Oxfam India is part of a global movement working to fight poverty, injustice and inequality; in India, it works in seven focus states. Oxfam India works against social acceptance of Violence Against Women (VAW), which is one of the most pervasive and the least recognised human rights violations across the world. Through its Gender Justice programme, Oxfam India works towards enhancing women’s access to formal and informal justice systems to end violence in their lives. Oxfam India joined hands with FARR (Friend’s Association for Rural Reconstruction), a women’s rights organisation based in Odisha in 2009, to reach out to women survivors of domestic violence from the Muslim community. The objective was to increase their access to justice.

One in every two women in South Asia experiences violence in her daily life. Social, cultural, political, economic, and legal factors in the region combine to make women vulnerable to community-sanctioned violence. While VAW manifests itself in many forms, domestic violence is one of the most pervasive forms confronting women in India.

Under the Indian criminal justice system, only those cases related to cruelty by husbands and relatives are categorised as domestic violence. However, this is set to change with the 2014 National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report that includes data on number of cases filed under the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 (PWDVA). Concerns persist related to under-reporting. Data shows that only 426 cases were reported in year 2014.

At the national level, a 2014 study by United Nations Population Fund-India (UNFPA) and International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) found that 60 per cent men admitted to using violence to assert their dominance over their partner if she wanted to step out of her traditional roles.

The situation is equally alarming in the states. Odisha and Uttar Pradesh reported the highest incidence of intimate partner violence at 75 per cent. In states like Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand, where there is already high prevalence of domestic violence, women in their marital homes are also targeted as victims of witch hunting. Data collected by the North East Network (NEN) suggests that violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is on the rise in the North Eastern states of India. The rate of domestic violence in Assam is comparatively higher than other North Eastern states.

The worrisome numbers and the underlying mentality necessitate the urgency to tackle the issue of domestic violence. In 2009, Oxfam India became a part of a consortium of seven international NGOs, with the support of Department for International Development (DfID), to implement the International NGOs Partnership Agreement Program (IPAP). IPAP was a five-year programme where Oxfam India worked towards ending VAW, focusing on domestic violence.

Oxfam India implemented this programme across five states through a number of initiatives, and, by engaging key stakeholders to reduce domestic violence. The programme aimed to reach out to the community (women and men), disadvantaged groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), police and judiciary, civil society organisations, and their alliances.

Oxfam India, along with FARR, began work in three districts of Odisha, namely Kalahandi, Rayagada and Cuttack. District-level Women Support Centres were set up in collaboration with the police department to support women facing domestic violence through provision of legal and other support services. Oxfam India supported FARR to reach out to women survivors of domestic violence from the marginalised communities and increase their access to formal and informal justice system.
FARR set up their Women Support Centre in Cuttack, Odisha in 2010. They realised that Muslim women hardly ever approached the Women Support Centres in the police stations. It made them aware about the need for a focussed engagement with women in the Muslim community. “It was important to reach out to women and convince them to access police stations without hesitation. The women barely got any support from the men in the family because, more often than not, they themselves were perpetrators of violence,” says Pramila Swain, coordinator, FARR.

Then there is the issue of mobility of Muslim women. “Women venturing out without their mehrem (male escort) is considered a religious offence...moreover women’s modesty is often questioned or doubted if she goes out alone,” says Fatima Sheikh, a women’s rights activist associated with the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan. This hinders their freedom to approach the Women Support Centres on their own. In 2010, only 20 cases of domestic violence were reported from the Muslim community.

In this backdrop, a need was felt to mobilise the community and reach out to the women. Community mobilisation, key to activating Women Support Centres, would provide a platform to discuss incidences of domestic violence and sensitisie women about the DV Act.

In this regard, FARR decided to collaborate with the Bold Initiative Research and Documentation (BIRD) Trust. BIRD Trust is a community-based organisation in Odisha with a history of working with Muslim women in the city of Cuttack. As a result of the joint intervention of Oxfam India along with FARR and BIRD Trust, there has been a significant improvement in the turnout at the Women Support Centre in the city. In 2014-15, of the 334 cases reported at the FARR-run support centres, 40 were from the Muslim community.

Meetings are held regularly with women from the Muslim community to create awareness on violence against women and girls.
Farhat adds “Women get divorced unilaterally and are left to fend for themselves. They are now being divorced through phone calls, post cards, SMS and even email, and are left in the lurch without provision of maintenance or other rights. All this is domestic violence. Then, there is this misinformation about polygamy; it points that monogamy is ideal. Similarly, there are other aspects of Quran that need to be explained. The Draft Muslim Family Law that is being drawn to interpret the Quran, is tipped in favour of men as they have continued to interpret it over time. The interpretations of nikah (marriage), meher (bride’s wealth) and talaq (divorce) are such that the women are always at the receiving end,” says Farhat Amin, secretary, BIRD Trust.

One of the first strategies to tackle violence against Muslim women was a signature campaign demanding a ban on oral talaq. BIRD Trust faced opposition from both religious heads and, surprisingly, from young girls. The students called the campaign anti-Islamic. Furthermore, the Trust barely got any support from the teaching fraternity.

The Trust then identified community mobilisers who could reach out to women and to households and explain the nuances of the Quran and the PWDVA. The BIRD Trust also operates centres that train women and young girls in skills such as embroidery and making paper bags. Few of the trainees were identified and trained as community mobilisers. The BIRD Trust has since identified 25 women community mobilisers in the Muslim-dominated areas in Cuttack city.

Informal meetings of these community mobilisers are held almost every week and they are open to conduct counselling session whenever the need arises. The main focus of these meetings is to encourage Muslim women to talk about domestic violence and steps to tackle it. Discussions are held on marriages, divorces, cases of domestic violence, and the steps needed to tackle the situation.

Initially, members of BIRD Trust and the women who came for these meetings faced resistance from the men, following which the women were also invited. As a result, those who attended have a better understanding of the work. Jugna Sheikh’s husband Sheikh Ukil is one such convert. He likes the fact that his wife campaigns for women facing domestic violence. The BIRD Trust even invited religious leaders for their meetings but they have stayed away.

A couple of initiatives were taken to ensure that women could freely express themselves. One of them was putting up a complaint box in the community. “Many times, women don’t want to speak out publicly. They then have the option of writing their complaints and putting it in the box. The box is collected by the local coordinator and taken to the support centres. It is then dealt with accordingly,” explains Farhat.

The other initiative was holding Sharia courts. These courts ensure that women get justice through the Sharia laws. Though the proceedings are based on the Sharia laws, these are interpreted from a woman’s perspective in a more gender-just manner.

Traditional interpretations of the Quran, is tipped in favour of men as they have continued to interpret it over time. The interpretations of nikah (marriage), meher (bride’s wealth) and talaq (divorce) are such that the women are always at the receiving end,” says Farhat Amin, secretary, BIRD Trust. The Draft Muslim Family Law that is being drawn to interpret the Quran, is tipped in favour of men as they have continued to interpret it over time. The interpretations of nikah (marriage), meher (bride’s wealth) and talaq (divorce) are such that the women are always at the receiving end.”

For the survivors of domestic violence, and the family members who want to help them, the support from the community mobilisers has been crucial. Roshanara Bibi, married for 22 years and mother of four children, faced domestic violence during most part of her marriage. The 40-year old supported her family by taking home tuitions teaching Quran. “He wasn’t violent but he would refuse to give money, for food, either for me or my children. My sons and daughters-in-law supported me. They told me about BIRD Trust, I attended a few of their meetings and learnt about the domestic violence act. Now if he tries to misbehave, I threaten to take him to the police. It works,” says Roshanara.

The numbers of community mobilisers have swelled in the last few years. “Women, who are associated with BIRD Trust, get married and when they go to a different basti, they talk about our work, especially about cases of domestic violence they see around them. Then, on their request, we go and hold meetings and identify community mobilisers,” explains Tasneem Banu. Tasneem, an English teacher in Cuttack, started as an intern with the BIRD Trust a couple of years ago. Having invested herself completely in the organisation, she leads the advocacy and training of women in the community.

The community mobilisers counsel the women not just about the PWDV Act and their rights but also help them in reaching out to the Women Support Centres. They also support the women to pursue legal cases. Take the case of Khurshida Begum who was married to Sheikh Goolam Noor. He was working abroad. After a few years of marriage, her husband and in-laws began to torture her mentally and physically. When she resisted, her husband gave her talaq and she was thrown out of her in-laws house along with her son.
She was left with no other alternative but to go back to her parents’ house. But, without any financial support from her husband, it was difficult for her to send her son to school. Khurshida approached the community mobilisers at BIRD Trust. The Trust encouraged her to complete her education so that she could get better job opportunities. She was provided legal support to fight her domestic violence case as well.

Oxfam India is supporting BIRD Trust’s initiative to set up Saher – an initiative for young girls. This is a platform where young girls pursue their hobbies and interests like painting, singing and acting. Families were initially reluctant as they considered it un-Islamic to pursue singing or painting as a career. “But we explain to the families that if the child learns to sing, they will be able to sing the Quran well,” explains Farhat. Some of the girls in the youth wing are pursuing Hindustani classical music.

The community mobilisers have reached out to 355 women through 12 meetings in 2014-15. The community initiative has ensured that women are now engaged in negotiating for their rights not just within their families and communities, but also through the formal and informal justice system.

**Notes**

1. Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Assam
4. Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India – A Study; UNFPA-ICRW study
6. North East Network (NEN), established in 1995, is a women’s rights organisation working in the north east region of India with a focus on women’s human rights.
7. The Law Research Institute, Guwahati
8. Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat
9. The last NFHS data was released in 2005-06. This is the latest national data available.
11. Muslims comprise 5 per cent of Cuttack’s population. A religion wise national break-up of NFHS data shows that Muslim women reported the second highest incidence of violence (35 per cent); the highest incidence was reported from Buddhist or Neo-Buddhists (41 per cent) and the third highest by Hindu women (34 per cent).
12. Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (‘Indian Muslim Women’s Movement’) is an Indian Muslim women’s organisation in India. The Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMM) is demanding a gender-just Muslim Personal Law.
13. Established in 2008, BIRD Trust’s focus had been on education, employment, law, health, and security. Farhat Amin has been one of the frontrunners in demanding the codification of Muslim Personal Law in order to accord equal status to women.
14. The Draft Muslim Family Law is being proposed by the Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMM). This draft law calls for a gender-just Muslim Personal Law. This Act, based on the values and principles of the Quran as prescribed in the Quranic verses [Schedule 1], is to consolidate, clarify and codify the provisions of Muslim law and related procedure regarding Muslim marriage, divorce, maintenance during marriage, maintenance after divorce and widowhood, custody and maintenance of children. http://bmmaindia.blogspot.in/2014/06/bmmas-draft-muslim-family-law.html (as viewed on Oct 14, 2014) The BIRD Trust represents BMM in Odisha.

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