

OXFAM IN ACTION

Mobilising Women in Marginalised Communities to End Violence against Women and Girls

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Oxfam India is committed to ending gender-based violence in its six focus states¹. As part of its 2016-2020 strategy, Oxfam India, a rights-based organisation, will strive to ensure that poor and marginalised women will claim and advance their rights and make violence against women and girls (VAWG) unacceptable. VAWG is one of most widespread, yet the least recognised human rights violations across the world. Through its work on gender justice in Uttar Pradesh (UP), Oxfam India works with a non-profit organisation, Vanangana – directly in 15 villages and through campaigns in 170 villages. They work in Chitrakoot and Banda district in the Bundelkhand region to mobilise communities through *Nigrani Samitis* to end violence against women and girls, and bring about a perceptible change in social norms. These *Samitis* comprise mostly of *Dalit* women; it also includes *Adivasi* and Muslim women.

Oxfam India works amongst the most marginalised communities in the country i.e. the *Dalits*, Muslims, and *Adivasis*. They, and in particular the women in these communities, are often at the bottom rung of the society and lag behind in practically all parameters of health and education. For instance, their literacy rate is lower than the national average – female literacy among *Dalits* is 57 per cent as against the national female literacy rate of 65 per cent².

Though *Dalits* fare better on sex ratio than the national average, they are one of the worst victims of domestic violence. According to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) Data-3 (2005-06) (albeit dated, latest data is awaited) nearly 46 per cent of *Dalit* women reported domestic violence as against 40.1 per cent nationally. Domestic violence is one of the most pervasive forms of violence against women and girls. Reflected through cases reported under section 498-A (IPC) or cruelty by husbands or relatives, domestic violence comprises 35 per cent of the cases reported according to the 2015 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data³.

Though the cases of violence against women have reduced marginally between 2014 and 2015, it continues to be high and unacceptable. Uttar Pradesh reports the highest number of cases of violence against women⁴. Among the six focus states, it also has one of the worst numbers of violence against *Dalit* women⁵.

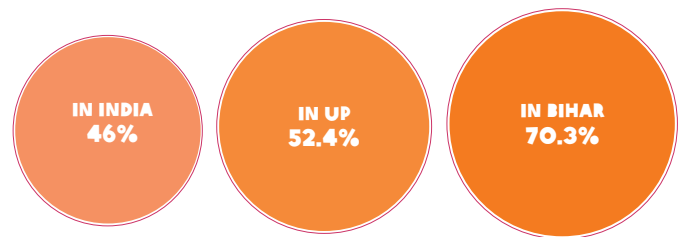
This makes Oxfam India's work on violence against women in Uttar Pradesh and in particular, among the *Dalit* community imperative. Despite the fact that Uttar Pradesh became the first state to elect a *Dalit* woman as Chief Minister, the plight of *Dalits* and especially, women continue.

Through Vanangna, Oxfam India is working among women in Chitrakoot and Banda districts since 2004. These are two of the most backward districts in UP and are part of Bundelkhand, one of the least developed regions in the state. The harsh geographical landscape and a deeply entrenched feudal system have made

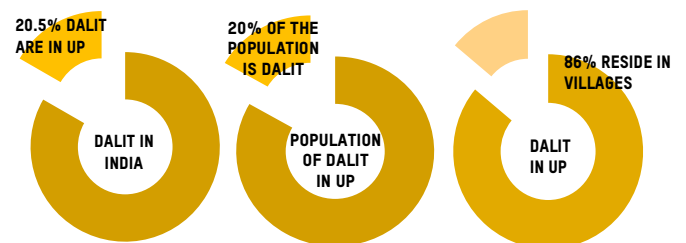
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST DALIT WOMEN#



DALITS IN UP\$



*NCRB 2015 #NFHS-3 \$Census Data of Scheduled Caste

women, especially *Dalit* and *Adivasis*, socially and economically marginalised. The *Dalits* and *Adivasis*, owing to their social standing, have been left out even of the meager economic growth of the region. All these make the position of women more vulnerable.

Oxfam India-Vanangna formed *Nigrani Samitis*, with women across 170 villages in four blocks in Chitrakoot and Banda; nearly 2500 women are part of these *Samitis*. Women in these groups are trained to provide holistic support to survivors through formal and informal justice. Through Women Support Centres, based at the Vanangna premises in the two districts, nearly 233 cases have been taken up either for counselling or for legal recourse. Vanangna has used *Nukkad Natak* or street plays to engage with men and boys to reduce social acceptance of violence against women. It is an effective medium to change social norms that translate into attitudes and behaviour of the society that discriminate and perpetuate violence against women.

NIGRANI SAMITI

The women sat in a semi-circle in the front room of a house. Light flitted, through a couple of doors, into the brick room. The room with a cot and a couple of plastic chairs had a motorcycle parked in one corner. A few clothes hung on a line just above the cot. The loft at the other end of the room was packed with dried cow dung cakes; a cat sat snug in one corner of the loft. More women trickled in. They were there for a cluster meeting of the *Nigrani Samiti* at Chakla village.

The *Samiti*, one in each village, comprises of 15 to 30 women. It was easy to form women collectives as they were already formed into Self Help Groups (SHGs). "These SHGs were dissolved as they weren't performing too well and it was restricted to a handful of them. These *Samitis* was formed to be more inclusive, empower, and provide a platform for *Dalit* women, who are at the lowest rung in the social ladder," says Avadesh Gupta, one of the core team members of Vanangana.

The *Samiti* members are federated at cluster (groups of villages) and district levels. A couple of members from each *Samiti* represent at the federation level. The *Samiti* does not work exclusively for members; they help others from the village who approach them with cases of domestic violence.

The meeting began with a round of introductions and attendance. Most of them were veterans — associated with the *Samiti* for over 20 years. The membership and participation of women has increased over the years. "Initially the men opposed. They thought we were being disruptive. The *didis* spoke to the men separately. Some have understood that this is for a better society; a few get angry even today. But we come anyways," says Hiramani of Pachokhar village. She has been a member for the last 20 years.

Surajkali started the meeting by displaying posters on domestic violence — the types of domestic violence, its perpetrators, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2006, and the relevance of the Act. A project officer at Vanangana, Surajkali explains that this exercise was done at all meetings and was important to start discussions around domestic violence.

These posters broaden their understanding of domestic violence. Earlier domestic violence only meant physical abuse by the husband and in-laws. This helps women to understand and report incidents of domestic violence to the *Samiti*, both personal and from the community. "Through these meetings we came to know that mental, economical and sexual abuse is also domestic violence and this needs to stop," says Geeta, a *Samiti* member from Chalgafa village.

The *Samiti* members are trained in counselling; over the years they have gained access to police and legal aid cells. After an issue is brought to the notice of the *Samiti*, a consent letter is filled and signed by the victim or a family member in the presence of the victim. The members then initiate talks with victim and her family members. If after consultations the victim



A *nigrani samiti* meeting in progress at Chakla village in Chitrkoot.

wants to go back to the in-laws, the *Samiti* members monitor her stay on a regular basis. This is to ensure her safety.

"Sometimes the woman wants to go back to her parents but they refuse to take her in. There lies the problem; even today parents are hesitant to take in their daughters for fear of the society. We hold several counselling sessions with parents and convince them to accept their daughters. There are some who understand but there are others who after a couple of months want to send back their daughters; they consider daughters a financial burden," says Santosh, project officer, Vanangana.

When the victims are left with no support — either from in-laws or parents — Vanangna brings them to their Women Support Centres. The two Centres, providing food, shelter, and medical aid, is run from Vanangna's premises at Karwi and Banda. The women are housed for a maximum of three months, during which they are counseled, families are met up with and joint counselling held, and economic options and legal recourse are explored. The *Samitis* are the link between the community and Support Centres; 233 cases were brought to the two Centres during 2014-16.

"If the victim opts for legal recourse we connect her to the district legal services authority. Sometimes, the *Samiti* also take suo motu cognizance of incidents. This is especially the case when the woman is being abused or beaten and she needs immediate help. If required the police is approached," explains Sona, the secretary of the federation.

Sona has been a member of the *Samiti* for the last 20 years. "It is difficult to say for certain whether incidents of violence against women have increased but the reporting definitely has. In addition, more women are now willing to approach the police. The *Samiti* has given them a platform to freely speak out. While some women are open to discussing their problems in public, a few prefer to speak in private," she says. During the meeting women had uninhibited discussions about their sexual experiences – a clear sign that women understood that sex without mutual consent is tantamount to sexual violence and it wasn't ok. They had learnt to say 'no'. Earlier, this was considered par for the course.

The village meetings are held every fortnight and cluster meetings every couple of months. All members of the federation meet once annually. Women participation in these meetings is very encouraging. Apart from the usual *Samiti* members,

non-members and young girls are encouraged to attend these meetings. Young girls are also formed into groups. With the young girls, stress is laid on education, marriage after legal age, spacing between children, and non-acceptance of domestic violence.

Vanangana receives at least 10 to 15 cases a month and up to 250 cases a year, through the *Samitis*. Since 2008, when Oxfam India started working with Vanangana, nearly 1200 cases have been dealt with. The *Samiti* mostly receive cases related to the classic case of wife beating, dowry, violence due to inability to bear children or a male child, and injuries sustained due to sexual violence. While some cases have been solved through meticulous counselling and constant monitoring, a few women have chosen to take legal recourse and start afresh.

"Most victims of domestic violence end up going back to abusive relationships because they are economically dependent on either the husbands or their fathers. It is very important to make them economically independent so that they can start afresh and not be dependent on their families," says Avadesh. Vanangana has supported women to become economically independent.

EMPOWERING WOMEN ECONOMICALLY

Mubina Khatoon, 30, owns a grocery shop in one of the by-lanes of Chitrakoot's Karwi town. Vanangana and Oxfam India supported her, financially, to set up the shop after she walked out of an abusive marriage. Mubina got married in 2009; she got some jewellery and a two-wheeler as part of her dowry. Soon her in-laws began harassing her for gold and four-wheeler. Her in-laws and husband physically abused her. Unable to bear the humiliation of his daughter, Mubina's father's health deteriorated and he passed away. The family tried to chip in as much but the harassment continued.

She approached Vanangana while she was still with her husband. Counsellors met the family but they refused to talk and continued to abuse Mubina. She finally walked out of her marriage in 2011. She filed a petition for divorce and demanded all her dowry be returned. Both her in-laws and husband have refused to acknowledge court summons.

"From what we have heard, he has moved to another town and re-married. I just want to get divorce and want my *mehr* back. I want to expand my shop and be able to support my family here," says Mubina. When she left her in-laws, her mother and older brother received her well at her paternal home. In the beginning she worked at *Apni Rasoi*, a canteen run by Vanangana at their premises; some of the women at the canteen are survivors themselves. Mubina also took up assignments to cook for functions at people's homes; she continues to do so even today.

She set up the shop in 2014. "The business is a little slow because there is a bigger grocery store round the corner. However, I plan to diversify. I will open another shop in the other street and start serving eggs, perhaps," she smiles. Her earnings supplement the income of her household, which now has eight members; her widowed sister with her four children is also staying with them.



Vanangana has helped survivors to become economically independent. With the support of Oxfam India, Vanangana has supported survivors to set up grocery shops, paan-shops, and tailoring units. The *paan*-shop was promoted to break the notion that women cannot do jobs traditionally done by men.

"A source of income ensures that they do not have to go back into an abusive relationship. Even today it is difficult to convince parents that daughters should be brought back home if they face abuse at their in-laws. This also helps to decide whether they want to go ahead with a legal recourse or go for counselling," says Santosh.

ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS THROUGH NUKKAD NATAKS

Vanangana has engaged with men and boys in the past. Although it has mostly been on a one-on-one basis where they either spoke to the husbands or fathers about letting their wives and daughters to attend meetings or met them during counselling sessions. Since 2016, they have been preparing grounds to engage with men and boys more directly.

Like the *Nigrani Samiti*, men and boys too have been formed into groups. Since July 2016, 270 men have become members of *Purush Samitis* in 15 villages. Their meetings are held once every month. Each *Samiti* has between 15-40 members. For instance, Bharkarra village in Chitrakoot's Karwi block has a 15-member *Purush Samiti*. Young boys have been formed into youth groups; at present 222 boys are members of these groups.

"While it is important to empower women and make them economically independent, it is important to strike at the root of patriarchy. Men and boys have to be brought into the discussion. They have to understand that all forms of violence against women and girls is wrong," says Surajkali. *Nukkad natak* or street play is an effective medium to engage with men and boys. Both men and women are part of Vanangna's *nukkad natak* group.

The popularity of these street plays is gauged from the huge crowd that gathered for an impromptu play, on the day of our visit. Over 50 adults — both men and women — and equal number of children came for the play. The members of the group usually inform the village in advance about the performance. The *Purush Samitis* along with the *Nigrani Samiti* play a key role in informing the community about the shows.

The *nukkad nataks* touch upon issues of dowry harassment, domestic violence, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, economic independence, education, and equality. After each performance, the audience is encouraged to give their opinion and discuss issues.

"This helps bring men and women on a common discussion platform. Most women are shy and don't speak in front of men. So members of *Nigrani Samiti* take lead. Some men and boys do voice their opinion and discuss their doubts. These arise from deep-rooted social norms," says Santosh.



A street play, *Badalti Tasveer*, being staged at Bharkarra village.

For instance, on one hand, there is Kapil, a member of the youth group, who believes that boys and girls should receive equal education, on the other hand are older men, who believe that women are an economic drain. Kallu, a septuagenarian, is an exception though and is often seen reprimanding those who dismiss women or believe that domestic violence is justified.

"Mind-sets need to change. Unless it happens girls will continue to be deprived of education and will never be able to become economically independent," says Kallu.

Broaching issues on gender-based violence, equality of men and women, and social norms directly is usually met with a lot of resentment and skepticism. *Nukkad nataks* is a good way to break the ice, start a conversation and keep the folks engaged. "Through the plays we have also managed to shift the focus of domestic violence from a husband-wife issue to a larger canvas. Once a man stops seeing things from a husband's perspective but as a father, brother, and son he is in a better stead to understand and put an end to violence against women, at home and in the society," says Surajkali. Vanangna, since 2014, has performed nearly 400 plays in 170 villages.

NOTES

- 1 Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam
- 2 http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/user_folder/pdf/New_files/Key_Issues/Dalit_Women/Manjula_Pradeep_-_Current_scenario_of_Dalit_women_in_India_2014.pdf (as viewed on Jan 13, 2017)
- 3 <http://ncrb.nic.in/>
- 4 <http://ncrb.nic.in/>
- 5 NFHS-3 (2005-06)

Author: Savvy Soumya Misra

Inputs: Julie Thekuddan, Binod Kumar Sinha, and Ranu Kayastha Bhogal

Editing: Ranu Kayastha Bhogal

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ऑक्सफैम इंडिया
OXFAM
India

Oxfam India, 4th and 5th Floor, Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, 1, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi 110001

Tel: +91 (0) 11 4653 8000 www.oxfamindia.org