

Beginning with Our Own Lives

An open letter to women activists, women's groups and organizations



THOUGH we feel very encouraged by the fact that over the past year, many more individual women, women's groups and organizations have become activated around the issue of dowry and dowry murders, we have noticed with concern, a rather disappointing trend. Many of us who see our role as that of women "activists" mobilizing "other" women in protest action against atrocities like dowry murders – we who take upon ourselves the task of changing society's attitudes continue to live our own lives almost untouched by the ideas with which we seek to influence others.

We, the undersigned individuals,* feel that initiating any kind of social, political action is meaningless unless it begins with our own lives, that those of us who assume the role of mobilizers, lead protest marches and speak or write against dowry, owe it to ourselves and to all those whom we try to draw into collective action, that we do not in any way become party to such crimes as the giving and taking of dowry. We have no moral right to shout slogans like "Dahej Mat Do, Dahej Mat Lo" if we privately continue to participate in marriages where dowry is given or taken. If we do not dare boycott the marriage ceremony of even our own brother or sister where

lavish dowry is given, if we do not start the campaign in our own homes, what moral right have we to preach to others? We are not for a moment suggesting that every woman who participates in a protest action or starts getting involved in the campaign should be called upon to make such a commitment. We are referring only to those who take on themselves the task of mobilization or consciousness-raising with other women.

It is unfortunate that the viciousness of the dowry custom comes to be noticed only when a woman is murdered for it. We feel that all those who give and take dowry or participate in this ritual, are also responsible for making such murders possible. Are they not helping perpetuate a vicious custom which reduces women to articles of sale and barter? Why cannot a protest or public meeting begin or end with the organizers making a commitment that they will not be a party to dowry giving or taking in any form, that they will boycott all dowry marriages?

We therefore appeal to all women's groups and organizations to ensure that the movement begin with our own lives, that all of us be prepared to pay the price of our convictions. At least the women actively involved in taking up any issue should seriously discuss how it touches their lives and make such commitments with regard to personally and collectively battling against it.

Some of us have been practising this form of boycott for a while. But now we publicly affirm that

1. We will not attend or in any way participate in a marriage where dowry is either given or taken in however veiled a form (as gifts, trousseau, money deposited in a bank in the girl's name at the time of marriage), even if the marriage

be that of a close relative or a dear friend. We will openly make known our reasons for boycotting such marriages, rather than just quietly staying away from the ceremony. We will also boycott all rituals wherein dowry continues to be given after marriage such as customary gifts to the son-in-law's relatives at festivals and childbirth.

2. That we will henceforth not confine protest actions to dowry murders but will also protest when dowry is given, at extravagant marriage ceremonies.

3. That we will not attend marriages in which the woman has no active choice – in deciding whether she wants to get married at all or in choosing the person to whom she is to be married.

By protesting only when murders take place, we are keeping our own homes untouched, because dowry murders, for all their frequency, are still rare as compared to the high frequency of dowry giving and taking. Almost all of us participate in or connive at the giving and taking of dowry – not just in the form of cash, jewellery, household goods, gifts to husband's relatives, trousseau but also innumerable gifts that flow from the woman's family to the husband's on every conceivable occasion – the various bribes that the woman's family is forced to continue offering so that she may not be taunted and maltreated.

Only when dowry itself is attacked in all its forms and manifestations, does the battle ground shift to our own homes and personal lives. It is there that the real struggle begins.

Asha, Anju, Geeta Whig, Anna, Kumkum, Ancy, Ruth, Madhu Kishwar

We appeal to all of you to make such commitments as part of our collective women's struggle. We would like to publish regularly in **Manushi** the names of those women who wish to make such commitments. Write to us if you subscribe to the points we have outlined and also if you would like to add anything to them.

* Not synonymous with Manushi Collective.