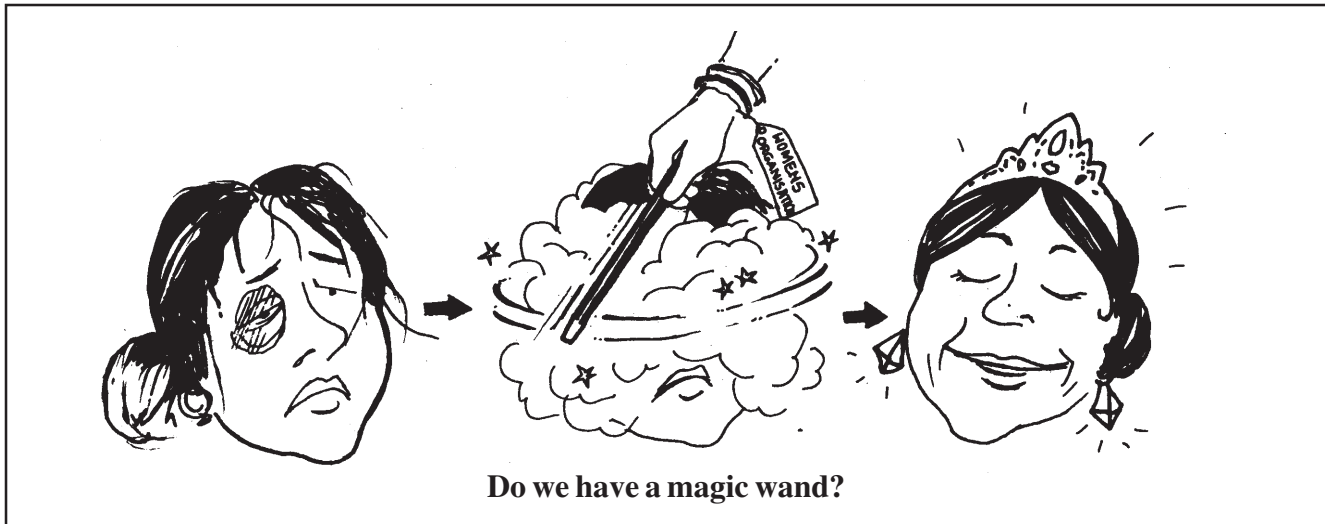


# Women's Organisations

## The Pressure of Unrealistic Expectations

by  
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“ATROCITIES on women are increasing. Does it not show that women’s organisations have failed in their task?” The implication of this oft-asked question is that since women’s organisations have singlehanded taken on the responsibility of eradicating violence and injustice against women therefore, the continuation of this violence shows the ineffectiveness and futility of women’s organisations. Often, the question is related to a specific case of violence reported in the press: “So and so woman has been killed or battered or raped. What are women’s organisations doing about it?”

Let me give two specific examples of the unrealistic expectations from women’s organisations. A man from a small town in Uttar Pradesh wrote to us a heartrending account of how his daughter who was married in Delhi some five years ago is being subjected

to brutal torture and violence at the hands of her husband and in-laws. He said he suspected she might be done to death as her husband had already attacked her murderously on several occasions. He then went on to express his inability to come to Delhi to help his daughter, saying he was prevented by some illness in the family. He asked us to help his daughter and save her from impending death. We wrote back saying that if his fears about his daughter’s safety were well founded, he should come to Delhi or send some responsible member of his family so that she could be rescued from her in-laws’ place and that we would help them in this task, legally and otherwise. The father neither came nor sent anyone. Instead, we got a letter from him giving us a lecture on how if women’s organisations could not really help and save women like his daughter, what was the point of their existence.

In another typical case, we received a phone call from a man to say that a woman in his neighbourhood had been beaten up many times and maltreated in many ways by her husband who was soon planning to bring a second wife home. Giving us the phone number and address of the victimised wife, the caller asked us to ring up and offer her help. When I called the number and spoke to the woman concerned, she flatly denied that she was facing any problem and said I had been misinformed. However, I gave her our phone number and told her to call us if she ever needed help. A couple of hours later, she called to say that the information we had received was correct. Her husband had fixed a date for his second marriage which was to take place in two days. He was determined to bring the second wife to the same house. He beat the first wife severely for protesting. She had been

unable to tell the truth when I had called earlier because her husband was in the house at the time. She then asked for advice. I suggested that she lodge a police complaint against her husband for intending to commit bigamy, and offered to help her with legal action to follow up the case. She expressed her helplessness to do so because if he got to know of it he would throw her out along with her children.

But did she really want to continue living with a man who put her through such humiliation? The answer was: where was she to go with her three small children? Her parents, who are living in Bihar, were not willing to take her back. She was a graduate but had no other employment skills and no job experience. In any case, under whose care would she leave her children if she went out to work? With the small salary she was likely to get as an unskilled, inexperienced graduate, she would not even be able to rent a small room, let alone have money to bring up her children. At present, her husband at least said he was willing to support her and let her continue living in the same house if she quietly accepted his second marriage. But if he got to know she was planning any kind of action against him, he would simply beat her out of the house. She then asked if we could help in any way and stop his second marriage without her coming into the picture.

We rang up the neighbour and explained the situation as the woman had described it to us and asked if he and other neighbours would be willing to help if we intervened and approached the husband. He flatly refused and said as someone who had to live in the neighbourhood he did not want to intervene and provoke enmity. He then went on to give us a lecture on how, if a victimised woman was not willing to help herself and if we, as a women's organisation, could not instil enough courage into her to fight for her rights, then the moral of the story was that women deserve to be maltreated.

Thus, the onus for the continuance of the unjust situation gets to be

passed on to the victims of injustice and to the women's organisations who claim to fight against injustice done to women. Both the above are fairly typical examples and routinely recurring ones.

The question we need to ask is: can a women's organisation be expected to substitute for a family, kinship, neighbourhood support, or for a social welfare system? Are parents, relatives and neighbours justified in abdicating their responsibility in favour of a distant organisation? A women's organisation is not like a trade union which collects membership dues and purports to guard the work-related interests of its members. Even a trade union's main function is to guard its own subscribing members, with whose employers it has some *locus standi*,

not all oppressed workers. But a women's organisation, functioning on limited social acceptance and a paucity of human and economic resources, is expected to guarantee the economic, social and emotional well being of half the population, when all the power structures are weighted against that well being, and is denounced as useless if it fails to be omnipresent like Brahma and play the guard in every home where women are maltreated.

How did the illusion arise that women's organisations must be able to rescue every maltreated woman and magically resolve her problems? It arose partly from the misconception of those of us who began to organise new women's groups about a decade ago. Since dominant social opinion appeared to be hostile to a woman



actively resisting marital violence, women's organisations hoped to act as an alternative body of opinion, one which would reassure maltreated women that they were justified in resisting aggression, even in leaving a violent husband. In working on this assumption, women's groups tended to focus more on the emotional support needed by a woman than on the physical protection and social and economic support she needed. A few individual women who were educationally and otherwise equipped to support themselves independently, and most of whom also had the support of their natal families, were able to draw on the moral support offered by women's groups. But the large majority of maltreated wives face immediate problems of housing, subsistence and help with childcare, and also the active hostility or prejudice of both marital and natal families.

A few women's organisations set up shelters for battered women but these proved to be of limited value. They were intended as shortstay homes for three to six months, as only thus could they continue to cater to more women in need. But, very often, after that time, a woman still had nowhere to go and the women's organisation would be compelled to negotiate with her natal or marital family to take her back on slightly better terms than before.

Responding to the problem of marital violence by providing shelters for battered women was a product of women's movements in the West. However, the overall situation there was substantially different from that in India. In many Western countries, a woman can get social security payments and subsidised housing for herself and her children. This may not be sufficient to keep her from poverty but at least allows her and her children to survive. It is also relatively easier for a woman, even one without any

professional skills to find some sort of a job in the West. The shelter thus can try to function as a transition point while the women's organisation helps the woman establish herself independently.

In India, however, many women, even those from middle class and lower middle class backgrounds, have been allowed to develop only the skills of domestic work. The best part of their lives has been spent on perfecting these skills - cooking, cleaning, childcare. But domestic services is a despised and ill paid occupation in our society. It cannot support a woman and her children in a lifestyle even remotely resembling that to which she is accustomed. It is also not an occupation that her community would approve of. Since family and community approval and support are very important for an individual's mental and emotional well being, few women desire to take up jobs which are looked down upon by their community.

It is, in some ways, relatively easier for a poor woman to cope with living on her own, because the husband's desertion may not bring about a major change in her income, given that these households often run mainly on the woman's income, even when the husband is living with her. If her natal family is within reach, she may be able to resist the violence of her husband and manage to live on her own. This is one major reason for the much larger number of woman-headed households among the poor.

Our experience shows that the lack of viable options, economic and social, is a major cause for most maltreated wives being unable to live on their own, and being compelled to return to their husbands. Women's organisations end up trying to negotiate with her marital family for a better deal for her. But it is not possible for the organisation to mount a round-the-clock vigil to see that she is not

battered again. This inability is not a measure of the failure of women's organisations. It is merely a physical impossibility. The only people who have some chance of intervening at the moment of violence are immediate neighbours who live close enough to observe maltreatment.

If it is impossible for women's organisations to substitute for a social security system, it is equally impossible for them to substitute for overall social norms which can provide a supportive environment to women. A positive social opinion refusing to acquiesce in maltreatment of women, whatever the excuse, has to be built up locally within each community and neighbourhood. Many of us tended initially to be dismissive of organisations like *biradari panchayats* and *mohalla samitis*. We assumed that they would automatically throw their weight on the side of the husband's family rather than of the victimised daughter-in-law who has no independent status in their eyes. However, it is important to try to change this opinion rather than substitute for it.

We have to try to get neighbours and community to be at least willing to take responsibility to ensure that women of their neighbourhood are not tortured. They are in the best position to do this because they can observe more accurately, and can also exert pressure on the man, than can outsiders, including women's organisations. Protest demonstrations by women's organisations may temporarily embarrass a wife murderer but soon enough he recovers and even remarries. However, if his community boycotts him, it is not so easy for him to remarry or live a normal life. In our community oriented society, the fear of community disapproval can deter people more effectively; status in the community is highly valued and a low opinion can be extremely harmful for a man in a multitude of areas of his life.

As a result of the activities, protests and pressure built up by women's organisations, and the very sympathetic coverage given to these and to women's rights issues in the mass media, many more people today are aware of the need to combat women's oppression. Concerned members of different communities have been, emboldened openly to espouse women's rights, even to organise discussions on the subject to spread awareness in the community. It is not as much the fashion today to laugh at women's groups. This overall favourable social opinion proves useful to individual women who need help. Relatively larger numbers seem able to acknowledge that they are being maltreated and to seek redress,

We should recognise that it could be as much this speaking up which is creating an effect of seemingly more violence in society. It is more violence being acknowledged than the scale of violence actually going up that we are witnessing. The process is still nascent and largely confined to urban areas; it needs to be furthered.

Parents have to be made aware of their own role in crippling their daughters, by not equipping them to stand on their own feet, and by treating marriage of a daughter as a substitute for an independent livelihood. Once parents realise their responsibility, many of them will offer support to a maltreated daughter, and try to help her build an independent life rather than repeatedly bribe a violent son-in-law to take her back into his house. When a woman is well educated and skilled, the full support of her parents and siblings is often all that is needed to help her make the break.

Women's organisations have been successful in generating a widespread debate on women's situation. Today, there is a visible ferment amongst women in many parts of the country, both urban and rural, and many more

men are willing actively to support work for women's rights.

Thus, generating ideas and building social opinion is an important task women's organisations must continue to perform. The popular assumption that every women's organisation must provide relief to individual battered women, and that this must be the only purpose of women's organisations, is a mistaken one.

However, those organisations which choose to work in the area of relief provision to victims of violence



would be probably more effective:

1. if they tried to open a dialogue with community organisations in the neighbourhood where they are based. They must induce women to participate in decision making of the community bodies, and see that individual cases of wife beating are taken up by the community organisation which should commit itself to combating violence on women within the community. However slow and piecemeal this process, which some organisations have already undertaken, it is likely to be somewhat more effective in the long run in providing relief to individual women.

2. We should make it clear to ourselves and to the public at large that:

a. Women's organisations alone cannot ensure that violence is eliminated from society, or that every perpetrator of violence is punished or restrained.

b. Women's organisations cannot act as a substitute for the economic, social, and emotional support a woman needs. Only a supportive environment which includes family, community, neighbourhood and the larger society can provide this.

c. What women's organisations can do is act as catalysts for action to combat violence on women, and to press for the building of a more supportive environment for women to resist injustice and maltreatment.

d. While it is not necessary that every women's organisation must provide relief to individual victims of violence (and there are many other kinds of useful work that need to be done) those women's organisations which choose to provide relief to individual victims can support mainly those women and their families who are able and willing to take responsibility for building an independent life for the woman. □