



Supporting Maltreated Women

Report from Bombay Women's Centre

demanding that the wife stop working. In at least 24 cases (out of the 74) the in-laws were central to the harassment of married women. The extended family is the norm in Bombay, but the ethos of the joint family still prevails among most sections of the population.

Blatterers and Victims

The 15 cases included under beatings by husbands were not the only cases where wives were being beaten up. These include just those cases where beating by the husband was mentioned as a major problem.

Most of the husbands whose wives were being beaten up regularly also did not support them financially. Only two out of the 15 husbands were unemployed. Out of the 13 employed ones, only two earned less than Rs 1,000. One of the husbands reported an income of Rs 25,000 per month. (As a marine engineer with some service behind him, he would actually have been earning double that amount). Of the wives, nine were working women and five were unemployed. The highest earner among them received Rs 1,500 per month. Nine out of the 15 wives mentioned the husband's drinking as a serious problem and connected it to the beatings.

Six wives complained of other forms of harassment by their husbands. One of the husbands, a factory worker earning Rs 2,500 per month, actually managed to get the collaboration of a doctor to certify that his wife, working in an office and earning Rs 800 a month, was insane.

He also mobilised the police to help him to take his wife to a mental hospital in Thane for admission and treatment. Fortunately, the hospital certified that she was absolutely normal and refused to admit her. We have observed several cases of married women who are taken to a doctor under some ruse to get them on tranquilisers or sedatives. The husband and in-laws later argue that the woman has pathological depressions and has been treated. This may also be a prelude to murdering her and claiming that it was suicide. One unemployed husband's method of making his wife feel bad was by beating their children up. Another unemployed husband with a wife who was struggling to support the family slept all day and abused his family all night to keep them awake. A lecturer husband earning Rs 5,000 a month harassed his wife, who is also a lecturer in the same subject, because he does not 'really' want her to work. It seems to make no difference to husbands whether their wives are working or not. There is harassment in either case. However, it does make a lot of difference to the woman, when she arrives at a decision to live on her own.

One case which we judged to be a bogus one is worth mentioning in order to illustrate the way in which the Women's Centre deals with support work. The husband and wife approached the Centre together for help to register a case against the husband's mother under Section 498

Between April 1990 and April 1991, 102 new women came to the Women's Centre for help and support. Most of them were facing harassment within the family—either the marital or the parental family.

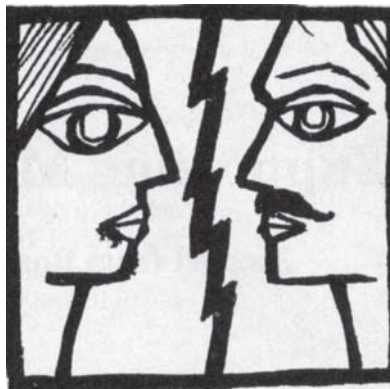
The majority (74 out of the 102) were married women who were being abused by either their husbands and/or in-laws. The most frequent abuse was beatings, which were at times brutal. But this was by no means the only way in which these women suffered. Other 'creative' ways that husbands and in-laws victimised wives including trying to incarcerate a normal wife in an asylum for the insane, threatening to kill the wife if she did not conveniently vanish from the husband's life, restricting her mobility to the extent of assaulting her if she looked out of the window, bigamy and extra-marital affairs, non-support, starving the wife, throwing the wife out of the marital home while refusing to part with her jewellery and other belongings, demanding that the wife hand over her total earnings, and

A for harassment. The wife is a doctor and medical adviser to a company and the husband is an engineer. Each earns about Rs 6,000 a month. They approached the Centre together and seemed to be on excellent terms with each other. They lived with the husband's mother in a flat which belonged to her. In most cases, the widowed mother usually derives her power to harass the daughter-in-law from the son. It seemed surprising that, in this case, a son who was so supportive of his wife was so powerless against his mother. Finally, it turned out that the couple feared that the mother would leave the flat to all her children, including her married daughters. They felt that the flat should be left to the son only. And for this, the engineer son was willing to get his widowed mother arrested! They lacked the confidence to go ahead by themselves and wanted to be justified by a social action group. This is the only case the Centre has come across where a husband and wife conspired to take advantage of Sec. 498A. They were strongly advised to look for another dwelling place since both earned good salaries, and not to think of harassing their mother.

Thrown out of Marital Home

Out of the 12 married women who had been thrown out of the house, half (six) had been married for only a short time—one and a half years or less. Seven of them had no children. Only three out of these 12 women mentioned that there were any demands for dowry, but 10 of them said that there was harassment by members of the husband's family. The picture that emerges is one of young married women staying with their in-laws, including unmarried or married sisters-in-law, being treated as an outsider, harassed and thrown out of the house. Most of them took shelter with their parents or some member of the parental family. Only three of them had an independent income.

Unemployed, usually unskilled, though with some school education, and shelterless, these lower middle class women are entirely at the mercy of their parental family's concern for them. They feel deeply fearful about their situation. Employment could be of help in enabling them to regain their confidence and to improve their position in their families.



Abandoned and Deserted

The issue of desertion of wives in the rural areas of Maharashtra and Gujarat has been raised prominently in recent times. Several rallies attended by hundreds of women have been held

to highlight the demands of deserted women. But surprisingly, only nine women came to the Women's Centre during the year because of desertion, strictly speaking. Perhaps this apparent discrepancy is because of the way in which the Women's Centre uses the word desertion. It may be that the movement in the rural areas has tended to include in desertion all harassment of married women except dowry-deaths, or there may be a reluctance to highlight issues other than desertion. The end result—the husband deserting the wife or the husband driving her out by physical and mental harassment—may be the same for the wife. Also, the legal meaning of the term desertion could be construed as non-fulfillment of marital duties which include non-support and throwing the wife out of the house. There is no doubt that a large number of wives are abandoned in the rural areas of Gujarat and Maharashtra. But are they thrown out of the house? Is bigamy involved in this phenomenon? Using the word desertion for all this seems to make the experience of women more

Principal problem for each of the women served by the Women's Centre, Bombay during the period April 1990 through April 1991

1) Beatings by Husband	- 15
2) Other harassment by husband	- 6
3) Thrown out of the marital home	- 12
4) Desertion by husband	- 9
5) Extra-marital affair of husband	- 6
6) Bigamy	- 10
7) Harassment by husband and in-laws	- 12
8) Dowry harassment	- 3
9) Sexual harassment	- 2
10) Single women being harassed by family	- 3
11) Authoritarianism of parents and guardians	- 3
12) Services (Jobs, Shelter, Scholarships etc.)	- 16
13) Miscellaneous	- 5

Total

- 102

opaque. Perhaps using this word creates a more acceptable image. We have used the word desertion for instances where the husband has simply abandoned the wife and mostly just vanished.

Out of the nine deserted women, six were jobless and had no means of earning anything. One was a vegetable vendor and another a domestic servant. Two of the nine were urgently in need of shelter but the others had managed to find refuge with family members or friends. One woman was in such deep depression that she hardly talked and did not even have regular baths or help her sister-in-law who was sympathetic and had sheltered her and her three children. Out of the nine husbands, five were unemployed and so were their wives. This might have been a major reason for desertion in these cases. Two others were 'Dubai' husbands.

Bigamy, Extra-marital Affairs

This year, 10 women came to the Women's Centre because of their husband's bigamy and six because of the husband's extramarital affairs which resulted in harassment to the wives.

These bigamy cases are also in a way cases of desertion or of the wife being thrown out of the marital home. In most of these cases the financial situation of the wife and children deteriorates considerably, though not that of the husband. Anjali, who has a seven year old son, lives with her parents now. Her husband lives with another woman. She studied only up to the fourth standard and now earns Rs 200 a month as a domestic servant. Her husband, who studied only up to the fifth standard, is a worker in a well-known food-processing company and earns Rs 2,000 a month. He gives nothing to his wife and son. Alpana's husband is a worker in a fertiliser factory and earns Rs 2,000 a month.

After marriage, Alpana found that she was actually her husband's second wife and that the first wife had run away from him. Now he lives with a third woman. Alpana is 29 years old and the husband is 50. He does not give her any financial help. She and



her son live with her parents, though the parents have expressed their reluctance to keep her. Elizabeth is 55 years old and her husband is 65. He now lives with a 21 year old woman. Though he earns Rs 10,000 a month and she has no regular income, Elizabeth's husband gives her no financial support. There is apparently little that she seems able to do in this situation.

Most of the bigamy cases that come to the Centre are among Hindus and the man may just exchange garlands in some temple with the 'second wife'. (Out of 14, 10 were Hindus, two were Christians, one was Muslim and one an intercommunity marriage). Proof of second marriage is hard to obtain for criminal proceedings and strict proof is required by the courts. Frequently, the first wife cannot even prove her own marriage as all that she has in hand by way of evidence may be a wedding invitation. This is good enough for a maintenance order, but not for criminal proceedings. If she manages to get a

maintenance order, most husbands refuse to pay up and she has to keep mobilising the court again and again to collect the maintenance owed to her.

Still, it is striking that only one woman among the 13 wanted to get a divorce. So attached are women to the status of being the 'real' legal wife. One girl who was badly cheated by her husband, whose family took a dowry of Rs 50,000, was not at all offended when her father (during discussions at the Centre) suggested the murder of the 'the other woman' as a possibility. The Centre people found even the suggestion shocking, but the victim herself felt that she was the lawful wife since hers was the public marriage, and that she was the real victim; getting rid of the other woman, she thought, would solve all her problems quite neatly. At the Centre, we too live and learn! The girl and her father both ruled out the possibility of her returning to her father's house. They said that they came from 'Nawabganj' in U.P., and that if she returned there, the only possibilities for her would be either kerosene or a well. She was able to see only two alternatives—either her own suicide or the other woman's death. However, she finally said that she would continue to stay with her in-laws and do some skill-training course.

The saddest part about this girl's life was that, as her marriage was taking place, her father received a telegram informing him that the boy was already married. He did nothing and kept the telegram to himself. The telegram seems to have stated the truth and the man seems to have married 'the other woman' earlier without his parents' permission. He then allowed himself to be pressurised into the second marriage with Kalpana and also proceeded to produce a child

by his first wife. All of which makes his marriage with Kalpana invalid. So even her much valued legal position as wife was not what it seemed. Her father could have refused to send his daughter with this man when he received the telegram. Kalpana and her husband's first wife were both cheated and exploited by the man, the in-laws, and even by Kalpana's father. Yet, our social and family structure is such that the two women will see each other as their main enemies.

Problems of Shelter

One of the major difficulties for many of these women has been finding a place to live, especially for women with children. There are pitifully few places offering even short term shelter for married women who have to leave their marital home. The inadequate living conditions and the constant anxiety about shifting to another place put women who go to shelters under so much stress that they do not get enough time to recover from the crisis that they have undergone just before leaving the marital home. There are quite a few hostels for working women in Bombay, but they do not take in working women with children. Generally, women want to take their children along with them while leaving their matrimonial homes. And one of the major reasons for women putting up with harassment by husbands and in-laws is the lack of adequate shelter. Because of these problems, when women desperately need short term shelter, Centre full timers or volunteers end up taking them home. When that is not possible, they are referred to one of the existing shelter homes.

Last year, a sympathiser of the Centre offered us a one room-kitchen tenement on low rent for 11 months. We decided to run an emergency shelter there for one year on an experimental basis to learn more about the problems and difficulties involved. We hired the place from

June 1990 through April 1991. From the beginning, however, we were faced with a problem about finding a person to stay there and 'run' it. We were not in a position to ensure job continuity at the end of the year. We had not raised finances for running a shelter on a long term basis since we were unsure of the problems involved. We compromised by offering the shelter to women who had earlier come to the Centre for help and who were in need of a place to stay. As they had



been attending the Centre get-togethers for quite some time, they were expected to be able to manage things in the 'Women Centre spirit'. One of the women was given a part time salary to take care of the place and of the women who came for shelter, but she was also holding a job in a nearby company. This left the women who took shelter by themselves during much of the day; not too desirable a situation even for a non-hierarchical shelter. The two women who were in charge themselves came from different socio-economic backgrounds—one was from the middle class and wanted some privacy, while the other was from a lower middle class, joint family background and resented any emphasis on privacy. Despite counselling and discussion sessions with the Centre group throughout,

these differences caused tensions. There were both encouraging as well as unpleasant experiences. Strict rules and regulations were not laid down. Rather, we expected to gain some idea of how women living in the shelter home could themselves feel responsible for it and formulate and implement rules and regulations. The women who come for shelter are used to authoritarianism or charity all their lives, not to autonomy and taking responsibility for themselves. This of course causes problems. The person in charge of such a shelter must be very mature, both firm and humanistic. The place was a one room tenement and it was really overcrowded at times. There are also problems in being situated within a *chawl* system, the neighbors' unfamiliarity with such things as a shelter of this type. They were curious about the past of women living without men to vouch for them. Despite all the problems and differences, mostly the women shared their joys and experiences and in times of need extended mutual support. Towards the end of the 11 month period, all the women came together to support a young woman who had left the house of her cousin, her nearest living relative, after verbal and physical assault by him. She had fallen in love with a young man from a different caste and they did not have a place to stay after marriage. One of the women from the shelter convinced the prospective father-in-law that he should accept this girl who had given up everything for the love of his only son, conduct the marriage and take them into his house. The girl's family was represented at the marriage by women from the Centre and the shelter and it was a joyous occasion for all.

After the 11 months were over, the Centre wound up the shelter, but we do have clearer ideas of how to run one and hope to do it on a more systematic basis. □