



1. Origins

how did it all begin?



origins

how did it all begin?

What Enables a Campaign like 'We Can' to Happen?

This chapter looks at what made it possible for Oxfam to imagine the Campaign, what nourished the first seeds, and how they grew into ideas and the Campaign vision.

It looks at what is often called the 'enabling environment', the confluence of factors such as institutional history and culture, political will, and material support, as well as the wider, national and international context which can create a climate and source of energy to stimulate growth.

When this fertile ground comes together with the people with the energy and vision to make something happen – something happens!

Of course, there are always struggles and obstacles to overcome, mistakes, false starts and unknowns, and some of these are also recorded here.

Fertile Ground

Oxfam GB's history of programme and policy work on gender equality and violence against women through the 1980s and 1990s provided the seeds for 'We Can' and the nourishment for them to germinate.

In turn, Oxfam itself was nourished and its awareness expanded by its experience all over the world of grassroots women's struggles and triumphs, from the 1960s onward. This awareness was transformed into action by activists in Oxfam, inspired by the international mobilisation of women's rights advocates and feminists during the 1970s and 1980s, who influenced their own organisations, governments and international opinion.

The ethos developed within 'We Can' – of internal, personal as well as external political change, of democratic and egalitarian ways of working, of equally valuing the bolder and the less visible actions – owes much to the women's movements which challenged – and changed - the existing social order all over the world during these important decades.

Internationally – the UN World Conferences on Women in Nairobi in 1985, and in Beijing in 1995, had focussed the world's attention on the continuing violation of women's rights in every aspect of their lives. In 1993 due to the efforts of women's rights advocates at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the UN General Assembly adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. 1994 saw the appointment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and the beginning of a process of systematic documentation and publication of the nature and extent of this violence in countries around the world.

The 1995 Beijing Conference reinforced the UN's commitments, and the requirements of countries signatory to the Platform for Action. The Beijing Platform for Action firmly established violence against women as a fundamental aberration in human progress and stated:

'Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.'

In Oxfam GB, inspired by work on women's rights in Latin America, a Gender and Development Unit (GADU) was founded in 1984 and became the driving force behind Oxfam's programme to tackle gender inequality. In 1984 Oxfam funded a study on 'the hidden crimes against women' in India, and in 1989 supported a national conference on the anti-dowry movement in Bangladesh. During the 1990s, as Oxfam took an increasingly committed approach to human rights, its programme work on violence against women grew.

It was taken forward at the policy level by research into this programme which culminated in an international workshop for Oxfam staff and partners on violence against women in Sarajevo in 1998. The research was published in 2001, in a book in which Oxfam GB documented its experience from around the world and 'laid out its stall' on violence against women.⁴ Violence against women was now firmly on the organisation's agenda, and established as a priority programme.

This made it possible for Oxfam as an institution to imagine a Campaign on violence against women; it became possible to bring it out of the wings onto the public stage of organisational Campaigning.

4: Pickup, Williams and Sweetman: Ending Violence against Women – A Challenge for Development and Humanitarian Work, Oxfam, Oxford 2001

In South Asia - Meanwhile, the process of 'regionalisation', was moving Oxfam from country-based management and planning to cluster countries in administrative 'regions'. Oxfam's South Asia region was a cluster of six countries – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Nepal.⁵ One of the implications of this was that Oxfam had a new regional budget for funding initiatives on a regional level – and the 'We Can' Campaign became one of them.

Looking across the countries of the region and the extreme forms of discrimination against women in them, it became clear to Oxfam that the process of equal development for women and men within a framework of human rights was not achievable without tackling the violence of the oppression of South Asian women.

An Oxfam Briefing Paper⁶ for the Campaign outlines the situation of South Asia women:

'In South Asia, one in every two women experiences violence in her daily life. Social, cultural, political, economic, and legal factors in the region combine to leave women vulnerable to community-sanctioned violence.... Violence against women is endemic in the region, with culture-specific variations. It begins at the stage of conception; sex-selective abortions are frequent. One in six deaths of a female infant in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan is due to neglect and discrimination. Culture-specific forms of violence include domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, incest, trafficking, honour killings, acid attacks, public mutilation, stove-burnings, and forced temple prostitution.'

The policy environment was ready – the climate was right, and the scale of the terrible situation of women cried out for action. There was already

much programme work on different forms of violence against women in individual countries, and a regional level initiative would offer scope for a coordinated effort to complement this work and take it into new constituencies.

Fig. 1: Violence Against Women Campaigns and Advocacy Initiatives Supported by Oxfam in 2001

- ⇒ **India and Nepal:** Violence against women campaigns, both with a focus on caste.
- ⇒ **Nepal:** Women in Black Campaign on trafficking, advocacy on property bill, media sensitisation and advocacy on trafficking and Violence against Women Bill, and gender curriculum development.
- ⇒ **India:** Ending violence against dalit and ethnic minorities.
- ⇒ **Bangladesh:** Networking and mobilisation of police, judiciary, and girls' education advocacy initiatives.
- ⇒ **Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka:** Trafficking.
- ⇒ **Nepal and India:** Political participation of women.
- ⇒ **India:** Small initiatives on female foeticide, and initiatives on domestic violence.
- ⇒ **Nepal:** Violence against women in refugee situations and working with Bhutanese refugees.
- ⇒ **Regional:** ActionAid South Asian Campaign on trafficking.

Starting to Shape the Campaign

As the new millennium kicked off, there were a number of landmark meetings of Oxfam South Asia programme staff, and particularly the Gender Working Group, (a group of specialised staff taking forward gender equality work in the countries of the region), where the idea for a regional campaign on violence against women took form. Amongst the participants in these meetings were the key people who would drive the Campaign forward.

5: In this book, 'South Asia Region' refers to this administrative unit

6: Towards Ending Violence against Women in South Asia., Oxfam Briefing Paper, August 2004

A Short Timeline of Early Meetings of Oxfam South Asia

July 2000, Delhi

A renewed commitment was made to work on violence against women.

August 2000, Dhaka

Initial discussions took place about a gender campaign, with some theoretical planning and conceptual clarification.

September 2000, Gender Working Group⁷ Meeting, Dhaka

Four programme priorities were identified: Enhancing political participation of women, ending violence against women, increasing female education, and women's control over income and productive resources. Institutions that could be partners and allies were also listed.

February 2001, South Asia Regional Meeting

This meeting identified and agreed on ending violence against women as the Campaign issue. Broad level planning and exploration of different sub-issues included identifying the targets, allies, objectives, strategies, and tactics of the Campaign. Issues of importance to be included in the Campaign strategy were:

- Working with men
- Ensuring linkages with the programme
- Recognition that the programme base needed strengthening too.

June 2001, Islamabad Campaign Planning

The meeting developed an initial time line, and the phasing of the Campaign; it explored insights in campaign methods particularly the popular campaigning concepts, and defined tasks for six months. The issue of developing an identity for the Campaign was raised.

November 2001, Gender Working Group meeting, Nagarkot, Nepal

This was a key meeting in the early development of the Campaign, in which the core and strategic components of the Campaign were developed - the vision, proposition, objectives and its ownership. These set the groundwork for the 'We Can' Campaign. The role of the Gender Working Group and a management process for the Campaign were discussed, and a

Steering Group established. The meeting's main conclusions are summarised below.

The Vision and Proposition

The initial vision statement "Where The Mind Is Without Fear" was changed to "Make South Asia Safe For Women" in order to encompass the idea of accountability of both the individuals and institutions, at the state and community levels; to imply the need for action; and reflect a positive tone. A proposition statement was also drafted (see Fig.2, below)

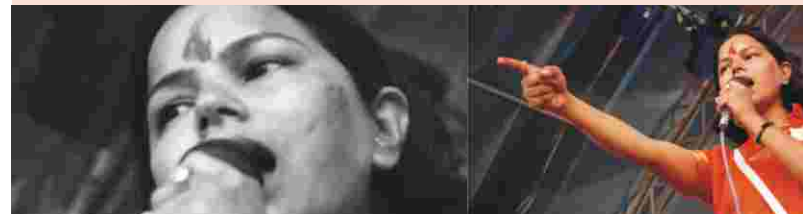
At this time the proposed Campaign was called CEVAW – the Campaign to End Violence Against Women.

Fig. 2: 2001 CEVAW Draft Proposition

Women in South Asia live in an oppressive, backward and feudal environment, which is caused by the patriarchal value system, unequal power relations and socio-religious and cultural norms and traditions. Therefore, women are rendered powerless, assetless, excluded and perceived as worthless.

The many forms of violence against women constitute a widespread and systematic strategy employed to maintain patriarchal power. Such violence erodes women's self esteem and contributes to trapping women in poverty.

Ending Violence Against Women – South Asia (EVAW-South Asia) Campaign will work towards changing policies, attitudes and behaviours to end systematic violence against women and make South Asia safe for them.



⁷A group of specialised staff taking forward Oxfam's work on gender equality in the region

Campaign Objectives

Initial objectives were set at this meeting for the long, medium and short term.

The long-term objectives, with a 10-year timespan, were to:

- change attitudes and beliefs that accept and perpetuate violence against women;
- challenge gender stereotypes reinforced by tradition, religion and culture; and
- see reduced tolerance to violence against women, increased accountability of institutions, from the household to the state, and increased appropriate strategic action.

The short and mid-term objectives at that time were concerned with changes in attitudes and beliefs in state and civil society institutions and mobilisation at these different levels to tackle violence against women with practical actions.

Involving Men

After much debate, it was decided that men should be centrally involved in the Campaign, proposing non-exploitative forms of masculinity, and to work with other men.

Reaching New Actors

The meeting recognised that this was not the first violence against women campaign in South Asia. But in contrast to others which had been taken forward exclusively by women's movements, the new Campaign needed to involve broader constituencies to achieve its goals.

Whose Campaign?

Ownership of the Campaign was a critical issue in these early discussions – what role would Oxfam play? What would be its relationship with other organisations in South Asia? The diagram below, from the Nagarkot workshop, shows the options (Fig. 3, next page)

Fig.3: Diagram of Campaign Ownership, Nagarkot



The participants concluded:

“The criteria that determine the ownership of this Campaign include the ability to be spontaneous, creative, innovative, mass-based, make speedy decisions, and take a variety of actions to suit changing needs or respond to different needs of different locations or issues. In addition, deep knowledge and understanding of the factors causing and perpetuating violence against women is essential for the partners playing a leadership role in this Campaign. Inclusion of other movements and not just women's movements was felt to be crucial, as exclusion of men from the decision making echelons of women movements would not help. Oxfam's key strength lies in strategic leadership, leveraging resources as well as anticipating backlash and employing proactive strategies to deal with it.”⁸

The group agreed that Oxfam would play an active and visible role in initiating the Campaign, and would maintain a shared leadership role for as long as necessary on an equal basis with other partners of the Campaign. The 'ownership' of the Campaign would be devolved to a broader steering group as other players and actors come on board.

8: From the report of the Gender Working Group in Nagarkot, 2001

Risks

Risks were envisaged:

- ▶ Conflicting priorities between the Campaign and Oxfam's programme work, in relation to issues and to funding;
- ▶ Difficulties in finding partnerships for such high risk work;
- ▶ Potential confusion or tension between existing partners and new Campaign allies.



The group agreed that minimising the risks would involve:

- ▶ Maintaining close integration between the new Campaign and existing programme work, allowing each to complement and strengthen the other;
- ▶ Widening the communication with other groups working on violence against women;
- ▶ Beginning with existing partnerships and alliances;
- ▶ Clarifying that initially Oxfam leads the Campaign, but will step back over time;
- ▶ Sharing human and financial resources between programme and Campaign initiatives.

New skills and/or people would be needed:

- ▶ Media and advocacy, through capacity building of existing staff as the first alternative;
- ▶ Documentation, especially process documentation, to be outsourced or supported by regional structures, while developing skills within country level staff;
- ▶ Street action, both inspiring it and organising it;
- ▶ Conceptual clarity on gender, understanding of issues and context;
- ▶ Internal knowledge of Oxfam, leadership and communication skills;
- ▶ More stakeholders e.g. social marketing people.

By the end of 2001, the founding decisions had been made to run a regional Campaign on violence against women in South Asia.

The basic principles and ideas which would later be incorporated into 'We Can' were laid down at Nagarkot in 2001. However, for reasons which will be outlined in the next few chapters, the Campaign planning ran into trouble, and it was another two years before it really got back on track.

