

Community Mobilization for Ending Violence against Women

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Violence against women (VAW) is one of the most widespread, and yet, the least recognised human rights violations across the world. While VAW manifests itself in many forms, domestic violence is one of the most pervasive forms of violence that women in India face.

A recent study on VAW covering 7 states in India, reveals that 52% of women surveyed had experienced some type of violence in their lifetime and 60% of men had perpetrated some form of violence against their wife or partner.¹ In states such as Uttar Pradesh and Odisha, the percentage of women experiencing at least one incidence of intimate partner violence (IPV)² was 73% and 75% respectively.³ The study also reveals that 6 out of 10 men feel violence against women is justified.⁴

In 2009, Oxfam was part of a consortium of seven international NGOs to implement the International NGOs Partnership Agreement Program (IPAP), a five year program aimed at “improving the status of the poor and marginalized in India”.⁵ Oxfam as part of the IPAP chose to focus on VAW, focusing on domestic violence as a key factor in the social exclusion of marginalised women and worked across

5 states through a number of initiatives, and by engaging key stakeholders on domestic violence. The programme aims to reach out to the community (women and men), disadvantaged groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims; Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), police and judiciary; civil society organisations and their alliances.

This note focuses on community mobilization for addressing domestic violence in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. In implementing the IPAP program, Oxfam partnered with an NGO named HUMSAFAR, in Lucknow, that has been working on VAW since 2003 and is a support centre for women in crises. Oxfam was one of the organisations involved in setting up Humsafar in 2003, and renewed its association with the NGO in 2010 through IPAP. HUMSAFAR mobilizes the community through *nigrani samitis* (all-women neighbourhood watch groups).

The NGO has two strands of work, the first is individual cases that are taken up and resolved—either legally or through dialogue (see box: Individual Casework). The second is community work that raises awareness about women’s rights and preventing VAW.

COVERAGE*

States of Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

KEY STRATEGIES*

- Mobilizing communities to address and prevent domestic violence
- Creating context - specific models of support centres for women who were victims of violence
- Focused advocacy for effective policy changes at the state and national level,
- Campaigning to sensitize and generate awareness
- Bringing civil society organisations together and facilitating networks to end violence against women and creating gender champions in men and boys

*IPAP

VAW study on 7 states in India

60% of men had perpetrated some form of violence against their wife

52% of women surveyed had experienced some type of violence



60% men feel violence against women is justified

TOTAL OUTREACH*

8,64,402 (4,82,065 women and 3,82,337 men)

SURVIVORS



A Nigrani Samiti meeting in progress at Afroz (fifth from right) and Ashrafulnisa's (sitting next to her / 4th from right) bangle shop. Neetu of Humsafar (right corner) is coordinating the meeting.

Naheed was animated at the gathering. She was narrating how, a few months ago, she had stood up against her husband and her entire family who were bent upon marrying off their 14-year-old teenage daughter to a man almost twice her age. Naheed and her husband are tailors. "My husband was adamant and so was I. 'Nothing doing, my daughter stays,' I said," she recounted to cheers from her audience.

The meeting was interrupted by a quarrel that broke out on the street. A man who had just alighted from a cycle-rickshaw was refusing to shell out the transport fare of five rupees. Seema got up from the meeting, went out, intervened, made the man pay up and returned — all in a matter of minutes.

The impromptu nigrani samiti meeting took place at Ashrafulnisa and Afroz's (mother-daughter) bangle shop-cum-beauty parlour that they operate out of their home in Baraura, in the outskirts of Lucknow. They are survivors of domestic violence. Ashrafulnisa was beaten up every time she raised objections to her husband's extra-marital affair. Afroz too faced her father's wrath when she tried to stop him. In a fit of rage, the man broke all the bangles in the shop and, once, even thrashed Ashrafulnisa in public.

The public beating was the breaking point. This was when the mother and daughter put their foot down and decided to take up the issue with the nigrani samiti.

"A woman could become a victim of violence at any time. It is sometimes not possible for us to immediately rush to the spot. This is where the community support system comes into play. It is like first aid," Sudha Singh, a programme associate at HUMSAFAR and a survivor of domestic violence, explained.

Afroz gave details on how the 'first aid' works: "Suppose a woman is being abused or beaten at home at night, it might not be possible for someone from the centre to go there at that hour. Then, the samiti members step in. We all stay close by and as soon as one of us comes to know of the incident, the rest of the members are informed. We assemble at the victim's house and first try social mediation by talking to the husband or any of the male members in the house. If they are not ready to listen, we take them to the police station. We keep the centre updated on the minute-to-minute proceedings. This controls the situation for the time being. Someone from the centre will turn up the following day to take the case forward."

She said her father too was brought before the nigrani samiti. After several rounds of social mediation and warnings of police intervention, the father apologised and promised to mend his ways. Today, he has become an ardent supporter of the samiti. Naheed, Seema, Afroz and Ashrafulnisa are members of the nigrani samiti at Baraura.

NIGRANI SAMITI, LUCKNOW

“We realised that women who face violence and sexual abuse of any kind need access to all kinds of remedial measures in one place— counselling, legal advice and support, police intervention, medical assistance, social mediation, rescue and shelter. Moreover, survivors have to go back to the community, so work is also required at the community level. HUMSAFAR wanted to be that one place,” Neetu, another programme associate and counsellor at HUMSAFAR, pointed out.

The *nigrani samiti* is an all-women’s committee. Men are not eligible to be members; they are called *saathis* and formed into *saathi samoochs*. Separate meetings are held with the men’s groups and parallels between human right violations and domestic violence are drawn to drive home the point. These meetings have helped convert a few offenders into *saathis* who are now taking up the cause of women and supporting their wives in the fight to end domestic violence. Afroz’s father is an example. *Saathis* accompany the members of the *samiti* to the police stations or to the homes where incidents of domestic violence spiral out of control.

Members of the *nigrani samiti* at Baraura have been issued identity cards giving them easy access to police stations. “Earlier, we had to explain why we are interested in taking up cases of other people and why were we not minding our own business,” said Ashrafulnisa. Despite HUMSAFAR’s good standing at the police stations, it was important to give an identity to the women. The decision to issue identity cards came after nearly two years of weighing the pros and cons fearing misuse of the cards.

The Baraura *Nigrani Samiti* became the first to get identity cards in July 2014 as a pilot. These cards were distributed at a police-public meeting organised by HUMSAFAR to ensure that the police department acknowledged the *samiti* and took it seriously. Police-public meetings are very popular among the women as they get an official platform to air



Afroz holds the *Nigrani Samiti* identity card that was given by HUMSAFAR in June 2014

their grievances and get at least some reassurance from the police department.

While the idea of neighbourhood watch groups seems to have been met with favour among the women, forming a *nigrani samiti* takes time. HUMSAFAR started working with the Baraura community in 2005 and the *nigrani samiti* was formed only in 2008. *Nukkad natak* (street plays), *kathputli* (puppet) shows and film screenings are also organised to break the ice before moving to the larger issue. Interaction with the society begins on issues like health and sanitation and not domestic violence. “If we start with domestic violence, we will never be able to talk to anyone. As it is, the men consider us to be home breakers,” Sudha, of HUMSAFAR, said.

Sudha Singh is a programme associate at HUMSAFAR and a survivor of domestic violence. She is key in mobilizing communities and forming *Nigrani Samitis*.

“These activities get women interested and inquisitive. They want to know what we do. They open up to us, share their problems and if they want any intervention, we move to the next step,” she said. The next step, either legal action or social mediation, is taken as per the wishes of the survivors.

Reaching this stage could, however, take upto six or eight months. Women do not discuss problems in the open. “It’s a huge confidence building step. They visit the centre, their problems are heard and the identity of the survivor throughout the consultation is kept under wraps. Anonymity is maintained for as long as the survivor wishes,” Sudha said.

Nigrani samitis meet informally almost every day and hold a formal meeting once a month. HUMSAFAR has regular meetings with the community during which discussions are held on gender justice and domestic violence. There are some women who are more outspoken, active and



Sudha Singh, a programme associate at HUMSAFAR and a survivor of domestic violence, at the HUMSAFAR office. She is key in mobilizing communities and forming *Nigrani Samitis*.

motivated than the rest — they are the ones that are selected to be members of the *samiti*.

Special training is also given to the *samiti* members on VAW, gender justice, domestic violence as well as the legal options to resort to with regard to these offences. “We came for the meetings even when our husbands stopped us. Initially, it was difficult for them to understand, but when HUMSAFAR held meetings with the men, they realised it wasn’t going to spoil us,” said Seema with a smile. Seema runs a grocery store along with her husband.

There is no cap on membership to the *nigrani samiti*, with the one at Baraura comprising 12 members. Sudha asserted that there were times when it was difficult to get even a few active members and they had to go ahead with two members. Since 2008, 179 cases have been brought to HUMSAFAR through the *samitis*.

HUMSAFAR works closely with the youth and professionals, forming them into *mitramandalis*. The *Yuva Mitramandali* is instrumental in reaching out to men and comprises volunteers from communities, schools and colleges. HUMSAFAR is directly working with 4,070 students in 37 schools and colleges in Lucknow through modules and sessions pertaining to gender, gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, domestic violence, declining sex ratio and other laws related to women. The *yuva mitramandali* are not members of the *nigrani samitis* but play an active role in organising *nukkad nataks*, film screenings, 16 Days of Activism¹ and sometimes even fundraising.

HUMSAFAR works with 53 communities (each consisting of 75–100 women) in Lucknow and the adjacent districts of Hardoi, Unnao and Sitapur. Oxfam supports five communities in Lucknow.

Through its *Professional Mitramandali* (comprising of professionals like lawyers, doctors, teachers and others), HUMSAFAR has managed to get employment for a few survivors. It is especially proud of the six women trained in non-conventional professions; four women trained in furniture polishing and two trained as drivers. Oxfam also connected with the multinational retailer, Marks & Spencer

INDIVIDUAL CASEWORK

The other important strand of work is the individual casework. The crisis support centre receives about 12–15 cases in a month. In most cases, the survivors seek assistance through telephone calls as they tend to prefer anonymity. They range from survivors of domestic violence, bigamy, harassment, rape and sexual harassment, child sex abuse, harassment at the work place and right to choice of partner in marriage. It takes months of talking and counselling before legal proceedings can be initiated — and then too, only if the survivors want it. HUMSAFAR has handled 221 such cases, providing the survivors free legal aid as and when required. It is the only NGO that is part of the Lucknow special cell for weekly counselling at the office of the Senior Superintendent of Police (Lucknow) and has intervened in about 2,900 cases at the SSP’s office. The centre follows up on the cases, either directly or indirectly, for at least two years.

India, which under its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) trained two survivors from HUMSAFAR as sales persons at one of its retail outlets.

Since 2003, HUMSAFAR has intervened in around 6,500 cases and reinstated 173 women.

Notes

- 1 ICRW-UNFPA (2014) Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India: A study. Page vii
- 2 Intimate Partner Violence is commonly used in the literature to denote violence between two people who are intimately involved and could include a husband and wife or sexual partners.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Oxfam India (2014) Promoting violence-free lives for women from poor and marginalized communities in India: An endline evaluation.
- 6 The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence is an international campaign that starts on 25 November, International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women and ends on 10 December, Human Rights Day. The campaign hopes to raise awareness about gender-based violence as a human rights issue at the local, national, regional and international level. (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/womens-rights/16-days> as viewed on Nov 13, 2014)

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