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## **Stree Mukti Sanghatana and its Experience in Mitigating Violence**

*Sharada Sathe*

As awareness spreads among them, women demand an end to domestic violence. In the last twenty years, many women's organisations in India started their own centres to combat domestic violence in order to assure the distressed women that they were not alone and that the women's movement was ready to extend a helping hand. The SMS was not an exception to this process.

Stree Mukti Sanghatana started its counselling centre in the year 1986, following on the demand made by women after watching our play "A Girl Child is Born". The play gave courage to those women to speak of their personal problems. Before starting the counselling centre, we had brain storming sessions about the following issues:

Whether we should venture to start such a centre without any experience on our part.

Whether this would solve the basic ailments of women.

In the given oppressive social structures what effect could our counselling centre have.

Whether we could mobilize total support - economic, physical, material, psychological.

What should be our priority - general awareness campaigns, building a mass movement for change or specific projects for specific issues or individual cases of atrocities and violence.

How to reconcile constructive work in oppressive systems with the fight against the system itself.

Whether we would be able to cope with the influx of cases of violence and atrocities by opening one centre. If not how were we planning to cover the entire city of Mumbai and other districts of Maharashtra.

Whether redressal of grievances of individual women was our responsibility or building up a mass movement to end all atrocities.

These discussions still continue and are in a way unresolved. And yet the awareness which is slowly but surely seeping through the women has compelled us to take up various projects of constructive work. Counselling is the first and foremost among them. In the last ten years we had to open five centres in and around Mumbai to cope with the cases. The other women's organisations have also started and expanded their activities against violence during this period and have always worked in cooperation with each other. Initially none of us had formal training in counselling. This did not deter us. The basic framework of feminist thought gave us the confidence while addressing the other family members of the woman concerned.

Initially we could not address ourselves to intricate psychological problems but effectively tackled social problems and issues, We still retain this in all our counselling centres, that is, we do the counselling as activists of the women's movement and generally try to evolve a solution with consensus which is amenable to the woman concerned and only with her consent. But we do recognize the need for expertise in legal, social and psychological problems. Over the period we have learned to segregate general issues and individual problems. However we would like to concentrate on making the woman stand on her own and face the situation boldly and come out of trauma. This is the major challenge. During these eleven years we have identified our strengths, weaknesses, impediments and opportunities which we have enumerated in a separate chart (SWOT Analysis).

### **Individual Cases**

Individual cases are sometimes solved, legal aid is given, social intervention in the form of demonstrations and other forms is made and yet there remains a big question mark. Individual cases need individual solutions and even similar cases do not have similar solutions. At times trivial incidents lead to serious and extreme difference of opinions and extreme steps. Most of the time, the element of revenge on either party for the family discord is dominant and it really has nothing to do with general situations.

The family counselling centres and the volunteers/activists/ professionals often to put forth various options to the needy woman and her family. But we insist that the final decision has to be taken by the woman concerned.

This work is increasing day by day. More and more women and even other family members come for counselling. We find there is need for child counselling

and guidance cells, parental communication, crisis and disaster management cells with adequate resources, (financial and otherwise).

Though we try to assess each case in terms of equality and gender justice, the individuals are free to evolve their own solutions irrespective of our assessment of:

Whether it was a compromise on principle

Whether the guilty party goes scot-free or punished

Whether we have rehabilitated the victimised woman or not

Whether we have been able to mould the woman and her family from our point of view or have served just as a stepping-stone in management of the individual crisis.

Quite a few women have turned activists. Some try to help other women to come to the centre. The majority of women do not come back after the case is closed. There is no further feed-back. But they definitely get some relief from their otherwise unbearable situation. acquire self-confidence and become self-reliant to a certain extent.

### **Support Structures**

The available support structures are inadequate in number, form and philosophical statement.

They totally lack the woman's point of view, that is, the feminist point of view, and often are conservative and traditional.

They do not help the victims to overcome the difficulties but cause further deterioration in their mental health. They utterly lack freedom and a conducive atmosphere wherein women can be empowered.

We need all kinds of support structures such as

free legal aid centres

free temporary shelters

rehabilitation centres

economic activity centres where women can earn a livelihood

social and cultural interaction and assimilation in the mainstream of community life

crisis operation groups

prevention activities centres

peripheral support from the community

in-built support from family members

material physical security

awareness campaigning, media support, attitudinal change within the society

asylums, clinics, sanatoriums, specialised services, old age homes.

These support structures should not be rigid in approach and activities. They should be properly interconnected and flexible enough to allow the needy woman to choose any of those according to her needs. The support structures should not encroach upon the basic rights given by the constitution, but should empower the women to exercise those rights and live with dignity and self respect.

### **A Redefinition of Social Service**

Many things can be added to this list. And yet the basic ailments would not be tackled at all if we do not undertake social service in its proper perspective. We need to redefine social service. In today's context social service has become a specialised job. We have to create some new forms of organisations to address the problems of women for which a total halt to violence against women and children is the most essential step. It cannot be handled isolated from other issues and in the abstract, especially when the world is facing rampant racism, religious fundamentalism and all kinds of violence on a global level. Yet the need is very much there. The kind of social work which we are doing at present is inadequate and suffers from basic lacunae. Social service is basically meant for social misfits or weaker sections such as the physically handicapped. If we treat half of humanity as social misfits where shall we end up? Women are not social misfits or weaker sections. Therefore the support structures must be in built defences available in the family and in the community where we are born and in

the religion which we call ours. How to go about it is the task and challenge before us.

### **Swot Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats**

#### *Strengths*

The Indian constitution gives equal rights to all citizens.

The Indian state is duty bound to protect and implement the constitution.

The constitution provides for special legislation for socially and economically backward sections.

The police machinery is duty bound to maintain law and order and protect the people from mistreatment.

The judiciary has to give judgements according to legal provisions within the constitutional framework.

Since 1975, women's problems are being tackled from a women's point of view. This process has matured over the period. The various women's groups have started counselling centres to handle individual problems. At the same time they try to focus on general issues concerning women at various levels with the support of other organisations, individuals and the community. Other social and political movements also have started supporting the women's cause. This can help to give relief to needy women and to strike at the roots of the problem.

The Media (visual/oral) play an important role in creating awareness, as the atrocities committed against women and children are exposed to the outer world.

There is networking among the organisations issue-wise and world-wide.

The Government of Maharashtra is framing policies on women.

The Central Government is evolving policies on women.

The Government of India has declared its commitment to the Platform of Action adopted at the 4th World Women's Conference and has signed CEDAW (Convention for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women).

### *Weaknesses*

The rights given by the constitution cannot be exercised due to poverty, casteism, racism, religious fundamentalism and social and economic disparities.

The state itself does not implement laws and the state machinery is lethargic, conservative and traditional, that is, patriarchal.

The traditional fundamentalist approach towards women hinders the implementation and crimes are not registered.

The women do not come forward to complain against the violence due to various reasons.

The community keeps aloof on the pretext of problems being personal.

The numerical strength of the organisations is negligible and support in the community very restricted.

The differences in assessment of a particular issue come in the way of effective united action.

There is still a lack of coordination amongst organisations.

The women do not have knowledge about legal provisions. The women's organisations are not well equipped in this regard.

All women's organisations lack material support structures, especially shelters. They have no means for rehabilitation. It becomes difficult to give all-out support to a needy woman till she becomes independent.

### *Opportunities*

Theoretical refraining of the issues and problems concerning women has been done to a great extent at the national and international levels by national and international organisations,

Action plans also have been envisaged.

Funds are made available.

The government of India has declared several policies and schemes for women.

The 33% reservation in Panchayats, the Women's Commission, women's credit fund, self employment schemes are a few examples. Women's organisations must equip women and themselves to avail of these facilities.

The educational policies should be constantly examined and refrained.

The awareness campaigns must be widespread.

All action plans and schemes should be implemented by women's organisations and they should not be left to the bureaucratic machinery of the government.

All organisations should strive to create united committees in the local areas and prevent violence against women and children.

The legal provisions should be fully utilised.

There should be continuous dialogue between government machinery and women's organizations.

Cooperation with the establishment - law and judiciary, police, bureaucracy and administration wherever required.

### *Threats*

The individual cases require a lot of attention. Monetary and legal support are difficult to obtain.

The general issues (dowry, rape, riots, wars, etc.) are not effectively tackled due to political interests vis-a-vis women's interests.

The women in general do not have economic support (independence). They do not have a place of their own which compels them to succumb to the pressures and atrocities. The paucity of material structures is the most important factor.

The media is largely governed by traditional values and dual standards and patriarchal culture.

The victimized woman often is engrossed by the security syndrome for herself and her children.

Women's health is constantly neglected.

The revival of religious fundamentalism, casteism, racism, wars and insecurity adversely affect women.

There is still lack of education and equal opportunity.

The action plans, funds do not reach the desired clientele.

Much of the available funds and resources are eaten up by administration and infrastructure.

Women are deprived of various skills.