Organizing Against Violence: 
Strategies of the Indian Women's 
Movement*

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In India the challenges to those engaged in building a women's movement are formidable. Activists who seek to capture political space for women's issues must work to have their voices heard alongside and as part of the multiplicity of class, linguistic, religious, ethnic and caste claimants that make up the Indian polity. The purpose of this article is to consider the kind of power and resources that the Indian women's movement has utilized in the struggle to bring attention to women's subordination.

I argue that what has given the Indian women's movement influence far in excess of its numerical strength or organizational cohesiveness has been its ability to "name" issues, to call particular attention to aspects of women's lives that journalists, intellectual and political elites, and a large cross-section of the general population could no longer ignore. Beginning in the late 1970s, women activists undertook to organize around issues of gender violence—rape, dowry deaths, wife-beating, sati (the immolation of widows on their husband's funeral pyre), female-neglect resulting in differential mortality rates, and, more recently, female foeticide following amniocentesis. Raising such issues won the movement its share of critics but without the protest against gender violence, it is questionable whether the growing awareness of gender issues which now exists in India would have developed.

Issues of violence against women by no means constitute the whole or even the primary focus of the contemporary women's movement in India. Only recently, at the third annual women activists conference in Patna (February 1988) and at the Fourth National Conference on Women's Studies in Andhra (December 1988), the debates ranged broadly across questions of poverty, employment, work, property, health and ecology, communalism, culture and religion, political representation, law, reproduc-

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tion, as well as issues of gender violence. But it was the focus on violence against women, beginning in the late 1970s, that propelled the movement forward and endowed it with much of its present strength.

THE INDIAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW

The contemporary Indian women’s movement is constituted by a panoply of organizations—urban and rural, academic and activist—drawn from upper, middle, and lower-income segments of society (with the leadership stratum largely upper-middle class). Although on particular occasions thousands of women can be mobilized for protests, rallies and mass meetings, the numbers of activists with sustained movement involvement as well as supporters who identify with a collective feminist consciousness are limited in comparison with such numbers in the West. In structure and ideology, the movement resembles its European more than its American counterpart in that feminist groups in India are dispersed (there is no central organization like NOW) and political commitments and language are distinctly more leftistic than liberal.

Both ideologically and structurally, however, the movement is marked by heterogeneity. As Susie Tharu observes, “the movement as it has emerged today, has no centralized organisation, no commonly acknowl-

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2 The IWY march led by the Dahej Virodhi Chetna Manch (an umbrella organization of different groups that had come together around anti-dowry issues) on 3 August 1982 drew between three thousand and five thousand people. (Times of India, 4 August 1982.) The meeting in Chandwad organized by Shetkari Sanghatana (connected to Sharad Joshi’s movement) reportedly drew forty thousand women. See B.M. Purandare, “Giving Vent to Indignation,” *Femina*, 23 December 1986–7 January 1987, pp. 14ff.

3 The women’s movement poses particular identification problems more vexing than for some other movements. Unlike the labor movement, for instance, whose participants are virtually all card-carrying union members, women’s movement activists are not necessarily members of any (feminist) organization. Identifying movement participants by “consciousness” rather than by organizational membership is difficult as well. Clearly the movement in India and elsewhere is broader than those who would use the term “feminism” as a self-description (although as many as 50 percent of American women consider themselves to be feminist according to a Gallup poll published in *Newsweek*, 31 March 1986, p. 51). If feminism is understood, however, to refer to the opposition to gender hierarchy, the individuals and groups engaged in such work include a far larger swathe of Indian society than the organizational membership of the “autonomous” women’s groups (those usually associated with the term feminism). As Susie Tharu says well, “Though autonomous groups are its mainstay, what we might think of as the women’s movement can hardly be limited to their activities or their sphere of influence. . . . Journalists, civil liberties activists, teachers, artists, film makers, party workers, policy makers, development agencies and even government officials have been party to shaping it” (pp. 122–23 in Susie Tharu, “Engendering Political Processes—Or, What The Women’s Movement Is Doing and What It Might Amount To, Some Day,” *What’s Happening to India? The Last Ten Years Conference Papers*, 4–7 December 1986, Melbourne, Australia, pp. 122–36).
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edged leadership, no unifocal programme. . . . Groups do not share a commitment to any one analysis of women's oppression, or its relationship with other forms of oppression/exploitation, or the strategies necessary for action or change. In fact even an intra-group consensus is often not assumed or demanded."4

The movement is multi-associational, ideologically diverse, regionally broad, and concerned with a vast array of issues. Taxonomically, it can be thought of as embracing six organizational sectors each with particular strengths and weaknesses.

Party-connected Women's Organizations

These encompass both older and newer organizations ranging from the venerable All-India Women's Conference (AIWC) associated with Congress to the newer Mahila Dakshata Samiti formed as a women's wing of the Janata Party in 1978. Founded in 1927 as a social reform organization committed particularly to the promotion of education for women, AIWC declared itself apolitical.5 There were, nevertheless, many prominent members of AIWC who were also active in the nationalist movement. Over the course of particular periods mutual support existed between the movement and the conference. Since independence the conference has been closely connected to the Congress Party.

Under CPI leadership, the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) was formed in 1954. Following the Communist party split, CPM women worked in the All India Working Women's Coordination Committee and later also in the All-India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), formed in the 1970s under pressure from the newer women's movement. The national organization has been less active than particular subunits such as the Janwadi Mahila Samiti in Delhi whose protest against dowry deaths and whose work in slums is well known. The Mahila Dakshata Samiti, led by Promila Dandavate, whose socialist and later Janata affiliation links organization to party has also been very active in Delhi.

Other loosely affiliated organizations existed such as the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) linked to Naxalite student groups in Hyderabad which were in turn succeeded by the more autonomous Stri Shakti Sanghatana (SSS).6 A recently formed Samagra Mahila Agadhi (the "All-Women's Front") affiliated with the Sharad Joshi-led Shetkari

Sanghatana (a powerful opposition force in Maharashtra) has been formed to contest panchayat elections.\footnote{7 See Krishnendu Ray and Satish Kumar Jha, “Assessing Shetkari Sanghatana,” \textit{Economic and Political Weekly}, 19 December 1987, p. 2229-30. See also “Reaching for Half the Sky: A Reader in the women’s movement” (Baroda: Antar Rashtriya Prakashan, 1985), pp. 18–19.}

Leftist party commentators, particularly, argue that women’s groups associated with parties have the potential of being more effective because of their connections with mass organizations. Without these party connections, feminist activism would “remain isolated [and] middle class with limited fields of perception and activity.”\footnote{8 Gita Harrihan, “Women and Political Participation: An Emerging Perspective,” mimeographed, no date but circa 1983 as quoted in Tharu, “Engendering Political Processes,” fn. 5.} Whether or not this charge is valid, it is clear that these party-connected groups are far better able to mobilize huge numbers of women for demonstrations. During the controversy over the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights in Marriage) Bill in 1986, for instance, the leftist party-connected women’s groups mobilized large numbers of women for demonstrations, numbers which the Delhi-based autonomous groups could not have brought out. Similarly, in 1986 the Sharad Joshi-led groups of Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra brought forty-thousand rural women together in a women’s meet in Chandwad.\footnote{9 See footnote 2.}

\section*{Autonomous Women’s Groups}

Beginning in the late 1970s, feminists came together in what were later termed “autonomous women’s organizations.” These groups were independent of party affiliation although individual members often had party links. The distinction between party-linked and autonomous groups is not always clear-cut. Such groups as POW, for instance, mentioned above, might arguably be categorized as “autonomous” rather than party-linked but most of the autonomous groups do not have the clear party affiliations that the Janwadi or Mahila Dakshata Samiti have.

These newer autonomous organizations are largely urban-based. In Delhi, in January 1979 a small group of women began the publication of \textit{Manushi} (in English and Hindi) that was soon to achieve a circulation of several thousand. Saheli, formed in 1982, concerned itself particularly with issues of dowry and domestic violence; Mediastorm with documentary films covering current controversial issues; Ankoor with adult education; Jaguri with the collection of feminist documentation, film and literature; Kali For Women devoted itself to the publication of original feminist literature and analysis. Stree Sangharsh staged street plays about dowry murders, rape and “eve teasing” (harassment). The list of Delhi organizations is long.
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In Bombay, the Forum against Oppression of Women, organized in 1981, took up issues of rape (particularly police and custodial rape), dowry deaths and harassment of women commuters. The Women's Centre in Bombay has provided legal help and counseling to women in need. Also active earlier in Maharashtra was the leftist Purogami Street Sanghatana that started Bayza, a Marathi women's journal.10

Groups elsewhere in India include the SSS in Hyderabad (mentioned above); Vimochana (Bangalore); Pennurima Iyakkam (Tamil Nadu); Chingari Nari Sangathan (Ahmedabad), the Ahmedabad Women's Action Group; the Stree Jagruti Samiti (Bangalore and Bombay) among many others.

The membership of these groups is small. Many have between ten and twenty active members; some are scarcely one- or two-person operations. But when activists from these different groups come together, their numbers can be impressive. The Bihar conference in February 1988, for instance, drew 750 representatives of different autonomous groups with 8000 people attending the final rally.11 But generally, the strength of these autonomous groups is not based on their ability to mobilize large numbers in protests or demonstrations but rather stems from their capacity to reflect on, to name, and to publicize movement issues as will be detailed in the later discussion of the movement's politicization of the issue of gender violence.

Grass Roots Organizations

An important force that works for women's interests is located in the grass-roots political movements of India in which women play a major role.12 These have included the well-known Chipko (tree-hugging) movement that protested deforestation in Uttarkhand in 1978,13 and the Shramik Sanghatana movement in Dhulia District of Maharashtra in which activist Bhil women and others organized against wife-beating, male drinking and harassment. Activist Dalit women were important in pressuring the J.P. Narayan-formed Yuva Sangarsh Vahini in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, to address issues of drunkenness and wife-beating. Similar movements in Marathwada also took place in the late 1970s under the auspices of the Kashtakari Sanghatana.

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These grass-roots groups have undertaken energetic campaigns for increased wages, an end to wife beating and the alcoholism of their husbands, and to protest incursions of outsiders on their livelihood. But such efforts are fragmented, only occasionally linked by national meetings or gatherings.

Women's Research Institutes

Over the last ten years a number of institutes have become a home to large research efforts for the study of women's issues. In New Delhi, these include the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS); the Institute of Social Studies Trust; the Indian Social Institute Programme for Women's Development (a research and networking organization associated with the Jesuit social action institute and in Bombay); and the Research Centre for Women's Studies which is associated with SNDT Women's University in Bombay.

Each of these centers has research and activist components as part of their broad agenda. CWDS, for example, is involved in two "action research" projects in West Bengal and the Punjab where staff members help in the coordination, networking, training programs and evaluation of women's employment and production projects. In contradistinction to the image sometimes entertained of these organizations—that they are narrowly-focused on middle-class concerns—many, indeed most, of the research and activist projects address issues facing rural and poor women.

These research organizations function in an interesting "place" in the movement. Unlike women's studies faculty in the United States, the research staff of these institutes (there are exceptions) do little teaching. They are, however, much more closely linked to the extra-university sections of the women's movement than is true of their U.S. counterparts. Their role in creating feminist consciousness occurs not through the classroom but through the dual links that many feminist researchers in these institutes have, both to those in policy-making positions in government and to activists in different sectors of the movement itself.

Women's Development Organizations

The last decade and a half has also seen the formation of a number of nongovernmental, largely urban organizations which attempt to enhance the economic situation of women workers in the informal sector. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) organized in 1972 and led by Ela Bhatt in Gujarat; the Working Women's Forum in Madras, initiated in 1978 and directed by Jaya Arunachalam; and the Annapurna Mahila Man-

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dal in Bombay founded in 1975 by veteran trade unionist Prema Purao\textsuperscript{15} have organized approximately sixty-five thousand women who are petty vendors, hawkers, home-based producers, and laborers.\textsuperscript{16} A large number of smaller but important organizations such as the Mobile Creches started by Mina Swaminathan in Delhi are also dispersed in cities and towns throughout India.\textsuperscript{17}

The numerous "old" and "new" voluntary organizations

These include religious, caste, ethnic and nonsectarian organizations that offer services to poor women (job training, legal aid, health clinics, etc.). Although the targeted beneficiaries of these volunteer groups are usually low-income women, certain projects are aimed at a more middle-class clientele, as for example the fund-raising schemes in Bombay to construct dormitories for working and professional women.\textsuperscript{18}

The inclusion of this kind of voluntary organization within the definitional parameter of the women's movement might be debated. These "charitable" organizations tend not to see themselves as explicitly mobilizational\textsuperscript{19} and do not begin to be as self-conscious as the autonomous women's groups about breaking down the stratification between volunteer and client. Unlike the more autonomous organizations or development projects sponsored by the women's studies research institutes, there is less self-reflection about the dangers, as Maitreyi Krishna Raj observes, of "becoming intermediaries for others' uplift."\textsuperscript{20}

At the same time it is important to recognize that the functional distinction between these more traditional voluntary groups and the more "feminist" organization groups is not always so clear in practice. Many of the more "traditional" voluntary organizations do empower women through

\textsuperscript{15} Christian Science Monitor, 22 June 1987, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{17} Mina Swaminathan, "Who Cares? A Study of Child Care Facilities for Low Income Working Women in India" (New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies, 1985).
\textsuperscript{18} P.M. Mathew and M.S. Nair, Women's Organizations and Women's Interests (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1986); Patricia Caplan, Class and Gender in India: Women and their Organizations in a South Indian City (New York: Methuen, 1986).
\textsuperscript{19} Some groups do participate in movement demonstrations and protests as did the YMCA, for instance, during the anti-dowry movement in Delhi between 1981–1984. Like the AIWC, the YMCA took a less political stance than AIDWA or some other leftist-party-connected groups. The YMCA activists preferred to talk about the needed change in societal attitudes where groups such as AIDWA target the government as responsible for gender violence. See Rajni Palriwala, "Women are Not for Burning: the Anti-Dowry Movement in Delhi," Paper prepared for Anthropological Perspectives on Women's Collective Actions, 1975–1985, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, an International Symposium, 9–17 November 1985, Mijas, Spain.
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their services. By the same token, many of the newer feminist organizations express frustration at becoming principally social service associations unable to retain the participation of clients after personal problems have been addressed.²¹

Several general points can be drawn from this synopsis of the women's movement. (1) The movement in India is highly diversified among party-affiliated groups, autonomous feminist organizations, grass roots organizations, private voluntary and development groups and institutions of academic research. (2) This diversity is echoed in the ideological character and political concerns of the movement. Organizational agendas span the range from reformist to radical and target a broad range of concerns from the economic livelihood of poor women to sexual violence across social groups. (3) Each of the movement's organizational sectors has distinct strengths. The party-affiliated groups are of course able to draw on political leverage which established political parties can exert and mobilize funds and people for protest demonstrations more readily than the autonomous groups can. The development groups (SEWA and WWF, for instance) as mass organizations also have far greater numbers than the autonomous groups. The autonomous groups, however, have acute political savvy and connections to professional, media, and governmental circles which enable them to politicize issues with an effectiveness that belies their numerical "insignificance." (4) The distinction between voluntary and autonomous feminist groups according to whether they serve social services rather than mobilizational functions is more a matter of degree than of kind. (5) Similarly although the "old" movement could be thought of as being less explicitly mobilizational and more directed toward women's welfare concerns than toward the articulation of women's interests as such, this functional distinction is far from absolute. The politics of social reformism and the politics of mobilization and empowerment have co-existed in the period before 1975 and afterwards with the rise of the more autonomous organizations.

**The Expanding Feminist Agenda: Protest Against Violence**

1975 is often thought of as the beginning of the contemporary²² "feminist" movement in India. The term, feminism, is usually associated with

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the autonomous sector of the movement—groups like Saheli, Manushi, the Forum Against Oppression—that emerged in the late 1970s and that mobilized around issues of gender violence. It is true that in some senses 1975 was a beginning. In anticipation of the 1975 International Women's Year declared by the United Nations, the government of India commissioned a report that was to play a catalytic role in the emergence of the contemporary feminist movement in India. Published in 1974, the report dramatically called attention to existing gender inequality with its documentation of a declining sex ratio (read as an indicator of differential female mortality) and its presentation of evidence of inequalities in education, income, access to health care and political representation. The report galvanized both academics and activists. Not only did it cite patterns of inequality that had not been widely recognized but no less important, the process of preparing the report caused several women members of the commission to redirect their scholarly and activist energies entirely. Having previously neither reflected on nor undertaken research on women's issues, Lotika Sarkar (Delhi University law professor) and Vina Mazumdar (a professor of political science) were to go on to occupy positions among those at the forefront of the women's movement.

That year (1975) two conferences on gender were held—the first in Pune, sponsored by various parties of the left, and the second in Trivandrum, run by the Indian School of Social Sciences. The national Emergency, imposed in 1975, spawned the birth of numerous civil liberties groups that protested the abrogation of democratic rights. These events in the mid-decade produced an upsurge of interest in and organization around gender issues.

Between 1975 and 1980, the movement focused largely on economic and demographic issues. The two important conferences in 1975 in Pune and Trivandrum had given scant attention to issues of violence, dwelling largely on economic questions brought to the fore as a natural part of the left's agenda. At these conferences and elsewhere prior to the turn of the decade, there was some discussion of dowry issues, the sexual exploitation of women in advertising and of "atrocities perpetrated against women" largely as part of upper-class exploitation of untouchables and the poor, but the general issue of sexual violence was given little attention. It was not only the left parties that glossed over such concerns. Several of the authors of the 1974 *Towards Equality* report have reflected with retrospective

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24 Omvedt comments on the "economistic" focus of the conference, "Participation," p. 18.
surprise at their own inattention to sexual violence. One member comments.\(^\text{25}\)

I realise now that there were other things which we should have investigated. We did not include rape in our enquiry. We took some note of suicides when they were brought to our notice, but no one mentioned a single case of dowry murder. Harassment, even torture was reported but never a murder. Today I realise that the issue of violence of crimes against women did not feature in our report as we have not investigated it. Even the practice of dowry was not in our initial questionnaire—it was forced on us by the women we met.

Another commission participant noted,

More than dowry, when I look back I am shocked that we have not taken up the issue of rape at all. As far as I can recollect, nowhere in our discussions on women, the problem of rape was ever brought up. Rape was brought up from time to time only in the context of prostitution. I cannot say that I was not aware of rape as an instrument in subjugating the lower classes and lower castes, but what has come to light since the publication of the report, I was not aware of.

In 1979-1980, the movement shifted gears. As Gail Omvedt observes, "the year 1980 can be considered to be an important dividing line."\(^\text{26}\) It was at this point that the women's movement led by the autonomous women's organizations brought issues of sexual violence to the forefront of the feminist agenda. This broadening of the feminist agenda was catalyzed by the political mobilization around the Mathura case. Mathura was a tribal girl of between fourteen and sixteen years old when she was called to a police station in a small town of Maharashtra where she was raped while in police custody by two constables. The lower (sessions) court held that she was "of loose morals" and found the policemen innocent, a judgment overturned by the high court. However, on appeal the Supreme Court ruled that Mathura had consented to sexual intercourse. This verdict was protested by four Delhi University law professors who in 1979 wrote an open letter to the chief justice of India. The four included one of the women, Lotika Sarkar, who had served on the Status of Women commission earlier in the decade. The letter was followed by country-wide mobilizations around the Mathura rape case and around the issue of custodial rape (rape in police custody). Manushi and other feminist newsletters and journals carried exposés and personal accounts of women who had been victimized. Others told the tragic stories of daughters and sisters who had been ill-treated, assaulted, or burned to death. These were accounts of what the women's movement came to term "bride-burning" or "dowry-deaths," where in-laws dissatisfied with the young wife and/or with the dowry she had brought would pour kerosene and set fire to her clothing causing her


\(^{26}\) Omvedt, "Participation," p. 17.
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death in incidents made to look like accidents from the explosion of the small kerosene stoves many households use for cooking.

Between 1979 and the present, feminist activists mobilized around different aspects of gender violence. The anti-rape protests were followed by the anti-dowry campaigns of 1981-84. Feminist groups have continued their support of women who are victims of family violence and have extended their protest to other issues such as the practice of sati and female foeticide.

The Shifting Agenda: An Explanation

The movement’s turn-of-the-decade shift towards protesting violence against women evoked criticism largely from leftist quarters where it was argued that feminists pandered to bourgeois concerns. Lost in the criticism was any real attempt to explore the political logic that steered the women’s movement in this direction. This logic was two-pronged: on the one hand, forces external to the movement made a “discourse” around violence common currency for movements that sought political attention. By 1980 the threat and/or use of violence by ethnic, religious, and class-based organizations gained currency. Violence was not new to political activists of the 1970s as the bloodshed of partition and the violent demonstrations erupting out of the linguistic state protests of the 1950s and 1960s remind us.

But it is clear that by the late 1970s, direct action, frequently violent, became established as one proven method by which government attention to group grievances could be secured. Intensification of conflict and strikes preceded the Emergency in 1975, subsided briefly and again increased.

Second, the movement’s concern with issues of violence also follows logically from developments that were internal to the movement. Not simply in India but in the experience of other feminist movements as well, feminists appear to address issues of violence only when the movement has established a strong degree of autonomy from the state and party actors. Whether in India or elsewhere, when the state or political parties “sponsor” feminist concerns, concerns about violence against women is rarely a priority.

In Sweden, for instance, where the state has perhaps more clearly than anywhere else declared its commitment to gender equality, and where feminists have been the beneficiaries of close ties to a strong labor-

27 In addition to the Mathura case, feminists demonstrated on behalf of Rameela Bee in Hyderabad and Maya Tyagi in Delhi. Both women had been raped in police custody, and their husbands who had protested their treatment killed.


dominated corporatist state structure, issues of violence against women have been low on the agenda. Similarly, in the United States the first two major legislative initiatives around gender equality (taken in 1963 and 1964 respectively) concerned equal pay and employment and both preceded the emergence of the women's movement. It was only later with the efflorescence of an independent feminist movement that the issues of rape, harassment, and battering came to be articulated and addressed. The more closely tied women's issues are to state and party, the less likely it seems to be that issues of violence will occupy central attention.

The turn to issues of violence, then, followed a logical progression in India as sectors of the women's movement that were autonomous of party politics gained strength. With the emergence of the autonomous wing of the movement, publications and discussion groups provided a forum where personal experiences of battering, rape and dowry violence could be voiced. The pages of Manushi, most notably, became the repository for extensive personal accounts of women's experience of violence that had earlier been silenced.

Movement Strategy: Radical Pragmatism

The autonomous groups took up issues of sexual violence through a combination of political strategies that were both radical and pragmatic. The radical dimension of the movement was manifest in that Tharu calls its "commitment to intra-group democracy" as well as in its agitational style of politics, a style nevertheless laced by a strong pragmatic approach to getting things done.

The attention to dowry-related violence has its own specific history that is linked to the spread and increase in dowry and cash transactions at marriage which may have contributed not only to dowry deaths but to wife beating as well. Hence the attention to dowry and wife beating could be said to have emanated in part from the changing economic bases of marriage. But the attention to rape that preceded the anti-dowry campaigns cannot be said to have emanated from the same sources.

51 See Flavia, My Story, Our Story, Rebuilding Broken Lives (Bombay: Women's Centre Publication, November 1984).

52 Party-connected groups like AIDWA, MDS, and NWIF were very active in Delhi around the dowry issue.


54 Feminist organizers in India eschew both the more radical German and the more liberal American models. In the United States the Battered Women's Shelter movement has moved increasingly in the direction of professionalization relying on staffs with demonstrated "credentials" paid by government and foundation grants and with routinized support and counseling groups sessions where the focus is on individuals taking control of their life plans. In the German movement, more emphasis is put on autonomy from government, fewer "rules" govern the admission of women to shelters (shelters are open to women drug or alcohol dependency notwithstanding; length of stay may not be limited; work and decision-making is shared). See Myra Marx Ferree, "Equality and Autonomy: Feminist Politics in the United States and West Germany," in The Women's Movements of the United States and Western Europe: Consciousness, Political Opportunity, and Public Policy, ed. Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Carol McClurg Mueller (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).
The politics of the mobilization against sexual violence is most clearly illustrated through a depiction of Saheli, one group in Delhi that made gender violence its central issue. Founded in August 1981, it now operates out of a small unimposing upstairs office above a neighborhood shopping esplanade in a middle/lower-middle class section of New Delhi. The organization has four to five paid staff members, several full-time volunteers and an extended group of part-time unpaid workers. Earlier Saheli activists spent much of their time on dowry and bride-burning issues. Activists also organized around rape and battering, and in 1984-85 worked with widows in the Sikh resettlement camps and among women in the aftermath of the Bhopal tragedy. More recently Saheli has considered discontinuing work on dowry murders in order to concentrate resources on women "who live to struggle." The support for victims of battering continues (Saheli’s one-room shelter is in continuous use) along with mobilization around health, housing and other concerns.

Saheli’s radical pragmatism has been evident in many dimensions of its political organizing. Apprehensive about the cooptative dangers of work with government officialdom, some Saheli activists prefer strategies of agitational politics such as the demonstrations that the organization once mobilized outside the houses of husbands where a wife had been burned to death. At the same time, Saheli volunteers have met with supervisory officers of the Delhi police urging the instituting of new investigatory procedures. Moderate and agitational politics are sometimes combined as in the case of Asha Rani, a young woman who had left her family and refused to go back despite the vehement attempts of her two brothers to secure her return. In 1982, the brothers together with the local police ransacked the Saheli office in an attempt to find information about their sister’s whereabouts. A confrontation between police and Saheli workers ensued followed by a Saheli-led demonstration of fifty shouting and placard-carrying women outside the local police station. The demonstrations and complaints lodged led to the transfer of a senior police officer. Saheli’s connections to the media and the newsworthy confrontational politics ensured coverage and won Saheli notoriety and clout. From this point, women identifying with Saheli were able to exact some (not always willing) cooperation from their meetings with local police.

Saheli is also versed in the less public style of politics—using connections to get things done. Saheli’s personal connections, for instance, to the Delhi Police Commissioner, Ved Marwah, led to many mutual consultations over police actions concerning the handling of dowry complaints. Letters requesting meetings with Indira Gandhi, ministers and government secretaries were an integral part of Saheli politics. The daily impor-

35 Much of the following is based on interviews with Saheli activists in December 1986 and in Spring 1988.
The radical pragmatism of the autonomous women’s movement has worked quite well given at least two realities such organizations face. First, unlike organizations linked to parties or broader movements, the autonomous women’s movement cannot organize vast numbers of supporters in protest. Unlinked to party organizations, moreover, the autonomous feminist movements do not have ready access to party leadership and parliamentary votes.

Second, a further constraint the movement faces in its effort to protest violence against women is a state which is at best willing but weak. American feminists, particularly those who have come of age as feminists under the reactionary policies of the Reagan administration, cannot help but be impressed by the many highly placed officials and intellectuals in India who have proved to be deeply committed to women’s interests. The

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30 Saheli; the first four years, published by Saheli Women’s Resource Centre, Defence Colony, Flyover Market, New Delhi 110024. No date.
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late J.P. Naik, Margaret Alva of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Ashok Mitra, and former Census Commissioner K.G. Krishnamurthy of the Planning Commission are some of the many names that come to mind. Nevertheless there is a wide gap separating declared policy and its effective execution. India is not short on legislation. There have been reforms in the rape law (the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1980), 1984 amendments to the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1981, a revision of the Indian Penal Code (Section 498a dealing with the cruelty of a husband and his relatives), and a law prescribing the death penalty for anyone abetting sati and directing the removal of sati temples, etc.37 Even with some reforms now having been instituted, weak enforcement gives little hope for those who wish to see profound changes in societal practices around gender issues.

Given these constraints, the radical "realpolitik" of autonomous feminist groups has proved quite successful, particularly in three areas. First, it has provided an important source of support for some number, probably not very large, of low-income and middle-class women whose marriages or home life have been rent by violence and abuse. Even if middle-class or lower-middle class women have been the predominant beneficiaries of such support, the importance of such crisis services is undeniable. Yet it is curious how readily such activities on the part of feminist groups are criticized even by liberals and by the left as antifamily and as presumed evidence of the bourgeois character of the women's movement.

Second, the movement has assisted in successfully pressuring the courts and legislators to begin to take violence against women seriously. In 1983, an additional session judge in Delhi made history by handing down a death sentence conviction in the Sudha Goel dowry murder case, a judgment overturned on appeal. In 1985 the Supreme Court handed down a sentence of life imprisonment for two of the three defendants in the Goel case. In Delhi alone, police figures record between 400 and 630 "accidental" burnings each year for the first part of the 1980s.38 Although the number of court convictions remains paltry, it is of no small symbolic importance that the courts have begun to reach such verdicts.

By working for the reform of rape law, for the revision of police protocol around allegations of dowry deaths and for changes in the law dealing with violence in the family, feminist groups have helped to remove some of the legitimacy the legal system gave to practices of violence against women.

Third, the greatest impact of feminist activism has been to capture public attention. Violence which had been simply obscured and silenced

37 See Nandita Haksar, Demystification of Law for Women (New Delhi: Lancer Press, 1986). Manuski and many journals have carried commentary on each of these legal reforms.
38 Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj, Women and Society in India (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1987), p. 275. For state data on dowry murders see the Newsletter of the Research Centre for Women’s Studies, SNDT Women's University, Sri Vithaldas Vidyavihar, Juhu Rd. Bombay 400049.
before has now been named. Feminism's turn to issues of violence has caused a surge in newspaper attention. A study of *The Hindustan Times* (a random sample of twenty days in each year between 1977 and the present) vividly illustrates this dramatic surge in media attention. Three changes occurred: (1) The shift in feminism's agenda coincided with a sharp increase in newspaper coverage. In 1977 and 1978, of the twenty days read, there were only three articles on women in the former and one in the latter year. In 1979, the year the movement took up issues of violence, the number of articles rose to twelve and stayed constant through the 1980s. (2) The broadening of the movement's agenda to include issues of violence invited newspaper coverage not simply around issues of rape, dowry murders, battering, etc., but also around a range of other movement concerns. Reports on violence comprised between two-thirds and three-fourths of the article coverage. But coverage of other gender issues increased as well. (3) Coverage of violence against women became highly influenced by the movement's construction of violence as a problem. What had earlier been reported as "police blotter" assault or suicide came to be "labeled" as involving a suspicion of dowry murder or forced suicide stemming from family quarrels. What might have been earlier described as sexual assault came to be denoted as rape, and special note was made of police involvement, using the term "custodial rape." The movement's role in "naming" violence seemed to have a clear impact on press reporting.

There can be no doubt that movement-prompted newspaper attention has contributed to the widespread popular recognition of dowry harassment and violence. Newspapers convey consciousness far beyond the direct reach of feminist organizations themselves.

At the same time as these demonstrations and protests have been of critical importance in eliciting media attention and in shaping a new consciousness around gender violence, they have provoked criticism of the movement as well. Generally this criticism portrays feminist activism as originating out of a Western, bourgeois, modernist perspective. This kind of critique has been articulated most recently in connection with the feminist demonstrations against the sati incident that took place in Deotala, Rajasthan in September 1987. A sophisticated version of this criticism

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39 The study was conducted by my research assistant, Roy Selig. We chose the *Hindustan Times* because it was the only Delhi paper received in the Cornell library. The twenty days each year were sampled using a random number table.

40 Classifying reports on violence was on the whole clear cut. Perhaps the only ambiguity was the issue of eve-teasing (sexual harassment) which I categorized as an example of violence against women.

41 By police blotter reports, I refer to news items that do not identify violence as a social issue but describe an incident with such headlines as "Issueless Housewife's Body Found in Canal," "Woman Done to Death."
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is set forth by Ashis Nandy.\textsuperscript{42} He begins with the observation (in consonance with the argument of many feminists) that sati in these times is likely to occur in the presence of direct or indirect coercion or at the least in the absence of attempts to deter a woman from this act. He also remarks on the likelihood that social dislocation and societal stress provoke families to use such rituals to assert their status in a social hierarchy which is in flux, an analysis echoed in the pages of the feminist journal, \textit{Manushi}.\textsuperscript{43} He further stipulates that an analysis of and political response to present-day sati must incorporate the knowledge of the heroic meaning of sati in mythological times—which Vina Mazumdar evinces in her analysis of the dual heroism and oppression of women who undertook to become a sati in earlier times.\textsuperscript{44}

Nandy finds the anti-sati demonstrations, however, evidence of the shallow understanding of rural India by feminist and middle-class protesters. He criticizes the call for a government ban on the glorification of sati as presumptuous, questioning whether such a ruling would bar the reading of the Mahabharata’s treatment of Madri’s sati or the ritual worship of the goddess Durga (a question Nandy must have meant largely as a rhetorical flourish rather than as a prediction of any probable government action). But Nandy’s more fundamental point deserves serious consideration: when traditional norms and customs that are a source of people’s historical identity conflict with prevailing norms about how life is or should be lived now, which values should be privileged? When erstwhile models of the heroic that enshrine a widow’s self-immolation as an act of religious devotion confront current secular models of equality, what political praxis would embrace respect for both the old and new? Nandy does not suggest what a preferable response to the Deorala sati might have been. Should there have been no demonstrations? Should feminists have eschewed any appeal to the government for action? If some political and public expression of the view of sati as violence to women was warranted, what form could this expression have taken that might also have acknowledged the mythological tradition that has in the past given the acts of sati its heroic meaning? From a feminist perspective, Nandy’s analysis is ultimately inadequate because it does not seek to address questions that are central to political praxis.

\begin{itemize}
\item Ashis Nandy, “The Human Factor,” \textit{Illustrated Weekly of India} (17 January 1988), pp. 20–23. See also his \textit{At the Edge of Psychology: Essays in Politics and Culture} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), and \textit{The Intimate Enemy} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
\end{itemize}
What gives a social movement strength is not just the existence of organizational networks, strong leadership, access to funds—those attributes usually thought of as movement "resources." Just as critical is the capacity of a movement to produce new meanings in interaction with the political system of which it is a part. The ability of women's organizations in India to act as signifying agents, naming experiences that had been earlier unrecognized, is at the root of the movement's emergence as a growing force in Indian society and politics. By giving prominence to women's experience as victims of violence—of rape, battering, dowry-harassment, murder, and sati—the women's movement has begun to review the way women across a broad spectrum of Indian society see themselves as well as the way women's experiences are understood by those in positions of dominance in society and within the state.

In the first half of this article, I have sought to explore the political logic that moved Indian feminism to take up the issue of violence against women. The logic was both external and internal to the women's move-ment. On the one hand, the persistent if not necessarily increasing reliance on violence to bring ethnic, religious, and other group claims onto the political agenda in India made issues of violence a compelling "currency" in the quest for attention. On the other hand, the emergence of the more autonomous sectors of the movement allowed feminists to find their own voice, not simply around economic issues that were sanctioned as legitimate in the eyes of their leftist political patrons but also around issues of violence that were self-defined as important as women came to speak from their own experience.

In the second half of the paper, I have described the strategic approach of autonomous feminist organizations towards incidences of violence against women. Their political perspective can perhaps best be described as emerging from an ideology of radical pragmatism. Feminist groups have worked hard at retaining autonomy from philanthropic organizations and from the state. Moreover, through an insistence on nonbureaucratic structures and by their ready use of marches, street plays and political demonstrations, the autonomous organizations continue to emphasize mobilizational goals. At the same time, a certain pragmatism prompts feminist activists to work in support of legal and policy reforms and to use class connections and social contacts to elicit the cooperation of institutional authority on behalf of women victims of violence.

The achievements of this radical pragmatism are considerable. Feminist activism has led to important legal reforms. But the law is at best a clumsy tool to change patterns of behavior within the family and between individuals. Thus the success with which feminist activism directed the attention of the media to the once invisible phenomena of dowry deaths,
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rape, and domestic violence has been critical to what Susie Tharu so aptly calls "the slow, creeping change in the mood of women." 

Those who might wish to argue that the movement's priorities overplayed the importance of gender violence must be prepared to argue that other issues could have as effectively gained the attention of the public and of the state. Those that might argue that issues of violence are better subordinated to the prior concerns of economic livelihood and the amelioration of poverty might well heed Amartya Sen's comments in a different context. Writing in the aftermath of the Emergency, he asked, "Would not better feeding, clothing, and health for the Indian population compensate for the loss of (political) liberty which after all effectively concerns only a minority?" "I believe," he continued, "this way of posing the choice is both banal and wrong. First, there is little evidence that matters of liberty do not concern most of the people, even in poor countries. Second, the choice posed is unreal." Sen's answer is no less convincing as an argument on behalf of the mobilization by the Indian women's movement against gender violence.

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