

Oxfam India (OIN) is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality; in India, it works in six focus states.¹ OIN works to reduce social acceptance of Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG), which is one of the most pervasive and the least recognised human rights violations across the world. OIN has been working on the issue of VAWG with a specific focus on Dalit, Adivasi and Muslims. One of OIN's overarching goal towards gender justice is to reduce the social acceptance of violence against women and girls through policy advocacy towards better implementation of relevant, on ground redressal interventions for women and girls experiencing violence and influencing change in attitudes and norms within communities to promote gender equality.

Through its Gender Justice programme, OIN works towards enhancing women's access to formal and informal justice systems to address violence in their lives. OIN along with its partners piloted the Women Support Centres, for survivors of violence, in the police stations of Gujarat in 2009. This model was scaled up and institutionalised by the state government in all 33 districts of Gujarat.

Though all forms of violence are a concern, domestic violence is particularly so as it is perpetrated within the 'safety' of homes, by people who are related to women (intimate partners and/or relatives). The third round of the Indian National Family Health Survey² 3 (NFHS) conducted in 2005-06 recorded that 37.2 per cent of ever-married women aged 15-49 years face some form of domestic violence. The more recent NFHS 4 (2015-16) records spousal violence at 28.8 percent. In the State of Gujarat, the prevalence of domestic violence recorded by NFHS 3 and NFHS 4 is 27.5 and 20.1 percent respectively. There has been a decline in spousal violence as indicated by the NFHS data over the last decade however, there is much progress still to be made in addressing the issue.

From 2009 to 2014,³ OIN implemented International NGOs Partnership Agreement Program (IPAP), a project on addressing violence against women. The specific focus was to ensure the effective implementation of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005, which was then a relatively new act. OIN implemented this programme across five states⁴ by engaging key stakeholders to address domestic violence. One of the key interventions were to demonstrate, scale and institutionalize the Women Support Centres as an effective redressal model to respond to women facing domestic violence. The OIN model of the Women Support Centres was adapted from the model developed by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) who referred to these as Special Cells for Women and Children.

Women Support Centres are based on feminist principles that upholds the principle that a woman is not responsible for any kind of violence inflicted against her. Trained social workers in the Women Support Centres provide women psycho-social, emotional, legal and referral support. Counseling in the Women Support Centre is aimed at helping women to resist violence, think through their situation, understand their options and choose their next steps. Women are also provided assistance in filing cases in the police station, court and under the PWDV Act. Referral services for shelter, education, skill-building, medical and free legal aid are also provided.

The IPAP endline evaluation study found that placing a Women Support Centre within the police station has been very useful. It provides a legitimate and credible space where a woman



Women Support Centre, (Panchmahal, Godhra), Gujarat

experiencing violence can access support services. The Women Support Centre also enables the police to improve their intervention in cases of domestic violence while otherwise they would often try to seek a compromise without really addressing the issue of violence. Under the IPAP programme 23 Women Support Centres were set up in police stations and civil society organizations' premises. OIN, with the technical support of TISS, invested in setting up this model in four states namely U.P, Odisha, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh.

WOMEN SUPPORT CENTRES IN GUJARAT

OIN, TISS and partner organisations implementing the Women Support Centres invested in both setting up the Women Support Centres and demonstrating them as a scalable model. Oxfam partnered with organisations that had significant experience of working on violence against women, existing interventions at community level for women survivors and strong linkages with government departments and other relevant stakeholders.

In Gujarat the setting up of the Women Support Centres in the police stations required strategic and consistent advocacy, and liaisoning with different state machineries especially the Police (through the Home Department) and the Department of Women and

Child Development. It took a year of persuasion, strategic meetings, and advocacy, investment in resources and infrastructure by OIN and TISS in 2010 and post which Gujarat police granted permission to initiate Women Support Centres on a pilot basis in the state. Seven Women Support Centres across the police stations were set up in seven districts of the state. OIN supported Ahmedabad Women's Action Group (AWAG), Area Networking and Development Initiatives (ANANDI), Saurashtra Kutch Network against Violence against Women (SKVAW) and Centre for Development to implement the Women Support Centres.

The Police Department provided the necessary infrastructure and support. One of the non-negotiable, with the police, was a separate space within the police station for the Women Support Centre to provide a safe and confidential space for women survivors. This was a significant achievement given the police stations were already dealing with limited infrastructure for their own staff.

Post initiation of these Women Support Centres, OIN significantly invested in building capacities of the social workers as counsellors. The social workers were given specialised training by TISS to build their perspectives on issues of gender, violence against women and sexuality. The training also included a component of field exposure where they were able to gain practical skills on feminist counselling. Refresher trainings were also undertaken once the social workers started handling cases and running the Women Support Centres. A visible outcome of the trainings was the counsellors being invited by the police and other stakeholders for building their capacities on issues of gender and violence against women.

TISS facilitated the setting up of the documentation and reporting processes. Additionally, they also monitored the status of the Women Support Centres at regular intervals. The loopholes at different levels were addressed by effectively liaising with the police and government officials to both address the impending issues and also ensure an increased investment and buy-in from the State in the pilot phase.



IN THE PILOT PHASE OF THE PROGRAMME (2009- 2014), THE FOLLOWING IMPACT WAS ACCOMPLISHED IN GUJARAT-

•750 WOMEN

ACCESSED THE SERVICES OF THE WOMEN SUPPORT CENTRES

•400 WOMEN

WERE PROVIDED LEGAL AID AND WERE SUPPORTED TO FIGHT THEIR CASES IN COURT

•40 WOMEN

FILED CASES UNDER THE PROTECTION OF WOMEN FROM DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT, 2005

•35 WOMEN

HAVE RECEIVED MAINTENANCE AFTER A DIVORCE

•12 WOMEN

WHO RECEIVED CHILD CUSTODY WERE HELPED IN RECOVERY OF THEIR DOWRY



CASE STUDY: SUSHEELA'S STORY⁵

Susheela was married at 17 years of age to a daily labourer. After the birth of her first child, a son, Susheela started facing domestic violence. In her words, "when he (her husband) would come home from work my in-laws would carry tales about me to my husband". He would then beat her. After four years of domestic violence and the constant fights arising out of these conflicts, she could bear it no more and left for her natal home. Her husband did not visit her or ask her to come back.

When she went back for the second time to her marital home, Susheela had a son. Susheela shared that although her husband did not then abuse her, the violence by her in-laws continued unabated. She was so fed up with the constant mental harassment that she decided to end her life. She poured kerosene on herself and tried to set herself on fire. Her husband asked her to return to her natal home so that she could recover faster. But when she did spend some time in her natal home and recovered sufficiently, he refused to take her back because her burns had left deep scars on her face.

She felt very worried because she had no source of support and her three children were away from her, hence she approached the all-women's police station. She wanted the police to call the husband, threaten him, take a written undertaking and reconcile them as a couple. However, the women police station could not support her and she was referred to the Women Support Centre managed by AWAG.

The counsellor at the centre heard the case in detail and called her husband. She explained to him that he should not harass Susheela. After a couple of months, the counsellors visited her to find out how she was doing. They found that while her husband no longer physically abused her, he did not treat her well either. He would constantly taunt her that she had attempted suicide because of which he had to incur a great deal of financial losses

Susheela filed a case for maintenance with the support of the counsellors. Her husband had to run from pillar to post handling this legal matter and at the end of two years, he decided to reconcile with her promising to take up a separate residence and treat her well. Now he has stopped taking alcohol and works regularly. The counsellor shared that when she visited Susheela's home for a follow up visit her husband brought a chair for her to sit and talked at length to her. Her husband shared that when Susheela Behn decided to approach the police he was not really worried about what would happen. However, when he was called by the Women Support Centre counsellors he realised she was not alone. He invited the counsellor to come again. Susheela also shared that he was treating her reasonably well. Although she did admit that there were occasional fights and skirmishes

The counsellors shared that when Susheela first came for the counselling sessions they had spent a lot of time allaying her doubts and fears about her future, building her sense of self-worth and making her feel supported. Overcoming the sense of shame and despair arising from her suicide attempt has been a very long process for Susheela Behn.



Counsellors in the Women Support Centre, Gujarat

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF WOMEN SUPPORT CENTRES BY GUJARAT STATE

From 2010 to 2013, OIN and TISS held a series of strategic meetings with different departments of the government especially the Home and Women and Child Development. This was to explain the model and the need to institutionalise the model as a government programme. A proposal was presented to the government to upscale these centres to all districts and blocks of Gujarat. The frequent transfers of supportive and sensitized officials, poor coordination among different departments of the state government, and delays in responses by the departments were some of the major challenges in institutionalizing the Women Support Centres.

The impact of the Women Support Centres both for women survivors and for the police stations was quite visible after sometime of piloting the Support Centres. In Patan, the Women Support Centre was lauded by the media for establishing an effective model of partnership with the State.⁶ Eventually, reviewing the effectiveness of the model and convinced by its success, the state government accepted the proposal and invited OIN and TISS to facilitate the process of institutionalisation of the Women Support Centres.

Anju Sharma, the then Secretary of Women and Child Development of Gujarat announced the scaling up of Women Support Centres by the Government of Gujarat during the launch of 'Hand to Hold', a booklet developed by OIN, based on the experiences and learnings of the Women Support Centres.

The Women Support Centres, now called Police Station based Support Centres (PBSC), was officially launched on May 8, 2013. The PBSC is anchored with the Gender Resource Centre (GRC). The GRC, established in July 2003, was instituted by Gujarat Women and Child Development (WCD) Department to provide support for incorporating gender equity and equality in overall development process and plans of the state. GRC is the nodal agency to implement department schemes and programmes such as PBSC, 181 women helpline and State Resource Centre.

PBSCs were initially scaled up in 26 districts and now they have been set up in all 33 districts of Gujarat. There are 35 PBSCs; one in each of the 33 districts of Gujarat and two additional at the block level. From April 2014 to March 2015, 3974 cases were registered in all 33 PBSCs.

In its current state, the director of the GRC oversees the functioning of the PBSCs. The PBSCs comprise a State Project Coordinator and three regional coordinators who closely monitor the implementation of the PBSCs. Each of the regional coordinators manage a cluster of 11 PBSCs, assigned on a rotational basis. The counsellors are regularly trained. During the first 16 months of the setting up of the PBSC, the counsellors underwent two rounds of trainings. The first round of training was conducted by TISS.

Unlike in the pilot phase, the counsellors now have increased access to police personnel and resources like vehicle to help women in distress. The GRCs have played an active role to ensure greater coordination and buy-in of the police to support the PBSC units. They conduct regular trainings for the police officials at the district level on issues of gender and specifically on violence against women. The GRC also conducts regular trainings for the Protection Officers under the PWDV Act.

The civil society's role and the innovations they piloted for working with survivors of violence, are crucial in the success of the PBSC. For instance, in Panchmahal district, the Women Support Centre implemented by ANANDI continues to function along with the PBSC unit and the police finds value of their collaboration in dealing with the critical cases such as rape. Similarly, in Rapar district, the Women Support Centre implemented by AWAG was sustained by the Police for a while as they provided the salary of the counsellor even after the completion of the project.

POST SCALING UP

The institutionalization of Women Support Centres in Gujarat has been possible due to the consistent engagement of different stakeholders, organisations implementing the model, TISS, GRC, Department of WCD, Police, OIN and the Gujarat based OIN Partners. It is also remarkable to see the commitment of the GRC in owning, investing and scaling up the PBSC units in all districts.

Like in the functioning of any large institution or machinery, there are some niggles in the working of the PBSC. In the pilot stage, the Women Support Centres were strengthened with a strong base of community led groups which acted both as a referral system as well as a support system for the survivors. In the PBSC model this link is missing.

One of the concerns for the organisations that had implemented the model in the pilot stage is that the counsellors in the PBSC are too entrenched in the system to act as an independent and strong pressure group for intervention in sensitive cases. This was possible for the organisations in the pilot stage. Though the GRC continues to engage with the organizations involved in piloting the model by inviting them for trainings and consultations, more active involvement of these organisations will iron-out the remaining creases in the functioning of the PBSC model. The heart and nerve of the Women Support Centres are the counsellors, it is crucial that they get regular trainings with a feminist perspective which is a role the organisations involved in the pilot project could have played effectively.

Some of the immediate challenges articulated by Dr. Kapadia the former Director of GRC is that of inadequate remunerations for the counsellors and the difficulty in getting adequate space for the PBSC in police stations. With the increase in demand there is need



Counselling underway in a Women Support Centre, Gujarat

to set up these centres at block level as well which will ensure greater reach to women from remote and marginalised areas.

Every model has to be dynamic to be able to be sustainable, for which, external inputs and collaborations are a requisite. Gujarat has a very vibrant and progressive civil society. Thus, setting up a monitoring committee to review the quality of the PBSCs will be very effective. This would enable organisations that have run the pilot and other experts to provide strategic guidance to the GRC in improving the implementation of the PBSC especially in terms of the quality of services it provides to women facing violence.

NOTES

¹ Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam

² The latest NFHS 4 (2015-16) figures are not mentioned given the project was implemented from 2009- 2014

³ In 2009, Oxfam India was part of a consortium of seven UK based International NGOs, with the support of Department for International Development (DfID), to implement the International NGOs Partnership Agreement Program (IPAP). IPAP was a five-year programme from 2009 to 2014 on social exclusion where Oxfam India worked towards addressing violence against women (VAW).

⁴ Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Chhattisgarh

⁵ Oxfam India (2014) Promoting violence –free lives for women from poor and marginalized communities in India: An endline evaluation

⁶ Source of Media Report : <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/Cops-NGO-join-hands-to-help-harassed-women/articleshow/6242567.cms>

** Oxfam is grateful for the time and support provided by staff of TISS, Anandi, Gender Resource Centre, AWAG, Sejal and IPS Anil Pratham to be able to document the learnings from the Women Support Centre mode in Gujarat.*

AUTHOR: MARY THOMAS, ANU VERMA

INPUTS: JULIE THEKKUDAN, RANJANA DAS, AMITA PITRE, RAJINI MENON, SAVVY SOUMYA MISRA

EDITED BY: DIYA DUTTA

PHOTO CREDIT: OXFAM INDIA NGO PARTNER

© Oxfam India, November 2017

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, permission must be secured. E-mail: savvy@oxfamindia.org. Oxfam India, a fully independent Indian organization, is a member of an international confederation of 20 organizations. The Oxfams are rights-based organizations, which fight poverty and injustice by linking grassroots interventions to local, national, and global policy developments.

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

Tel: +91 (0) 11 46538000 | Web: www.oxfamindia.org

Oxfam India is a member of a global confederation of 20 Oxfams and is registered as a company under section 8 of the Indian Company Law.



ऑक्सफैम इंडिया

OXFAM
India