

ENOUGH! NO MORE VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIA'S DAUGHTERS TIME TO TALK OF LOVE

Not a rare occurrence - Ghastly incidents of violence against women appear to be on the rise, particularly in Delhi. Since the horrific story of Nirbhaya, there has been a palpable anger against such crimes, and particularly against such criminals. This simmering anger has flared up once again in April with the brutal rape of the five year-old girl. The (late) Justice Verma Commission had made an excellent set of recommendations, some of which are part of the new law. Unfortunately it has not been an auspicious beginning with the police being accused of trying to hush up the case at the outset.

For many of us working on the issue of violence against women – domestic violence, sexual harassment in public places, rape, child sex abuse and so on, these were incidents which we came across regularly. However, while these incidents were commonplace, their reports were few. The first response was usually one of denial – a refusal to believe that such an event could happen. There are those who still say that violence against women is ‘an idea imported from the west’. The second and even more difficult barrier is the hesitation of the woman, girl or their family to report this event to the police. In India the notion of ‘honour’ has meant that women who are victims of sexual violence ‘lose their honour’ and by association her family too loses its honour; therefore it is best to hush it up, while the male perpetrators roam free.

But today the situation is changing. Women and girls and their families, even the public at large, are protesting in the face of these ghastly events: the denial has given way to widespread anger.

Not a law and order issue alone - As a lethargic law and order machinery tries to cope with the now emboldened woman or girl and her family, or the protests on the streets, we have to realise that violence against women is not an issue of law and order alone. We find it easy to express our anger at the perpetrator, consider him a rare sexual pervert, and call strongly for the death penalty. But it is time we recognize that violence is not rare. The recent cases are the tip of an iceberg – violence against women stems from an interconnected web of reasons; ranging from extreme gender hierarchies which keep women subordinate, to cultural practices and traditions which we accept without challenge, to a sense of male privilege and entitlement which mothers and fathers inculcate in their darling sons. Beyond households are the growing economic inequalities, a failure of governance mechanisms, a sense of impunity among the political and economic elite, and an archaic policing system.

While the perpetrator is certainly culpable and deserves punishment, while the police certainly need to ensure both women's safety and for bringing criminals to book, we are all implicated in the growing incidence of violence against women. While we call for a more effective law and order and criminal justice system, we must understand that the answer to the violence around us today cannot be combated by the fear of the police and a quick justice mechanism. We need greater freedom and security at the individual level, we need a responsive and accountable public system but above all we need much greater trust, respect, mutuality, concern and compassion in all our relationships.

Divisions in our society - We have a deeply divided society in India. According to tradition, everyone has a fixed place in society which is marked primarily by their caste and gender. This idea of division and difference is not only seen in the public sphere, but is present within our homes: for example when parents treat their sons and daughters differently; when husbands beat their wives on frivolous pretexts; when families collude to torture their daughter-in-law for not bringing adequate dowry; when brothers kill their sisters for marrying out of her own choice. And these are not isolated instances taking place in a rare household; these are extremely commonplace among both rich and poor, in our cities and villages.

Creating Real Men - We need to also examine our conception of the ‘good’ or ‘real’ man. The birth of a boy child is a cherished and often a wildly celebrated event. In our society it is the ‘son’ who is expected to carry the name of the family forward – an expectation that could burden him for the rest of his life.

On the one hand the son is given a better share of care and support creating a sense of entitlement and privilege. On the other hand the son is taught to compete, to work hard, to succeed, and to win at all costs. The messages are clear: ‘do not to cry like a girl’, ‘do not play with dolls like a sissy, take the gun’, ‘do not come into the kitchen, its women's work’. And thus we create ‘sons’ who not only have an overwhelming sense of self-importance and privilege, but who have been trained to tolerate pain, to be angry, to shoot the enemy, to be violent.

At the same time we have taken away his ability to respect, his creativity, his capacity for sympathy and compassion, and to deal with failure. Most public places are full of men, the *chowpal*, the stadium, the pub or the parliament. In these places men can be found posturing, bragging, discussing weighty matters, celebrating success, engaged in a brawl over disagreements or failures, but rarely will men be found confessing failure, acknowledging lack of clarity, sharing confusion or seeking honest support in the company of peers. Often men do not have much of a space at home which is often an exclusive preserve of women. This denies

men an opportunity to have meaningful, mutually respectful, caring, equal relationships with women, be it their mother, aunts, sisters, wife or daughter.

We have the added complexity of how we as a society relate to the issue of sexuality. Even though the issue of reproduction and 'population growth' is a matter of great concern to the Indian, discussions about sex are prohibited. While child marriage is common, sexuality education is taboo. Boys and girls grow up in strictly segregated societies without an opportunity to seek clarity about bodily changes, erotic feelings, emotional responses and sexual inclinations.

'Real men' and violence - Today the world is changing rapidly. Women are no longer satisfied in being subordinate, of being invisible, of not expressing their desires, of not achieving their aspirations. Social and economic divisions are being broken. Many pampered sons, now men, are unable to relate to these changes, where they cannot take their privileges for granted, where women are not submissive and invisible.

While globalisation and economic liberalisation has created an opportunity for men trained for competition to succeed, but it is also devastating those for whom the situation has been adverse. Failed 'real men' seek 'instant gratification' from pornographic video clips, and would readily 'exercise their power' over a helpless five year old, or 'punish' the woman who dares to protest by repeatedly ramming an iron rod into her vagina.

The successful 'real men' consider marital sex their 'right', see nothing wrong in claiming sexual favours from their subordinates, fulfil their 'duty' by killing their daughter or sister for marrying someone out of her own will to save the honour of the family. These successful 'real men' have their wives undergo numerous sex pre-selection tests to ensure a boy is born who can continue the legend of the successful 'real man'.

If we are sickened by the violence around us, it is unhelpful to call for hanging the perpetrator. The power and will to change the way we look at each other and our relationships is within each one of us, women and men. We need to start with changing ourselves.
