

SELF-HELP IS THEIR CREED: A WOMEN'S HELP CENTRE IN MADRAS*



Neerja Chowdhury

Dans cet article, l'auteur étudie Sahodri, un centre des femmes à Madras.

There are women who need help and others who are in a position to provide it. When the two converge they benefit from each other. And they are enriched.

That is a striking aspect of Sahodri, a women's help centre in Madras. As yet a fledgling unit, it has brought together professional women in the city and their not-so-privileged sisters.

Sahodri is sponsored by the Joint Action for Women, a registered body of professional women, who do not have time to run such a centre to help women in distress but are conscious of the need for one. They have employed a full-time social worker for the purpose. And they have been able to find accommodation at a nominal rent from organizations like the YWCA and the Andhra Mahila Sabha. So far Sahodri has hesitated to publicize its activities; women have learnt about it by word of mouth.

The need to create a network of help centres for women has been stressed in the past in view of dowry murders, suicides, rapes and domestic violence. There could be an address in many a *mohalla* to which women could go to or send a message when in trouble and be sure of receiving support and succour.

Given the middle class morality which equates any complaint of ill-treatment with disloyalty, the necessity for such centres assumes importance. Normally women only talk about physical and mental torture in their husband's or in-laws' house to their mothers and are advised to

"adjust" themselves to their lot. When they see no way out and no support is forthcoming from any quarter quite a few try to or commit suicide.

It is not enough to create an infrastructure of help centres, important though they are. More important is the disposition of those running them. They are the ones who constantly come in contact with women in need. That is why voluntary organizations like Mobile Creche (which offers creche services to children of construction workers) and Sanjivini (which helps the mentally disturbed) take care with the selection of their volunteers. Their criteria are not just skill and training – both of which can be acquired – but empathy (which is different from sympathy) for the people they would be helping. This quality is often lacking in those who head government-run institutions like the Nari Niketans. For most of them, it is just another job. And worse, they can be self-righteous and arrogant.

That is why I was impressed by Mangaiyarkarasi, the social worker at Sahodri. She is as gentle as she is firm. And she is young, just 25. It did not take me long to discover the reason: she has had many a painful experience.

An incident about Mangai, as she is called by her friends, speaks much of her as a person and her commitment to the betterment of women.

As I sat in her room a poor Harijan woman walked in and Mangai excused herself to attend to her. And I could not help thinking, how often those of us who espouse women's rights – particularly the rights of those who are oppressed by poverty and caste – are callous.

In our homes, we think nothing of

asking the woman who sweeps the floor to wait because we are having breakfast, or the washing woman to come again a little later because the bathroom is not free. We consider our time more valuable than theirs, even though they are the ones who have to go to work in several homes and return to the chores of their own at the end of the day.

The Harijan woman had come, Mangai told me later, with an application for a bank loan. Her husband is a leprosy patient. She runs a little *idli* shop in her house and makes a profit of about ten rupees a day. With a loan of five hundred rupees with which she could buy bigger vessels, she could expand her business. Sahodri has recommended her application and Mangai accompanied her to see the bank manager.

Mangai is available at the centre from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. She works closely with the Tamil Nadu State Legal Aid Board, to which she refers women in need of legal assistance. And they are quick to take action. Most of the women who have come to Sahodri for help in the eight months since its inception have faced marital problems. Mangai tries to bring about reconciliation where it is possible and has succeeded in several cases. But the assistance of a man, who can talk to the husband, is required. She is happy that the secretary of the Tamil Nadu Legal Aid Board has stepped in to play this role effectively. After reconciliation, Sahodri does not give up. It follows up the cases to see that the woman is happy.

Widows deprived of their rightful share of property have approached Sahodri for legal help. The centre also maintains a register of women looking for jobs and

tries to help them through its members' contacts.

Mangai is given an honorarium of five hundred rupees per month and she can manage with this money because she lives at the YWCA hostel. "I have suffered a lot and that is why I want to help other women. And that is why I am happy with this job and do not look for a better one," she says.

Mangai was married to her maternal uncle, who was seventeen years older, as is customary in many parts of South India. She was only eighteen at the time. Both she and her uncle – she has not been able to address him as anything else – opposed the marriage. But they were forced into it by the family. The idea was to keep property within the family. Her parents are also first cousins. Marriages between children of siblings are recognized in the Hindu Marriage Act.

Mangai's marriage could not be consummated because both of them could not overcome the uncle-niece relationship. Her uncle used to take her to the

kindergarten school everyday when he was a pre-university student.

After four years of co-existence the situation became unbearable for both. Mangai's uncle took to alcohol. Finally, Mangai could take it no longer and a family *panchayat* was called to decide. But they decreed that Mangai must live with her uncle, if not as his wife then as his servant. They quoted an instance in the family where the man and his niece had lived together without having relations for over forty years.

Mangai tried to abide by the decision but could not. Her parents refused to take her back. She heard relatives say that she should be "eliminated" because as a woman she had questioned family traditions.

Mangai left home and approached a woman lawyer she had read about for help. Both she and her uncle filed for divorce by mutual consent. Her uncle married again a day after the court decreed divorce.

Her parents did not accept it and tried to

intimidate and kidnap her. Mangai enrolled in the Madras University to take an M.A. in Criminology.

Her struggle to stand on her feet despite heavy odds would not have been possible but for the support she received from the warden of her hostel, her professor and fellow students who escorted her everywhere, and from the lawyer who fought her case.

And today she supports other women in trouble. And her personal struggle continues. She is now engaged in post-graduate work in Indo-Japanese studies. She is a confident woman.

Suffering has made her sensitive to the suffering of others. She has no regrets about the past. It was an experience, she says.

But quite a number of Mangais are needed. They could run help centres for other women in trouble. But they have to be located and enlisted.

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Feminists protest Miss Universe contest held in Lima, Peru in July 1982.
Credit: "Manuela Ramos" photo archive.