



## Readers' Forum



### In a Man's World

I am a regular reader of your magazine. Often, I come across letters and articles on how women are harassed in the work place, on roads and at other public places. Such incidents are so common that one tends to overlook them. But only a woman can understand how it feels to be sexually harassed.

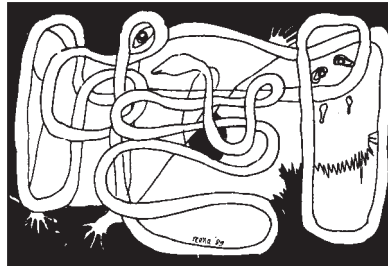
I wish to share one such experience with your readers. I work in an NGO as a documentalist. My job requires me to travel to remote areas of Orissa, where my organisation is active.

On a field visit, I am heading towards one of the remotest villages. I am waiting for a bus. There comes a tiny bus. Oh! it is already overcrowded. How am I going to get in? Well, there is no choice. Push, push a step further. By the time I am settled, there is another halt. More people, more pushing. These drunk and half-drunk people! The whole bus is filled with the smell of *handia* (a kind of country liquor). Eh! Whose hand is this, touching mine? How uncomfortable a human touch can be. He is getting closer and it is deliberate.

I have a strange feeling. Not exactly fear. Something similar yet very different. He is standing very close to me, feeling my body. My back touching his front. He is shifting position to have better contact and I am trying to avoid it. But there isn't any space. Men are everywhere. He is so close to me, almost pressing his body against mine. How dare he? Can't he see my class, my good

clothes, the contrast to others around me? And, suddenly, I feel so vulnerable, so insecure. In spite of everything, I am a woman! I cannot give in.

I think of the university campus. My feminist group, all the speeches, rallies and slogans against everything sexist. The promise I had made to myself never to give in. In this rural setting, in a small bus, in front of a possibly illiterate and crude villager, I see these resolves crumbling. He is very close to me, doing this and that to get some pleasure. How repelling. Why can't he feel my hostility?



Should I shout at him? Instead, I clench my teeth, tighten my muscles, swallow my words. Because, I know the consequence of such an act. More attention, more stares. Some lewd, some chivalrous and some admonishing. It is a crime to travel alone. It is a bigger crime to shout when treated offensively. So I keep mum, swallowing the humiliation and accepting the fact that there isn't much difference between me and the village women I am going to educate.

I feel funny, thinking of the purpose of my visit. I am supposedly an empowered, aware and conscious

individual. I am here to enable village women to be vocal about their rights. To instil in them a sense of pride and make them conscious of a basic dignity, which they rightly deserve. And here my own dignity is at stake. By the time I get down from the bus, I am so demoralised that all my beliefs, my ideals, everything that I hold sacred, and, above all, my preachings, become meaningless. The dream that we cherish at my organisation of having a gender-neutral society is a far cry from the crude reality. I realise how difficult it is to practice the things we preach, sitting at the head office. I begin to lose faith in my convictions. Under such circumstances, how well can I work? Can I work at all? Will my organisation be sensitive to this problem? Will it see it as a problem? I doubt it.

In practical terms, what can my organisation do in such situations? It cannot provide vehicles to all the employees, and it is not fair to demand vehicles for female workers only. I have to prove myself in the same conditions as the male workers. But how difficult it is! I know that when I go back to the head office, I will again submit myself to an illusion. I will forget the distasteful experience and prepare myself for further tours. But I also know that the same problems will resurface in myriad ways, demoralising me time and again till I lose hope in everything. I have to work in such conditions. But how long can I sustain myself?

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