



Strategies to combat Violence against Women: an overview

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Sex selective abortion, gender parity in education, girl child education, violence against women, domestic violence, sexual harassment, safety of women, gender and commerce, sexuality, property and land rights for women – these were some of the issues that were addressed on the Gender Channel of the OneWorld South Asia portal during the year 2006.

Also highlighted were the issues of 'displacement for development', globalization, women's political participation, as well as women's contribution to peace and their participation in peace processes and negotiations.

Specifically on the issue of violence against women, the collection of articles on the channel mostly highlighted various campaigns, employing different strategies to combat violence against women.

The "We Can" campaign was launched in 2004 in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Pakistan, and will be launched in Afghanistan in 2007, to challenge and change deeply entrenched gender-biased societal attitudes and practices that endorse gender discrimination and violence. By 2011, the campaign will work to mobilize five million Change Makers in these six countries. Each of them will reach out to at least ten others so as to reach 50 million people in an effort to symbolically link up with the 50 million missing women in South Asia.

Launched in 2005, Jagori's "Safe Delhi Campaign" was based upon a series of 22 safety audits conducted in residential colonies, resettlement colonies, market places, railway station, the metro, and Delhi University. The campaign was inspired by The Metropolitan Toronto Action Committee on Violence Against Women and Children (METRAC) and sought to explode the myth that safety is a women's issue alone. During the year 2006, it engaged various stakeholders to highlight safety in the city using several strategies such as training, disseminating information, addressing urban design and planning issues, and most of all, involving communities themselves.

Other campaigns by civil society organizations and the state police department have included the imparting of self defence training. As a self defence trainer put it, "There is more to self defence than meets the eye. It is about being assertive, and meeting the need for safety and security, not only using physical techniques but also by being alert, assertive, and self confident." It follows, therefore, that for effective self defence, it is essential to undo some of the conditioning that leads women to see themselves as the weaker sex, to believe that they are helpless and cannot fight back, or that there is no way out of a situation of violence.

Concurrent with campaigns on the ground for combating Violence against Women were the online campaigns. The Association for Progressive Communication's Women's Networking Support Programme (APC-WNSP) urged everyone, to 'Take back the Tech.' This global campaign asked women to take control of ICTs and to reclaim their critical participation in and contribution to ICTs. It also asserts women's right to move freely within online spaces without harassment or threats to women's safety.

Yet another campaign, BlankNoise, began as an online design project amplifying voices on a specific aspect of violence against women – Eve Teasing. Eve teasing, as the name suggests, is considered a joke, a prank. But BlankNoise is a project to raise awareness around the fact that eve teasing is in fact, nothing but street sexual harassment! Over the last year, the 'project' has taken on a larger dimension as it draws passionate responses and participation from all over the country and abroad. It now aims to work with other groups that are already

working on the issue, and also through offline platforms and interventions.

Domestic Violence

The other aspect of VAW that received a lot of attention during the year was the violence that occurs behind closed doors, within the home – often considered as the safest space for an individual – and by known, trusted relatives. On October 27, the much-awaited law against domestic violence came into force, seeking to address issues linked to the status of women within their homes and to empower women to report acts of violence suffered at the hands of family members.

Under this Act, the definition of domestic violence has been expanded to include verbal abuse, taunts for not bearing a male child or not bringing dowry, not allowing the woman to work or study, and marital rape. Another significant aspect of this law has been the inclusion of women who are subject to violence in a 'live-in' relationship. The challenging aspect now is believed to be the actual implementation of the act.

Some of our readers responded to the laws against domestic violence and dowry, saying that it is only inviting women to file false cases, and causing the imprisonment of innocent husbands and their families without investigation. One reader stated that "As all women are not victims, they are villains too; and all men are not villains, they are victims too," and looked forward to gender balanced laws instead of gender biased laws.

Yet another reader quoted an article from the *Indian Express* to show the large number of cases where stringent laws against dowry are misused by women, in order to facilitate divorce, to claim a high settlement, or out of spite.

Another landmark act that was indirectly linked with the status of women and with the incidence of violence against them was the amendment to the Hindu Succession Act. The amendment makes Hindu women's inheritance rights in land and joint family property legally equal to men's, and provides the daughter with rights of residence and partition of the family dwelling house.

A research study by Bina Agarwal and Pratip Panda in Kerala revealed that owning house or land, can dramatically reduce the risk of marital violence. It was found that the incidence of physical violence was as high as 49% among propertyless women, but 18% among landowning women and 7% among those owning both house and land.

Sex Selective Abortion

In January, 2006 the British medical journal *Lancet* published the results of a research by Prabhat Jha and his colleagues at St. Michael's Hospital at the University of Toronto and Rajesh Kumar of the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh.

The study, based on a national survey of 1.1 million Indian households and published in *Lancet* journal on Monday, claimed that nearly 500,000 female babies are lost in India every year because of selective abortion. Another study by the Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI) highlighted the misuse of medical technology for the identification of the sex of a child before birth and selective abortion of female fetuses.

The study revealed that while most sex selective abortions were found to occur for second or higher order of birth when previous children were females, they also occur in families which have existing children of both sexes. Further, an orphanage in Rajasthan revealed that out of 120 children adopted in three years, 95 were boys.

One of the responses to the issue, by one of our readers, was titled "Wake up before it is too late!" She pointed out that societal acceptance and its reinforcement by the market are colluding to ensure the persistent drop in the sex ratio of girls to boys.

On August 18, 2006, the Supreme Court of India issued notices to the Indian government and the states and union territories on a petition by a civil society organization, seeking stricter implementation of laws that ban pre-natal sex-selection tests and sex-selective abortions in India.

Various schemes had been devised by the Indian government - the Centre proposed, on December 18th, 2006, an insurance cover of Rs 1 lakh for every Indian girl child to save her life from being nipped in the womb and

see her through the early years; the Ministry of Human Resource Development decided to waive fees and hand out scholarships to all girls from single-child families until the post-graduation level.

At a meeting of senior government officials, NGO representatives and UN representatives, a core group was formed to monitor the incidence of sex selective abortion and ensure strict action against offenders. Various campaigns were initiated by civil society organizations, faith based organizations, governments, and others, to spread awareness about sex selective abortion.

However, all this action notwithstanding, the sex ratio continues to be abysmally low, leading to the purchase of women for marriage from poorer states in the country and the region, or the marriage of one woman to all the sons in a family. The devaluation of the girl child and declining sex ratio go hand in hand, and are linked up closely with the trafficking of women and girl children and forced prostitution.

At the same time, while there is a need to find a balance between combating family values that encourage and necessitate the birth of male progeny, and championing women's right to choose, and their right to abortion.

Debates: looking backwards and forwards

One of the most passionate debates around VAW was in response to an article on eve teasing and its portrayal in the media. While the article itself pointed out that the media must address and explode the myths around VAW – one of our readers voiced the opinion that girls or women who are teased or molested, are the ones who invite such a situation, and that apart from the men who are "sick" or perverted, normal and healthy men will not have even the slightest tendency to tease or harass a woman unprovoked.

This only goes to illustrate that we have a long way to go in changing mindset that condones the sexual harassment of women, places the onus of safety, empowerment and progress squarely on women's shoulders. We continue into 2007, looking forward to integrating communication and strategies against VAW in offline and online spaces and enabling women and girls to reclaim their right to move around in these spaces unfettered and unhampered.

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