

JANAKIAMMAL...

MY name is Janakiammal. I am 45 years old and already I am tired of life. I feel like an old woman...

I remember how in January this year a neighbour of mine came to ask for the loan of my washing stone. I refused. A quarrel ensued and a crowd gathered. On hearing the trouble the neighbours got wild and cried. "You prostitute, how dare you tell us not to use your stone! You and your daughters are prostitutes! We can drive you out of this place!" I retorted in the same fashion. These people got even more angry and beat up my eldest daughter and me with a big stick of firewood. I lodged a complaint with the police.

It may seem silly of me not to allow the neighbors to use my stone or bucket. But if you want to know the reason, have the patience to listen to my story.

I was born into a weaving caste, the Devanga caste. I was the second of five brothers and two sisters. My father and mother didn't have any property, so their children were their only assets. To feed my brothers and sisters, I had to start working when I was just 12 years old. My elder sister and I were the only earning members of the family. My father did not bother to work. My mother helped us in the kitchen, but that was all. As many people say, I didn't have any kind of childhood. All that I remember are hard work and poverty.

When I was 21, my marriage was arranged by my parents. They said, "The man earns more than Rs. 12 a day and he has only two brothers and two sisters besides his father and mother. So you will not need to work as hard as you are doing here." I looked forward to a bright and prosperous future. But just three



-Ira Roy

...One Of Many*

days after my wedding, I learnt that my husband's family had incurred a debt of Rs. 5,000. I also found that my husband was a spendthrift. So I had to tie myself to the hand-loom again and work even harder than in my mother's home.

But I could not tolerate the way my in-laws spent my money without making any effort to support themselves. I told my husband that I could only go on living with him if we stayed separately. During these two years of marriage I had little happiness. Two children had been born to me but both had been still-born.

Now, hearing that I wanted to live apart, my mother-in-law cursed me, "You are a barren woman, that is why no child lives in your hand. You had better go to

your parents, we can find another bride." I got angry and replied, "You have not fed me even for a day I have had to earn my own living all this time. It is your precious son who has made me batten by not feeding me properly during pregnancy. Even the money I earn is spent by your spendthrift son. Go find any number of brides, they will all be like me as long as your son goes on squandering money."

After all kinds of quarrels, my husband and I began to live apart from his people. I continued weaving and earned Rs. 2 per day on the average, while he earned Rs. 10. He would only give me Rs. 2 each day to pay for his meals. He would not bother about any

family expenditure.

When I was only 33, my husband died during an operation for some ear trouble, leaving behind two daughters. At that time I was eight months pregnant. Relatives and neighbours expected me to deliver a baby boy. To their utter disappointment I gave birth to another girl. During the 12 years that I was married I had 10 children, and all but three girls had died. We never had any property. Like my parents I too consider my children my only assets.

Just three days after the youngest girl was born, I started working regularly on the loom. People of my community scolded me for daring to touch the loom during my 'impure' days. I answered back, "When god is not willing to punish my caste people for not feeding my children during these 'impure' days, how can the very same god have the right to punish me for touching the loom?"

My eldest daughter was 11 and in standard six, while the second one was in standard three in those days. I was hardly able to earn Rs 2 a day and could not make both ends meet. So my relatives suggested that I stop sending my children to school and instead put them to work as domestic servants in other people's homes. I could sense what these people wanted my daughters to be. I kept my eldest daughter at school and stopped the studies of the second girl, for one was needed to look after the new-born. My relatives were irritated at this and my relationship with them was no longer cordial. But I was firm and when my youngest girl was five years old, I sent her elder sister and her to school as well.

My eldest daughter later went to a distant co-educational school. She had to stay in the hostel attached to the school. My relatives would not tolerate this, as the girl had already attained puberty. They quarreled with me, so I was forced to leave my native village of Aruppukkottai and migrate to the city of Madurai which was close by.

I lived in the handloom workers' area. I cooked *vadai* and *idly* and earned Rs.

3 a day by selling these snacks on the street. Here I had to face to serious problems. A gang of drunken rowdies began to come and snatch away any number of *vadais* and *idlies* without paying for them. If I asked them to pay, they would use filthy language and leave. So I sought the help of some neighbours. They helped me to end this nuisance. But the very same men wanted to exploit me sexually in return for the service they had rendered. I refused to yield to them and so I had to move to another area.

I don't want to become a slave to any man. I have taught this to my daughters. However, our male-dominated society is not prepared to accept this. My daughters and I are still suffering. In the village I had to confront social and



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economic oppression. But now, in the city, my biggest problem is to escape this sexual exploitation by men.

Today my eldest daughter is a trained graduate in science. The second one is training to be a nurse and the youngest is doing her higher secondary. My eldest daughter was unable to get a teaching post in a school so she joined a social service organization at a monthly salary of Rs. 300. Her work consists of visiting villages to give women an informal education. She has also to attend seminars off and on in Bangalore,

Madras and other places and travels a lot.

The neighbours can only see that the family is now better off. They cannot and perhaps do not want to believe that my daughter earns money through a proper job. Some time ago, they started spreading rumours that the girl was indulging in immoral conduct to earn money. One married government servant had the nerve to approach me and tell me that he wanted to keep my daughter as his mistress. I was furious at hearing this and I jumped at him with a slipper in my hand. The others present quietened me and persuaded me to return home. Some men of the area including a police constable met with the same treatment, when they approached the girls with a similar motive. It is really strange that the womenfolk of the area, when they heard of their husbands' mischievous manoeuvres did not tell them off. Instead they confronted me: "If girls are not married off even upto the age of 25, what is wrong with men approaching them for this? There is no male members in your family. Therefore, you should try to make an arrangement with your make neighbours."

I have never yielded to arguments, abuses and threats. I fought back with my tongue. The values upheld and imposed by a society which is so dominated by men have been absorbed by the womenfolk – they don't even have a mind and time to think of the oppression to which they themselves are subjected! Instead, of joining hands with me in my fight against sexual exploitation, the women actually oppose me. Clinging to their husbands, they do not understand that their own fate could have anything to do with mine!

This is why I don't want any of my belongings to be used by my neighbours. I am fed up with being used by others. They want to use my body, they want to use my daughters. So I won't even let them use my washing stone. But I am so tired of fighting back alone. Is there no way of bringing women together to fight back against being used?