

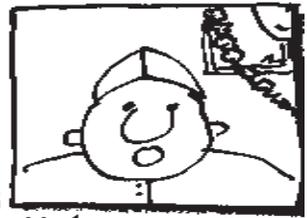
Women have been planting it ...



weeding it ....



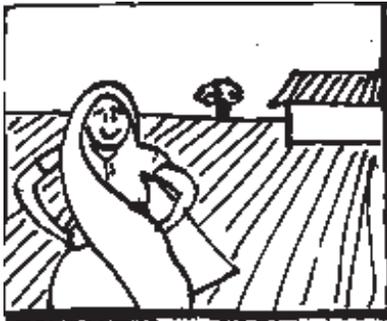
...Harvesting it..



Not content with that ...

## Towards More Just Norms for Marriage: Continuing the Dowry Debate

Madhu Kishwar



They also want to inherit it ?!

My article "Rethinking Dowry Boycott" in **Manushi** No. 48, 1988, provoked a diversity of responses. A few of them seem to be based on a misunderstanding of what I wrote. Most of the confused responses were not sent to **Manushi** but to other newspapers and journals, where they were published and generated a rather ill-defined controversy. Several of the writers seemed not to be regular readers of **Manushi**, as they reacted to the article in isolation rather than in the context of **Manushi's** 10 year long engagement with this and related questions, and many earlier writings in **Manushi** on these issues. **Manushi**, I feel, is the most appropriate forum for the continuation of the debate sparked off by the article, hence the present attempt at laying out its implications more systematically .

Many of those responding to the article simply reduced the issue to one of being "pro-dowry" or "anti-dowry" and labelled me and **Manushi** as having turned "pro-dowry." This is a major distortion of what I wrote. To say that the anti-dowry campaign (of which **Manushi** has been an active

participant) has been faulty and ineffective and needs to be rethought is not at all to say that our dowry systems are justifiable. My article, as its title indicated, was not an evaluation of dowry practices, but of our strategies thus far of combating it, primarily of the call to boycott dowry weddings, given by **Manushi** in 1980 (see No. 5, 1980)

**Manushi** has always tried to encourage reflective and self critical accounts of various campaigns by the activists involved in them. We have tried to avoid passing editorial judgement of campaigns of which we have no firsthand experience. Instead, we try to get activists of the campaign to write about it, or to talk to us on tape about their experience of organising in all its complexity - the successes, the setbacks, the changes in approach, and the insights that, hopefully, develop with looking back on one's experience and reevaluating it. This kind of reflective writing by participants is, we feel, essential to the growth of any movement. It is through such sharing that others can learn and can, in turn, be stimulated to

think and rethink strategies for change in our very complex social fabric.

In the case of the anti-dowry campaign, we can speak from firsthand experience. **Manushi** was among the organisers of one of the first demonstrations in Model Town, Delhi, against a family whose daughter-in-law had been murdered following maltreatment accompanied by dowry demands (see **Manushi** No. 3, 1979), **Manushi** continued to be consistently active on the issue over the next decade at various levels - organising and participating in protest demonstrations, issuing a call for dowry wedding boycott, offering legal and other aid to victims of marital violence, and conducting research studies of dowry practices in different communities. Hence, my critique of the campaign's strategies was in the nature of self criticism which I felt was worth sharing with readers of **Manushi**.

My experience was that my boycotting dowry weddings did not bring about any change in dowry practices in my social circle. More important, by talking to and listening to numerous women, I found that women did not think that merely getting married without dowry, all else remaining the same, would alter their powerless position for the better. In the absence of any better option, many women I spoke to even perceived dowry as being of some limited benefit to them, given their dependent situation, lack of fundamental rights, overall disinheritance and lack of control over assets. It was this multifaceted experience over the 1980s that compelled me to review the strategy of boycott, and to try and think of more effective ways of equipping women to refuse and to demand something better.

A more meaningful dialogue would have been possible if others had come



forward to state whether they actually had boycotted dowry marriages and to what effect. Personally, I know of hardly anyone who has systematically boycotted dowry marriages; therefore, I feel the debate is stunted, amounting merely to a criticism of my conclusions rather than a sharing of experience. The anti-dowry movement, like the government's Dowry Prohibition Act, has even failed to define dowry (as distinguished from gifts) and has been unable to implement its anti-dowry rhetoric on any significant scale. The generating of anti-dowry rhetoric on a large scale has merely led to a situation where any number of people profess to be against dowry yet continue to practise it.

Many readers have responded with thoughtful contributions, whether agreeing or disagreeing. Unfortunately, some others have reacted with thoughtless attacks, questioning our integrity and bonafides. These attacks are distressing because they seem designed to discourage reflection and instead to maintain a stagnant uniformity of underdeveloped opinion on major issues.

My questioning of the anti-dowry campaign was not a questioning of the premise that dowry in its present form operates against women's overall interests. This is an obvious fact, too widely acknowledged to need

labouring. In an earlier article, "Dowry - To Ensure Her Happiness or to Disinherit Her?" (**Manushi** No. 34, 1986), I had analysed how dowry operates as part of a system that disinherits women.

However, I felt that in simply repeating that dowry is bad and by merely asking people to stop giving and taking dowry, the anti-dowry campaign was not going far enough, hence its singular ineffectiveness. No one can deny that over the last decade, simultaneous with the growth of the anti-dowry campaign, dowry, far from decreasing, has actually increased and spread. A common reaction of people to this fact is that the anti-dowry campaign is ineffective because women are too backward to respond to it, and it is primarily because women lack courage to refuse dowry that it continues. It seems to me that such a response is uninformed and insensitive. It is no different from the government's response to the spread of waterborne diseases. With the onset of the monsoon, government begins to waste money on big hoardings and on radio and TV ads telling people not to consume dirty water and food. When people do not obey these warnings and fall sick, government attributes their sickness to people's folly and unhygienic habits, considering that it had done its duty by warning them. However, a casual glance at the conditions in which most people in city slums are forced to live reveals that they drink dirty water not because they are foolish but because no clean drinking water is available to them. The lack of a viable option impels them to appear to act against their own interests.

Similarly, if women have not, on any significant scale, heeded our call to boycott dowry, we are not therefore justified in concluding that this is because they suffer from "low consciousness" and all we are required

to do is shout louder for them to wake up and listen. Rather, we should examine what women's real options are, and what we can do to develop and enhance more viable options. At the moment, most women do not have the option to refuse dowry. The few who do refuse it do not bring about any change in the overall situation because dowry seeking grooms can easily find others willing to enter into a dowry marriage. The situation is analogous to that of bonded labour, where simply releasing bonded labourers without changing the overall situation of rural poverty and lack of credit for the poor, fails to improve the condition of the released labourers. They are forced to enter into bondage again in order to survive. Unfortunately, many more will be available to take their place should they refuse.

I am not advocating that we now give up in despair and accept dowry as an unchangeable fact. I am arguing that while dowry in its present form needs to be done away with, this cannot be done simply by telling women to say "no" to it. We have to work to enable women to exercise a genuine option, to say "no" to dowry but "yes" to something better. They have to be able to see a realistic possibility of improving their lives by refusing dowry and making other positive choices. If they merely refuse dowry but have to marry under the present conditions which force on them a dependent and exploited position in the family, very few will see any point in refusing dowry.

Dowry in its present form in India I consider pernicious - but not because there is anything inherently wrong in a woman's family giving her material assets at the time of her wedding. All other things being equal, the possession of assets should enable people to have greater control over their life. But in our social and familial structures today, the woman is not



perceived as an agent in control of her life and financial condition. This perception, in part, internalised by the woman herself, also changes the significance of the dowry. Dowry functions as part of a cultural system wherein the woman is a devalued object, a liability to be disposed of at a discount in the inter-family transaction that is marriage. Since she is divested of intrinsic value, everything associated with her also gets devalued. Her family, her friends, her education, her employment, her personal qualities - all are downgraded and made pretexts to harass and taunt her. Numerous cases dealt with by us testify to the fact that marital violence frequently occurs for reasons or on pretexts completely unrelated to dowry.

Dowry in its present form is pernicious not only because it serves as one handle among many to harass the bride. More important, it provides a socially acceptable way for many parents to abandon the woman to the mercies of her husband and in-laws. Her parents convince themselves that they have done their duty by paying a dowry, and their daughter has no rightful claim on them. The daughter too is trained to acquiesce in this belief. Letters from numerous maltreated daughters to their fathers are eloquent testimony to the fact that a woman who seeks to be received back into her

natal home after her marriage, feels she is begging a favour rather than claiming a right.

Dowry thus ends up as a way to disinherit the daughter, not just materially but morally. Since dowry is perceived by most people as the daughter's share in parental property, she is in the position of a child who has taken its share and become severed from the parental home. This is one reason for the anxiety of many parents to pay a dowry at all costs, so that they can claim to have shed all responsibility for the daughter. But the catch is that the daughter (unlike a man who may take his share of the property before his parent's death) usually has little or no control over the dowry, and even if she has some control over it, it usually consists of consumer items which cannot generate an income. So dowry actually functions as one of the devices that prevent her from establishing an independent existence apart from being the wife of one man and the daughter-in-law of another.

It was as part of a strategy to combat this culture of women being allowed to survive only on the sufferance of husband and in-laws that I had suggested a shift in focus of the anti-dowry campaign to the demand for inheritance rights. It is significant that historically, any attempt to ensure women's inheritance rights has been violently opposed by women's fathers and brother (the supposed victims of the dowry system). For instance, a perusal of the parliamentary debates in the years preceding the passing of the Hindu succession Act, 1956, is very instructive in this regard. Men were united across party lines in opposing equal inheritance rights for women on the ground that it would create discord between brothers and sisters. In other words they virtually admitted that a key element in the asserted harmony

between brothers and sisters is the disinheritance of the women. While some brothers accept their obligation to give dowry, few are willing to concede inheritance rights to women. This is evident in the near universal flouting of the Act today. Overall, despite their lamentations over having to give dowry, most fathers and brothers would much rather give dowry than inheritance rights.

It is not enough to say, as many of those reacting to my suggestion have said, that inheritance rights for women were always on their agenda. There has been no concrete plans to make it a reality. It has been given much less

attention than the anti dowry campaign. I suggested that any will or document, such as a gift deed disinheriting a daughter in favour of a male heir, be treated as an invalid legal document, so that it would be impossible for parents to flout the equal inheritance law. This proposal goes against the current trend in development of laws governing property. I had expected it to be a controversial proposal and to arouse a debate. Instead, it has been completely ignored and all the debate has centred around my criticism of the dowry boycott strategy. The failure of most to notice and react to the

proposal on property rights which advocates a major change in property laws, shows how non-seriously we take the issue of inheritance for women. The tendency to blame the victims, women, for failing to refuse dowry, arises from a basic conceptual confusion in the anti-dowry campaign as to who are the main victims of dowry. As much or more sympathy is expended on the sufferings of the fathers and brothers of women as over the women's own sufferings. Most of the reactions to my article focused on the sufferings of brothers whose inheritance was frittered away on dowries for their sisters and on bizarre

## Is Dowry the Real Killer?

We made a count of all marital violence cases mentioned in **Manushi** from No.1, 1979, to No.50, 1989, in order to see what pattern of causality, if any, emerged. We included here only cases where physical violence was used against the woman by husband or in-laws. The cases are described in varying degrees of detail, from a paragraph to several pages, in the form of reports by activists, victims or their families, letters from readers, interviews, and interview or survey based articles. This is what the count showed.

A pattern we noticed in the reporting was that when the woman spoke or wrote about the violence she suffered, dowry was almost never mentioned as the sole cause and, further, that most of the reasons were, merely pretexts, the violence being actually irrational and causeless, merely an expression of power. When a third person who was not a continuous witness to the violence, such as the woman's parent, sibling, other relative, or an activist, reported the case, the description tended to be briefer and more unidimensional, and more frequently focused on dowry as the only or primary cause of violence.

This pattern is evident from the fact that in cases where the women had died, and had died, and had left no account of her suffering, about half the cases (reported by others) were ascribed simply to dowry (36 out of 79). But in cases of torture or attempted murder where the woman either reported herself or would have spoken to the person reporting, only 14.7 percent cases cited dowry as the sole cause, 13.2 percent cited other causes as primary while mentioning dowry, and 72 percent cited other causes, or none, not even mentioning dowry. It is noteworthy that the violence in these cases was not of a negligible kind, ranging from attacking with an axe to chopping of nose to repeated rape by father-in-law to severe battering and sadistic torture.

### Total number of marital violence cases reported = 147

Cases where dowry was cited as the primary cause of violence

36	10	46
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Cases where other causes (such as producing daughters, or husband's suspicion of wife or his intention of remarry) were cited as primary, but dowry also mentioned.

8	9	17
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Cases where other causes were cited, and dowry not mentioned, or no reason was cited.

35	49	84
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<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>147</b>
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stories such as the description of a father who had to sell a kidney to save for his infant daughter's dowry. If every family with daughters is seen as a victim of the dowry system, then who is really to blame?

Most families, even wife murderers' families, are at some time givers of dowry. To see all giver families as victims enables parents of girls to indulge in self pity and decry dowry when it is their turn to give, without having to acknowledge the benefits they derive when it is their turn to receive.

We must clearly distinguish between those who are the real gainers from the system and those who may get a few crumbs but overall remain the losers. Although, in individual cases, women's fathers do suffer hardships and losses, particularly if they happen not to have sons to compensate, on a societal level "fathers of women" cannot be identified as dowry victims. To identify them as the victims is to foster the dangerous conclusion that the girls themselves are to blame.

The dowry system on a societal level works to disinherit women while keeping wealth transfers between men. A man who gives dowry for his sister or daughter is likely to receive it for himself or his son. But the woman is never, in her own right, a receiver. As a bride or mother-in-law she may use some part of the dowry-usually clothes, jewels or household goods which do not alter her basic financial status, and hence she may perceive it as of some immediate benefit to herself. However, it does not function to enhance her status as it does that of the man who receives it because he is a man and as such, labelled a superior being who must be compensated for taking on the burden of a wife.

Unless we are clear about whose interests dowry serves, we cannot know whom we should primarily



address to eradicate it. Dowry is not a natural phenomenon like a disease which affects the whole population, and in whose eradication everyone has an equal interest. It is a societal phenomenon, from which one set of people -men- gain overall, while another set -women- lose overall, despite exceptions and apparent contradictions. But the anti-dowry campaign has not made this distinction clear. Its call to eradicate dowry as a "social evil" has been vaguely addressed to everybody, as if the whole population would immediately and equally benefit from the eradication.

Why is it that women, the chief victims of dowry and of disinheritance, do not demand implementation of the laws in these matters? One reason is that our legal system works in a way that it safeguards only those individuals who are in a position to claim their rights by fighting long, costly and often inconclusive battles. Women as individuals are rarely in a position to do this. The laws are not framed to ensure the rights of women as a group. The situation may be compared to that prevailing in regard to land reform legislation which is expected to be implemented wholesale wherein large groups of landless poor are expected to gain rights to land at one stroke, and assistance provided

to ensure that their entitlements are not snatched from them by the powerful.

Experience has shown that only a very few individual women are in a position to demand their property rights, and their own individual rights. In **Manushi** no. 30,1985, we had written about Lata Mittal, who challenged the Hindu Succession Act to demand her share in her father's ancestral home, but even now the case has not been decided and the woman, buried in oblivion, continues to fight a lone battle. Maki Bui, the old tribal woman who filed a petition in the supreme court along with **Manushi** in 1982 for the right to inherit the land of her husband and pass it on to her daughter, has faced great harassment and risks to her life in her village, and probably will not live to see the judgement and its effects, if any. Even when a favourable judgement is delivered, as in the Mary Roy case, very few women of the community benefit and come forward to demand their rights. Thus, most individual battles have led to demoralisation for the individual woman and little societal change.

If any document that disinherited daughters was automatically invalidated, all daughters would find themselves equal inheritors, without having to enter into legal disputes to protect their rights. If a parent makes a will leaving all the property to male heirs alone, then the legal machinery which executes the transfer of property will be obliged to include the names of the daughters as well, as equal sharers. Dowry would probably suffer a severe blow since fathers and brothers who knew the daughter was bound to get an equal share in all assets would hesitate to give a dowry in addition.

As far as the dowry wedding boycott is concerned, my rethinking regarding it does not mean that I will now start attending dowry weddings. I still do not attend them. However, in

agitational terms, I no longer would focus on the kind of wedding I would boycott, because I found this an inadequate strategy for change. Instead of focusing all our energies on dowryless marriages, I would like to focus on evolving new bases for marriage. The assumptions underlying marriage today have to be changed completely if women are to get a better deal. Even if at first only a handful of weddings exemplifying an explicit rejection of women's oppression take place, they at least will have the potential to serve as positive alternatives and role models for those who aspire to a more humane way of life.

At present, the cultural ideal is that women should give and give, endlessly, smilingly, however unreasonable the demands on her, and however harmful the consequences for her. This ideal fosters the vesting of unrestrained power in the hands of the husband and his family. All that the woman is guaranteed out of the deal is the auspicious status of a married woman, with whatever protection and respectability in the eyes of society this may confer. She may in addition get other benefits but these are not guaranteed to her.

A woman who appears to have lived up to the cultural ideal is held up as a role model to others, not just in films and popular literature, but also in real life. The bizarre assumptions of the ideal are:

The ideal woman does not demand any rights except those that her husband and his family choose to give her. Since she belongs to them she does not protest against their behaviour, however unreasonable. This part of the ideal is comparable to the dictum of the Victorian legal authority, Blackstone, who laid down that the husband and wife are one and that one is the husband.

The ideal woman never complains



against her husband or in-laws to any one, not even to her parents or friends. She pretends that all is well even though she may be suffering untold tortures. Her parents too should aid her in living up to this ideal by refraining from any intervention on her behalf. By so refraining, they are believed to be helping her "adjust" to marriage, which is a euphemism for unquestioning acceptance of whatever her husband chooses to mete out to her, good or bad.

The ideal woman does not consider anything her own. She considers all her assets, including her person and her labour, as belonging to her husband and gracefully parts with anything he or his family desires. She does not dispose of anything without their permission. Decisions regarding her employment may be primarily taken by her husband and his family—if they wish her to earn, she does so; if not she refrains. She does not claim any right over her earnings and only undertakes expenditures to which they do not object.

On the other hand, she has no indisputable or independent claim on the earnings, assets, business, inheritance or properties of her husband and his family. At the most, she has a right to be maintained in whatever style they deem fit, and she does not demand a better lifestyle for

herself than what they ordain. If the marriage breaks up, her claim to maintenance is assumed to lapse.

The ideal wife does not undertake or maintain any relationships, associations or alliances of her own, not even with her natal family, without her husband's approval. She does not object, however, to her husband's right to establish all and any kinds of associations and to take on social and physical obligations such as expenditures on his family or loans to friends, without her prior consent or knowledge. She participates in and makes sacrifices to help him fulfil his obligations and commitments.

The ideal wife never refuses love, care and sexual relations to her husband, no matter how uncaring he may be. She accepts her husband's primary right to determine the number of children to be borne, and if she fails to produce them, especially healthy sons, she is no longer an ideal wife.

While monogamy for the husband is today the approved ideal, infidelities by him are expected to be condoned by the wife, whose tender and unswerving loyalty is expected to reform him. However, she is not expected to take offence even at his baseless suspicions of her fidelity.

The larger community is expected to honour such an ideal wife. But since the ideal wife claims no rights, the community is not expected to enforce any for her. If she claims rights, she is no longer ideal and the community is expected to treat her credentials as highly suspect.

The ideal wife dies before her husband, thus remaining *sada suhagin*. As this term suggests, no woman is to be considered happy until she is dead. This ideal is the logical culmination of the idea that her existence is subsumed in her husband's.

The ideal, as outlined above, is rarely sought to be forced on a woman

in an undiluted form. Wide variations in detail exist as between communities, regions and individual families. Usually, some parts of it are implemented more sternly and others less so. But even if only some parts are implemented, the situation proves suffocating for the woman.

No woman can wholly live up the ideal of effacing herself completely, even though many sincerely wish to do so. Women always express resistance in some form, however muted or disguised. But the acceptance of the ideal at a conscious ideational level makes women feel guilty for their resentment and resistance. It leads them to blame themselves just as others blame them for not being “perfect” wives and daughters-in-law. Thus these cultural norms play a crucial part in creating the present degrading relations between men and women in the family.

The total imbalance in fundamental rights, autonomy and powers between men and women in the family destroys many women physically and demoralises many more, emotionally and intellectually. A dowryless marriage in and of itself is not likely to alter this imbalance. Dowry is an important additional instrument to carry out the woman’s humiliation but is not the cause of it. Women’s oppression did not stem from dowry and it could survive in a virulent form even if dowry were somehow to go out of fashion.

The kind of wedding I would like to see and participate in would be based on principles of mutuality and reciprocity of rights and obligations, not merely selfless giving on the part of the woman. Principles of mutuality should not be merely privately agreed on by couples that wish to act on them but should be publicly affirmed. The marriage should not be merely a sacrament but a public agreement. We already have in India one such



tradition in the shape of the *nikahnama*. Registered marriages also involve a contract of sorts. However, neither of these is sufficiently based on principles of mutuality. Also, the parts that grant the woman some rights have been reduced to a rarely enforceable and therefore empty ritual.

To put content into the agreement, the following could be the affirmations and guarantees to be publicly made:

1. The *shadinama* or marriage agreement should involve both families as guarantors. The woman’s natal family should give a commitment that they are not washing their hands of her or giving her away but that she continues to have as much right to their home as their sons, and can call on them for help at any time. They should commit themselves to giving her an equal share in inheritance which she will receive with her brother, if any, at the time of her parents’ death, or earlier, if her parents so desire, but not at her wedding because such an arrangement would tend to merge into the present day dowry system, would cause her parents hardship, and would mean that marriage is treated as altering a woman’s status in a way radically different to that of a man.

2. Although no dowry would be paid, if the couple were setting up a separate home, both parents could equally contribute to the expenses entailed in this. If one partner is to

live in the other’s parental home, then any expenditure on the wedding celebrations, on new clothes, jewelry, gifts to relatives, and so on, must be mutually agreed upon and equally shared by both parties. The woman’s parents are not to be responsible for more than an equal share of the expenditure or arrangements. Responsibility must be equally shared and the celebration jointly hosted, so that neither family is in the position of having to entertain or defer to the other.

3. The husband and wife would pledge that even though they are marrying in order to build a life together, they retain their basic human rights and responsibilities as individuals.

4. The woman will continue to maintain her relationships with her natal family, and her husband and in-laws will not interfere in any way with these. She and her natal family will continue to have obligations towards and claims on one another. She will be free to take as much responsibility for her parents as she feels is necessary.

5. All decisions affecting family life will be taken jointly, with each partner having an equal say at every stage of decision making. This will include decisions regarding finances, expenditure, savings/investments, shift of residence, social connections, lifestyle, the education and upbringing of children. In the event of the husband unilaterally taking any decision without consulting his wife she will be free to refuse to participate in its implementation. If it affects the children adversely he will be obliged to reverse it, should his wife object, or at least to ensure that she is enabled not to participate in it.

6. Both partners, if both are employed, will take equal responsibility for smooth running of the household and the upbringing and welfare of children. The decision whether or not to earn will be taken by

the woman, as it is her right to decide whether or not she wishes to devote herself to domestic work alone. If she earns, she will have a right over half her earnings and half her husband's earnings. And if she is not earning, she will have a right over half his earnings since she is contributing by way of taking primary responsibility for the running of the house and care of the children.

7. All property and assets acquired by either partner from the day of the wedding onwards, will be jointly owned and will be equally shared in the event of a separation. If the couple sets up a nuclear family, the matrimonial home will belong solely to the wife while she is raising the children. If there are no children, the home is to be treated as equally owned and whoever resides in it must compensate the other financially. If the woman at the time of marital breakdown is living in her husband's parental home, she must be provided with a home adequate for herself and the children.

8. The woman will retain the right to maintain and /or establish her own social circle, continue her friendships, alliances and associations, join any organisation, political, social or religious, that she wishes. These are individual rights, decisions regarding which do not have to be jointly taken. Commitments and obligations arising out of individual alliances are to be met by the individual from his or her own time, energy and share of the family income, without the other partner's necessary participation. Whatever norms of fidelity are mutually agreed upon and declared by both partners will apply equally and without distinction to both.

9. Since the woman's health is vitally involved in childbirth, she will have the primary right to decide the number of children, the spacing between their births and matters relating to their care in infancy which relate to her body. In case she is not

able to bear children (either due to her own or her husband's inability to reproduce) this will in no way affect any of her rights or claims as a wife.

10. In the event of a separation, custody of children below 14 must go to the mother, unless the father can in a court of law prove that she is unfit as a mother. Custody of children over 14 should be decided on the basis of the child's own expressed preference.

If the woman is not earning, the husband must pay maintenance of her and the children. If she is not earning and there are no children, she should get half his income. If there are children, the income should be divided, giving each member an equal share of it. If both are earning equally, they contribute equally to child support. If the man is earning more than the woman, he contributes proportionately more.

These, or similar commitments, together with others that apply to the specifics of each marriage, should be made in writing by the couple at the time of marriage, in the presence of all the wedding guests, witnessed and guaranteed by elders of both families, and by any other friends or relatives whom each party wishes to invite. Suggestions that couples enter into such a contract does not obviate the need to work for such changes in law as well. It merely indicates that individuals and their families need not wait for changes in law in order to try to implement their beliefs in their own lives.

If conflict arises at any point in the marriage, over either or both parties not honouring their commitments, either would be entitled to appeal to the guarantors who in turn would be obliged to intervene and oversee negotiations. If the marriage breaks down the guarantors would be required to mediate and oversee a fair settlement in the terms laid down by the marriage agreement.

Making such commitments will not ensure that all or any of them will

be honoured. But, at least, the man who dishonours them will be made to feel in the wrong, instead of feeling, as at present, that he is merely behaving in the normal and acceptable way. Even if a small percentage of couples come close to honouring such a commitment, they will serve as important inspirations for others.

Some of the proposals made above may sound farfetched. These proposals are not meant to be definitive formulations but rather as a basis for a wider debate. Such a debate could bring up more concrete and better worked out schemes for reforming marriage norms and building women's rights into them.

Not much research work has been done on the subject of changes in marriage patterns and norms in different parts of India in different epochs. We are, however, somewhat familiar with efforts at change that began in the late nineteenth century. For instance, Mahatma Fule vigorously campaigned for more egalitarian norms within marriage though his Satyashodhak Samaj. His work had wide influence in Maharashtra (see box).

Gandhi's stated convictions on the new norms needed in marriage had a much larger inspirational influence throughout the country. In the course of the movement, many followers of Gandhi made systematic efforts to live up to the new ideals of the man-woman relationship within marriage and came to be regarded as models. These included well known figures such as Jayaprakash Narayan and his wife, Prabhavati, as well as any number of lesser known ones all over the country. (see, for example, interview with Indumati Kelkar in **Manushi** No. 48, 1988). Though the total number of people who tried to implement a variety of new norms was small, they helped to challenge the legitimacy of oppressive social norms that operated against women.

Today, we need to carry the tradition of such reforms a step further. □