

Sexual Harassment and Slander as Weapons of Subjugation

by
Madhu Kishwar

The problem of sexual harassment is part of a whole syndrome of discrimination and exploitation women are subjected to in most societies. It is important not just because this form of oppression is more gender specific than most others but also because women become even more vulnerable as they protest about it. The veil of silence cast over this particular form of exploitation makes it much harder to fight against or seek redressal.

The problem of sexual harassment affects women of all classes, strata and communities. Very few women, even among the supposedly privileged sections of society, are likely to have altogether escaped various forms of sexual harassment, especially if they do not stay within the extremely narrow and debilitating boundaries and norms set by their community and family.

Sexual abuse for women comes first and foremost at the hands of those supposed to be their near and dear ones; those supposedly meant to protect them from aggression from the outside world. But in this article I will not be dealing with this aspect of the problem. I will also not be talking about the vast majority of poor urban or rural women who bear the worst forms of sexual violence and coercion nor be dealing with blatant forms of sexual violence such as rape.

I have confined my attention to the experiences of a tiny

segment of our population, university students and teachers who come from middle and upper middle class homes. The reason for narrowing down the focus to this group is simply that as someone who has taught in Delhi University for several years, I am most familiar with the problems of these women. However, I am well aware that women in universities, coming, as many of them do, from relatively elite backgrounds, are the least vulnerable among the various categories of women who venture out of home to seek employment. Nevertheless, the accounts I have put together point to a general pattern. Sexual harassment is not so much rooted in individual inclinations towards power plays; rather, women become more or less vulnerable depending on how much control men have over their ability to earn a livelihood or to thwart their chances of acquiring a degree or skills

which will equip them for entering the job market.

Another reason for concentrating on the experiences of middle and upper middle class women is that they are more likely to take their humiliation silently for fear of seriously jeopardising their status and survival within their own family and kinship group.

If most well-educated women from well-off families are unable to effectively resist sexual harassment and abuse, how much more difficult is it likely to be for women from vulnerable and poorer sections of society to resist this form of exploitation.

I extended the theme to include another related dimension of the problem, the use of sexual slander as a weapon to keep women in a perpetual state of fear, the fear of losing *izzat* in a way that can affect a woman's very chances of survival, and result in loss of family support, loss of a job, and in being treated as a social outcaste.

Sadly enough, women may be subjected to sexual slander not only in situations when they are suspected of having violated some norm of sexual behaviour. Equally often they may become targets of slander when as victims they dare



**This is the text of the annual Vikram Sarabhai Memorial lecture delivered on the 20th of January 1992 at India International Centre*

openly protest against sexual harassment or abuse. It's fairly common for a man accused of sexual harassment to start a counter campaign against the woman alleging sexual misconduct on her part. In fact threatening to make such allegations is one of the most frequently deployed weapons used by men to frighten women, and to keep them subjugated.

What do we mean by sexual harassment? Sexual harassment occurs when a woman, despite having clearly indicated her disinterest, is pressured into tolerating or accepting undesirable sexual advances by someone who is in a position of power over her and is able to harm her interests if she declines to tolerate these advances or to have sexual relations with him. For example, a boss who threatens, overtly or covertly, to withhold the promotion of a junior colleague or get her fired from the job if she doesn't respond to his sexual overtures, or a professor who uses his power as a member of a selection committee to coax or coerce a woman student into a sexual affair, have committed acts of sexual harassment.

Even if a woman takes the initiative in offering a sexual bribe to a man in a position of power to escape a difficult predicament or extract a favour, the man in a position of power who accepts the bribe would still be guilty of sexual harassment. As someone in a position of power, he has a special responsibility to ensure that women working under him do not have to debase themselves simply to get their due or offer their bodies as a bribe to extract extra favours.

If a boss repeatedly makes sexual propositions to a woman employee, day after day, with or without any physical overtures, despite her repeatedly indicating that she finds his advances offensive, he can be rightly accused of sexual harassment. As someone working under him, the woman has little choice but to suffer it daily and constantly. In most jobs, she has no way of escaping these unwanted sexual

advances except by quitting. If she quits, she may not be able to get another job at all, or one that pays enough. Repeatedly making advances, *even if they don't go beyond the verbal*, towards someone who has no option but to suffer them, makes a boss guilty of sexual harassment.

I may well be accused of applying too wide a definition of sexual harassment that is unfair to many men. However, we need to acknowledge that we live in a world where men have a near total monopoly of power - economic, political and social. There is at best a microscopic sprinkling of women, mostly token figures, at the top decision making layers of our society. Therefore, women have to enter the job market or the political world on men's terms, which are more often than not highly disadvantageous to women.

A Weapon for Dominance

Aggressive sexual encounters are used by men as one of the means of maintaining dominance and control, and often as a weapon for humiliating women. When men use their power to seduce or compel women into sexual relations, it often has little to do with mutually sought after physical pleasure. Sex is frequently used as a weapon to try to debase the woman, to train her to accept a demeaning self view, to see herself as a thing rather than a person in her own right, a person who can demand and get her due. If in any society men feel safe in demanding sexual bribes or inflicting sexual harassment with impunity and actually get away with humiliating women in this fashion fairly frequently, this is a good indication of a gross power imbalance between men and women. This is well illustrated by a recent case at one of the prestigious Institutes of Technology (IITS). **Manushi's** help and intervention was sought by a group of concerned people at this IIT. I give below an abridged version of their letter:

Dr A joined the Department in early 1991 under Dr S, who is also the Head of the Department. From her first day on

the job Dr S tried to cajole and coax her into having sexual relations with him, initially by way of suggestive hints and then overtly indicating that it will be in her 'best interest' for a bright future and career that she subject herself to his wishes. ... Dr S resorted to daily pestering of Dr A, giving examples of the girls whom he has similarly 'helped' in reaching excellent career tracks. When the advances became too overt and also since she did not receive any support from other lab mates Dr A gave her resignation letter indicating that she was not able to continue due to continuous harassment by the project leader. However, her resignation letter was not accepted and instead she was served with a termination letter by Dr S citing that he has been 'observing her progress since she joined and it has not been up to his expectation and satisfaction'. What his "expectations" were and how she could have 'satisfied' it is disgusting but obvious....

Since Dean, Research & Development is the competent authority in charge of project staff, Dr. A submitted the resignation letter. ... However, instead of promising her that an enquiry would be initiated and strict action would be taken against Dr S if found guilty, these senior professors and the custodians of the Institute, using pseudo affection as a facade, suggested that it would be better for her reputation and future that she withdraw the present resignation letter and substitute it with one giving some other excuse....

Dr A however did not accept the proposal. One evening a jeep full of goons went to her house, showered her with abuses and threatened her with dire consequences if she ever dared to enter IIT. She was totally upset at this turn of events; the dramatic coincidence of this and her meeting with Institute authorities clearly speaks of criminal collaboration.

The group who wrote us this letter end by requesting that an outside enquiry be instituted because they have

failed in their efforts to get Dr A a fair hearing from the IIT authorities.

When we tried following up on the letter, we were informed by a professor working at the same IIT that after having stood up to intense pressure for a while Dr A “took a complete U turn.” She gave a written statement to the Acting Director saying that she had a lot of respect for Prof S who is a “great man” and “an internationally reputed scientist” with whom she wished to continue working in the lab. But since her resignation had already been accepted earlier, her project post fell vacant. It was, therefore, re-advertised. She was the only candidate who appeared and the selection committee recommended her for the job. It is suspected that she made a deal under pressure not just in order to retain her position but more out of fear of not being ever able to get her Ph.d degree. She has already submitted her thesis but has to go through the interview to defend it. Since Dr S is likely to be on the committee to approve her Ph.d thesis, years of her labour would go waste if he went against her. But her backtracking in this fashion has left the students very confused and scared. They had openly supported Dr A when she took a stand. There was a signature campaign and an open protest encounter with the Director. But after she wrote this letter to the Director, the students got so demoralised they refused to even talk about the incident. The position of the concerned professor seems fairly secure and he continues occupying the same position of power, though he is alleged to have a long track record of similarly exploiting many of the women who worked under him. On an earlier occasion when he also got caught in a scandal, his colleagues saved him by arranging a job for him in the US for some years so that he could return after things cooled down.

This particular case is fairly typical of the atmosphere of exploitation in many science establishments and labs. By all accounts it seems that women

working as researchers or project officers in science institutions are far more vulnerable to sexual harassment than those in other disciplines. The reasons are obvious.

The power that a research supervisor holds in a science institution is vast because he can effectively block all avenues of research including lab facilities. A woman who has spent several years working on her thesis or research project is totally dependent on the whims of this one person for completing her research and getting her degree. Being denied access to lab facilities or certain expensive instruments can completely mar a researcher’s career. Leaving one institution and joining another is not an option easily available to science researchers as it is to those in social sciences because in scientific establishments control over funds and grants makes professors in positions of power act as mafia dons with a tendency to protect and support each other. Most important of all, perhaps, is the fact that the system obliges the student to depend on the supervisors recommendation for further studies and academic positions. This too appears to be more strongly institutionalised in the natural sciences. Falling out with one’s supervisor means putting one’s entire career in jeopardy. In the event of a researcher - supervisor rift, the entire faculty closes ranks. In most cases, the unfortunate student will not find another supervisor since he or she has violated the unwritten code of servility. Mild exploitation of the guide-student relation is fairly common with students of both sexes. “Where are you going?” “To buy vegetables for my guide” is a standard joke among Ph.d students in the sciences. But exploitation takes far humiliating deadly forms for women researchers.

In the last few years there have been several cases of suicides by women who were unable to cope with very debasing forms of sexual harassment in some of Delhi’s science departments

and research institutions. On the few occasions when the aggrieved students decided to make a public issue of it, the outcome was not very different from that of the IIT case mentioned above. Some years ago the Department of Physics in Delhi University was rocked by a serious protest movement by students against gross forms of sexual abuse and harassment by one of the professors. Despite long drawn out efforts to get an enquiry instituted, nothing much came of it except that the professor accused of financial corruption and sex harassment left and got himself an even better, higher status job as the head of a prestigious research institution on account of his political connections.

However, the problem is not confined to science establishments alone. It occurs wherever women have to work in a situation of job insecurity and lack of accountability of those in positions of power.

The sad story of degradation related by women employees of the Department of Adult, Continuing Education and Extension of Delhi University (DACEE) demonstrates clearly that even women from relatively better off families are extremely prone to be exploited if they are working in a situation where their job is totally dependent on the whims of one man or a small coterie who have tremendous arbitrary powers placed at their disposal. We saw how diffident most of them were in fighting back sexual exploitation even though the Department Head, S.C. Bhatia had indulged in extremely gross forms of sexual exploitation of his numerous female colleagues. Dr Bhatia hired 22 women employees in the period from the founding of his Centre in 1978 to his suspension. Most of them were young and attractive, and few were married. He sexually harassed virtually everyone of them. Those who resisted, he physically assaulted. He pawed these female colleagues, made lewd comments and sometimes even tried to force sex on them. He enacted many a

violent sexual assault on these women in his office. From whatever information we could gather, it appears that some of these young women succumbed to Bhatia's advances. Such women would be given special money allowances, taken out to conferences and introduced to influential and powerful people. Some had open affairs with him, some did it surreptitiously. One of these women even went to the extent of nearly marrying him though he has a wife and she knew of his behaviour with other women. Some began resisting him. As long as he was pawing them and forcing kisses on them, many didn't resist but when he began demanding sex and intercourse, some got frightened. Only one woman, Dr Sushama Merh, gave him a tough fight; she continually protested and refused to succumb either to his sexual advances or to his physical violence. She fought it out alone for years at the cost of her health and career. When she found the University authorities continued protecting Bhatia despite her best efforts to get his conduct enquired into, she approached Manushi for help. After Manushi took up the case and campaigned for an independent probe, an enquiry committee was instituted into Bhatia's conduct. The enquiry committee was seriously hampered by the fact that 20 of the 22 women he had hired left the department quietly and only two out of those agreed to give evidence apart from the two who had stuck it out in the department - some because they could not take his continued demands beyond a point. I don't think Bhatia would have dared to go as far as he did in extorting sex bribes had he found his women colleagues offering him tough resistance rather leaving quietly only when they found they could not put up with it beyond a point.

Why did so many women -- young and educated and none of them from really poor families -- not protest more effectively when forced to undergo so much humiliation? Many of their colleagues think it was the lure of career

promotion. Some others think they simply enjoyed the attention. We will never know for sure what complex set of motivations or compulsions led each of them to act as they did. But we do know a crucial factor in all this was that Bhatia ensured that everybody else besides himself in the academic positions of the department was temporary or ad hoc. He was thus not just a colleague, not just a man, but a power figure who controlled everyone's livelihood.

Unfortunately we do not have the versions of many others because they did not appear before the Commission. But from the accounts I have heard from various employees of the department it seems many of the women found it hard to openly resist him because he was a figure of authority. The tendency to obey men in power is in part due to the fact that women are too often trained to think that their business is to please men, especially if the man is in a superior position. The same woman who would react violently to a poor man - say a rickshaw *wallah* who makes a pass at her - is much less likely to offer firm resistance if a powerful man, say a vice-chancellor or a Minister makes sexual advances towards her.

Not surprisingly, even though the women employees of DACEE confess that they were for years subjected to highly offensive and sexually exploitative behaviour by the Head of the Department, the matter came to a head only when a majority of the employees, including men, were faced with a near certain fate of being fired from their jobs. And it is quite likely that most of them would lose interest in pursuing the allegations of sexual harassment if they won their case concerning job regularisation.

The fact that some of the women of DACEE fell for the crumbs and "perks" that were offered them in return for sexual favours created an atmosphere of mistrust and hostility among them, preempting the possibility of their being able to make common cause with each

other. The fact that too many of the women kept quiet for years or, at best, chose to leave their jobs without as much as a formal protest, and that the male employees who are making a big issue of it were likewise silent all these years, makes people suspect their motives today, even if their grievances are legitimate. For the natural question asked is: Why are they taking up the issue now? Could it not be motivated? It's not a coincidence that women employees have raised the issue in such strong terms only when their male colleagues decided to make common cause with them at a time when most of them have been threatened with the chance of likely dismissal from their jobs. Thus by getting embroiled with the battle of the employees to retain and regularise their jobs, it becomes much harder for the issue of sex harassment to retain its integrity. On the other hand it cannot be ignored that the primary reason why the women employees were so vulnerable to exploitation and abuse was that no one of the staff, except the head of the institution, had a regular and permanent position.

Why Do Men Gang Up?

However, even when women do raise timely protests the outcome is not necessarily very encouraging. In the vast majority of cases where such instances of sexual abuse come to light the authorities protect the culprit and further punish the victim, in those few instances where they don't succeed in silencing her in the first place. Let me illustrate this by another example from Delhi University. J had opted for a newly introduced course during her final semester studies for M.A. Most of the books required for the course were not available in the library or in the market. The professor teaching the course offered to lend her the books before the exams. When she went over to his house to collect the books, he tried molesting her. His wife and children were present in the house not far away from the room in which J and the professor were sitting. J tried resisting,

but he refused to stop his attempts. She slapped him and ran out of the house. A few days later, when the exam result was announced, she found that while she had done fairly well in all her other papers she had been given a failing mark in that one paper which was corrected by Dr B. Convinced that this was an act of vindictiveness on the part of Dr B she went to lodge a complaint with the head of the department, demanding a re-evaluation of her paper. The head simply refused to accept her written complaint, asserting he was doing so in her best interest, because if she made it a public issue "mud would only stick to her name." J, who was only 20 years old, was thus left with no choice except to drop that particular course and take an additional one in the next semester. She later happened to learn that the head of her department was himself regularly subjecting his own niece, who was a

student at the same university and department, to even worse kinds of sexual harassment whenever she went over to her uncle's house for weekends.

Among the many reasons men spontaneously tend to protect each other when they learn of other men's misdemeanours against women is that too many of those who have attained such power have themselves committed such abuses. Thus in protecting each other they are essentially protecting themselves from present or future potential exposure. Any woman who dares make a public issue of sexual harassment must face the risk of being put down and humiliated so that she becomes an object lesson for others and few will dare follow her example.

This happens not only when women are in clearly vulnerable and dependent positions but also in those rare cases where women occupy

relatively higher positions of power and prestige. Rupan Deol Bajaj, a Senior IAS officer of the Punjab cadre, was treated no better by the higher bureaucrats when she dared complain against sexual misbehaviour by a senior IPS officer. This occurred despite the fact that the sexual misbehaviour took place at a public party in full view of dozens of people, and he was known to have acted similarly with other women. Yet the police chief was not only avidly protected by the bureaucratic and

wealthy and influential family. Even so it is an extremely unequal battle in which she is more likely to be the loser than the man who misbehaved with her.

Impossible to "Stay Away"

Many are likely to respond to this tale of woe by saying: 'Why make such a fuss over some bit of unwanted sexual attention? How do you know women don't enjoy it? And if they don't, why don't they simply stay away from such undesirable situations?'

The unfortunate truth is that, as things stand, it is virtually impossible for women to "stay away" from sexual harassment. All those millions of women who decide to stay homebound, and do not venture outside the home for a living, are not really "staying away" from trouble. We know, from world wide experience, that women and girls suffer the worst forms of sexual harassment and abuse at the hands of various

male relatives, including brothers, uncles, cousins, brothers-in-law, and fathers. Yet the physical and ideological power of the male dominated family is such that the possibility of sexual harassment at work is used as one of the important reasons for not allowing women to go and seek work outside the house. Instead they are often urged to accept a life of crippling dependence on the men of the family. Sexual harassment is one of the few crimes which are seen by most people as primarily the fault of the victim rather than the aggressor. The victimised women are the ones who are sought to be imprisoned within four walls, not the aggressive men. Such crimes set into motion a vicious cycle, entrapping women so that they end up seeming voluntarily to choose to be confined within the house.

It is proof of the low opinion men



political establishment, but the man was actually decorated with the Padma Bhushan while this case was going on in the courts. To add further insult to injury, Rupan Deol Bajaj was slandered and demeaned in several ways. She was accused of helping terrorists when she accused this IPS officer of misconduct because he was supposedly spearheading the anti-terrorist campaign in Punjab. A number of other irrelevant charges were brought against her. She has been fighting this lone battle for years in the courts and in the public realm. Very few of her women colleagues in the IAS dare support her openly for fear of damaging their own careers. Even fewer now dare come out and complain against personal harassment or abuse after seeing how Rupan's case got handled. She has been able to press her case simply because she has the support of her fairly

have of themselves and of each other that jobs outside the home which bring a higher degree of exposure to men are considered more disreputable for women, as though mere interaction with men will pollute women. For example, the job of a nurse is considered much less respectable than that of a primary school teacher because in the former case she is expected to deal with a large number of men but in the latter case this contact is minimal, especially if her colleagues are women. Unfortunately men's mutual mistrust of each other's intentions towards women doesn't affect men as adversely as it does women. It virtually imprisons and severely restricts women's existence. Since those jobs that bring women social exposure are usually the ones where sexual harassment is most frequent and dangerous, women are expected to either stay homebound or take up only those kinds of jobs where their interaction with the male world is minimal. Barring a microscopic section among the educated elite in metropolitan cities, the social status of the working woman is in many ways much lower than that of a homebound woman.

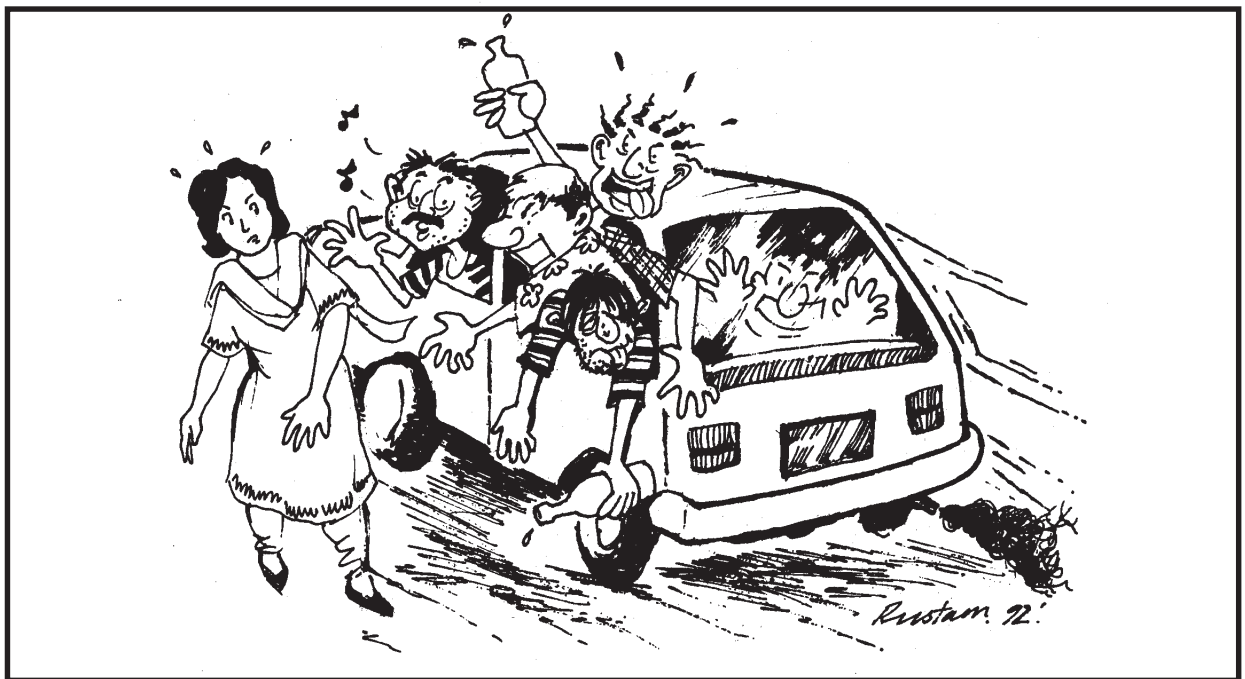
It Ghettoises Women

This is one of the reasons middle class women constitute such a small percentage of the professional or organised labour force in India. This is also how middle class women get ghettoised into certain low paying, high drudgery jobs with negligible upward mobility such as school teaching. Even when they open businesses they must choose businesses in which they deal primarily with other women such as running beauty parlours, or garment boutiques for women. Otherwise they must choose to be home based workers, give private tuitions to children, knit and sew for other women. Thus the few women who do manage to be allowed to seek work outside their homes have to severely restrict their choices and access to skills and work. In addition they must be willing to give up jobs as soon as their husband or other family members find their attendance at their jobs inconvenient or objectionable.

An important reason why few girls are allowed to be educated in India is due to the fear parents have that their daughters will be sexually harassed if the school is situated far away from their village. Even those few who get

educated are allowed to do so only within narrow confines. If higher education demands letting a daughter study in a co-educational institution, live away from home, or even travel long distances, many parents would rather discontinue her studies.

Normally it is assumed that women coming to study in co-educational institutions are likely to enjoy a freer atmosphere and be more "liberated". In actual fact it often works to the detriment of women students. As someone who studied in an all women college, I found that we could be more relaxed and free within our college. We did not feel inhibited about how we dressed or looked. Women students freely sat and lounged around on the lawns, talked and laughed without a feeling of being constantly "watched" and observed by leering men. Similarly, in the class room, we were relatively far less inhibited in discussing or asking questions. In contrast my experience of teaching in a co-ed college tells me that women students tend to lead a ghettoised existence. They behave as though they are being forever "observed" and most of them are afraid to draw any attention. Very few dare to



intermix freely with male students for fear of inviting rowdy behaviour or even flirtatious attention. Very often male students bully them into accepting dates and will not hesitate to blackmail them with threats of violence if they turn down their advances. Sometimes this can take fatal forms as, for instance, it did for a young girl from Bombay who was doused with acid and set on fire by a young man who felt snubbed because she refused to have an affair with him. On the other hand, being seen openly dating with this or that boy could equally well invite the wrath of her family and ruin her marriage chances because she would be then suspected of being a "loose" woman.

While the college compound may offer some degree of security, the streets on the campus are truly menacing for women. A woman walking down a campus street is in perpetual fear of being hit, pawed or molested and subjected to obscene vulgar comments. No wonder then that a large number of parents prefer sending their daughters to off-campus all women's colleges even though that does not take care of the sexual harassment suffered by women in public buses. Many a parent tries to take care of that by insisting that their daughter study through a correspondence course.

Hardly any women students will stay back to participate in any activity on the campus, however important, if it requires their missing the "University Special bus" and having to take a regular bus. The harassment in the latter case is far more severe than in the Univ Specials even though a lot of mishaps occur fairly regularly even in those specials. During exams very few women students, even those living in campus hostels, will be found using the library in the evening because it would involve a "risky" walk back to the hostel or bus stop. Thus women students lead a very marginalised existence in the social, cultural and political life of our universities. The threat of sexual harassment and violence is acting as a

very major hurdle in the way of women acquiring education and skills that can equip them for an independent life.

Politically Peripheralised

Prejudice against middle and upper class women seeking employment outside the home, especially in secure government jobs or public undertakings, has been breaking down slowly over the last few decades, especially in big cities. However, the prejudice against women engaging in politics on their own is still very strong. It seems that a much larger number of women participated in political movements during the Mahatma Gandhi led freedom struggle than today. The fear of sexual abuse, harassment and slander has only increased with time as politics seems to have been taken over more and more by *goondas* and hoodlums. An unprotected woman feels unsafe in virtually any and every political party today. That's what partially explains why the few women who are active in politics today or have been elected to state assemblies and Parliament are mostly wives, daughters or sisters of powerful politicians, and thus have some protection when they need to deal directly with men.

Unlike in jobs where sexual harassment occurs because a woman has to work as a subordinate of men, in the realm of politics the mere entry of women excites hostility from men who will unleash slander campaigns against the woman who dares enter unaccompanied by a husband or father. A woman in politics is the easiest target because politics necessitates a great deal of public contact. A woman entering politics, therefore, cannot escape slander no matter at what level from the *gram panchayat* and *zilla parishad* to state assemblies or Parliament or, for that matter, in student unions or trade unions.

My own experience as a student of Delhi University is a fairly typical one and helps demonstrate the process through which men manage to keep women politically peripheral and,

therefore, powerless in society.

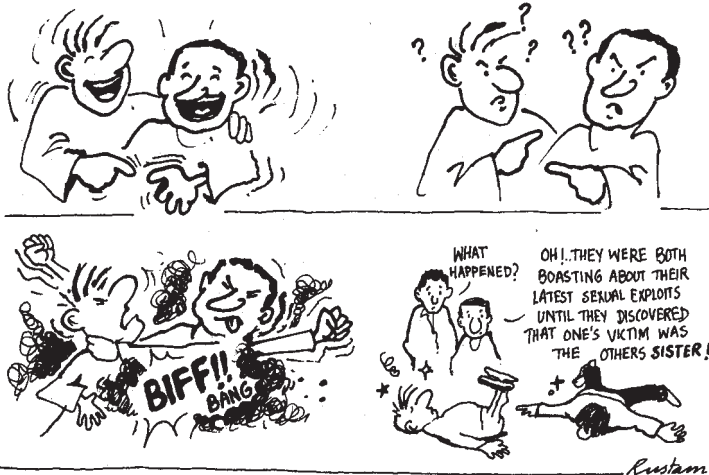
In the early 1970s Miranda House Student's Union was the first women's union to get affiliated to Delhi University Student's Union (DUSU). The reason some of us initiated this move was to try and loosen the hold of hoodlum male politicians over the affairs of the University. They could not formally oppose the move but they tried various methods to intimidate women representatives from attending the crucial meetings where important decisions would be taken. Their style of operation was such that it made it virtually impossible for young women to participate in campus politics without seriously jeopardising their safety and reputation. For example, most important meetings would be held during late night sessions, with liquor flowing freely and the threat of intergang violence forever looming large. If we women representatives kept away from these meetings then the very purpose of our joining DUSU was nullified. On the other hand if we dared attend those meetings then all manner of scandalous rumours would be let loose about us. Very often the male leaders would themselves warn us that we better stay away from certain meetings to ensure our own safety, especially the late night ones. The reputation of the DUSU office was such that a woman seen entering that building late at night or even in the evening hours would be automatically viewed as a prostitute or a call girl. And that's precisely the kind of rumours they would spread about us if we dared be present at their really important meetings. The reason for keeping women out was obvious: they could not make their shady deals which included wining, bribing and womanising in our presence. We inhibited those transactions by our mere presence and hence we were not allowed to have more than a token presence. Most of my fellow women students refrained from those meetings because of the risks it involved. I was one of the few women who persisted,

though I couldn't make too much of a dent in their political culture because there weren't enough of us to make a difference. I could afford to take the risks involved especially their slanderous talk, because I was confident of being able to handle my family. But most women are frightened of their family disapproval. Even a whiff of slanderous talk associated with their name can ruin their lives.

That this problem persists even at the higher echelons of political life came out clearly in a recent interview with Sarojatai Kashikar, the Shetkari Sangathana MLA from Maharashtra. Explaining why women can't act effectively in politics, she described how she herself never dares sit down in the Mantralaya canteen even for a cup of tea with male politicians (except the three or four who are close to her husband and family on account of their Sangathana connection) because it could easily lend itself to scandalous talk. Thus women politicians are unable to keep themselves well informed because of the restrictions on their social interaction. Sexual slander is such a powerful weapon that even an ordinary nobody can end up harming even a powerful woman in serious ways. Mahasati Sita was after all discarded by Ram at the instigation of a *dhobi* casting aspersions on her sexual fidelity!

This is one aspect of our culture which has a very pernicious anti-woman bias. The revelations in the Anita Hill hearing in the US show how a woman could end up living a traumatised and scarred existence even in a culture where remarriage, multiple affairs, even certain types of extra marital sex are socially tolerated to a large extent. Imagine the consequences to a

HILARIOUS HYPOCRITES



woman in our culture, where even divorcees and widows are treated as "soiled" goods, where remarriage of even a young divorced woman is a difficult proposition in many communities because she is stigmatised as a used and discarded woman. In such a situation, most women cannot afford to carry the stigma of being (even wrongly) suspected of sexual affairs outside marriage because the punishment can go far beyond mere social disapproval. It can take deadly forms such as murder or can end up with the woman being discarded by her husband and family, being socially shunned and put into the category of the "disreputable" woman, the ostracised prostitute.

The categorisation of women into two mutually exclusive categories, the *izzatdar bahu beti samaj* and the so called *patita samaj* acts as one of the biggest factors for women accepting extremely circumscribed lives of crippling restrictions. The mere threat of being pushed into the second category through sexual slander, even when it is baseless, can jeopardise the very survival of a woman. The fear of punishment for even unwittingly crossing *lakshman rekhas* that most women have to deal with make it virtually impossible for them to openly and boldly seek redressal for sexual

wrongs committed against them. This is one of the special features of women's oppression. We have been trained to consider such abuse "unspeakable." The manner in which we are socially criticised for speaking against sexual abuse ensures our silence much better than any external censorship or bans on freedom of speech. To put up with indignity and act as if nothing has happened has been socially

defined as the most dignified course for a woman to adopt. Any attempt at making a public issue of it is seen as proof of having invited trouble through some fault of our own.

The point when the censorship imposed by the family and the society becomes the woman's internal self censorship is the point of her final silencing. Unless women can struggle successfully against bans imposed on their speaking against abuse that affects them most intimately, they are unlikely to have their voices heard on other important social and political matters, or for that matter to act as full members of society. They will remain socially and politically marginalised, thus facilitating their continuing subjugation.

Why She Succumbs Easily

One of the reasons why women find it difficult to effectively resist sexual harassment and abuse is that in the existing state of male-female power relations women do not receive very respectful kinds of sexual attention from men even within 'normal' family and other relations. They are used to being manipulated and having men take decisions on their behalf, as well as trained to accept sexually passive roles. With such a conditioning they often mistake sexual advances as a sign of genuine interest or attraction on the part of the man and often succumb to it in

part or full, especially during the early stages of what may appear as a harmless flirtation. If, in addition, the man is in a position of power and influence, the idea of being sexually wooed by such a man may even be gratifying to a woman's ego, even if it is a blatantly manipulative relationship. It may also appear attractive because of the potential enhancement in career prospects. Thus it may well happen that the attention which may initially appear flattering begins to assume threatening dimensions only when a woman discovers that she is unable to draw a line of thus far, and no more, and becomes a hapless object (whose futile objections are ignored) rather than a consenting beneficiary of a certain give and take process. It is in situations like this, when it's hard to tell where consent ends and harassment begins, that women have the least chance of being taken seriously, and later attempts at protest often boomerang on the woman.

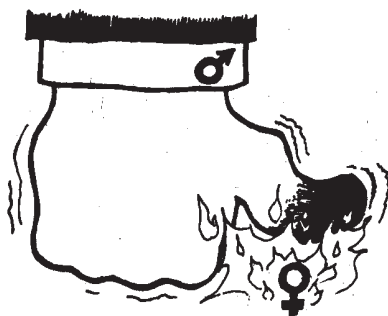
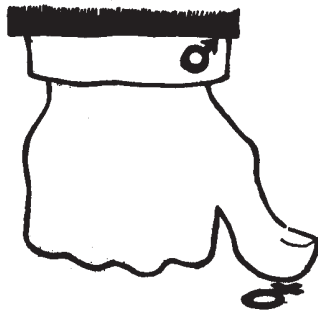
Steps Towards Protection

Yet the battle against sexual harassment and slander will have to be a central one if women want to effect meaningful changes in their currently powerless and vulnerable position.

If we had a functioning judicial system, I would have begun by emphasising the need to make and enforce laws which stipulate heavy fines and damages for men who indulge in sexual abuse and harassment. But knowing full well that our judicial system is a near total disaster and is not likely to undergo major changes in the near future, we need to create other channels for redressal.

* The first step in this direction is to recognise that living confined lives at home does not offer any real protection to women. It only enhances our vulnerability. Like Sita we may spend a lifetime zealously guarding our chastity, but Ravans are lurking even within our homes, and the Rams of this world have never had any compunctions about discarding their Sitas even when baseless accusations

are made. In fact, the solution lies in the opposite direction. The larger the number of women entering the public realm the safer each woman is likely to be, just as currently our presence in small insignificant numbers renders the few who venture out far more vulnerable. If we enter the public realm in respected positions we are less likely to be treated shabbily than if we enter trying to fit into the glamour doll roles in the job market which seem to attract



large numbers of women from western educated elite families. A woman personal secretary or an air-hostess, for instance, is more likely to get sexually harassed than a woman doctor or a bank officer. Yet large numbers of women from elite families tend to gravitate towards glamorous but vulnerable jobs. This despite the fact that they have the option to qualify for and get less glamorous but more remunerative and respected career jobs.

* A woman who has an independent source of income, assets and resources is less likely to experience or need to succumb to sexual manipulation than if she lives a life of dependence.

* It is equally important to try

and break out of the demeaning behaviour patterns men have taught us to adopt for seeking advancement. We would do well to recognise that flirting with those on whom you are dependent can land you into real trouble. Even at the risk of sounding prudish, I'd say that in the present situation of gross imbalance in male-female power relations, flirtation, especially with men in authority, is too dangerous a game for women to play. It may become harmless in a more egalitarian society but in today's context failing to practice the required art of saying 'No' at the right moment only conditions women into accepting the role of playthings.

* It is important to recognise that this is one battle in which we can expect very little support from men. They have a tendency to protect each other unless, of course, they have some other score to settle against someone, in which case the whole issue gets politicised between two rival gangs of men in such a way that the wronged woman becomes a mere instrument for men's political ends.

* Women, unfortunately, make it easy for men to get away with exploiting them because they seldom rise to defend each other in this type of situation as men so spontaneously tend to do. In fact, in most of such situations women tend to remain hopelessly divided against each other, each one trying to safeguard just her own interest. It is time we understood that women's safety is indivisible. None of us is truly safe till each one of us is safe. The most powerful of male protectors cannot provide us the safety that a socially safe environment can do.

* We have to fight to make the workplace safe for women by stipulating a code of conduct which is enforceable even more stringently than service rules. We have to demand a permanent machinery at every level of employment to handle women's grievances and complaints of sexual harassment, one which has well defined rules and obligations about seeing every

complaint through within a specified period of time. For this women have to learn to take an active interest in the politics of their respective workplaces so as to have a say in their many important decision making processes as well as in the functioning of the grievance machinery.

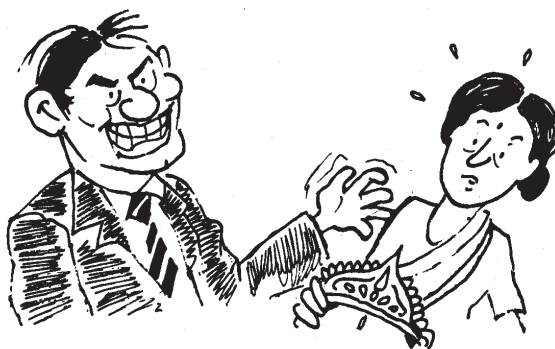
* Men will not feel as bold as they presently do in their misbehaviour if such acts are routinely made public. Even if the man can't be punished through the legal machinery, public exposure and building social opinion against men who abuse their positions of power is bound to act as some kind of check and balance. However, such exposures can go against the interests of the victimised woman herself unless every work place has women's support groups who protect the woman from further harassment and slander and raise public awareness to ensure that men who harass and abuse women are socially despised and ostracised. If men cannot feel "manly" in sexually abusing women, they are less likely to try and do so. However, these collective efforts are likely to take a long time in materialising. In the meantime each one of us has to learn to protect herself in the best possible ways that we can individually devise.

Playing Durga Helps

I will end by sharing with you a strategy which I find has been usefully employed by many women who have learnt to deal effectively with men. However, I do not claim universal application or a uniform success rate for this strategy.

One of the characteristic features of our culture is that men in India are habituated to fearing and respecting strong female figures. The very same man who thinks nothing of beating

his wife or daughter has no psychological barrier to bowing in reverence and fear before a *chandi* or a *durga*. Our culture worships two kinds of goddesses. The benign consort goddesses like Parvati, Sita, Lakshmi are revered but not feared. The other kind of goddesses are far more numerous and culturally more powerful. Each region, often each village in India, worships its own local version of the *Chandi/Durga* type of deity. Such goddesses have some common features. Frequently, the



story of their origin is derived from that of a woman who transformed herself into a ferocious being in order to defend herself from being wronged by some man or the other. The all pervasive religious folklore has thus made available to the women of India certain powerful forms of social protest and redressal not available to women in many other cultures. This includes the socially and culturally sanctioned right to assume the *Durga/Chandi roop* to defend herself against wrong. I have found that men in India are conditioned to accept and fear this aspect of women. This is not true for

cultures with less varied patriarchal religious traditions in which God and other authority figures are invariably male. If men are aware that a woman is capable of rising to her defence, with ferocity if necessary, they are less likely to attempt to harass or abuse her than if they know her to be trapped into wanting to fit into the female stereotype of the helpless creature and sex object that suits men's requirements. The reputation of being upright and ferocious may invite ridicule or hostility in many cultures where women have been more successfully manipulated into playing the decorative sex object role with pride. But in India such ferocity brings an unusual kind of respect and saves a woman from many a potentially exploitative situation. However, we have to remember that becoming *Durga* can be very self destructive if we don't regulate our anger and keep it under control. If turned inwards it can harm us both physically and emotionally as well as destroy our ability to receive and give affection without fear. And once that happens, then we are defeated anyway.

In short, the simplest way to render men powerless is to stop fearing them – without at the same time hating them. We are lucky that men in India have the good sense to fear women who are not afraid of them.

However, it is not enough that some women manage to keep men at bay by provoking in them a fear of a woman's wrath. Ultimately our aim has to be to create a society in which no man can abuse or exploit a woman with impunity, to build new social norms whereby it is considered despicable rather than admirable for men, especially those in positions of authority, to use sexual aggression as an instrument of abusing and exploiting women. □