

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Breaking the Culture of Repression

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When a man threw acid on Rina (not her real name), she reported it to the police. But, instead of implicating the true culprit -- her husband -- in the crime, she named a different man altogether. She figured that if her husband went to jail, the family would lose its breadwinner, and no one would want to marry her daughters. Months later, when Rina realised that the whole strange chain of events had taken place because her husband wanted to remarry, she decided to tell the truth about her attacker. But by then her testimony had become unreliable and her case became weak.

Women are caught up in such vicious circles all the time. They are taught to be dependent on men and to submit to them. They are kept ignorant of their basic human rights. They are made to think themselves the weaker sex. Eventually, they become it, and the cycle of oppression and violence continues.

The concept of "violence against women" has become stereotyped to the point of becoming clichéd. The first -- if not the only -- pictures the words will bring to one's mind are those of rural women draped in sarees, their faces hidden in the shadows, battered and bruised. Or images of the many cases filed (according to newspaper reports), or, on a slightly more positive level, pictures of women's rights organisations holding up placards and taking out processions, demanding justice in a handful of cases.

But, in reality, they are just that -- a handful of cases. The highly sensationalised cases, that finally get a verdict after a long drawn out legal battle, don't represent the hundreds of others that never make it to the public eye, or even to local courts. The violence against women and girls, wives and daughters-in-law, that don't only take place in villages but among the urban, educated

and, even privileged classes. Violence that is not always visible. Violence that is never talked about.

Violence against women transcends all boundaries of class and creed, age and relationships. It can happen to any woman, anywhere. Even educated and otherwise strong women remain in abusive relationships due to the pressures of an unaccepting family, an unforgiving society and an inefficient legal system.

But violence is not only about bleeding wounds and acid burns but also about incidents many people don't even refer to as violence, that many women simply accept. Marital rape, for example. For a woman, who, from childhood has been taught to obey and be submissive to men, be it father, brother or husband, and for a man who has been conditioned to be dominating, to exercise their authority over women, is marital rape really a crime? Does it even exist? Not in our legal system.

While on pen and paper we seem to have enough laws protecting women and their rights, their effect is obviously questionable. Some issues are just swept under the rug as "private" affairs between a married couple or "family matters."



Garment worker Rahela, a victim of the worst kind of violence.