

National Conference on “The Public and Private of Domestic Violence”

The conference was held as a part of the project on the “Institutional Responses to Domestic Violence” that has been going on at Anveshi for three years. The conference had two objectives: to address the questions that came up during the project and to share the findings of the project. The issues taken up for the conference related i) to the history and genealogy of the concept of domestic violence in India, ii) the responses of the women’s movements to the issue iii) the history of institutional responses to domestic violence iv) the demands made by the women’s movements on institutions and v) the ways in which the discussion on domestic violence had figured in the public arena. The conference was organised around four themes: frameworks, interventions, institutions and movements. A background note that briefly described the problems and questions for the conference was sent ahead of the conference to the speakers and they were asked to respond to specific sets of issues related to their work in the area. The conference took place on 1st and 2nd of August 2003, at the Inter-University Centre for International Studies.

The session on “Frameworks” had as speakers, A. Suneetha (Anveshi), Mary John (JNU, Delhi), and V.Geetha (Chennai). Rekha Pappu chaired the session. Expanding upon the issues raised in the background note, Suneetha critically evaluated the manner in which domestic violence emerged as an issue in the Indian context, where till recently, dowry violence has been the predominant description for violence experienced by women in the marital context. Her presentation also focused on the questions that arose from the project findings on women and institutions, especially regarding the assessment of institutions and women’s use of them.

Mary John’s presentation looked at the shifts in the ways family, sexuality and violence figured in different historical moments – pre-independence social reform, the second wave women’s movement in the 1970s and the contemporary moment. Speaking about the contemporary period, Mary raised two issues which refocused attention on sexuality and family – the media coverage of Nisha Sarma’s rejection of

dowry and the committee on sexual harassment on the Jawaharlal Nehru University Campus which has been established with the purpose of sensitising the campus about the issue as well as looking into all cases of sexual harassment. Mary was critical of both these developments and felt that they were deflecting from the actual address of the kinds of violence women faced.

V.Geetha's presentation titled 'Confounding love with violence: Confounding Violence with Love: An Enquiry into the Nature of Conjugal Intimacy, sought to examine why in our feminist attempts to redress women's pain borne of violence through discourses of rights, we did not pay sufficient attention to the bonds of conjugal love and intimacy, which prompt many to hold onto the marriage. She argued that our discourse of rights and justice do not offer a language to understand this amalgum of love and hurt.

Anuradha Kapoor, (Swayam, Calcutta) and Flavia Agnes, (Majlis, Mumbai) were the panelists for the session on "Interventions." Madhumeeta Sinha chaired the session. Anuradha Kapoor's presentation titled, "Beyond the criminal justice system: working with survivors of domestic violence" dwelt on Swayam's experiences of dealing with survivors of domestic violence. A significant part of their work involves working with institutions such as the police, judiciary and the hospitals as part of offering support to women. But a substantial part is non-institutional, including theatre, music, writing, creating support groups and addas, where she thinks they have been able to make some creative departures.

Flavia Agnes spoke about the legal intervention strategies that they have evolved at Majlis over the years. Speaking from the experience of Majlis where they prepared women for litigation and won cases, Flavia argued that the law is a double-edged weapon and could be used for women, if one strategizes carefully. She argued that new laws are therefore not always needed if one understands the functioning and logic of law and courts and use it to get relief for women.

The session on “Institutions” had Surinder Jaswal (TISS, Mumbai), Padma (Dilaasa, Mumbai), Vasudha (Anveshi) and K. Sajaya (Anveshi) as the speakers. Sheela Prasad (Anveshi) chaired the session.

Surinder Jaswal presented a part of her study, which examined hospital records in order to get an insight into how many women who face domestic violence approach the hospitals and what kind of record is maintained of the violence. The study showed that there was enormous evidence of domestic violence in the hospital records themselves. The number of clear cases of violence and probable violence came to nearly 70% of all the MLC cases that women reported at various health facilities. And a majority of these women were referred from gynaecological and surgical wards.

Padma spoke about *Dilaasa*, a programme started by CEHAT at a hospital in Mumbai where the staff of the hospital is being trained to screen women for domestic violence. The initiative started with a small study that looked into the ways domestic violence appears or does not appear in the records of the hospital as well as into whether the staff found that women faced domestic violence during the routine check up that they did. But the study revealed data similar to that of Surinder Jaswal’s. This was then used in the training workshops with the staff on violence against women.

Vasudha’s presentation focused on the functioning of the police stations in response to cases of domestic violence. Reviewing the ongoing debates within the women’s movement on Section 498A and the Bill on domestic violence prepared by the Lawyers Collective Vasudha emphasised the need to examine the process between women’s approaching the police station and the registration of the case rather than conclude that the police system has failed women.

The next presentation was by K.Sajaya who spoke on the issue of domestic violence in Telugu literature in the recent years. She took ten short stories written by writers from varied social background- backward caste, dalit, male, dominant caste feminist

and progressive writers and examined the ways in which domestic violence was dealt with in their stories.

The panellists for the session on “Movements” were K.Lalita (Anveshi), Ajitha (Anveshi, Calicut) and U.Vindhya (Andhra University, Vishakapatnam). Veena Shatrugna (Anveshi) chaired the session. Lalita’s presentation focused on the nature of activism, the various campaigns taken up, the kind of dilemmas and the internal dynamics of the group *Stree Shakti Sanghtana* which was formed in 1978 and of which she was a part. Ajitha’s presentation focused on the emergence and survival of Anveshi, Calicut of which she was the founder member. Vindhya’s presentation titled “Human rights movement and domestic violence: an uneven terrain” attempted to capture some defining moments in the engagement of the human rights movement with the issue of domestic violence with particular reference to Andhra Pradesh. Vindhya argued that a major impediment in accepting the notion of women’s human rights in the context of domestic violence was the public/private dichotomy within which the notion of human rights developed and got entrenched.