Battered women have only activists to rely on when the law goes missing

Anurag Behar

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Summary

- *Women at the receiving end of violence in India get very little help from law enforcers or others who are supposed to intervene on their behalf. Though activist groups do not always use legitimate methods, their grey-zone approach can be surprisingly effective.*

Her right ear was torn from the beating her assailant was giving her by the time help reached. Seeing five other people arrive, the man who was hitting her stopped, but soon resumed. They restrained him as he struggled to box and kick her.

They urged her to give him two slaps, after which they said they would handle him in kind. Which seems to be their system—the victim must deliver the first blow, and then

they would beat up the man sufficiently, but avoiding serious injury, so that he would not ever forget the lesson.

The woman hesitated and refused. The five stayed for an hour, threatening the man with thrashings and a police complaint, and then left.

Riding back to town, they took a 25km detour through the blazing sandscape to go to a police outpost and inform them of the case. This was standard procedure, though they did not expect any action.

They rushed again to the woman's village the next week. Not only had the assailant battered her again, but also his own elderly mother; and he was rounding up goats to sell for money to buy alcohol. They reached her hut in half an hour; there was no sign of the police, whom they had alerted immediately upon receiving the woman's call.

He was still there, chasing the woman to continue his assault. He paused as they reached. Sensing an opportunity, without being urged this time, the woman gave him four quick slaps. After which the team took over. The five delivered about ten blows each—a mix of boxes and tight slaps. Soon, he was begging for mercy.

The drama was witnessed by most of the neighbours. The team threatened him with direr consequences if he ever struck her or his mother again. Then they left.

That man called the leader of this team the day before I met them to report to her that he had been behaving very well, and they should talk to the woman. Which she did, and the woman confirmed that the man had been different for the past five weeks—since the day of his thrashing.

Six members of their full team of 20 had come to our meeting. The leader was there, along with two who were involved in that incident; the three others were also veterans of many such skirmishes.

Four of this group of six were women—of which three are survivors of acid attacks, among the most heinous acts that women suffer in our country.

Our conversation was light-hearted because the women were bubbly. Their bodies bore acid scars, but not their spirit. They seemed to be having fun. Given the easy-going conversation, I could ask them everything directly.

Wouldn't he, like others of his kind, restart beating the woman soon? How long could they keep watch? Couldn't they tackle this some other way? And they were themselves resorting to violence; wasn't that wrong? What about the law? And more in the same vein.

They described their experience. Cases where the man reverts to serious violence are rare. In the past 10 years, they have developed a collective of 2,000 women who are their eyes-and-ears, along with a reputation for quick and decisive action.

They act on every kind of injustice to girls and women. Forced drop-outs from schools, child marriages, discrimination against widows, and more. Not all these require beatings, they said, but all require quick fearless confrontation and a hawk-eyed vigil.

The full force of their collective action is deployed not only to hold violent men in check, but also to engage the community, panchayat, local administration, police, designated government helpline and women's safety institutions. Despite their efforts, the response from others who can help is slow and often missing.

They cannot wait. That is what they have learnt. Because victims can suffer relentless violence. Little girls are married off overnight. Young widows routinely brutalized. Some are sold.

"Na toh koi sunne waala hai, na koi sunwai hai, sir. Koi aur tareekaa humko toh samajh mein nahin aata hai." There is no help, and no justice, sir. We don't know what else to do. She beamed and grinned and sobbed. In Kurukshetra, can a warrior answer what is wrong and right? Or good or bad?

She must battle, she said, as that is her dharma, her duty. Kurukshetra makes her.

The real question is why this Kurukshetra exists and how we go on from here. We are mostly oblivious to injustice, often complicit, and sometimes satisfied by anodyne protests against it.

Who am I to judge her, or even ask, in this morally grey zone. This is so not only in that blazing sandscape, but across in our plush metros as well. Daily indignities and brazen exploitation are all around us. Ours is no country for women, but a war zone.

On a hot summer evening, she got a call. "Come pick me up from the bus stand." An unknown young woman with her five-year-old child was waiting there.

Kicked out of her house and her parents' door closed in faux shame, she had nowhere to go. She had travelled 250km in that heat with nothing but her child and a phone number to reach that bus stand.

In response, she rode her scooter to the bus stand and asked the young woman why she had come so far. "They told me that when there is no one left to turn to, I must come to you." People journey a lifetime searching for their saviour, so what is 250 kilometres? The young woman rode pillion, with the child in the middle. She took them home.