

“If she doesn’t listen to me ...I’ll beat her up... she’s my wife, I can do whatever I like.”

Sadly, as things stand, this Bangladeshi man’s view is not unusual. Many men in South Asia think it is their right to batter their wives, and all too regularly that’s what they do. Studies reveal that one in every two women in the region has suffered violence in her home*; where they should be safest, they are most vulnerable. The inescapable violence goes unchallenged, leaving women and their children to suffer alone.

A recent Unicef report estimates that **nearly one million children in the UK have witnessed violence against a parent or caregiver**. So the problem is not unique to South Asia, but its widespread acceptance and adverse impact on the welfare and prosperity of families have prompted organisations and individuals in the region to do something about it.

Challenging attitudes

In India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, people have been working to end the violence by changing attitudes and behaviours. As part of our work to promote human rights to end poverty, Oxfam supported their coming together in a campaign called ‘WE CAN end all violence against women’ – ‘WE CAN’ for short.

Women in South Asia face violence in many areas of their lives, often fuelled by alcohol and resulting from prejudice, and it is a significant reason why women remain poor. Discrimination starts from birth; girls may suffer neglect in favour of boys, leading some, like Sachi Kumari from India, to feel **“it was a curse to be born as a woman.”**

But how do you change such deeply entrenched attitudes? The campaign is making people aware that however prevalent violence against women may be, it is not normal, not acceptable, and must end.

Did you know: WE CAN aims to reach 50 million men and women across South Asia, encouraging them to oppose violence against women



Change-makers use dance, drama, and songs to get their message across at the We Can festival in Sri Lanka. Above, Beauty enrols people at the festival

Then campaigners can start to change behaviour. The most difficult part is the first step – taking responsibility and making a personal change, whether it is learning to speak out about what’s happening in your home, or taking a pledge never to beat your wife again. Ordinary people from all walks of life are now taking that step.

They are ‘Change-makers’, a vital part of the WE CAN campaign. By 2011 we aim to have five million Change-makers, both men and women, each of whom will reach out to ten other people. Change-makers use dance, drama, comic strips, and songs to get their message across in areas where literacy rates may be low. “People shouldn’t have to deal with these kinds of issues alone,” says Pravat Kumar, Change-maker from India. “The problems faced by women and girls are also a problem for us [men].”

Change Maker Kits are just one of the gifts available from *Oxfam Unwrapped* this Christmas. To buy, call 0870 410 5630 or visit oxfamunwrapped.com

Beauty Ara is a Change-maker in Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

She got married young and the violence started soon after, ostensibly over the lack of a dowry. She suffered mental and physical abuse at the hands of her husband every day, and was finally thrown out of the home, leaving her only son behind. She has not seen her son since; the family have told him she is dead.

“ I support myself by tailoring and keeping poultry. I have seen so much unfairness and violence, I don’t want any more women to face these problems. I became involved in WE CAN through a village organisation and now volunteer with local families. When they’re angry and arguing, they swear at me very badly. They say: ‘It’s a private matter, don’t interfere...’ I feel hurt but if I get nervous I won’t be able to do the work. Instead of getting angry I talk to them gently and bring them round. Then they understand and talk to me. When someone says they have made up with their wife and they now have a

normal relationship and understand each other, this makes me optimistic because I know that I have made a positive difference.”

Beauty believes in the power of people like herself to bring about change and “remove the violence from the very roots”. Many of her neighbours are now joining hands to make change: “Now they’re talking about it and understanding it’s something we can do.” Making change is no easy task, requiring persistence, understanding, and courage – but Beauty is showing that WE CAN. ”

www.oxfam.org.uk/we-can



“In the areas we work in, illiteracy is very high. We find the change maker kit useful, the posters and cartoon booklets.”

Beauty Ara, Change-maker, Bangladesh



WE CAN

A new campaign in South Asia is bringing hope to millions of women who, until now, have been afraid to speak out against physical and mental abuse