

'We Can': Hidden Violence in Homes as Focus Area



One in two women in South Asia experience violence by their husbands. In Bangladesh, between 50 and 60 percent of women experience some form of domestic violence, according to recent research by International Center for Diarrhoeal Disease Research – Bangladesh (June 2006). One Stop Crisis Centre, a Bangladesh-based NGO that supports women victims of violence, reveals that almost 70 percent of sexual abuse suffered by women occurs within their own homes. An estimated 200 women are murdered each year in

Bangladesh when their families cannot pay their dowry, says Oxfam Australia.

In Sri Lanka, over 60 percent of women in the country live with violence within their home on a daily basis. This was stated by Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former Special Rapporteur on violence against women, in 2005, at the Fifth South Asia Regional Ministerial Conference. It was confirmed in 2006 by a survey by the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment that says 60 percent of women throughout Sri Lanka are victimised by domestic violence and 44 percent of pregnant women are also subject to harassment.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS -II) in India reveals that one in five married women in India experiences domestic violence from the age of 15. Around two-third of married women in India are victims of domestic violence and one incident of violence translates into women losing seven working days in the country, according to United Nations. As many as 70 percent of married women in India between the age of 15 and

49 are victims of beating, rape or coerced sex, says a United Nation Population Fund report. According to the Indian National Crime Records Bureau's unique 'crime clock 2005' (which tracked criminal activities over 2004) the country reported one dowry death every 77 minutes.

In Pakistan, around 80 percent women suffer violence within their homes according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

Records of Nepal's Central Women Police Cell registered 3,505 cases on domestic violence between 1998 and 2004; women's organisations, however, maintain that a majority of cases remain unrecorded.

Research conducted by Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission's (AIHRC) in 2005 on domestic violence shows that more than 50 percent of women are victims of abuse within their homes. Forced marriages are common though it is a punishable offence under the law.

A Worldwide, Worrisome Problem

The United Nations Women's Development Fund (UNIFEM) estimates that domestic violence is the leading cause of death across the world. The figures of women who die of domestic violence are greater than the numbers of those who die in war, of cancer or in motor accidents. The UN study *In-depth Study on all Forms of Violence* released by the UN Secretary General at the 61st UN Assembly in October 2006 took particular note of the severity and the scale of the problem.

If the statistics on domestic violence – a pattern of behaviour which is characterised by the exercise of control and misuse of power by one person within the home – show that it is shockingly widespread, its impact is devastating. As domestic violence occurs across society regardless of age, race, ethnicity, social class, economic position, culture and religion, its fall-outs affects everyone in society. The effects on individuals, families and the society at large are long-term and adverse.

Some of the biggest victims of domestic violence are the smallest. According to a recent report from UNICEF *'Behind Closed Doors: The Impact of Domestic Violence on Children (2006)*, nearly 275 million of children worldwide witness abuse in their everyday life. In South Asia, the estimates range from 40.8 million to 88 million children.

Domestic Violence: Not Easy to Talk About



Women's organisations across the world and especially in South Asia, where the problem is extreme and severe, have been trying to bring the issue of domestic violence into public discourse. But domestic violence is not easy to talk about. It is still viewed as a 'private' issue that does not warrant public dialogue or policy attention.

But is domestic violence really a 'private' issue? When homes 'normalise' violence against women, it becomes 'normal' in the streets and the society at large. The sense of 'entitlement' and 'control' that men have over women spills over from the home to the public arena as is reflected by the unequal gender norms and socio-economic power structures wherein women are not allowed to share equally in rights, resources and opportunities. Violence against women within homes, hence, creates and strengthens inequality among men and women in the larger society.

Women will never be equal in their public lives until they are equal in their homes. Domestic violence is central to people's rights. Violence within homes make women (who are largely affected) lose the freedom to live their lives the way they want.

Voices and Choices

'We Can' sees addressing domestic violence, situated within the 'private' sphere of the family, as the first step to address the crisis of violence of women in society. The idea is to make this 'private' issue a 'public' concern. Transforming the unequal power in gender relations within homes is at the heart of the 'We Can' endeavour.



By talking about the issue in public, 'We Can' is negating the stigma and the 'culture of silence' attached to it. Pushpa Rani of Dema village in Bangladesh, says, "The fact that I am here sharing my story would not have been possible if I had not been educated about my rights by the campaign. Now I

know what violence against women is, I know my rights. I have confidence to express myself. I hope that this campaign reaches more women; they will be even more aware than me and do great things."

Two, it has made a beginning by creating a culture that takes collective responsibility. People are now getting together to say that domestic violence is unacceptable. Says fifty-four years old Jessy Ariaratnam of Mannur Women Development Federation, Mannur, Sri Lanka, says, "Women and men have organised to expose and counter violence against women under 'We Can'. They have brought the violations out of the shadows and into the spotlight. This initiative may not put a complete halt to violence against women. But it will enable women to stand up and speak out. We need more voices to support the urgent struggle to stop violence against women as acts of violence against women also feed on and reinforce other forms of discrimination."



Jessy Ariaratnam
Mannur Women Development Federation
Mannur, Sri Lanka

While it is building a mass movement to oppose practices that foster domestic violence, it is also helping ordinary people to start changing their behaviour at home and in their communities, and facilitating them to take their own decisions and make choices about their lives. Twenty-one years old Rekha Rajput of Jagjeetpur village, Haridwar district in Uttaranchal in India, sees 'We Can' both as her personal journey of discovery and also one that ties up the collective destinies of people within her community.

She says, "In our region, women's rights are severely curbed. There are restrictions on our movements, space and expression. The campaign allows us to seek our identities and rights within a formalised and streamlined structure in a manner that is effective. The campaign has given us the advantage of numbers. We are a large and united force now. Speaking for myself, I would like to say that I am far more confident and all my earlier fears and reservations about speaking out have dissipated. My female cousin was being treated shabbily by my family because she chose to marry a man who does not belong to our caste. I spoke about this to my family members and made them understand the violence of their act. She has been reunited with our family now. I see this as a tremendous change. If each one of us can affect change, however small, the process of change will be irreversible



Rekha Rajput
Jagjeetpur village
Haridwar district, Uttarakhand, India

This is the story of 'We Can' so far. Change Makers are talking repeatedly to people about domestic violence so as to affect people's hearts and change their minds over a period of time. Violence within homes that is intense and pervasive will not end overnight. It will end only when the idea that 'women are fundamentally of less value than men' is rejected; and when large numbers of people act against this belief to make homes safe and violence-free for women – a right they are being denied. The effort is on in six countries and Change Makers are persistently creating 'public' spaces for 'private' matters.