

CREATING A SAFE SPACE FOR WOMEN



As important as it is to identify and support viable livelihoods in villages, equally vital it is that issues of gender and sex, gender and patriarchy, and gender and violence are discussed in safe spaces such as SHGs, Clusters and Federations, helping women live lives of equality, dignity and freedom

RAJNI (NAME CHANGED) WAS IN deep distress. Her husband and her in-laws shunned her. She had brought disgrace upon them. Her father and brother rebuked her for her conduct. All the villagers agreed that the *jati panchayat* had rightly punished Rajni because she had brought such shame to her family.

Rajni's fault was that she had dared to hold her brother in-law's hand to stop him beating her and had shouted at him. Her brother-in-law felt humiliated...he could not believe that a woman

of his house would resist him. He had only been punishing her for her misconduct.

He took the matter to the *jati panchayat*. Acknowledging the disrespect and shame that Rajni had brought to him and his family, the *jati panchayat* ordered Rajni to feed the entire village with traditional *murga-roti* (chicken and bread). She was also made to publicly apologize to her brother-in-law. Their version, "*Chahe kuchh bhi ho jaye, ek aurat apne jeth ka haath kaise pakad sakti hai* (Whatever the situation, a woman cannot hold her brother-in-law's hand)."

As a para-legal and in order to support women in distress, Reena used to go to the block headquarters, the police station and to other places

Rajni had no choice but to succumb to the verdict. She took a loan from her brothers, to arrange for the feast.

Three months later, a trained para-legal worker, Reena (name changed), came to the same village, Udadna. She was there to conduct training for the village women, mostly around matters of domestic violence. As a para-legal and in order to support women in distress, Reena used to go to the block headquarters, the police station and to other places. Yet, back in her own home, her husband did not want her to go out for work. He doubted her, believing that she had relationships with other men. He

used to remain inebriated most of the time and, lately, had started beating and abusing her. When she used to resist, he would call the *jati panchayat*.

The last time, the leaders of the *jati panchayat* had listened to both the parties. As expected, Reena was fined Rs 1,000 and was asked to respect her husband and to follow his orders.

Reena did not let the case rest there. She said that she would only pay the amount if her husband stopped abusing her and started working. Surprisingly, her voice was heard. Reena stopped going out for work. Her husband, however, didn't stop the abuse;

he became more violent. And the leaders of the *jati panchayat* did not intervene on her behalf.

Grounding the Problem

—
Such stories are fairly common to come by when working at the grass roots. The case being highlighted is from Narayanganj block in Mandla district, Madhya Pradesh. Narayanganj is an idyllic block in the vicinity of Kanha National Park. Gonds and Baigas are the predominant tribes living there. Although it is believed that tribal women have more freedom compared to those in the mainstream, cases of violence against them are frequent and



“Hamein apni samajh banani padegi (We need to build our understanding).” This statement became one of the action points of the Federation

the norms of the community are primarily biased toward the men. Moreover, the women themselves believe that there is nothing wrong in such norms. They succumb to all such atrocities without any resistance and also live in fear of repercussions if they were to resist.

In Narayanganj, PRADAN has mobilized more than 10,000 women into Self Help Groups; the women have further congregated into village-level Clusters and block-level Federations called Ekta Mahila Sangha. One day, Shanti (name changed) arrived late for a Cluster meeting. Her cheeks were blue with bruises. When asked, she said that her husband was against her attending these meetings and had hit her to stop her. She had managed to come with the support of some senior SHG members. She couldn't control her tears as she spoke. Some other members wept in silence as they listened. Shanti was not alone. If this was the plight of Federation leaders, one could only imagine how alarming the situation might be for others. Clearing the lump in her throat, a member said, “Aaj chup rahe to hamesha chup rahna padega aur aise hi sehna padega (If we do not

raise our voice now, we will suffer in silence our entire life).” This was in 2017.

When finalizing the annual plan for the Federation, one of the issues that surfaced was the issue of violence. Some Federation leaders resisted saying, “*Ghar ghar ka mudda hai. Apni rozi dekhe ya ye? Auraton ki kismet mein yahi likha hai* (This is a common household issue. Should we think of our livelihood or this? It is the fate of women, we should just bear it).”

Others said, “*Peechhe na hate, ye adhikar ka mudda nahi barabari aur samman ka mudda hai. Agar barabari bhi nahi to yeh meeting ka bhi kya fayda* (We shouldn't step back. This is not about only our rights but also about equality and respect. If there is no equality, what is the point of us meeting)?”

Such discussions began happening in subsequent meetings and, finally, it was decided that the initial steps should be to discuss this issue with other members in SHG and the Cluster meetings. “*Hamein apni samajh banani padegi* (We need to build our understanding).” This statement became one of the action points of the Federation.

Collectives: Awareness-building and Sharing Platforms

What followed was a series of central-level trainings to one or two members of each VLC from about 20 villages. Topics such as gender and sex, gender and patriarchy, and gender and violence were discussed and debated. Members who attended the training started sharing their learning further and created awareness. The effect was that the women, who would earlier shy away from discussing these matters, found a safe space in the SHGs and the VLC and were able to openly confide in other members. Many cases related to violence were shared in these forums.

There were mixed feelings in the SHGs when such cases were shared. Voices that were heard more frequently had statements such as, “*Kitta sahe* (How much should we bear)?” Some others said, “*Ye hamara adhikar hai ki hum apni baat kahein aur kisi se maar na khaye* (This is our right that we are heard and are not abused by anyone).” Some others took a different stand, “*Wahi aadmi ke saath rehna hai wahi ka burai karein, aur aiso kar rahe hai* (We have to stay with the same men,

Many women started realizing their plight and began to share their stories in these trainings and in other forums

and here we are cursing those same men)." Some shared, "*Maar khana to hamari kismet mein hain, woh pati hai, maar hi sakta hai* (Getting beaten is our destiny, he is the husband, he can hit us)."

Reena's Case Again

—
Reena had been suffering in silence. It was unbearable for her that whereas she helped women in distress, in her own house she was succumbing to the unwanted whims of her husband and his family. She knew the law; she knew that whatever was happening with her was wrong. Other SHG members had told her to attend SHG meetings and go to the block to attend other meetings regarding her work as a para-legal worker.

Encouraged, she started going back to SHG meetings and other forums. One day, her husband came home with his friend. They started drinking and he asked Reena to cook chicken for them. Although she did not want to, she cooked. Not liking the taste of the chicken, he started hitting Reena in front of his friend. She ran away. With the support of other para-legal workers, she filed an FIR under Section 498A of the IPC (Indian Penal Code), a non-

bailable offence. Her husband was immediately jailed.

Owing to pressure from her relatives and the villagers, Reena withdrew the case after one month. Her husband came back home. Overwhelmed by the consequences, he mended his ways. He no longer interfered in Reena's work. "*Sahi kare tene, aadmi ko seekh deni chahiye* (You have done the right thing, man has to be taught a lesson)."

Taking the Legal Way

—
Such cases were discussed in various women's forums. The PRADAN team, meanwhile, was continuing with the training on gender. One of the major strategies was to promote and create awareness through a Gender *Sathi* (resource person), a person who imparted training to the women on the issues of gender, patriarchy, gender and livelihood, gender and violence, etc. Many women started realizing their plight and began to share their stories in these trainings and in other forums. Reena was one of the Gender *Sathis*. Her case was highlighted as a success story: if she could stop the violence against her, why could not the others? Taking their case to the *jati panchayat*

no longer served any purpose. On the contrary, the *panchayat's* support of the men and penalization of the women gave the men more impunity. Taking the matter up legally, through the police and the courts, could be an alternative solution.

Another woman, Sheetal (name changed) elicited Reena's support and lodged a case against her husband, for physically abusing her. He also had a relationship with another woman. Intervention by the police helped. Her husband stopped hitting her although he continued his relationship with the other woman. Sheetal did not want to leave her husband and, therefore, continued to live with him, well aware of his infidelity.

Taking a case to the police also had difficulties. Whereas women like Reena, who were more exposed to the outside world, could take their cases to the police, it was not easy for some of the other women. First, they would be dependent on others for support. Fighting legally would involve hassles such as visiting the police station, going to the court, bribing, etc. Officials at such places are not co-operative and are not sensitized to handle such cases. Moreover, such actions would mean facing the

Sensitizing men on gender-based violence had very positive implications. Role reversals and constructive dialogues during the trainings helped men see things from a different perspective

ire of their family members. Women wanted to live peacefully with their families. They also did not want the issues of their family and their village to go to the courts. Also, all cases were not of absolute violence, there were varied issues, which could be better dealt with at the community or village levels.

Back to Village Forums

Apart from the *jati panchayat*, another platform, promoted by the Madhya Pradesh government, was functional at the village level. Called Shaurya Dal, it was promoted under Tejaswini project in Paraswada. Shaurya Dal comprised five women and five pro-active men. These members were selected in the *gram sabha*. This group's role was to curb violence and atrocities against women and girls, with the philosophy that the solution of all the problems lies within the community. Although this initiative was being implemented in the village, the women were not aware of it. Neither did they know who the members of the Shaurya Dal were, nor did they know its role.

Revamping the Shaurya Dal seemed to be a better strategy

Initiatives by the Shaurya Dal at a Glance in Narayanganj, MP (2017-18)

Intervention villages	72
Cases reported to Shaurya Dal	87
Cases resolved at the community level	53
DIR/FIR lodged	21
Types of cases	Domestic violence, witch- hunting, child marriage, dispute

to address domestic violence. PRADAN consulted with the Tejaswini staff at the district level and the Department of Women and Child Welfare. A rigorous training architecture was designed to sensitize Shaurya Dal members, with the support of organizations such as the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and Jagori. Members were trained on issues of gender and sex, manifestation of patriarchy, violence and its types, relevant laws and constitutional rights, provisions under Domestic Incident Report (DIR), etc.

Many cases were taken and analyzed; what could be the various options for resolving these cases? Sensitizing men on gender-based violence had very positive implications. Role reversals and constructive dialogues during the trainings helped men see things from a different perspective. These members were exposed to the

police station, the block and the district headquarters and the Women and Child Development department.

Some of the interventions, besides training, to strengthen the Shaurya Dal were:

1. Training SHG members as para-legal workers and promoting Gender *Sathis* to become members of the Shaurya Dal.
2. Sensitizing and training the men in the Shaurya Dal
3. Following up the cases resolved by the Shaurya Dal regularly
4. Documenting all the proceedings of the Shaurya Dal
5. Establishing and maintaining linkages with departments such as Women and Child Development police, BDO, PRI, etc.

Representatives need to be aware of their role and also be capable and sensitive enough to deal with the cases that come up in these forums

Gender-based violence against women is deeply rooted in our society. Such violence occurs often within the family. And it is perpetuated by societal norms. It is normalized, and women themselves do not find it wrong if men abuse or hit them. They continue to suffer in silence because they have no space or forum to raise such issues. Whereas traditional spaces such as the *jati panchayat* have a bias against women, legal spaces are also insensitive and inconsiderate. Women also fear

the dire consequences of taking legal action because they have to remain in the same society and neighbourhood.

Forums such as the Shaurya Dal are good initiatives; however, just forming such structures is not enough. Representatives need to be aware of their role and also be capable and sensitive enough to deal with the cases that come up in these forums. In Narayanganj, members of the Shaurya Dal, both men and women, are being trained to look at the issues from

a gender lens. It becomes more effective when the men talk on the issues of women. Challenging patriarchy may be a long haul; however, the greater need is to provide a safe space where women's voices are heard and solutions are provided so that there is equality and respectful coexistence within the family and in society.

Sumita Kasana works with PRADAN as Executive, Research and Advocacy

Bharti Raghuvanshi works as an Executive with PRADAN and is based in Narayanganj block, Mandla, Madhya Pradesh