

Letters That Came in Response to Our Call for Boycotting Dowry Marriages



In the editorial entitled "Beginning with our own lives" (**Manushi No. 5**) we had drawn attention to the disturbing fact that many of us who join protest actions against dowry murders, continue to live our own lives untouched by the ideas we seek to propagate. We had appealed to women's groups and organizations to ensure that the movement begins with our own lives, and had called on women actively involved to make commitments with regard to personally and collectively battling against dowry. We had printed the commitment made by some women not to attend or participate in dowry marriages, to protest at extravagant marriage ceremonies and not to attend marriages where the woman has no active choice. We had invited other women to make such commitments as part of our collective struggle.

Several women told us that they hadn't realized we were suggesting a publicly made commitment. They thought a silently made vow would be enough. We feel that such pledges need to be publicly taken, not just to ensure our accountability to each other as sisters in struggle but to inspire one another with the assurance that we are moving towards a collective and open boycott of dowry weddings rather than making purely personal, private decisions.

One sister had written to us saying that for so many years, she has been boycotting dowry marriages as well as birth ceremonies of third children, and has been encouraging inter-caste marriages.

However, she added that she did not consider gifts voluntarily given by the girl's parents to be part of dowry. We feel that this defeats the purpose of a boycott because firstly, it is precisely under the name of "gifts" that the Dowry Abolition Act of 1961 is being routinely evaded. Who is to decide that Rs. 10,000 in cash is not a gift but a refrigerator costing Rs.5,000 is? In fact, the use of the word "gift" is much more dangerous than a straightforward dowry demand. When the boy's side has expectations which they do not clearly state, the girl and her family are all the more traumatized – they have to keep guessing and over-doing the gift-giving. The vicious cycle is only strengthened by such game-playing. Secondly, any financial transaction at the time of a marriage reinforces the idea that the woman herself is a gift who must be handed over to the man with suitable adornments and accompaniments (*kanyadan*). The elements of bargaining, buying and selling, competing and pressurizing invariably operate resulting in the degradation and humiliation of the woman.

Here are the responses we received :

Dear Sisters, you are absolutely correct in saying that until we boycott the marriage of even our own brother or sister, if lavish dowry is given, we have no moral right to shout slogans like "Do not give or take dowry." I am a student of class ten and I discussed this question with my classmate who is a supporter of **Manushi**.

I feel that we must protest and boycott dowry marriages. I am making the commitment that I will not attend or in any way participate in a marriage where dowry is either given or taken in any form. And I will not attend marriages where 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.

Madhavi Sharma, Calcutta

...I add my name... and I feel the way we have vowed not to attend any wedding where these three conditions exist, so also we should vow not to use sexist abusive language. All those who make this vow should be encouraged and their names be printed in **Manushi**. In Bombay I notice that everyone – comrades, academicians, political workers, trade unionists, women activists – use words like "fucking bastard", "bugger", "sala", "chutiya", "teri ma ki..." When I objected, people told me that I am unnecessarily sensitive because I come from Gandhian, puritan Gujarat. Here, even some women liberationists seem to think that unless you use these terms in every sentence you are not bold and liberated! What irony! I keep discussing this question but it is not taken seriously. Yet these same people are sensitive to racist and casteist abuse like "bhangi" or "nigger". We have to evolve new songs, new jokes, new terms to give vent to our anger, a new vocabulary and a new culture in which we don't entertain ourselves at the cost of any community,

sex, race or minority group. In all our means of recreation, the content of women's equality should be reflected – it should be part of our life...

Vibhuti Patel, Bombay

In your editorial, it is well begun to battle against dowry beginning with our own lives. I sincerely endorse your commitments. Though I do not belong to a women's organization nor am I a woman activist, I shall not be a party to such an evil in my own life... Excerpts from Gargi's diary made inspiring reading. I have known many girls who had to face similar challenges. The only difference being – they succumbed while our Gargi didn't.

Lakshmi Iyer, Orissa

...I was disappointed because I did not receive **Manushi** for a long time but when I saw on the cover the sad faces of others like me, I thought, this disappointment, this pain is not just mine but hers too, and what is **Manushi** but the story of all of us sisters?

...About four years ago, many of us girls studying in BA vowed not to give dowry. My own sisters also took this vow. For many days after that, we used to discuss this with glee: "Let's see how these men who demand dowry get married! We will crush these guys..." Such were our slogans. That feeling: "We will not be sold" is still strong in me but I am all alone in obstinately clinging to it. My own sisters disapprove of me and in fact, I often notice that before marriage, women themselves demand that this or that item be given in their dowry. When I meet those classmates now, they tell me how their father gave a scooter at their marriage and their mother gave saris costing thousands of rupees. And their shameless husbands stand by, cackling away. I feel like catching hold of these scoundrels and twisting their moustaches. But there are their wives supporting them... I am sure that if women overcome the temptations of wealth and luxury, we can take our lives into our own hands and combat those filthy hands which crush our aspirations...

Sarojini Dahiya, Rohtak

(Translated from Hindi)

...I hereby swear in the name of all that

is good not to attend any dowry marriages...

Gayatri Saberwal, Delhi

On reading the editorial, I was moved to share with you my own story. I am the eldest in a family of three sisters and a brother. I evolved a different, a romanticist perspective on marriage, which definitely did not coincide with the ideas of my parents and grandparents. It was a period of great conflict and emotional dilemma. My mother was on the one hand, propagating an early marriage to just any one who was eligible and on the other, was instilling in me the fear that if I was too choosy, I would miss the boat. But gradually as the years passed I grew out of my Denise Robins type of "they loved, they married, they lived happily ever after" romanticism...

I knew what I wanted marriage to a man who would marry me for what I was, not for what I could bring as dowry. Also, I decided that I would spend my own savings (Rs. 500) on the marriage and the man should spend exactly the same amount. Just this and nothing more. I did not even want new clothes for the occasion. I was going to take the same old clothes. Of course my family was sure I would not meet anyone to fit the peg and they gave me up as a bad joke.

This was way back in the early seventies when I had not been exposed to any ideology but I had a personal abhorrence to being bought or sold as a commodity. I did ultimately meet an old college friend who had exactly the same views on marriage...

Shashi Sail, Chattisgarh

Dear sisters, we also feel that feminism should be linked up with personal struggles. We believe that a feminist group has to strengthen itself on the basis of our own personal experience of being a woman and the oppression we face in our daily life. Each of us in the group is there to fight against our own oppression as well as to fight against oppression of women in general... It is only through the painful struggle in our personal lives that we will emerge strong enough to fight oppression at a wider level. Male power and male-

dominated institutions oppress us all. We are all victims of patriarchy. Let us unite as women to eradicate all forms of male control over our bodies and our minds. We publicly affirm that 1. when we face oppression in our personal lives we will try to make a political issue out of it. 2. We will not attend or in any way participate in a marriage where dowry is given or taken in however veiled a form. 3. We will protest when dowry is given at extravagant marriage ceremonies. 4. We will not dress in a way which reveals our marital status.

Indira Jaising, Vibhuti Patel, Usha Desai, Shaila Shah, Meena Srinivasan, Sonal Shukla, Anuradha Keskar, Sonali, Nirmala, Sathe, Aruna Bhurte, Manju Upadhyaya, Flavia, Vasanti Damle, Mira Savara, Preethi.

Paramita and Archana from Calcutta have also made similar commitments. □

NFIW CONFERENCE

The National Federation of Indian Women held its tenth congress at Trivandrum from December 27 to 30, 1980. The congress was attended by 1389 delegates from all states of India, including faraway places like Tripura, Meghalaya, Jammu and Himachal Pradesh. Assam which is in such turmoil, also sent a good delegation. Kerala was represented by a very big delegation drawn from all districts. Many delegates had brought with them rich experience of struggle in the last four years, since the Jullundur congress held in 1976...

There were biri workers from Bombay who had recently fought a 75-days strike, teachers from Delhi and Bihar who had actively taken part in movements for better conditions of work, peasant and agricultural women workers who are engaged in struggle, and women who had fought and won several local demands like more water taps, health and maternity facilities, better drainage, increase in sugar quota, improvement in fair-price shops...

The procession on the inaugural day in which more than 20,000 women participated was an inspiring sight...

(extracted from NFIW bulletin, January 1981)