comes to religion. She recalls how she once read some right wing propaganda claiming that India was a Hindu nation. 'I felt angry, but I wanted to wait till things died down,' she says.

That she has developed a sense of self-preservation as a minority is telling of how India, along with its internet universe, continues to cement divisions along class, caste and religious lines. Sachi tells me how users on ask.fm, for whom English is obviously not a first language, are relentlessly 'cased' or bullied. I ask Neha what she thinks of the negative comments she receives. 'Some of them are very horrid but there will always be one person that supports you.'

If Neha uses social media to understand her own politics, her friend Shruti, who is also a regular Sunday Schooler, uses Instagram and Facebook to pitch summer vacation spots to her family. Maria, in turn, uses social networking platforms to follow her favourite vloggers, a.k.a video bloggers. What's interesting, though, is how these girls define 'use'.

Maria has an account on YouTube but no channel, since her mother doesn't allow her to actually upload any videos. 'I like watching DIY films and life hacks,' she explains. When I ask what kinds of videos she would like to put up, she thinks for a long time before saying, 'Maybe about a craft project that I've done. I already have a camera and online editing software, because first my mum said that I would be allowed to put up videos, but then she changed her mind.' She's made a home video, too, as practice for when mum eases up on the rules.

Back in Kavita's living room, Sachi tells me about her new Instagram venture. 'Me and my friend, we have this account, and we're selling stuff on it.

We make iPhone cases, like decorate them.’ Kavita and her older sister start to giggle, but I resolutely demand details. Do they call customers home? What do they do with the money? ‘We tell the customers to come to Gold Adlabs to pick it up and we charge extra for delivery,’ she explains. The logistics of this endeavour, while certainly impressive, are of course firmly rooted in the privilege of class. For buyers who want their product home delivered, the family driver is dispatched with the goods and returns with the money. The proceeds go to a neighbourhood aunty who runs a charity for children.

Some adults bemoan the death of ‘wholesome’ and robust outdoor games. Others can’t get over the fact that children don’t read anymore. Either way, the accusatory finger is always pointed at the evil lighted screen. However, as Boyd points out, it’s less about what’s on the screen and more about the people behind it. ‘Most teens are not compelled by gadgetry as such—they are compelled by friendship. The gadgets are interesting to them primarily as a means to a social end.’

‘Look,’ demands Sachi, waving her phone at me. ‘Look at the lame things Kavita sends us.’ Indeed Kavita has sent out a message to a bunch of classmates asking them to pick her best characteristics from a given list. ‘I just reply saying “all” and then she replies saying, “aaaaw”.’ They laugh. Replying to a forward, no matter how silly, is a testament to love and friendship. Similarly, almost all of Neha’s class is on the same WhatsApp group, but only close friends are admitted into a second, more intimate group. Maria’s crush (‘He’s also my friend but I don’t know if he likes me back’) keeps posting pictures, so she is able to glimpse his life outside the classroom. But friendships are not all built to last, and some, often unfairly, must suffer social media’s death knell. Girls who are ‘misguided’ or too wild for parental tastes may be gently weeded out of groups. ‘My mom is cool with me chatting with my building friends. But if it’s school friends, especially this one girl who had WhatsApped me once saying that she was drunk, then my mom gets really hyper. She tells me not to talk to people like that anymore,’ says Khursheed. There is a pattern to who passes the Social Media Test of Friendship (survivor version), but in many ways, it says more about us than about the girls themselves.

India often gets presented in binaries: either the big ol’ corrupt city or the subaltern rural space. Pune, along with many other cities in India, lies between these binaries. It has the comfort and elegance of a metropolis folded into the intimacy of a smaller town. Families who have lived here for generations swear by its unalterable spirit of camaraderie and friendship. People dine out at the same places, go to the same bars, and take their kids to the same parks they went to as children. Pune-kars seek comfort in familiarity, but not always excitement in novelty.

For these schoolgirls, the familiarity of Pune and the novelty of a wider world come together in online spaces. Contrary to popular narratives of addiction and threats, these girls were born into a world, as Boyd puts it, where ‘technology is a given’. They don’t put social media on a pedestal.

They don't regard the internet as an object to be demystified. The mystery for them lies in trying to understand who they are, what they like, who their friends are, and how the world works. They're figuring it out. Social media is helping.



SHEENA D'LIMA

Sheena has a Master's in Gender, Development and Culture and has worked in print media and communications. She is pursuing Research within the discipline of women's studies.

15. THE RANKS OF FEMALE SOCCER COACHES ARE GROWING, BUT NOT WITHOUT PUSHBACK

October 23, 2017 | www.thelily.com

Women coaches account for just seven percent of licensed soccer coaches worldwide.

In the middle of a soccer game at the Duler Stadium in Goa, India, Linda Whitehead lets out a long laugh from high up on the stands. She is amused by a simple question: Do women coaches face prejudice in the world of soccer? “Where do you want me to start?” she asks. “I’ve been a coach for 35 years. You don’t have that much time.”

Whitehead, 55, is a former player, coach, university professor, and woman with a long and deep association with the game.

In 1995 before Whitehead left Canada to work in the United States, she was one of only two women with the A-license — the highest nationally recognized coaching certification. In 2009 when she returned, she was still one of only two women with the certification. In more than two decades nothing had changed.

That year she applied to the Ontario Soccer Association for a job to teach community coaching courses. She was armed with a newly minted MBA and a master’s in coaching science. She had also worked with three provincial teams, two American university teams and the Canadian national women’s team.

“They said, ‘how qualified are you?’” she says. “You can teach our kids’ course.” Instead, a man without a college degree and with a lower coaching qualification was picked to teach the senior courses. She had to pursue the matter with the higher ups in the association before she was assigned to teach all the courses.

Whitehead has worked in a developed country where the women’s national team is ranked fifth in the world and the women’s game is increasingly being taken seriously.

Still, when it comes to coaching, the glass ceiling is largely intact. “It’s still rare to find women in head coaching jobs,” she says. “It’s assumed that men are better until women prove themselves. There’s a cultural bias.”

Women coaches account for just seven percent of licensed soccer coaches (of all levels) worldwide, according to FIFA data from a 2014 survey. Though a woman coached the Dutch women’s national team to victory at this year’s Union of European Football Associations’ Women’s Championship, and there are more women than before, the numbers start to thin as you work your way up the pyramid.

Last month Emily Lima, hailed as a pioneer when she was first appointed to coach the Brazilian women’s team less than a year ago, was fired for poor results, despite support from players. Soccer is still very much a man’s game in most parts of the world — less normalized than women’s tennis or basketball, for instance. There’s the incipient and overt sexism that comes on- and off-the-field, and the inherently sexist nature of coaching education itself.

Coach Whitehead celebrates with her team during a match at the “Our Bodies, Our Rights, Our Game” soccer tournament. (AlexaVachon for The Lily) Only a small proportion of women might enter coaching given the usual barriers that exist. Starting a family might coincide with the end of a playing career and the natural beginning of a coaching one. The traveling might be off-putting. “It’s a hard barrier,” says Whitehead. “Women also feel guilty about taking time away from their families.”

In the United States and Canada, licensed women coaches make up 21 percent of coaches, the highest. If these developed countries are still a work in progress, how much better can the others be? The short answer: not much. Victorine Fomum is an assistant coach in a first division men’s team in Cameroon, where incredulity at being coached by a woman was the instinctive natural reaction when she first joined in 2014.

“As a woman it is not easy,” she says. “At times it is difficult to get acceptance.”

Cameroonian coach Victorine Fomum interacts with her team during half-time at the “Our Bodies, Our Rights, Our Game” soccer tournament. (AlexaVachon for The Lily) Fomum and Whitehead were among eight international coaches participating in a grassroots football and women’s rights festival in India in August, an occasion when conversations about gender and sport were front and center.

Fomum, 43, is one of the few — if not the only — women from the tiny West African country to get the A-license. A portly, poker-faced woman with an eccentric sense of humor, she commands animated authority on the field.

Coach Fomum celebrates with her team’s goal keeper after a match. (AlexaVachon for The Lily)

Men are sometimes reluctant to take instructions from women, so facing skepticism is an occupational hazard, alongside the pressure of continuously delivering results.

“Every day,” says Fomum, “you have to prove yourself.”

A little later that evening she joined the other coaches in a friendly seven-a-side game that included Juliana Roman Lozano, a slight woman with a flowing mop of hair and a dramatic nose pin. Lozano’s powerful right-footed kicks belied her 1.56-meter stature.

Lozano, who works in football and development, received her A-license in 2015, graduating in a cohort where she was the only woman among 87 men in Argentina, where she lives and works.

Argentinian coach Juliana Roman Lozano instructs her team at half-time during the “Our Bodies, Our Rights, Our Game” soccer tournament. (AlexaVachon for The Lily)

In a demonstration or a teaching drill that required volunteers, Lozano, 33, was not usually picked. “They assumed I didn’t want to participate so I wouldn’t embarrass myself,” she says, speaking quickly. Then matter of fact: “But that’s not true, because I am an amazing player.”

There were other little things: a teacher who lived by 19th-century standards of chivalry and apologized every time he swore when she was present. “But I swear three zzztimes more than him,” she says.

When Lozano moved from Sweden — where she largely grew up — to her home in Colombia as a 15-year-old, there was culture shock.

“When I came back it was like ‘you’re lesbian, you’re masculine, you’re the tough one,’” says Lozano. “It doesn’t help with your self-confidence.”

This is the garden-variety homophobia and sexism that permeates the hyper masculine world of soccer.

Coach Lozano cheers with her team at half-time. (AlexaVachon for The Lily) Bias though, is often simply baked into the fabric of coaching the sport. At Lozano’s classes in Argentina, the manuals made references to male bodies and research on men. Where were the theoretical conversations geared specifically towards understanding the body of the female sportsperson? At the higher levels people are trained on the female athlete triad: diet, menstruation and bone density, and how to deal with these when coaching women. But when Whitehead mentions this in a class full of male coaches, she usually gets blank stares.

“It’s disappointing that men who coach women don’t have a clue about this,” says Whitehead. “We need to have coaching education from the perspective of women.”

“We realized that strengthening women coaches is crucial for the development of women’s soccer because they face problems and hurdles on many levels,” says Cordula Gdaniec, via email, one of the editors of “Female Coaching Zone,” a manual from a female perspective for which they interviewed two dozen women coaches. The booklet was prepared at a conference of coaches in 2015 organized by German soccer nonprofit Discover Football and released last year.

“Seeing a woman doing what you would like to do or achieve is crucial for girls in pursuing their goals,” Gdaniec continues.

Coach Lebogang Tlhako from South Africa coaches a player during her team’s at the “Our Bodies, Our Rights, Our Game” soccer tournament. (Alexa Vachon for The Lily)

Lebogang Tlhako, a tall, short-haired woman, was one of the coaches interviewed while assembling the manual of experiences and case studies from around the world. She grew up being coached by men and played surreptitiously in an all-boy’s league for a while as a child by masking her gender through haircuts.

In 2010 Tlhako, 30, became the first woman coach at Blue Birds Ladies Football Academy in Johannesburg, a club team she had earlier played for. As soon as she joined, there was a palpable shift in the air with the teams, she believes. “It makes a difference,” says Tlhako. “How men perceive women is not the same as how women do.”

Coach Tlhako celebrates with her team after winning the “Our Bodies, Our Rights, Our Game” soccer tournament. (Alexa Vachon for The Lily)
With boys and men after the initial resistance, there is acceptance, and over a period of time it simply becomes normal. Fomum’s team moved from 15th to 7th place in their division last season, cementing her credibility among the players. The others too, speak of changing mores or greater acceptance, and definite improvements for women in the sport compared to their own playing days.

The number of women getting licensed has been incrementally increasing each year, alongside player growth, according to UEFA data. Since last year’s Under-17 world cup in Jordan, all teams had to have at least one female coach. Three of the 10 coaches shortlisted for FIFA’s best women’s coach were women, and one was among the three finalists.

But it’s not just about coaching those at the top level of the game but also about bringing more girls into the fold, especially in nonprofit interventions or areas where sport is harder for women.

Coach Tlhako's team warming up before a match at the "Our Bodies, Our Rights, Our Game" soccer tournament. (AlexaVachon for The Lily)

"Coaching girls in soccer requires extra sets of skills and awareness of issues around playing football that only girls face," says Gdaniec. "One key element here is liaising with reluctant parents and organizing training around the fact that girls are not allowed to play. In many countries football is used as a means to provide health and life skills education, where girls are addressed, it is essential that the coaches are women."

Gdaniec found one other thing that resonated across regions and coach interviews — the women had sorely missed a female role model in their own playing years. "Now they see their own role as being that role model they had wished for," she says. "It was a very personal issue for each woman but also a universal one."



BHAVYA DORE

Bhavya Dore is a Mumbai based freelance journalist. She was previously a beat reporter for the Hindustan Times. Her stories have appeared in the Guardian, BBC, ESPN, caravan, Quartz and elsewhere. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Western Region).

16. MS. REPRESENTATION: WHAT ARUVI MEANS TO US.

December 19, 2017 | The New Indian Express

As someone writing about women in cinema, exclusively week after week, since July for this paper, I finally struck gold this week. I watched Aruvi. Starring a glorious Aditi Balan in the lead, it is for me, undoubtedly the film of the year. From rip-roaring laughs to unstoppable tears the film had me going to extremes I haven't gone to in a while, especially in a film that's about one woman. And her life.

The introductory montage of Aruvi – as a child and as she grows up – is the finest I have seen for a girl/woman in a long, long time in Tamil cinema, heck I'll say it, Indian cinema. It helped me get into the skin of the character. Know her intimately. As if I was watching her grow up in front of my eyes. And boy does it help that her presence lights up the screen. Her smile delights. And the fact that she is wearing simple everyday clothes of today's young women and very little or no makeup (for the record I like makeup and have nothing against it), is disarming. As if a filter has been removed between her and us. She looks like any of us.

In one sequence, she is scandalised by a friend drinking and smoking and then later she is taking to it... in one sequence she is sceptical about touching a gun (as a child), and in another, she's showing it off and later, wielding it with an almost otherworldly rage. None of it is of course, in your face. The film isn't trying hard to get you to notice how intelligent it is. It just is.

Aruvi's departure from home, at first beguiling, culminates in an a-ha moment. These a-ha moments can happen in our cinema only when filmmakers trust the audience instead of trying to think for them. And the audience rewarded the filmmaker in my show in so many ways – least obvious of it being with applause. In one hilarious scene, the entire audience pre-empted a character on screen and shouted in unison, "Rolling sir", and then when the character said it, broke into unabashed peals of laughter. It was a moment of pure Tamil cinema bliss, being a part of something like that.

Here's something else to cheer about, not only does Aruvi hit the Bechdel test out of the park (which demands a movie have two women characters with names and they must speak to each other about something other than men), it does so with a beautiful friendship, between Emily and Aruvi. Emily

(the wonderful Anjali Varathan whose screen presence should bring many roles and one hopes non-stereotypical ones her way) is a transwoman in whom Aruvi finds a soul sister. A great friendship. In a touching scene, towards the end of the movie Aruvi shows a mirror to us, even as she realises how the burden of taking care of others fall on the most vulnerable in any society – as Emily does for Aruvi what no one else wants to do for her, despite being doubly disadvantaged. There are also other gal pals in the fray who come and go

Now that we have established all that is amazing with the film, I would like to delve a little into some of the problematic positions it takes. This isn't to take away any of the cheer and accolades the film deserves. In fact, when was there last a Tamil film with a woman at its heart that had us analyzing it in depth?

Aruvi's 'relationship' with the men and how the plot proceeds in this film is somewhat unsettling in hindsight. While my emotions were all over the place as the film gripped me while I watched it. In hindsight, was I happy about Aruvi settling for not even a sorry from four of the five main men that had wronged her? (One of them apologises while the others including her father whom she loves dearly fails her miserably.) The satire element though of the reality television that is today making a mockery of the miseries of the poor, uneducated and vulnerable even as TV channels laugh their way to the bank hits home rather well. When I analysed why I teared up towards the end (of course because Aditi Balan was unbelievably good and the scene was very moving), the fact that all of the people who wronged her in the film, and had given up on her (except for the amazing Emily) instead of apologising, paying the price for it or even feeling remorse are allowed to pity her. That did not feel good at all.

But the fact that Aruvi was made and this well is something one is happy about. Here's to Arun Prabu Purushothaman (the director), for a job done dazzlingly well.



LAKSHMI KRUPA GE

Lakshmi Krupa Ge is a writer, editor and columnist from Madras. She writes a column on women in cinema, titled Ms. Representation, for The New Indian Express. Her reportage and cultural writings have appeared in publications such as The Hindu, The New Indian Express, The Wire, First-post, Ladies Finger etc. over the last ten years. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Column (Southern Region).

17. DEALING WITH VICARIOUS TRAUMA: WHAT LAW SCHOOL DID NOT TEACH ME ABOUT WORKING ON CASES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

December 12, 2017 | medium.com/skin-stories



Description: A person sits on a bed, holding a cigarette and wearing ear-phones. They look at a second person, who stands beside the bed and looks back at them. To their right is a desk with a lamp, a laptop and some books. Behind them is a window through which we see buildings in the moonlight. Credit: Upasana Agarwal.

I am a law graduate, and three or four years ago, I started working with children who are victims of sexual abuse. I told myself that a case like this was just like any other, in which I have to represent my clients and safeguard their interests. I did not think this through. I did not discuss this with anyone. I went into the work head on, without any preparation, except of course some readings on the law, which I thought made me well equipped to handle the work.

But after five years of having studied the law, twelve internships, and two years of litigation experience, I was still not prepared. I had completely over-estimated my ability to handle these cases. When I began to reflect on what went wrong, I realised that the root of the problem partly lies in the education system of which I am a product.

There are a variety of courses for people who want to study law in India.

Some colleges offer multi-disciplinary courses. There are specialisations. There are super-specialisations. But nothing, I repeat, nothing in law colleges prepares one for working with victims of sexual violence.

Unlike courses such as social work and psychology where students are taught about empathy, boundaries, and self-care, we did not have a single paper on how to work on these issues. This may be a big reason why lawyers are known to have very low emotional quotient.

A lot of it can be associated with years of orientation towards 'focusing on the facts' with 'rationality' and being asked to be 'devoid of emotions'. As lawyers, we often forget that we are working with the concerns of other human beings, and that it isn't so easy to do this work without feeling something about it. I was conditioned to make all of these mistakes.

At first, I thought everything was fine. Casework was growing. We had a multidisciplinary team and everyone was very competent, compassionate, and co-operative.

Fast forward six months, I was working on one of the most complicated cases I had ever worked on. A child with several mental health concerns had just testified. We had been working for months on this case, and I was exhausted. I came home, took a shower, shut the door, switched off the light, and went to sleep. It was a weekend. I did not wake up for the next two days. I could not. I did not eat much, I did not shower for two days, I did not meet or speak with anyone. I thought I was just exhausted, and I completely ignored the obvious signs that I felt seriously unwell. This was the beginning of my mental health going downhill.

Weeks later, I shared this with one of my lawyer friends, in passing. 'Don't put your heart into your cases, P', he said. 'Just treat them like any other case.' By then, I had had to work on incest cases, gang-rape cases, cases involving toddlers as victims. I simply could not look at them as 'mere cases'. They involved children who had been abused by people they should have been safe with. For me, it was nearly impossible to represent their interest, their experience, their point of view, and their expectations to the justice system if I just treated them as 'cases', or if I 'kept my feelings aside'.

Meanwhile, I could see several changes in myself. I was more careful about my own safety, sometimes unreasonably so. Before entering my house, I would check behind doors, fearing that someone was hiding there. I checked door locks multiple times every night. For a month, I slept with the lights on, because every time I switched off the lights, I thought someone was in my room.

I have a tendency of dreaming whatever I read. In this context it meant I would have nightmares about whatever I read in case chargesheets. It wasn't just me —many colleagues at work also had case-related nightmares. We'd all joke about it. We embraced it as part of our new life.

My partner pointed out that I needed therapy. I ignored him, thinking of myself as strong, competent and resilient. He urged me to take a break. 'Nothing is more important to me than my cases', I retorted. He, as politely as possible, pointed out that I was showing signs of burn out. 'Are you doubting my capability?', I snapped. Like I said, I over-estimated my ability. There was institutional support available at work, which I chose not to use. I felt that I should not share my emotions at work, that I should be professional and rational.

The old lesson in rationality eventually became a curse. It took me another year and a half to realise that I was traumatised. Later, I learned that what I was experiencing is called vicarious trauma, which is apparently very common among people who continuously empathise with trauma victims in the course of working with them.

This is why they are advised to practice self-care, which—as I understand it—involves being in touch with one's emotional health and seeking professional help in order to cope. It also involves nurturing one's hobbies, taking breaks, and doing anything that'll take their mind off work for a few hours every week, if not every day. Because of my training, I was not doing any of this.

Fast forward three years, and I had stopped feeling. I was numb. In clinical terms, I was experiencing 'compassion fatigue'. My mind felt like a sponge which has soaked water to its full capacity, and cannot soak any more until you fully squeeze it out.

This worried my partner, and the few friends who knew about it. And then one day, the inevitable happened. I burst into tears at work. That day, I knew that, for the sake of the children, for the sake of the organisation, and for my own sake, I had to quit. I needed healing. I needed to finally start practicing self-care.

To this day, I feel guilty for prioritising myself over the children. But I have come to terms with my decision. I miss my workplace, I miss my team, and, more importantly, I miss working with children. Quitting was one of the hardest decisions of my life. However, it was also necessary at that time. I realised that I cannot do justice to my work, and I cannot represent my clients zealously and passionately if I am not healthy—physically, and mentally.

In this one year break from casework, I have spent a lot of time reflecting on how to improve myself. I am now more aware of my limitations. I am aware of some of the mistakes that I have made. I am more aware of ways to prevent burn out. I know I will be a better advocate when I start casework again.

However, I wish our education system had at least one subject addressing the concerns of burn out, compassion fatigue, and self-care. Our jobs are challenging and emotionally draining. They are ten times more challenging

when the clients are victims of crime and abuse. I have learned the hard way that while it is very important to be factual and rational, one cannot simply ignore the importance of one's own mental health and well-being either.

To all my fellow lawyers out there, especially those working with victims of violence, I urge you to be aware of your emotions, and to take care of your mental health like you would take care of your physical health. This is the only way to sustain our work.

PRIYANGEE GUHA

18. SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON CAMPUS: FOLLOW 'DUE PROCESS' OR MAKE A LIST?

The News Laundry

My experience at two different universities made me realise the need for a redressal mechanism and the flaws that can accompany.



I pursued undergraduate studies in journalism and communications from an elite and expensive college, Centre for Management Studies (CMS), Jain University, in Bangalore. The majority of students here belonged to the upper class, the socio- economically privileged strata of society. Within the larger educational institution, the department of media studies was headed by a 60-something, “well-mannered”, English-speaking professor who was quite the charmer for the first few days, until stories of his misbehaviour on campus under the influence of alcohol and sexual misconduct with female students and teachers started doing the rounds. Yet, none of us didn’t really believe it as we hadn’t witnessed it first-hand.

It was during my final year in college that some new and explosive information emerged. One of my friends was threatened by the professor that he would withhold her hall ticket if she spoke up about how he had propositioned her. Another incident happened during a study-abroad trip to Germany. The professor called over a few female students to his room and

made sexually inappropriate statements in an inebriated state. The students sent emails, of which Newslaundry has copies, but that had no effect. The two women faculty members who spoke in favour of the students were hounded. While one has already quit, the other is leaving soon. At the same time, two other teachers who stood by the HoD have apparently been rewarded. When Newslaundry reached out to the professor, he denied all the allegations. "I don't want to comment anything on this because the emails are completely fabricated and it's an attempt to demean my image. I have already stepped out from the position of HOD in August on health grounds and spoken to the girls as well," the professor told Newslaundry refusing to respond further.

One feels helpless in such a situation, especially when so many details emerge towards the end of your undergraduate years, and more information much after you have graduated and lost ties with the institution. What is more distressing is the fact that had we been aware of these details during the college days, we would not have been able to do much. What I now realise is that it is not easy to speak out against strong establishments. It is not just authority in play here but the structure of power. There are multiple factors, such as position, age, accomplishments, access, control, fear etc., that come into play. All these dilute the power available to students to speak up. Looking back, one of the starkest things that come to mind is the lack of a system to combat sexual harassment on campus. None of us were aware of the need for an internal complaints committee (ICC), even by law. Even if some other mechanisms existed, there was no effort on behalf of the college to communicate it to students. I was not even aware of the fact that the University Grants Commission mandates by law that every university must have an ICC with faculty and student representatives.

What is ironic is that within the classroom, we learnt and discussed women empowerment, the waves of feminism, gender equality and so on, whereas the very institution that was providing the space to spread this knowledge did not have adequate measures to tackle the issue of harassment. Even more ironic was the fact that lecturers who taught us these concepts were the ones accused of indecent behaviour. Every time we raised questions, one of them would say "bridge the gap between genders. Do not create more tension than already exists".

After graduating, I was accepted into the Young India Fellowship programme at Ashoka University in Delhi. At the university, right from orientation week, we had multiple sessions about institutional mechanisms that handle a variety of segments of our life on campus. The committee that stood out to me was the Committee Against Sexual Harassment (CASH), formally called the Internal Complaints Committee.

We were introduced to CASH by professor Madhavi Menon who heads the Centre for Studies on Gender and Sexuality (CSGS) at Ashoka University. The session with her laid out the foundation for our understanding of sexual

harassment on campus. A lot of people opened up about their experiences of harassment within the session and this was right at the start of the fellowship. It was a reality check for all of us who till then were in denial that sexual harassment was perhaps not so pervasive among the well-educated “change agents”, at least so early on in the programme.

After the rude shock, a series of workshops were conducted by representatives of the CSGS. What constitutes harassment was discussed in smaller groups along with logistical details such as how to report a case to CASH, the right time to file a complaint, who to approach for help with the wording of the complaint, and so on. The entire system and procedure was explained in detail, leaving others and myself feeling more secure and comfortable on campus, and having access to an institutional mechanism that would redress a very serious aspect of life.

This made me think why I never questioned the lack of a formal mechanism for complaints in my undergraduate college. Was I oblivious to sexual harassment on campus then? Was I just that ignorant? Or was I just not well-informed? Was this due to my own lack of initiative or was this an intentional omission on the part of the university? All these questions and many more popped up in my head and made me want to do something about it. I did not want to feel helpless any more.

I wanted to be part of the solution in whatever small capacity possible. An opportunity came my way when elections for student representatives to CASH were announced. I quickly filled up the application form and submitted it. The list of candidates was announced and elections were conducted. Soon, I got to know that I had made it to the committee. I felt empowered and enthusiastic. I felt the need to serve justice to those who had been harassed. I felt like coming down strongly against sexual harassers.

While all this is very true, I soon realised that being part of the committee is not easy. And a committee is not the answer to all problems related to sexual harassment on campus. In fact, several questions were raised within the university about the committee itself. Certain incidents and sequence of events led me to raise a lots of questions to myself as well.

The sequence of events I talk of here started with the sharing of the explosive list of sexual offenders in academia by Raya Sarkar. Three specific incidents, such as the Harvey Weinstein scandal, the #MeToo campaign and the “list”, came in close succession to one another and created an atmosphere conducive to debate and discussion around the topic. Of special interest to me at the point was Raya’s list for a variety of reasons:

- 1) I knew for a fact that the allegations against some on the list, if not all, were absolutely true.
- 2) I was wondering how I could get added the name of my undergraduate head of department to the list. I soon got in touch with my juniors and teachers from college, collated email evidence and sent it over to a friend

who knew Raya.

3) A professor from Ashoka University was named on the list as well, and this had multiple implications.

Students started whispering around campus and rumours began to spread about the case. The professor's students got worried about their own future in academia or industry. All this activity made me pause to think and reflect. At first, I was in support of such a public list, but it was only when I looked at it from the CASH's perspective that I understood the nuances. It made me think about whether such lists could undermine the effectiveness of a body such as CASH. There was fear of the committee losing students' trust, because CASH enjoyed their support and this is what made it an effective body.

With respect to sexual harassment on campus, power structures are not going to change to a large extent any time soon. The laws exist, the Vishakha guidelines exist, the UGC guidelines exist and have existed for some time now. But I have seen personally that none of these are followed even in a top college in a cosmopolitan city such as Bangalore.

At Ashoka University, as an exception, the sexual harassment committee and the disciplinary committees actually function, and as a committee member it is easy for me to say that one must follow the due process and report any infraction. It is important to trust the systems else there will be no process and procedure, and this might actually lead to the feminist movement taking a couple of steps backward.

But other colleges and universities, or even the legal system in general, have failed the women of our country. So in such a situation it is utopian to expect one not to take, in desperate times, desperate measures such as sexual harassment lists.

It leads me to believe that in a place such as Ashoka University, one can debate and discuss the complexities of feminism and the nuances of sexual harassment, power structures and so on. But, how much of it is really relevant inside and outside the boundaries of the university? Will our campuses ever be truly safe?

SURYA HARIKRISHNAN

19. ECOSAN TOILETS ARE MAKING IT SAFER FOR RURAL BIHAR'S WOMEN TO DEFECATE DURING FLOODS

November 04, 2017 | thewire.in

Floods often bring poisonous snakes along with the waters of Nepal's hilly rivers – and parts of North Bihar experience up to 60 flash floods a year. A new women-led initiative is making these threats a thing of the past.

Paschim Champaran, Bihar: Puneeta Devi, a resident of Kairi village in Gaunaha block of Pashchim Champaran, is in her early thirties and has braved many floods. Her village, located near the India-Nepal border in north Bihar, faces recurring flash floods every year.

Devi has predictably lost count of these natural occurrences. However, there is something distinct she remembers about the floods that marooned several districts of Bihar in August.

“This year when our village got flooded, it was the first time my 12-year-old daughter and I defecated in a toilet during the flood. Every other flood in the past, we had to walk up to a kilometre to find a safe place to squat and relieve ourselves,” Devi said, occasionally exchanging shy smiles with her young daughter, Reema Kumari, who giggled as her mother shared their experiences of maidan jana (a local term for defecation).

Defecating in the open during floods is a nightmarish experience. Floods often bring poisonous snakes along with the waters of the hilly rivers from Nepal, according to Devi. “Now that we have a Phaydemand Shauchalaya, men cannot watch us defecate.

I no more feel any shame in doing what all human beings do daily,” Kumari said.

Devi invested Rs 17,410 to build her own Phaydemand Shauchalaya (or „beneficial toilet). She has expected to receive Rs 12,000 from the government in subsidies. “I am convinced that Phaydemand Shauchalaya is good for me and my family, hence I did not think twice before investing my money in it,” she said. Apart from her, seven more households in Kairi village constructed Phaydemand Shauchalayas in July this year.

One of them is 80-year-old Aasiya Devi, who spent Rs 19,065 to build her

Phaydemand Shauchalaya. “I have weak knees and cannot walk properly, but had to walk long distances to defecate every morning. During the floods, my condition was pitiable. Sometimes I felt I would defecate in my saree,” she said. “But now, with the Phaydemand Shauchalaya, the quality of my life has improved. I only have to walk a few steps to reach the toilet.”

The toilet is so popular that her married granddaughter, Pratima Devi, visits her house every morning to use it.

A number of rural women in other villages of Pashchim Champaran are also adopting Phaydemand Shauchalayas. It is a unique floodresilient ecological sanitation (ecosan) toilet. It is accessible during floods as well as generates humanure – manure from human excreta – and urine that can be used in farming.

The Phaydemand Shauchalaya has also been linked to a reduction in the risk of groundwater contamination. Groundwater is the primary source of drinking water in rural Bihar.

MEET THE PHAYDEMAND SHAUCHALAYA



Bihar has the lowest coverage of individual household toilets in the country. Only 33.16% of its population has an individual household latrine (IHHL). The rest, more than two-thirds of the state’s population, has no access to safe sanitation. The district of Pashchim Champaran, where Phaydemand Shauchalayas are slowly becoming popular, has an IHHL coverage of 30.39% only.

Apart from low sanitation coverage, Bihar is also troubled by recurring floods. More than 73% its 94,163-sq.-km area is floodprone. The problem is particularly acute in north Bihar, where the lives of almost 76% the population – about 50 million people – are adversely impacted by the floods.

These issues are aggravated when one considers the shallow groundwater table in the area: about 2-5 metres below ground.

“Shallow groundwater table and frequent floods means high risk of groundwater contamination due to the excreta stored in the underground soak-pits of conventional toilets, which often leak,” Eklavya Prasad, a managing trustee of the Megh Pyne Abhiyan (MPA), a non-profit working on water and sanitation issues in north Bihar, told Scroll. “During floods, water enters the pit and chokes the system.” The MPA is instrumental in fine-tuning ecosan toilets and popularising the Phaydemand Shauchalaya in north Bihar.

“Before constructing a Phaydemand Shauchalaya, we educate the community about ecological sanitation, which goes beyond just building toilets. We also conduct village-level studies to mark floodwater levels [in] the last year 10 years to ensure the pan [in a] Phaydemand Shauchalaya always remains above the floodwater,” Prasad explained.

A Phaydemand Shauchalaya promotes ecological sanitation by treating excreta as a valuable and manageable resource (it contains nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium), protects and conserves water, and sanitises faecal material.

According to an MPA document, every Phaydemand Shauchalaya has two specially-designed ecosan toilet pans. Under each pan is a concrete chamber that is kept above ground, on a raised platform, so the toilet’s working is not disrupted during floods. Each pan has a 10inch-wide hole opening into the chamber. This is where the faeces is collected. Two basins slope away from the chamber: urine collects in the one at the front; cleaning water, in the one at the back.



A Phaydemand Shauchalaya. Credit: Preeti Singh

After defecating, one only needs to sprinkle a handful of ash mixed with neem leaves (wherever possible) on the faeces and close the lid. Keeping wash water or urine away from the faeces prevents bacterial growth and, thus, bad odour.

A family uses one chamber for five or six months. Once it is filled, it is sealed and the faeces allowed to decompose into manure in four to five months. In this time, the family switches to using the second chamber.

Once the “humanure” is ready, it is collected by family members and used in the fields. The urine is collected in a separate container, mixed with water and sprinkled in the fields as well.

Vinita Kumari, a 26-year-old resident of Poorvi Tola in the Gaunaha block of Pashchim Champaran, has been using a Phaydemand Shauchalaya since early 2013.

“Within the first two years of using a Phaydemand Shauchalaya, I harvested 10 quintals of humanure and over 72 gallons of urine, and used it all in my agricultural fields to grow sugarcane, wheat, rice, corn, etc.,” she said. “My family has stopped buying chemical fertilisers and saves up to Rs 12,000 a year.” Vinita works with a local non-profit, Water Action. Her village – Poorvi Tola – has 30 such toilets. The neighbouring hamlet has three.

A WOMEN-LED EFFORT

One of the greatest benefits of a Phaydemand Shauchalaya, as narrated by the women of rural north Bihar to *The Wire*, is access to safe sanitation during natural calamities like floods. Several villages in the region, primarily along the India-Nepal border, face up to 60 flash floods a year.

“Whenever it rains heavily in the Terai region, hilly rivers flowing down Nepal bring flash floods to our village. The floodwater has very high velocities and it is not possible to wade through it. Thus, finding an appropriate place to defecate during the floods is a major problem,” said Leela Devi, a resident of Poorvi Tola.

Her village faced unprecedented floods on the night of August 12, leaving it desperate under three-plus feet of water. “I have never seen such a flood in my entire life. In no time, it washed away our standing crops and stored grains. Several houses were damaged, too,” Guljariya Devi, an 85-year-old resident of Poorvi Tola, recalled.

Interestingly, none of the 30 ecosan toilets in Poorvi Tola were flooded. “Since Phaydemand Shauchalayas are built on a raised platform, floodwater could not enter the pans and the chambers. The excreta remained safely packed inside the chambers,” Vinita Kumari said. The fast floodwater did break the stairs of one Phaydemand Shauchalaya, but that can be repaired easily, she added.

Naya Tola is a hamlet of around 88 households located in the Nautan block of Pashchim Champaran. Its residents are trapped between the Gandak

River and its east embankment. Every year during the monsoon, the Gandak rises and floods Naya Tola. Only one Rajput family in the entire village has a toilet – a conventional latrine – built at a cost of Rs 21,000.

Early this year, MPA started to work with the residents of Naya Tola to build a flood-resilient habitat, of which the Phaydemand Shauchalayas are an integral part. “In March, we held discussions with the villagers, following which the residents were taken to Kairi village to [see] functional Phaydemand Shauchalayas,” said Kumod Kumar Das, the technical programme officer at MPA. After the visit, five families came forward to build their own ecosan toilets in Naya Tola.

Interestingly, the women of Naya Tola have taken a lead in building these toilets. As part of Jeevika, the Bihar government’s rural livelihood mission and also the implementing agency for the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan-Gramin, women self-help groups (SHGs) exist in 24 blocks in the state. Jeevika has a sanitation, health and nutrition (SHAN) fund that is made available to the women SHGs to undertake various activities, including build ecosan toilets.

These women are using both their SHG savings and the SHAN fund (Rs 8,000 per beneficiary) to construct their own Phaydemand Shauchalayas. No contractors are involved. “I cannot describe the pain we undergo during the floods. We wade through waist-level floodwater and walk long distances to find a place to defecate. Because of poor sanitation, sickness never leaves our house,” said Chhathi Devi, who was the first woman to build a Phaydemand Shauchalaya in Naya Tola. When completed, the ecosan toilet will be used by her 12 family members.

“I am part of the SHG where I deposit my monthly savings. I have taken a loan of Rs 5,000 from the SHG to build the ecosan toilet. Another Rs 12,000 subsidy should come from the state government,” she said.

The per unit cost of constructing a Phaydemand Shauchalaya in Naya Tola is estimated to be Rs 25,000-30,000. This is much higher than the cost of building one in Kairi and Poorvi Tola villages. “Naya Tola is located inside the embankment, hence faces extreme floods. For the ecosan toilet to sustain such kinds of floods, extra material is needed to build a strong foundation strong, which in turn has increased the cost,” according to Prasad.

As a support mechanism, the MPA has provided an interest-free loan of Rs 5,500 to each family of Naya Tola for building Phaydemand Shauchalayas. “Rather than giving the money, we have provided 1,000 bricks per ecosan toilet, which cost Rs 5,500. Beneficiaries are expected to return this money, which can then be offered to other families in the village to build an ecosan toilet,” said Aparna Unni, a water programme officer with the MPA.

However, despite the high cost, Naya Tola’s women aren’t complaining. “During floods, we have to take a dengi [boat] and go around looking for a

place to defecate. A Phaydemand Shauchalaya is a one-time investment to put an end to our daily misery,” said Kailashi Devi. Her mother-in-law, Channati Devi, had visited Kairi as part of the MPA visit, after which she decided to construct the ecosan toilet for her family of 18.

At present, all five ecosan toilets at Naya Tola are under construction and are expected to be ready in the next couple of months.

MISSING SUSTAINABILITY FACTOR

Bihar’s rainfall patterns are in flux, and the state is expected to face both extreme floods and droughts. Cognisant of this, the state government recently allocated Rs 68,500 crore towards managing their effects. It could be missing the forest for the trees.

Under pressure to increase toilet coverage under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, state agencies are building conventional soak-pit latrines in the villages of north Bihar. The sustainability component is missing in such toilets. “Conventional toilets cannot withstand recurring floods, which is why it is crucial to work towards building a flood-resilient habitat,” said Prasad. The MPA is already collaborating with design and construction experts to create a more robust version of the Phaydemand Shauchalaya, to withstand floods of an unprecedented nature.

However, officials aren’t unaware of the benefits of ecosan toilets. “Information on ecosan toilets is available with our district authorities, who inform the local people about available technologies. But, ultimately, it is the right of the beneficiary to decide what kind of toilet he/she wants,” said Balamurugan D., the CEO and state mission director of the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (Jeevika). According to him, Jeevika is trying to promote ecological sanitation by training and disseminating information to its women SHGs. “I have also issued a written order to my field-level staff to support organisations like the MPA in helping villagers construct ecosan toilets,” he added.



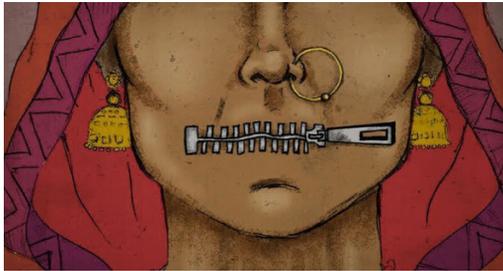
NIDHI JAMWAL

Nidhi Jamwal is currently an independent journalist who began her career with the Down To Earth magazine. She contributes to various publications such as Scroll, The Wire, Down To Earth, DNA, India Climate Dialogue and Village Square among others. Jamwal won first prize (internet category) in the ‘All India Environmental Journalism Competition 2015’ and Jury Appreciation Certificate in the ‘Laadli Media and Advertising Award for Gender Sensitivity 2014-15’.

20. THE BACKSTORY: ON THE POLL TRAIL, SEARCHING FOR GUJARAT'S MISSING YOUNG WOMEN

26 December 2017 | www.sahiyo.com

In the Banni grasslands, the only females visible in public spaces were little girls playing and older women busy with chores.



“Are you happy with the current government in Gujarat?” I asked a young woman outside a college in Gujarat’s Jetpur town.

It was a question I had asked dozens of young Gujarati voters in the last week of November, and this time, I could almost predict the response. Sure enough, she looked up in surprise, turned to her friend and then burst into a fit of giggles. “I don’t know about all this,” she said with an awkward shrug. “You can ask someone else.”

I went on to interview other students and the only ones who had a response to that question were the men.

I was in the textile town of Jetpur as part of a week-long tour of five districts in Saurashtra and Kutch, three weeks before the Gujarat Assembly election that the Bharatiya Janata Party went on to win on December 18. I was seeking the political views of young men and women from various communities for a series of reports on Gujarat’s under-22 generation: firsttime voters who had been born during the BJP’s 22-year reign and had never seen any other party in power in the state.

As the week wore on, however, I found that talking to young rural women about politics – or even their daily lives – was proving to be an impossible task. Those who weren't hidden away indoors by their family patriarchs were busy labouring on farms, far from the worldly matters of men. Those who were in college in small towns were largely uninterested or clueless about politics, often second-guessing their own opinions.

By comparison, most of the young men I interviewed – in the same age group of 18 to 22 – had strong views on Gujarat's politics and development. They spoke with conviction, even if they were unaware or misinformed about local matters. When they were surrounded by village elders, particularly elders from other caste groups, many of them faltered. But when they were with their peers, they eagerly shared their opinions.

Where were the opinionated women of rural Gujarat? Why were they so hard to find?

'I REALLY WANT TO VOTE'

My reporting trip around Gujarat had actually begun on a positive note. On my first day in Surendranagar district's Thangadh town, I met 19-year-old Swati Parmar who believes in the importance of voting, is pained by the discrimination she faces as a Dalit and wants a government that can ensure jobs for the youth and justice for her community.

I also met Kesarben Parghi, a 37-year-old housewife who was as excited to be a first-time voter as her 20-year-old son. "When I turned 18, my husband never let me get a voter card. He always said, „what do you need to vote for, you work in the house?" said Kesarben, who claims she often fought with her husband about it but never had her wish. "He died six months ago, so I went and got a voter card made with my son. I don't know whom I will vote for, but I really want to vote."

'WE DON'T LET OUR GIRLS TALK'

After Thangadh, however, things went downhill. I moved on to Morbi, Jetpur, the fishing town of Salaya and finally the Banni grasslands of Kutch, and at every step, women grew increasingly conspicuous by their absence from my reports.

In Morbi, the only young women visible on the streets were the ones returning home in their college uniforms, and most of them shied away from me. The few who agreed to talk were largely uninformed about the government's work, had no interest in whom they would vote for and merely nodded when I asked if they supported Patidar community leader Hardik Patel. In the rows of Patidar-owned shops and stores across Morbi, not a single woman could be seen managing sales at the counter.

In the villages around Jetpur, young men from Other Backward Classes explained why they prefer to work in textile factories instead of on their father's farms. "Who wants to work in the sun all day?" one of them said. "At least there are fans in the factory." But when I asked about their sisters, who are given no choice but to work as agricultural labourers, these men applied different standards: "The factories employ only men because the work is harder. Picking cotton is easy for women's fingers, so they work in the farms."

When I asked if I could speak with their sisters, they were dismissive: "They just work at home. They won't know anything."

This dismissiveness grew worse on the last days of my reporting trip, in Dwarka district's Salaya town and in the villages of the pastoral Maldhari tribes of the Banni grasslands. Here, the only females visible in public spaces were little girls playing and older women busy with chores. How little the women mattered to the men was evident in their confusion and surprise every time I asked to speak to their young daughters or sisters: "What will you do speaking to them?" "Yes they vote, but they don't know about all this." "What do you want to know? We can tell you on their behalf."

Contrary to what I had assumed, being a female reporter didn't help me gain access to these hidden young women, many of whom were married and tending to their babies.

In Salaya, when I was in house of a fishing family interviewing their 22-year-old son, his sister walked in to offer me a cold drink. Mentally crossing my fingers, I asked her if she, too, was a first-time voter. "She is," her brother answered for her. But even before my heart could leap with joy, she blushed, turned on her heel and hurried away to another room. Smiling politely, her brother said, "We don't let our girls talk to people like that."

SHOULD WE GET USED TO THIS?

At the end of my Gujarat tour, I returned to my Mumbai office feeling crushed by the guilt of my sheer, accidental privilege. This was certainly not the first time I had witnessed glaring gender disparities during my reporting trips around India. As an English-speaking, city-bred woman journalist who could choose to work, stay unmarried and travel alone, I am used to reactions of shock and awe. I am used to men – both in cities and villages – interrupting women and answering for them during interviews. I am also used to women responding to questions with the heart-breaking words, "I wouldn't know, I am just a housewife." But as I sat at my computer writing up my reports from this Gujarat trip, I couldn't shake away one nagging thought: why should I allow myself to get used to all this? This is an epidemic of gender-based exclusion and suppression infecting the whole country.

Why should we just accept it as an unfortunate but commonplace reality of our culture? It needs to be pointed out every time, all the time, as a constant reminder of the distance we need to cover to be an equal society.

In the five reports I wrote on Gujarat's new generation of first-time voters, I was eventually able to quote 24 young men and just three women. How much longer before we see some balance?



AAREFA JOHARI

Aarefa Johari is a journalist, feminist and activist based in Mumbai. She is a senior reporter at Scroll.in and the co-founder of Sahiyo, a collective working to end female genital mutilation in Asia. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Jury Appreciation Certificate.

21. FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING IS BEING PRACTICED IN KERALA TOO: SAHIYO INVESTIGATION

14 August, 2017 | www.sahiyo.com



The practice of Female Genital Cutting (FGC) in India has so far been associated only with the Dawoodi Bohra community and other smaller Bohra sub-sects. However, a recent investigation by Sahiyo found that FGC – the ritual of cutting parts of the female genitalia – is also being practiced by some other communities in at least one part of Kerala.

During an investigation in February, Sahiyo found a medical clinic in Kozhikode (Calicut) where two doctors admitted that they perform the procedure of “sunnath”, or circumcision, on both boys and girls. They claimed that women from several local Muslim sects are increasingly coming to their clinic to have sunnath performed for themselves, their daughters and even their daughters-in-law.

The doctors said that in the female circumcision ritual, they cut the prepuce of the clitoris, also known as the clitoral hood, because it is allegedly “good for married life”. They also mentioned that “some husbands insist on it”. The doctors claimed that this ritual is also practiced in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Africa, but denied that it could be harmful.

However, the sunnath ritual described by the Kozhikode doctors falls within the World Health Organisation’s definition of Female Genital Mutilation/

Cutting (FGM/C), which is internationally recognised as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. WHO defines FGM/C as “all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons”.

WHO has classified FGM/C into four types, based on degrees of severity. The least severe – and most common – is Type 1, which involves partial or total removal of the clitoris or the clitoral hood.

Female Genital Cutting in Kerala

Sahiyo’s investigation in Kerala was based on a tip-off from a resident of the state who had come across discussions about sunnath on females in some online Malayalam forums. The resident claimed that the practice is typically performed by an “ozathy” or a traditional cutter without medical training, but is also being done by some doctors in the Malabar region.

When Sahiyo spoke to gynaecologists in prominent hospitals in Kozhikode and Malapuram, they stated they were unaware of the practice and were firmly opposed to it. However, one small clinic in Kozhikode, run by a doctor known for performing male circumcisions, candidly admitted practicing sunnath on girls as well.

For the investigation, the Sahiyo reporter posed as woman who needed to make inquiries about female sunnath because her fiancé’s mother wanted her to be circumcised before marriage. When asked if she performs female sunnath, the lady doctor at the clinic said, “yes, we do it”. She said that the practice involved “cutting the foreskin of the clitoris” to increase sexual pleasure, and that it is “good for married life”.

The lady doctor claimed that the practice was now growing popular among Muslim women from “many sects” in Kerala, and that she performed it for girls and women of “any age”. For very young girls, she said, the procedure is sometimes performed by the male doctor who runs the clinic. The doctors apply local anaesthesia before the cutting, and they claim the wound takes five days to heal.

“It is better to do it when the girl is a baby,” the lady doctor said. “But these days a lot of women prefer to get it done for themselves immediately after delivering their baby, when they’re also getting other stitches to their vagina. That way they have to deal with two pains in one go.” According to the doctors, some women also ask for sunnath after delivery because “delivery lessens sexual pleasure and the sunnath helps enhance it”.

The lady doctor also offers pre- and post-marriage counselling at the clinic, and she claimed that she recommends sunnath for women during such counselling to allegedly improve their sex lives. “Once their sex life is better, their marriage will also be happy,” she said.

When Sahiyo asked whether the practice is compulsory for Muslim women, the doctor said, "It is not compulsory, but if your mother-in-law has told you to do it, then it is compulsory for you, you have to get it done."

The male doctor at the clinic claimed that the practice is mentioned in "four or five Hadiths", or Islamic texts containing the teachings of the Prophet. "You should read up about it, this is also done in Saudi, Egypt and Africa," he said. The doctor denied any knowledge of the fact that this practice is controversial or that some African communities cut more than just the clitoris. "There is no controversy, very little is cut," he said.

Despite this, the clinic's website mentions only male circumcision in the list of services it offers, and makes no mention of female circumcision. The practice is secretive, the doctors said, because it is a "female issue", and the religious taboos associated with "all things female" prevent people from talking about it. However, the doctors asked the Sahiyo reporters to "spread the word" among friends that they perform sunnath for girls.

It is unclear how widespread the practice of FGC is in Kerala, or for how long it has been practiced in the region. Since the investigation, Sahiyo has come across at least two persons - one from Kerala and one from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu - who claim to know a female relative who has undergone sunnath, but the women in question did not wish to come on record.

Is FGC illegal in India?

According to WHO, there are no medical benefits of any type of FGM/C, and the practice can in fact be harmful. The negative health consequences of Type 1 FGM/C include pain, bleeding, urinary problems, infections, injury to genital tissue, sexual problems and long-term psychological trauma. The clitoris, located above the vagina and urethra, is a bundle of sensitive nerve tissue that serves the sole purpose of giving the woman sexual pleasure when aroused. Damage to the clitoris can lead to reduced sexual sensitivity and stimulation.

FGC is not an Islamic practice and is not mentioned anywhere in the Quran. It is not practiced by all Muslim sects and in some countries, it is practiced among Christian, Jewish and animist communities too.

FGC illegal in at least 41 countries around the world, including in Egypt and several African countries. India does not have a specific law against FGC, but the Supreme Court is currently hearing a Public Interest Litigation by an independent lawyer asking for a ban on the practice.

On May 8, the Supreme Court asked the Central government and four state governments to respond to the PIL. On May 29, women and child development minister Maneka Gandhi issued a statement clarifying that Female Genital Cutting would already be considered illegal under the Indian Penal Code and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO).

Contact Sahiyo: Sahiyo is a collective working to end the practice of Female Genital Cutting / Khatna / Sunnath among all South Asian communities.

If you have undergone this practice in Kerala or any other part of India, and would like to talk about your experience or get more information about the practice, reach out to Sahiyo at info@sahiyo.com.

We will help you to the best of our abilities, and your confidentiality will be protected.

AN APPEAL TO THE MEDIA

We understand that Female Genital Cutting (FGC) is a shocking topic for many people, and that the media is likely to investigate and report on FGC in Kerala in the days to come. However, it is also a very sensitive topic for women who have undergone the practice and for communities that follow it. Sahiyo therefore appeals to all journalists, editors, photographers, graphic designers and bloggers to report on this topic sensitively, without sensationalism, by keeping the following points in mind:

- Respect the privacy and perspective of women and girls: FGC is a form of gender-based violence, so when you are interviewing and quoting women who have undergone FGC, do not reveal any information that will compromise their identities (unless the woman consents to reveal her own identity). Ask her if she prefers to be called a “survivor”, a “victim” or neither, and use the term that she chooses for herself.
- “Mutilation” versus “Cutting”: FGC is often called Female Genital Mutilation in the media, but “mutilation” is a controversial term that many FGC-practicing communities find offensive and judgemental. This is because women do not cut their daughters with the intention of “mutilating” or harming them – they do it because they believe it is a social, cultural or religious norm that is good for their daughters. Several activists around the world now prefer the more neutral term “Female Genital Cutting”, and even the World Health Organisation now calls the practice “Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting”. So we request the media to avoid the term “mutilation”, unless community members themselves prefer to use that term.
- Avoid sensationalist language and visuals: Please avoid using words like “barbaric”, “horrific”, “gruesome” or “tribal” to describe FGC. Such language can be traumatic for women who have undergone the practice and can also alienate the communities who practice FGC. Similarly, avoid depicting FGC with images of blades covered with blood or children crying in pain. These too, can be traumatic for women who have been through the practice.

- Read Sahiyo's Media Resource Guide: Sahiyo has created a special guide to help the media understand the practice of FGC and report on it sensitively and effectively. Although this guide focuses largely on the Dawoodi Bohra community, a lot of the information applies to any reporting on FGC anywhere.

AAREFA JOHARI AND AYSHA MAHMOOD

Aarefa Johari is a journalist, feminist and activist based in Mumbai. She is a senior reporter at Scroll.in and the co-founder of Sahiyo, a collective working to end female genital mutilation in Asia. Aysha Mahmood is an independent writer, feminist, activist and criminal psychologist from Kozhikode, Kerala. Recipients of LMAAGS 2017 Best Blog (Western Region).

22. SHAMING OF THE MOTHER IN PASCAL CHILD ABUSE CASE SHOWS ALL THAT'S WRONG WITH OUR LEGAL SYSTEM

May 01, 2017 | The News Minute

The defence's strategy was simple: To prove that she was a "bad mother" and an "immoral woman."

Last week, a sessions court in Bengaluru acquitted Pascal Mazurier, a former French diplomat, in a child rape case. Pascal was accused of raping his own daughter by his now-estranged wife, Suja Jones. While she and her lawyer have said that they will appeal against the acquittal, the questioning that she went through in the court reeks of misogyny.

While the case was against Pascal Mazurier, the person put on trial was the complainant, the mother of the victim. Building on the media narrative at the time of Pascal's arrest, the defence lawyer asked her about everything from her clothes, her friends, her relationship with her sister's husband, her spending habits...

And again and again, the judgment copy shows, she was questioned about her 'partying', and whether her husband disapproved of it.

THE 'BAD MOTHER' ARGUMENT

In cases of child abuse, it is very difficult for mothers to come forward and file a case against the accused - especially when the accused is the father. Often, the defence in the case sets out to malign the character of the victim's mother, and that's exactly what happened in the Pascal Mazurier case.

The questioning in the case, at multiple points, was around whether the mother frequently stepped out to parties with her 'male and female friends', while leaving her children in the care of nannies, and her husband Pascal. While the mother denied it multiple times, the question was repeatedly asked, and this 'evidence' is taken into consideration while providing the judgment.

The judgment also questioned her for 'leaving' her children in the care of their father. "If at all she being a dutiful mother she ought not to have left

the home by leaving the responsibility of the children on her husband for shopping,” the judgment reads.

THE ‘IMMORALITY EVIDENCE’

Another question that came up multiple times during the questioning is whether she took private photos.

While the complainant accepted that she had taken a private photo - at the request of her husband, and the accused, Pascal Mazurier - the court still judged her for it.

“In this case it is undisputed that this complainant is in the habit of moving with the friends,” the judgement reads, and that she also admitted that she had taken private photos in the absence of her husband, “to which she has offered explanation that her husband had requested her to send her photos,” the judgment says.

The questioning also repeatedly focussed on the fact that she had ‘male and female friends’ when her husband was not around.

Another point on which she was put on trial was on her alleged relationship with her brother-in-law - who has no connection with the case.

The defence’s argument was that as a woman of ‘immoral character’, she wanted to implicate her husband because he was unhappy with her.

‘HE HAD REGULAR SEX WITH HIS WIFE, WHY WOULD HE RAPE THE CHILD?’

But the most shocking part of the judgment is perhaps the claim that since the accused was getting sex regularly, he wouldn’t therefore rape his child.

“It is undisputed that the accused and the complainant were having regular sexual intercourse. Then what was the necessity for the accused to have sexually abuse on his own child,” the judgment claims.

CHILD’S TESTIMONY DISREGARDED

The fact that the child herself said that her father had hurt her has been completely disregarded in the judgment.

“I love Papa but he should not hurt me,” the child had said in her statement. She had also pointed at her father to say that he hurt her in her private parts.

But the judgment has disregarded this by claiming that since the child said she loves and misses her father, she couldn’t have been abused by him.

MOTHER ATTACKED FOR APPROACHING NGO

The defence and the judgment also attacked the mother for taking the help of an NGO to pursue the case.

Suja had approached an NGO, Enfold, for advice on how to take the case forward. The very fact that she asked for help has been painted as a conspiracy. The judgment in fact blames the mother for being prepared to face such a case in court.

“It is highlighted that she planned, searched, met several NGOs, Doctors, Advocates, read articles on internet,” the judgment reads, and this has been taken as proof of the fact that the mother wanted to falsely indict her husband.

TESTIMONIES THAT WEREN'T

The judgment was also given on the basis of a driver and a nanny's statements, who were never present in court for questioning. The statements were given to the police, and neither of them were called to court during the trial.

The two witnesses have given a certificate of good character to the accused for one reason: He did not go to 'night parties', while she did. And the statement was accepted on face value, to declare whether or not an accused had committed rape.

“Further the behaviour of the accused is appreciated by the house maid and also the driver because they told that the accused is of good behaviour and he was not going to parties, whereas this complainant used to go to night party and she herself admitted that she was attending the parties and she was arranging the parties in the absence of the accused,” the judgment reads.

RAGAMALIKA KARTHIKEYAN AND THEJA RAM

Ragamalika Karthikeyan, is an Editor who writes about gender, sexuality and the law in The News Minute (TNM). Theja Ram is a news hound who has covered issues related to crime, politics and social injustice for The News Minute. Recipients of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Southern Region).

23. PRIVACY ISSUES HAUNT BIHAR'S FLOOD-HIT WOMEN

19 August, 2017 | IANS

Even as over 10 million people uprooted by the floods in 15 districts of Bihar grapple with survival issues amid inadequate relief, the womenfolk face problems of another kind — privacy issues amid inhuman living conditions.

For Kunti Devi, in her early 40s, more than clean drinking water and milk for her children, attending to nature's call and maintaining personal hygiene amid the rising flood waters are bigger issues. Farzana Bano faces similar problems.

Both women along with their families are living under the open sky on an elevated railway track in Azamnagar block in Katihar district.

"We women have a serious problem which nobody looks at — going through daily ablutions in the open. Men don't face such issues," Kunti Devi griped.

Dulari Devi, one of the group of women whom IANS talked to, said: "We women face more problems in relieving ourselves when floods force us out of our villages. No one can imagine what we go through, except us."

A few kilometres away, Mamta Devi and Lalo Khatoon in Kadwa block narrated similar tales of woe.

They said they had no option but to relieve themselves in the open by simply shutting their eyes and minds to their abysmal surroundings.

"We have to relieve ourselves near our temporary shelters, under the open sky, in front of all people. What to do?" they said.

Mahender Yadav, an activist working among flood victims in Seemanchal region comprising Katihar and Kishanganj districts, said: "Neither menfolk in the family nor the government pay any attention to this problem of women in flood-hit districts. There are no plans to erect makeshift toilets on elevated roads and embankments for women to relieve themselves during floods."

“Imagine the plight of pregnant women and those with newborns to nurse,” he added.

Pokhariya villager Ganpat Rai, father to three grown-up daughters, rued: “Women, old and young, have no choice but to close their eyes and relieve themselves in the open.

“It has become a part of their lives. They have to live with it.”

Floods in Bihar have claimed 153 lives so far, with the situation remaining grim in 15 districts, an official said. supply as authorities have failed to provide them,” he said.

The Disaster Management Department official said 108,195 lakh persons living in 1,688 panchayats of 156 blocks were affected by floods.

More than 60 lakh persons were affected in Kishanganj, Araria, Purnea, Katihar, and East and West Champaraan districts alone.

Ranjeev, a flood expert working in flood-prone Koshi region, said women have been fighting shame and struggling for their right to privacy during floods for years but the government has simply ignored the issue.

“A much sought-after item for these women is polythene/plastic sheets or anything they can wrap around to relieve themselves in the open. Even polythene sheets are in short supply as authorities have failed to provide them,” he said.

Ranjeev recalled a British woman researcher visiting an embankment during floods a few years ago. He recalled how shocked she was when told of open defecation and other privacy issues of flood-hit women due to absence of any alternative.

He said authorities hardly provide for proper toilets at government relief camps. “So, the situation is none the better for those living in relief camps as far as privacy is concerned.”

IMRAN KHAN

Imran Khan is a journalist based in Patna. He reports on societal and developmental issues related to environment, climate change, poverty, health, education and sustainable development. At present he writes for IANS, Villagesquare.in, Thirdpole.net, and India climate dialogue.in. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Jury Appreciation Certificate.

24. WHY THE PHRASE 'BOYS WILL BE BOYS' IS DAMAGING OUR SONS - TEACHING OUR BOYS TO BE SAFE!

January 11, 2017 | Women's web

"Careful!" "Don't run too fast!" "Let's not be wild!" Do you know that girls hear these phrases more than boys? Why aren't we teaching our boys to be safe?

I was at the playground with my kids, one day when I noticed a young boy rush in front of a girl with his hand held up. "Guys, can't you see there is a girl here! Don't be rough." He yelled out.

It was sweet to see a boy of four or five want to protect a girl of eight or nine. Yet the incident somehow stuck in my mind. What is it about our society that entrusts boys with the responsibility of protecting the girls? Why is it that from an early age, we bring gender into the conversation and make kids believe that girls, no matter what age are frail and delicate and need to be shielded from the unpleasantness of rough play? Boys, on the other hand, are boys. They can be as wild as they want to be, breaking bones and shooting each other with (Nerf) guns and falling from trees. Why would a girl want to do that?

Much as I would love to explain why a girl would want to do that, as a girl who grew up doing pretty much what she wanted and as the mother of a daughter who grows up knowing that our genitals do not dictate what toy we want to play with, that is not the position I am here to write about. I am here in the position as the mother of a son worrying about the impact that this has on my boy.

Every time, we reinforce a female's supposed frailty we are teaching our boys that the only way forward for him, if he wants to identify as male is to be stereotypically masculine - to be loud, unconcerned about invading someone else's space, to take risks, play rough and be wary of expressing gentler emotions, for fear of being a sissy. There are multiple ways this hurts our sons.

SUPPRESSING EMOTION

While playing rough builds character, when it is limited to one gender, we are teaching them it is fine to segregate on the basis of gender. Every time we characterize expressing emotions as feminine, we are teaching our boys to suppress their natural instincts. Studies have shown that boys as young as five and six are already conditioned to hide their true feelings, as 'boys don't cry' and 'boys don't play with dolls'. Is it a wonder that we as a society denounce men for not being sensitive enough or even completely oblivious to the emotions of others when they have been repeatedly told that to do so is a repudiation of their gender? Reckless behaviour = male? Another dangerous side-effect of not curbing boys as much as we curb girls, is unwittingly letting them believe that reckless behaviour is a part of being 'male'.

Studies have shown that unintentional injuries are one of the most important causes of death in children beyond the age of one. The rate of getting injured increases throughout the years, with it peaking in adolescence and teenage boys get injured more than girls. Researchers cite many causes for these with one of the leading ones being 'psycho-social conditioning' or behaviour that becomes more or less routine or at the very least frequent, due to the psychological factors or social environment the child is exposed to.

For example, parents allowing boys to roam further away from the home and play alone without direct supervision, than girls of the same age

Or boys allowed to engage in exploratory play without being restrained while girls that indulge in the same behaviour are restricted.

All of this contributes to a false sense of security in our boys who start to internalize that risk taking is not a big deal, sometimes with fatal consequences.

MYTH: BOYS NOT SEXUALLY ABUSED

Society has always put the onus of being careful on the woman. Do not go out after a certain time. Dress a certain way. Do not attract attention.

Be careful. Be careful. Be careful.
And why should we be so careful?

For men are careless – they are allowed to be careless with other people's emotions, bodies, lives and themselves. They are, to a great extent conditioned to be so. So much so that boys fail to see that they themselves could be victims too.

According to a study reported in Time Magazine, girls have a 1 in 4 chance of being molested and boys have a 1 in 6 chance of being molested before the age of 18. Research shows that males are less likely to report sexual abuse. Since boys are conditioned from an early age to be more physical, they are

more hesitant to report abuse, considering it to be a part of being a boy rather than inappropriate behaviour. They don't talk about it, as "talking and expressing your feelings are not what boys do". That is for girls.

As I look down at my sweet little one-year-old baby boy, my heart breaks a little. That is not the world I want for him. I have made sure that his four-year-old sister knows her gender does not determine either her favourite colour by default or what she wants to be when she grows up. And I want my son to know that he too can be whomever he wants to be - in a world he can play with dolls and express emotions, without being called 'girly' or deemed 'lesser than'. I want him to know that he can tell me whatever he wants and that just as he should respect other people's bodies, his body should be respected as well. What I want for them is a world where both boys and girls have to be careful or even better, a world where children are safe, irrespective of their gender.

As Gloria Steinem put it, "We've begun to raise our daughters more like sons, but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters." And I believe that, that is the key to teaching our boys to be safe while making sure that they get to reach their full potential without being weighed down by the prejudices and preconceived notions of previous generations.



SHWETA GANESH KUMAR

Shweta Ganesh Kumar is a writer and travel columnist who has been featured in a number of various national and international magazines and papers. 'Coming up on the Show' and 'Between the Headlines', are two novels written by her on the Indian Broadcast News Industry. Her short fiction and poetry have been published in anthologies and online literary magazines in more than four continents. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Blog (Southern Region).

25. TIME'S UP, AGE-OLD BELIEFS! ODISHA IS SAYING NO TO CHILD MARRIAGE

April 24, 2017 | The Quint



Post-2008 riots in Odisha's tribal populated Kandhamal district, when Rashmita Bagarti (now 27) started the Antarang (literally meaning intimate) Club in the Phiringia block to spearhead peacebuilding activities in the community, she had about 45 members. But to her worry, the number went down to 20 in about a year.

As she looked for the reason behind such a drop in membership, she found that at least 12 young girls of the club had got married at an early age and left their villages.

It was alarming! Because early marriage was the practice in tribal and Dalit communities and it was difficult to ensure long-term participation of young girls in the club. So, I decided to fight against child marriage alongside our peacebuilding activities

Rashmita Bagarti, Social Activist

According to Indian laws, marriage of a girl before the age of 18 and a boy before the age of 21 is child marriage.

AGE-OLD BELIEFS

Home to 62 tribal communities, including 13 particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTG), making 22.85 per cent of the state population, child marriage is still a norm in the tribal-dominated districts of Odisha, as in Kandhamal.

This is an age-old practice. Again, having a girl for a longer time at home after puberty is a big risk. While it's always difficult to get a groom for a girl who doesn't fit the conventional concept of being young, there is also the risk of love relationships and elopement

Sanmati Durua (65), Resident, Chanchraguda village, Koraput

Poverty, deep-rooted gender discrimination and dowry system increase the vulnerability of girls to early marriage.

Puspashri Debi, Member, ActionAid India, Bhubaneswar

According to Jitendra Pattnaik, a Nuapada-based social activist, "Girls are married off early to rid the family from their burden. Parents believe, delay in marriage of a girl would cost more dowry and cause difficulties in getting a groom."

Parents in left-wing extremism (LWE)-affected areas are almost compelled to get their children married to save them (the children) from being picked up by extremist groups, who are on a look out for new cadres regularly, said a development activist of Kalahandi district on conditions of anonymity.

The 2015-16 National Family Health Survey (NFHS4) indicates that the top five child marriage prevalent districts are all tribal dominated and affected by LWE. While the percentage of married women in the age group of 20-24, who got married before they turned 18, remains 39.3 percent in Malkangiri, it is 37.9 percent in Nabarangpur, 35 percent in Mayurbhanj, 34.7 percent in Koraput and 34.4 percent in Rayagada.

STATEWIDE PREVALENCE

Of other districts, Nayagarh has 31.3 percent of married women in the age group of 20-24 who married before 18. In Khordha, of which the state capital of Bhubaneswar is a part, it is 18.1 per cent.

In Odisha, nearly 21.3 per cent of the currently married women in 20-24 age group married before 18. It was 37.2 percent during NFHS3 (2005-06). Similarly, 11 percent of married men within the age group of 25-29 got married before 21, as per NFHS4, which was 22.2 percent during the NFHS3.

Although child marriage is more prevalent in rural and tribal hinterlands, its presence in urban areas is equally concerning. The difference between urban and rural prevalence is only 2.2 percent for women and 3.6 percent for men of the aforesaid age group.

HEALTH ISSUES

“Child marriage violates children’s basic rights to survival, development, protection and participation,” said Laxminarayan Nanda, Child Protection Specialist at UNICEF, Odisha.

It limits the freedom of girls and boys and narrows down the scope of dreaming a future of choice. Child marriage also results in the loss of lives and hampers any effort of reducing IMR (infant mortality rate) and MMR (maternal mortality rate) as it leads to malnutrition among mothers and children

Ghasiram Panda, Activist, ActionAid India

Another flip side of child marriage is the higher risk of contracting HIV, along with domestic violence and teenage pregnancy, which are among the leading causes of death in girls aged between 15-19.

A World Bank-ICRW joint report has warned earlier that child marriage will cost the developing world trillions of dollars by 2030 because of discontinuation of schooling, health issues, malnutrition, maternal and infant mortality etc.

RAY OF HOPE

Odisha, however, has been successful in scaling down the prevalence of child marriage in many districts between NFHS3 (2005-06) and NFHS4 (2014-15).

Due to the actions and interventions by both government and non-government agencies, young girls like Daimati Santa of Koraput, Phulmani Raita of Gajapati, Minakshi Guru of Jajpur have stood against child marriage. Many boys have also said no to marriage before turning 21.

This has become possible due to the transformation of girls into change agents. Having their own space in the form of adolescent girl clubs so that they can discuss their issues freely, is enabling them to spread awareness across the community, thus ensuring an appropriate environment for a smooth transition to adulthood

Sanjukta Tripathy, Activist, PREM (UNFPA-supported programme)

PREM is a non-profit organisation that manages the UNFPA supported programme under its Action for Adolescent Girls (AAG) initiative in Gajapati’s Gumma block.

“Communities that were hesitant to talk about this issue earlier are now discussing it. Many have even resolved to stop child marriage in their respective communities,” Ghasiram Panda observed.

NEED TO SPREAD AWARENESS

“Yet, the mindset of people who believe in it, promote it and encourage the practice. It has to be changed through reinvigorated action and intervention,” said Laxminarayan Nanda.

According to Dr Amrita Patel, State Project Coordinator of Odisha State Resource Centre for Women, “Community awareness, building on girls’ education and capacity building of families are necessary. Alongside, implementation of the law and awareness are also needed.”

Raising the issue of almost nil registration of cases under the Prevention of Child Marriage Act, Dr Patel urged, “Prosecution has to be strong.”

On the other hand, prevention is also a critical strategy. However, in today’s world, skill building and making the girls economically independent will take more than curbing the problem of child marriage

Dr Amrita Patel, State Project Coordinator, Odisha State Resource Centre for Women

Bringing to fore the issues of dowry as exploitation leading to an unsafe atmosphere for girls in the society, Puspashri Debi sought proper implementation of the Dowry Prohibition Act.

Anticipating growing incidents of elopement due to media exposure from childhood, she insisted that “priority should be on creating a safe space for the adolescent to discuss sexuality and personal issues in a free environment.”

BASUDEV MAHAPATRA

Basudev Mahapatra is a Bhubaneswar based journalist, editor and documentary filmmaker with more than two decades of experience in journalism. He writes on issues concerning rural India and specialises in developmental, environmental and gender based issue reporting. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Eastern Region).

26. HOW SÜMI VILLAGE IN PHEK DIST. REVIVED MILLETS & BECAME GENDER WISE

March 20, 2017 | The Morung Express

In Sümi Village folklore, millet (Etsübe) is the 'elder brother' of the 'female' paddy (Erübe). Millets have been traditionally harvested and eaten before paddy; even the traditional millets festival once held greater fervour. Patriarchal as that may be, paddy won the war on securing the fertile valley, banishing millets to terrain where it grows best—the steep jhum field slopes.

This was no easy task. Like all domesticated crops, millets needed help from humans, sparse to come by in the past decade. Consumption had declined, so had production. The rich agro biodiversity as well as grain-based wealth of the people declined alongside. The people of Sümi Village in Phek district of Nagaland took timely note and action, leading to a prospering village polity. Women became leading decision makers in the change that swept the village.



WINDS OF CHANGE

We are at a discussion with Diwetso Lohe (52), Pastor of the Sümi Village Baptist Church (SVBC), Neitelo Rhakho (50), Chairperson of the Sümi Village Council (SVC), Kezungulou Wezah (65) and Kezukhalou Shama (40), both members of the SVC as well as farmers and seed keepers. The discussion, at the SVBC's guest house, is facilitated and translated by North East Network (NEN) Nagaland's Programme Manager, Wekowe-u Tsuhah.

Wezah and Shama have become the second batch of women core members of the Sümi Village Council; 2010 saw the first ever entry of two women into the SVC alongside male members and 3 Gaon Buras (GBs). In progressive ideals, the Sümi Village Baptist Church is not to be left behind. Two women are members of its core deacon board.

(L-R) Neitelo Rhakho, Kezukulou Shama, Kezungulou Wezah and Diwetso Lohe seen here at the Sümi Village Baptist Church guest house in Phek district, Nagaland, in early March 2017.

“We encourage women to take part in Church activities, to speak from the pulpit and take up various roles that influence society,” says Pastor Lohe on how they laid base to empower women to talk in public and assert their voices. “Due to various programs and conventions of the Church, we became acquainted with various issues that made us realize that women are needed in making some core community decisions,” concurs Wezah.

Alongside, the SVC witnessed an increasing number of cases that needed women for collective decision making. In yesteryears, the women’s society of the village spoke once annually at community programs, able to bring only marginal issues to the common table. Now, they are part of the SVC that meets twice a month or even thrice a week at times depending on issues.

While issues particular to women exist, Wezah prefers to use a different example of women’s role. With women taking up more activities at home and outside, she explains, “When material needs to be provided under central schemes like Indira Awas Yojana, women are in a better position to collate information on which family needs what, to bring the right beneficiaries.”

Wezah and Shama brought up issues of marketing sheds needed for farmers to sell their produce, arrangements to be made for visiting guests, right shawls to be given on right occasions and even bringing men folk back to the field for collective farming.

Pastor Lohe gives an example. In 2015, when the SVBC celebrated its golden jubilee, the women suggested that they cultivate local cotton to make the shawls to be gifted to guests. Their only condition was that men lend a hand. This way, many young men and women learned to cultivate, process and weave local cotton, a dying tradition. Shama says that the knowledge of agriculture and seeds give women a position of influence over grassroots policy making.

Besides, “Women have brought a culture of dialogue to village council meetings by controlling the tendency towards aggression in the rest of us,” notes Rhakho who has been the Chairperson of the SVC for 12 years, and under whose tenure women leaders

were brought into the policy arena. He remains skeptical that women loaded with work at home may find it difficult in the long run to step into public processes but Wezah suggests a way out.

“Men need to share the workload at home so that both can partake in decision making for the community. Like millets and paddy, men and women should work and produce together,” she wisely chips in.

HARVESTING MILLETS

These visions for a shared future eventually led to the revival of millets in Sümi Village.

“Millets were always a part of our food culture. They were particularly known to be an insurance against sudden changes in climate or food scarcity due to accidents,” says Pastor Lohe after Wezah tells us the traditional lore on millets. But a blanket ban on burning forests for jhum cultivation by apex bodies, the arrival of market rice, migration of young people to cities, crop attack by birds, difficulty to process—they list in that order—led to reduction in collective farming practices that help retain a large part of Naga agro biodiversity.



Millets remained uncultivated in the village for more than 10 years but any granary had stocks of old millets, keeping its whiff alive. 5 years back, the NEN Nagaland in neighbouring Chizami village started talking about the benefits of millets and its cultivation practices for the community. A chord struck home. Those who heard NEN’s message started consulting elders about the veracity of these claims. Benefits stood affirmed repeatedly.

So the village decided to instate awards, three years ago, for the ‘Best Millet (and vegetables) Grower’ from the village. This was an extension of a previous award that prized successful paddy cultivation. The Church chipped in to gift winners (first, second and third) with cash prizes as well as farming tools.

“The award is always handed over to the woman of the household,” says Rhakho, reiterating women’s role in the growing prosperity of the village. Village decisions, he notes, on livestock or grains cannot be made without women.

With millets, more vegetables get cultivated in the field due to which the local markets thrive. The regulation of rates for such items also needs women for they understand the investment—labour, seeds, tools, storage—required and can gauge market prices better.

Today, Sümi Village in Phek is prospering, becoming increasingly self-sufficient in producing food, as well as economically robust by selling local produce. Its development through collective decision making has led to judicious use of central schemes that are keeping rural economies going. With its neat, clean and plural atmosphere, the village has become a model for progressive politics, sparking fresh hopes for a humanity that is not just shared but also self-sufficient.



AHELI MOITRA

Aheli Moitra works as a journalist at The Morung Express, Nagaland. In the past she has worked as a Research Associate at the North East Network Resource Centre, the South Asia Forum for Human Rights and the Strategic Foresight Group. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Eastern Region).

27. GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT: THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF WOMEN DRUG USERS IN MANIPUR

December 19, 2017 | The Indian Express

28.2 per cent of female injecting drug users in India are from Manipur, the highest in the country.

“SP, World is yours, Heroin; they make you feel like superman. Oh wait, superwoman! Thanks to these drugs, I survived some very distressing phases of my life. I felt sick, tired, helpless and irritable when I wasn’t taking them.

-Akon speaking about the high she got from drugs.

For over seven years, Akon was addicted to ‘World is yours’ (WY) and SP tablets. The former is a mixture of caffeine and methamphetamine, while Spasmo Proxyvon (SP) is a painkiller with a mild opioid. Akon would feel a gush of energy and euphoria. And then a period of insomnia, irritation, anxiety and anger would follow. To get over these lows, she would burn and smoke more tablets. It was a vicious circle and Akon was stuck.

Akon is currently undergoing treatment at the Integrated Rehabilitation Centre for Addicts (ICRA) in Torbung, a small village in Churachandpur district, in south-west Manipur. The residential centre situated in the midst of lush green farms is a two-hour drive from the capital Imphal. Since its establishment in October 1999, this womenonly center has enabled more than 2,000 women drug users between the age groups of 15-60 find rehabilitation, including medical treatment, psychological counselling and vocational training. Most women, like Akon have landed here on their own.

When I walked into the centre a few months ago, Akon was sitting in a group. Most of them were laughing, cracking jokes. Akon, though was silent and distant. An hour later, when she decided to talk about her journey to Torbung, Akon mentioned her marriage to a drug peddler in Thoubal district and her six children.

“It didn’t matter to me that he was making his living by transporting drugs across the border, at least not until his travels led to the extramarital affairs. When I first found out about other women, I drank up a bottle of cough

syrup so that I could stop crying. I felt I was flying. It was my first brush. I got addicted soon enough. In the last seven years, I have been going to rehabilitation centers, but it keeps coming back. I have had 10 relapses till now,” she says.



MANIPUR: THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF FEMALE INJECTING DRUG USERS

Akon's story is similar to that of many other female drug users in Manipur, who are either pushed into drugs by their husbands/ partners or encouraged by peers. A 2015 study by the UN office on Drugs and Crime says that 28.2 per cent of female injecting drug users in India are from Manipur, the highest in the country. The same study says that for more than half of Manipur's women addicts, drug peddling and sex work are the primary sources of income. Like in the case of Akon, whose husband moved to Assam and her parents took her children away, women drug users in Manipur are unlikely to be living with a partner or spouse, a reason that makes them more vulnerable to continued abuse.

"I have nowhere to go, no one to be with." Akon says, her voice feeble, almost incoherent.

Manipur with its porous border with Myanmar (the world's second largest producer of opium after Afghanistan) is an easy transit and market for drugs. The civil insurgent movements and prolonged cycles of violence and repression have all contributed to the high rate of drug abuse. Men and women, both equally vulnerable, but for different reasons.

"Post the 1992-1993 Naga- Kuki conflict, many Kukis migrated to different parts of Manipur. Young girls went to Imphal, trying to make a living. They fell prey to the drug peddlers and traffickers who started using them for transporting drugs across the border. The history of women addicts starts there. Today, the reasons why men and women in this region become addicts are very different, says Pradeep Keisem, Member of Manipur State Commission for Protection of Child Rights.

CONFLICT, UNEMPLOYMENT AND EASY AVAILABILITY: THE DRUG COCKTAIL

Young men with their faces masked in scarves, plying rickshaws on the streets of Imphal has been an imagery used to describe unemployment in the state. These are educated young men, graduates, in many cases unable to find employment. Nearly 7.5 lakh people registered unemployed in the state as of February, 2016. The literacy rate for Manipur at 79.85 per cent, is higher than the national average of 74.04 per cent.

“For men, it’s the boredom that comes with unemployment, peer pressure or simply a job as a drug peddler. For most women, it’s likely to be an escape from the trauma they may have experienced. It could be because they have lost their husbands to extra judicial killings or have suffered domestic violence. There are also college going girls who are now taking it up for the fun of it, because of easy availability. 100-150 rupees for a tablet. They are trying eraser, mosquito repellent or even SP,” Keisem explains.

WHY WOMEN ARE LEFT BEHIND IN ANTIDRUG PROGRAMMES

Experts say that given the drug use among women in the state, responses and rehabilitation efforts have neither kept pace nor distinguished between men and women and the prejudices they face. Unlike in case of men, families of female drug users are likely to abandon and disown them. Men are more likely to get support from their families once they are on the path to recovery. Women are not easily re-integrated, which makes them more vulnerable to relapses. “55% of women treated here have had relapses. 70% women who come here are destitute or homeless. Very few are brought in by families. 70% of women who come here are sex workers, and it becomes difficult to treat them along with the college going girls,” explains Maharabi Singh, the co-coordinator at ICRA Torbung.

Rima, a 44-year old single woman wanted to pose for photographs without a veil when we met her at the centre in Torbung. “I don’t care,” she said. “I tried Heroin for the first time when I was 20, mainly because everyone in college was trying it. I got addicted to an extent that if I didn’t inject even a single day, I would go mad. In all these years, I have had 20-30 relapses. My family has abandoned me, they didn’t even think of getting me married. Maybe if I were a man, I would have got help, there would be more options for help.”

Opiate Substitution Therapy (OST), a form of treating opiate addiction by replacing illicit drugs with medically prescribed ones, such as buprenorphine or methadone is one such help that Rima is referring to. Research has shown that OST is effective in reducing illicit drug intake, vulnerability to HIV and death from overdose. Despite these benefits, only 3 percent of injecting drug users in India—and only 8 percent of them worldwide—have access to OST, according to the World Health Organisation(WHO). It is even more difficult for women, to access OST, given that it is available only as a last resort after the patient proves that they have tried and failed programmes for drug

rehabilitation and detoxification. Apart from facing structural barriers in accessing services like the OST which are already inadequate and available in male dominated centres, women drug users are also more susceptible to HIV, TB, Hepatitis and reproductive health issues. “If they are married to male drug users, the prevailing socio-cultural norms increases their vulnerability to contract HIV as they don’t have the agency to negotiate safe sex or refuse sex,” says Keishem.

Akon had sought treatment at other centers (for both men and women) before she came to the women-only center at Torbung. Majority of the patients there were male. So was the staff. There was abuse and violence, and even sexual abuse in some of the male dominated centers, thus making it impossible for women to seek residential treatments.

“There is a lot of lacuna that needs to be filled. To help the younger girls, we need a juvenile IRCA center. We also need more exclusive women facilities that allow children. Of course, regulations that stop the easy availability of drugs are most important, ” says Mahrabi Singh. His team of 12 members, 5 male and 7 female divide the day, keeping women busy in group conversation, physical exercise, meditation, physiotherapy and counselling sessions.

Just then Rima says, “You know what people here believe? A male drug addict can make a good husband or a father someday but a woman drug user can never be a good wife or mother ever,” underlining the crux of this journey from drugs to sobriety.

#GenderAnd is dedicated to the coverage of gender across intersections. Use #GenderAnd and join the conversation.



SINDHUJA PARTHASARTHY

Sindhuja Parthasarathy is a widely published independent humanitarian photojournalist based out of Chennai, India. The core of her work explores gender equity, human rights issues of indigenous people and environmental sustainability; keenly highlighting the complex socio-cultural anthropology elements and their interplay with humanitarianism. Recipient of LMAAGS 2015-16.

28. THE MURKY CASE OF MANGALAM TV AND THE QUESTIONS IT RAISES ABOUT THE GENDER PROBLEM IN MALAYALAM JOURNALISM

May 06, 2017 | The Caravan

On 26 March 2017, Mangalam TV, a Malayalam-language news channel, made its debut on Kerala's airwaves. The channel hit the ground running—at about 11.15 am, it aired an audio clip of a conversation that allegedly included the then transport minister of the state, AK Saseendran, a 71-year-old member of the Nationalist Congress Party. In the clip, a man—Mangalam TV claimed it was Saseendran—can be heard making sexually explicit remarks. “Hug me tightly,” the man can be heard saying, in Malayalam. “Come, remove your clothes, let me see your breasts.” The channel edited out the other side of this exchange—it claimed that Saseendran had made these comments to a housewife who had called him seeking help, and who had later handed a recording of the call to the channel. “A minister who is an insult to the ministry,” the screen read as the edited clip played.

The airing of the audio clip caused outrage in the state. Within four hours of its telecast, Saseendran resigned. The former minister held a press conference that day, during which he declared his innocence and said that he did not have anything to do with the clip. He added that he had stepped down “to uphold the integrity of my party and coalition” and that he had asked Kerala's chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan to conduct an inquiry into the matter. The clip, and consequently Mangalam TV, received widespread attention. Regional and national news organisations covered the controversy, and the clip itself was circulated widely on WhatsApp.

The channel's decision to air the clip attracted the reproof of many in the journalistic and media community. Several criticised Mangalam TV for airing the clip without a warning regarding its explicit content. Some expressed the concern that the clip could have been culled from a private conversation, and that airing it was a form of moral policing. Others raised questions regarding the identity of the woman in question and why she was yet to come forward. “Is there an allegation or a complaint [against the minister]?” the actor and media personality Parvathi T said during a discussion on a regional news channel. “Otherwise to tap a phone conversation of two mature consenting adults and air it saying it is a case of sexual harassment cannot be accepted.” Several observers also floated the possibility that the

conversation had been staged—Parvathi, for instance, cited a news story that broke earlier in 2017, when the Kerala-based news website Daily Indian Herald published tapes that appeared to confirm that Matthew Samuel, a former editor with Tehelka, had worked with his women colleagues to honeypot and blackmail government officials.

On 29 March, the Kerala government ordered a judicial inquiry into the incident. The state cabinet appointed a commission headed by Justice PS Antony, a retired district-court judge, to investigate the contents of the tape, and gave it three months to submit a report.

The same day, Al Neema Ashraf, who was employed as a sub-editor with Mangalam TV, resigned from her post. Ashraf announced her decision through a Facebook post. “I resigned due to unbearable circumstances, as a woman and as a journalist,” Ashraf wrote. She added that when she joined the channel in May 2016, ahead of its launch, she was appointed to a five-member investigation team. “The profile of the investigative team was something that I did not envisage as part of a journalist’s role,” she wrote. Referring to the airing of the clip, she added: “Due to this incident, an environment has been created in which all women journalists have come under the shadow of suspicion and been humiliated. This is unfortunate.”

In a later conversation, Ashraf told me that during the third meeting of the investigations team, K Jayachandran, a chief reporter and senior employee of the channel “told us that the investigation team’s aim should be to get news at any cost, and we should go to any length for it.” “I couldn’t reconcile with this and I immediately told them that I was not ready to get them news at any cost,” Ashraf said. She added: “I was not called for any meeting after that. Assignments were allotted to others personally, and the editors told me that mine would be assigned later.” (Jayachandran has a dubious history as a journalist. In the early 2000s, he was accused of helping a Congress MLA forge a document that appeared to link the then tourism minister of Kerala to a hawala scam of Rs 33 crore. Jayachandran was also involved in an espionage case that was allegedly connected to an employee from the Indian Space Research Organisation—in 1994, the state police arrested the ISRO scientist S NambiNaryanan for allegedly passing classified documents to Pakistan. At the time, Jayachandran authored several news reports that seemed to confirm Narayanan’s guilt. However, in the subsequent years, the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Supreme Court stated that the allegations against Narayanan were false.)

When no assignment came her way, Ashraf said, she contacted Jayachandran, who told her that investigations could wait as there were other projects that required immediate attention. “They did not want to take it forward in the right way, and that was why I was not included. And I was never contacted again.”

Ashraf’s post regarding her resignation strengthened the criticism against Mangalam TV, especially on social media. Several people, journalists in

particular, shared her post, accompanied by the hashtag “WeAreNotMangalam.” The phrase gained prominence on social media as a means of criticising the channel’s ethics and its decision to air the audio clip.

In the days following Ashraf’s resignation, several allegations regarding Mangalam TV’s decision to air the clip came to light. The nature of the incident is murky at best—at this stage, it is difficult to ascertain the circumstances surrounding the airing of the tape. However, the questions that it raised—regarding the ethics of the channel’s actions—led women journalists in Kerala to mobilise and speak up about the gender-based discrimination they face during the course of their work. Anupama Mohan, who works at Metro Vaaritha, a Malayalam-language daily, wrote in a Facebook post published on 29 March: “This incident was part of a continuum that treats journalists as meat; a continuation of the prevailing sexism in the industry.”

For a few days after it aired the tape, Mangalam TV defended its decision to do so. On 29 March, Ajith Kumar, the CEO of the channel, repeatedly stated during an interview that the audio clip was not part of a sting operation, nor was it a honeytrap. “If it’s found that this is not Saseendran’s voice, we will shut down Mangalam channel,” he said. Kumar added that the channel was unwilling to reveal the identity of the woman the minister was allegedly speaking to.

On 30 March—soon after the government transferred the investigation of the case to the state’s crime branch—Mangalam TV made a startling volte-face. Kumar took to his channel and announced that the audio clip was the result of a sting operation. He added that the woman at the other end of the call with Saseendran was an employee of Mangalam TV, and that he had earlier claimed otherwise in order to protect her identity.

Reading from a piece of paper in his hand, Kumar said that he and his channel erred in judgment by telecasting the sting operation. He continued: “This decision was taken by an eight-member editorial team consisting of senior journalists. The woman journalist took this assignment by her own will, without any coercion from the editors.” Kumar added that he accepted the criticism leveled against the channel “including on social media from people in the industry.” “I apologise to journalists and organisations like KUWJ”—the Kerala Union of Working Journalists, of which a large number of journalists in the state, including Kumar himself, are members. He added that he would like to apologise “especially to women journalists.” “Going forward, we will ensure that such mistakes will not be repeated,” he said.

Kumar’s admission was met with severe condemnation, both within the channel and beyond. By this time, women journalists had already begun experiencing the discriminatory consequences of the sting operation. On 29 March—the same day on which Ashraf resigned—SuviVishwanathan, a reporter at the Malayalam-language channel Indiavision, wrote about an exchange she had with TK Hamsa, a senior leader of the ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist). Vishwanathan wrote that she had called Hamsa

seeking an appointment for an interview regarding an upcoming by-election in the Malappuram constituency. She wrote that the leader refused to entertain her request. “Do you want to make me AK Saseendran?” Vishwanathan said he responded. She added that Hamsa said he would give the interview to a male reporter, but not to a woman. Hamsa later told the online publication the News Minute that he had made the comment in jest.

On 31 March and 1 April, the Kerala chapter of the Network of Women Journalists in Media (NWMI)—an informal collective of women journalists—organised protests in Thiruvananthapuram, Kozhikode and Kochi. The NWMI’s members stay in touch through platforms such as WhatsApp, and it has nearly 230 members across Kerala, many of whom helped plan and mobilise journalists for these protests. According to Shahina KK, a senior editor with Open magazine who was at the forefront of these demonstrations, even though most news organisations instructed their staff to not protest, nearly 30 women journalists from various news organisations marched in Kochi, and close to 20 in Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode each.

“This incident is highly damaging and questions the credibility of woman journalists,” Shahina said. “It was our responsibility to tell the public that this is not what real journalism is.” The women journalists marched towards the various offices of Mangalam TV, holding placards that read “Proud to be a woman journalist” and “Female reporter is not equal to honey trap.” Dozens others joined in on social media. Women journalists began posting pictures of themselves holding placards with similar slogans. “Proud of my integrity, proud to be a woman journalist,” many of these placards read. Others added “Apology not accepted”—in response to Kumar’s admission of guilt.

On 31 March, the police registered an FIR against nine people, including Kumar and Jayachandran, under Section 67(A) of the Information and Technology Act, which proscribes publishing sexually-explicit material, as well as Section 120(B) of the Indian Penal Code—criminal conspiracy. On 2 April, the NWMI wrote a petition addressed to Kerala’s chief minister, which 136 women journalists signed. The petition reiterated the journalists’ demand that those at Mangalam TV be held accountable. “The current incident places entire woman journalists of the state under suspicion and humiliates them,” it read. “We believe it is necessary that whoever is responsible for this should be brought before law and punished.”

After Kumar’s admission, news of resignations at the channel began to emerge as well—Ashraf told me that at least five people apart from her left the organisation in protest. Some of these journalists then took to Facebook to mount their criticism. Deepak Malayamma, a reporter, declared in a Facebook post that he was ending his association with Mangalam TV. “I won’t do pimping for journalism,” Malayamma wrote. Ragesh Palazhi, an editor, announced that he was resigning from his position as a deputy news editor at Mangalam TV via a Facebook post on 30 March, shortly after Kumar announced that the audio clip was a part of a sting operation. “When on the first day of Mangalam television camp they asked us to get news by going

to any length, mine was the only voice that said this was not journalism,” he wrote. Addressing young journalists who entered the field with the ambition of becoming “the star of tomorrow,” he added, “Without experiencing the tears and bitterness, and the realities, you won’t be able to reach your destination.”

NithinAmbujan, a reporter at the Thrissur district bureau for the channel, had announced his decision to resign a few hours before the CEO’s address. Ambujan noted in a Facebook post that, owing to the channel’s actions, “freedom, security of women and the borders of ethics became more unclear.” He told me that he was forced to answer for the channel’s decision to telecast the audio clip. “We were the ones who had to get out with the mic to face the public,” he said. “When no explanation was coming from the higher authorities, I decided to quit.”

More disturbing allegations came to light in the days that followed. On 3 April, the Kerala high court heard a plea by the accused for anticipatory bail, but did not grant it. The next day, the police arrested five individuals—including Kumar and Jayachandran.

Between these same days, the journalist to whom Saseendran had allegedly made the remarks, filed a complaint before the director-general of police and the chief judicial magistrate at the Thiruvananthapuram district court. In the complaint, the journalist alleged that Saseendran had sexually harassed her in person and over the phone for several weeks before the clip was aired, and that though she had informed Kumar about this, he had urged her to refrain from filing an official complaint.

The journalist said in her complaint to the magistrate that she first met Saseendran while she was on an assignment for Mangalam TV. She alleged that, in November 2016, when she visited Saseendran’s official residence to conduct an interview regarding Kerala State Road Transport Corporation—a state-owned road-transportation company—he propositioned her. The complaint included troubling details: “As I sat across from him, he looked at me for some time and said, ‘You’re beautiful,’ and ‘How old are you?’” the complainant wrote. She added that Saseendran had asked her if she would like to join him on a trip he was soon to make, to Sri Lanka. She wrote that the minister also asked her to accompany him to his “personal room,” and asked if he could kiss her. She alleged that he then disrobed before her, and exposed himself. “I was scared and perplexed, and didn’t know what to do,” the complainant wrote. She added that she approached Kumar and said that she would like to file a complaint with the women’s commission. The CEO dissuaded her, she said. “He said that my name would appear in news reports, and that this was not a desirable outcome since the channel was due to be launched,” she said. “He said that if the minister continued to harass me, he would take up the matter.”

The complainant alleged that Saseendran continued to call her. At first, she wrote in the complaint, the minister threatened to have her thrown out of

the channel. Then, he began calling her at odd hours. The complainant added that she asked him not to call her, but the minister did not relent. “Often the calls were sexually explicit ... he was talking in a way that disgusted me,” she said in the complaint. Frustrated by the continued harassment, the complainant said that she decided to speak to Kumar again. (I attempted to contact Saseendran regarding the allegations against him—his phone was unreachable, and my email to the NCP office went unanswered.)

This time, she wrote, Kumar informed Jayachandran—the senior executive Ashraf had referred to during our conversation. Jayachandran “asked me if I had any proof,” the complainant wrote. “I told him I had recordings of the conversations, and handed them over ... I requested that I want to go live when the clip is aired, but I was not granted permission.”

I attempted many times to reach the complainant—the person who answered the phone when I called the Mangalam TV office to ask for her first told me that she was away on leave, and then, during a second call, that she was “not around.” The complainant’s cellphone was switched off.

On 25 April, Kumar and Jayachandran were granted bail on the condition that they would not enter the channel’s offices for two months. I sent queries addressed to both of them to Kumar’s email address and to Mangalam TV’s Delhi office. I did not receive a response.

The complainant is not the only woman whose account reflects a grueling ordeal at the hands of those at the channel. Although Ashraf received support on social-media platforms for her stand against the management once she had resigned, some employees unleashed a vilification campaign against her. “At that time, the employees at Mangalam who wanted to announce their support for the channel took the route of abusing me in their posts,” Ashraf told me. “Some women employees of Mangalam messaged me and accused me of doing this to gain fame.” She added that some of the editors employed with Mangalam TV “alleged that I had submitted fake certificates,” and that she had not been given the job due to her merit. Employees of the channel “raised many allegations, trying to insult me and ruin my career,” Ashraf said. (Ambujan, the Thrissur reporter, told me that he did not face vilification after he resigned, as Ashraf did.)

The incident has prompted several women journalists in Kerala to draw attention to sexist attitudes within the media industry, and the lack of infrastructural support for women journalists. In her Facebook post, Mohan, the journalist with the Metro Vaartha, listed various incidents that women in media organisations face. “26 March was not the only black day for women journalists,” she wrote. “Isn’t it also a black day whenever as women, we break news, or are rewarded at work, we hear that all-too-familiar snide comment—that we’re given this due to gender favouritism, or for our sexuality? Isn’t every such day a black day for women journalists?”

“Journalism in Malayalam, like every other industry, remains a man’s world,”

the author and former journalist KR Meera told me. Shahina KK said, “In every profession, women need to put in a lot more effort to withstand and make a mark for themselves. The media industry is more so.” “No magazine or newspaper would conduct an investigative series on the working conditions of women in media,” Meera added. “Are their basic needs taken care of? Are they granted same days of maternity leave as in other professions? Do they have anti-harassment committees in their offices?”

Both Meera and Mohan, along with several women who attended the NWMI protests, criticised the KUWJ—a more formally organised group than the NWMI—for failing to take action when the rights of women journalists in particular were involved. By their inaction, Shahina said, the KUWJ had effectively not stood by women journalists.

“KUWJ and its members are not insulated from the outside world which is sometimes ignorant of and sometimes blind to the necessity of upholding the democratic values of gender equality,” Meera said. She told me that, in early 2000, the organisation’s leaders had suggested that the KUWJ establish a women’s wing. Meera told me she had opposed the move. “I believe that a journalist’s union should bring more women to its leadership and provide a model for others rather than sidelining women by disconnecting them from the larger public space,” she said. Among its 62 office bearers, the KUWJ currently does not have a single woman journalist.

The women journalists’ criticism of the KUWJ appears to be borne out by the organisation’s actions in the days following the airing of the clip. In a press release it issued on 5 April, the KUWJ—which, on its website, claims to be the only organisation representing journalists in the state and lists one of its aims as “maintaining high standards of conduct and integrity in the profession”—termed the fallout of the Malayalam TV incident “a permanent taint on the media.” Instead of addressing the allegations of misconduct that had emerged against the channel, most of the press release was devoted to criticising the police investigation and the harassment that Mangalam TV’s staff and reporters faced from the police during it.

I spoke to Abdul Gafoor PA, a news editor at the Malayalam-language paper Madhyamam Daily, who is the president of the KUWJ. Gafoor insisted that the KUWJ represented all journalists in the state. While discussing the comments made by TK Hamsa, Gafoor told me, “This incident has affected the woman journalists a lot. Many female colleagues have also shared their difficulties with us.” Many in the community also criticised the KUWJ for granting membership to Kumar—according to the constitution of the organisation, Kumar, as the CEO of a channel, was not eligible to be a member. Gafoor told me that in a state committee meeting held on 8 April, the KUWJ state committee decided to not renew Kumar’s membership. He added that the KUWJ will seek explanations from the Mangalam TV employees involved in the airing of the tape, including Jayachandran. “Going forward, we would strongly oppose and take strong action against all those involved in this scandal,” he said. I asked Gafoor whether the KUWJ supported the NWMI

protests. “We were not aware of the plans to protest by NWMI. They didn’t consult us and we didn’t know,” he said.

According to Shahina, this incident will make it difficult for women journalists to enter the profession. “For a middle-level journalist or a fresher trying to gain foothold in the industry, this will put them on the back foot,” Shahina said, before adding, “This has been a discouraging experience for all those women who come into this industry against their family’s wishes, often ignoring the protests of their family.” “What has been violated here is the fundamental right of women journalists to do a job and earn their livelihood,” she said.

Shahina’s worry does not seem misplaced. Ashraf told me that, following the responses to her resignation, she has decided to take a break from her career as a journalist. “Neither have I applied to any other job, nor did I get call from any other channel so far,” she said. She repeatedly told me that she loved her job. “I object to much of its practices, but I am very passionate about my job,” Ashraf added. “But I can’t do this.”



LEENA GITA REGHUNATH

Leena Gita Reghunath is a freelancer based in the US. She was formerly the editorial manager at the Caravan, and has written for the New Indian Express, The Hindu, The Times of India and the Hindustan Times. She received the Mumbai Press Club’s RedInk award for her reporting in 2015 and 2018. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Southern Region).

29. TELANGANA WOMEN COPS FACE BIAS

February 08, 2016

Discrimination and sexual assault on women cops show the extent of male chauvinism in Telangana force.

Hyderabad: In the first week of September last year, Home Guard Minakshi (name changed) panicked when she got an unusual order from her boss, Deputy Superintendent of Police A. Lakshminarayana. Knowing she had lost her husband, the DSP, posted at the Armed Reserve in Ranga Reddy district, had been calling her over the phone. His harassment started weeks after she was posted to his office.

Though this order did not seem official, Minakshi had to follow it. "He asked me to go to his house," Minakshi later told investigation officials. She doubted his intentions, and she wanted to put the harassment to an end. "When I reached his house, I secretly switched on my phone's sound recorder," she said.

In his official quarters at Vikarabad, Lakshminarayana made advances to Minakshi. She begged him not to, but he was adamant. Their conversation was recorded on the phone. She took the evidence to the police.

On January 30, Telangana DGP suspended Lakshminarayana on the charges of molestation. "His act has brought disrepute to the police department," the DGP said.

Lakshminarayana is not the only one who brings 'disrepute' to TS police. The police department has many such officials. A few are caught and others are still having a free run.

"The extent of male chauvinism in this department is alarming. Even the Bihar police might not have such a horrible misogynistic working culture," said a senior woman IPS official. Not only junior cops, SI-level women personnel cannot escape the overt misogyny.

"In 2013, the woman sub inspector of Shankarpally was threatened by a male SI who was her junior. He even pointed a revolver at her. Both were later called to the police headquarters on this issue," said a source in the DGP office.

The woman SI, in charge of the police station was only asking her colleague to comply with the procedures, and that irked him.

In the last week of September 2014, then Abids inspector T. Uma Maheswar Rao was suspended on charges of sexual assault on a woman cop. Strangely, no criminal case was booked against him.

Last year, Secunderabad Railway SP Janardhanan was accused of misbehaving with a female colleague. Many junior women cops, especially those posted in district police stations, have a tough time getting married.

“It is quite possible that their immediate seniors and superiors exploit them sexually. That would harm the marriage prospects of these women, as gossips would have spread within the department and outside,” said a senior police officer.

WOMEN PERSONNEL GET RELEGATED AS ‘RECEPTIONIST’ AT POLICE STATIONS

While top cops talk big on ‘people-friendly policing’ and ‘community policing’, many women personnel are put as receptionists and many are posted at the front desk of police stations. Other duties of women cops include bandobust and escort. Crime investigation is largely monopolised by men.

“In women police stations, female cops might get a chance to investigate marital dispute cases. It is very hard to find women cops who investigate other cases in common police stations or in special wings of the state police. Whenever I was posted to a police station, I was given administrative charges, never crime investigation,” said a woman sub-inspector.

Women SIs and CIs are usually pushed to “insignificant” posts in the state police headquarters, commissioner’s office, IT and passport verification cell. Hyderabad has no female station house officers, except in women PS and Lake police.

IPS WOMEN OFFICIALS FACE VEILED MISOGYNY

Gender bias against women IPS officials in TS police is played out in a different way. Their postings get delayed and there are high chances of them getting bullied by male officers. They often get transferred to insignificant posts in administrative wings, or are compelled to go on deputation.

Women officers also face direct and indirect misogyny from their male superiors. “Once, a very senior official told me that he could not see me as a police officer. He said that I reminded him of a woman who cooks in the kitchen,” said a woman IPS officer.

The matter of postings is difficult for women officers. “In order to get im-

Women officers who perform well are featured in the media, but this irks their seniors.

“There is always discouragement from a few officials. Once, a DIG asked me what ‘equation’ I had with reporters. He indicated that I was bribing the media to get coverage,” said a woman IPS official, who had earlier served as a district SP. Another IPS officer said that she was warned by a higher official against being close to the media.

THE GENDER BIAS IN AMENITIES

The TS police recruitment this year will be unique with the government reserving a third of the posts for women. The decision is meant to address the serious gender imbalance in the force. However, right from the buildings to dress, gear and other facilities, everything is designed for men and not gender-sensitive. The facilities are less favourable for women in district police stations. According to sources in the state police headquarters, 98 per cent of the state’s police stations do not have separate washrooms and dressing rooms for women cops. There are no specific barracks for them. There is no system to address their special needs. In special meetings convened on January 9 in the police commissioner’s office, women cops expressed their grievances. They wanted separate washrooms and dressing rooms, these cops told the additional commissioner of police Swathi Lakra. “We are forced to use common washrooms. There is health risk in using these unhygienic washrooms. It is impossible for women to change their dress in police station,” said a woman SI. Another problem women cops face is the lack of facilities for their special needs. “Women on duty during pregnancy or their monthly period have to suffer. There is no place to dispose of sanitary pads and no place to take rest,” said a woman head constable. In a survey conducted among women police personnel in the districts, most respondents sought drastic improvements in the existing conditions. They asked for separate barracks. Many were not comfortable with the anti-riot and bullet-proof gear they wore. The uniform issued by the department is also uncomfortable. In Hyderabad and Cyberabad, only a few renovated stations like the one in Abids have separate facilities for women cops.



ABDUL RAHOOF KK

Abdul Rahoof K K worked for the Deccan Chronicle as a senior reporter before moving to a non-Profit Organisation based in Hong Kong. He has covered various topics such as criminal justice, human rights, disasters, health, women and child welfare, road safety and insurgencies. He was one of the 12 journalists from around the world selected by WHO and International Center For Journalists for their International Safety Fellowship in 2016. Recipient of LMAAGS 2015-16 Best News Report (Southern Region).

30. A NATURAL INSTINCT FOR WEAVING HELPS PATCH TATTERED LIVES

August 17, 2017 | The quint

This is the story of Nandini Moochahary, Thringing Boro, Rethe Basumatary and others in Assam's Chirang District, many of them ruwathis – girls who stay with the families who employed them, and are considered not eligible for marriage. But thanks to a weaving project started by The Ant (Action Northeast Trust) in 2002, they finally found freedom. A new world opened where they realised that their traditional weaving skills could be a source of livelihood. Being a ruwathi could not suppress her fiery spirit. Even as she worked relentlessly all day long at her employer's house, something within Nandini Moochahary said this was not what she was meant for. Entangled in the warp of a tough life, Nandini, however, always felt her destiny lay elsewhere. Harsh reality struck her early as River Aie swelled up each year near their house in Assam's remote Chirang District. Everytime Aie refused to subside, Nandini's heart sank. Every time their miniscule land and house got submerged, they rebuilt it painstakingly with whatever little was left. Until one day in 1977-78, her house caught in the swirling waters of Aie, vanished from her vision forever.



Women weaving fabric in their village in Chirang District.

Not left with anything more to rebuild her house, Nandini, just a teenager then, was forced to leave her native place far behind to eke out a living. Not only for herself but for her huge family of four sisters, two brothers and her parents, who otherwise would have faced starvation. Nandini left for Karbi Anglong, one of Assam's poorest districts, to stay with her uncle. Like other Bodo girls, she too had to work as a housemaid in one of her wealthy relative's home, doing everything from sweeping, mopping and cooking to tilling fields and babysitting for just Rs 400 to 700 a month, so that her large family back home could survive.

Called ruwathis, girls like Nandini often stay with families where they are employed. Because of the underlying sexual connotation – of a feeling of already belonging to someone else – these girls are never considered for marriage and become social outcasts in a way.

Nandini worked hard all through the day, getting little time for herself. While at work, her memories of her family, her little house by the side of Aie, her banter with her friends and mother while weaving the dokhona, their tradition wear on the home loom, kept flooding her mind. Being a Bodo, she could not forget weaving, an integral and intrinsic part of Bodo culture.

When she returned home on a break in 2002, Nandini's deft fingers could not resist working the loom and weaving in the intricate unique Bodo motifs like spinach, peacock, water hyacinth, tortoise, mountain and pigeon's eyes on the dokhona. She seemed to enjoy it much more than being a housemaid. One of her neighbour's then told her about Undangshree Dera Camp (meaning An Abode of Freedom), a camp run by Aagor, a weaving project started by The Ant (Action Northeast Trust) in 2002. Aagor means design, literally designed to promote the traditional craft of rural Bodo tribeswomen into a significant source of livelihood.

The camp, specifically of 30 women, was to help the poorest Bodo women and rehabilitate the maids, who took care of their large families. For six months, they would let the women live with them, weave with them and would then sell her handicraft. The fair trade wages they paid left the women with a savings of around Rs 20000.

Nandini says her urge to break away from the ruwathi bondage was so strong that she literally jumped at the God-sent opportunity. She recalls: "I never wanted to be a ruwathi or remain so. I was restless and wanted to break free. And as weaving was a part of our lives always, I grabbed the opportunity." Nandini, a master weaver and designer, soon became a permanent staff at Aagor. Today, she can speak English and Hindi almost fluently and has represented Aagor at many international platforms like international trade fairs, and been to expos in Kolkata, Delhi, Rajasthan and Ethiopia as well. Similar is the story of Thringing Boro, whose husband ran away from home to escape the burden of loans. Thringing was left with a mess of unpaid loans, threatening money-lenders and three young children, without a house. For her, too, her weaving knowledge rescued her from the cycle of loans. Thringing is today one of the most dependable weavers in Aagor,

weaving an average of 30 metres of fabric and earning about Rs 1500 a month. She has been able to repay nearly half of the original loan and wants to build her own house in a few years. Rethe Basumatary, 30, was also a ruwathi till she joined Aagor in 2005. She soon became one of the fastest weavers, producing excellent quality in short amount of time. She is now supporting her siblings' education. Weaving on the traditional looms at home practically weaved in a little magic into the lives of these women. The women soon formed a weaving organisation, run by them, and became self-reliant in many ways. The weaving organisation was formed on the principle that the most effective way to run it was to hand over the reins to the actual weavers, who know the intricacies of weaving and would be able to predict and overcome the obstacles that came along.

An executive committee consisting of only weavers looks after all the departments like weaving, tailoring, accounts, stocks and villages. This has led to women weavers taking more ownership of the organisation, its mission and its output. Aagor now works with weavers in 12 villages, divided into three clusters, Udangshree Dera, Rowmari and Mangolian to make it convenient to distribute yarn, monitor progress and collect fabric. Each of the three clusters is headed by a cluster coordinator who oversees activity in all the areas and reports back to the manager on a weekly basis regarding the status of the fabric woven and yarn needed.

Loishi, who weaves at her own village along with her friends, says she works not more than three hours at the loom. Rest of the time, she devotes to her household work. And that leaves her with around Rs 1500 per month, which is not much but "better than not earning anything". Each of the three clusters has a set of permanent weavers – those who weave fabric worth at least Rs 5000 per year, who are given a health insurance by The Ant and awarded a bonus of 10 per cent per annum. By 2005, the women had set up Aagor Daagra Afad (ADA), a collective for weaving and marketing of Bodo handlooms. It was a runaway success and doubled sales every year for the first six years.

ADA then aspired to enter the retail market, thus the first The Ants Store came up in Bengaluru in 2007. The shop is a retail initiative to showcase Northeast handlooms and crafts and to generate revenue to sustain livelihoods of people from that region. More such shops are on the anvil in the city. Smitha Murthy, designer and founder trustee of ADA, who gives the design inputs for its products, feels the real challenge was create a market for the women weavers' goods at a price that earned them fair wages. Fair wages and the dignity it provided, made marginalised women like Nandini, Thringing, Rethe feel empowered. Their confidence level now run high, they no longer run away from troubles. Instead they confront them with ease, knowing difficulties can always be overcome. Says Nandini: "Every Bodo woman knows weaving as it is done in every home. But we never knew that it could become our source of livelihood and make us stand on our feet and give us a voice as well." With fair wages, the women are also trained to invest their savings from the six-month programme in livelihoods such as

weaving, agriculture, and off-farm activities. As demand for Northeast and especially Bodo handicrafts grow, the number of women who have benefited, has risen over the years. With better incomes ranging between Rs 12000 and Rs 15000 per month, the women now enjoy greater control over their lives. With the mothers empowered, their children now have a chance at education and a better future



RAKHEE ROYTALUKDAR

Currently a freelancer, Rakhee Roytalukdar has worked with The Telegraph, The Times of India, The Pioneer, Abroad News Service and United News of India covering varied beats, be it politics, elections, wildlife, tourism, women, gender, human interest stories or investigative stories. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Western Region).

31. THE PRICE OF LIFE

July 01, 2017 | The Caravan

The trafficked children of the red-light area in Silchar

IN MID DECEMBER OF 2011, Agnes Kharshiing received information that a 16-year-old girl had run away from Radhamadhab Road—a red-light area in Assam’s Silchar town—and returned to her home in Shillong. Kharshiing, who had been working for women’s rights for about six years, decided to seek the girl out. She found her in a Shillong slum, where the survivor was living with one of her siblings. She told Kharshiing about the horrific three years she had spent in Silchar— she had been sexually exploited, and put through physical and mental torture by clients, brothel owners and police officers. She also told Kharshiing of how common the trafficking of minors was in Radhamadhab Road.

Soon after, Kharshiing resolved to organise a rescue mission to Radhamadhab Road, and asked the girl if she would accompany her. The survivor agreed. The red-light area—the biggest in the Northeast by most accounts—is run from a narrow lane inside a quieter part of Silchar’s main market, in the heart of the town. The buildings and shanties on each side of the lane, along with a few smaller houses along connected alleys, are mostly brothels. There are roughly 70 such places, each of which can have up to 20 girls. Every house has an owner known as a “madam,” or “malkin,” who procures girls from traffickers and pays off the local police. The houses are guarded by well-built women. Outside, girls sit on stools waiting for customers. Kharshiing contacted Anil Kumar Jha, who was then an additional director general of police in Assam, to help organise the mission. Jha was reluctant at first. “He said, „Why do you want to go there? It’s a dangerous area,” Kharshiing told me over the phone last August. “„They will attack us with daus”—large Assamese knives. But the activist was adamant and managed to persuade the officer to offer help. (When I called Jha last December, he recalled providing assistance for the rescue, but did not comment on Kharshiing’s recollection of his initial reaction.)

On 20 January 2012, after a month of planning, Kharshiing and the girl who had escaped Silchar accompanied about ten personnel of the Assam and Meghalaya police to Radhamadhab Road. During the raid, which lasted about two hours, they searched about three or four brothels, including the one from which the survivor had escaped. The girl even showed Kharshiing

the room she once lived in. “It was dingy,” Kharshiing recalled. “There was a picture of Jesus there.” Most of the lane lay dark and deserted, and the raid was prolonged due to the fact that nobody could be found. One girl, who had been trafficked from Shillong as a minor and knew Kharshiing, ran out of one of the brothels to the rescuers as she heard the survivor’s voice. She had spent years in the same brothel that the survivor had escaped from. The girl later told Kharshiing that the brothel owner had instructed the girls to hide prior to the raid, but she had decided against it.

Kharshiing now believes that the brothel owners were tipped off by the local police and hid minors working for them. But the rescue team still managed to rescue four girls, including a nine-year-old child whose mother had left her behind when she fled the brothel.

IN THE LAST DECADE, Assam has emerged as a hub for child trafficking. According to the National Crime Record Bureau’s 2015 data, Assam recorded 1,317 cases of child trafficking that year—the highest for any state in the country. These cases accounted for 38 percent of the national figures. In November 2015, the Crime Investigation Department of Assam released a report stating “at least 4,754 children” in the state had gone missing since 2012. Of these, the report said, 2,753 were girls. The report also said that in 2014 alone, 129 girls were forced into prostitution by traffickers.

“Assam, mainly Guwahati, serves as a transit point not just for the Northeast but also for other neighbouring countries,” including those in Southeast Asia, Miguel Queah, a child-rights activist, told me. A report published by the NGO Population Council in 2014 counted Assam among the four states where minor girls trafficked from Bangladesh were typically initiated into commercial sexual exploitation.

Due to ethnic conflicts and annual floods, which displace millions of residents, as well as the state’s long history of economic underdevelopment and poverty, a large section of Assam’s population is extremely vulnerable to trafficking. Traffickers often lure parents into handing over their children by promising to find them well-paying jobs. Even though 501 people were arrested in Assam for sex trafficking between 2010 and 2012, the state recorded a conviction rate of just 1 percent in these cases.

Silchar, located in the state’s southernmost corner, has emerged as the trafficking trade’s most prominent destination. With a population of roughly 136,000, most of which speaks Sylheti, Silchar is the second-largest urban area in Assam, after Guwahati, the capital, but many locals believe that it is not sufficiently developed to be considered a city yet. Large open drains line narrow roads, and the town is struggling to deal with the increasing number of people, houses and vehicles. The town’s connectivity with the rest of Assam has improved significantly in recent years. A broad-gauge rail track was constructed a few years ago. Silchar’s airport has been seeing more traffic, which has meant affordable airfare. The surrounding national highways, too, are being renovated. The border of Bangladesh is only about three hours by

road, which has brought a large number of immigrants into the town over time. Silchar is also easily accessible from the states of Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura.

There are no definite statistics or data regarding the trafficking of women and children to the redlight area in Silchar, but the prevalence of the activity is common knowledge among the town's authorities and residents. Local and regional newspapers often report on the rescue of minors from the red-light area, which is constantly referred to as a trafficking hub. Civil-society organisations, including those that have worked closely with sex workers here, admit that the area is unsafe to enter for anyone who is not a customer or someone the brothel owners are familiar with.

A 2012 report prepared by a team of the Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights put the number of children inside the red-light area at 100. The report also stressed that “in spite of high risk of visiting the area, the Commission went ahead with its task” of reviewing it. According to many survivors' accounts, trafficked girls in Silchar are often sent to red-light areas in other states for brief periods of time, which indicates an interstate nexus between brothels. A police station lies about 100 metres away from Radhamadhab Road, but there has been a spate of allegations that the local police is in cahoots with brothel owners.

Over a period of eight months, starting in August 2016, I spoke to many local residents of Silchar, two minors who escaped the red-light area, and several human-rights activists, social workers and senior police officers in the Northeast. Having studied multiple cases of rescue in this time, I learnt that in spite of rampant trafficking of children to Silchar for commercial sexual exploitation, the authorities have failed miserably in preventing these crimes, and in rehabilitating the survivors who have escaped or been rescued. On many occasions, children and young women have found themselves back in the red-light area after they were rescued. This state of affairs indicts not only the law-enforcement agencies, who have been accused of delaying investigations and abetting trafficking, but also the judiciary and various levels of government.

ONE WEEKEND IN AUGUST last year, I spoke over the phone with the girl who escaped Silchar in 2011. She is now 22 years old. When I asked her about her life, she said, “Where do I start? There's too much to say. It might reduce you to tears.”

At a very early age, she lost her mother to cancer, and then her father, a wage labourer, to a stomach disease. She lived with her five siblings—three brothers and two sisters—in a rented home in Shillong. She was the third child, and her elder brother was the only earning family member. “I never went to school because we were poor,” she said.

Before she even turned ten years old, she was trafficked to Mumbai. She spent a year in an ashram in Thane district's Dongri area. At this time the girl

was not harmed—probably because she was too young, she said. She was rescued by the Shillong police and brought back.

The next time, when she was 13 years old, a man she knew, who worked as a driver in Shillong, asked her if she was willing to work in a biscuit shop in another town in Meghalaya in return for money being sent to her family every month. She agreed. “He gave me Rs 500 the day he took me away, and I remember giving it to my brothers and sisters, telling them I was going away for work,” she told me. When she arrived in Radhamadhab Road, she realised she had been sold into a red-light area. When the brothel owner asked her to sleep with customers, she refused. “The owner started hitting me and said she had bought me with money,” she told me. “So, I said okay, now I’ll have to somehow manage and live here. I used to cry every day, thinking of my brothers and sisters.”

Recalling her time in the red-light area, she said there were ten, twenty customers every day. “Sometimes two at a time. ... We had to do whatever the malkin asked us to do.” The malkin would sometimes burn her with cigarettes. “She did not give me a single rupee,” the survivor added. “Sometimes I would force the customers to pay me directly. But she would find out and hit me before snatching the money away.” On days when the brothel was tipped off about a rescue operation, the girls were hidden in boxes or sent to a nearby hospital, where they waited until the raid was over. The girl also said she had gotten pregnant, and that the brothel had forced her to abort the baby. “They killed my baby when I was eight months pregnant,” she said. “The doctor gave me some medicines and it was done. They have no emotions there. They just want you to work.”

She told me that some girls are manipulated into believing that this kind of work is fine, but that she never bought that argument. “If someone selected me, I would turn my face away and ask him to get lost,” she said. “But I had to eventually go to him or my malkin would hit me.”

It was three years before she attempted an escape. This was the only part from her short life that she recalled with some positivity. One night, she received a severe beating from her malkin. “I told her, „Hit me as much as you want, but if I live today, I will make sure none of the young girls live here,” she said. She had become friends with a girl from Guwahati, also a minor, who had been sold into the red-light area five years earlier. Both decided to escape.

The next morning, she told me, while it was raining, she asked her madam’s daughter, who was keeping a watch on the girls, to buy puris for breakfast. “As soon as she left, my friend and I made a run for it,” she said. “Some men tried running after us, but we escaped.” They took an auto first and then a bus, where some locals drew attention to them, saying they were from the red-light area, but they remained undeterred. They found a newspaper shop at a taxi stand, and sought help from the shopkeeper. “We were so hungry and thirsty,” she said. “We were not even wearing slippers or dupattas.” The shopkeeper allowed them to hide in his shop for a couple of hours as the

malkin's son, along with women from the red-light area, searched the taxi stand for them. He gave them food, some cash and a mobile phone, and bought them tickets on a shared jeep going to Shillong. A few army men in the jeep promised to protect them, and paid for their meals on the way.

The girls reached Shillong at 1 am. The survivor told me she was unable to find her old home, and that she and the other the girl spent the night under a pear tree. Over the next few weeks, she found her siblings scattered across the town. The girls managed to find a rented home, and lived there for a while. About three months later, the girl from Shillong asked her friend to go back home to Guwahati.

THOUGH EVIDENCE, especially in the form of testimonies, points to the fact that trafficking in Silchar has been mounting, there is little acknowledgment of the problem from government and law-enforcement agencies, even as many police personnel have been implicated in the crime. I confronted several police officers over the lack of action on the front.

"We can't go by people's perceptions, we need facts and complaints," Rakesh Roushan, the superintendent of police of Cachar district, in which Silchar is the largest urban area, told me when I met him in his office in March. "Whenever there's a complaint or we receive information, we take action."

I told him that many of the children who have escaped or have been rescued from the red-light area have testified to unchecked trafficking of minors, and that many still remain inside. "We do not have information that things are happening on a large scale," Roushan told me. "We do not think trafficking is a major issue here." Roushan, who had been recently posted in Silchar, said he was not "up-to-date about all the previous cases," and that he would be eager to look into them.

I then met Sudhangshu Das, the deputy superintendent of police, who was distracted through most of our conversation, having simultaneous discussions with a police officer called SwapanDey and another journalist. When I got a chance to speak, I reminded him of our telephonic conversations and told him I wanted to discuss trafficking in Silchar. Das was insistent that I go inside the red-light area to clear my false perceptions about trafficking and the involvement of the local police. Most other people I spoke to advised me against visiting the redlight area on my own, but a few hours after speaking to Das, I decided take a look at the area from the outside. The entrance lane had been barricaded with a bamboo fence. Nearby, there were a few paan shops and small dhabas that sold home-brewed liquor. A local who was accompanying me was uncomfortable throughout. He said the residents were all aware of trafficking and police involvement, but there was little anybody could do, and they had decided to quietly go about their lives.

"Even if we shut prostitution down, it will spread everywhere," Das had told me in his office. "It has already spread around Silchar. Prostitution is such an old profession." I asked him about the children in the red-light area and if the

police officers around it knew what was happening. Dey interrupted to say that they didn't go into the red-light area looking for children—suggesting that he thought child trafficking was not a problem there. The police did go in, he said, to arrest men who had committed petty crimes, such as theft.

Das had another theory about the presence of children in the brothels. “The red-light area has been there since I was born,” he told me. “We don't disturb it because the children are of the sex workers and the owners. Of course they will have children there.” I told him again that the children rescued from there had been trafficked, and asked him about specific cases, but he refused to answer my questions until I had visited the red-light area. After the interview, I learnt from an old newspaper article, republished in a research book by the Silchar-based NGO Barak Valley Welfare Development Society, that SwapanDey, who is now in charge of the Udharpolice station, was one of four police officers suspended in 1999 for returning a girl who escaped from the red-light area to the owners of the brothel to which she had been trafficked.

Next, I visited the Silchar office of Ujjawala—a scheme by the central government to prevent trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. The staff there told me that 28 girls had been rescued from the red-light area since the scheme's inception in 2012. Twenty of these cases were registered under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, they recalled, and only two cases had resulted in convictions. Survivors and their families were afraid of long legal procedures and the dangers involved in filing cases against traffickers, the staff said. The office had not received funds from the government for about two years. Every time they called the ministry of women and child development, they told me, they were informed that their funds were being processed. Ujjawala is now struggling to carry out its functions in the area.

In a statement to the press, in 2012, the then deputy commissioner of Cachar district, Harendara Kumar Dev Mahanta, said that the government had decided to shut down the red-light area since “such illegal activities cannot be carried out in the heart of the town.” But it is clear that the district administration did not follow the statement up with any concrete action. The government has not carried out any detailed investigation, survey or eviction in the area yet.

The only government body to visit the area with some regularity has been the Assam State Commission for Protection of Child Rights. I spoke to RunumiGogoi, who was the chairperson of ASCPCR until May this year, at her Guwahati office in August 2016.

Recalling a visit she made to Radhamadhab Road in 2015, she said that district administrators accompanying her walked with their hands covering their noses because of how unhygienic the place was. Gogoi said she believed that all trafficked minors had been hidden prior to her visit. Only the madams, she said, reluctantly came forward to talk. However, she happened to see a girl who seemed to be about six to seven years old. After exchange-

ing a few words with her and the woman who claimed to be her guardian, Gogoi had reason to believe that the child would be put to work in a few years. I asked her if she could not have rescued the girl on the basis of her suspicion. "If I rescue one girl, what will happen? I won't be able to go back inside again," Gogoi said. Following her visit, she sent a proposal to concerned departments regarding the rehabilitation of the children of sex workers. She did not receive a reply.

IN THE AFTERMATH of the 2012 raid, which the girl who escaped Silchar in 2011 went on, Kharshiing heard more damning information from those rescued. One of them told her that when she had once tried to escape along with another trafficked girl, two policemen captured them and returned them to the brothel in exchange for a hefty sum of money.

In February 2012, Kharshiing filed two separate complaints with the National Human Rights Commission, or NHRC, on behalf of the survivors. One alleged that "the girls have been trafficked and sexually exploited and the perpetrators were assisted by the police of the SilcharSadar police station"—which lies next to the red-light area—and the second demanded compensation for the survivors. In response, the NHRC called for an investigation into the involvement of police officers, and directed the Assam government to compensate survivors under the Assam Survivor Compensation Scheme, which provides a sum of Rs 1 lakh to any survivor of human trafficking who requires rehabilitation.

In a letter addressed to Kharshiing, dated 28 January 2014, the NHRC noted that Cachar's superintendent of police had put down in a statement to the commission that the complainants had been unable to identify any policemen involved with the accused traffickers. But the commission added that the statement lacked merit since the policemen had not been called in for an identification parade. The NHRC further emphasised that "there appears to be a deliberate attempt to cover up the involvement of the policemen in the trafficking business and to save the policemen against whom specific allegation was made." The commission said that it had asked the superintendent of police to send a report on further investigation by 5 March 2014.

Yet it was only in November 2015 that the police called one of the rescued girls for an identification parade. "We reached early morning but were made to wait till evening in the same police station whose officers were involved in exploiting the girls," Kharshiing said. The girls identified Mintu Seal, an assistant sub-inspector posted in a police station in Karimganj district, and TapanNath, a former home guard, from a group of 20 men; both of them had earlier worked at the SilcharSadar police station. A month prior to the identification parade, during the celebration of the sixty-seventh Assam Police Day, Seal had been one of 44 officers awarded a commendation medal by the then chief minister, TarunGogoi. The 22-year-old who escaped Silchar in 2011 also recalled with disgust during our conversation in August that Nath had once come seeking her services, and that she had declined.

Kharshiing has not heard from the police in the 18 months since the identification parade. The commission continues to await further information from authorities. Rajveer Singh, who was the superintendent of police in Cachar district from August 2015 to October 2016, told me over the phone in August that a charge sheet has been filed against the two officers, and that action would be taken according to court orders.

The 22-year-old escapee, in the meantime, went on another rescue mission with police from Assam and Meghalaya in 2014. She was pregnant then. She remembered that, on this mission, a particular obese officer from Guwahati had chatted and smoked with brothel owners and even offered to help them if they bribed him. "I did not have a phone or I would have recorded it," she said. "I told him that this is not good." The officer, annoyed, threatened to leave her in the redlight area.

She told me that many of the malkins tried to attack her and abused her. "But they couldn't do anything," she said. "The two Shillong police who were with me were very nice." She recalled one of the malkins telling her, "You come here again and again to pull out girls, and finish our business? We won't let you. We'll finish you instead." She said that they were able to rescue a woman and her child on that mission. There were many other girls who wanted to escape and be rescued, she told me, but they had either been scared into silence, or hidden away.

EARLY LAST YEAR, a rescue mission to Radhamadhab Road conducted by two NGOs—the Nepal-based Maiti Nepal and the Meghalaya-based Impulse—exposed serious flaws in the system meant to provide justice and relief to the survivors.

On 2 January 2016, a few days after two investigative officers of Maiti Nepal mapped out the red-light area for the operation, members of Impulse and the local police conducted a raid that led to the rescue of 11 girls, including three minors. Hasina Kharbhih, the founder of Impulse, who was a part of the operation along with another woman colleague, told me that, ahead of the raid, she had been in touch directly with Assam's director general of police, Mukesh Sahay. She sought assistance from the local police only 15 minutes prior to the raid to ensure there was no tip-off, and yet, when the rescue team entered the red-light area, they found the gates locked and most children hidden away. Information had reached the brothel owners anyway.

The three rescued minors, all of whom were from Nepal, were sent to a government-registered rehabilitation home in Guwahati. The activist Miguel Queah, who spoke to the other eight rescued women while they were in the State Home for Women and Children in Guwahati, told me that they asked one question repeatedly: there were so many children in the red-light area so "why didn't you rescue them?" One of the rescued women, a 27-year-old who had three sons and one daughter, told Queah that there were "pimps" who sourced women from all over the country and sold them to brothel owners in Radhamadhab Road. She also said that the brothel owners treated

the women poorly and kept all or most of the money that came from the clients. Most of the eight rescued women said that initially they had been trafficked to the area or had been forced into sex work, but, eventually, they started pursuing the work willingly due to a lack of other options.

However, a 25-year-old said that she had been made to perform sex work against her will. She had been trafficked roughly ten years earlier, while still a minor, when she was employed as a domestic helper in a Guwahati home. She now wanted to return to her own home. She told Queah about being confined in a small room in Radhamadhab Road from 10 pm to 8 am every day, and being physically abused when she refused to work. Another woman sought government assistance so that she could save herself from being forced back into the red-light area. Two of the eight women rescued were from Nepal, Queah said, and were especially worried and vulnerable because their families back home had been severely affected after the 2015 earthquake. They did not know what to return to. Queah prepared a detailed report with all information for the court proceedings to follow. He also included specific recommendations and mentioned the fact that one of the women was willing to give up sex work and instead assist in curbing the trafficking of minors from Nepal into Silchar, if she was assured state protection.

But things turned out differently in the state home. In April 2016, a local Bengali daily reported that the women had been tricked back into the red-light area. In April 2016, the 25-year-old who was trafficked ten years ago escaped again and went to the police station to lodge a complaint against her brothel owner and her husband. Speaking to a few reporters, she recounted that when they were in the state home in Guwahati, brothel owners in the red-light area of Silchar contacted them through a few men. They offered to help the women search for their respective addresses so they could all return home. In spite of being suspicious of the offer, she recalled in the article, it was so intolerable staying in the state home that the women eventually agreed. According to many survivors, the state home has been hostile to them—they have complained of misbehaviour by staff, unclean toilets and a lack of food.

The women signed the required papers, and the state home agreed to release them, as documented in a court order in Queah's possession. None of the concerned NGOs were notified. In a subsequent court hearing, men from the red-light area brought in people who posed as guardians for the women, and the women played along, believing that it was all for their own good. After the court passed its judgment asking that the women be sent to their respective homes with the "guardians," the women were taken back to the red-light area. After about two months, the 25-year-old who was first trafficked ten years earlier mustered up the courage to escape following a bout of torture by her brothel owner. The article reported that she was angry and upset with the NGOs, which she said had rescued them but abandoned them in a sorry state.

Kharbhih, who only found out about the release of the eight rescued women

during a visit to Silchar a few days after the court order had been passed, went seeking names and contact details of custodians with whom they were sent, without success. She was exasperated that her NGO had not been informed of the court hearing and the survivors' subsequent release, even though the organisation is a petitioner in the case.

"Our recommendations were very clear," Queah told me last August. "For the 25-year-old, we provided her home address and the name of her father, asking that her family be located, and a probation officer or the district social welfare officer study the social background of the family through a home visit. She, and the other women, should have been restored only after these verifications were done."

Along with Queah's detailed report, Kharbhih's NGO, Impulse, had also prepared and sent a psychological report to the state home, saying that the eight women required a few more months of counselling and time to recover in the rehabilitation centre. "We sent a local team to Silchar to trace back the girls, but in the absence of sufficient information, like phone numbers, it wasn't easy," she told me over the phone last September. "It wasn't easy to enter the red-light area again either."

When I asked DSP Sudhangshu Das if he was aware of the eight rescued women being tricked back into the red-light area, he said he had received no such information. SP Rakesh Roushan, on the other hand, told me that he had heard that the eight women had willingly returned to the redlight area, and cited the incident as an example of how sex work was more of a social and economic issue than a criminal one. He said he was not aware of the details of the girls being tricked.

The case gets murkier. In a letter dated 1 June 2016, addressed to the superintendent of police, crime investigation department, Queah lodged a First Information Report stating that two of the three Nepali minors who were rescued along with the eight women had revealed in their counselling sessions that "one or more men from the NGO, involved in the rescue mission, had sex with them." Queah requested investigation and action against the perpetrators. The letter was forwarded to Cachar's then superintendent of police, Rajveer Singh, who told me last August that he was aware of the incident and that a case had been registered in Silchar. To date, however, the police have not responded to Queah's letter, or approached the two girls for their statements. "I've worked on trafficking cases in several districts across Assam, and the SPs have always been responsive and willing to coordinate," Queah told me. "This is the only time when there has been no correspondence or action at all in months."

After spending about a year in a government-registered rehabilitation home in Guwahati, the minors were sent back to their respective homes in Nepal in December 2016. Kharbhih said she has written to the anti-human-trafficking unit headquarters in Guwahati, asking them to provide a directive to the AHTU branch in Cachar to speed up the investigation and provide an update regarding its status. In Silchar, Poulomi Dutta Roy, the former director of Ujjawala, has been volunteering on the case on behalf of Impulse, but said she has received little cooperation from the police so far.

When I met a child-rights activist familiar with the case in a coffee shop in

Guwahati last August, he told me that he did not expect any justice for the Nepali minors in the case. The three Nepali minors all belonged to remote parts of Nepal, he told me. Two of them—one of whom worked in the red-light area in Silchar for two months and another for a year—had been trafficked by an agent who promised them well-paying jobs, while the third minor had been trafficked by a relative about five years earlier, when she was 12 years old. “They were so scared,” the activist told me. “They did not even reveal their real names for a long time. They couldn’t trust anyone.” In the counselling session, according to the activist, they recalled being beaten, watching others get beaten, and being locked up in small rooms time and again. If they ever tried to run away, the police would pick them up, sexually abuse them and drop them back at the brothel. They had been sent to other red-light areas as well, including one in Delhi for a brief period of time. “Most rescued girls recount similar forms of exploitation,” the activist told me. “But who’s listening?”

Since the rescue of the 11 girls in January last year, a staffer under the Ujjawala project in Silchar told me, the brothel owners have further restricted entry into the area to control the flow of information to outsiders. Queah and Kharbhih are adamant that a Public Interest Litigation be filed in the courts, as they think there is enough evidence to shut the brothels down, and rescue and rehabilitate all those trafficked. But even as this quest for serious action against the red-light area continues, the sexual exploitation of trafficked women seems to be spreading beyond the red-light area. According to Paulami Dutta Roy, there are now several trafficking networks in seemingly quiet Silchar, and prostitution is being carried out not just in the red-light area but also in rented flats and homes, where clients are directed through social media.

ON A COLD, GLOOMY MORNING this March, I met the girl who escaped Silchar in 2011 in a one-room shanty she lives in with her three children. We talked sitting on a wooden single bed, while her children fought and played around us. Before I met her, I had spoken to her twice on the phone last year, once in August and then in December. She had sounded upbeat during both of those conversations. But this time, she seemed tired and troubled. Her life since her escape had been fraught with struggle, and she repeated several times that the government should have compensated her with a house instead of with money.

She told me that one of her friends who had escaped had returned to the red-light area and that another had sold her own child to earn some money. “This other girl, I had rescued her in 2012, she sells drugs now,” she said. “She has such a good life now, she even owns a car. She asked me to do so as well, but I refused out of respect for Agnes. I told her that I don’t want to earn money by ruining someone’s life.”

She sustains herself on the income of her younger sister, who works as a nurse in a missionary home. She said she faces discrimination from local authorities because of her past. As a result, she has no voter card or ration

card to help her avail of government subsidies and schemes. She tried building a house with the money given to her by the government, but said she was cheated, as the land did not belong to the person who sold it to her. She was forced to vacate the house.

“What work will I look for?” she asked. “Who will give me work when I have three kids? If they had given me a house, I could live there peacefully and also open a shop or something.”

Most survivors face similar problems. In Ujjawala’s shelter home in Silchar, I met a 17-year-old who was trafficked to the red-light area when she was about 11 years old. A few weeks after she was taken in, her brothel owner forced her to take pills that induced menstruation, and put her to work soon after. She, too, recounted instances of torture. “My owner mostly kicked me here,” she said, pointing towards her pelvic region.

She also talked of being locked up, and of police officers who acted as informants for the brothel owners. “Some days we would not get time to eat, there were so many men coming in,” she said. “There would be more than five customers every day, all night and sometimes even during the day. We wouldn’t get much time to sleep. We even had to wake up from sleep and take customers sometimes.”

After spending about four years in the red-light area, she escaped to Guwahati. She spent a few months in a state home for children, and a few more in the Centre for Development Initiatives. There she was trained to be a domestic helper and provided with employment in a household.

But she fled again and returned to Silchar. This time, the brothel owner kept her in her own house and told her that she would put her back to work when the situation was better and the officer-in-charge at the SilcharSadar police station changed. In the meanwhile, the owner tried to sell her into the brothels of Sonagachi in Kolkata, but, following X-ray tests (used to determine a person’s approximate age), they refused to accept a minor. “I had come back with a different motive, to fight and take away money from her,” she told me. “But I never succeeded in doing this.” In November, she fled from the brothel owner’s house and was directed to the Ujjawala home by the police.

When I met her, the 17-year-old seemed visibly distressed and confused. Having lost her parents, she only recalled the address of an uncle who was refusing to take her home. “I am not educated, but I hope I can find some kind of work. If that doesn’t work out, I’ll commit suicide,” she said, weeping silently.

The 22-year-old who escaped Silchar in 2011, too, said that she feels helpless to the point that she constantly considers returning to the red-light area. She has been forcibly evicted from houses multiple times in the past few years. “Actually, I was better off there,” she said. “Even if there was sadness, there were no hassles like this. But after coming back here, I have faced a lot

of difficulty. ... There, at least we got food to eat and a bed to sleep on. At least we didn't have to keep listening to someone say „Empty the house now and leave.”

A few minutes before we ended the conversation, while telling me how tired and angry she was, she trailed off and mentioned that Kharshiing had suggested that they go into Radhamadhab Road for a rescue again. “I want to go,” she said, fiercely. “Why should they keep children there?”



SARITA SANTOSHINI

Sarita Santoshini is an independent journalist, reporting on human rights, development and gender issues. She has reported on gender rights from northern Uganda as an International Reporting Project (IRP) fellow in 2017, and was also the 2016 Bitch Media writing fellow in reproductive rights and justice. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Eastern Region).

32. WIDOWED BY TIGERS, ABANDONED BY THE STATE

October 12, 2017 | ruralindiaonline.org



Every year, estimates indicate, around 100 men are killed by tigers in the Sundarbans. A bureaucratic maze then disallows their widows from getting compensation, forcing them to live in distress and penury

Shikha Mondal lost her husband Asit in November 2015. “He went with two other men to the Garal river in the Baganbari forest to catch crabs. The other two returned and told me that a tiger carried my husband away,” she says. Asit Mondal was 32 when he died, the family’s sole earning member, and the father of two school-going sons. Determined to claim compensation, Shikha, a resident of Jahar Colony village in West Bengal’s Gosaba block, paid a lawyer Rs. 10,000 to help her. “There were many documents to gather – no objection certificates (NOCs) from the police and Forest Department, insurance card, a letter from the village pradhan, and a death certificate.”

Shikha now catches crabs and prawns, does odd jobs and agricultural la-

bour, and somehow manages to send her sons to school. Unable to afford an independent household, she and her children live at an uncle's house.

Thousands of women in the Sunderbans have similarly lost their husbands to tiger attacks. This delta region, spread over around 4,200 square kilometres in eastern India and home to the world's largest mangrove forests, is synonymous with tigers.

THE SITUATION WORSENS WHEN THE MEN DIE IN THE CORE AREAS, WHICH THE VILLAGERS HERE ARE NOT ALLOWED TO ENTER AT ALL, WITH OR WITHOUT PERMITS

The tigers in the forests of Hingaljanj, Gosaba, Kultali, Pathar Pratima and Basanti blocks are a threat to the villagers who depend on the forests for their daily needs and livelihoods. These blocks are close to the Sundarbans National Park (and tiger reserve), which includes a core area of around 1,700 square kilometres and a buffer area of around 900 square kilometres, where some livelihood activities are allowed. Usually, it is the men in the villages here who venture into the forests to catch fish and crabs, or to gather honey and wood. In a face-off with a tiger, most often the man dies.

The exact number of women widowed in this manner in the Sundarbans is unknown, but locals, non-governmental organisations and others estimate the number is at least 3,000 over three decades- or around a 100 a year. "Since 2011, nearly 250 women have lost their husbands to tiger attacks in Gosaba's Lahiripur gram panchayat area [consisting of 22 villages]," says Arjun Mondal, who manages the Sundarbans Rural Development Society, an NGO that works for the welfare of the 'tiger widows'. "Not a single one has received compensation," he adds.

The women are entitled to total compensation of roughly Rs. 4-5 lakhs from the West Bengal government's Forest Department, Fisheries Department and the state's Group Personal Accident Insurance Scheme. However, there are many conditions; Arjun lists a few: "The husband should not have died in the core area, he should have had a boat licence certificate (BLC) and a permit from the Forest Department. Additionally, the wife is required to submit several documents to the different departments to get the compensation."

Invariably, people from the villages do wander into the core area. Arjun, a fisherman himself, says, "We don't realise where the buffer zone ends and the core area begins. The government issues very few BLCs, and not everyone can afford one. Getting permits also depends on the will of the Forest Department."

Therefore, the odds are stacked against the wives of men who do not have BLCs or permits. The situation worsens when the men die in the core areas,

which the villagers here are not allowed to enter at all, with or without permits.

As it did for Namita Biswas, 40, from Patharpara village in Gosaba block. Her husband Manoranjan, a fisherman, was attacked by a tiger in the core area in February 2015. He survived and was admitted to a hospital, but died a few days after he was discharged. "The infection from his head injury had not healed," Namita explains. "My husband had a BLC, but the police refused to take my statement. We gave all our documents and medical bills to the Forest Department for reimbursement. The money is yet to come. There are so many widows like me. The government should at least give us a monthly pension."

Purmila Burman was duped by an 'agent' claiming he could get compensation for her husband's death. While Shikha and Namita still await compensation, Purmila Burman, 55, of Patharpara, has no such hope. In March 2016, her fisherman husband Shubhendu was killed by a tiger in the core area. "A middleman promised to help me when Shubhendu died. I gathered all my documents and gave them to him, believing he would help," Purmila says. The agent has since disappeared with her documents, and she has received no compensation.

The Sundarbans are full of stories like these. In some families, consecutive generations of families have lost their men to tiger attacks. Most of the villages where this has happened have bidhoba paras or 'widow localities'. In most households, the women's lives are marked by distress and penury. It is difficult for them to remarry since remarriage is frowned upon.

In July 2016, this writer filed three separate Right to Information (RTI) petitions enquiring about compensation for tiger widows with the West Bengal government's Fisheries Department, Forest Department and Department of Sundarban Affairs.

Only the Fisheries Department responded: in the last six years, only five women – a tiny portion of the estimated 100 women whose husbands are killed by tigers every year – have filed for compensation with the department. Of them, only three received Rs. 1 lakh each. The other two were denied compensation since the postmortem reports for their husbands were not available.

But contrary to the Fisheries Department data, most of the women I talked to said that they had applied for compensation – so it is likely that their claims are not being accepted due to incomplete documents or other conditions they fail to meet.

"The entire process is daunting, with many documents to submit and a lot of running around. The woman may even be misled or might be unaware of the process," says

Pradip Chatterjee of the Dakshinbanga Matsyajibi Forum. (The Fishworkers Forum of South Bengal, which is trying to help ‘tiger widows’ claim compensation and find work). “Meanwhile, fresh killings by tigers are reported every year, adding to the numbers of widowed women,” he says. And some women, Chatterjee adds, fearful of the questioning by the Forest Department, ‘suppress’ the death of their husband, especially if he has been killed in the core area – they don’t even register it with the authorities, and nor do they claim compensation.

But Ranbibala Mondal of Patharpara village did try to claim the compensation. Her husband was attacked by a tiger many years ago. “After all these years, the government has given me nothing,” she says. “Can you do something?”



URVASHI SARKAR

Urvashi Sarkar is an independent journalist writing on politics, culture and gender. She is a recipient of the 2018 Reham al Farra Memorial Journalism Fellowship and 2016 People’s Archive of Rural India Fellowship. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Feature (Western Region).

33. A TALE OF EXPLOITATION

| Frontline



PINKUBAI GORAKNATH RATHOD, 24, lives in the picturesque Lambani hamlet (tanda in local parlance) of Belamogi in Aland taluk of northern Karnataka's Kalaburagi (Gulbarga district). Pinky, as everyone calls her, has distinct features—she is fair, has sharp features and light eyes—that mark her out as a Lambani or a Banjara, as the community is also known. She is originally from a tanda near Malkhed, on the other side of Kalaburagi district, and came to Belamogi 11 years ago after her marriage.

By the end of 2014, Pinky was the mother of three children. Her husband was struggling to find a steady job, as eking out a living from one acre (0.4 hectare) of land that he owned was not feasible. At this time Pinky developed severe abdominal pain accompanied by whitish vaginal discharge.

When the primary health centre (PHC) in Belamogi could not help her, she ended up at a private hospital called Girish Noola Surgical & Maternity Hospital in Kalaburagi, the closest town, some 50 km away. "The doctor at the hospital told me that my uterus is swollen [soojan] and pus had formed. He said that anything could happen and I could even get cancer," Pinky recalled. "I panicked. I felt that I did not have a choice when the doctor said

that I needed to do the bada [big] operation immediately. I borrowed Rs.20,000 from my sister-in-law and underwent the operation.” She was only 22.

The “big” operation was a total abdominal hysterectomy (TAH). A survey conducted in July 2015 by members of the Karnataka Janaarogya Chaluvalli (KJC, Karnataka People’s Health Movement), a public health rights movement based in Karnataka, found 20 cases of hysterectomies performed on women under 40 in Belamogi tanda, a remarkably high number considering that there are only 87 families in the hamlet. A pattern emerged in the KJC’s survey undertaken in 38 tandas coming under the jurisdiction of 19 panchayats spread across four taluks—Kalaburagi, Chincholi, Aland and Afzalpur—in the district. An abnormally high number of hysterectomies among young women were recorded in all these Lambani hamlets—707 in all. Of these women, 355 were under 35 when they had the operation.

The KJC had done a similar survey in a village near Birur in Chikkamagaluru district in 2013. But its findings in Kalaburagi showed that the problem was on a large scale in this district and affected thousands of women. Teena Xavier, an activist of the KJC who lives in Kadaganchi village, around 25 km away from Kalaburagi, was the first to suspect that something was amiss. “In the villages where I work in Aland taluk, I heard about the enormous number of hysterectomies,” she said.

Dr Shaibya Saldanha, a gynaecologist based in Bengaluru with 25 years’ experience, explained to Frontline how a hysterectomy affects women’s health: “A hysterectomy is a major surgical procedure that means the removal of the uterus and is done for certain medical conditions. After a hysterectomy, a woman loses her child-bearing capabilities. It is to be done only in cases of poor quality of life, prolapsed uterus or a threat to life like cancer. In younger women, the circumstances under which this surgery is done would be rare. The removal of the uterus also induces surgical menopause. Sometimes, the ovaries are also removed, which has drastic effects on a young woman’s health. Every hysterectomy is a major surgical procedure and will have side effects and complications.”

Long-term implications include the hastening of osteoporosis and cardiac disease. Sexual intercourse becomes non-pleasurable and there is a loss of libido as well. A hysterectomy, therefore, is not recommended unless absolutely essential, especially for younger women. Pinky no longer complains of abdominal pain, but she suffers from a dull nagging pain in her shoulders and hips accompanied by general fatigue and an inability to lift heavy objects, all common complaints after a hysterectomy. Pinky also complains of a gradual decline in her vision, something that stumps Dr Shaibya Saldanha. “I have been hearing a lot of women complain of this, but this is something that we don’t have a medical explanation for yet,” she said.

While it is still not possible to get a reliable figure for the number of hysterectomies taking place in the country, an estimate can be made from data

from the third round of the District Level Household Survey, which shows that around 2 per cent of women in the 15-49 age group had undergone hysterectomies (12,888 in a sample of 6,43,934 women). The figure was higher among women from rural, lower-caste and deprived backgrounds.

A cross-sectional study in 2010 of 2,214 women showed that up to 9.8 per cent rural women in Gujarat had undergone hysterectomies. A few years ago, large numbers of unwarranted hysterectomies were reported from Dausa (Rajasthan), Samastipur and Kishanganj (Bihar) and rural areas of Chhattisgarh. In 2010, there were reports of women of the Lambani community becoming victims of unwarranted hysterectomies in Kannaram village of Medak district in Andhra Pradesh (now in Telangana). The reason seems to be clear: it is an easy way for doctors to make money, taking advantage of the lack of awareness among the women concerned.

The large number of unwarranted hysterectomies performed in Kalaburagi seem to make a pattern: the women are rural, belong to marginalised communities (the Lambanis come under the Schedule Caste category in Karnataka, forming around 12 per cent of the S.C. population in the State) and are largely uneducated. Pinky, one of the more literate women from the Lambani community, has studied up to the seventh standard.

While the National Family Health Survey (2015-16) has questions on hysterectomy in its questionnaire, the results have not been included in the published State and district fact sheets. Once these results become available, a precise picture will emerge on the scale of hysterectomies in the country. But what is certain so far is that unwarranted hysterectomies are happening all over the country in a serious breach of medical ethics.

A perusal of news reports all over the country regarding cases of unwarranted hysterectomies shows that the women went to doctors with similar symptoms—abdominal pain, white discharge, smelly discharge, lower back pain, and itching—and ended up on the operation table. In Kalaburagi, the doctors who advised patients to undergo a hysterectomy did so only on the basis of a scan and without any clinical examination. They also did not take a pap smear or conduct an examination under anaesthesia (EUA) and dilation and curettage (D&C). In Pinky's hamlet, and in the neighbouring hamlets, the stories were almost uniform. In a few cases, the symptoms were different, but hysterectomies were performed nonetheless.

Lalitha Bhimsingh Chavan, 38, is a resident of Ambalaga tanda, again in Aland taluk. Three years ago, she had abdominal pain and difficulty passing urine. She consulted a doctor in Umarga, a town just across the border in Maharashtra's Osmanabad district. (From interviews with the Lambani women, it sounded like Umarga was another major hysterectomy hub, along with Kalaburagi.) "The doctor in Umarga conducted a few tests and then sent me to 'Loola' [a common misnomer for the Girish Noola Surgical & Maternity Hospital in Kalaburagi], where they told me that I needed to undergo a hysterectomy immediately as my womb had gone bad and I could die soon,"

Lalitha said. "I was in hospital for seven days. The operation cost me Rs.20,000." The bill that the hospital provided to Lalitha is scribbled on a prescription slip.

After the operation, Lalitha's inability to pass urine and burning micturition continued. Tests revealed that she had renal calculus, or kidney stone. Not surprisingly, the removal of the uterus had not helped. Lalitha narrated her tale while drinking cold bottled water, as her current doctor had prescribed. "I have spent Rs.30,000 on other costs since then," she added.

Lalitha was surrounded by several other women of her tanda aged between 27 and 48 who had also undergone hysterectomies. In this hamlet of 55 households, 17 women lost their wombs under the surgeon's scalpel.

Sunita Yemnath Chinni Rathod, 35, of V.K. Salagar tanda in Aland taluk had to sell two goats to finance her hysterectomy four years ago. She first had an operation to remove her uterus and a second one to remove her ovaries. "I went to Loola when I had severe abdominal pain. The doctor first did an operation for Rs.25,000 and then a second operation after three months at a discounted price, for Rs.15,000," Sunita said. The KJC survey of 2015 recorded 24 hysterectomies in this tanda of 84 households.

The ultrasound reports of the abdomen and pelvis of Pinky, Lalitha and Sunita are in the possession of Frontline. When these were shown to Dr Shaibya Saldanha, she said the scan reports did not demonstrate any need for a hysterectomy. She explained what the doctors had done with an analogy: "Imagine, if a patient comes to me I take one look and I decide that he's anaemic because he's looking pale and I give him two blood transfusions. That's ridiculous, isn't it? That's what's happened in this case. Pinky's case is especially scandalous as no 22-year-old woman undergoes a hysterectomy."

There have also been three recorded deaths over the past few years. Savitabai died in July 2015 just after the completion of her operation at Basava Hospital in Kalaburagi. She had come to the hospital with complaints of abdominal pain. The doctors told her family that she needed a hysterectomy because her uterus was swollen. When she died, a doctor at Basava Hospital hastily paid a sum of Rs.3 lakh to Savita's family, an act that raises suspicion. Two other Lambani women in Chincholi taluk died in 2015 of post-operative complications following hysterectomies.

Consequent to the KJC's complaints in 2015, two inquiry committees were set up with gynaecologists on them. The first one was constituted by Karnataka's Department of Health and Family Welfare and was headed by Dr A. Ramachandra Bairy. It submitted its 12-page report on October 17, 2015, after an inquiry that lasted for two days. While 36 hospitals were named in the complaint made by the KJC, only 25 submitted information on the number of hysterectomies they had conducted in the preceding 30 months. Girish Noola Surgical & Maternity Hospital topped the list with 900 hysterectomies out of a total of 2,258 operations.

The report implicated the hospital for lack of proper records, which cast doubt over whether the hysterectomies had been necessary. It recommended action against the hospital under the Karnataka Private Medical Establishments (KPME) Act (2007) and the Pre-Conception and PreNatal Diagnostic Techniques (PCPNDT) Act (1994). Three other hospitals were also marked out for violations.

A second inquiry committee was set up in September that year by the Karnataka State Women's Commission and was headed by K. Neela. This committee submitted its 105-page report in April 2016 after a thorough inquiry. Its members interviewed 66 women, and in all the 66 cases they concurred that a hysterectomy was not necessary. It has brief summaries of interviews with the victims as well as inferences. After their interview with Pinky, and perusal of her medical records, the committee noted: "Age of patient precludes hysterectomy. Examination shows hypertrophic cervix and erosion. Pap smear showed no evidence of malignancy. Scan diagnosis of Pelvic Inflammation Diseases (PID) insufficient. PID was not treated with antibiotics." The committee discussed Lalitha's case, and its inference was: "Diagnosis was renal calculus and recurrent Urinary Tract Infection (UTI) for which no treatment was given."

The women interviewed by the committee were diagnosed with PID, bulky uterus, thickened endometrium and fibroids. The common complaints included chronic backache, excessive uterine bleeding, chronic abdominal pain and white discharge per vaginum. None of these warranted a hysterectomy, the committee concluded, and could have been treated with a variety of antibiotics, vitamin supplements, safe sexual practices and painkillers. Such problems, moreover, are not unusual among rural women who undertake hard labour and are associated with early marriage, multiple and quickly following pregnancies, malnutrition, lack of sanitation and unsafe sexual practices. Pinky, like many other women in the Lambani community, was 13 when she was married and had three children in quick succession. Lalitha, at 38, is already a grandmother.

The report has held the doctors responsible for the hysterectomies guilty of violation of medical, ethical and legal norms. The committee implicated Girish Noola Surgical & Maternity Hospital, saying it had insufficient evidence to show there was good reason to perform the hysterectomies. The hospital did not have any medical records of the patients who underwent the operations. The report held that the doctor couple who managed the hospital, Dr Girish Noola and Dr Smitha Noola, had created a "psycho fear" [sic] in the minds of the largely illiterate and poor victims. It has called for criminal action to be taken against the doctors at Girish Noola Surgical & Maternity Hospital and Basava Hospital, apart from other doctors involved in this malpractice. It has also recommended that the victims should be financially compensated.

STATE OF PUBLIC HEALTH

In a paper published in Indian Journal of Medical Ethics (Volume II, No. 1, January-March, 2017), KJC members Teena Xavier, Akhila Vasan and Vijayakumar S. discuss the implications of this sordid affair. They write: "A medical procedure such as a hysterectomy has morphed into a 'business strategy' in the 'medical/health care market' with poor women's bodies being trafficked for profit. Governments that ought to protect citizens from such predatory motives have not merely failed in their duty, but have turned accomplice in their crimes by ushering in policies that encourage exploitation."

They continue: "So long as the profit motive drives the provision of health care, the most vulnerable will continue to fall prey to the predatory motives of the system. Radical policy shifts aimed at reining in the medical profession, transforming medical education, disallowing 'profit' in health care, rolling back public-private partnerships, and strengthening the public health system meaningfully to regulate and deliver health care are required urgently to reverse the commercialisation of health care. Enacting a broad-based law to protect health/patients' rights and to bring the medical profession under the ambit of criminal prosecution is of critical importance to ensure the safety of citizens, particularly those most vulnerable."

The KJC survey data show the dismal state of public health. Only 13 of 707 women identified by the KJC in 2015 reported that they got the procedure done at the District Government Hospital in Kalaburagi. According to the District Health Officer (DHO) of Kalaburagi, Dr Shivaraj Sajjanshetty, there is only one hospital in the entire district with facilities for hysterectomy, the District Government Hospital. "Two years ago, when I was posted there, we had difficulty even doing caesarean surgery, how can we get gynaecologists to do hysterectomies? We simply don't have the facilities," he said. The PHCs have also failed at being the first-tier providers of medical relief. "Many of the complaints that the women had could have been resolved with a simple course of antibiotics, but not enough doctors visit the PHCs," said Teena Xavier.

The submission of the two reports has led to some action by the district administration. The registrations of four hospitals, including Girish Noola Surgical & Maternity Hospital, have been cancelled, but the licences of the gynaecologists and surgeons practising in these hospitals have not been rescinded yet. Criminal action has also not been initiated. The DHO said a letter dated January 23, 2017, had been sent to the president of the Karnataka Medical Council (KMC), Dr H. Veerabhadrappe, requesting suitable action be taken. On his part, Dr Veerabhadrappe said: "KMC will conduct a civil court-like procedure once we receive the letter from the DHO."

On February 6, several hundreds of Lambani women gathered at the Deputy Commissioner's office in Kalaburagi to protest against the district administration's inaction on K. Neela Committee's recommendations. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has also taken cognisance of the mal-

practice and issued notices to the governments of Karnataka and Maharashtra.

SEASONAL MIGRATION

Back in Belamogi, Pinky waits for redress of her grievances. She has filed a writ petition in the Karnataka High Court. Her eldest child was diagnosed with leukaemia in early 2015, and she has been spending the past year getting him treated at the Kidwai Memorial Institute of Oncology in Bengaluru. Her husband left the tanda in 2015 in search of work and is somewhere in Saudi Arabia or in the United Arab Emirates—Pinky is unsure about his exact location—from where he calls her once a week. Many of the women who were interviewed for this article had husbands who had migrated for work, a common practice among Lambanis in the region. They are seasonal migrants. They do own land, but their small landholdings do not amount to much in this arid, drought-prone region. Many of them work as construction labourers in Mumbai. Earlier, the wives accompanied them. But now many of the wives stay back as hysterectomies have rendered them unfit for hard labour.

Pinky does not have a phone number to contact her husband, who seems to have joined the legions of exploited construction labourers in countries around the Persian Gulf. “His passport is with his employer. He can’t return as his contractor owes him Rs.2 lakh [in unpaid wages],” Pinky said.



VIKHAR AHMED SAYEED

Vikhar Ahmed Sayeed is Senior Assistant Editor with Frontline magazine and is based in Bengaluru. He has postgraduate degrees in history from Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Oxford and was an Asia Journalism Fellow in Singapore in 2017. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Investigative Story (Southern Region).

34. THE CONFLICT WITHIN: PARSIS AND GENDER RIGHTS

May 22, 2017 | The Hindu.com

One of India's most progressive communities faces conflict between liberal and orthodox viewpoints on women's equality

India's vulture crisis, which started in the 1980s, caused the Parsi Zoroastrian community to reconsider one of its practices. Traditionally, the community does not bury or cremate its dead; instead, corpses are laid out in a Dakhma, or Tower of Silence, for carrion birds to consume. The steep decline of the vulture population meant that bodies would just slowly decompose.

In January this year, this was being debated at the Samast Anjuman (a community organisation) in Navsari, Gujarat; 160 voted on whether a burial ground should be allotted. An overwhelming majority, 156, chose change.

There was one peculiarity in this progressive event: no women voted.

In fact, minutes before the voting, Pervin Surti, who travelled from Mumbai to witness the voting, was asked, rudely, to leave. "I had no idea that women were not allowed there," she says. "I was shocked, because in Mumbai, women don't face such discrimination." Yazdi Kasad, secretary of the anjuman, says that women never had rights to attend meetings or vote: "We are simply following the rule that have been set by our predecessors. No woman has every questioned us or expressed that she has a problem."

There are over 69 anjumans across the country (29 in Gujarat), and while some have women trustees or even heads, most follow patriarchal traditions unchallenged.

Parsi Zoroastrians (which does not include Iranis, co-religionists, but descendants of a later migration) are one of India's tiniest ethnoreligious communities, with around 57,264 members as per the 2011 census (down from 69,601 in 2001), but they have punched above their weight in many ways. They are also regarded as one of the country's most liberal communities.

In one respect, though, Parsis — or at least the orthodox within the community — seem to fit the Indian stereotype when it comes religious practices: gender inequality.

LEGAL BATTLES

The children of a Parsi Zoroastrian man married outside the community can become Parsi, but the same is not true of the children of a Parsi woman married to a non-Parsi. Some women in the community have questioned the practice and taken the matter to the courts.

Kolkata resident Prochy Mehta's daughter married a Hindu, but her grandchildren regularly visited the Anjuman Atash Adaran, the only agiary (fire temple) in the city. But since 2013, when a new priest took over, the children were not allowed admission. In a case in the Calcutta High Court, Ms. Mehta asks, can children of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father enter a fire temple? Isn't the practice of preventing such children from entering religious sites discriminatory? "All I am asking for is equal treatment for Parsi women," Ms. Mehta says. "Children who have navjote (the Zoroastrian coming-of-age ceremony) performed, but belong to intermarried Parsi women, are not allowed into the agiary, while children of Parsi men married outside don't face this discrimination." Ms Mehta says that her case is not just for her grandchildren but for all Parsi children. "Our girls should be able to choose freely, without fear of community censure. Surely, this is not a right reserved only for men."

Goolrukh Gupta, from Valsad, Gujarat, had seen a Parsi friend, married outside the community, not be allowed to attend her parents' funerary rituals. Ms. Gupta, who too has married outside the community, wrote to the Valsad anjuman demanding the right to enter the Valsad fire temple, and to be allowed to enter the doongerwadi (the place where death rituals are performed) when her parents — both now 84 — die. She was refused. She then petitioned the Gujarat High Court; in 2008, the HC ruled against her, stating that when a woman marries outside, she is deemed to have taken the religion of her husband. Ms. Gupta's advocate, her sister Shiraz Patodia (who has also married outside the community, as has their younger sister), says, "In law, there is no such thing as deemed conversion." She says that the rules set by the orthodox in the community are barbaric: "Parsi women seem to have second-class citizenship." The case comes up for a final hearing in the Supreme Court in the first week of August.

THE PRECEDENT

More than a century ago, Sir Dinshaw Petit filed a suit against the Bombay Parsi Panchayet (BPP) challenging the validity of the trustees and contending that the funds and properties under the Panchayet could benefit those born into other faiths who have converted to Zoroastrianism. R.D. Tata, who had married a French woman, also joined as a plaintiff in this case that came to be known as Parsi Panchayet Case of 1909. His wife had embraced the Zoroastrian religion and had had a navjote ceremony. Mr. Tata said that this meant she could enter an agiary, and be consigned to the Tower of Silence after her death. There was an uproar from orthodox Parsis. The HC ruled in favour of the orthodox.

“The judgment laid down by judges Dinshaw Davar and Frank Beaman stated that a Parsi can only be so termed if he or she is born of a Parsi father,” says Jehangir Patel, editor of community magazine Parsiana. “It’s been over 100 years now. Unfortunately, no woman has taken up the issue in a big way.”

In a 2016 editorial, Mr Patel wrote that Parsi women have tolerated discrimination for over a century. He asked, “Why are there no Parsi Trupti Desais? How can our community today be bereft of courageous women when in the past we had the likes of Madam Bhikaiji Cama who first unfurled the Indian flag, Mithu Petit who supported Mahatma Gandhi, the Captain sisters, Perin, Goshi and Khurshid, who were active in the freedom movement, and countless others who have taken up social, political and economic reforms?” Advocate and former BPP trustee Homi Ranina says, “A woman, belonging to any religion, becomes a Hindu once she marries a Hindu man; this is what the Hindu law says. In the Goolrukh Gupta case, the Gujarat High Court too considered the same law before giving a judgement. In fact, the HC’s judgement is based on a Supreme Court decision in the case of Valsamma Paul vs. Cochin University. The women who have gone to court are in a way trying to go against the principles of Hindu law.” Before changes in Parsi practices, he says, perhaps Hindu law must be amended first.

MEN ONLY

The religious orthodoxy aren’t the only ones who seem to consider Parsi women second-class citizens.

The Ripon Club in south Mumbai, based on the English concept of a gentlemen’s club, had been founded for the community in 1884 by stalwarts like Sir Phirozeshah Mehta, Jamshedji Tata and Sir Dinshaw Petit. It has around 900 members today, of which 100 are women. But female members are technically ‘lady associate members’ — most of them are either wives or daughters of male members — without voting rights.

Simin Patel, historian and blogger, had been visiting the club on her father’s membership for years. In December last year, there was an extraordinary general body meeting of the club, to discuss the sale of one floor of the premises to raise funds. As someone deeply invested in the club, “because it is a beautiful historical space, I went there to be a part of the meeting because I wanted to know the fate of the club.” But she was asked to leave. “Why can’t a woman have full rights as a man?” Ms. Patel asks. “Why can’t she vote and have a say in the running of the club?” She points out the double standards in the club advertising in community newspapers asking more Parsis to join, but excluding half the community from membership.

Xerxes Dastur, a trustee of the club, says that ‘lady associate members’ enjoy all members’ privileges, as do that wives of members; “The only question is about not having the right to vote or stand for elections.” After years of promising that women will be allowed equal membership, the club is changi-

our constitution within this year so that women can also become regular members.”

Another prominent community organisation, Parsee Gymkhana at Marine Lines, has similar rules. A notable exception is Dadar Parsee Gymkhana, which has a standard membership, irrespective of gender, and all its 1100 members can vote and contest elections.

NO SCRIPTURAL BACKING

Vispy Wadia, who with his brother Kerssie started the Association for Revival of Zoroastrianism (ARZ) to fight discrimination towards liberal Parsis, says, “Zoroastrianism roots for total equality. Even prophet Zarathustra in his sermons has always addressed men and women together as *na va nyari*. There has never been any gender discrimination.”

Mr. Wadia’s theory is that Parsis were influenced by the Hindu caste system when they landed in India. “We came into the alien land. We saw Hindu customs and traditions and thus began protecting our religious places from others, just like the Hindus did. But if you go to Iran, there is no discrimination whatsoever. Anyone and everyone is allowed to enter a fire temple.”

Faced with dwindling numbers, liberal Parsis like Mr. Wadia are debating these matters and others, like whether women can be priests and carry out basic religious activities like tending the to the fire and assisting the main priest given that the number of priests has also drastically shrunk.

But for the orthodox in the community, changes like those Ms. Mehta, Ms. Gupta and Ms. Patel want are drastic, even unthinkable.

THE ORTHODOX VIEW

The head priest of the Byculla agiary, Ervad Bajan, says that a Parsi is someone born to a Parsi father and a Parsi mother. “Our institutions are exclusively meant for Parsi Irani Zoroastrians and by that definition, children born to a couple with either one of the parents from other faith cannot be considered Parsis and cannot access these institutions.” He says it is wrong that children of a Parsi father married outside get access to them. Over 1500 years ago, he says, the reason Zoroastrians came to India was, “We had the choice to convert to Islam but we chose to escape and protect our religion. That is how important it is for us.”

GENDER EQUALITY A BUZZWORD

Parsis believe in gender compatibility, not gender equality. Thus speaks Khojeste Mistree, former Bombay Parsi Punchayet trustee and Zoroastrianism scholar, who says that this view is based on intense study. “Gender compatibility means a man recognises the strengths of a woman and the woman recognises the strength of a man,” he says. “If a man behaves like a woman

behaves like a man it's bad news."

On barring entry to religious sites for women married out, or not considering their offspring Parsis, Mr. Mistree says that Parsi Zoroastrians are patrilineal, and the 'religious seed' is passed on through the father. When a woman marries out, "She has to listen to her husband or, if he is not very religiously inclined, then her in-laws. Naturally, the woman has to bow down to them. In an oriental environment that we live in, the women have to make much more adjustments than men. That is the ground reality. Even in an emancipated marriage, the woman has to do many more things than the man."

The court cases, Mr. Mistree thinks, will devastate the community. "Unfortunately, secular judges, who don't have sufficient studies to merit a response which is right for the community, will decide the cases." He says that judges will probably decide on the grounds of a 'buzzword,' gender equality. "It's fashionable to talk about gender equality, but is that ground reality? Does one throw away customs and traditions for the sake of a notion that comes from outside the tradition? Religion is custom and practice, with a spiritual dimension attached to it. This dimension is unique in flavour to each religion. I don't think you can mix it."

ETHNIC PURITY

Medioma Bhada, a retired naval commodore, says that the Parsis are what they are because they have been ethnically exclusive. "These are our beliefs that have been there for centuries." He insists the community has never subdued women in anyway. "There is no question of discrimination here." On the court cases, he says, "All of a sudden we are hearing these voices of women who are married outside but want to remain Parsis. Why? What's wrong in being a good Hindu, Christian or a Muslim? I wonder how the husbands allow it to happen." He says that his sister and brother both married Hindus, and they and their children are very much a part of the family. But, he says, "My sister's children are being brought up as Hindus. She very well knew that would happen when she took the step of marrying outside."

Mr. Mistree feels that intermarriage could mean Zoroastrianism will die. "When one marries out, one is ethnically weakening the fabric of our community. Let's say a Parsi marries a Hindu; obviously, the Hindu culture is going to come into the house. So, the first generation of such a couple is going to be only 50% Parsi. Rough statistics show that the second generation will be 25% Parsi and the third about 12.5%. By the time the fourth generation comes in, the Parsi ethnicity has disappeared completely. If one wants to preserve the community and its ethnic identity, then marrying out spells a disaster."

Mr. Mistree says that the rebels want to piggyback on what their forefathers had built, but changing the rules. "The Goolrukh Guptas of this world are not concerned about what is good for the community in the long run. They are just interested in making a point. If these girls feel so passionate about being Zoroastrians, let them create a new fire temple. Let them create a new order.

Why bring in alien customs and culture to a community not equipped to handle it? Start you own institutions just like the Jews did.”



JYOTI SHELAR

Jyoti Shelar currently working with The Hindu, Mumbai has around 12 years of experience in print journalism. While her primary focus is healthcare, she often writes on communities and related trends. Earlier she has worked with the Hindustan Times, Mumbai Mirror and Daily News and Analysis (DNA). Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best News Report (Western Region).

35. WHY IS ILLNESS IN WOMEN MORE LIKELY TO BE WRONGLY DIAGNOSED AND TREATED

JUNE 14, 2017 | women's web

Medical research has always been done with men as the default, and the 'one-size-fits-all' approach does not work well in diagnosis and treatment of illness in women.



Jayanti is a 56 year old house-wife, who was suffering from a burning sensation in her chest. After trying some home-remedies, she approached her family physician. Knowing that she was stressed due to some family problems, initially she was dismissed as attention-seeking and treated her for 'acidity'. However, when her "heart-burn" persisted, a complete check-up was ordered (more as a tongue-in-cheek indulgence than any belief in her symptoms). The changes in her ECG alarmed the physician and prompted an immediate angiography, where it was determined that she had had a heart attack and needed a bypass surgery at the earliest.

The American Heart Association estimates that women more often ignore symptoms and postpone seeking treatment. They also have symptoms that are different from the typical and are consequently more likely to be dismissed as non-cardiac complaints. In percentage terms, this kind of illness in women received less of guideline-directed medical therapy or aggressive, invasive treatments.

THE SLEEPING PILL INCIDENT THAT WOKE UP THE MEDICAL FRATERNITY

In the US of A, annually over 11 million prescriptions are given for the drug Zolpidem (Ambien) which is a sleep medication. The prescribed adult dose was 10mg (and has been the same for nearly 20 years). However, in 2011, a study found that women had a higher level of the drug in their blood stream the next day (eight hours later) as compared to men. This was a great risk as it results in impaired decision making, slower response time thereby affecting skills such as driving, etc. As a result of this research, the FDA cut down the dosage of the drug to HALF (5 mg.) for women. It was also recommended that prescribing doctors take into account the individual needs of patients rather than prescribe the same dose for all patients.

The incident involving Zolpidem (Ambien) overdosage in women created a storm of public interest. It exposed a little researched and hitherto neglected area of medical science – that of sex/gender differences in disease and the way illness in women might not be handled right. If a sleep medication, widely used and over a long period of time could behave so differently in women and escape detection, the mind boggles at the scope of the problem.

SOME FUNDAMENTALS

Medical science broadly categorises patients into adult and paediatric. Even among adults, pregnant women are recognised as a different category (physiologically, biochemically, etc.) for treatment and clinical trials. Thus adults, pregnant and paediatric were the three broad categories of patients for treating physicians. Non-pregnant adult female and adult males are, however, lumped together.

THE NUMBERS DO NOT LIE

Interestingly, if we exclude sex-specific diseases like prostate enlargement or uterine fibroids, etc., statistics show that many other conditions occur more often in one sex or the other.

Autoimmune diseases (such as Lupus) are commoner in women as is clinical depression. Thyroid diseases and anti-thyroid antibodies are more common in women, whilst male sex is a risk factor for thyroid cancer. Women are more likely to develop Alzheimer's and COPD. Alcohol enters the blood stream more rapidly in women and they are affected by it faster. Women are more susceptible to the effects of alcohol induced liver disease as well and secondhand smoke. Post menopause, women are more likely to have ischemic heart disease. And so forth.

Not only are the numbers distributed unequally, the symptoms and risk factors also frequently vary in the two sexes. In Jayanti's case, the classic triad of symptoms – chest pain, shoulder or neck discomfort, and sweating were

missing. Women often have 'atypical' symptoms like heartburn, fatigue, discomfort, etc. which could delay diagnosis by physicians who are used to male patients and their 'classic' symptoms. Younger women like Renuka are susceptible to lung cancer due to second hand smoke.

What about the drugs that are used to treat such conditions? Are they tailored, adapted, tuned for treating women differently from men? Obviously not! The Ambien case in 2011 is a striking case where women received double the required dose for YEARS.

DIFFERENCES

Logic dictates that women and men ARE different. Women have different fat content, kidney blood flow, liver function, water content, surface area, hormonal levels, and so on. They differ in their physical activity, quality and quantity of food intake, stress levels, etc. Not only do women neglect their health, they often delay getting medical attention, and once it is sought, the emphasis is on 'budgeting' the expenditure, especially if the woman is not an earning member of the family.

CLINICAL RESEARCH

Research is expected to be egalitarian, equal, logical and non-partisan in its approach to "evidence-based" results. But it is sadly not so.

In a 2014 report, researchers at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston chronicled the exclusion of women from health research and its impact on women's health:

The science that informs medicine – including the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of disease – routinely fails to consider the crucial impact of sex and gender. This happens in the earliest stages of research, when females are excluded from animal and human studies or the sex of the animals isn't stated in the published results. Once clinical trials begin, researchers frequently do not enroll adequate numbers of women or, when they do, fail to analyze or report data separately by sex. This hampers our ability to identify important differences that could benefit the health of all.

Drugs that are mainly tested on male subjects are also used by female patients. Doses for men and women can differ. Side effects and complications can be more severe in females as the hormonal levels, fat content and liver and kidney functions that metabolize these drugs are different.

An analysis of hundreds of studies on common cancers published in the journal *Cancer*, involving millions of patients, suggests women are underrepresented in three out of every four cancer studies.

The FDA in USA has now laid down guidelines for clinical trials where adequate number of women should be represented and the response to the

INDIAN SCENARIO

Illness in women in India gets the short stick every time.

Indian women neglect their own health and seek medical treatment much later than their male counterparts.

Less money is spent on the vaccination of girls than boys, as also medical treatment of women.

Treating physicians are also less aware of the difference in symptoms or risk factors that female patients are likely to have.

Women are also expected to have more 'hysterical/psychological' problems than men and not taken seriously. Research into medical problems affecting women is also lacking. This is a fundamentally flawed approach as it ignores nearly half the patient population. Often this leads to late diagnosis of the illness in women, wrong treatment or the wrong dosage of the right treatment. Ignorance of socio-economic factors leads to limited reach of the therapeutic treatment. While gender specific medicine is a twenty-first century phenomenon and is a welcome one, in India sadly, we still follow the 'one-size-fits-all' approach so far.



DR UJWALA SHENOY KARMARKAR

Dr Ujwala Shenoy Karmarkar is an anaesthesiologist based in Mumbai. She started blogging, writing featured pieces and theatre reviews around 6 years back and found writing a life changing experience. Besides features and blogs, Dr Ujwala also writes short stories, with women at the core. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Jury Appreciation Certificate.

36. WHAT KILLED SWATI JAMDADDE? THE PREFERENCE FOR A SON, A SONOGRAPHY ERROR OR AN ILLEGAL ABORTION?

April 03, 2017 | Scroll.in

A mother of two daughters, Swati Jamdade, 25, died while undergoing a sex-selective abortion. Her death has exposed an inter-state racket.



A little after midnight on March 2, Praveen Jamdade brought his 25-year-old wife's body to the civil hospital in the town of Sangli in Maharashtra. Jamdade, a farmer, asked the hospital's medical officer to keep the body of his wife Swati in the morgue.

"He told me that they wanted to conduct the funeral when the deceased's parents arrived from Puducherry," recalled Dr ST Patil, for whom such requests are not uncommon.

Patil started the paperwork and asked for Swati Jamdade's death certificate. Praveen Jamdade handed, a sheet of paper to Patil that read: "Complaints of loose motions and vomiting. Accidentally, I found her dead." The sheet was signed by a Dr Babasaheb Khidrapure, a homeopath practicing in Mhaisal, a village on the Maharashtra-Karnataka border.

Praveen Jamdade lived with his family in Manerajuri, a village about 36 kilometers north of Mhaisal. Jamdade's relatives told Patil that the family had been visiting a temple in Mhaisal when Swati Jamdade suddenly took ill. Patil thought that the death certificate looked suspect. Besides, Swati Jamdade's abdomen appeared like that of a pregnant woman.

"While I was taking down the medical history, no relative mentioned that she was pregnant," said Patil. "Even the death certificate had no reference to the pregnancy."

Patil alerted the local police station and recommended an autopsy. "A pregnant woman had died possibly of unnatural causes," he said. "We had to find out how."

Patil's suspicions about the death certificate and the subsequent autopsy exposed an interstate sex-selective abortion racket running in Sangli and Belagavi, which is about 150 kilometres away in Karnataka. The police investigation revealed that Swati Jamdade had undergone an illegal abortion at Bharti hospital in Mhaisal run by Khidrapure, who is a homeopath and not legally permitted to conduct abortions. She had allegedly had a sex determination test at the clinic of Dr S Ghodake, a homeopath in Belagavi.

According to Belagavi health officials, Ghodake owned an ultrasound clinic whose registration had not been renewed since November.

The Maharashtra police have arrested 13 people, including Praveen Jamdade, Khidrapure, Ghodake and other accomplices and booked them under relevant sections of Indian Penal Code, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act and the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques Act. The police have found plastic bags containing fetuses on the banks of Krishna river allegedly dumped by Khidrapure's milkman Vishnu Sutar.

DISTRAUGHT PARENTS

While Swati Jamdade's autopsy was underway, her parents and other relatives arrived at the Sangli civil hospital. Her father Sunil Jadhav told doctors that she was pregnant and had undergone an ultrasound when she visited them in Puducherry in the last week of January.

Jadhav also told the police that his daughter was unhappy. "Tila khup dadpan hota," said Jadhav. She was in acute stress. He said that after her first daughter was born, Praveen Jamdade and his family harassed her and things got worse after their second daughter was born. Praveen Jamdade had supposedly called Jadhav a few days before Swati Jamdade's death to say that he was taking her to Mhaisal for an abortion.

"When he told me that Swati is pregnant with a girl, I asked him not to do anything and accept whatever God gave," said Jadhav. However, Jadhav said, that Praveen Jamdade insisted that his wife should get an abortion:

“Tyala pishvi khali karaichi hoti.” He wanted to empty the uterus. The police and district health authorities went to Bharti Hospital and found Khidrapure absconding. The police arrested and interrogated Sandeep Vanmore, a helper at the clinic, who told the police that illegal abortions took place in the hospital. An arts graduate, Vanmore had been working at the hospital for five years.

“The doctor would admit the women in the basement rooms and bring them to the operation theatre when the foetus was to be removed,” Vanmore told Scroll.in. “Smaller foetuses would be thrown in the toilet but bigger ones were disposed of by the milk-man.” The milkman Vishnu Sutar was allegedly paid Rs 300 for every foetus he disposed of.

The more advanced a pregnancy, the larger the foetus will be. The law allows registered medical practitioners to perform medical terminations of pregnancies on foetuses that are 20 weeks old or younger.

The police’s interrogation of Vanmore led the police to Sutar, who then directed them to the spot where he would bury the foetuses. The police have recovered about 19 bags of foetuses on the banks of the river Krishna, which flows through Mhaisal. The samples have been sent for forensic DNA examination to the Forensic Science Laboratory in Pune to confirm the sex of the foetuses. The police say that they are also considering matching the DNA of couples they suspect have undergone abortions at Khidrapure’s clinic with the DNA samples of the recovered foetuses.

THE SURPRISING POSTMORTEM

Meanwhile, Patil of the Sangli civil hospital and forensic doctor AB Dheeraj conducted the postmortem on Swati Jamdade at the Government Medical College in Miraj, which is 12 kilometers from Sangli city and on the road to Mhaisal. The postmortem confirmed that Swati Jamdade was four and half months pregnant at the time of her death. But there was also another surprising result of the postmortem – a finding that the pregnancy was ectopic. An ectopic pregnancy is one in which the embryo attaches outside the uterus in the fallopian tube. This kind of pregnancy is potentially dangerous and, if not detected in time, can cause the fallopian tube to burst. The postmortem report said that Swati died of “haemorrhage shock due to rupture of a tubal pregnancy”.

The postmortem findings are surprising because ectopic pregnancies do not usually last as long as Swati Jamdade’s had. More surprising was the fact that none of the doctors Swati Jamdade had previously seen detected the condition through ultrasounds. An ultrasound or sonography is conducted for various reasons during the course of pregnancy and one of the reasons is to ensure that the embryo is attached in the uterus. An embryo growing outside the uterus is not viable. “It is extremely rare for an ectopic pregnancy to advance up to four months,” said a senior gynaecologist not related to the case.

Swati Jamdade had two ultrasounds, say the police. The first one was at Puducherry when she visited her parents in January and the second one was at Ghodake's clinic in Belgavi. According to police investigation, Khidrapure referred the Jamdades to Ghodake.

"I have given the report on the basis of what I saw on the scan," said Dr S Natarajan, the doctor in Puducherry who conducted the first ultrasound. "Her pregnancy was not ectopic."

A COVER UP?

A senior doctor involved with the case said that the postmortem findings are "more accurate" than an ultrasound. "The postmortem findings clearly show that it is an ectopic pregnancy and the sample has been sent to the forensic laboratory for further tests to confirm the autopsy findings," he said.

Activists working against sex-selective abortions in Sangli allege that the postmortem report is a cover-up to protect Khidrapure. Activists say they have repeatedly complained against Khidrapure for performing illegal abortions in the past and alleged that the conflicting reports are an attempt to protect Khidrapure.

"The government wants to show that she died of some pregnancy complication and not because of abortion," said Nana Kamble, one of the activists who has complained about Khidrapure earlier.

However, Dr Deepali Kale, deputy superintendent of Sangli police refuted the allegations of a cover-up. "Swati's death is a result of an illegal sexselective abortion performed by Khidrapure," she said.

THE FUNERAL

As contradictions grow and the investigation continues, a tall poster has been hung outside Swati Jamdade's maternal home. It has a picture of her smiling, flowers adorning her hair neatly tied in a bun. This photo was taken during her younger sister's wedding.

During Swati Jamdade's own wedding, her parents had gifted her husband Praveen Jamdade gold and home appliances. Now, her grandmother angrily said, "We don't care about the gold. I just want to see Praveen being hanged to death. Only, then female foeticide will stop."

In anger, Swati Jamdade's parents lit her funeral pyre right outside her in-laws' house. "We want them to always remember that they are responsible for her death," said Jadhav, her father. A few years ago, Swati Jamdade's childhood friend Pratibha was allegedly murdered by her husband for bearing three daughters. The case is pending in the court. "Swati is the second woman in our village to die for not having a son," said Jadhav.



Kusum Jadhav, grand-mother of the deceased. (Photo: Priyanka Vora)



PRIYANKA VORA

Priyanka Vora currently working for Scroll.in. is a developmental journalist focused on reporting on public health and medical ethics in India - for which she has won several awards. She was selected as the Early Childhood Development Fellow by the International Centre for Health Journalists in 2017. Recipient of LMAAGS 2017 Best Investigative Story (Western Region).

ADVERTISING AWARDS



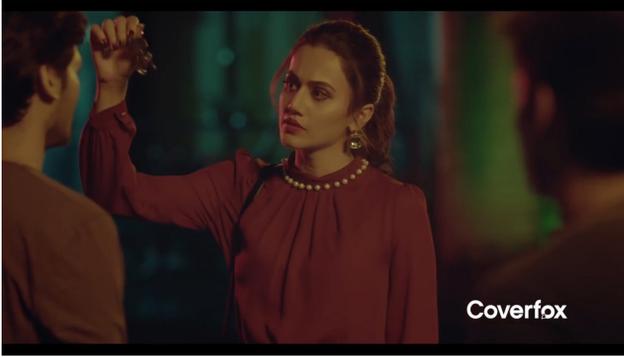
**Best Advertisement - Grand Prix|Lowe Lintas
#EveryWomansRight| An initiative by Astral Pipes**

This powerful ‘#EveryWomansRight’ advertisement for the toilet building initiative by Astral Pipes asserts that a toilet within the house is every woman’s right. It uses an extremely catchy verse with the backdrop of an attractive rhythm that tends to stay with the viewer, while accentuating the authoritative voices of the women. The women powerfully counter the men’s patriarchal retorts with strong meaningful banter, ultimately driving their point across, i.e. their right to personal lavatories.



**Best Advertisement - Product| The Womb
Saregama Carvaan - The Perfect Gift For Your Mother| Saregama GenY**

This advertisement not only highlights the rarely expressed playful aspect of the character of the mother by showing her dancing around without a care, but also puts a positive spin on the daughter-mother relation which is hardly, if ever, acknowledged in the media. The tagline sums it up very well by saying “...the perfect gift for your first love, your mom”!



**Best Advertisement - Service| Coverfox
Cover Karo, Kaam Aayega | Coverfox.com**

This advertisement for an insurance service provider puts an empowering spin to women's reaction to eve teasing on the street. Instead of covering and feeling embarrassed, the protagonist faces up to the eve-teasers and puts them in their place by boldly calling out their behaviour and not losing her cool.



**Best Advertisement - Corporate| Ceat India
#ThingsThatHappenAtWork- Gender Bias| Ceat**

The ad playfully underscores gendered assumptions that are encountered on a daily basis – especially in workplaces. It shows a male incorrectly supposing and targeting his questions about bikes to another male colleague when he spots a new helmet – wilfully ignoring the possibility that it could belong to the female colleague who is sitting right across. The ultimate punch of the helmet belonging to the woman highlights the commitment of CEAT to break gender stereotypes.



**Best Advertisement - Digital| FCB Interface
#LadkiHaathSeNikalJaayegi| Mahindra and Nanhi Kali**

This emotional and powerful ad uses brilliant wordplay and puts a positive spin on the commonly used phrase in Indian society Ladki Haath Se Nikal Jayegi meaning that 'the girl would go out of one's control' – used to curb girls' freedom and choices. It shows how a forward looking father paints a positive picture of the phrase in the mind of his young daughter. The ad stresses that girls' success depends on them not being controlled as is willed by the society but having the freedom to make their choices to fulfill their dreams.

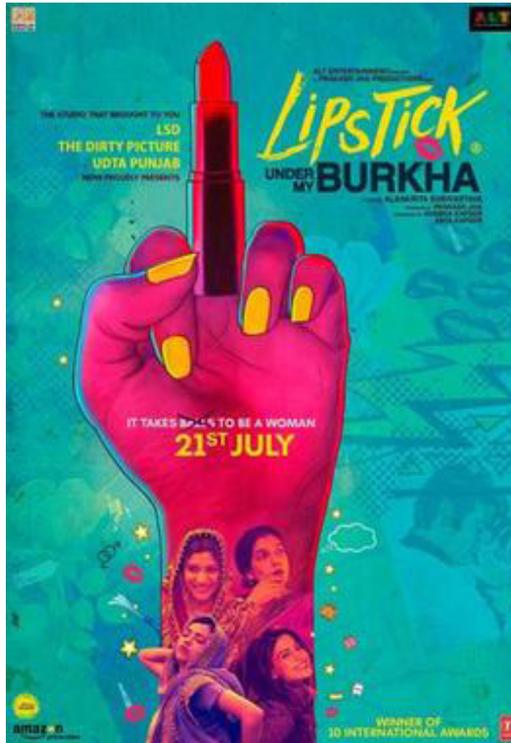


**Best Advertisement - Digital| Cheil India
We care for the girl child #SapneHueBade| Samsung Technical School
– A CSR Initiative**

This advertisement highlights the importance of a supportive family environment for girls to realise their dreams. It emphasises how a compassionate father enables his daughter to realize her dream of becoming an engineer and an entrepreneur. It also stresses acknowledging the value of a daughter as a daughter, instead of treating her as a 'son' when she does well for herself and her family.

OTHER CATEGORY AWARDS

FILMS



LIPSTICK UNDER MY BURKHA

2017

Lipstick Under My Burkha is about four women in a small town who dare to exert some autonomy in their lives, at their own small levels. Whether it is career, marital, reproductive, sartorial or sexual choices, these women try to find their ways around familial and social constraints on their desires, and also ultimately pay the consequence for their “transgressions”. By realistically portraying the dynamics between individual feminine aspirations and an unrelenting societal framework that brutally controls the same, the film throws light on a very pertinent subject rarely explored in Indian films - the life-world and daily negotiations of a huge chunk of female population in the small towns of India.

THEATRE



SAAT TERI EKVEES

In its 3rd season, Saat Teri Ekvees has a new set of monologues by women and has an underlying theme of “desire”. It explores narratives on Survival, Intimacy, Being Oneself, Motherhood, Love, To Be Born and Appreciation. Some stories evoke heart-warming smiles, others evoke a soul-searching silence, but all make one sit up and notice a woman’s soul with a new perspective. The Gujarati monologues are well etched out and are representative of stereotypical characters and situations. The plays deal with women characters that have shown strength and courage to establish their individuality in an unsupportive social structure.



INDIASPEND

IndiaSpend is an online magazine which utilizes open data to analyse a range of issues with the broader objective of fostering better governance, transparency and accountability in the Indian government. They have also consistently been covering issues related to women in a lucid and comprehensible manner.



SKIN STORIES

Skin Stories presents fresh new perspectives and urgent personal essays at the intersection of gender, sexuality and disability. It is an initiative of Point of View, a Mumbai-based non-profit. It brings forward narratives that are most often absent from mainstream media and gives the reader insight into the lived realities of persons with disability.

Special Edition



TALKING GENDER - THE NEWS MINUTE

The Talking Gender series by The News Minute addresses rarely discussed aspects of gender conditioning, gender roles and how these concepts are ingrained in us. Violence against women is justified and women and their bodies are abused. It urges one to pay attention to our collective mindset on gender and has sparked much discussion.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN



FCB INDIA- SINDOOR KHELA

This strong social media campaign by Times of India moves beyond being a mere creative commercial by impacting change on the ground. The campaign opens the door for widows, sex workers and transgender individuals, who are traditionally shunned from such festivities, to be part of the Sindoor Khela - their feisty spirit leaving the conservatives no choice but to embrace them.

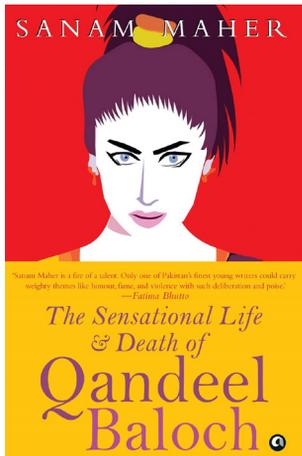
BOOKS



CAPPUCCINO CONFESSIONS

ANITA KUMAR | OM BOOKS INTERNATIONAL

Cappuccino Confessions is a refreshing read which looks at hypocrisy within society that places women in as good and bad. This book reveals marriages which are a farce, divorces, failed relationships, affairs and so on and the double standards and moral judgments that are attached to them, particularly with regards to women. This book reveals a web of relationships. What comes through is the need to love oneself and be true to oneself is the key to move forward in life.

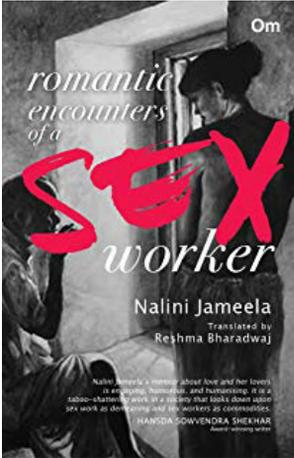


THE SENSATIONAL LIFE AND DEATH OF QANDEEL BALOCH

SANAM MAHER | RUPSA AND CO.

The book holds a mirror to what society is today and tells the story of an honor killing. Though it is about life in Pakistan, much of what happens in the book happens in India too, not just in villages and hidden small towns but in metropolitan cities too. More relevant is the desire for instant fame in the context of social media and its consequences apart from the patriarchal structures of violence which come into force when women stray from the path laid out for them by the society.

BOOKS



THE SENSATIONAL LIFE AND DEATH OF QANDEEL BALOCH

NALINI JAMEELA | OM BOOKS INTERNATIONAL

The book deals with the lives of people who might be considered “disrespectable” under a typical heteronormative, patriarchal and misogynistic mindset. It also deals with a different kind of labour, the sex work of Nalini, that is often unrecognized in a formal sense. Nalini’s simple and clear account of her own trials and tribulations and her searing honesty serves as a mirror to all of us to reflect on our own biases and the fault lines along which we create our own identities. Her nuanced understanding of how patriarchy is a system that traps both men and women to replicate patterns of violence serves as a warning to all of us. The book gives us an insight into the travails sex workers face and surmount in their work.

AWARD FOR CONSISTENT REPORTING ON FILMS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE



SHOMA CHATTERJI

Dr Shoma A. Chatterji, Lifetime Achievement SAMMAN awardee from the Rotary Club of Kolkata Metro City, is a freelance journalist, film scholar and author based in Kolkata. She has won two National Awards –for ‘Best Film Critic’, in 1991 and for ‘Best Book on Cinema’, in 2002. She won the Bengal Film Journalists Association’s ‘Best Critic Award’ in 1998 and the ‘Bharat Nirman Award’ for excellence in journalism in 2004. In 2009-2010, she won a Special Award for ‘consistent writing on women’s issues’ at the UNF-PA-Laadli Media Awards (Eastern region). In 2010, she was bestowed the ‘Kalyan Kumar Mitra Award’, for her remarkable work in film scholarship and contribution as film critic. In 2017, she won the Indycor Lifetime Achievement Award and in May 2018, she was bestowed the ,prestigious Kalish Mukhopadhyay (Lifetiime Achievement) Award for her achievements, contribution to and development of Film and Television Industry by the Bengal Film and Television Chamber of Commerce. . She has authored 24 books of which 12 are on Indian cinema. She regularly contributes to around a dozen print media and online publications across the Indian map and beyond. She has been a jury member at several film festivals in India and abroad.

LAADLI SPECIAL AWARDS

LAADLI LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD



DR. PRABHA ATRE

Dr Prabha Atre is a renowned Hindustani classical music vocalist and the senior most front ranking living legend of the Kirana gharaana. She has donned many hats in her life; beyond her mainstay as a performer she is also a researcher, academician, reformer, author, composer and guru. In the past she has been an Assistant Producer with the All India Radio as well as Professor and Head of the Department of Post-Graduate Studies & Research in Music at SNDT Women's University, Mumbai. Dr. Atre is an acclaimed guru both in performance and research, being actively involved in music related academic activities like workshops, seminars and teaching at foreign universities as a visiting professor. She has also set up the 'Dr. Prabha Atre Foundation' that aims to promote the cause of Indian classical music and performing arts. In addition to several regional awards, Dr. Prabha Atre has been honoured with the highest national awards in the country - 'Padmashree' and 'Padmabhushan' by the Government of India, as well as 'Sangeet Natak Akademi Award' and 'Tagore Akademi Ratna' by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi.

LAADLI OF THE CENTURY



MADAM COOMI WADIA

Coomi Wadia began her career as a graphic artiste at Eves Weekly and Ogilvy Benson and a pianist and singer in the Paranjoto Chorus. When her mentor and conductor Dr. Victor Paranjoto died in 1967 she was seen as the obvious choice to take over as coordinator of the esteemed choir. She left the advertising world to focus on her musical journey. Under her baton the choir scaled even greater musical heights. She is the first and only conductor to lead an Indian chorus to win international competitions, winning gold in Poland in 1974, and silver in Spain in 1977. Another career highlight came at the 1981 Partnership Festival in Stuttgart, Germany, where she was chosen to conduct over 700 singers and instrumentalists in the grand finale concert.

She began to introduce Indian audiences to modern 20th century works with rhythms and tonalities unheard here before. One spectacular five-decade long partnership has been between Coomi and the brilliant Indian composer Vanraj Bhatia, whose path-breaking and challenging compositions she instinctively and authoritatively interprets.

WOMAN BEHIND THE SCREEN AWARD



KALPANA LAJMI

Kalpana Lajmi (1954 - 2018) was an Indian film director, producer and screenwriter. Her films were often woman-oriented. She debuted as a feature film director in 1986 with *Ek Pal*. She then took a break from directing movies and went to direct her first television serial *Lohit Kinare*. Best known for *Rudaali* (1993), in which she cast Dimple Kapadia, Lajmi proved herself with that film as a sensitive filmmaker who could handle bold subjects with aplomb. Based on Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Rudaali* follows the life of an oppressed widow (Kapadia) in a Rajasthani village. Lajmi's later films also contained a social message. Her film in 2001, *Daman: A Victim of Marital Violence* was distributed by the Indian Government and was highly acclaimed by critics. It was the second time that an actress won the National Film Award for Best Actress under Lajmi's directorial hand. Along with Sai Paranjpye, Mira Nair and Aparna Sen, Lajmi was one of the few women filmmakers to demolish the status quo.

PARTNERS AND SUPPORTERS



Yusuf & Farida Hamied Foundation



Global Compact Network India



Banyan Tree

We bring performances aLIVE



OUR JURY

Abha Singh	Former Civil Servant and Advocate
Anand Madhab	Principal Consultant, Gender Resource Centre
Anuja Gulati	State Programme Coordinator, UNFPA
Anuradha Rajan	Development Professional, CEO Mumbai Mobile Creches
Arvind Kumar Singh	Senior Journalist
Asha Hans	President of Sansriti and Founder Director of School of Women's Studies, Utkal University
Bishakha De Sarkar	Editor Blink, The Hindu Business Line's features Section
C. Vanaja	Acclaimed Journalist and Film Maker
Deepa Gehlot	Author, Scriptwriter, Film and Theatre critic
Dr. Bal Mukund Sinha	Senior Journalist and Academician
Dr.K.Bharathi	Writer, Trustee of an Educational Truste
Dr. Daya Krishan Mangal	Professor of Public Health and Dean at IIHMR University
Dr Gaurang Jani	Faculty at Gujarat University, NIMC, CEPT and EDI Ahmedabad
Dr Kalpana Apte	Head, Family Planning Association of India
Dr Kanchan Mathur	Professor, Institute of Development Studies ,Jaipur
Dr S. Krishnaswamy	Documentary and Film Maker, Film Historian, Author
Dr Sonal Pandya	HOD of Communication, Journalism and Public Relations and EC Member, Gujarat university
Geeta Ramaseshan	Advocate specialising in Human Rights and Consultant to UNICEF and UNDP
Geeta Seshu	Independent Journalist, Contributing Editor of The Hoot
Gokul Krishnamoorthy	Independent Consultant on branded content, Journalist
Gyanendra Pandey	Editor, Dainik Bhaskar UP
Indrajit Neogi	Head of the Film and Video Dept MIT, Pune

Keerti	Country Director, Caritas India, State Convenor of MKAM and of Collective Coalition against Human Trafficking
Kavitha Muralidharan	Bilingual Journalist, Poet
Lad Kumari Jain	Women's rights activist
Lalima Aneja Dang	Newsleader, Commentator, RJ at AIR
Malti Mehta	Media and Communications Expert, Founder Member of Gujarat Media Women's Forum
Manjari Chaturvedi	Assistant Editor Navbharat Times
Manjira Majumdar	Independent Journalist and Writer
Mannika Chopra	Journalist and Managing Editor of Social Change, a social science quarterly
Meena Karnik	Senior Journalist , Writer
Meena Menon	Journalist, Writer
Meghna Ghai Puri	President, Whistling Woods Film School
Mini Kakar	Development Professional leading programmes on Media and Youth and Inclusive Citizenship
Mohammed Khan	Advertising Professional
Monica Nayyar Patnaik	Managing Director of Sambad Group, Promoter Radio Choklate
Mukesh Kumar	Documentaries, Director, TV Professional
Olga Tellis	Senior Journalist
Parmesh Shahani	Head of Godrej India Culture Lab, Writer
Priyadarshan	Senior Editor at NDTV, Senior Journalist, Writer
P.P.James	Deputy Editor, Kerala Kaumudi
Pamela Philipose	Editor, The Wire.in
Pia Benegal	Actress , Costume Designer
Prof. Kuldeep Kaur	Visiting Faculty TISS
Prof Hemant Joshi	Journalist, Writer, presently with IIMC
Rabiya Nazki	Senior Journalist, Academician
Richa Anirudh	Journalist ,RJ and TV Host
Ritu Kapur	Cofounder and CEO of The Quint
Sajaya Kakarla	Women's rights activist, Journalist, Documentary Film Maker
Sampad Mahapatra	Consulting Editor of Odisha Reporter
Sandeep Sahu	Senior Journalist and Columnist
Satya Saran	Author, former Editor Femina

Satyavati Kondaveeti	Women's rights activist, Founder of BHUMIKA helpline for survivors of gender based violence
Shefali Chaturvedi	Executive producer BBC Media Action India
Siby Kattampally	Assistant Editor , Malayala Manorama
Smriti Nevatia	Film and Theatre Critic, Scriptwriter, Curator of Film Festivals
Sonali Khan	Social Communication Professional who led Breakthrough
Sunny Sebastain	Senior Journalist and VC Haridev Joshi University of Journalism and Mass Communication
Toral Shah	Creative producer and Production Manager QTP
Urmilesh	Journalist,Television Anchor , Writer
V J M Diwakar	Senior Journalist, Music and Film Critic
Vidya Bal	Editor Milun Saryajani, Women's Rights activist
Yusuf Hatim Muchhala	Advocate working on Human Rights
Sarmad Ali	Managing Director, Jang Media Group Pakistan
Asha Basnyat	Development Sector Professional
Helder_de Oliveira Filipe	President ACA Mauritius,Director Redhouse McCann
Ravin Lama	Director, Mind Initiatives and Organiser of Brand magic Summit
Guna Raj Luitel	Editor-in-Chief, Nagarik National Daily
Christina Chan-Meetoo	Senior Lecturer, University of Mauritius
Shanker Raj Pandey	Development Sector Professional and Head KFW Development Bank
Meeta. S. Pradhan	Development Sector Professional ,Nepal
Touria Prayag	Editor and Writer
Prakash Rimal	Editor,The Himalayan Times,Nepal

LAADLI

Laadli works with various stakeholder groups to change the mindset that undervalues the girl child and makes her unwanted in millions of Indian homes. Through our advocacy and communications campaign we try to address the gender discrimination and inequality between the sexes. We work with the youth and media at large to question the deep-rooted son preference in our society and change the gendered mindsets.

The Laadli Media Advocacy initiatives focus on promoting gender sensitivity in media and advertising by organizing innovative training programmes, campaigns and workshops, engaging media and advertising industry leaders in consultations and presenting awards to gender sensitive reporting and advertising.

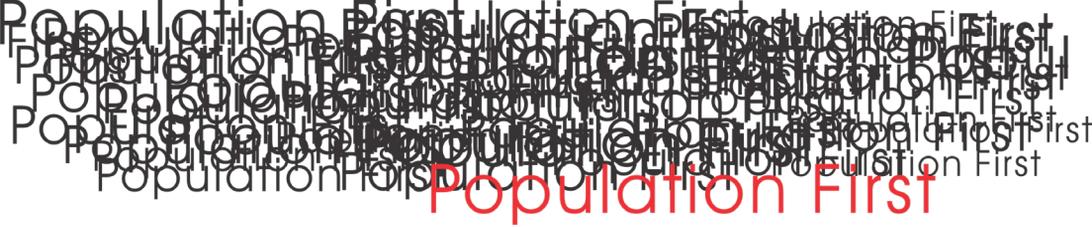
LAADLI MEDIA AWARDS

The Laadli Media Awards for Gender Sensitivity is the only one of its kind in the world given exclusively for promoting gender sensitivity in the media and advertising. It is a year-long advocacy initiative with senior editors, media leaders, journalists, and cultural icons that culminates in the awards functions. The objective of The Laadli Media Awards is to draw the attention of the public to the positive efforts in the media with regard to gender sensitive reportage and provide a platform for showcasing such efforts. It does not focus on visible achievers but on media persons who are reporting from the field level- analyzing laws, policies, programmes, events and incidents using a gender lens. By acknowledging and felicitating the media persons who are writing positive stories on gender we hope to encourage more people to join the movement

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LaadliPF/>

Blog: <http://laadlimerilaadli.blogspot.com/>

Twitter Handle: @Laadli_PF



Population First

POPULATION FIRST

Population First is a not for profit organization registered in March 2002 under the Bombay Public Trusts Act, 1950.

We work on health and population issues within the framework of social development and gender equality. We believe that poor demographic indices in the country are linked to the disempowerment of women to make informed choices. Our key objective is to help reduce gender imbalances in the population and work towards gender sensitive and social development oriented health and population programmes. We do this through two main flagship programs:

(i) **Laadli** - focuses on the welfare of the girl child through media and youth initiatives; especially by promoting nuanced, informed and balanced media portrayal of issues, using a gendered lens

(ii) **AMCHI** - works for community empowerment to ensure access to better quality, accountability and transparency in social development government services specifically focusing on health

Registered Office

Shetty House, 3rd floor, 101, M. G. Road, Mumbai - 400 001.

Tel : +91 22 22626672, +91 22 22672411

Postal Address

64, Wodehouse Road, Ratan Manzil, Ground floor,
Colaba, Mumbai - 400005 Telephone : +91 91679 02776
Email: info@populationfirst.org Website: www.populationfirst.org

**Contributions to Population First are exempt
from tax under section 80G of Income Tax Act.**

GENDER FRAMES

A look at the featured work shows that even in the most difficult and cynical times there is hope. There is hope because there are many who are being true to their profession, showing great sensitivity and compassion, raising critical questions about gender inequalities, discrimination and violence. Each one tells a story, raises an issue, questions the current state of affairs and shows mirror to the misogyny, biases and discrimination that pervade our country. Gender Frames thus affirms the aim of Laadli Media Advocacy to create an environment where gender sensitivity in reporting and programming is pursued as a core journalistic value.



Dr. A. L. Sharada has been active in the developmental sector for the last 32 years as a teacher, researcher, trainer and programme manager. She is the Director of Population First for the last 15 years. She was on the faculty of the Central University of Hyderabad and Indian Institute of Health Management Research, Jaipur.

She was invited by the State Department of US to represent India under the International Visitors Leadership Programme (IVLP) to speak on the Role of NGOs in Global Gender Issues. She is a special invitee to State Supervisory Board on PCPNDT Act, and a member of the Committee constituted to suggest amendments to MTP Act.

She has been reviewing ads in Campaign India Magazine as Gender Expert for the last couple of years. She was on the jury of ABBY award for gender sensitivity and was a member of the Advisory Committee for the New Vision Fellowship for Script Writers.