

Exposing Violence against Women: A Campaign in Uttar Pradesh

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Vanangana, a women's group, recently organised a campaign against domestic violence in Banda district in Uttar Pradesh. To provoke the women themselves to break their silence on this issue. Vanangana, in 30 villages, performed a play based on a real incident and followed it up with discussions. The campaign proved effective in creating awareness.

BANDA district in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh has made headlines because it is home to the dreaded dacoit Dadua and his gang. The crime that escapes notice is domestic violence against women. The industrial and economic backwardness of this region - one of the most backward in the state - provides fertile soil for such activities. The parameters of women's progress in the region are lower than the already abysmal state averages. Female literacy is 23.9 percent and the sex ratio (number of women per 1,000 men) is 846 compared to the state average of 25.3 per cent and 879 respectively. No figures, however, can reflect the plight of women or the social and economic constraints that shackle them.

It is in this arid, poverty-stricken and dacoit-infested district that Vanangana, a women's group, has been working for the empowerment of rural women. In an area where water is a perennial problem, Vanangana has broken the stereotype of the male mechanic and has trained women to become hand-pump mechanics. Self-help groups have been organised to extricate women from the clutches of rapacious moneylenders, and to increase their earnings by helping them to acquire skills.

Even as Vanangana members mobilised women on these issues, there was one issue that loomed large in many gruesome forms. Domestic violence was an issue that impacted on most women but one which remained wrapped up in a shroud of silence. Sometimes the shroud was not just metaphorical. Many women, were killed, and several others driven to suicide in increasing incidents of domestic violence. In Banda district alone, in the last one year, the number of reported dowry deaths was 21 and suicides seven, which was the highest ever. Yet very few of the total cases were reported and even fewer resulted in any convictions. In no case was there any public outcry.

"Domestic violence is so all-pervasive, it just cannot be ignored any more. Society, the police, the administration and the family are all guilty in this

conspiracy of silence. We decided to start an all-out campaign and take the sensitive issue of domestic violence head on," says Huma Khan the coordinator of the campaign. Their first task was to visit the villages and investigate the cases in which women had been found dead in unnatural circumstances in the last one year. They made a list of 30 such villages. They had worked in some of the villages, others were new to them.

"Each village had one or more chilling story of a women's murder or suicide. But the greater tragedy was the silence on the issue. The stories were different, but the underlying theme was the same. Class, caste, religion and patriarchy all collude against women. We wanted to bring this issue into the open. We wanted people to discuss it. All the women who had died were between 18 and 24 years of age. They all either had small children or were pregnant. Even today men in these areas think they have absolute right over their wives. What they do with them is their private family matter. We wanted all the different views to emerge," says Madhavi Kukreja, the crusading founder of Vanangana.

The campaign started in the first week of January 1999. In each village, a play was first enacted to project the theme. The play was based on the true story of a girl from one of the villages. In the play, the girl is mercilessly beaten by her husband but gets no refuge even in her fathers home. When she eventually dies, there is much breast-beating. Her father threatens to take the matter to the police, but instead of having his son-in-law arrested, the father, at the instance of the police, strikes a deal with his son-in-law. He goes home richer, his conscience clear. After all, his daughter cannot come back so what harm can some cash do? The police is happy -- it has done its job; it has resolved a case amicably (and, not to be mentioned, lucratively). The boy is also happy. He is free, free to marry again and bring in another dowry.

The play was followed by an open discussion in the villages. Since there had been recent incidents of violence in these villages, there was tension and some acrimony. However, Vanangana activists were able to contain this because the objective was to initiate a debate, create awareness and build up public opinion against it.

The incidents of domestic violence in these villages make gruesome stories. In Bhitakhera village, the body of Gita Devi had been found in the fields in July last year. She had been first hanged and then her body had been thrown out in the fields where it was discovered the next day covered by slush and rain. Her in-laws had fled. Her husband and in-laws were later arrested, only to be released on bail soon after. Gita Devi's death raised many issues that were discussed in the meeting after the play. Women said they felt helpless because they were not educated and there were few opportunities for employment. The legal system

and the police were all insensitive to a woman's needs. The growing demands for dowry, they said, had made life insufferable for women.

When Neelam, a newly married girl died of burns in village Bachran, her father with the help of Vanangana activists lodged an FIR against the husband and got him arrested. However, six months on, the situation is completely different. The father struck a deal with his son-in-law. No one knows the details of the deal, but he is now getting his second daughter married to the same person.

About 400 people had assembled in Bachran village to watch the play. There was some tension because the theme of the play was so close to the sordid events of their own village. Many women wept and said the situation was the same everywhere but who was willing to listen to them?

One youth said that it was the greed for dowry that made life miserable for women. Another, stated that the question was not one of dowry alone. It was one of mentality. Till such time as men consider women inferior and no better than slaves, the situation will not change. In-laws who murder their daughters-in-law and parents who compromise with their daughters' killers should be socially ostracised. Not everyone, however, was in favour of change. One old man said that when a girl gets educated she starts asking for her rights, and that is not acceptable to men, that is why there is conflict. Another criticised women's groups which talk of the rights of women and break up families.

One elderly villager said that Bachran village was considered the most ideal village in the district, but some four incidents of violence against women have spoiled the name of the village. In an intensely emotion charged ambience, one young man who beat his wife frequently took a pledge in front of all those assembled never to beat her again.

Ahriya, a harijan girl of village Bihara, consumed poison and died only three months after her marriage. Vanangana members tried to persuade her father to register the case. He would agree, and then back out. Finally, it was discovered that he had taken money to hush up the matter.

The complicity of the police at worst, or their apathy at best, was another reason why perpetrators of crimes against women got away. This was the view of women in a large meeting that was held in village Agarhunda. Kamlesh, a backward caste girl belonging to this village, had been married to a man from another village. She was frequently beaten by her in-laws. No one in the village would come to her rescue. She was not allowed to go to her father's home. Last June, she was found dead, crushed by a truck. Her in-laws said it was an accident. Her father and others, however, did not believe that. They suspected

that she had first been killed and then thrown under a truck. Everyone in the neighbourhood knew she used to be beaten. In fact, all her neighbours testified that she had been badly beaten the day before she was found dead. However, no FIR was lodged because the police did not find any evidence of murder.

In the meeting in Agarhunda village, Kamalesh's mother crying profusely, declared, "I have lost one daughter, but we will see that no else in this village loses another."

In village Chamrauha, Nirmala, an adivasi woman, was found dead hanging from a tree. She was several months pregnant. People said she was brutally beaten up by her husband., but the police did not register the case. Her father was very poor and belonged to a distant village. Pursuing the case would have meant frequent trips and expenses both in cash and in lost earnings. After Vanangana had staged the play in this village, Nirmala's case came up for discussion. Some people said the police was responsible because they did not take these cases seriously, consequently culprits escaped and those who committed these crimes were not afraid. The role of society and its responsibility in the tragic loss of young lives also came up for discussion. Other questions generated heated exchanges too: "Does a man have a right to beat his wife if he wants to? Is it an internal family matter? Fights between father and son, or mother and son, or for that between two brothers are not considered exclusively an internal matter of the family. Why then, is only beating up of the wife an internal family matter?"

A young harijan girl, only 17 years old, died of burns in village Taraon. During the course of the discussion after the staging of the play people said that even if a woman commits suicide, the family should be held responsible because their actions had driven her to the extreme step. How far were the girl's parents responsible? In this case the girl did not want to come back to her husband's house but her mother had forced her to come. To complicate matters, there were also rumours that the girl had illicit relations with her father. Many women, however said it was very easy to spoil a girl's reputation and then harass her.

Leelavati, the woman pradhan of the village, took a vow along with other women that they would not be silent in such cases any more and work towards change.

One of the objectives of the campaign was also to sensitise the bureaucracy. After covering 30 villages, on the penultimate day, the play was staged in the premises of the district court in Karvi, Banda. Hundreds of people attended the meeting. The song 'Kya kassor keenha, kanha, jo diyo ye sajaye, babul bhaiya, maiya, sab bhaye paraye,' brought tears to the eyes of many of those present. The district

magistrate and other officials participated for over two hours watching the play and taking part in the discussions.

"When we started the campaign we were unsure of what to expect. We just knew we had to take up the issue. Vanangana activists themselves have been victims of brutal violence. But they are lucky to have escaped. Others have not been so fortunate. We wanted to show that women's rights are human rights. The response in all the villages has been overwhelming and beyond our expectations. The campaign has generated a public debate and the bureaucracy and police will have to take notice," say the organisers.

"A public hearing on the issue is next on our agenda," says Madhavi, "the struggle will go on."