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COMMENTARY

Daughters at Risk

When will relatives, friends and neighbors stop ignoring domestic violence?

Madhu Kishwar, editor of Manushi magazine and a renowned champion of the oppressed in India, offers her analysis of domestic abuse in India. First and foremost, she argues, we must create a social awareness that abuse is not acceptable, and that is the duty of friends and relatives to both intervene and to offer shelter to the abused. Kishwar is especially critical of the failure of India's legal system to bring abusers to justice, but it is also true that every nation's response to domestic abuse has been inadequate.

By Madhu Kishwar, Delhi

Manushi's birth in 1979 coincided with a new outburst of protest and mobilization of opinion against domestic violence. Independent investigations by women's organizations revealed that many of the cases of wife murder were being recorded as "kitchen accidents" or suicides, due to police complicity with the murderers. In numerous cases, incidents of a husband and his family killing his wife were falsely reported as household accidents to be dismissed in half a dozen lines in the "City

Briefs" columns of the newspapers.

This atmosphere of apathy and unconcern changed dramatically when organizations like Manushi questioned police reports and did their own investigations into cases of unnatural deaths of married women. We not only gave wide publicity to these reports but also organized protest demonstrations against such atrocities. We organized one of the earliest such demonstrations in cooperation with a few other women's rights organizations in the case of a young Delhi woman who had been burnt to death, allegedly by her in-laws. As usual, the police had registered it as a case of suicide even though our investigations clearly showed that her in-laws had murdered her by pouring kerosene on her and then setting her on fire. Some of us from Manushi who were also teaching in Delhi University visited hundreds of families in the girl's area, explaining the details of the case and asking them to join us for a protest demonstration on a particular date outside the house of the alleged killers.

The response was overwhelming. Nearly 1,500 men and women of that area joined us in a spontaneous show of outrage. The idea behind approaching the neighbors was to enlist their help in socially boycotting the killers. From our experience with the Indian police and law courts we knew that they were likely to get away with the murder by suitably bribing the police. However, if neighbors took an open stand and ostracized them, it might act as a powerful deterrent to further murders because in our society samajik izzat, "social respect," still carries far more importance than the verdicts of India's corrupt and tardy legal system. This was a way of making people pass a collective verdict against the murderous

family in much the same way that the village panchayat, assembly of five elders, have an old tradition of doing.

This demonstration was given widespread coverage in the national media. As a result, it became the catalyst for a whole series of similar protests in different parts of the country. Sometimes, families whose daughters were murdered by their in-laws would by themselves or with the help of local organizations stage similar protests. In many cases, public-spirited neighbors began to take the initiative. In Delhi, we were flooded with requests for similar interventions from the natal families of the women victims. All those frustrated by the malfunctioning of our law-and-order machinery felt that they had found an alternative way of getting some small amount of justice.

It was very heartening to see that each one of our interventions or direct actions brought forth very enthusiastic responses from neighbors. Almost always hundreds of neighbors would join us rather than express disapproval of our demonstrations or claim we were disturbing their neighborhood peace. In many instances it was neighbors who contacted Manushi at their own initiative and tried to expose the culprits through their own collective initiative.

However, soon we began to realize that in several instances we were being used as revenge brigades by the dead woman's natal family who had refused her refuge while she was still alive. By listening to the accounts of various families who contacted us following their daughters' deaths, we were horrified to find that in most cases the parents had been well

aware that their daughter was being tortured for long periods before she was actually murdered or compelled to commit suicide. Yet, they did not intervene to save her life. They would keep advising her to submit to whatever the husband and his family inflicted, invoking adjustment formulas such as "produce a child, it will cement your marriage." When we questioned the woman's family about why they allowed their daughter to undergo the severe beatings, humiliation and brutalities that they knew were occurring regularly, we would get fairly standard answers of the following variety: 1) "We never expected her to be killed. We thought things would settle down slowly." 2) "How could we encourage her to break up her marriage and return to us? After all, life as a divorcee is not easy." 3) "We wouldn't have minded her returning to us, but her sisters-in-law [who now live in the natal home] would have made her feel unwelcome and unwanted. They would also disrespect us for taking her back."

Thus, it became clear that the woman's natal family was almost as much to blame for her murder as her husband or in-laws. In such a situation, should we have been portraying the women's natal family as mere victims during our protest demonstrations? It became clear that a woman whose life was so devalued by her parents that they preferred to let her live or die as a battered wife rather than offer her their support as a deserted, separated or divorced daughter was bound to live a vulnerable life in her marital home. Husbands who thought their wives had nowhere to go and no other option but to put up with whatever their in-laws meted out to them got further emboldened to be ever more abusive, violent and extortionate. Therefore, we resisted being manipulated by such families to use our protests and boycotts merely to settle scores with the in-laws. There were even some families who were more upset

at the loss of the "money investment" they made on their daughter's marriage than at her murder. Manushi shifted its focus to rescuing women while they were still alive rather than protesting after their death and then spending years fighting usually fruitless legal battles to get the guilty punished.

Our interventions took a much simpler and a far more rewarding route. We were helped in adopting this approach by the fact that in India victims of domestic violence seldom approach the police or women's organizations alone. They are invariably accompanied by a whole range of relatives, not just parents. Whenever a family came to Manushi to seek legal or police help through Manushi for their daughter who was being battered or abused in her marital home, we would confront them, especially the girl's father, with the question: "Why do you want to run to the police station at a time when you say your daughter's life is in danger? Was she born in a police station that she should be treated as the local constable's responsibility? Even God, leave alone the police, cannot save the life of a woman whose own father is willing to let her be beaten. The simplest way to save her is to remove her at once from the place where she is being beaten and humiliated. Make her feel welcome in your house. Assure her that she has as much right to stay in her parental home as do her brothers. Having done that, you would have earned the moral right to approach the law courts to protect her rights as a wife. If you are not willing to grant her rights as a daughter, we don't believe you are your daughter's well-wisher."

It was heartening to find that most of the families who were given this line of reasoning responded positively and provided the required support and assured shelter to their daughters

even though they were initially shaken up by our vehemence on this point. In almost all such cases where the women concerned received unconditional strong support from their parents, they were able to rebuild their lives without too many traumas and scars as compared to those who only relied on the legal machinery. That further strengthened my faith that to save women from exploitation and abuse, you do not need ever more draconian laws. You need to build a culture where daughters are valued as much as sons, where parents do not treat their daughters as burdens to be shed at the earliest possible time, where marrying off a daughter does not mean she ceases to have rights in her parental home and property. In short, without strengthening women's rights as daughters, we cannot hope to strengthen women's rights as wives. Unwanted daughters are likely to be treated as disposable wives.

MADHU KISHWAR, 48, New Delhi, is editor of Manushi, India's leading magazine on human issues, especially women rights. She is an erudite activist in the effort to raise up the quality of life in India.

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