

WOMEN

R Subha

WOMEN are emerging from the shadow of male oppression to claim their rightful place in society," reassured a leading national daily in one of its recent society page articles. The expose would have gladdened the hearts of many who have been fretting over the plight of women but for its reasoning—the sagacious conclusion was buttressed by a lone fact, that more and more women are now resorting to smoking in public! Yet another publication, this time a magazine dedicated to the cause of women, carried a cover story on the all-important subject of "How to make an impression on men."

Brash VJs, scantily-clad show hostesses, hip-gyrating heroines of the tinsel world and brazen feminist writers - are they the true representatives of the Indian woman, the icons of a changing milieu? Admittedly, they are the most perceivable of the lot, but their number is minuscule as the majority of Indian women continue to bear the yoke of aggression. Cowed down by a predominantly patriarchal society, they are the targets of some of the most gruesome offences. As many recent studies confirm, Indian women, especially those in rural areas, still live under the shadow of fear, oppression and male despotism. A look at some classic examples of persecution:

- The woman sarpanch of Mandasahi gram panchayat in Jagatsinghpur district of Orissa is stripped by three youths for refusing to pay the Dussera 'chanda' (contribution)

- Seven men armed with lethal weapons barge into the makeshift shed of a construction site watchman at Bangalore. After assaulting and gagging him, the criminals gangrape his wife

- Man pours boiling oil on his 26-year-old wife and 18-month old child for refusing to give him money for

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drinking

- Woman corporator of Navi Mumbai set ablaze by four men

- Over 30 Kol tribal women from Chitrakoot in UP narrate horrendous tales of rape, sexual exploitation and humiliation by upper class 'dadoos' (landlords) before the National Commission for Women

These are not hideous tales from feral medieval ages, but crimes perpetrated in the last one year by a shockingly inhuman society on defenceless women. Though non government organisations (NGOs) have been crying hoarse on the increasing incidence of crimes against women, it took the government an incident like the rape of nuns in the Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh to sit up and take notice.

So diverse is the range of crimes against women that no study has been able to deal exhaustively with all

the aspects. Violence against women finds its genesis even before birth, with attempts being made to abort the foetus resulting in unbalanced sex ratios. And once a girl child is born, she bears the brunt of innumerable forms of aggression - physical, sexual and emotional.

"Most of the crimes against women go unreported because of several factors," says Vimochana spokesperson Gowri. "Victims of sexual abuse fear social ostracism and those who suffer from marital discord cling onto relationships at any cost. Ignorance is another factor. Most women do not even know whom to approach and how to file an FIR in the event of a crime." But, what's the point in filing complaints when the culprits are seldom convicted? Crime statistics collected by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences from one police station in Mumbai showed several

Violence against women is no longer a metaphor. As more and more women begin to debunk myths about their status in society, they become targets of violent retaliation.

cases registered for offences against women. But, there was not a single conviction in the last eight years!

Confronted with reports of bride burning and suicides in the dailies, last year Vimochana, an NGO in the forefront of fighting for women's rights, decided to conduct a survey on the unnatural deaths of women in Bangalore. And, what they unearthed confounded even the authorities. In a liberated, upwardly mobile city like Bangalore, there were 50 to 70 cases of unnatural deaths every month. While the data available with Vimochana shows as many as 714 deaths of women under suspicious circumstances in 1997, the actual cases registered with the police amounted to only 25 per cent of the lot.

The nationwide statistics are even more unnerving. A study conducted by the Delhi-based women's support group, Recovering and Healing from Incest (RAHI) shows that at least 76 per cent of the Indian women suffer from some form of sexual abuse. This is not all. Of these, about 40 per cent were abused by their own family members comprising maternal/paternal uncles, male cousins and sometimes even the father.

Bride burning, wife bashing and dowry-related deaths are also violent manifestations of gender bias practised with impunity by the Indian society. Categorized broadly under the head of domestic violence, these are

the "sinister embellishments of inequality, power struggles and fractured psyches and relationships within the home and the family," says Bhargavi Nagaraja, a journalist.

How do women react to the violence against them? Dr Shantha Mohan, who heads the Women's Policy Research and Advocacy (WOPRA) at the National Institute of Advanced Studies says, "Most women continue to put up with such oppression for a variety of reasons - fear of coming out of the marriage, financial insecurity and lack of support from outside sources." A study conducted by the WOPRA shows that in most cases women were harassed for factors beyond their control like giving birth to girls which defies medically proven facts!

What was even more shocking was many women had come to accept physical harassment by their spouse as an inevitable part of their marriage. About 70 per cent of the women respondents of the WOPRA survey felt it was a husband's prerogative to beat his wife! "The rural mindset is that the wife's rightful place is with her husband."

Most cases of brutality go unreported unless they culminate in death. And, even if they are reported, sanctimonious speeches are hurled at the

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abused women by the cops. Even after her death, there is no guarantee justice will be meted out to her tormentors. A typical case was that of Usha Shankar (not her real name) who had been struggling to hold together her crumbling marriage for 14 years. Her husband, an alcoholic with obvious behavioural problems, had repeatedly subjected her to mental and physical torture throughout their long marriage. Financially dependent on her

spouse, she had put up with his aggressive behaviour for several years until she decided to take her life in November last. The police have registered a case of suicide, which means her husband will go scot-free.

Rape, custodial rape and sexual harassment at the workplace are the other predominant forms of offences against women, which largely go unnoticed due to gross underreporting. Most of the NGOs concerned with women's welfare dismiss the recent government announcement that rapists will face capital punishment as political rhetoric. "We have enough laws to bring the culprits to book. What is lacking is the awareness. The police and the judiciary need to be gender sensitive and we need a few landmark judgements to stir people out of their apathy," says Dr Mohan.

There is yet another menacing facet to the issue of violence against women: where there is no palpable evidence, the scars are deeply entrenched in the mind. None of the women's organisations or the NGOs has dared to venture into this murky area of psychological abuse for obvious reasons. Many of these victims never come out into the open. And, when the simmering emotions do burst forth, they are branded as insane.

The feudalistic Indian society has evolved sinister methods of dealing with women who are labelled as schizophrenic. In rural India, there are temples dedicated to 'treating' psychiatric patients, most of whom are women, in the most barbaric fashion. The Mahandipur Balaji temple in Rajasthan is one such place where the women are chained, flogged and thrown on the floor repeatedly in the name of exorcism. The list of crimes against women doesn't end here - women being forced into sex trade, illegal trafficking of women, witch hunting in villages, sati, the list is endless.

So what needs to be done? "Empowerment of women," point out the activists for women's rights. Evidently, it is not only the women who need to develop a sense of self-esteem and poise to counter various manifestations of violence against them, the society, too, needs to be sensitised to the cause of women.

With inputs from
Chaitra Pallavi R S