

# **Girls at Margins**

Questioning Constraints, Claiming Futures

National Symposium

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YMCA, Colaba, Mumbai

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A Report

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Cover : Girls from Vacha Community Centers at Juhu Beach, Mumbai  
Back Cover : Girls engaging in various activities at Vacha, Mumbai

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## Foreword

Vacha decided to organize a symposium "Girls at Margins : Questioning Constraints, Claiming Futures" to generate information, share common concern with activists, researchers, academicians, administrators, media, legal experts and policy makers. It also aimed to reach authorities on issues concerning "girlhoods" namely status and survival struggles of girls in the family, schools, community and society at large, challenges faced by girls with respect to education, health and freedom from psychological, physical and sexual violence, both in the 'private' and 'public' realms.

The murderous and barbaric attack on Malala Yousafzai on 9 October 2012 in Pakistan who was shot in the face by a Taliban gunman has brought concerns of adolescents girls centre stage in the world.

Malala's speech at the UN on her birthday delivered on 12th July 2013 signifies the mood of today's girls:

"Dear sisters and brothers, now it's time to speak up.

So today, we call upon the world leaders to change their strategic policies in favour of peace and prosperity.

We call upon the world leaders that all the peace deals must protect women and children's rights. A deal that goes against the dignity of women and their rights is unacceptable.

We call upon all governments to ensure free compulsory education for every child all over the world.

We call upon all governments to fight against terrorism and violence, to protect children from brutality and harm.

We call upon the developed nations to support the expansion of educational opportunities for girls in the developing world.

We call upon all communities to be tolerant - to reject prejudice based on caste, creed, sect, religion or gender. To ensure freedom and equality for women so that they can flourish. We cannot all succeed when half of us are held back.

We call upon our sisters around the world to be brave - to embrace the strength within themselves and realise their full potential.

Dear brothers and sisters, we want schools and education for every child's bright future. We will continue our journey to our destination of peace and education for everyone. No one can stop us. We will speak for our rights and we will bring change through our voice. We must believe in the power and the strength of our words. Our words can change the world."

We are pleased to present this report that covers debates and discussion on needs and rights of girls. These came out in the narratives of the panelists and discussions. Our Malala-s at VACHA also expressed their aspiration for 'freedom from bondage and traditions, illiteracy, ignorance" through their poems, verses, paintings, drawings, speeches. This is why this report is full of life and hope.

Violence against girls has increased manifold, both in intensity and variety. The symposium also kicked off the chain of events to commemorate "One Billion Rising" global campaign to combat violence against girls and women. Gang rape of Nirbhaya in Delhi on December, 2012 in a moving bus resulted in massive protests and a series of legal reforms regarding sexual abuse of girls and women. Unprecedented protest actions by young boys and girls have galvanized the state and civil society into action.

(i) The report brings to the fore agency of girls to determine their destiny with the help of collective endeavour, progressive legislations, gender just education, right to life, health and nutrition and by raising the benchmarks of affirmative action by the state and cultural alternatives that promote dignity, bodily integrity, equal opportunity, safety and respect for girls.

The report captures sharing by feminists from different socio-cultural milieus. It brings out nuanced understanding of the layers of patriarchal oppression, exploitation, subjugation, discrimination and injustice operating at the ground level that restrict, suffocate and trample upon rights of girls. At the same time, it captures resilience of girls to rise in spite of multifaceted hurdles. Four individuals from the Women's Movement talked about events and individuals in their lives that sowed the seeds of their later understanding of women's issues and desire to participate in collective action. They came from different class and caste backgrounds. It was the move to Mumbai from a small town for one, impact of a progressive professor for another,

(ii)

early association with a Left party for another and hostel, boarding school for yet another. Perhaps we can locate such positive influences in our work on empowerment of women and girls and explore possibilities of providing such elements that are replicable.

Adolescent girls from varied caste, class, religious and ethnic backgrounds and locations are slowly and gradually creating their own space through excellence in the area of education, skills, leadership and cultural activities. They are proactively fighting for their rights, challenging obscurantist forces and moral policing, crimes in the name of honour and acid attacks, opposing child marriages. Thousands of girls are entering male bastions of science and technology, engineering and all streams of professional education. They are successfully challenging misogyny. Their success stories are multiplying in spite of socio-economic and cultural hurdles. Now the state and civil society need to remove the institutional and cultural constraints so that the adolescent girls can realise their dreams. Providing good and healthy role models for adolescent girls in all walks of life is very important.

This report will be helpful to throw light on the roadmap to empowerment and enablement of adolescent girls. Reflections and feedback on this report from child rights organizations, educationists, health and medical fraternity, social activists, policy makers and political workers, administrators and media professionals are imperative.

We would like to acknowledge the valuable contribution made by all the speakers, participants and students. Vacha team deserves special thanks for the hard-work in terms of preparation for the workshop and follow up work. Special mention must be made of Amrita De who worked hard on this report. We thank Vrijendra for his contribution to editing and for always being there.

All of us at Vacha thank Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), Delhi, for its support and partnership.

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*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*



I

# Inaugural Session



### **Welcome Address by Sonal Shukla, Director - Vacha, Mumbai**

"It is my great pleasure to invite all of you here for this two-day symposium. I welcome all of you who have come from various NGOs and colleges. Glad to see teachers and students too. I am very happy that this is happening together with all of you. I welcome Dr. Ranjana Kumari, who really made time for us, despite her tight schedule. I thank her for being here with us.

"It is a great pleasure to welcome Nandita Das too. I am very excited to meet her also because I have been a great admirer of her grandparents. She is the daughter of artist Jatin Das and writer Varsha Das. Her grandparents were among the most principled, rationalist journalists of Mumbai and Gujarat. It was her great grandfather who went and met the Azad Hind Fauj and wrote about Captain Laxmi and others at the height of the second World War. Nandita Das has continued this great heritage. Many of us are also admirers of her as an actor and film-maker and we are waiting for her next film to come.

"The symposium is jointly organized by Vacha Trust and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). Damayanti Sridharan, Senior Project Adviser, from the partner organization FES, is here with us. I welcome her and her colleague Mandvi Kulshreshtha.

"I also welcome the Human Rights advocate, Saumya Uma, whose book Rights of Adolescent Girls in India - A critical look at Laws and Policies is to be released here today. This study was undertaken by her for us. Vacha has been very concerned about the rights of adolescent girls which are unfortunately always clubbed with women's rights and children's rights. Saumya Uma has made an in-depth study of all aspects of different laws, conventions and policies regarding adolescent girls in this book. Vacha Trust is its proud publisher.

"We have with us, Dr. Vibhuti Patel, Head of Post Graduate Economics Department, SNDT University. She has always been the helping hand for academics, teachers, activists, students and many others. Dr. Vibhuti Patel has coordinated this programme and she will be introducing the speakers. We have planned to begin this symposium with a girls' song. We have Jhanavi Shrimankar with us, who has lent her voice to Kishori Geet, the album of songs of girlhood. She was a school girl then, slightly older now, isn't she! She has established herself as a well-known singer. I request her to sing after which girls from Vacha will make a presentation."

The welcome speech was followed by Jhanavi Shrimankar singing "*Maine sapna suhana ek dekha, mujhe baandh sake na koi rekha...*"

'I had a beautiful dream. No one would draw boundaries for me. (The oblique reference in this girls' song is to the line Lakshmana had drawn that Seeta was not meant to cross.)

Amrita De, a member of Vacha team, briefly introduced Vacha and its ongoing work in bastis/communities in Mumbai, Thane district and in Valsad in South Gujarat. She invited representatives from girls' groups in some of these bastis to come forward and make their presentations.

### **Presentation by Girls from Communities**

(Speeches translated from Hindi. Girls' identities are partly concealed.)

Sushma talked about the Indian Constitution that guarantees rights for everyone. But the language of law, she said, needed demystification. Her group talked about the attitudes of family and community towards girls on issues of health, education, child marriage and other related issues that have an impact on the lives of girls.

These girls were aware that attitudes towards girls change, especially after the girls turn 18. They wanted to know what the laws have to say about the overall growth and development of girls and their participation in the wider society. The group felt that while there are many laws to protect girls and women, they are not implemented. They thought it should change.

Payal criticized attitudes which consider a girl, a burden. She felt that gender based discrimination against a girl begins right at birth and continues throughout her life. Even a pregnant woman is not spared; she is also constantly under scrutiny and feels oppressed.

Shabnam talked about yet another denial to a girl: her right to good quality education. She questioned the disparity in families which sent their sons to English medium schools but did not find the same necessary for their daughters. As a result, girls end up with a disadvantage when they go on to study in colleges. Everything there is in English! If only parents had treated them as equals and sent them to English medium schools with their brothers! She also felt that girls are generally viewed as objects of entertainment and taken lightly. But girls themselves are not permitted the simple pleasures of listening to music, watching television etc. She felt that

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even within homes, there was no space for girls to express their feelings. Parents proudly introduce their sons to guests and treat them with a lot of love, respect and concern. But they ignore their daughters. Parents' rough tone and manners hurt and anger us (the girls), she said. Further, girls are not allowed to participate in any decision-making within families. They are never consulted and often confined to the 'inner space' as if girls and women could not be good and capable decision-makers! She talked about the kind of machines to which girls are allowed access: mixer, grinder, washing machine, sewing machine etc. But they are never allowed anywhere near computers, cell phones, cycles, bikes... Why? Boys are free to listen to music on their cell phones all the time, but if a girl does it, everyone thinks she is having an affair and listening to a male caller! When boys tease and make passes, girls end up being punished. The discrimination never ends.

Shehnaz talked about a very basic irritant to girls living in small houses i.e. being asked not to make any noise while peeing! She also disliked the way girls are distanced from their fathers once they start menstruating. She wondered if the government schemes, which push them to consume folic tablets, have anything to say about this

**'If we are not good looking enough, our very existence is under threat.. parents worry that we might not get married easily. And if we are beautiful, even then it is a problem because then they worry about us going wayward! Then, some more restrictions are imposed!'**

behaviour that is meted out to girls. As 10-year olds, girls can stand and walk upright. But once they are older, a lot of restrictions are placed on how they should walk, talk and conduct themselves. These restrict and limit us, she complained...

Saima talked about the concept of beauty. Whether we accept it or not, beauty is a major issue with girls. Girls are very often reminded about their lack of beauty in terms of height, weight, complexion, looks... 'People judge us by our looks', she said. 'If we are not good looking enough, our very existence is under threat. If we are not seen as beautiful it is a problem because parents worry that we might not get married easily. And if we are called beautiful, even then it is a problem because then they worry about us going wayward! Then, some more restrictions are imposed! Schooling stops, dupattas are forced on us. What does all of this suggest? Should we be beautiful or should we not...?'

All the girls strongly felt that while the Constitution

has given them equal rights as human beings, there is no space for girls to articulate their feelings about discriminatory behaviour and practices. The girls' group asked everyone: What do you think... should not there be a law against this discriminatory behaviour against us?

The presentation received a thundering applause from the audience and the panel.

Medhavinee Namjoshi thanked the girls for their presentation. She added that the girls are a major source of energy and inspiration for Vacha, "It is important for us to understand what the girls themselves feel about all the issues that are to be presented in the next two days".

**Dr Ranjana Kumari, Chairperson - Women Power Connect, Delhi** was the chief guest for the symposium.

*Dr. Ranjana Kumari is a women's rights activist and author. She is President of Women Power Connect (WPC), Delhi and Director of the Centre for Social Research (CSR), Delhi. She has been senior advisor to the Ministry of Labour, Government of India and Coordinator of South Asian Forum for Women's Political Empowerment. She is involved in research, advocacy, lobbying, and training for the protection of women's rights.*

**Excerpts from her talk :**

A very good morning. Fortunately, the mike is finally working! I feel overwhelmed when I join my friends with whom we have been walking the same steps for the past 30 years. It is really a pleasure to be with all of you Sonal, Vibhuti, the very talented actor Nandita Das as well as Damyanti and Saumya Uma. I feel very encouraged by the presentations that the girls have made. I think you have defined a sense of direction for them. I am glad to have heard them.

I wonder after all the work carried out by generations of people, after the struggles of the women's movement, after all that work done collectively, I wonder where are we headed to? How do we see our society 20 years from now? Where will these young girls be when they reach our age? The assurance is that a lot of it is going to change. The dream is that it should change. But many a time the worry is that things are not happening the way it ought to happen. Three decades should have been enough to take a stock of the situation which we are going to talk about. So, let me come back

to the topic-Rights of Adolescent Girls in India, this book, which I believe all of you will read with great care. Ours is a unique country with the largest young population in the world. By that definition, we are the youngest country in the world. I would like to put facts before I say things to you. India has the largest number of children in the age group of 0-14 years, that is 365 million children. Adolescents in the age group of 10-19, are about 224 million. So, we are talking about 224 million people. There are approximately 130 million adolescent girls. That makes India a country with the largest adolescent population. Even though China's total population is more than ours, we still have the largest population of adolescents in the country.

We need to look at what the special construction of adolescence in India is. It is of being neither a child nor an adult. It is the age in-between. But the difficulty in India is that this in-between age gets locked. I am talking about children across geographical regions that may experience adolescence differently. The book that I wrote in the early 90s comes to my mind - "Problems and Needs of Rural Adolescent Girls", which especially spoke about the adolescent girl in rural areas. We saw that the girls had absolutely no transition period from childhood to adulthood. Why is this so? The reason is that they become surrogate mothers to their younger siblings at an age as early as 7-8 years. This is to enable her mother to go out for work. By the time she is 19, she has already looked after 2-3 children of her mother. This loss of adolescence is something that you can still see in rural areas.

That is the social construction of adolescence. As per social perceptions, adolescence just does not exist for the majority of the girls that I am talking about. Another important issue when we talk about adolescents is that of adult responsibility on young shoulders. How do we deal with that? What are the challenges? I look at it as twin challenges of education and early marriages. Both are interlinked along with the health issue.

As for some health statistics, 50 % of our girls are underweight. Do you all go to the net and look at your body mass index? We all are conscious nowadays of what is happening to our bodies. And the concept of beauty has changed so dramatically that all of us want to fit into that bracket of beauty. The body mass index of our young girls is only 18.5. That indicates that the body is not prepared for any healthy life in future. As for anemia, 39 % of girls are mildly anemic, 15 % girls are moderately anemic and 2% are seriously anemic. We also have the largest number of women dying during

childbirth in India. This is where I think we need to look at education as a very serious intervention. Education should not mean just the classroom education but should also include the kind of education that Vacha is doing through its outreach processes.

Whenever we talk about women, we talk only about reproductive health. There are other health issues of women, beyond reproduction. Anemia is taken care of only when the woman is pregnant. Anemia means low thinking ability, low mental capabilities and low performance. Also, this doesn't allow girls to play equally. This is in addition to the social restrictions faced by girls for playing, laughing, jumping around, enjoying themselves...

In the urban context, girls just cannot understand this idea of "girls cannot play"; they say, "I don't want to play". Mostly their energy level is low. This is so even in case of the girls who come from better-off families. There is a body cycle which needs to be paid attention to every month in terms of food and nutrition. But that really does not happen. So, health emerges as a major issue that needs attention and is clearly interlinked to education.

Let me now look at child marriages. 50 % of India's girls are getting married at ages 18 and below. So, what are we looking at? For the girls in urban areas too, their sociological, cultural and traditional boundaries are drawn from the places where they originally belong to; which in many cases are states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. I am not being state-specific, but decisions about girls are taken by their traditional families in villages.

So, what are the ways in which all these challenges can be readjusted? We spent a lot of time identifying problems. We have done it for years in various forums. We need to understand where we stand and how to tackle these issues. I think there are three opportunities that we should look at in order to build the adolescents. The first thing is to enable them is to understand that they are persons in their own rights. Unless a girl is aware about her own rights, she will not be able to act. Her own assertion has to be built in her mobility - physical and social, in terms of accesses and also looking at the kind of programmes we have. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan is at a very junior school level and after that is the stage when the maximum number of drop-outs start happening. We need to put them back into school or make them reclaim the schools.

A lot has been said about the high level of drop-outs from schools. But what has actually been done in the last three decades is not

good enough. The key issue is to recognize themselves as persons in their own rights; and to be able to give them the voice of assertion. This has to happen in the way women are today asserting their rights when faced with domestic violence. They are saying a clear "No" to domestic violence. Nobody has a right to hit the other person and this will not be tolerated. This is what has been established over the past three decades of work. A similar empowering process needs to happen with the adolescent girl too.

The second issue to be addressed for these millions of girls is, what kind of policy do we have? Do they have any kind of forum, any consultation that goes into the making of a policy for girls? The girls talked about the social barrier. They ask questions like, "Should we look beautiful?" "Should we cover ourselves?" Do the policy makers consider changing all these social attitudes while making policies? When girls get educated, they will seek careers and a better quality of life. They will be pushed into exploring a better life for themselves. That is where we need to ask ourselves, are we looking at policies, programmes and budgets at the Central government, State governments, District and Panchyat levels? Are adolescents addressed in any form, in any way?

There is a very recent change that has happened in the policy of the Delhi government. Like in case of nutrition supplements, the focus will also be on availability of sanitary napkins in schools. There is a huge area of work where the girls are getting into disadvantaged positions. We need enough interventions that include the role of adolescents in the policy defining processes. Can we just target this millions of adolescent population which also has a large number of adolescent girls?

The third one is to empower and enhance the role of adolescents in any society. What role do they play actually? They play an extremely important role in terms of child care services. If they don't support child care, mothers cannot go to work. And in a majority of cases, most adolescents are engaged in the agricultural sector. In urban areas, they are engaged in home-based work. Should they do all this or should they be allowed to study, play and take care

**.. issue to be addressed is to empower and enhance the role of adolescents in society. What role do they play? They play an extremely important role in child care services. If they don't support child care, mothers cannot go to work. Should they do all this or should they be allowed to study, play and take care of their health?**

of their health? Should they proceed to become another generation of tinier, thinner women with poor health? We are witness to an entire generation of women which changed characteristics in the past 30 years. I think that is something that we should look at. Empower and enhance the role of adolescents in our society. And for that we need to work on the social mindset that barricades growth, development and participation of adolescents. Most of the cultural and traditional practices target the adolescent girls. They are groomed into accepting gender roles through rituals like the sindoor, karwa chauth etc. for the good of the husband.

If we have to impart or inject change into society, it has to come from the young. We need to work to change the perception - both of the adolescents about themselves and of the society about them. We need to change our own perceptions about the young girls, and start viewing them as thinking persons and create equal opportunities for them, as we would for the boys.

I think that is the core of the effort that we need to make. I would again like to appreciate the efforts of Vacha, the kind of work that they have been doing with girls for years now. This kind of commitment is really going to contribute to the overall change in the status of the adolescent girls in India. Thank you.

**Nandita Das, Film-maker and Actor**, was the guest of honour.

*Nandita Das is an award winning film actor and director. She has acted in films such as Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' (1996), 'Water' (1998) and has directed the international award winning film 'Firaq' (2008).*

Excerpts from her talk:

I have come here today to express my solidarity. I have neither so much experience nor have I done that much. I have really learnt a lot from Ranjana Kumari today. I moved to Mumbai only 3 years ago and am slowly learning about the work done by various organizations here. I am very happy to know about Vacha's work and will be a part of it in future too. I will be sharing just some random thoughts that were coming to my mind, on my way here and while listening to all the speakers and the girls as well.

All of us know about these issues. Everyone says yes, it is necessary that girls should have equal rights. There would be very few people who would publicly speak against this. But these girls have shared certain small nuances that are true and from their own

life realities and experiences. I have a younger brother; my mother was a writer and my father, a painter. My mother worked in a 9 to 5 job with the National Book Trust. My father was a wonderful cook. So he cooked at home and I thought he painted for recreation! It was a complete role reversal and I thought that was the norm. It was only when I grew up that I realized that this was not the norm. It was the other way around. I went on to participate in the women's movement in my own little ways. Also did my master's in Social Work. Not that the course makes you a better social worker, but it does expose you to a lot many realities than what you are used to.

In my introduction, it was said that I have a daughter. Let me correct that, I have a son! When I was pregnant, let me say in our "educated, privileged class" world, people wanted me to have a daughter. The collective guilt of wanting a son weighs so much on your head that you want your little daughter to do all that you wanted to, in your own life! But I think the responsibility to raise a daughter who will have that sense of equality and freedom, raises questions as important as raising a son who is sensitive and who will not "allow" equality but will appreciate the joys of equality. Though I admit there was a bit of depression on knowing that it was boy! When I was pregnant, we did try to find out whether it was a boy or a girl, but thankfully the doctor did not allow that. We would call this unborn child whom we expected to be a girl as "Chhoti". At that point of time, we were starting our own company which is now called "Between the Lines" and has a production lined up in Mumbai. We called it the Chhoti Production Company. And it turned out to be a Chhotu! My friends say, "Fine, now you have two children - a Chhotu along with a Chhoti"!

But the point is that now as a mother I feel the weight of this responsibility all the more. My struggle is how not to burden this child with all that happens in the world and to introduce the joys of equality, despite the fact that it doesn't exist around him. I would like to introduce him to books, events, spaces like this. I did not know if children were allowed here, else I would have got him with

**I came across this Ganesh Chaturthi procession..the boys and men were dancing in gay abandon to the beat of drums. There were a lot of women and girls too. The girls must have been above 10 years of age. Their feet were tapping to the rhythm of the drums. All of them wanted to dance, but they wouldn't... That image just didn't leave me..**

me. I anyway take him with me wherever I go. Right from his childhood, he has had the exposure of watching his mother work, other women coming in to work with her, talk, play...!

I write a weekly column for The Week and every week I wonder what I should write about. I came across this Ganesh Chaturthi procession on a road in Worli. I could see that the boys and men were dancing in gay abandon to the beat of the drums. There were a lot of women and girls too. The girls must have been above 10 years of age. Their feet were tapping to the rhythm of the drums. All of them wanted to dance, but they wouldn't... That image just didn't leave me and the article that I wrote was about a girl-child. One can imagine this to happen in the biggest, most cosmopolitan city to a girl child of almost 10 years of age. I feel devastated when I hear about the rape and molestation of girl children, even babies. And here was this child, who was not allowed even to dance to the drum beats... And that is how the article that I wrote was called, "Itching to shake a leg".

As Ranjana said, change will happen anyway. All of us are but a drop in the ocean. But if we do not do our bit, the pace of this change process will suffer. The slower the process of change, the more will be the suffering of women and girls that we are talking about. And so, it has become very important to speed up this change-process. It is said that a single generation can bring about a desired change. My grandmother, as has been introduced earlier, has done a lot of work in her times. She was a freedom fighter and contributed a lot to the struggle for freedom. Grandmother would do all this and look after the house as well. But her daughter broke all norms and went out to study, work and earn money. This generation of her daughter has already brought about a change. That woman's daughter will never be what her mother was. So, it doesn't require 20 generations to bring about a change. In real time, it takes only one generation to bring about that change. Each of us can bring about that change. If I do something different, my children will also do the same in their own lives. And that gives you a lot of hope.

There is a lot of pessimism in the mainstream media and for that reason alone I do not watch any of it anymore. Earlier I used to feel the need to read up, watch new things and be informed. Media has of late become very negative and depressing, contorting facts even to the extent of messing up real life stories with strange music and special effects. I try not to go beyond the headlines in newspapers, because otherwise it takes away the sense of optimism

in our lives. I am trying not to be cynical because cynicism is the act of a lazy person. If a person does not want to do anything, cynicism becomes an excuse. One has to really be proactive to bring about the desired change and being hopeful is the only way out. As Gandhiji said, "Be the change that you want to see in the world". I draw a lot of inspiration from this quote. It's true that if we aspire for a world that is more equal and just, we ourselves will have to work towards it.

Vacha is part of the One Billion Rising Campaign which is a worldwide campaign that talks about these issues. I am sure all of you too must be a part of this campaign which talks about this disease of violence against women and inequality. This is when a billion people will come out on the streets and protest about the violence faced by women. They will also demand 'no more violence against women'. Earlier too, I have participated in many rallies organized on March 8, the women's day. But I have seen only women participating in such programmes. But this campaign involves the participation of both men and women. I really hope we never give up on involving our men in such issues, it is imperative that they are in this struggle equally, as partners. We have to find out own ways of negotiating for equality. And for that we have to be totally convinced. Else, it will not work!

Earlier the girls spoke about the concept of Beauty. In the film industry I have been told many a time that I am good-looking, but dark-skinned. And this is especially so when I have to do upper middle class roles, I am told to allow make-up to hide my skin tone. Dark skin is okay when one is playing Dalit or lower middle class roles, but upper class roles cannot have dark skin tones! These are the kind of images that we see all around us. Be it films, advertisements, air-hostesses, receptionists... even in job applications! (Vibhuti added that nowadays even in schools, dark skinned teachers are rejected). I was shocked when looking for a house-help, the service agency told me that a help is available, but that she is dark-skinned and if I will be okay with that! We are not spared at any levels!

I am thankful that my parents did not have that

**In the talks that I give in colleges, invariably some girl will raise her hand with a question, "Madam, how come you are so confident despite being so dark?" Confidence has been taken away from young girls because they are not fair enough, tall enough, good enough... if I don't fit into that stereotypical image of a beautiful girl, I am just not good enough. And how do we get over it?.. by discovering our own talents, likes and dislikes.**

inferiority complex because otherwise it would have come down to me. I was never made to feel that my complexion was a problem for me. In the talks that I give in colleges, invariably some girl will raise her hand with a question, "Madam, how come you are so confident despite being so dark?" Confidence has been taken away from young girls because they are not fair enough, tall enough, good enough... if I don't fit into that stereotypical image of a beautiful girl, I am just not good enough. These are very basic struggles, but we will never get over it if we don't get over it within ourselves. And how do we get over it? Not just because it is a good theory to follow. But only by discovering our own talents, likes and dislikes. One day, I will discover that my complexion, my features, my religion, gender is all a given. I haven't done anything myself. I was born into it and I need to feel neither ashamed nor proud of these facts. It was not in my control to define these things. But I can definitely decide what I want to be. This is defined by my thoughts about myself. Once we understand that, we realize that all these other identities will cease to be of any importance.

It's very important that we all work on ourselves. All of us are a bundle of contradictions. But it doesn't mean that I am all sorted out. I have my own prejudices, complexes and struggles and that is why to share is such a wonderful opportunity. That is the reason why I like speaking in spaces where people are working on these issues. Also, this acts as a reminder for myself. When we speak to others, we are also talking to ourselves. I hope all of us speak up, especially on February 14, when a lot of us will be seen on the streets. Hope to also see others who are not involved in such issues. Let's hope that all of us try and bring all these other people with us, so that they can witness the change that is happening all around them and participate in the change process. My role is to expose them to processes and experiences such as these. After that, life will take them where they wish to go.

**Advocate Saumya Uma, author, Rights of Adolescent Girls in India**

*Saumya Uma works as a consultant on gender, law and human rights. She researches, writes, speaks, lectures, and is involved in capacity-building and advocacy initiatives.*

Excerpts:

I think a lot of what I have wanted to share, I have already shared in my book. I would like to share a little bit about the process that

went into this book. I still remember the day when in mid-February Sonal Shukla called me to ask if I would be interested in taking up work on a book about laws and policies for adolescent girls. This since she felt there were not enough resources on issues related to adolescent girls with everything being either for women or for children. At that point of time, I said yes, because I visualized the output to be a booklet. It was a time when I had a personal loss at home. I had lost my mother-in-law who had been with me for 18 years and I had not got over the shock. But I promised Sonal that I would definitely produce something by the end of March. But in March my own mother fell ill, and she expired in April. Till August this year, I was in a state of depression, shock and trauma and was unable to do any work at all. I felt very guilty and even asked Sonal to find someone else to take up the work. But she was very supportive and insisted that I do it. The fact that she had vested so much of trust in me got me started on the book and by mid-August I was deep into the writing process.

Writing this book has been a very cathartic process for me. In a way it helped me get out of all the trauma and shock that I was in the first part of the year. I channelized all my energies into the writing and I hope it is positive. Also it is an important fact that the need for this kind of a book came from the ground level. When a need arises from the ground level, the output is always effective. Law and policy complement each other. I come from a law background, where my law training teaches me to accept the law as it is, not to question it. But it is the feminist politics that taught me to question law and look at the limitations of law. That is how I understood that laws, policies and programmes complement each other. It is the smaller initiatives like schemes by governments and efforts by non governmental organizations that reach out to the girls. While I felt that it was important, I really did not have any experience in analyzing policies. It is here that Dr. Vibhuti Patel has been a pillar of support for me. She helped me through with every chapter which required an analysis of policy, the language of which I was not familiar with. So, Dr. Vibhuti Patel has contributed in a major way to this book.

**Vacha carried out a study with 112 adolescent girls from the communities where it works. One strong response was that the girls.. view education as a way of getting empowered. Other responses were strongly against early marriages. The girls mentioned that they want to get married after the age of 21 years.**

I would like to thank Vacha too. Because we did not want to bring out this book without the voices of the adolescent girls themselves, Vacha carried out a study with 112 adolescent girls from the communities where it works. We worked together to prepare a questionnaire for the study and the last chapter of this book includes the responses from the girls themselves. I would like to share some of the findings with you. One strong response was that the girls wanted to continue their education beyond secondary schools and colleges and not stop at the primary levels. They view education as a way of getting empowered. Other responses were strongly against early marriages. The girls mentioned that they want to get married after the age of 21 years. They deplore honour crimes and they advocate the right to choose their own life partner. They have demanded the eradication of discriminatory social practices against girls. They have repeatedly talked about the gender based discrimination and how it adversely affects their lives. They also believe in self assertion as a way of getting empowered.

Their voices form an important chapter in the book and that compliments another chapter on "State Responsibility". It deals with the question - what is the responsibility of the state - and talks about state responsibility towards the adolescent girl. My effort has been to introduce an international framework of state responsibility to fulfill and protect human rights. It is a first attempt from my side and I look forward to feedback from all of you to further improve on it. With that I would like to end my talk, with an emphasis that this was really a team work. It wouldn't have been possible without the support of the Vacha team, Sonal Shukla, Dr. Vibhuti and my family who are sitting in the audience. I only hope that the book contributes in a small but significant way to the existing pool of information that we already have on this subject.

Nischint Hora thanked the speakers for the wonderful insights. She especially thanked Vibhuti Patel and mentioned Dr. Patel's hard work for the symposium, Dr. Saumya Uma for working diligently on the book and putting it together. Nischint thanked FES for its support to the symposium and referred to other programmes in which both organizations have partnered.

***"Parents proudly introduce their sons to guests and treat them with a lot of love, respect and concern. But they ignore their daughters. Parents' rough tone and manners hurt and anger us"***

**- Shabnam  
Member of youth group - Vacha**

*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*

# II



## Girls in Situations of Conflict with Law



**Rashmi Oza, Head - Department of Law, University of Mumbai**

*Prof. Dr. Rashmi Oza is currently the head of the Department of Law, University of Mumbai.*

Excerpts from her presentation:

India is a signatory to several international conventions and as a democratic state, it has a commitment to protect Human Rights. The Indian Constitution also contains many provisions for protection of human rights. We also have anti-trafficking and anti-child labour laws. And yet, in practice, rights are widely violated in India. Girls and women are routinely kidnapped, abducted, are victims of domestic violence including dowry, female feticide, infanticide, slavery and trafficking among others. And Rape. Besides, laws also discriminate against women. While social stigmatization inhibits girls and women from reporting such offences at police stations, lack of evidence inhibits action.

The law against rape was amended only after the large-scale public protests against the judgment of the Supreme Court in the Mathura Rape case. In this case, the lack of evidence was construed as consent and it led to the acquittal of the accused. There are large-scale violations of laws relating to international trafficking and pornography. Violations are also more acute in the case of mentally-challenged women, women belonging to minorities, refugees, women in conflict areas, migrant women and adolescent girls. Violence against girls and women during armed conflict is a known fact. Though India has not ratified the United Nations Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987) it has ratified the UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child), and yet our children, especially girls, continue to be victims of torture.

Further, stereotypes ensure that gender based discrimination against women continues. Implementation of laws is another weak area. Adoption laws also have a patriarchal bias especially for physically and mentally challenged girl-child. In states like Andhra Pradesh, adolescent girls are given to foreign countries for adoption and then forced into trafficking. Rapes of girls in remand homes remind us that even these homes are not safe for girls. 65 years after independence, the status of girls and women in our country makes one wonder when we will be ready to make a world fit for them? When will we reach our goals? We need to introspect.

**Monica Sakhrani, Assistant Professor - School of Law, TISS, Mumbai**

Adv. Monica Sakhrani has been practicing law for over 13 years in Chennai and Mumbai. She is a member of the Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights and Indian Association of People's Lawyers. Currently, she is a visiting faculty at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai.

Excerpts from her talk:

I am struck by the fact that the adolescent girl is disappearing from the law books. She is neither a child nor a woman. The distinction and space between childhood and adulthood, these two stages of life has disappeared partly due to the Conventions on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child till the age of 18. About 7 years of transition from childhood to adulthood is ignored. This new thing of looking at people as 18 and above and 18 and below is strange. As a result, one day you are supposed to be a complete imbecile and the next day you are to become completely empowered! The new Child Sexual Assault Bill also covers girls till the age of 18. It will be applicable to any kind of sexual intercourse without the consent of the girl.

There are two other things I must point out: India has refused to sign the United Nations General Assembly resolution for a worldwide moratorium on executions (2012). That particular resolution talked about the progressive abolition of death penalty. From among 192 states, 37 refrained from voting on the resolution. 39 states voted against the resolution and India was one of those 39 states. We also need to look at how we deal with women who are in conflict with the law. About 2.5 percent of all women convicts are on the death row. As a criminal lawyer, I have worked with prisoners for quite some time. I have found that a majority of women who are accused of crimes in this country are actually accused of serious offences. Many of them are actually accused of murder. Around 4 percent of the prison population is women. And in terms of juveniles in conflict with law, the prison statistics of India 2010 and National Crime Records Bureau of 2011, out of 34,000 juvenile offenders, around 2000 are women. This also

**When we look at crimes against women, we find that as per data the largest number of increase in all kinds of crimes is of Rape. There is a 900 percent increase in the number of rape cases from 1973 to 2011.**

works up to approximately 4 percent.

One finds that this figure is almost a universal figure. Further, I discovered that a majority of the women prisoners are undergoing imprisonment of 7 years and above. And many of them are going through life imprisonment for murder and the majority of the women are in there for murder of family members, very often the husband. I also found that a large number of the women prisoners were having some kind of mental disability or illnesses. It was not clear if the disability was because of the imprisonment or whether they were here because of the illness. One family actually got rid of a mentally ill woman by sending her to prison and then resolving their issue.

There is this other case of a woman when she was 40 years old. Her brain was completely damaged. This woman was arrested because while undergoing post partum depression she had allegedly killed her one month old baby. I don't know if this is true or not. She used to have seizures in prison. She was never given any treatment for the same. It was after a long time that a doctor came into the picture and diagnosed her illness. He took her out on bail and sent her to a home for treatment. Also, if a woman is in jail, it is very rare that the family comes forth to help her in any way. Her parents too just pretend that this woman does not exist at all.

When we look at crimes against women, we find that as per data the largest number of increase in all kinds of crimes is of Rape. There is a 900 percent increase in the number of rape cases from 1973 to 2011. There is also a 750 percent increase in kidnapping. And most of the victims of kidnapping and abduction are adolescent girls. Further in 65 percent of these kidnapping and abduction cases, the reason is marriage. It is another issue whether she is actually a victim and if this really is a crime. In this context, one major issue I want to raise is of forced marriages. There is no provision in any law for a girl to be forced into a marriage by her family. But there is a law against girls choosing to get married when they are minor and they would be sent to juvenile homes for doing that. The Child Marriages Act actually does not address the issue of forced marriages. All it talks about is if the girl is "enticed" into getting married. If this 'enticing' is supposedly done by a boy, the marriage becomes void. The Child Marriage Act does not make any other marriage void but it makes marriages of choice void! Further, now, before the age of 18 one does not have the choice of falling in love, having sex, choosing your partner, you only have the choice of listening to your parents and let them do what they want you to do.

After 18 years, you do have the choice to walk out of the marriage. But then where do you go if it is arranged forcibly by the parents. This issue is not addressed in the Child Marriage (Prohibition) Act.

There are a few laws which deal with this transition from childhood to adulthood like the Indian Penal Code, the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act and the Factories Act. Though there is confusion about the age of a child in these acts but they allow for a transition period from being an adolescent to a woman and hence the need to be protected from doing hazardous work etc. This also distinguishes children who cannot be employed.

The Indian Penal Code starts with the most famous distinction in terms of the age - below 7 years of age, children are considered to have no mental intent so they cannot be capable committing any offence. Children between the ages of 7 and 12, if they are incapable of understanding the nature or consequences of the act that they have been accused of, then they would be considered to have no mental intent. Thus it is decided on a case by case basis, where one has to decide if the child understands the nature and consequences of the act she/he has committed and then decide if the person can be accused of an offence or not.

The rape of a wife if she is above 15 years of age is not an offence, but if she is between 12 and 15 years of age, there is a lesser punishment of 2 years. It is paradoxical because, if a girl is below 18 she doesn't have a right to give consent for sexual intercourse but if she is married and below 18 she doesn't have a right to say no to her husband. So in a way the law also infantilizes all the married young women. This is what rape laws do.

Kidnapping is under section 360 of the Indian Penal Code and is defined in two ways: kidnapping from lawful guardianship and kidnapping outside India. As per Section 363, kidnapping from under lawful guardianship is a punishable offence with imprisonment of up to 7 years if the person kidnapped is a minor where a minor is defined as a girl below 18 years and a boy below 16. So there is a distinction. In those cases, where girls are above 16 and below 18 and have run away with their boyfriends, their boyfriends are arrested under this section.

Abduction is defined as taking somebody away, by force, compulsion, or by deceitful means to force someone to go to a particular place. The question of abduction comes in only when external agents are

involved and not when the family members are involved. This is so, because your family members are your lawful guardians, and your lawful guardians cannot abduct you. Thus, if a girl is forcefully married off by her family, there is no provision in the IPC for her to say that she may not have been actually abducted or kidnapped, but she was forcefully married off. Apart from that there are other sections which distinguish between minor and children. This looks at a minor girl as somebody who is either below 18 or below 21 depending on the section. Section 373 of the IPC speaks about selling of a person for purposes of prostitution, talks of a person if she is above 18 years, and the provision for kidnapping talks about 21 years.

Now, I would also like to talk about the Prevention of Immoral Trafficking Act. One issue is the distinction between minor and major. If a girl is induced into trafficking and if she is below 18 years of age, she is a minor. But another provision is about living off the earnings of a prostitute if you are a major. Most of the civil law in the country, especially the law which relates to maintenance, distinguishes between boys and girls by saying that the boy is entitled to maintenance till he attains the age of 18 but a girl is entitled to maintenance till she gets married. To extend this logic to the law on prostitution, if a girl who is above 18 is living off the earnings of her mother who is a prostitute would be committing an offence. And she could be actually liable for prosecution and could go to jail with 10 years of imprisonment.

Let me conclude: If we look at girls at the margins, apart from the fact that infantilization takes place, the thing is that you are either a victim or a criminal. There is an increasing criminalization of the marginalized communities and girls are a part of it. Another issue that we need to be clear about is that under the Child Marriages (Prohibition) Act many complications arise because of the age of marriage being different for girls and boys. If a girl and boy above 18 but under 21 years of age get married, because the boy is under 21, it is the girl who is the offender. On the other hand, this provision gives the boy the right to opt out of the marriage before he turns 21, which means that she could be abandoned at the whim and fancy

**I also feel that when we look at a girl child, we look at her as having an instrumental value rather than an intrinsic value. She is the means to an end rather than an end to herself. We need to think of what will be the effect of this particular Act on that particular person.**

of the boy.

I also feel that when we look at a girl child, we look at her as having an instrumental value rather than an intrinsic value. She is the means to an end rather than an end to herself. We need to think of what will be the effect of this particular Act on that particular person. When we legislate something like the Child Marriage Act we really need to know that 50 percent of women in this country are married before the age of 18 years. And we need to look at what the consequence of that will be on their lives. Before we start thinking of a future, we need to start doing something about this.

To deal with these issues, we need to do many things. One thing is that we need to have registration of all marriages in a court. The definition of a child needs to be relooked at, as given in the Right to Education Act. Also, if you need the job of a contract worker, or in a cleaning job in a public sector undertaking, you have to have 12th class certificate. So, we need to have education up to the age of 18 made free and available rather than compulsory. If we are saying that up to 18 is the age for childhood then we should extend this for the Right to Education Act too.

Violence against women and girls is one of the most systematic and widespread human rights violations.

It is rooted in gendered social structures rather than individual and random acts; it cuts across age, socio-economic, educational and geographic boundaries; affects all societies; and is a major obstacle to ending gender inequality and discrimination globally. (UN General Assembly, 2006)

*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*



III

# Sharing From Their Own Girlhood



**Medha Kotwal, founding member - Aalochana Women's Research and Resource Centre, Pune**

*Medha Kotwal has been with the women's movement in western India since 1975. She is associated with Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti and is a founder member and managing trustee of Aalochana, a centre for documentation and research on women, Pune.*

Excerpts:

Wonderful to be here!! I look at this as a sharing of views, ideas between two generations of young feminists who are here and are of different hues and orientations. This seems to be a free flowing session. I started thinking about my past. I was born in 1951. The country was newly born and there was a positive feeling. I was born into a family which laid an emphasis on education. Being a feminist is an experiential process and I will try and share my life experiences that shaped me as a feminist.

What really is the role of having an educated mother? My mother was a graduate from one of Pune's most progressive colleges, Fergusson College. Her father was an advocate and it was this progressive mother that made a very important impact in my life. My father was an aircraft engineer, a self-taught person, though not a graduate. My mother agreed to marry a non-graduate and this was never an issue of conflict between them. They always treated each other with a lot of respect. This first exposure to equality was very important for me. I admire this relationship that my parents had.

Our mother gave us a lot of freedom. We were put into a boarding school, away from the colonial kind of existence in Bengal where we lived then. My father was worried about us, "ya mulinchya kay honar?" (What's going to happen to these girls?) He was insistent that we learn Marathi, so he put us in a school in Nagpur. It was a convent school. That exposure to Christianity was important. The environment was puritanical but very positive on many fronts. I imbibed a lot of values from there, including the idea that we should do something for others. These were some of the positive influences of my childhood. To learn to respect women is what I learnt from my father. When my mother sent us to a hostel, she was very sure that we should know about our bodies. So she took both of us aside, drew the female body on a paper and explained our bodies to us and told us about our reproductive system and sexual intercourse. We were repulsed! She said we would later enjoy this very thing! I think my mother was very radical for her times. I want her to know

that her daughter really appreciates her.

My father allowed us space to mingle and make friends with boys. In the colony, where we stayed, I grew up to be a tomboy, playing with boys all the time! However, I was told to be back home before 7 pm. This had been the norm for years. I don't say the same to my daughter today. I think you need to teach your daughter how to be alert, aware and take care of herself. I think I have passed on to my daughter what I had got from my mother. As Nandita Das said, the first generation itself had taken the initiative for change. We are the beneficiaries of their struggle.

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**..she took both of us aside, drew the female body on a paper and explained our bodies to us and told us about our reproductive system and sexual intercourse. We were repulsed! She said we would later enjoy this very thing! I think my mother was very radical for her times.**

"Having a co-ed education is a very empowering thing. Some may argue having an all-women's education is also very empowering. Like in SNDT University or the Nagpur girls' school that I went to. But being in a co-ed helps you to discover yourself: your body, your sexuality, emotions. You learn to be comfortable with men. Our parents trusted us a lot. During holidays, we travelled all the way from Nagpur back home to Bengal by ourselves. It is important to put confidence and trust in your child. My mother would always say, "Don't do anything that will make you feel ashamed later on. Do what you think is right and own up what you do." That was the very positive and nurturing environment in which we grew up. The other values that I received from my home and school were values of secularism and humanism. In our school, I studied along with students from different class and caste backgrounds.

My parents were wonderful, but I cannot forget that my father was a patriarch. He had to have the last say in the house! These gender roles were something that we always challenged in our house. I used to question the division of chores between me and my brother. This also made me a bit stubborn, but my mother tried to make peace. My parents realized that I was the black sheep in the family! But fortunately, they were never unhappy with that. I was the last of three

siblings and it was later that I found out that my parents were earlier wondering whether to have me or not! I am glad they finally decided to have me! When I would question the gender roles in the family, my father would say "She is our son!" Well, he had to say that because I was a tomboy.

Another important thing was that my parents allowed me to choose my own life partner. They were a bit skeptical but okay with me marrying anybody but a Muslim! Muslim boys, they said, belonged to a different culture altogether. That would irritate me and I told them I hoped I would fall in love with a Muslim boy! Unfortunately I never did. But I did get to choose my own partner. I think that is what we need to do. Trusting our girls and their capacities to make the right choices. My interest in politics was because of my post-graduation studies in political science in Pune under the famous professor Ram Bapat (he passed away in 2012.) It was the period of Emergency in 1975 and he introduced us to Marxism and Feminism. That made us active and till today we are active. I don't think I would have lived my life any other way. We then set up Aalochana and I hope the younger ones will take up responsibilities and take it ahead. Aalochana works not only on women's issues but also on issues related to child sexual abuse. I hope all this positive sharing of experiences and ideas will help us move forward - organizations like us and like Stree Mukti Sanghatana.

I am not sure if whatever I said has been relevant for all of you. But I have tried to bring out the conflicts and challenges in my life. I did have to fight my father for certain things, but he was quite tolerant..!

**Prof (Dr) Vibhuti Patel, Head - Dept. of Economics, SNDT University, Mumbai**

*Dr. Vibhuti Patel was born and brought up in Vadodara in Gujarat in the strong and, at the time, predominantly agricultural and well to do community of patidars. She completed her M. A. and moved to Mumbai and registered for Ph.D. at the University of Mumbai. She had been politically active in Vadodara and continued to be so engaged in Mumbai. Dr. Patel, together with other women formed the first feminist groups in Mumbai.*

Exerpts from her presentation:

I was born a dark skinned child and, like it was sometimes said

for dark girls, I was supposed to be a demon that would devour her own father. It was a time when practices related to gender based discrimination and violence were rampant and I too could have been a victim. But no one in my family killed their girls. Not even my great grandfather. My father was a very progressive and caring person. He groomed me in a way where I was encouraged to use my brain. My mother was a housewife and behaved differently with me. But right from a young age, I was very clear about my opinions and was very vocal with her. My father worked in the public sector and had many transfers in his working life. I still remember how I was dressed up by my mother for a function where I had to give a rose to Jawaharlal Nehru. I think this experience has shaped my writing, especially because I read his book, "Discovery of India". Tolerance and importance of writing were the two things that I learnt from his writings. I was very lucky to have good teachers in school. I would never like the PT class, and I would not do it properly, yet was never punished by my teachers. The Montessori training made it essential that children were not punished. My teachers channelized me towards extempore speaking instead. I was fortunate to have such teachers in an early age who gave a direction to my energies. There was no such thing that you cannot defy your teacher.

One important experience was that of a woman who died of burns. I was shocked to hear people immediately discussing a second wife for the man. Nobody was concerned for the woman who had died probably out of torture by the family! I understood marriage to be an institution of violence and even my mother told me not to get married. She told me that I was lucky to be born in my generation. In her generation, girls who asked questions were not tolerated. There was no space for asking "why"? Girls, even if they were intelligent had to pretend to be dumb. She told me, "don't think of marriage!"

My grandmother was an important influence in my life. When she was widowed, her relatives took everything away from her, including her land and gold. She refused to shave her head or dress depressingly like a widow. She walked out of the family and went on to get

**My grandmother was an important influence in my life. When she was widowed, her relatives took everything away from her, including her land and gold. She refused to shave her head..like a widow. She walked out of the family and went on to get trained as a Montessori teacher.**

**Social movements also introduced me to more women who were like me. They were dark skinned tribals - adivasis and women from different class and castes...and so different from the upper caste, fair women.. my association with social movements was political and ideological. But in my subconscious, since they looked like me, I felt closer to them.**

trained as a Montessori teacher. She set up a school for a group of industrialists which later became very successful. This also coincided with the Quit India Movement. She would always tell me, "Never perpetuate injustice and do not ever tolerate injustice. Be dignified and ensure that you get your labour's worth. In case you are in any trouble, just come to me, your basic survival needs will be taken care of." Everybody else was calling me a "paraya dhan"(another's property) since girls are meant to belong to her in-laws' family and are always reminded of being outsiders. But here she was, my grandma, who made me feel welcome. She was a primary school teacher and I think that made all the difference.

Grandma also disliked the way we mimicked our south Indian neighbour who spoke English in a particular way. She would advise us to respect all communities. I think she was a huge influence in our lives. All around us, in Patidar families, girls and women were victims of barbaric violence. But all the women in our house married outside the typical Patel families. Girls were not killed, raped or tortured in our family because all of us were so much against

these crude patriarchal practices.

I entered politics at a very young age when I was in the 10th standard. I was introduced to facts about the Vietnam War and to the writings of Prof. A R Desai. I was often told that Patidars are very crude and they are agriculturists and can never be cultured. But here we learnt to criticize the education system and were encouraged to write our opinions about the present educational system in our vacations. I wrote my one page note and took it to Dr. Desai. He read through it and gave me a feedback. I felt so honored that this great man, such a well-known sociologist, had recognized me as a thinking being.

After I became politically active in Left politics, I discovered that the New Left political activism thrived mainly on intellectual arrogance. I soon got disillusioned. The way they were treating women as a functionary, as fundraisers and foot-soldiers... that kind of equation

was not acceptable to me. But I worked with them because they were interested in the processes of social transformation. I started looking up for other influences. In 1972, leaders of Anti-Price Rise Agitation came to Baroda to tell us about black marketing, corruption, inflation. It was my duty to receive these women at the railway station. Like any other new volunteer, I offered to carry their bags. But these women refused saying that I was a volunteer and I should concentrate on doing my work. They carried themselves with a lot of dignity and interacted with us for over three days during their stay. I think this was a very important influence of my life.

Social Movements have played a very important role in my life. My first public appearance was in a rally for the "Stop Vietnam War" movement. I was put on a big stage before an audience of 5000 workers. That event completely changed me and my dress code too! I was always a shy, diffident person who was always the teachers' pet. I could never say No to others. But now I had become fearless. I was trained by my party in difficult tasks - cycle to a village 10 kms away from Baroda, hold meetings after the third shift of workers which got over at midnight. Even the local mafia would let me off saying, "She is a good person; she is doing some good work. Let her be." So this was the environment in which I worked.

I disciplined myself into writing. Social movements also introduced me to more women who were like me. They were dark skinned tribals - adivasis and women from different class and castes...and so different from the upper caste, fair women in Brahmin families. It was easier for me to touch them, talk to them... So, my association with social movements was political and ideological. But in my subconscious, since they looked like me, I felt closer to them. So anywhere I went, I would stay with other workers in the union offices. I never felt that I was not one of them.

I also must admit that all the patriarchs of my left political party were extremely nurturing. I found the feminine side of these male political bosses. They never viewed women as sex objects. They would treat women as intellectual beings and discuss with them accordingly. All these people are now old and dying - they were my mentors and introduced me to Marxism. The camps organized by Seva Dals which I attended played a very important role in making us less individualistic, having faith in collective wisdom and team work. I think abstract ideological pontification is one thing and living the ideology in real lives is a challenge and we learnt to do that. I was fortunate.

### **Gangaben Baria, community organiser, member - Forum against Oppression of Women**

*Gangaben Baria has been actively working for women in the dalit communities in Mumbai and also identifies with FAOW. She was once elected to the caste panchayat of her community. She is basically concerned about issues faced by all women and has participated in several regional and national meetings and conferences of autonomous women's groups. Many have appreciated and have benefitted from her capacity for hardwork and resourcefulness as well as her keen sense of humour. Baria acquired a college degree as a private student but remained at a non-teaching level in a Municipal school. She is happy that at least she is appointed a teacher at their community development centre.*

Excerpts from her story:

Everybody here spoke in English, but I will speak in Hindi. This is about my life, I am Ganga. Let me begin with my childhood. It is a long story. My mother was the second wife of my father. I was born after two sisters. Some sadhu had told my mother that after my birth, she will never beget a son. My mother was closer to my other sisters since they were good-looking. I was not, so she kept aloof from me. She did not love me. We were eight sisters in all, of which 4 died. Today, my parents are no more. But I remember the situation in which our mother took care of us. Get ready to watch the movie of my life!

My parents did not get along well, so my mother used to stay mostly with her brother and mother. All of us sisters used to stay with her. Then, she decided to move out from her mother's place. But she did not take me along with her. I stayed back with my grandma and she was everything to me. But then, she had her own life too. My mother was a sweeper with the BMC and my father was a proof-reader in a newspaper and he also was a member of Hind Samaj Sevak. Till today, people know me as Walji master (my father)'s daughter. He used to run a crèche over there and he was a very respected person. But I grew up missing my father and mother.

**My self-esteem was low..I had no confidence in myself. I was forbidden to talk eye-to-eye with boys, especially boys from other communities. But I did not feel this was wrong. This was the situation in which I met my future "Life-Boy"! And thus, I started my romantic life.**

In school, boys used to tease me, "Ganga, the old woman." I used to complain to my father. He said "My daughter, you are the same Ganga that flows from Haridwar". That completely changed me! Like the river Ganga, I too will never grow old! Mother never liked me. Whenever she came to visit granny, I would hide myself. She was like a lion. Even today when I look at her photograph, it seems like she is going to roar. I was sure that she would only scold me...as if I could only do wrong. My self-esteem was low because of this. I had no confidence in myself. I was forbidden to talk eye-to-eye with boys, especially boys from other communities. But I did not feel this was wrong. This was the situation in which I met my future "Life-Boy"! And thus, I started my romantic life.

I was a regular at the Welfare Centre in my community. I was a part of the Scouts and Guides. I used to like the activities - camping, scouting, trekking, going for camping, and being with other girls. When I was around 17-18 years old, I fell in love with Devshi. But he was quite scared of my uncle and my mother. And hence he could never muster the courage to talk to them (asking for my hand in marriage). When my uncle came to know about my relationship, he started to drop and fetch me from school. When I came into class 11, my mother clearly told me that she was not willing to support my studies any further. But I wanted to study, so I started making paper bags which gave me 2 rupees for every 10 kilos of bags. I used to make 10 kilos everyday and made 60 rupees in a month. That's how I reached till HSC class. But I could not pass my exams because of various other pressures at home.

One day, I felt that I had enough and I just ran away from home! I ran to Devshi who stayed two bus-stops away from my house. But he clearly said, "I don't have the courage to face your uncle." I came back. The teacher at the Welfare Centre felt sorry for me and gave me an address where I could find myself a job. But I received no response from there too. Meanwhile back home, there was quite an uproar, "Ganga has run away with Devshi"! I went to my mother who advised me to tell everyone that I was forced to run away at knife-point. But I felt this was wrong. How could I tell a lie? I made an excuse and ran away from there to the Agripada police station, where my uncle and mother were waiting for me! Devshi ditched me, but I was truly in love with him. I had no option but to go back to my uncle and aunt. But at the police station, my uncle accused me of theft. I got wild and said that I didn't want to go with them. I told them to put me in an Ashram (a shelter home

for women)! I was like the heroine in the film "Julie" with my 'umbrella skirt', high heels and a huge hairbun. I refused to go with my relatives. But they managed to convince the police into me going with them wherever they were taking me. They pushed me into a taxi and on the way my aunt told me that she would put a lizard in my food. I thought to myself, "Oh, I am going to die!" I jumped out of the car. It was around midnight. Mill workers from the last shift gathered around me and I told them what had happened. The public supported me and took me back to the police station. As I was feeling quite cold, I asked the policemen if there would be a warm bed in jail. They assured me of one! I was taken to the Saat Raasta Police Station where a line of bed bugs awaited me! I can never forget that time...

Some women came near me and started asking me questions that I couldn't understand, "Which lane were you caught from? Are you new in the business?" Later, I realized they were sex workers. Then I was shifted to a children's home, where I stayed with a lot of girls. But these girls were from villages. They were accused of various offences, such as elopement, attempted suicide, theft etc. We could barely understand each other's language. But we stayed together as friends. Since I was educated, I did not need to attend the literacy class, but I was asked to wash all the utensils. A lot of work but I did it since I had no option. Meanwhile Devshi came with my school diary where it was written that I was above 18 years of age. Thus I could not be kept in the children's home.

I was shifted to a home for women at Worli. Here too I was bullied by seniors. They would make me run errands. But I made a good friend there who taught me to refuse to be bullied. I was plotting about how to run away! On Mondays, they took us for temple visits. My friend knew about this but I told her to keep away else she too would get caught. At the temple, when everyone was praying, I quietly slipped off. When everyone reached back, they found one girl was missing! I ran all the way to Mahalaxmi station where I met Devshi's brother and gave him a message. Mind you, there were no mobiles at that time! Devshi, my "LifeBoy" came to fetch me. He took me to his aunt's house and the very next day, we got married by Arya Samaj rites and registered the marriage in court. I really don't know how all this happened so soon!

Look at me now! I got married, we came back to our area and started living with Devshi's family: his parents, brother-in-law, sister-in-law. I had to get along with all of them. But one day, they had a tiff with

Devshi and he just left home. Let me tell you something. When things are far away, they look beautiful. But only when you come nearer, you understand the realities. Later on, when we started living alone I understood Devshi better. Devshi always supported me in whatever I wanted to do, whether it was studying further or working on women's issues. He gave me a lot of freedom to do things and move ahead in life. Meanwhile, I also did my BA in History. I work as a peon in the mornings, in a school. I like to talk, I am an orator and was elected to our dalit community's central body. From 1989, I have been a teacher at the Welfare Centre in evenings. All that I had learnt at the Scout and Guide Centre as a child came handy! I tried a lot for promotion in the BMC school system but in vain. Never mind, I got quite a few other promotions in life! But soon after this, Devshi started getting mentally affected by all this. The male-dominated society started telling Devshi, "Your wife has gone out of control. A lot of women used to come to my house at night with problems of domestic violence and other issues. I would go and spend nights with them, I would frequent the police station and take up (women's)cases. That is why men in the society started getting upset with me. They managed to influence Devshi. After that, life became a nightmare for me. I spent the rest of my life between hospitals and police stations. But I can say that I have always taken life in my stride. My father had always taught me not to ever step back from whatever we have committed to. When I started working in the Nari Atyachar Virodhi Manch/ Forum Against Oppression of Women, I learnt how to talk to the police. There are the women who made me what I am today. I still remember all these women. I never let my personal problems affect my work, because then what will happen to all those women who come to me for help?

I know what I am all about. I am Ganga, named after the ever nourishing river.

**I jumped out of the car. It was around mid-night. Mill workers from the last shift gathered around me and I told them what had happened. The public supported me and took me back to the police station. As I was feeling quite cold, I asked the policemen if there would be a warm bed in jail. They assured me of one! I was taken to the Saat Raasta Police Station where a line of bed bugs awaited me! I can never forget that time...**

**Daivashala Giri , trainer/consultant on health and gender, Badlapur, District Thane**

*Daivashala Giri comes from a nomadic tribe and was married off early. She chose to pursue further studies and follow a career in school teaching. When circumstances brought this to an end, she became very active in social education and training. Using all her talents and training in music, craft and teaching, she has developed her own modules in health and gender training and is a much sought after resource person in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Giri educated herself through distance education. She has a master's degree in sociology.*

Excerpts from her speech:

I am from Latur. I have lived my life well outside in public. Never inside a home! Never before I have spoken so openly...I have a lot of stories within me. It is only now that I have become conscious about these stories. What I am talking about right now is just the trailer. I cannot show you the entire film right now.

My mother never went to school. I have also never seen my parents displaying affection for each other. I found this was different in other houses and I often thought why is it like this in my house? And there was no question at all of any display of love towards the children! I was the eldest and I had three brothers. But my brothers always got the best of things. I, despite being the only girl child in the family, never received any attention. My mother lived in a world of her own, I guess since she did not get any love from my father. I used to be very angry with her thinking "What kind of woman is she, thinking only about herself?" But today, I feel she was right. At least she did not allow herself to be suffocated by the reality around her. But it took me 50 years to realise that. My mother faced a lot of violence. We were also beaten often. Today I can open my mouth and tell my mother, "You have hit me quite a lot in my childhood". I have only recently learnt to speak up. But I would say she was quite ahead of her times. She never believed in God, nor performed any religious rituals. Never kept a fast either. Compared to other mothers around me, I found her to be quite strange. But she was a good woman. She always did a lot of things for me. It is like this. Till today I hate school. I never liked the system of learning in schools. And today, I work in that area - how to teach. That is what I am involved in right now. Once my teacher hit me because I had not done my homework. I was unable to do the homework

because I had not understood the lesson at all. But she hit me and I went home crying. My friend shared this incident with my mother. She quietly packed me off to bed. Next day, she readied me for school and confronted my teacher. "Who has hit my daughter? Don't you dare hit my daughter ever again!" It was then that I realized that nobody should ever hit me again. And this was the same mother who used to get beaten even till the age of 65 by my father, who was even older than her. Two years ago, when I visited them after a long time, I heard a loud noise. My father had kicked my mother and she had fallen down. I was so enraged that I pushed him off. I felt a bit bad too about pushing him. I have never looked at my father in his eyes out of respect for him, but I did that day. And I told him, "Don't you dare hit her again..." The violence stopped after that. Small thing, but it worked.

I never liked school, but I always managed to pass. Teachers themselves used to give us extra time to write our exam papers so that we could pass. Till today, I am unable to learn English because my English teacher had once hit me very hard. That scar remains, and I am not able to remove it even if I want to. I would have failed, but somehow I managed to reach Class 10 and complete schooling. I would have gladly stopped school, had somebody asked me to do so. But the only good thing that my father did was to push me into continuing with school and that is how I reached class 10. My father was happy too since he could now tell everybody how he was educating his daughter. I barely got 35 marks out of 100 in English!

I was married at the age of 16 and came to Bombay. It was in Mumbai that I saw a different world altogether: women going out with their handbags early in the mornings and earning money! This was a new experience for me. A lot of people asked me who my idol is. For me, it is the women in Mumbai and the sex workers. That is because I had spent my entire childhood staying next door to sex workers and have observed them very closely. Early mornings, these women

**Once my teacher hit me because I had not done my homework..Next day, my mother confronted my teacher. "Who has hit my daughter? Don't you dare hit my daughter ever again!" It was then that I realized that nobody should ever hit me. And this was the same mother who used to get beaten even till the age of 65 by my father..**

used to wear nice saris, look at people straight into the eye and walk with a lot of confidence. But the other women used to look down when walking. So, I used to wonder which one of them is the 'good' woman? They always had money to buy ice-cream while we were always poor. It was from them that I learnt to walk with confidence, looking people in the eye.

Also, from the Mumbai women, I learnt to study! Looking at them, I felt I too have to do something. I took admission in a D Ed course to get a diploma in primary teacher training. This was the first time in my life that I passed without copying! I got good marks too. It was very difficult for me to appear for my D Ed exams, being as I was from a rural background. There were many other girls but I was focused on myself and never felt scared. It was in that college that I gained a lot of confidence. In a Rangoli competition where a lot of girls from different language mediums had participated, I won the first prize. That gave me a lot of confidence. All kinds of girls came to congratulate me. All those who had earlier never even looked in my direction were now coming to wish me. I was very happy. From that day onwards, I have never looked back. I don't copy anymore. Not in my studies, not in my life. I live my life the way I want!

***".. the language of law needs demystification.. What do the laws have to say about the overall growth and development of girls and their participation in the wider society? .. while there are many laws to protect girls and women, they are not implemented.. This should change."***

- Sushma, 17 years  
Member of youth group - Vacha

*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*



IV

# Girls at Margins



**Hasina Khan, gender consultant and independent researcher - Aawaaz-E-Niswan, Mumbai**

*Born into a conservative Muslim family, Hasina began to work by the age of 14 and managed to save enough money to continue her education, ultimately attending university and becoming a freelance educator. She belongs to Awaz-E-Niswan, an organization that was set up in 1985 in the ghettoized and marginalized Muslim communities of Mumbai. It was initially known as a Muslim women's group, but gradually it has come to be recognized as a general women's group.*

Excerpts:

We need to place girls in the Muslim community in a larger context. Apart from the National context of ghettoization, we find that there is shortage of schools, public places like gardens, basic services like health, hospitals, sanitation are missing... understanding this context will us better understand issues of Muslim girls. Friends of Muslim girls ask them in trains, buses, "Why do you wear the burkha? Why don't you venture out of your house after dark? Why do you get married so early? Why don't you go out on your own"? Before answering such questions they need to understand whether they have any right to ask such questions, to ask why you are not like 'us'? The context to be understood is that there are continuous and systematic attempts in this country that are against the progress of the Muslim community. It is in this environment that fundamentalism establishes itself. This also brings forth the control over women of our community - especially on how they should behave, what kind of clothes they should wear, what friends they should choose, how far they should venture. The safety and security of girls are decided by people who call themselves the representatives of the community. These particular representatives and other political representatives at the National Level connive to define and dictate roles to girls and women. It is important to know how they work together.

Let me explain this to you with an example. In 2004, Ishrat Jahan was murdered in an encounter.

**Friends of Muslim girls ask them in trains, buses, "Why do you wear the burkha? Why don't you venture out of your house after dark? Why do you get married so early? Why don't you go out on your own"? Before answering such questions, I say, they need to understand whether they have any right to ask such questions, to ask why you are not like 'us'?**

I have prepared this presentation for students and I can see that there are a lot of students in this hall. I want to tell the students it is very important to understand how the television and media work and follow the thought processes of the right-wing media. Ishrat was a young girl from Mumbra, a distant suburb of Mumbai. It was said that some young groups were planning to attack Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and that Ishrat was one of them. This was sensationalized a lot. Ishrat was a girl and only 19-year-old. Right-wing political leaders said, "Look, to what extent people can go to kill Narendra Modi!" We have been fighting ever since that at least this should be recognized as a fake encounter. But look at the context. Mumbra is an area where people from Mumbai moved into after the riots of 1993 - 94. A creek adjoins this area and there was no place to live. But this was where people settled down. Muslims made this their home. But when the Ishrat encounter happened, people started asking, "How is it possible that a girl like Ishrat was able to come out from a community like this one?" The entire environment turned against girls. People said they would not send their girls out - not to study, to learn, to work or for anything. Girls were put into confines. That was what Ishrat's case did for the girls of the community.

The case also had another impact. The local leaders in the community came forward to fight Ishrat's case. The person who took up Ishrat's case went on to become the MLA of this region. People were happy that at least this non-Muslim MLA had tried to take up Ishrat's case. This was a very positive development. It also happens that people who have been fighting Ishrat's case till now have problems with the Centre for Girls run at the Reh-e-Numa Library. The issue is that the Library has a lot of books by Ismat Chughtai and Sadat Hasan Manto that also talk about sex. There are books there which inspire you to learn, dream, live life the way you want and realize your dreams. The girls sometimes paint on the walls, they dance, they sing, have fun. This place is being used by girls in the age group of 14-25 years in different ways. This place is an eyesore for people who are fighting Ishrat Jahan's case.

**..we are an eyesore because we talk about the rights of the girls in Mumbra. This is the situation of the marginalized within the marginalized..We are fighting for a change in the Muslim Personal Law: the *Shariat* which says that a girl can be married off once she is 12 or 13 years of age. People traveling in buses and trains ask, "Why are Muslims like this"? But they will never ask the State why it is silent about this law.**

They sent some person to find out what the organization does. And then they slandered the organization's name in an Urdu newspaper. They said that this organization promotes homosexuality; that they mislead women and tell them not to get married and so on...

I would like to question these so-called progressive leaders of the case. They are okay with the leaders in Gujarat but our group in Mumbra is an eye-sore to them! And we are an eyesore because we talk about the rights of the girls in Mumbra. This is the situation of the marginalized within the marginalized. We do try to fight for the rights of such people. At an individual and organizational level, people have been trying to raise issues. The Sachar Committee has already pointed to the rampant and open discrimination and injustice being meted out to the Muslim Community at various levels. The situation is still the same after decades of struggle. But we feel it is very important to understand and expose the truth about the people who are leaders at the national and local levels and are hand in glove with each other to maintain the status quo.

Our country has an Act which talks about the prevention of the child marriage: the Child Marriage Act. However, different religions have their own Personal Laws. We are fighting for a change in the Muslim Personal Law: the Shariat which says that a girl can be married off once she is 12 or 13 years of age. The state has not said anything about this. People traveling in buses and trains ask, "Why are Muslims like this"? But they will never ask the State why it is silent about this law. The State on its part will never talk about such issues. These are questions about the Muslim identity. This is also a question for the Feminist Movement and for those with the feminist perspective about how we can carry this issue forward.

### **Madhavi Kumar, In-Charge CEO - ADAPT, Mumbai**

*Madhavi Kumar made the presentation on behalf of Malini Chhib, acting CEO of ADAPT (Able, Disable All People Together - formerly 'The Spastics Society of India'). Malini who has cerebral palsy couldn't come since the YMCA does not have the necessary infrastructure. Malini considers herself a feminist. She feels that unlike her own parents, who formed the Spastics Society, most families cannot afford to take care of their disabled children. Through ADAPT, she works on issues of disabled children.*

Excerpts from her speech:

Madhavi Kumar introduced ADAPT which works on issues of

disabled people. Her presentation was about the status of disabled women and girls in the country and looked at the triple marginalization of the disabled - the poor, disabled and a woman. A door to door survey in both rural and urban areas helped identify disabled children and their situation. It was found that especially disabled girl children have to face a lot of stigma. Most families don't even wish to acknowledge the existence of a disabled girl child and the kind of disability that she has.

She said that as per the Census of India (2001) there are about 21 million disabled people in India, but real figures would be closer to 100 million which the government does not recognise. Disabled women are vulnerable, and in most cases, poor. They are marginalized in terms of socio-economic parameters and as per their health status. Girl children are not given enough food to eat and are left to die. Madhavi presented the case study of a child who was located during the mapping process. Her brother actually wanted to know about an orphanage where she could be sent since she would do nothing but play all day. On the other hand, the girl wanted to be with her family! Madhavi felt that there is a lot that can be done for adolescent girls like her. The other case she mentioned was about an adolescent girl who received care and treatment from the organization. The organization is also trying to connect disabled children to the services that are already available for them.

Madhavi made a power-point presentation about Malini's childhood and the challenges that she faced while growing up. Malini believes that disabled children need an inclusive environment especially in schooling where they can learn with other children. She feels that given timely support, education and opportunities for development, any child can make good progress in life.

**..as per the Census of India (2001) there are about 21 million disabled people in India, but real figures would be closer to 100 million which the government does not recognise. Disabled women are vulnerable, and in most cases, poor.**

**Dr Putul Sathe, Department of English, SNDT University, Mumbai**

*Currently a faculty member of the English Dept., SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, Dr. Putul Sathe's research interests are, amongst others, postcolonial and gender studies.*

## Excerpts:

Putul Sathe looked at the construction of girlhood in the text of two Dalit women writers. Her paper focused on Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) as narratives of resistance. Putul emphasized that these writings are voices of previously silenced subaltern women, which are trying to create emancipatory spaces. As narratives of resistance they are small voices located on the margin of social and cultural imagination, because not only are they dalit writings, but also written by women, which makes them doubly marginalised. Her paper was an effort to read the construction of Dalit girlhood as an ideological site, where humiliation and hurt had been articulated. Excerpts:

Within the field of autobiographical writing, women's autobiographies emerge as a site of difference, since they provided an alternative to the 'maleness' of most such writing. Autobiographical writings have been "one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject" (Anderson 2007 :87). In the context of women's writing in India, women could write about only a few things in the absence of a sustained, high level of formal education. Beginning in the 19th century, it was high caste Hindu women, who started writing autobiographies which were located in the new social condition resulting from reforms and legislative innovation in the public sphere. Hence the autobiographies revolved around sati, widow remarriage, child marriage, divorce and the age of consent. Women's autobiographies then became site, where tensions were articulated resulting from colonial modernity. The dominant ideology of nineteenth century cultural nationalism celebrated India's spiritual superiority over material West and remained silent about caste/gender based humiliation and was not concerned about racial humiliation. The autobiographies of upper caste women have to be located within this framework. The question of caste was invisible in their writings. Sharmile Rege in her study of autobiographies in Marathi written by upper caste women has drawn attention to this

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erasure. In this background, dalit women's autobiographies through their struggles and literary representations have questioned the genealogy of Indian feminism where the position of caste has not been articulated, and drew attention to the relationship between feminism and caste's complex history.

Baby Kamble's text can be located within the existing genre of protest writing in Marathi. According to Maya Pandit, the translator of Baby Kamble's autobiography, this work is probably the first autobiography by a dalit woman in Marathi. Most of the dalit autobiographies were written by men and they were for a mixed readership of dalit and non-dalit readers. This narrative on the other hand is located in the tradition of direct self-assertion. However it is important to note that throughout the narrative the adult voice and the voice of the girl-child have been woven together. Details about the community life have been represented through the lens of the girl-child, but the experience of untouchability has been articulated by the adult. Therefore we have description about the Mahawada being told to us by the girl child and the experience of humiliation by the adult author. The construction of dalit girlhood then emerges as a site of resistance, and also as a mode of understanding the caste system from the point of view of a gendered untouchable identity. It is important to point out that the construction of Dalit girlhood moves beyond the liberal romantic understanding of childhood, where childhood is seen and perceived in a romantic primordial tradition. The text describes the childhood of Baby Kamble as part of community life, of the struggles of dalit society, of celebration of festivals and rituals performed at dalit weddings. It is looked at as being a part of the impact of Ambedkarite movement, of the plight of dalit women and of the world of the dalit labouring body. The recounting of humiliation by the girl-child is along the multiple axes of gender, class and caste, and it is not a victim narrative, rather it is a mode of resistance to the hegemony of caste system. This recounting of caste based humiliation by the girl-child provides for reading of resistance and an understanding of caste based violence.

**It is important to point out that the construction of Dalit girlhood moves beyond the liberal romantic understanding of childhood, where childhood is seen and perceived in a romantic primordial tradition. The text describes the childhood of Baby Kamble as part of community life, of the struggles of dalit society, of celebration of festivals and rituals performed at dalit weddings.**

In Urmila Pawar's autobiography, there are many recountings of the narrator as a child experiencing caste based humiliation. One of them is the moment, when the narrator wakes up to the implication of being a member of a low caste. When Pawar, as a girl, would go to deliver the baskets to her mother's customers, she would be made to stand outside their houses at the threshold. Pawar would then put the baskets down and the customers would "sprinkle water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would touch them" and would "drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me".

This leaves the dominant groups crippled, scientifically and epistemologically. Central to both the texts, the representation of Dalit community life viewed through the prism of the girl-child, is the articulation of a dalit feminist standpoint. This dalit gendered discourse has provided a critique of the failure of dominant groups to critically and systematically interrogate their advantaged situation in terms of knowledge production.

### **Robin Chaurasiya, co-founder - Kranti, Mumbai**

*Robin Chaurasiya co-founded Kranti, an organisation to empower trafficked girls and sex workers, in 2009 in Mumbai. Kranti is a healing home that works with daughters of sex workers.*

Excerpts:

In other homes for daughters of sex workers, girls receive education till the age of 18 and are then married off or repatriated back to the red light areas. Thus, the girls constantly face the threat of being trafficked.

Kranti as a healing home gives a lot of individual attention to the inmates. There is a lot of discussion about what they want to do in their lives, in contrast to other organizations where girls are referred to as "wahan ki hain, kabhi kuch nahi kar payegi." (She is from that area, will never amount to much). It is as if they are doomed to a life of being a sex-worker once they grow up. The question to be asked is what is it that makes an empowered girl? Actually, what empower them are the enormous hardships they face! Robin mentioned that Kranti is all about what it means to be a girl, dalit, poor and daughter of a sex worker at that. These different levels of marginalization make for amazing life stories she felt.

Kranti works around (a) formal education, (b) informal education:

extracurricular activities, travel, discussions about films and others, (c) weekly counseling, (d) social justice education and (e) volunteering and leadership opportunities. Three areas of focus for Kranti are: "Rescue, Repatriate, Rehabilitate". The girls can stay in Kranti as long as necessary or till they complete their education and become independent. Kranti believes that their girls are special and will be leaders 'because' of their background and experience rather than 'despite' it. Kranti invests a lot in building the self-esteem of girls. Kranti helps them to get out of their trauma and become stronger individuals.

Robin talked about 14 year olds who cannot read or write because they have studied in schools with languages they don't follow. Kranti involves the girls in a lot of activities including participating in theatre and protest marches. It also has a social justice education programme that includes a range of subjects around class, caste, religion, capitalism etc. The girls do about four weeks of work around a selected topic through various activities like theatre, debate, lectures, etc.

Robin started this organization because she felt that "everyone was looking at the wrong people for bringing about change." She felt that it is the girls themselves who can bring about the change. Kranti creates opportunities for the girls to understand their own selves, reasons behind their status and how they can themselves bring about a change in the situation. Robin also shared incidents of discrimination that the girls have faced from the slum community in its neighbourhood, particularly because of the background of the girls.

She showcased the activities of Kranti through an audio-visual presentation which showed the girls living, learning, having fun, reaching out to their peers and working as change agents themselves. She also shared stories of girls who have been able to appear for competitive exams that will help them move towards better careers they have defined for themselves.

For Robin, the following are the challenges for Kranti :

- Formal Schooling: grade levels behind age or getting enrolled in school
- Girls without documents (birth certificate, etc)
- Outsiders : middle class residential building society coming up in a slum
- Neighbourhood violence and bullying (including in school)

- Gender based violence on streets
- Need for healing from past sexual, physical, emotional abuses
- Never enough facebook and phone time
- Boyfriends/ relationships
- Harsher treatment for girls living together compared to boys
- Stigma vs. empowerment through identification with sex workers
- Developing self-esteem, positive self-image despite outside negative messaging.

**I learnt that it is okay even if a girl falls in love with another girl. I learnt that it is normal to have a relationship like that. I did not know about this before.**

### **Aparna and Sapna, girls associated with Kranti spoke about their organisation**

Excerpts:

It is the best organization that I have ever been to and I have stayed elsewhere too. I cannot describe in words what I feel for Kranti. I feel that my future is secure and I am very happy here. In other NGOs, girls are allowed to stay only till 18 years of age and then are married as if their future is only about getting married, having kids and cooking! But in Kranti, I have learnt a lot. Girls can do much more than this. Learning to cycle and ride a bike may be simple things for others, but for us, it means a lot. That is what we have learnt here... I really don't have much to say. I hope you understand how overwhelmed I feel right now!

We have been to Goa and we also went to Kashmir. We keep making such trips where we get to do trekking and other outdoor activities. Robin didi takes us to cool places in winter and warm places in summer! She wants us to experience everything... Here, I learnt that it is okay even if a girl falls in love with another girl. I learnt that it is normal to have a relationship like that. I did not know about this before. Words won't suffice if I have to speak about Kranti!

### **Raheen Jumami, founding member - Open Your Arms, Mumbai**

*Raheen is a clinical psychologist and has worked with NGOs. She heads an organization called "Open Your Arms" which offers psychological support to individuals. Raheen is also a radio jockey.*

Excerpts from her talk:

I am a clinical psychologist and therapist and have been associated with NGOs since the past 8 years. I consider myself lucky to have had opportunities of working with special groups. At 21, I worked with a group of sex workers. I spent a lot of time with them and learnt a lot from them. In fact, I have never learnt so much elsewhere! In 2007, after having worked with many organizations and groups, I attended a gender training organized by Vacha. After that, I considered setting up an organization with like-minded people around issues related to Mental Health. And thus, "Open Your Arms" was born. I would like to highlight the work done by OYA around Mental Health and Girls at Margins.

We agree with the definition of mental health as given by World Health Organisation. We have simplified it further and we believe that mental health gives equal importance to emotions. It is not enough to be physically fit. In case some people are not able to deal with their experiences properly, these will stay with them and unsettle them. We follow an integrated approach in the sense that when we listen to a child, we don't look at her problems in isolation. In case the child is from a shelter home, we try and work with the staff, other inmates and even the cleaners working in the home. That is what we mean by an integrated approach. With our years of experience, we have built a module wherein we use creative therapy along with psychotherapy in our work.

We work with girls from low income groups, from rescue homes and especially with daughters of sex workers. We have come to understand why the term "Girls at Margins" is used for them. I will focus on our work with girls from rescue homes. We were enthusiastic when we approached the rescue home. We had a lot of ideas. But when the girls actually started speaking up, they were so traumatized that we got lost. It was tough to find a starting point for our work. As their case histories began to unfold, we started wondering whether we would ever be able to handle so many different issues, all present at the same time in a single person! We found that the girls have lost their confidence and self-esteem. The girls live in fear. The girls often cry because the fear refuses to leave them despite their many attempts to overcome it. There are a lot of stress disorders and lots of emotional issues among these girls. When these issues came pouring out, it was difficult for us to decide which one to heal first!

As a mental health psychologist, one has to read every case history thoroughly, reflect on it carefully and then prioritize the issues that need to be healed first. A lot depends on how you use your skills to deal with the child. We ourselves face a lot of stress and go for counseling sessions once in three months. But the most challenging of all processes is to help the girls build trust. It is difficult because their trust has been broken many times in the past by people whom they knew and trusted. Sometimes we spend almost 3 months on a case because till the child develops trust, she cannot be healed completely. Besides, as you would know, these girls do not have any support system that will encourage them and look after them. Girls from families are safer in this regard...

These are some of the challenges that we face every day and we try to deal with them in our own ways. After years of working with a range of groups, we have evolved a different approach of work. Our creative therapies need us to approach the girls as friends who will sing, dance and play with them. This level of friendship helps the healing process. We prepare tailor-made projects for different organizations as per their needs. All the speakers here have said that everything begins from childhood and adolescence. If that foundation is strong, life in the future progresses beautifully; if during that phase, people have allowed you to be confident, liberal and free and provided you with education and valued you... That is why we focus on building a child-friendly environment. Hence, we have a lot of parenting workshops to enable them understand their children better.

As psychologists, we start getting emotionally involved. It is here that we need to compartmentalize ourselves and to remain emotionally detached. Else, there is the possibility of getting scarred..

We focus on self-love because that is at the core of the therapeutic process. We do a lot of workshops around this. This is what we believe in and we try and share it with as many people as possible.

**We work with girls from low income groups, from rescue homes and especially with daughters of sex workers. We have come to understand why the term “Girls at Margins” is used for them.. As their case histories began to unfold, we started wondering whether we would ever be able to handle so many different issues, all present at the same time in a single person!**

**Sneha Pandit Dube, Secretary - Vidhayak Sansad, Virar, District Thane**

*Sneha Pandit Dube is currently board member of Vidhayak Sansad, an organisation working on empowerment of tribals, dalits and women in rural areas of Maharashtra.*

Excerpts from her talk:

Vidhayak Sansad was established in 1979 by Vivek Pandit and Vidyulata Pandit. It began as an offshoot of Rashtriya Seva Dal where both were involved. I am proud to be their daughter. They have spent their entire lives for the organization and today I have got the opportunity of working in the space that they have built. We work with the marginalized groups, especially the adivasis. Initially, the work was to run Anganwadis and Balwadis. It was then that we discovered that a lot of injustice was being perpetuated on adivasis for years, especially bonded labour. Shramjeevi Sanghatana was established in 1982 because it was not possible to fight on all these issues through only one organization. The Sanghatana works with working women, bonded labourers, landless farmers and other marginalized groups. It works in the tribal and urban belts of Thane, Mumbai, Pune and Raigad.

I will focus on our work with women and girls. The Sanghatana has been working with women right from its inception. During meetings, we observed that only men would attend them. We had to go and pull the women out from their homes. Also alcoholism among men and wife-beating were common problems. When asked to retaliate, the women would tell us that they have been given an extra rib by God to bear the beatings of their husbands! That is how we started workshops for women to help them understand this issue. Women were taught about bodies - both male and female, different parts and functions. It was through these workshops that women started to occupy leadership roles. Today, women have become so confident that they negotiate with the police, collector and other officers on their own. The office-bearers of the Sanghatana are all women.

In 2005, the Sanghatana started the "Mahila Thingi", a body that works only on issues of women. This wing focuses on violence against women and other related issues. It also set up savings groups to bring about the economic empowerment of women. As a result, there are now more than 250 Self Help Groups of adivasi and katkari women, involved in various income generating activities. These groups are given trainings about how to access government schemes,

services and demand their rights.

Mahila Thingi also works on the right to education. Young girls in tribal belts perform the role of surrogate mothers. They work at home and in the fields; this work keeps them away from school and learning. Mahila Thingi along with children's group works to bring back out-of-school children into school and ensure that they continue to be in schools. Every year, when the new session of school begins, the Village Committee organizes a festival in schools where all the students are welcomed into a new year of learning. This is very encouraging for children.

During winters, when most of the agricultural activities have wound up, the community generally goes off to brick kilns in search of work. Since they take their children with them, schooling gets adversely affected. To stop this, Mahila Thingi members have started a new initiative. They ask the parents to leave behind their school-going kids with them and for 6 months children stay with Mahila Thingi members and are taken care of by them. Kanta, a member of Mahila Thingi, has 25-30 children each year whose parents migrate in search of work. Their children stay with her and she takes care of them.

In the political sphere, because of Shramjeevi Sanghathana's efforts, a lot of women have come forward to contest and win elections at the Zilla Parishad and in Corporations. We now find a large number of women sarpanches, zilla parishad members and corporators in the Sanghatana. These are the achievements of women. The Sanghatana trains them on how to take up their roles and responsibilities as elected members, effectively.

In the adivasi community, the birth of a girl is not celebrated. But quite a few rituals are performed to welcome the birth of a boy. When Mahila Thingi members get to know about the birth of a girl, they reach the house of the newly born and get the family members to perform rituals to celebrate her birth as well! Also, when a woman is widowed, the community first decks her up, makes her sit next to her husband's

**In the adivasi community, the birth of a girl is not celebrated. But quite a few rituals are performed to welcome the birth of a boy. When Mahila Thingi members get to know about the birth of a girl, they reach the house of the newly born and get the family members to perform rituals to celebrate her birth as well!**

body and then removes all her ornaments one by one. Mahila Thingi members protest against this too. They reach the place and insist that the woman should not be allowed to undergo such a ritual. The Thingi members feel that life for a widowed woman continues even after the death of her husband and there is no need to strip her of all the "shringaar" that she has always done as a woman. The call for rejecting such rituals for widows has received a great response from the community. Today in the Sanghatana, you will not be able to differentiate a widowed woman from the married women.

Every summer during vacations, we organize camps for adolescent girls where they learn about their bodies and their rights. The efforts of the Mahila Thingi are to initiate such camps in every village. Every village runs a "shakha" that children attend and where they participate in various activities with the help of a facilitator. One such facilitator at the young age of 20 was elected the sarpanch because of her contribution to such shakhas.

Elopement is increasing among girls in the age group of 14-17 years. Girls do not realize consequences of their actions. We are not against love marriage but we are definitely against child marriage. The Sanghatana counsels such girls and their families. They are encouraged to return to their families. We are currently preparing for a girls camp that will teach them about their bodies, sex education and their responsibilities in the family and society. We also find that quite a few cases of rape, molestation, pregnancy, illness have been coming up from Ashram Shalas for girls in tribal areas. This forms a core area of work for Mahila Thingi. As in Bhiwandi, where we found that the girls were not being given sanitary napkins, Thingi members reached the school, prepared a panchnama and submitted a report highlighting the gaps in the Ashram school. The school authorities immediately took action and rectified the error. They requested Thingi members to carry out another panchanama and submit a new report to the state. Consequently, the situation of girls, especially in the age group of 14-17 years studying in the Ashram Schools, has improved.

We also run a school for Katkari girls; it is attended by 209 girls. One of the girls Jayashree has completed her class 10 from this school. A group of American film-makers made a film about her titled "Fires in her Heart"; this film won the first nomination in the recent American-Asian Film Festival. We also conduct personality development classes and a girl from that class is here to share her experiences with you. Thank you."

**Jayashree, a girl associated with Vidhayak Sansad spoke about her experiences**

Excerpts:

When I was small, I used to go to school but I would miss quite a few days in between. This affected my studies. It was then that some workers from Mahila Thingi came and told my parents that they should send me to the school in Usgaon where I would get proper education. When Vidyulata tai and Vivek bhau carried out a survey, it was found that many children also work with their parents in the brick kilns. They take care of their younger siblings and hence stay away from school. It was felt that such children should be brought back to schools. Even children of the poor have a right to education just like children from better-off families. Girls, especially from poor families, needed such a school. Therefore, the school in Usgaon was set up where the poor could send their children to study. Today, we enjoy learning computers, music, tailoring and other skills in our school. On Independence Day, the Prime Minister is given the honor of flag hoisting. But in our school, the poorest of the poor child is given this honor of flag hoisting.

**Shalini Mahajan, founding member - LABIA, Mumbai**

*Shalini Mahajan is a writer, researcher, queer feminist activist and creative writing teacher. She is a member of Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA), a queer feminist Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBT) collective in Mumbai. Her research interests are Gender, Sexuality, Feminist Studies, Queer Theory, Crime Fiction and Poetry.*

Excerpts from her talk:

I would like to make a couple of preliminary remarks. I think it is wonderful all that we have heard about different categories of girls growing up in the margins. I will like to speak about gender and sexualities, especially of girls when they are growing up. I think we cannot talk about gender and sexuality without the fabric of family, community, caste, religion, society, etc. All of us know that different kinds of marginalization, different kinds of location have a big role to play in the kind of life people lead. And it is in this social fabric, that I would like to weave in one of the threads - that of gender and sexuality. Some people are marginalized because their gender and sexuality preferences are beyond the normative, the accepted - as in queer people. Then we are also talking about people who are very clearly located in these other fabrics that we are talking

about. That's one thing.

Secondly, I am part of the queer-feminist collective called LABIA - that is Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action. It is a voluntary collective of lesbians and trans-people which has been working in this city since 1995. It has a long history and I will not go into the list of things that we do. It would suffice to say that all I am presenting here is a part of my work. It's about LABIA and about myself and where I locate myself as a person. I am also a member of the Forum Against Oppression of Women. Many of you have met me in Feminist spaces or women's spaces, but I would also like to locate myself here, as a person who does not anymore identify herself as a woman. I identify as gender queer, a transgender, as a person who has never been comfortable identifying herself either as a girl or a woman but did not have the choice of identifying as a boy or a man. Since the last few years I have grown comfortable to tell my friends that I can still be called as Shalini and they may still use the pronoun "She" or use "They" for me, but I don't identify anymore as a woman. So this is where I locate myself.

**All our social institutions work on very binary notions of gender.. I think that it is the time to articulate more and more clearly that binary gender itself is violence. For a lot of people construction of a gender binary; of either being assigned a gender male or a gender female and to have to live that for a lifetime is itself a form of marginalization.**

I think your work, your beliefs, and conflicts reflect in the language that you use. If you say girls, it also means sexualities, but I am at a point when I find it very difficult to use the word "they".

Over the past two years, more and more lived experiences of people are coming out. More and more people are writing and speaking up openly. That brings out a lot more of how gender is constructed by different societies. This is also about people who are assigned gender male at birth or gender female at birth. I think people have been assuming gender. All our social institutions work on very binary notions of gender. Feminists are people who are working with young girls, women and adolescents won't challenge the roles, norms and the ways of being gendered. Also, I think that it is the time to articulate more and more clearly that binary gender itself is violence. For a lot of people construction of a gender binary; of either being assigned a gender male or a gender female and to have to live that for a lifetime is itself a form of marginalization.

I can see that more and more feminists are bringing this into their thought and into their work. All of us who work with different kinds of people need to think about this. The world operates around binary gender as the world operates around patriarchy, class, caste and all these other structures that we have been fighting and talking about. But we should be really fighting this given-ness of the binary gender because that is truly marginalizing. Very clearly when we are speaking of girl-children, we are talking about all those children who have been assigned gender female at birth. There are a lot of people who may be assigned gender male at birth and they may be experiencing girl-hood, but we don't know of their girlhoods. Same for the girls who are assigned gender female but may experience boyhood of which we do not know. We still insist on that they follow the assigned genders.

Institutions that we work in are extremely segregated in this manner. And we need to see what kind of people are falling into this trap. I am going to speak very briefly about three things. The first is about a sense of self. One thing we need to understand that all these people growing up in gender normative roles are from everywhere. You are facing this sense of feeling isolated all the time. There is also the difficulty of being able to connect to other people like them; to be able to speak about their issues. That is one part of it. Suicide attempts and depression are something that I will not go into. There is no understanding about the kind of difficulties that queer adolescents have.

Another thing is that when you look at families, neighbourhoods and schools; these are the only places available for children when they are growing up as places of support, places of expression, and places of learning. And somewhere, schools and families both become institutions which not just enforce these gender binaries, but they also become these institutions that reproduce these norms. So we have gender segregated schools and we need to ask, how much is gender segregation working, whether it is good or bad. We need to find out what it is also doing. Gender segregation is also there in the curricula where segregations are made on the basis of what girls should be learning and what boys should be learning. Dress is the most visible sort of dividing line, which a lot of people have a lot of difficulty with. These spaces then become the most violent spaces for people who are experiencing gender in ways that are beyond the normative. All these norms for queer people start getting enforced at the age of 8 to 10 years. This is along with other changes

of puberty and related pressures. This is an important time for queer people because this is a time when you start thinking about desire, you start articulating what desire is. And at the same time, the pressure on you to behave in a normative manner increases.

This is also the time when the family starts enforcing norms on the child. We also speak about the violence from natal families for queer children. This has been a concern and more and more people have been talking about this. We really need to take this up - all of us from the feminist movement, queer movement, others. All of us need to work on this question of the violence that the natal families themselves do to their children. And to that extent I think questioning the institution of the family itself is crucial. Families are the spaces where you come back to when you don't get social support. So when you don't have the family's support, then what do you have! There is a social push for girls to become what the family wants them want to be. And that really is a big question that we need to ask.

Then the question is how even as we are working on these issues we can work around gender binaries and also which has been already mentioned in this space but I would like to mention once again is about the need for sexuality education that is enabling. We have consistently witnessed a right-wing trend wherein the sexuality education in schools has been taken off. I think all of us who work with young people, who work in educational systems, have to take this up again. I think our campaigns lack this perspective about sexuality education that enables people and gives them some space where the young people can talk about their gender and sexualities.

I will end here, but I would really like to have continued discussions and debates on the issues that I have placed here today."

**Khushboo Kantharia, founding member - Disha, Mumbai**

*Khushboo Kantharia is founder member of Disha, an organisation working on rehabilitation of orphan and destitute girls, Mumbai.*

Excerpts:

I would like to start by asking you a hypothetical question. How would it feel to wake up one day and find yourself in Iceland or China without a Google map to help you find the directions? How will you find your way about? Once, this was not a hypothetical question for me. When I started this organization, I started it because of this question that me and my friend were faced with after leaving the home that we

had stayed in all our lives. After we had turned 18, we were asked to leave, and suddenly we were on our own with no assistance and the burning question for us was, "Where will we stay?" We went around for 18 days in the world outside, wondering where we will stay...It was good that the policeman from the Mumbai Central police station knew us and he would allow us to sleep in the waiting room of the police station. This went on for 18 days. It was like a nightmare. I have been working on this issue for the past 4 years. What I could not understand then, I have begun to understand now. Why is all this happening to us? This country has so many people. But none of them have the time to help resolve the problems of those who are neglected. I personally know 1800 people in this city who cannot prove that they are Indian citizens. This is a reality. How do we work around this?

I don't have fancy degrees and qualifications. I don't feel equipped but I want to work on this issue. I want an answer... I have been trying to rescue my friends who were staying with me in that shelter. It is very painful. These people were with me for a lifetime. Everybody knows this is a problem, so what is the solution...? I think there are some things that need to change. We are trying to work around that. The solution is not to remove girls from one shelter and put them into another. The place where the child lives should be worthy of the child. A shelter home cannot be a place where a bell rings for everything that you need to have. I don't agree with this system. I told a girl, "Take what you want from this." She was amazed. Before this, she did not know that she can also choose! For her, it was never that if blue was her favorite colour, she could take it...Where did this come from? That space where the child was in never asked her what she wanted.

When I am in hospital, I have certain people who come and look after me. They too are like me. We look after each other, since we

**How would it feel to wake up one day and find yourself in Iceland.. without a Google map to help you..? How will you find your way about? Once, this was not a hypothetical question for me..and my friend.. after leaving the home that we had stayed in all our lives. After we had turned 18, we were asked to leave, and suddenly we were on our own with no assistance and the burning question for us was, "Where will we stay?"**

don't have anyone else to care for us. But I think this has become our strength... We stay together and we look after each other. Thank you!"

**Discussions after this session :**

Sonal Shukla said that she felt a sense of shame after listening to Khushboo's narrative for not having identified the existence of a group like hers. She promised to support Disha's initiatives and explore how they can work together. Vibhuti said that in the 80s when she arrived in the city and stayed in the working women's hostel, similar conditions as described by Khushboo existed in the hostel too. And as working women, they fought against this. They demanded for a complete change in rules and regulations of the hostel and also in the relationship between the hostelites and the management. Even Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai has done a study about rescue homes. The study says that the rescue homes have a paternalistic concern. They are humane and kind; ensure that there is no corporal punishment, no violence... But concepts related to equality, decision-making, choices, dialogical approaches are not encouraged. Vibhuti said that she had also volunteered in rescue homes and in the best run homes like Shradda Vihar and St. Catherine's Home. In terms of material things, the film-stars of Mumbai are dumping the best material available into these homes. But the love that Khushboo talked about was missing in these homes.

Raheen Jumami said that this is the point where we begin our work in the shelter home. So far as love is missing, nothing is possible. We try to approach the child in a holistic manner. We were able to do this in one of the rescue homes and hope that other people take it up in other places.

Khushboo added about the life skills programme of Disha which has an emphasis on "either take them out or bring the world inside to them" so that they understand the world outside. Disha also works on a deeply personal level with girls. This is carried out by peers. Two girls sit with each other and work on identifying the milestones and goals in their lives. Disha intervenes when the girl reaches the age of 16, a time when the girl is aware that in another two years she has to move out of the home. Generally, girls are married off or pushed into other quick rescue programmes that do not understand the needs of girls. Disha tries to build a support system for such girls which they call "Disha Parivaar". People come into this system because they want to belong to a family and have nowhere else

to go. If a new person comes, she is welcomed but is asked to deal on her own with the existing inmates. Khushboo and her friends have started this but they want the initiative to run on its own. There are a lot of issues related to legal identity and its proof for which Disha has written a letter to the Prime Minister. Khushboo said that they are moving step by step, learning on the way and taking decisions to the best of their capacities and in ways that they understand the world around them. Disha encourages people to fight their own battles while it functions in the role of a facilitator. They do not believe in "giving". Khushboo said, "Though I don't know how to go about this, we have started working on legal rights issues. We have just begun and hope to progress well."

Anu Salelkar, a member of Vacha team, asked Shalini Mahajan if there were any initiatives happening in Mumbai around adolescent girls and understanding sexualities since gender binaries are reinforced during this age. Shalini emphasized the need for encouraging literature on issues related to gender and sexualities. One such effort is being made by an organization called Nirantar in Delhi. Another organisation Tarshi (Talking about reproductive and sexual health issues) too has a lot of material and most of it is in Hindi as well. Shalini suggested that the audience should take a look at these publications which are written from a different perspective. Also, there is the need to strengthen the campaign against prohibiting sex education in schools.

The child sex ratio has dropped from 945 females per 1000 males in 1991 to 933 females per 1000 males in 2011. (Census of India, 1991 and 2011).

An Indian girl child aged 1-5 years is 75% more likely to die than an Indian boy (UN-DESA data, 2012), making this the worst gender differential in child mortality for any country in the world.

*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*



# Girls taking charge - Empowering Processes



Second day of the Symposium began with a song 'Ladkiyan Hum Nahi Kisi se Kam' written by Meenal Patel for Vacha as part of the global campaign 'One Billion Rising!' (OBR) against violence against women and girls.

Before the first session, girls associated with Vacha presented poems that they had written themselves, on the struggles, triumphs and joys of being a girl :

### अफसाने करूँ कैसे मैं बयाँ

अफसाने करूँ कैसे मैं बयाँ  
साबित करने के लिये नहीं कोई गवाँ।

माँ की पेट सेही सवाल  
था मेरे लड़की होने पर  
सोचके ही घबरा जाती  
क्या होगा बाहर आने पर।

लोगों की कतराती नजरे  
रुला रही थी मुझे।  
जैसे पूछ रही थी  
लड़की ही होके आना था तुझे?

हमेशा मिले वही खिलौने  
बरतन, फ्रॉक, गुडीया।  
बॅट, पॅट, चेस कभी कोई  
नहां लाया।

छाती दिखने से पहले ही  
दुप्पट्टा आ गया छाती पर  
चुप रहना है और नजर  
होनी है ज़मा पर।

एक ही घर में भाई  
को अलग और मुझे  
अलग शिक्षा मिली।

उसे बनाया गया काबिल मर्द  
और मुझे मिला अनचाहा दर्द।।

- दुर्गा

## दीवारें

बचपन से ना किया किसीने स्वीकार  
न जाने कैसे हैं इस समाज के विचार  
जब पैदा हुआ मेरा भाई  
सबके मुहँ में थी मिठाई  
पर मेरी पैदाईश किसी के आखों में ना समाई  
चुल्हा चौका बरतन येह तै रहे काम मेरे  
और भाई मेरा जब चाहे मैदान में खेले  
जैसे मैं बढ़ने लगी परिवार की चिंता  
अपना रुख धरने लगी  
मेरे आने जाने पर मेरे रहने सेहने पर  
पाबंदियाँ पड़ने लगी  
कहीं ना हो मेरी छेड़छाड़ कहीं ना हो मेरा  
रेप  
इसलिए मेरे घर की दिवारों पर इंटे चढ़ने  
लगी  
दिवारों के पीछे सिमट गई मेरी हँसी न जाने  
इस बोझ के तले कहाँ खो गई मेरी खुशी  
सुरक्षा के नाम पर तै हो गया मेरा सफर  
मेरे माईके की दीवारों से मेरा पती का घर  
दीवारों की चौड़ाई दिन ब दिन बढ़ने लगी  
हैं।  
और इस घुटन में मेरी सांस फूलने लगी है।  
पर बस, अब नहीं घुट घुट के मरना।  
इस भारी भक्कम दीवारों में  
एक झरोखा है ढूँढना।

— सबा

## रुकावटों को हम रौंध के चले

जिस दिन माँ की गोदी में मैं आई  
ऊस दिन से मेरी सेहर शुरू हुई  
भले थी मैं प्यारी दुलारी सबकी  
पर नहीं भूलने दिया कि मैं थी लड़की  
कोई है जैन, बौद्ध, सुन्नी या सिया  
पर लड़कियों के लिये सबका एक ही  
नज़रिया।  
कि लड़कियाँ रहे घर में  
मुस्कुराहटों को सिमटे  
ना आगे बढ़े, वह  
सीना ताने नज़रें उठाके  
जमाना की तना बढ़े है आगे  
तो क्यें लड़कियाँ संभाल हैं बंदिशों के धागे  
हमेशा सवाल क्यें हमपे उठाये जाते  
कि लड़कियाँ होती है सबसे पीछे  
हमारे मंजिलों पर क्यें अनगिनत ताले लगाए  
जाते  
दुपट्टा लो, चुप्पी रखो, नज़रें झुकाओ, धीरे  
हँसो  
ऐसे कायदे कानून रोज सिखाए जाते  
तो आप ही बताओ  
कैसे हमारी मंजिलों को पाते  
पर अब इन रुकावटों को हम रौंध के चले  
चले यह सोचके कि हम कुछ आगे बढ़ें।

- स्नेहा

**Medhavinee Namjoshi, Chief Projects Coordinator - Vacha, Mumbai**

*Medhavinee Namjoshi is currently the chief projects coordinator of Vacha, a resource centre for women and girls in Mumbai.*

Excerpts:

Vacha's focus is on issues of women and girls through educational programmes, resource creation, research, training, campaigns, networking and advocacy.

Vacha works from the premise that girls are disadvantaged due to their gender and further pushed into marginalizations due to their age, minority status and socio-economic status. Also, the second decade of their lives (10-21 years) is marked by more restrictions and burden of preparation for womanhood. Vacha believes that there is a need to create safe spaces for girls to come together and become agents of change.

Activities - Vacha works with girls from the poor neighbourhoods of Mumbai, Kalyan and from tribal belts of South Gujarat, Valsad and Dharampur. They belong to Dalit, ST, OBC castes with a smattering of upper castes from Bihar and U.P. These girls study in government and state supported schools through the regional language schools. A few girls are now in the English medium schools.

Vacha addresses girls' empowerment through (a) creating safe spaces/ centres in community for adolescent girls, (b) enhancing pre-vocational skills and building self confidence and self esteem, (c) providing information on social issues and (d) supporting opportunities for leadership and for participation in civic life.

Impact -

As Individuals

- With knowledge, girls have gained confidence as well as skills for expressing themselves
- They have learned to articulate and advocate their feelings and needs at homes and at community level, and occasionally beyond that
- Girls have imbibed how to look critically at issues

concerning them and their communities

#### As a Group

- Girls have learned to work in groups and manage group dynamics
- They have developed skills of choosing a leader, making decisions, planning and executing
- Girls have gained social capital in the form of support of an informed peer group, with information about local resources
- Girls have successfully faced critical audiences, by whom they have been grilled while they make presentations and with whom they have negotiated: important qualities for cultivating leadership.

#### In the Community

- The community has started perceiving girls as a vigilant group in the area
- People in the community, especially parents, have begun to acknowledge girls' capacity for handling technology like cameras and computers.

#### Girls are now taking charge!

- Girls have negotiated at homes for continuing education; as a result in the last 4 years not a single girl has dropped out of school (up to class 10) from the group
- Girls have negotiated and, at times, have also fiercely protested against early marriage for themselves and their peers
- As a group, they have protested against sexual harassment on streets
- They have successfully created, edited and disseminated community newsletters, twice a year, for the past four years
- Girls now have a voice in their own communities.

#### Examples

- In one place, the girls compelled leaders to hold a flag-

hoisting ceremony for Indian Independence Day in the absence of such an event before. Such opportunities are used by girls to display their products such as photographs and newsletters.

- An article in one newsletter shamed an elected representative into urgently sending two persons to have a big dump of garbage cleared
- By screening a film against eve-teasing, together with performing street theatre and other campaign activities, girls actually got offenders to publicly promise that they would refrain from 'teasing' girls on roadsides
- Selected photographs by girls were displayed in a national seminar titled 'Women's Voices, Women's Spaces in Mumbai' as the exclusive exhibit of girls' perceptions of spaces around them
- Another set of photographs was exhibited in the 'Kala Ghoda Art Festival' in Mumbai. Two adolescent girls from Vacha received prizes in a photography competition at the festival.
- Girls have made Power Point presentations in front of different groups such as to parents and other community members in meetings, to representatives of a teachers' union and also at a press conference.

**Girls have negotiated at homes for continuing education.. Girls have negotiated and, at times, have also fiercely protested against early marriage for themselves and their peers.. They have successfully created, edited and disseminated community newsletters, twice a year, for the past four years..**

#### **Dr. Trupti Shah, founding member - Sahiyar, Gujarat**

*Dr. Trupti Shah is one of the founding members and the honorary secretary of Sahiyar, a women's group that supports women and girls to fight social discrimination and provides legal and counselling support to women in crises in Vadodara, Gujarat.*

Excerpts from her speech:

Sahiyar is a Stree Sangathan set up in 1984 as an autonomous

women's group. Sahiyar means "a woman's friend" in Gujarati. This name was suggested by Sonal Shukla, so that the organization could have a name women would identify with. Sahiyar's long-term aim is to "work towards a society which is free from any form of inequality, injustice and atrocities. A society in which women have equal status and recognition as human beings."

#### Activities-

##### With women

- It organizes awareness programmes and campaigns to challenge the structures and value system of society in the long run
- Carries out activities to provide support to women for their immediate needs
- Supports struggles for Human Rights by other marginalised groups
- Organizes gender sensitisation training workshops for various groups like other NGOs, trade unions and for professionals like teachers, lawyers, police, media persons etc
- Publishes leaflets, pamphlets, booklets, newsletters etc.
- Runs a library and documentation centre on women's issues
- Initiates and participates in various campaigns around Rape and Sexual Harassment, against sex selection tests and in support of girls' rights for survival, protection and development
- Supports women in critical situations such as victims of violence, sexual exploitation, injustice and/or discrimination in families, at workplaces or in society at large.

##### With adolescent girls

- It conducts group counseling sessions
- Organises Jagruti Juth (awareness groups)
- Provides financial support and encouragement for their education and careers

- Helps in developing leadership among youth and involving them in activities related to environment awareness and communal harmony
- Addresses issues of malnutrition, girls' obsession with beauty through discussions on the concepts of a healthy, beautiful body, love, friendship and marriage
- Raises funds for education of poor girls from middle and upper class families. Organises skills based sessions to help girls learn about society
- Organises common activities for students of different communities on issues of gender equality, communal harmony and environment
- Discusses difficult issues of sex education and health issues other than reproductive health with adolescent girls.

Impact - Because of Sahiyar's discussions, at a personal level, girls become confident enough to resist pressures for early marriage but getting married remains the ultimate destiny for girls.

**Dr Neha Madhiwala, founding member and Managing Trustee - Chehak, Mumbai**

*Dr. Neha Madhiwala is currently the secretary of Forum for Medical Ethics Society, Mumbai. She founded Chehak, an organisation working on empowerment of girls and women with focus on Muslim and Dalit women, in 1998 in Mumbai.*

Excerpts from her talk:

Chehak started the Sahyog program in 2000 in two largely Muslim slum communities in suburban Mumbai, comprising mainly casual and informal sector workers and migrants. These areas have very poor infrastructure and facilities and constantly face threats of demolition and relocation from municipal authorities. Municipal schools in these communities run upto class 4 while schools up to class 7 are located within walking distance. These Urdu and Hindi medium schools are overcrowded and under-staffed.

When the program began in these areas, the status of girls was as follows : 30 percent of 13-14 year olds and about 50

percent of 15-18 year olds were out of school in 2002. While many boys also dropped out of school, reasons for drop out for boys and girls were different. Chahak set up the 'Sahyog School without Walls' for girls with this background in mind. It also started a life-skills programme for adolescent girls and young women called 'Jhula'. Another program 'Sahyog Umang' was started to help prepare young women for careers in social sector.

Activities -

Sahyog School without Walls

- Trains local young women as teachers
- Hindi is kept as the medium of instruction in school, with the option of Urdu as second language
- Its curricula are customized as per the needs of students
- It was linked to National Open School in 2002-03
- Girls are categorized by competency levels and not by age
- Class size is between 15-30 at each level
- Pedagogy includes formal components of life-skills and community work
- School environment is democratic, participatory and secular.

Jhula

- It has a comprehensive curriculum focused on building life skills
- It is a community based program and ensures the availability of an open, flexible and unstructured environment
- It is interactive: it uses games, exercises and community-based work
- It attempts to introduce trainees to literature, cinema, art and history of India and the world
- It depends not so much on content but on building an environment for reflection and dialogue.

### Sahyog Umang

- It works for young women between 18-30 years
- It is inclusive, flexible and adaptable
- Components of this program are -building of perspectives, development of life-skills, teaching of English, computer, work-experience and mentoring skills
- It operates in 2 communities with the goal of reaching 5 communities
- At present, it has 90 trainees/graduates with the addition of 30-50 each year
- It emphasises providing wide exposure, while challenging trainees to stretch their boundaries and negotiate freedoms
- Its primary goal is development of self-identity of young women
- It involves flexible evaluation of outcomes depending on a trainee's life-situation, aspirations and capabilities.

The success of this programme depends on the convergence of a large number of processes within Sahyog, the community and other collaborating organizations.

Impact -

### Sahyog School without Walls

- Nearly 800 girls have been enrolled between 2000 and 2009
- Dropout rate of girls has declined from 50 percent to 20 percent
- About 300 girls have graduated with a secondary certificate from National Open School during 2002-2012
- By 2010, the school had been phasing out as girls had begun to enroll in formal schools.

### Jhula

- Its greatest impact has been that it was integrated into an ongoing program which brings girls together on a regular

basis

- It was realized that content is important only to the extent that it provides a stimulus for discussion and dialogue among participants
- Different trainers brought different methods/values to the programme which helped in critical thinking, increased engagement of participants and openness to different/divergent views.

Learnings -

- It was realised that there is no one definition to, or process of empowerment
- It was recognized that empowerment could not be measured or that levels of empowerment could not be compared
- It emerged that feelings and experiences of girls and women are important while gauging empowerment
- It was felt that the approach and process of work is more important than any specific skills given
- Importance of peer-interaction and learning emerged through the programs
- Need was felt for engagement outside of structured programmes/sessions.

**Ayesha Gonsalves, research officer - SNEHA, Mumbai**

*Ayesha Gonsalves is currently the Research Officer for the program of 'Prevention of Violence against Women and Children' at Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA), Mumbai.*

Excerpts:

One of the 'Millennium Development Goals' - a United Nations initiative established in 2000 and agreed to by all United Nations member states - is to promote gender equality and to empower women. The focus is to "eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and at all levels of education, no later than 2015". But today's reality is that two thirds of all children who are denied education or schooling are

girls, women often work the most but are earning the least, domestic violence is the biggest cause of injury and death to women, and women hold only 14 percent of the world's governmental seats (According to Oxfam International).

Violence faced by women from 'Womb to Tomb' :

Phase	Type of Violence
Prenatal	Prenatal sex selection, battering during pregnancy, coerced pregnancy (rape during war)
Infancy	Female infanticide, emotional and physical abuse, differential access to food and medical care
Childhood	Genital mutilation, incest and sexual abuse, differential access to food, medical care, and education, child prostitution
Adolescence	Violence during dating and courtship, early marriage, economically coerced sex, sexual abuse at workplace, rape, sexual harassment, forced prostitution *
Reproductive	Abuse of women by intimate partners, marital rape, dowry abuse and murders, partner homicide, psychological abuse, sexual abuse at workplace, sexual harassment, rape, abuse of women with disabilities
Old Age	Abuse of widows, elder abuse (which affects mostly women)

## FIGURES AT A GLANCE-2011\*

Sr. No	Crime Heads	Cases Reported	% of total IPC Crimes	Rate of Crime	Charge sheeting rate	Conviction Rate
A) VIOLENT CRIMES						
1	Rape	24206	1.0	2.0	93.8	26.4
2	Dowry Deaths	8618	0.4	0.7	92.0	35.8
B) CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN (IPC+SLL)**						
1	Kidnapping & abduction of women & girls	35565	1.5	2.9	73.0	28.1
2	Molestation	42968	1.8	3.6	96.5	27.7
3	Sexual Harassment	8570	0.4	0.7	96.4	45.8
4	Cruelty by husband and relatives	99135	4.3	8.2	94.4	20.2
5	Importation of girls	80	0.0	0.0	82.4	7.8
Total Crimes Against Women (IPC+SLL)		228650	9.8	18.9	92.0	26.9
C) CRIMES AGAINST CHILDREN						
Total Crimes against children		33098	1.4	2.7	82.5	34.6

\*National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), Crimes in India 2011, <http://ncrb.nic.in/>

\*\*IPC -Indian Penal Code ; SLL -Special & Local Laws

Violence against women is the fastest-growing crime in India. Types of Violence include domestic violence, child sexual abuse, molestation and rape, sexual harassment in public places and at workplaces, mob violence.

In light of this background, SNEHA undertakes many programs to work on the issue violence against women and children.

Activities -

- Adoption of a multi-sectoral approach to violence against women. Direct assistance includes services related to crisis intervention, counseling, police and legal support and training to develop new skills. Community based interventions include

spreading awareness about violence against women and girls as a human rights issue, encouraging timely reporting of violence and ownership of the issue

- Public awareness through street play performances by youth groups and through sensitization trainings for police and health care providers
- Developing simple guidelines to provide basic support to the survivors of violence
- Documentation and research in partnership with government departments, health care institutes and other NGOs, on the prevalence of violence and its health consequences
- Work with different public systems and other organizations to provide survivors of domestic violence with a co-ordinated and holistic response
- Lobbying and campaigning activities to put pressure on national or international actors to change policies regarding violence.

Challenges -

- There is resistance from the community and public systems, because violence is considered as a private matter, not looked at as a public health concern
- There is lack of implementation of protocols in public health systems
- Lengthy processes and hostile attitude of the justice system results in delayed justice for survivors of violence.

**Mimansa Shukla, state consultant - Gender Programming, UNICEF, Mumbai**

*A development professional committed to humanitarian issues, Mimansa Shukla has been working for more than 12 years in the areas of Public Health, Community & Women Empowerment, Environment and Post-Disaster Assistance. She is currently state consultant, gender programming at UNICEF, Mumbai.*

Excerpts:

Key facts and figures about adolescent girls in India

- 20% have no education
- 30% are married
- 16% are mothers
- 36% have not heard of HIV/AIDS (Human immunodeficiency virus infection / acquired immunodeficiency syndrome)
- 56% are anemic
- Only 9% of married women and 12 % of unmarried women have bank accounts.

#### Status of adolescent girls in Maharashtra

- Sex ratio has been declining over time, reflecting the low status of the girl child. While the adult sex ratio has slightly increased from 922 in 2001 to 925 in 2011, the under-six-year sex ratio fell from 913 to 883 during the same period - a sharp 30 points decline!
- More than half of the adolescent girls in the state suffer from acute under-nutrition (Body Mass Index less than 18.5)
- More than one-fourth (26 % as per District Level Household & Facility Survey (DLHS) 2007-08) of the adolescent girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years are married
- Nearly 7,00,000 girls in Maharashtra become mothers before the age of 20 years (National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 2005-06)
- Infant mortality is 59 per 1000 live births for adolescent mothers, as compared to 40 for mothers in the age group of 20 to 29 years (NFHS 2005-06).

In short, for girls, there is a life cycle of deprivation and discrimination.

'Deepshikha' means "Lighting a Lamp" and its goal is to develop a low-cost and replicable model that succeeds in empowering adolescent and young women. It addresses the issue of gender in development to ensure an equitable and sustainable development environment and an accelerated progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals of United Nations as established in 2000.

Activities -

Programme Strategy

- Encouraging volunteerism among young people to participate in the village development process
- Facilitating participatory dialogue and inclusive development
- Facilitating youth initiative and leadership by developing a cadre of peer educators / leaders
- Promoting community driven and facilitates individual and collective actions
- Establishing and strengthening networking and linkages
- Encouraging gender and youth mainstreaming.

Training content

- Focus on status of women and adolescent girls and their rights, sex, sexuality and gender, identity and group formation and life skills
- Focus on puberty, reproductive health, hygiene, sanitation, Response To Intervention (RTI), HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus /Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), government systems, financial literacy, self-help groups and life skills
- Focus on entrepreneurship skills and financial literacy, social entrepreneurship.

Impact -

Social Empowerment

- 2238 adolescent girls groups formed and 64360 (including 14020 out-of-school) adolescent girls reached
- 280 early marriages averted
- 1003 out-of-school girls re-enrolled in education
- More than 1000 Adolescent girls' groups (AGGs) have spread awareness on various social issues and have mobilized village communities for accessing various services.

### Political Empowerment and linkages

- 14 former prerikas (adolescent girl facilitators) selected as village sarpanch
- 353 former prerikas selected in various village level committees
- 700 former prerikas selected as ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist), AWW (Anganwadi Worker), ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) and NGO Staff.

### Economic Empowerment

- 1350 AG-SHGs (Adolescent Girl - Self Help Groups) formed
- 18529 girls have started savings
- 315 AG-SHGs have started income generation activities
- 4722 girls and 459 prerikas have joined vocational training courses.

### Health & Nutrition

- Increase in testing of hemoglobin, prevention of anemia and promotion of iodized salt amongst girls
- Awareness spread about maintenance of hygienic practices during menstruation
- Carrying out of cleanliness drives, toilet construction and sanitation measures in the village
- Increased awareness about HIV/AIDS
- AWWs, ASHAs and ANMs work to prevent malnutrition, for community mobilisation, for awareness about diseases and for vaccination drives for children and mothers.

### Education

- Girls enroll themselves for higher education / vocational training
- They motivate out-of-school adolescent girls and their families and bring them back to education system.

### Social Justice

- Awareness raised against early marriages and all possible actions are taken to prevent them
- Increased protection of girls' and women's rights
- Work done on gender disparity issues and on equality
- Rise in participation of girls and women in all village development processes, including in decision making.

### Replication and Scale-up

- Gender resource network has been established. This includes 25 trainers, 30 gender coordinators, and over 100 field staff and has been actively involved in various governmental schemes, initiatives and in YASHADA: State Apex Administrative Training Institute
- The Deepshikha model is being replicated in 31 districts, more than 700 facilitators have been trained and about 700 AGGs have been formed.
- The model has been integrated into the Maharashtra Human Development plan and is being implemented in 125 blocks in 25 districts.
- The model has been adapted into the 'Girls Education Programmes under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan'(Universal Education)
- The model has been incorporated in its entirety into SABALA - National Scheme for Adolescent Girls Empowerment.

### Learnings -

- Selection of adolescent girl facilitator (prerika) is one of the most important components for the success of this initiative and for its sustainability. While girls dropping out of school cannot be totally avoided, proper facilitation processes can reduce the rate drastically.
- Timely reflections, refresher meetings/trainings, inputs etc. are important to keep up and sustain the motivational level of adolescent facilitators.

- It is important to develop an activity based framework to keep the AGG and AG-SHGs alive and active. Adolescent girls' sub-committees and their linkages with PRI (Panchayat Raj Institutions) committees have shown good results in some project areas and need to be formally pursued across all project areas.
- It is important to develop a systematic work plan (inducting new adolescent girls in AGG) to meet the challenge of adolescent girls' turnover, one of the unavoidable challenges.
- A sustainable model is needed to establish stronger/ formalized linkages between AGGs /AG-SHGs and women's SHGs.
- It is also important to promote the concept of networking among facilitators (as well as AGGs) for cross-learning and peer-support.

Pallavi Palav, Project Coordinator - CORO for Literacy, Mumbai

*Pallavi Palav is currently project coordinator at Committee of Resources Organisation (CORO) for Literacy, Mumbai.*

Excerpts:

The GEMS project is undertaken in two stages - the first is of formative research and second is of interventions. This project started as a follow-up to earlier programmes of CORO, namely the 'Yaari Dosti' and 'Sakhi Saheli' programmes. It was realized that to work on gender equity, it is necessary to work with young children beginning from age 8, and the project was designed accordingly.

Some Details of the project

- Total schools involved : 17
- Standards : 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup>
- No. of divisions : 102
- No. of boys : 5604
- No of girls : 5632
- Total students : 11236.

Findings from the formative research

- Challenging and changing inequitable gender attitudes through intervention is possible
- Gender related attitudes are formed at a much younger age, therefore, there is a need to work with a yet younger age group
- There is a need to explore institutional structure
- Girls hardly play and/or are hardly encouraged to play outdoor sports. Inhibitions regarding bodily movements restrict girls from playing outdoor games

Some anecdotes :

*"Ladkiyan badminton nahi khelti kyonki unki chhati hilti hai": A boy*

*(Girls can't play badminton because their breasts move while playing)*

*"Ladkiyan maidani khel nahi khel sakti kyunki vo kudrati kamjor hai: A boy*

*(Girls can't play outdoor sports because they are naturally weak)*

*"Hum maidani khel nahi khelte kyonki ladke chance maarte hai": Girls*

*(We can't play outdoor sports because boys try to touch when we play)*

*"Humare PT teacher hume yaha waha haath lagate hain, isliye hume khelna pasand nahi" : girls*

*(A Physical Training Teacher touches us here and there so we don't like to play).*

- Girls and boys do not sit together in school, and don't even talk to each other. They are not allowed to play together. While girls are given work like sweeping, boys are given work like shifting benches; even punishments are meted out according to one's gender.

### Common findings about Girls

- They face strong family influence
- Girls believe that taking care of house/ family is their responsibility
- They think that women must compromise with violence to keep the family together
- There is a perception that beautiful girls face more violence
- Girls do not speak with their fathers
- They feel that women must be under the control of men
- Girls have many misconceptions about their bodies.

### Impact -

#### Observed in girls and boys

- Better communication
- Increased togetherness
- More instances of playing together
- Reduction in girls being teased
- Increased efforts to question gender relationships
- Absorbed relevant information
- Appreciated participatory method of work
- Formation of a trusted platform for communication
- Initiation of talks around gender and violence
- Reduction in absenteeism.

#### Observed in teachers

- Positive response from teachers
- Personal experiences shared by teachers
- Readiness to do work voluntarily.

#### Self reported changes in behavior

- Almost 44% girls started opposing discrimination at home
- Almost 52% girls said that they understand boys better now
- Almost 34% boys started opposing discrimination at home
- Almost 59% boys stopped harassing girls
- Almost 49% boys said that they respect girls better

#### Learnings -

- Separate sessions for girls and boys helped girls to open up
- As long as girls do not attain decision-making skills and powers, they do not have a say in their families and communities
- Also required is a holistic approach to working with the community
- Gender as a construct needs to be challenged and the only way to do this is by working with both boys and girls.

#### Discussions after the session :

Various questions were raised following the above presentations such as, "What are the obstacles to girls' empowerment?", "What should we be cautious about?", "How do caste and class politics in India operate in the context of adolescent girls?", "Are there alternatives to definitions of empowerment?",

Trupti Shah responded to these questions. She said that many girls followed many religious rituals such as fasts despite the talks they have had with the girls. In such cases, activists have to be very sensitive to caste and community identities and tackle them very carefully. She added that Sahiyar has not met with much success in these situations and it continues to be

**..one needs to be sensitive to class, caste and other dimensions of identity. The meaning of empowerment varies. While at an individual level, empowerment means a woman/girl should be able to identify her wants and find means to realize her goals. But there is a larger meaning to empowerment that all the participating organizations have worked with: to get women together as a collective and to.. draw strength from one another.**

one of its biggest challenges.

Vibhuti Patel felt that some guidelines should be formed by groups that work together so that they could reflect on such issues. She knew some members of the symposium group were observing Roza and other fasts so she got some fasting-food for them too from home along with the other food. But she added that we needed to be alert about practices that violate human rights and propagate notions of inequality.

During the discussion the issue of common dress code came up and how some activists think it brings about a sense of unity. A student wondered whether this was more about discrimination than empowerment and why these dress codes were only imposed on girls and not others and if it really served the purpose of 'unity'; how boys were not taught how to treat women with respect instead of imposing these dress codes.

Mimansa Shukla felt that empowerment cannot be defined simplistically. She said that some people, despite their circumstances, could take very strong decisions, but others even with all kinds of trainings and inputs, were unable to take decisions for their own lives. There were discussions about what true empowerment meant. Others talked about how even women in international organizations like UNICEF observed rituals like Karva Chauth. Such practices cut across class and caste and they are increasingly glorified by the mainstream media and TV serials as well.

The key issue that emerged in the discussion was that one needed to be sensitive to class, caste and other dimensions of identity. The meaning of empowerment varies. While at an individual level, empowerment means a woman/girl should be able to identify her wants and find means to realize her goals. But there is a larger meaning to empowerment that all the participating organizations have worked with: to get women together as a collective and to teach with, respond to and draw strength from one another.

Yet another major problem that women's groups face is the need to make compromises, in the light of current socio-economic realities without compromising on the core values of the movement; that is, gender empowerment, gender equality

and secular values. Gender empowerment cannot take place where there are discriminatory community and cultural values. At the same time, it is important to be conscious of minority rights and rights of marginalized communities.

**Presentation of Poem by Dr. Joy Deshmukh :**

Dr. Joy Deshmukh, an economist and a poet rendered her poem titled 'Torn Apart'. She shared that she started writing as a young girl. She belonged to a progressive family where she was given equal rights. But it was different outside. This bothered her a lot and thus was born her poetry, from the many questions that came in her mind about inequalities.

**Torn Apart**

*When I first fell in love  
With books,  
Fell madly, passionately  
in love,  
You didn't tell me that  
I was already married,  
Married long ago,  
When I was but a child.  
You didn't tell me  
When you made the  
introduction,  
That I was committed,  
To the little kitchen set  
In my toy trunk,  
That it was only  
A matter of  
Us growing up.*

*Not that I blame you,  
But it's just that  
Bookcases don't fit in  
kitchens,  
And  
It's a long walk to the library.  
Besides,  
Who doesn't know that  
Love and loyalty  
Can be tiring,  
Tearing,  
When they are different.*

*Not that I blame you.  
Not at all.  
It's only the law,  
That's the problem you know.  
Bigamy is just not allowed.*

This was followed by Sonal Shukla reading out a translation of the poem by her in Gujarati.

# VI

## Group Discussions & Presentations - Policy Recommendations



The audience was invited to form small groups that would work and make a presentation on four different topics. The same would be shared during the subsequent plenary session.

Discussions were to be around the current status of adolescent girls, for recommendations to be made for laws, policies, programmes and schemes for improving the status of girls. The themes were (a) education (b) health (c) work and (d) violence in the context of adolescent girls. Some recommendations:

#### Education

1. The group talked about school education and the gender biases therein. It felt that school and university curricula should be structured around the needs of students so that students don't 'fail' and have opportunities to explore their talents.
2. Admission forms that require only father's name to be filled in should also require mother's name.(This is largely done now)
3. There is the need to introduce sex education in schools in such a way that it becomes possible for all students till class 12 to participate in discussions around issues like child sexual abuse.
4. NGOs should participate in the education system and should introduce interesting activities such as this symposium, in schools and colleges too.
5. Gender based discrimination and violence that girls face in homes, schools and in different other learning spaces should be dealt with.
6. There should be a demand for quality in the education system, for better transportation facilities, improved infrastructure like toilets with running water and health care within schools and colleges. There should also be a female physical training (PT) teacher for girls which will help bring the girls back to the PT classes.
7. There must be counseling and vocational training in schools.

**Presently, the language of the law, in government policies, programmes and schemes uses the term "he" to include both male and female. This should change to make it more inclusive of all categories of gender.**

8. History as a subject should also include stories about women who have contributed to society. Presently, the language of the law, in government policies, programmes and schemes uses the term "he" to include both male and female. This should change to make it more inclusive of all categories of gender.

#### Violence

1. People need to speak up against violence.
2. Education policies should include self-defense classes for girls in schools and colleges to help them protect themselves from all kinds of sexual harassment.
3. Teachers should be given training on ways to deal with children facing violence and should counsel them accordingly. There should be a law against teachers who perpetuate any kind of violence against girls or others in school.
4. There should be a social worker in every school to deal with cases of violence against students. A helpline for students to talk about such issues will be of great support.
5. Procedures for filing complaints against sexual harassment should be simplified and the police should play a supportive role.
6. The media should be asked to act responsibly and to also show women raising their voices against violence.
7. Existing policies for children should be implemented effectively.
8. NGOs should be invited to initiate programmes in schools and colleges. These should be introduced as 'Learning Programmes'. The 'burns' ward at Bhabha hospital has an innovative programme where the medical officer, nurse, social worker and lawyer work together for the victims of violence. Such models should be replicated in other places.
9. Education should be made compulsory till the age of 18 years. Also, wide-ranging dialogue should take place on the nature of education to be given to children.
10. More attention needs to be given to the prevention of violence against women and for treatment, care and support for survivors of violence. This should also include financial support.

## Work

1. The laws need a certain amount of clarity while defining the terms 'Child' and 'Labour'. A large number of children work in reality shows on television. The children on these shows work under tremendous pressure and come under the category of 'work'. We need to find ways and means to ensure that pressures exerted on children and adolescents and the large amount of work that they are required to do are reduced.
2. The issue of menstruation has cultural and health impacts. Governments need to frame the health policy in a culturally sensitive manner on this issue. There is a need for availability of good toilets - the lack of which inhibits the mobility of girls, especially during menstruation. On railway stations especially, the absence of clean toilets and waste bins should be looked into. This is also the situation in rural areas where women do not have toilets in their houses and have to venture out to relieve themselves.
3. There should be reservation for women at the workplace. Women's safety at the workplace also needs to be ensured. What constitutes harassment needs to be defined with more clarity.
4. There are quite a few women-centered laws, but we ourselves are not aware of such laws. We need to learn more about these laws and need to have more awareness programmes about them.
5. The suggestion is also to have a women's cell at the workplace and colleges where women can represent their issues. These must be made functional wherever they already exist.
6. The violence faced by female domestic workers should be taken into consideration while working on a policy for them. They also need to be brought under laws and regulations.
7. Child care facilities need to be introduced at the workplace so that adolescent girls are able to attend schools when their parents go to work. Unequal and lower wages paid to girls should not be allowed.

**Governments need to frame the health policy in a culturally sensitive manner on this issue. There is a need for availability of good toilets - the lack of which inhibits the mobility of girls, especially during menstruation. On railway stations especially, the absence of clean toilets and waste bins should be looked into.**

## Health

1. Counseling should be included in all education programmes for adolescents. Spaces should be created for girls to come and talk about their bodies and to learn about good touch and bad touch.
2. The government should look into conducting parents' workshops on these issues.
3. Iron and calcium supplements should be made available to girls along with correct administering of these supplements.
4. Hygiene programmes, especially those centered on menstruation, need to be introduced in schools for both students and their parents.
5. Government should encourage participation of girls in sports and introduce sports' scholarships for girls.
6. There is the need to broaden the scope of Anganwadi system for girls' empowerment and the scheme should be supervised better. Infrastructure issues in health set-ups, the quality of health care, attitudes of health workers - all need to be looked into. Anganwadi workers should be given training on mental health and counseling to enable them to deal with issues faced by pregnant women.
7. The mid-day meal programme is a good initiative for children, especially girls, since it adds to micro-nutrients that they need to have every day. Fund allocation for this programme is important along with its strict supervision.
8. Trained counseling personnel as well as toilet and water facilities should be made available in rural areas. There is the need for a woman doctor and a mobile unit to respond to health needs of a village. 'Gram Sabhas' need to be empowered to speak about these health issues.

**Spaces should be created for girls to come and talk about their bodies and to learn about good touch and bad touch..**

**There is the need to broaden the scope of Anganwadi system for girls' empowerment..**

Vibhuti Patel added that in all four groups, people should learn to do a gender audit of systems since it is an important instrument in strengthening the processes of implementation.

*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*

VII



# My Perceptions of Future of Girls in India



**Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal, researcher - television show Satyamev Jayate, Mumbai**

*Director of all video footage documented as part of the stories on the television show Satyamev Jayate, Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal is currently the co-director and research head for the show.*

Excerpts :

I am humbled to be here in the midst of many senior people as audience and to share the limited knowledge and understanding that I have on this issue. I thank you since the work that you have done for so many years has also inspired people like me. I have closely followed the women's movement since my college days. In college, I was a part of students' movement and the women's movement. But my inclination was more towards the leftist movement. My thoughts and ideas were defined by this movement. I couldn't understand why we needed a different feminist movement to speak about women's issues. Then I was involved with *Satyamev Jayate*, the TV serial presented by the film personality Amir Khan, and there was a certain crystallization of a lot of experiences that came together for me and I realized that within me a new person was born and shaped and that this person was a feminist. I say this with a great deal of responsibility.

There have been quite a few things that touched me during the research period for the serial. I will share a series of anecdotes and incidents with you here and I hope you can make some sense of it! I was in a village in Punjab, a state which has one of the worst sex ratios in the country. I was there to discuss female feticide.

Once I went to meet a health worker. We were waiting for her in her house, and when we saw her, she was going up the stairs, struggling with big buckets of heavy linen - curtains, bed sheets etc. We spotted a washing machine, but obviously the linen had not been machine washed.

When we sat down to talk, I asked her about the washing. She told me heavy clothes are washed on Sundays. And she wouldn't wash them in the machine, because her husband felt that hand-washing cleans in a better way. I could see how the labour of the woman had to be controlled, and this is one small example. I could locate numerous such examples everywhere.

Another time, I went to a village where three-fourths of the families

had only one or two children - who were all male. When we spoke to the women they told us that they didn't go for sex selection, whereas it was a widely prevalent practice in that particular village. One woman informed me that the anganwadi had 58 boys and 22 girls. The skewed sex ratio was quite evident. She talked about her daughter and how difficult it was to raise a daughter. Safety was a huge concern. Suddenly her husband walked in and she stopped talking. He saw us talking to his wife and started asking us questions: Who are you? Where are you from? Are you married? Didn't your husband have any issues sending you out like this? For a city-bred person like me who has never met with such questioning, it was a bit difficult! But I just allowed all of this because it was an experience that helped me to understand the environment in which women and girls there are living today.

In that particular village, I asked adolescents about their schedules. Boys said they wake up, eat, play, go to school. Girls said they wake up, do house work, cook, go to school and do some more work. When I asked the boys what they thought the girls did, they scratched their heads for a long time and then said, "Sometimes they sit in the sun!"

To all the children in the group, it was very clear that boys were much happier than girls and that they were lucky and happy to be boys. Girls were scared of getting married. Children as young as 7 year olds were aware about the process and purpose of sex selection.

The situation is so dire that I feel that we cannot wait anymore for change. I think we should learn to say we want the sky today itself. We want the change today. We want the change now. Wherever I have the opportunity of speaking to young people like the ones here, I always say that you and I have the privilege of sitting under a roof like this, meeting at a symposium like this. We are far more privileged than the rest of our sisters and mothers. And therefore we have the responsibility to really care for and do something, become agents of change."

**Audrey D'Mello, Deputy Director of Legal Center - Majlis, Mumbai**

*Audrey D'Mello is currently the deputy director of the legal center at Majlis, a non-governmental legal aid body focusing on quality legal representation for individual women in court, Mumbai.*

Excerpts from her speech:

I would like to say thanks for having me here. I have spent a very happy part of my girlhood with Sonalben. I work with Majlis which is a legal aid centre dealing with cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse. We advise young girls who come to us about their rights and if need be, help them access court. Most of the girls who come to us share stories about pain, suffering, violence and grave injustice borne for a long time. The only good part of it is that they have decided to end the violence in their lives. They have taken a decision to move ahead in life. We help them do this through court.

Laws in our country today are quite pro-women. The change was brought about by the women's movement in India, somewhere in the 80s. A lot of the stalwarts of that time are sitting in this room. They have brought about the law on Domestic Violence, amendments in laws for rape, for sexual abuse and so on. They have done great work and today we have these laws with us. Today I have been called here to talk about how I locate young girls in the future. Let me tell you three stories and I want you to tell me in which period these three incidents took place. This is about two women, both in their 30s. One of the women has two children, both of them above the age of 10. The second woman has three children all below the age of 10. The first woman is educated, is a chartered accountant and works. The other woman has completed just her 10th standard. One fine day, the first woman goes up to the terrace on the 19th floor and, before jumping off herself, throws down her two children to death. And the second woman in spite of all her vulnerabilities decides to take some action. She says, "I will not take this violence anymore." Both women were facing domestic violence and were trying to deal with it. It was the second woman who refused to take the violence, took a stand and walked out of home. Life was not easy for such a woman. She became a social outcast, and it was always a struggle to provide enough for yourself and the children. But that was the choice she made. She chose not to take the violence and instead decided to educate herself and went on to become one of the most pioneering lawyers working on women's rights in the country.

The first story happened on March 8, 2011 when we were celebrating 30 years of Women's Day in India. The second story happened in the 1980's during the nascent stage of the women's movement. There were none of the laws that we are talking about today. But she made that choice about not tolerating the violence. This woman is my

mother and I am standing here today in front of you because she made that choice. That choice has given me the opportunity to be able to say what I am saying today.

The story actually goes way back into the year 1886. This is about a very ordinary woman called Rukmabai from Maharashtra, who was married in childhood. At puberty when she was asked to go to her husband's house, she refused saying that she did not want to live with that man. The husband filed a case against her in court demanding that she come to him. In the court too, Rukmabai refused to go. The judge ruled in her favour since it would have been barbaric to forcibly send her to a house where she didn't want to go, and consequently, face the violence. But at that time, our nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak whom all of us respect, supported Rukmabai's husband. The case went on to the high court where the judge under pressure ruled that Rukmabai would have to go to her husband. Rukmabai, a young girl at that time, stood up in court and said that "you can put me in jail for contempt of court, but I will not go with this man!" The case ended finally when she paid some compensation. But she was never given a divorce. She could never marry again. But she made that choice.

That was in 1886 and the other incident in 2011. I really don't know if we are going forward or backward. We may have all the laws but we are still backward. If we look at our gender equality ratio, we are probably one of the worst nations, our ratio much lower than countries like Bangladesh or Pakistan. 50 percent of our girls get married before the age of 14 in our country. Let's not even talk about the sex ratio or other statistics. It is not enough to have the right laws. I listened to the presentations where everyone called for strict implementation. I agree with that. Education and empowerment are extremely important. But as we can see from the first story, the woman who killed herself was educated and she worked as a lecturer. So, is

**I really don't know if we are going forward or backward.. If we look at our gender equality ratio, we are probably one of the worst nations.. 50 percent of our girls get married before the age of 14 in our country.. Education and empowerment are extremely important. But as we can see from the first story, the woman who killed herself was educated and she worked as a lecturer. So, is it just education for empowerment..? It is all about the woman taking a stand, making a choice about what she wants in her own life.**

it just education for empowerment or is it for something more? It is all about the woman taking a stand, making a choice about what she wants in her own life.

Making this choice is never easy. We have to always bear the brunt of our choices. Making choices is a constant process in our lives. There are women who come to us and say that they knew it was not right, but they gave in to their father's pressures or to the community's pressures to get married, or to stay on in an abusive relationship. Pressures will always be there. Women will always have to take a decision and stand up for themselves. You have to own your choice. You need to say that I am doing this because I need to do this. And that will be the change.

**Oorvi Randive, student volunteer - Vacha, Mumbai**

*Oorvi is currently in the 9th standard, studying at Lilavati Podar Senior Secondary High School, Mumbai.*

Excerpts:

I would like to thank Vacha for offering me this opportunity to speak here. I will be speaking about women in India and my perspective on them. In June this year, a news agency run by the Thomas Reuters foundation conducted a poll where 370 gender specialists voted and they voted India as the worst country for a woman to be in. Are the results of this poll surprising? 45 percent of girls in India are married before the age of 18. In 2010 alone, 56000 maternal deaths were reported. In a poll conducted by the UNICEF, 52 percent of adolescent girls and 57 percent of adolescent boys think that it is justifiable for a man to beat his wife. As per the 2011 census figures, there are 940 women for every 1000 men, 7 women more than in the 2001 census!

In the present day, we do have better role models like Sania Mirza, Barkha Dutt etc. We do have 50 percent reservations for women in Panchayati Raj, we also have women holding high positions in the private sector. As a young person today, how do I react to these facts? Should I see the glass as half empty or half full? If we see the glass as half empty, it means that the government

**But is it really a war that we face where women are victims and men are villains? In my opinion, the real villain is the socialization which young boys and girls go through and which tells them to behave in ways deemed appropriate for their gender.**

has not been able to do enough for women. On the other hand, we should celebrate the changes that have contributed to the empowerment of women.

But is it really a war that we face where women are victims and men are villains? In my opinion, the real villain is the socialization which young boys and girls go through and which tells them to behave in ways deemed appropriate for their gender. They are appreciated if they perform their assigned roles well and are expected to continue in the same way till they die. Until this changes there will be no real change happening in the lives of women and girls.

My perspective of an equal society is one where men and women work together with each other and not against each other, consciously or unconsciously. The future I envision will be one where tasks and division of labour will be based on skills and not on gender. The tasks will be carried out by people irrespective of their gender and without any discomfort in performing the same. So, a man should not be feeling apologetic about taking care of the child and worrying about what people will say. Only with such a mindset can one truly achieve progress or development.

I also envision that in the future, the word 'help' will not exist. My grandmother used to tell me that we all live in the same house as a family. We belong to this house and the house belongs to us. Using the word 'help' for doing household work would mean that we are doing a favour to each other, and that it is a burden which has to be repaid.

To conclude, I would like to read a poem which I wrote in 2010 on Women's Day.

*Every year on March 8  
Humans celebrate their females  
Those who change their fate  
Then hide behind a veil  
We cheer all their courage  
We reward all their toil  
Chuck inhibitions in the drainage  
Plant reformations in the soil  
So, let's raise our common cause  
Display that we actually care  
We will mend society's flaws  
Men and women in a world to share*

**Discussions after the session :**

Various questions were raised after the third session such as: "What is the definition of violence?", "Apart from physical violence, what are the other kinds of violence and how can girls identify different kinds of violence?", "What is the one thing that disturbs you about the present?", "What was the one eye-opening factor that you (Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal) encountered while doing your research?", "In terms of sub-culture in the days of the women's movement in the '80s, what is it that you (Audrey D'Mello) cherish the most? Generally, the children of activists don't become activists. What is it that has brought you back despite having an alternate career?"

Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal responded to some of these questions, saying that the Domestic Violence Act (2005) defines violence in a very broad way. But what is violence to one person may not be violence for another. The amount of violence that someone tolerates depends on her choices. Only a woman herself can identify what is violence for her, take a stand about it and decide to address it.

She added that in her experience of talking to men and women, people have different definitions of violence which are all socially created. For example, a man she spoke to said that there was no violence because there was no blood. But gradually society as a whole will have to move towards a "zero tolerance" approach to violence.

To the question on the one eye-opening factor that she encountered, Svati responded that it was primarily the issue of sex selection and the declining sex ratio that really shook me. She said that she could see how little control mothers had over their wombs. While she was not at all anti-abortion, here the case was such that the woman did not have the right to have a child that she wanted to have! Svati emphasized that women do not go for sex selective abortions out of their own choice. There is, in fact, an enormous amount of pressure and torture that they have to suffer on a day to day basis. She then shared the story of a young, educated and married health worker who was with Svati during the research. She had a girl child. She confided in Svati saying that there was immense pressure

**There was another girl in Rajasthan who said, "Girls should be bold. What will happen at the most? They will kill and burn us? We will face that too." That kind of violence was something I had never imagined. A statistic is just a number unless you meet people who are affected by it..**

on her "to have the next child as a boy". It was indirectly indicated to her that she would have to undergo sex selection and if found to be with a female fetus, she would have to go for abortion. And since she did not want that to happen she used to undertake desperate measures throughout the day like keeping away from her husband and avoiding sex, staying away from her house and so on.

There was another girl in Rajasthan who said, "Girls should be bold. What will happen at the most? They will kill and burn us? We will face that too." That kind of violence was something Svati had never imagined. In her own words, "A statistic is just a number unless you meet people who are affected by it. And they are there in every corner of the country. I live in Bandra and all around me I can identify a pattern -families with more sons and less daughters. This cannot be by magic. What must these women be undergoing? I can't even begin to imagine. The worst experience was when a girl actually told me what she underwent when she had her first abortion. The entire family turned against her. And the environment is such that you begin to wonder if you are a human being at all. She gave in to all the pressure. But she fought till the last moment even in the operation theatre. She told the nurse to call her husband so that she could convince him not to go for the abortion. The husband said she was going crazy and finally she had her abortion. But it turned out to be a boy. The girl told everyone, "Good that it turned out to be a boy. Now you know how it feels". However, the trauma remains. The girl said that she would never be able to forget the look of the foetus. She had a nervous breakdown. She was only in her 20s but she trembled. I fear for my daughter, my nieces, my students, all the young girls sitting in this room. What is the future that we are creating for them? I think that has been the most shattering thing for me."

Oorvi Randive responded to some questions saying that she found two flaws in women that she was concerned about. One was that they are often hurt a lot by the people they love the most. She said, "I have seen friends being always at the suffering end. I always ask them, why do you put up with this kind of behaviour, why don't you just stop being in the company of such people? But they always say that they have no option, they just love the other person so much! I think that is an internal battle that women will have to wage. Or else it feels as if you are okay with being treated that way. It is upto each woman to take this step, but it is their choice and decision completely, to stop this kind of a behavior."

Oorvi also wished that women became more selfish! She felt that

women needed to give more attention to their education and their career and be a bit more selfish in making right decisions for themselves. They were always considering themselves responsible for other people while others didn't feel the same. She wished that women would think about themselves and their motives a bit more.

Audrey D'Mello replied to the question on the sub-culture of the women's movement in the '80s, saying, "I do agree I was always known as the notorious child of the women's movement. I was all of 8 when I attended the first women's conference. For me it was like being in a family, it was about sisterhood and fun. It was like a wedding! We had Friday meetings and I was a regular there. I came from a family that had gone through domestic violence. We had very little of community interaction and socialization. The women's group for me was my family. It was also a very euphoric time for the women's movement. It was great to be a part of that culture because I was exposed to some very progressive thoughts. When I went to college, I would shock my peers when I told them how I knew what to do if and when I was raped, to save the evidence and to be able to identify the rapist. I have been brought up with very progressive ideologies.

**I do agree I was always known as the notorious child of the women's movement. I was all of 8 when I attended the first women's conference. For me it was like being in a family, it was about sisterhood and fun. It was like a wedding!**

In the 1990s, when I was in college, all nascent organizations were institutionalizing. They were all becoming more structured organizations from the big movement that it all was. I stepped away. I got into other things, ran my own business and ran it for about 12 years. It was only 5 years ago, after I had three children that I came back. By this time organizations were 10 to 20 years old. The organization that I am working with has been around for 25 years. It has immense passion and it is doing fantastic work. All the organizations that started at that time continue to do so. But we did not have institutionalized structures. They lacked management skills and it was affecting their growth. The young girls of the 80s had grown older; they had white hair and heart problems now! The question was how to make an organization last and that is what interested me, since I have learnt some management skills. It was more about giving back. This was my way of giving back to my mother and the movement.

The next generation that is coming up is not like the old times. I think somewhere, the women's movement and young girls have to reconnect. The reconnect cannot happen by the momentum of the women's movement alone. In order to engage young girls today, we need to show them careers centered around issues that they are thinking about. I think that is a lesson that all older feminists have to learn, how to include the younger generation into the feminist movement."

Joy Deshmukh added, "I want to connect to what Audrey has said and it also connects with my own lived experience of being a feminist and a part of women's movement. I think somewhere we get trapped in images, especially that of a 'good' woman. Oorvi's talk reminds me that a good woman is not supposed to be selfish. A good woman will always think about others at the cost of herself. I think the young are uncomfortable with the jargon that goes along with that image. My own experience has been that I myself was a big question mark for many women who did not understand my approach or where I came from. I wrote poems and I had dear friends like Vibhuti and Sonalben, but I wore chiffon sarees and red lipstick. No one did that in the 80s, in the women's movement! So I was supposed to be frivolous, stupid and a sexual object. But that was what I liked to wear. I was studious and always stood first. I was seen as this inexplicable bag of contradictions. And I struggled with it because I couldn't fit anywhere. Everywhere I was getting pushed out. I was very unhappy because I did want people to like me for who I am and not fit me into holes."

Sonal Shukla then spoke about Audrey, "She shall not remain unnamed! We are talking about visibility of women and of women being included in history. For those of you who are not aware about this, especially the younger students, her mother that she talked about is the well-known lawyer Flavia Agnes. You must have seen her pictures in newspapers. Recently, she participated in a TV discussion around Abortion in Ireland. She was born and raised a Catholic and knows both minority and mainstream laws on women's rights."

*Girls At Margins - Questioning Constraints,  
Claiming Futures*

# Conclusion



Dr. Vibhuti Patel summed up the day, "I will say that Girls' Empowerment is one of the most neglected areas where Vacha is working. This symposium has managed to create a platform where three generations of women participated in a very non-threatening environment. There were no generational gaps over here. And the way in which we discussed issues, right from the inaugural session till this point, there was so much of equality among the participants. None of the older people said that, "We are the seniors and we have more experience." No one talked in that tone. I think that was very important and very empowering. One of the participants told me yesterday that there was not a single session where she felt bored. Today more young women said that. The participation too has been very active. I think that is a great achievement.

Another achievement of this workshop is that we did not pontificate and intellectualize over issues. That was not the focus of this event. Analysis and critical reflection came but they were based on individual journeys that we have had. The sessions were planned in a way that there was scope for sessions by girls themselves. The empowering and passionate environment of this workshop has been very important for all of us. Even those who came from a purely academic background said that it is their struggle too and they would like to be associated with this cause in whichever way possible.

Sessions in the morning were very empowering. Yesterday, we focused on the psycho-social aspect, how all of us have internalized feminism through our different life situations and experiences, whether we started as a Marxist-Feminist or a Socialist-Feminist, Lesbian-Feminist or Environmental-Feminist. We all have managed to arrive at a common understanding of patriarchy and pooled in our collective wisdom.

Older feminists always worry about the younger generation's interest and involvement in issues of social change. I think the two-day deliberations here have proved that younger generations too are very much involved and interested. They may have different priorities in terms of their careers but they are very much concerned about their future as a collective.

The new generations of feminists are talking about a host of new concepts related to their self-perception, including sexualities. There is a lot of tolerance and respect in this dialogue between the two generations of feminists. I think that is the most important learning that we are taking away from this workshop. Thank you."

Sonal Shukla added, "Learning is a lifelong process. I was always reminded of the Jewish people in the concentration camps. Among them were poets, professors and philosophers. And they would secretly have underground classes in art appreciation, poetry appreciation, and learnings about astronomy. They didn't know who would die the next day. But until that time, they were learning and they were growing. And they were learning from each other. I always find that extremely important.

What is happening right now is partially the Third Wave. I say partially, because in India we have people living in ancient, medieval and modern times all the same time! There are some who are in the first stage, there are many who are in the second stage and for many in the current crop it is all about the Third Wave. But in the Third Wave, there are people who do not even know that they have benefited from the First and the Second Waves. And there are groups and areas that are in the earlier stage. In the second wave, there was a lot of interest in history, reading and owning of history. But it is a bit different today. This is a 'now' generation. Their needs and aspirations are different. They have already benefited and they have a lot of laws, schemes and services in their support.

I am not someone who will say old songs were good and new songs are bad. I think music is also created according to the needs of the times. There is no need to compare old songs to the crass new songs of today. In our times too, we too had crass songs! So we cannot say everything was great in the 1980s in the women's movement and be critical of what is happening today. Among the presentation, we could find a great deal of evidence that a lot of new areas are explored and new strategies are developed that are admirable and gave us a lot of hope."

With that positive note the symposium ended after rendering a new song created by Vacha for One Billion Rising (OBR) that many had thought was going to be a collectively planned general movement with shared resources.

## **Appendix - I**

### **Index of Photographs**

Page 1, top, L-R : Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Nandita Das, Sonal Shukla

Page 1, bottom, L-R : Saumya Uma, Dr. Ranjana Kumari, Nandita Das, Vibhuti Patel

Page 16, top : Adv. Monika Sakhrani

Page 16, bottom, L-R : Prof (Dr) Rashmi Oza, Prof (Dr) Vibhuti Patel, Adv. Monika Sakhrani

Page 23, top, L-R : Gangaben Baria, Medha Kotwal, Sonal Shukla

Page 23, bottom : Prof (Dr) Vibhuti Patel

Page 37, top, L-R : Hasina Khan, Madhavi Kumar, Damayanti Sridharan, Dr Putul Sathe, Robin Chaurasiya

Page 37, bottom, L-R : Shalini Mahajan, Raheen Jumami, Trupti Shah, Khushboo Kantharia

Page 59, top : Trupti Shah

Page 59, bottom, L-R : Ayesha Gonsalves, Neha Madhiwala, Medha Kotwal, Trupti Shah, Medhavinee Namjoshi

Page 83 : Participants engaged in group discussions

Page 88, top, L-R : Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal, Audrey D'Mello

Page 88, bottom : Oorvi Randive

Page 99 : A student raising an issue during discussion

## Appendix - II

### Schedule\*

Day 1 | 23-11-2012

9.30 am - 10.00 am	<b>Registration</b>
10.00 am - 11.00 am	<b>Inaugural Session</b>
	Inaugural Function and release of Vacha publication Rights of Adolescent Girls in India - A critical look at Laws and Policies by Saumya Uma, consultant on gender, human rights and law with U.N.
	Chief Guest: Dr Ranjana Kumari, President - Women Power Connect, Delhi.
	Guest of Honour: Nandita Das, actor, film-maker and former Chairperson - Children's Film Society, Mumbai
11.00 am - 11.15 am	<b>Tea</b>
11.15 am - 12.30 pm	<b>Girls in Situations of Conflict with Law</b>
	Prof (Dr) Rashmi Oza, Head - Department of Law, University of Mumbai
	Adv. Monika Sakhrani, Assistant Professor - School of Law, TISS, Mumbai
12.30 pm - 1.30 pm	<b>Sharing from Their Own Girlhood</b>
	Medha Kotwal, founding member - Aalochana Women's Research and Resource Centre, Pune
	Prof (Dr) Vibhuti Patel, Head - Dept Of Economics, SNDT University, Mumbai
	Gangaben Baria, community organiser, Member - Forum against Oppression of women, Mumbai
	Daivashala Giri , trainer/consultant on health and gender, Badlapur, District Thane
1.30 pm - 2.15 pm	<b>Lunch</b>
2.15 pm - 3.30 pm	<b>Girls at Margins</b>
	Hasina Khan, gender consultant and independent researcher - Aawaaz-E-Niswan, Mumbai
	Madhavi Kumar, In-Charge CEO - Able and Disable All People Together, Mumbai
	Dr Putul Sathe, Department of English, SNDT University's undergraduate college, Mumbai
	Robin Chaurasiya, co-founder - Kranti, Mumbai
3.30 pm - 3.45 pm	<b>Tea</b>

3.45 pm - 5.00 pm	<b>Girls at Margins (Continued)</b>
	Raheen Jumami, founding member - Open Your Arms, Mumbai
	Sneha Pandit Dube, Secretary - Vidhayak Sansad, Virar, District Thane
	Shalini Mahajan, founding member - Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA), Mumbai
	Khushboo Kantharia, founding member - Disha, Mumbai

## Day 2 | 24-11-2012

9.30 am - 10.00 am	A brief report on sessions of Day 1
10.00 am - 11.30 am	<b>Girls Taking Charge - Empowering Processes</b>
	Medhavinee Namjoshi, Chief Projects Coordinator - Vacha, Mumbai
	Trupti Shah, founding member - Sahiyar, Gujarat
	Dr Neha Madhiwala, founding member and Managing Trustee - Chehak, Mumbai
	Ayesha Gonsalves, research officer - Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA), Mumbai
11.30 am -11.45 am	<b>Tea</b>
11.45 am -1.00 pm	<b>Girls Taking Charge (Continued)</b>
	Mimansa Shukla, state consultant - Gender Programming, UNICEF, Mumbai
	Pallavi Palav, Project Coordinator- Committee of Resources Organisation (CORO) for Literacy, Mumbai
1.00 pm - 1.45 pm	<b>Group Discussion</b>
	<b>Lunch</b>
1.45 pm - 2.30 pm	<b>My Perceptions of Future of Girls in India</b>
	Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal, writer and researcher - television show Satyamev Jayate, Mumbai
	Audrey D'Mello, Deputy Director of Legal Center - Majlis, Mumbai
	Oorvi Randive, student volunteer - Vacha, Mumbai

\*There were parallel Foyer Events by girls from different bastis/communities. They expressed themselves through paintings, posters and other displays to launch One Billion Rising (OBR), 2012 campaign in Mumbai. Some of them also made short presentations during the symposium.

*Basti* is a preferred term by residents in poor neighbourhoods that are often disparagingly referred to as 'Slums' by many.

Sessions were anchored by Medhavinee Namjoshi from Vacha.

### **Appendix - III**

In all, there were 144 participants from various organisations, colleges and community centers.

#### **List of Participating Individuals / Institutions**

##### **Speakers and Chairpersons :**

Adv. Monika Sakhrani, Assistant Professor - School of Law, TISS, Mumbai

Audrey D'Mello, Deputy Director of Legal Center - Majlis, Mumbai

Ayesha Gonsalves, research officer - Society for Nutrition, Education and Health Action (SNEHA), Mumbai

Daivashala Giri , trainer/consultant on health and gender, District Thane

Damayanti Sridharan, senior adviser - Friedrich Ebert Stiftung India, New Delhi

Dr Neha Madhiwala, founding member and Managing Trustee - Chehak, Mumbai

Dr Putul Sathe, Department of English, SNDT University, Mumbai

Dr Ranjana Kumari, President - Women Power Connect, Delhi

Gangaben Baria, Member - Forum against Oppression of women, Mumbai

Hasina Khan, gender consultant and independent researcher - Aawaaz-E-Niswan, Mumbai

Khushboo Kantharia, founding member - Disha, Mumbai

Madhavi Kumar, In-Charge CEO - ADAPT, Mumbai

Medha Kotwal, founding member - Aalochana Women's Research and Resource Centre, Pune

Medhavinee Namjoshi, Chief Projects Coordinator - Vacha, Mumbai

Mimansa Shukla, state consultant - Gender Programming, UNICEF, Mumbai

Nandita Das, actor, film-maker and former Chairperson - Children's Film Society, Mumbai

Oorvi Randive, student volunteer - Vacha, Mumbai

Pallavi Palav, Project Coordinator- Committee of Resources Organisation (CORO) for Literacy, Mumbai

Prof (Dr) Rashmi Oza, Head - Department of Law, University of Mumbai

Prof (Dr) Vibhuti Patel, Head - Dept of Economics, SNDT University, Mumbai

Raheen Jumami, founding member - Open Your Arms, Mumbai

Robin Chaurasiya, co-founder - Kranti, Mumbai

Saumya Uma, consultant on gender, human rights and law with U.N.

Shalini Mahajan, founding member - Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA), Mumbai

Shazneen Limjerwala, counsellor, Mumbai

Sneha Pandit Dube, Secretary - Vidhayak Sansad, Virar, District Thane

Svati Chakravarty Bhatkal, researcher - television show Satyamev Jayate, Mumbai

Trupti Shah, founding member - Sahiyar, Gujarat

**Participants :**

Aalochana, Pune

Aangan Trust, Mumbai

ABP Majha, Mumbai

Able and Disable All People Together (ADAPT), Mumbai

Akshara, Mumbai

Bombay Charitable Public Trust (BCPT), Mumbai

Centre for Enquiry into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT), Mumbai

Committee of Resource Organizations (CORO) for Literacy, Mumbai

CREA, Delhi

Disha, Mumbai

Education Department, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, Mumbai  
Forum Against Oppression of Women, Mumbai  
Gandhi Shikshan Bhavan, Mumbai  
Girls From Vacha community centers, Mumbai  
Guru Nanak College, Mumbai  
H R College of Commerce, Mumbai  
Human Rights Action Group (India), Mumbai  
K. C. College, Mumbai  
K. J. Somaiya College, Mumbai  
Knowledge Resource Centre, Mumbai  
Kranti, Mumbai  
Mahila Mandal Federation, Mumbai  
Mithibai College, Mumbai  
Naandi Foundation, Mumbai  
Narmada Andolan, Mumbai  
Narotam Sakhseria Foundation, Mumbai  
Nirmala Niketan College of Social Work, Mumbai  
Open Your Arms, Mumbai  
Parivartan Mahila Sanstha, Thane District  
Sakaal, Mumbai  
SNDT University, Churchgate  
Sophia College, Mumbai  
St. Xavier's College, Mumbai  
Stree Mukti Sanghatna, Mumbai  
Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai  
United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Mumbai  
Utpal Sanghvi School, Mumbai  
Vacha Resource Centre for Women and Girls, Mumbai  
Vidhayak Sansad, Thane District  
Women's Rights Action Group (WRAG), Mumbai

### **About Vacha**

Vacha is a resource centre established in 1987. It began as a women's library to collect, create and disseminate oral and visual resources for literacy deprived women.

From 1995 Vacha has focused on issues of adolescent girls in the age group of 10-18 years. Vacha's outreach centres in bastis in Mumbai, Thane district and in Valsad in south Gujarat run programmes in education and life skills training with the aim of enhancing girls' self expressions, their participation in public life and to have their own agency in bringing changes for themselves and their communities. Vacha also works with mixed youth groups of girls and boys in several places.

Vacha's mission is to focus on issues of women and girls through educational programmes, resource creation, research, training, campaigns, networking and advocacy.

### **About FES**

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) was founded in 1925 as a political legacy of Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected President of Germany.

Aims of this foundation are - furthering political and social education of individuals from all walks of life in the spirit of democracy and pluralism, facilitating access to university education and research for gifted young people by providing scholarships, and contributing to international understanding and cooperation.

As a private cultural non-profit institution, it is committed to the ideals and basic values of social democracy.