

WE WILL NOT LIVE IN FEAR ANY MORE

SOME REPORTS AND IMPRESSIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

BOMBAY

In January 1980, many women's organizations, democratic organization and individual women got together to form a Forum Against Rape. We wanted to focus attention on the attacks on women and create mass awareness against such crimes.

Rape is a means by which men assert their power over women and thus reduce women to a state of fear and helpless dependence on men, whether fathers, husbands or sons. The case of Mathura, a 15-year-old agricultural labourer who was raped by two policemen, became a symbolic case taken up by women's organizations the country over to protest against the way state machinery works against women. Of late the police have committed some of the most horrifying crime against women in Narainpur, Parasbigha, Pipra, Assam. Such crimes cannot be stopped by appealing to the government or asking the state to pass better laws. In the Mathura case, the guilty policemen were set free by the Supreme Court * and the girl's testimony disbelieved – in fact, she was accused of having invited intercourse and then concocted the story of rape.

In Bombay, we organized a public meetings on February 23 and a demonstration on March 7. The two major demands were for the reopening of the Mathura case and amendment of the rape law. The campaign preceding the rally was a good experience. Plays were staged, posters put up and pamphlets distributed.

The Forum Against Rape now plans

to carry out a regular education programme through exhibitions, plays in colleges, slums, factories. In the hope of coordinating similar work being done in various places, the Forum plans to organize a National conference in a few month's time. Its main purpose would be: 1) To move in the direction of a National Committee for suggesting changes in the rape laws and 2) Formation of a fact-finding committee at a national level with representatives from various women's organizations which would react immediately to mass rapes.

— Gayatri Singh, Sandhya Gokhale

...In the demonstration, women (including myself) were in the beginning reluctant to shout slogans but what touched me most was that there were two old ladies who were most vociferous and were urging us on. They were not organizers – it was spontaneous. And then there was a woman who was very quiet but when we were about to reach a spot where there were many policemen, she told her friend : "Now I am going to shout and you join me." And she did yell: "Shame on the police who rape"...

— Usha Desai



MADRAS

In Madras, over 300 women, including workers, students, teachers, housewives and nuns gathered on March 10 and took out a procession under the banner of the Women's Democratic Association. Pamphlets in Tamil and English, explaining the Mathura case, were distributed. At the public meeting, resolutions were passed, calling for the reopening of the Mathura case, for government take-over of privately run women's hostels (in the wake of recent agitations by women students in SIET college) and increase of maternity leave period from two to four months.

MAHARASHTRA

In Pune this year, our main demand was : "Set up special courts of investigate incidents of mass rape." The increasing incidence of mass rape in the last year clearly shows that rape is being used as a weapon to crush the exploited sections of society. The Nari Mukti Andolan Samiti arranged a discussion on March 2 so that we could explain and analyse the rape laws. A rally and meeting were held on March 8.

—Soudamini Rao

This year, poor peasant and agricultural labourer women in two villages of Sangli district, Maharashtra, celebrated Women's Day. In Kasegaon, nearly 75 women and girls wound their way through the village, singing songs and shouting slogans: "End inflation", "Stop atrocities" and "Justice for Mathura". The procession began after 9 p.m. when the women had returned from the fields and finished the cooking. The meeting was organized by the Kasegaon Mahila Mandal which was founded over 30 years ago, during the national movement but has been controlled until recently by a few rich and high caste women. This year poor peasants, labourers and dalit women have begun to transform the mandal into a fighting organization of women.

In Kalamwadi, the Stri Mukti Sangathan, composed mainly of poor peasant women and many dalit women organized a rally and meeting attended by about 150 women.

The district town of Kolhapur saw its first women-organized meeting. About 300 people gathered to protest against the injustice done to women like

Mathura and the disappearance of a deaf-mute girl from Kolhapur who had been lost for three months without the police having taken any action. A poster exhibition was arranged after the meeting.

—Gail Omvedt

HYDERABAD

In Hyderabad, the Stri Shakti Sangathan organized a campaign, demonstration and a seminar to focus on the increasing incidence of rape and violence against women. The processionists marched in silence with placards, demanding re-opening of the Mathura case and changes in the rape law...

— Convenor, Stri Shakti Sangathana

Anti-rape marches were organized on March 8 in Bangalore and a few other cities but we have not received their detailed reports yet.

The aftermath... The question now arises : Should the organization of our Forum be formalized ? Would this kill our spontaneity of action ? Should men be included in the organization ?... I believe that there should be no executive posts or any leadership designations. We have

HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

On March 8, 1857, women textile workers in the US came into the streets to demand the reduction of their working time from 16 hours to 10 hours per day. This was one of the first protests by women workers.

At the International Congress of Women Socialists in 1910, the Russian woman revolutionary Clara Zetkin proposed that March 8 be declared International Women's Day. Earlier, they had given a call against the war to the women of the world : "Women, peace in the world has always been dear to us... The horrors of war have not erected barriers between us because our aspirations are strong... Not deceived by the noise of battle, the speech-mongering and the mindless excitation of the masses, we maintain our socialist ideal in all countries... If men kill, women must struggle for peace; if men remain silent, our socialist commitment raises its voice."

In March 1915, women in Oslo demonstrated against the First World War. On March 8, 1917, the Russian Revolution

was launched by a demonstration of women demanding bread. In March 1937, women demonstrated in Spain against Franco's repressive regime. On March 8, 1943, women in Italy protested against Mussolini's fascism.

In Vietnam, on March 8, 1974, women came into the streets together. March 8, 1979 marked the beginning of the movement for Iranian women's liberation. Some of them hesitated to commemorate March 8 because the Islamic "revolutionary" men labeled it a "western" phenomenon but when they learnt that Khomeini had decided to recover them with the obligatory *chador*, 50,000 Iranian women took to the streets of Teheran.

March 8 is not just one day in the year – it is a symbol of our daily struggles, of our unity with all the women of the world. Not the mere celebration of an anniversary but a day of renewed and continued struggle, a day on which, every year, we find our numbers growing.

Extracted from des femmes en mouvements hebdo

been regimented in organizations and institutions for too long Why shouldn't women discover new ways to function?

... It is very important to change the laws but this still leaves women at the mercy of the courts. There are many cases where village women have taken the law into their own hands.... We need to explore ways in which women can become subjects and fight for our rights. The idea of an all-women court was rejected by many women at our meetings. They pointed out that women can often be more oppressive than men because they have internalized male ideology with a vengeance. This is true but the fact remains that women find it difficult to talk in front of men. It is easier for a woman to face a woman. (Does there exist a spontaneous urge which can draw women together even if they have internalized the ruling male ideology?)

Another proposal was put forward that husbands who force their wives to have intercourse should be considered rapists. Many women reacted violently against this, saying it would antagonize people. I believe that a demand for such an amendment to the law would be the only radical and revolutionary demand as it strikes at the very roots of women's oppression in India where the majority of women are forced to submit to marriages not of their choice. What is urgently needed is a documentation of rape cases and investigation of them by women. It is essential that women's point of view surfaces. So far it is mainly male newspaper reporters who have been reporting the cases. Women must speak out...

—**Manju Upadhyaya**

On April 12, the Forum Against Rape organized a morcha at the gate of a factory in Ghatkopar to protest against the rape and murder of Sushila Manjrekar, a factory worker. The Forum has also taken up the case of Gosiyaabee, a 15-year-old girl who was brutally and repeatedly raped by two policemen and two others on the night of 11 April in Turbhe village, Thane.

DELHI

"Let's fight rape, Let us not live in fear any more... Join the march starting at Shivaji Park on March 8." In response to this call given by the Joint Action Committee Against Rape and Sexual Harassment which had been formed by many women's organizations and student organizations getting together, about 700 women and sympathetic men took out a demonstration.

With placards in our hands we passed through the crowded streets of Naya Sarak and Chandni Chowk, to the public meeting at Town Hall. Our main slogans were : "We are the women of India, we are not flowers but sparks of fire", "Punish the rapists", "Long live women's unity, long live the women's movement", "Women and men are equal, why then are women insulted?", "Stop atrocities against women" (Slogans translated from Hindi). In the week preceding March 8, three theatre groups had presented plays about rape at street corners, in slums, hospitals, colleges. At the public meeting too, these plays were staged after the speeches.

The question now arises : How do we go ahead from here ? There is much work to be done. Women's organizations all over the country could begin to keep systematic records of incidents of rape. Women's teams can be sent out to investigate such incidents. Women journalists can make a special effort to highlight women's issues. Rape crisis cells would be set up in every areas, where victims of rape could call for help and support. Mahila mandals could do this work in villages. Legal and medical aid could be given to the victims. Above all, it is necessary to spread awareness on the issue of violence against women so that people begin to think critically about this society which perpetrates such violence. More and more women should train in the art of self-defence. Classes should be started in all schools and colleges.

Women's organizations have filed a petition to parliament for amendment of

the rape law. We will relentlessly continue the struggle for justice in the Mathura case and will not rest till the two policemen are punished. But real change will come only when women organize to fight exploitation and when the most exploited – the labouring and dalit women, are in the forefront of this struggle. As in Shahada, where tribal women blackened the face of a rapist and paraded him round the village on a donkey. It is only such collective self-defence which can help us move towards solution of the problems women face.

— **Gouri Chowdhry for Stri Sangharsh**
In women's words

Some impressions of March 8

... Personally, I felt more confident later in facing up to the harassments which are our daily lot... marching with women from all walks of life strengthened the feeling that I am not alone... But most of the speeches did not rise above politicians' rhetoric and in response most of us lapses into our customary passivity – clapping, shouting and keeping quiet, as and when we were told... more painful was the way rape was reduced to a tragic-comic farce in some of the plays performed... the issue of solidarity of women was virtually ignored...

— **Kumkum**

"Against every form of injustice and violence, struggle is our only slogan." Yes, looking at this crowd, I really feel like struggling for justice... But the struggle should not stop... we need more understanding between us who are victims of such crimes... I remember, last year, university girls also took out a demonstration against harassment of women in buses... our demands were accepted by the authorities but not one has been implemented... of course, a rally is not the end of the struggle. We must continue and fight back against and again at any cost...

— **Fatima Aziz**

The day was spiritually uplifting for me. It is always a good feeling to take to the streets the issues that affect our lives... However, as a casual observer of

the activities of the Joint Action Committee, I felt that something was missing... I have listened during meetings and press conferences where rape was discussed as a legal issue and an organizational tool but never as a personal issue that is linked to the life and death of all the women present at these meetings. It is not the aim of the discussions that left me feeling listless after such meetings but the way in which rape was being used like any other issues – price-rise or lack of latrines – in a relatively impersonal way, to contact and organize women...

Rape is not just another issue... It is the ultimate weapon in the institution of male coercion... It acts as a form of *pardah*... hampers our independence, infringes on our civil liberties... It affects all women of all colours, castes, ages... I wondered how many of us involved in those sessions had been raped or molested in childhood or as adults. Do

we not need to develop an understanding of the problem by sharing our most buried experiences, fears, anxieties and aspirations? Will not a really collective strength arise from this sharing ?

—P.K.

Walking along with hundreds of women, I started feeling a sense of solidarity and sisterhood. As women paused to look, whether on the roads or from windows above the narrow alleys of Naiy Sarak, I felt that surging emotion – a feeling of oneness. I felt like pulling them all along.

It was good to feel and see such strength in that male-dominated commercial area. A strength that assured me one day things will change. I felt that today is an important part in that process. There were not enough pamphlets – too many were being wasted on the men lining the road while women were being neglected because they hung

back while men surged forward. I made it a point to give it to the women – women in cycle rickshaws, *burkha* clad women, women with children. They seemed to find it strange that they were being singled out to be given pamphlets. Some reached out, others accepted hesitantly. Some looked at it, read it, others folded and kept it. I wondered how many of them could read. Men on the road, surprised at not being given, sniggered at our attempts to reach women. If with a woman, they put out their hands to snatch it away, either from me or from her. They often prevented the women with them from reading it. The assumption was: “If he has got it, she has got it! If he has not got it, she need not get it!” I felt like shouting: “Man, you’re raping her right here on the road. What do you need this pamphlet for?”

—Asha