

MAVA: Aiming for a better society

Mamta Singh writes about this Andheri-based organisation that aims at bringing about major changes in society and helps curb gender-based violence against all women

Wanted men who believe wives are not for battering'. This is what the advertisement placed in Mumbai's leading newspapers during September 1991 read. The ad placed by a small group of journalists and social workers at the initiative of senior journalist C.Y. Gopinath went on to request all men who strongly opposed violence towards wives from their husbands and wanting to help stop it to send in their names. More than 200 men from the city responded.

This is how MAVA which stands for Men Against Violence and Abuse came into being. Registered in March 1993, it holds the distinction of being the first men's organisation in India working towards bringing about a social change and helps stop gender-based violence against women.

Harish Sadani, honorary secretary, MAVA was one of those who had responded to the advertisement. Armed with a Masters in social work from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, he was already working with various organisations at that time.

He saw the appeal and felt that it offered a lot of possibilities. He quit his job and has been with MAVA ever since its inception. For the first 10 years he tells us, "We were concentrating all our energies on taking specific stands on issues happening in society. We would demonstrate concern, talk about them, come to the streets, and run signature campaigns of men. This was our way of telling people about MAVA and also that we were serious about what we were doing."

He feels strongly about the term women's issues. He says, "If men are part of the problem they ought to be part of the solution. Issues concerning women should be equally seen as men's issues."

MAVA's vision is to have a gender just society- where men and women live in harmony and with self respect by providing spaces for mutual growth and well-being. This can't be possible if we look at problems only when they have blown out of proportion and become too difficult to handle. The root cause needs to be touched and tackled. MAVA recognises the need to work with men, involve them in debates on gender-related issues. They are of the opinion that it's not right to brand all men as bad. Men too are at the cross roads today. They too go through tremendous pressure to perform at their jobs, work on their relationships with women, and always be achievers, protectors, providers. They don't know how to handle the power given to them by the patriarchal system. There are no role

models of positive masculinity projected by the media around. In such a scenario it is important to look at the vulnerability of men too.

To facilitate this MAVA opened its counseling, guidance and resource center in Andheri (E) in May 2006. The centre has a team of professionals that counsel people on issues of gender and sexuality. The centre provides a space and platform for young boys and men in particular to

"Our motto is to create a happy society." A teacher by profession and having studied psychology she has been involved in counseling at MAVA since its early days. She describes her way of counseling by the term PELT; which stands for praise, encouragement, love and trust.

Pelting these four words, showing affection and care during counseling sessions she says "Has worked wonders when dealing with not only men and

essay and poster competitions, poetry reading sessions, talks and discussions by veterans in the field, and street plays.

Manjul Bharadwaj of the Experimental Theatre Foundation (ETF), who has been with MAVA ever since its inception, says, "We have taken what MAVA wants to do onto the streets. The street play Dwandwa (duel) that deals with the issue of domestic violence has had 500 performances in slums and other parts of Mumbai and got a tremendous response. This in turn translates into queries about MAVA." The need Bharadwaj feels is to spread the message that domestic violence is not accepted. He says, "This is not a private or internal matter. It needs to be brought out in the open and talked about."

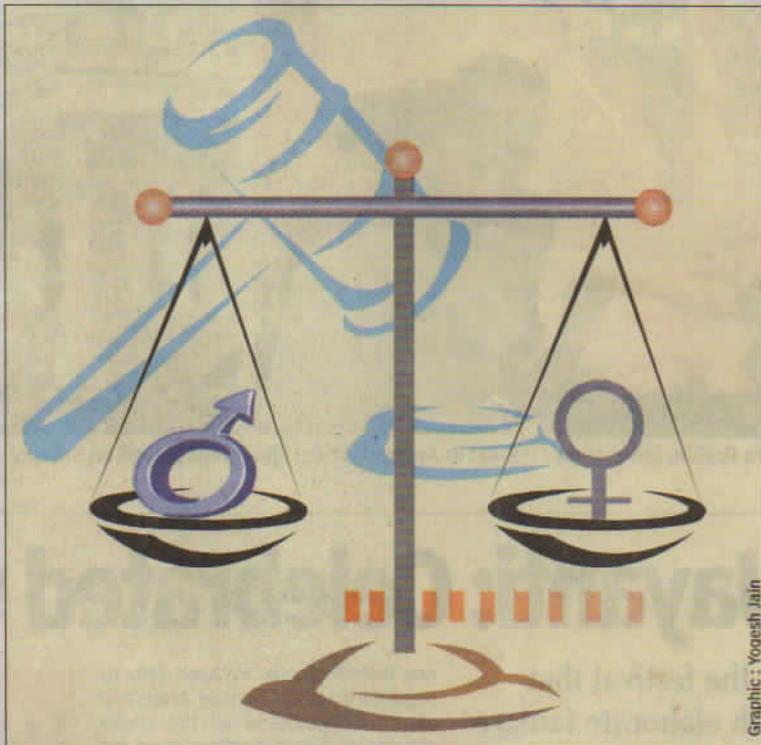
MAVA's other activities that have been popular include the one-day workshops for girls and women on self defence techniques and assertiveness training that has helped specific groups of women including senior citizens, street children, visually impaired women to prepare themselves against attacks by men on the streets, in buses, trains or even at homes. Their annual magazine Purush Spandan in Marathi provides insights in understanding male attitudes. All contributions short stories, interviews, poems, analytical articles are by men from various backgrounds and professions and touch upon various topics like man women relationships, companionship, aspirations, and violence. Brought out jointly by MAVA and Purush Uvach (men speak), Pune since 1996 the magazine is the first of its kind in India.

MAVA also plays the role of a watchdog and from time to time helps focus attention on incidents and cases in society that would otherwise have been forgotten. In 1995 their efforts helped raise Rs 75,000 for 19-year-old Dipti Khanna, who was a victim of an acid attack.

MAVA is doing all it can to build a better and healthier society. It needs all the help it can get to be able to keep on doing so. Its good to learn that people like actor Atul Kulkarni who inaugurated their counseling centre have pledged their support to this mission. Film director Ashutosh Gowariker ran for MAVA in the 2005 Mumbai Marathon and collected lakhs of rupees.

But as Purkayastha says the challenge is to see, "How we contact everyone. Funding is a major problem. Big corporates have their own social causes to support and do not commit to long term associations."

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come and share their thoughts, open up about their problems, talk about their fears and concerns on gender related issues.

Sadani explains the need for such a space, "It's easier for women to talk to other women about such issues, men find it more difficult to open up. There is a need to get men to talk." The centre gives them a non threatening environment to do so.

Swapan Purkayastha honorary vice president of MAVA feels that the term counseling itself needs to be looked at in the right perspective. "The meaning is wrongly perceived by our society. People feel that if a person needs counseling he or she must be sick.

This attitude needs to change."

Yashodhara Purkayastha, one of the two women members with MAVA says,

women but children as well."

She believes, "If we want to bring about a change in society we need to look at the way we bring up our children."

Till date MAVA has reached out to over 3,000 men and women in distress. But there is so much more that has to be done.

Members of the managing committee visit schools, colleges and talk to students about various subjects like sex education, value education, jilted love, stress and anger management, removal of intoxications. Awareness programmes and workshops in collaboration with several women's organisations on gender issues are regularly held for employees of business organisations, residential colonies, and community mandals.

MAVA uses innovative ways of involving the public in their mission. They hold