

- Taking Her Place in The Sun: Saira Arab

In the large spacious hall of the office of Aawaze- Niswan –which literally translates as the voice of women –located on the second floor of a building in a congested predominantly Muslim locality on Pipe road Kurla are three women sitting on flower print bed sheets spread on thick mattresses. These women were once victims of domestic violence , of mental and physical torture and perpetual restrictions on movement and interaction , are now counselling victims suffering from similar violence and restrictions .They had come years ago to the Aawaz –e- Niswan, a feminist organisation founded in 1985 which aims and works towards fighting injustice and restrictions that Muslim women face within families , communities , and a male dominated societies for redressal of their grievances . Here they met others like themselves , shared their pain and experiences , were supported in their cause and felt motivated to work towards amelioration of the lot of victims of such inequality and discrimination and became members of the organisation which works through campaigns , protests ,community organisation , networking and education to empower and liberate women and to bring about reform of the Muslim Family Law .

One of these three counsellors is Sara Arab whose radiant skin and lively black eyes belie the fact of the abuse she experienced as well as her age: she is now nearly forty and has two grown up children _ a son and a daughter.”My daughter is doing her second year CA” she says her eyes beaming _ Her son is a contractor for plumbing works .She has reason to feel such pride , considering the overwhelming difficulties she went through and achieved it through her earnings courage and confidence and the support she got from Aawaz .Here is her story :

Saira was seven and her brother only five and her sister hardly some months old when her mother died. Her father a Bhangari (scrap dealer) never remarried and the children were brought up by his mother who had been trained as mid wife i.e. bathing new born babes and doing emergency deliveries .She however found it difficult to look after three children and Saira was made to discontinue her education after 4th standard so as to help look after her baby sister .She was married off at 14 ,as her grandfather felt it too much responsibility looking after a young girl .After marriage she found that her husband’s family had lied to them about his income which was only Rs1000 instead of the professed 4000 and his right arm was paralysed .

Moreover life was tough in the chawl living in a room of 10 by 12 feet , with the father and mother in-law , a brother in-law and his wife and a sister in-law (husbands sister) who had three grown up children .After a year of marriage the taunts and rebuke started :she did not cook well , she brought little dowry etc. And then there were financial problems as they now had two children. To get some additional income her husband sent her to deliver Tiffin to people who by their action and conduct indicated their dishonourable intention .Despite being told about it , when her husband insisted she continue the work , she felt disgusted specially when she learnt that he was getting nearly Rs 5000 for such errands .She decided to earn on her own with the skill of massaging she had learnt from her grandmother. She earned enough to help with the children’s education as also to save some.

Her financial independence was a source of great irritation to her mother and sister-in-law who had started accusing her of misconduct, having her followed, and even physically hitting her. Once they even tried to poison her. Life became unbearable with the beating, taunts and an un-supporting uncaring husband. The battering was once so bad that her brother had to take her to the J.J. hospital where the doctor gave her the address of Aawaaz-e-Niswan whom she contacted. In those days the office was functioning in the Imambara area in the residence of one of the members. The intervention of Awaaz – Niswan did not have any impact on her sister in law and one morning when she was filling water at the chawl tap, her sister in law stabbed her with a knife which cut her hand and it started bleeding profusely. She contacted the Awaaz e Niswan and one of the members took her to the hospital and also filed a FIR in the police station. Her mother in law, her sister in law and her son were all arrested.

Some months later she in laws sold the house without giving her any amount. She had to move from the chawl and get another place where she shifted with her husband and her two children. She continued her work and also joined the Awaz as she felt a sense of gratitude and camaraderie with the organisation. Here she was trained to handle cases and educated in preparing case files etc. Her husband stopped working and just whiled away his time in the house not even bothering to look after the children or help around the house. On the contrary he pressurised her to withdraw the case against his mother and sister. Fed up with his attitude, she decided to get a divorce which she did as 'Fasaq –e – Nikah' which is granted for certain reasons including cruelty. She could establish harassment and cruelty as she had kept all the hospital records etc.

Twenty years have passed since she first approached the Organisation and she feels that her involvement with it has been a very fulfilling experience. She has been able to help her sisters in distress. She is of the view that women must raise their voice, speak up, fight for their rights. They should be self reliant for which it is necessary to have a skill, to be educated.