

## **BHUMIKA WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS REPORT 2008-09**

### **Introduction**

The Bhumika telephone Helpline, started in early 2006 has its antecedents in the many cases of distressed women that Bhumika, the feminist Telugu journal, handled on an informal basis, the idea of providing systematic support for women facing violence took shape. K.Satyavathi, Bhumika's editor, felt that an ongoing and stable support system for women was extremely important. Over the years the idea took a more concrete shape and was welcomed by Oxfam as well when approached for support. On the very first day of the launch of the helpline, it received about 144 calls. Since then, and with the able support of the Counselors Nagamani and Kalpana, the Bhumika helpline has continued to respond to the phone calls of women in distress. It draws also on a large group of volunteers throughout that they are caught in. in the initial year of inception itself i.e 2006-07 the helpline handled more than thousand cases successfully while a majority of them are related to domestic violence.

### **Mode of Operation:**

Bhumika helpline primarily operates through telephonic lines only. Help or advice is provided through phone only. Depending on the needs of the caller, the calls are classified into different sections and are handled accordingly by the present. Apart from this, two advocates Ms. Kanthi and Ms. Mandakini are attending legal advice calls on Mondays and Saturdays from 2pm to 5pm, voluntarily.

### **Types of cases handled:**

As the popularity of the helpline increased, the variety of cases has also expanded over the past one year. While the initial year recorded a majority of domestic violence cases, in the second year of functioning of this helpline there is a significant raise in the number of harassment cases, legal cases for de-addiction centers, career guidance or for self employment prospects. There is an alarming increase in the number of harassment cases. One reason for this could be that as the helpline number is widely publicized more people are calling. But sadly this trend shows that, while the helpline raises a hope and helps a lot of victims to come out of their shells, the need for more effective means to fight violence against women is more evident and reminds us that there is still a long way to go.

### **Support system/Network strength:**

#### **Volunteer's network**

The success of Bhumika helpline depends largely on its network strengths. As the helpline number got popularized more socially active citizens are registering themselves

as volunteers. Bhumika helpline depends a lot on this volunteer base, in handling emergency cases outside of Hyderabad that required personal intervention.

### **Advocates network**

The helpline has a large network of advocates. As the majority of cases handled by the helpline are either domestic violence or legal issues, the advocate's collective plays a very important role in providing the victims, proper information about their right and various acts and laws that can help them resolve their problems. The helpline also conducts regular advocates meetings to sensitize the advocates on women's issues and also to update themselves on various developments on women's issues on the legal front.

### **Information Database**

Bhumika helpline maintains a large database containing the details of protection offices across the state, legal services authority, names and numbers of different govt. officials at the district level, various shelter homes and NGOs, counseling centers, list of police officers, Psychologists, psychiatrists, de-addiction centers, rehabilitation centers, and resource centers for women and so on. This enables the helpline to guide the callers accordingly. As the helpline maintains a very friendly relationship with a lot of these support systems, they respond very positively to the cases referred by the helpline. More often than not this result in helping the needy women in a much effective way.

### **Writers' Network**

Because of the coordinators' literary background, this helpline has the support of a writer's network that is spread across the whole country. This kind of network can help in reaching victims located in different corners of the nation, sometimes across the border also.

### **Methods of handling cases**

#### **Telephonic counseling**

Many callers who call the helpline needed someone to share their feelings. While handling these kind of calls the counselor listen patiently and encourage the caller to speak more so that the client is relieved of her emotional outburst. The counselor later provides the caller with proper guidance. In August 2007 the helpline counselors dealt with a case involving young lakshmi (name changed) who had a bad marriage and divorce at an early age and later cheated by another man. The counselor initially gave moral support and later counseled her with some positive guidance and right attitude towards life. Now after counseling she concentrated on studies, got a job, improved her relationship with family and now ready to marry a person of the choice.

#### **Redirecting to proper resource centers**

The helpline receives a large number of harassment cases, legal cases and enquiry calls. All the legal cases are referred to the panel advocates. While handling harassment cases the counselor explain about the basis rights of women and also inform them about various acts like domestic violence act. In May 2007 the counselors explained Salma (named changed) who is facing dowry harassment how she has a right to file a case against her husband and gave the protection officers number. Later she filed a case with the protection officer. She called from time to time to take advice (legal and otherwise). Finally she got the judgment in her favour. She now gets maintenance from her husband. She called the helpline to thank for the tremendous support.

### **Volunteer's intervention**

One of the main strength of Bhumika helpline is its ever growing number of volunteers across the nation. The helpline depends on the volunteers support in cases that needed personal intervention. In October 2007 the helpline received an email from Jayesh (name changed) in U.S. He stated that his younger brother is ill treating his parents and harassing them. He requested the helpline to rescue the old couple who lives in Warangal. Coordinator later spoke with him and assured to send a volunteer to his house and later asked a volunteer in Warangal. The volunteer visited the old couple and took all the details of the case. Later with the help of local police managed to help the old couple. Now they are happy and the volunteer also makes frequent visits to their house to ensure their will being. In the end the client and his parents are grateful to the helpline for the timely intervention.

### **Coordinating though emergency service like 108**

Bhumika helpline coordinated with EMRI 108 emergency services to redirect distress calls they receive to Bhumika helpline. In March 2008, 19 year old Seems (name changed) an engineering student called 108 saying that she was going to commit suicide because of family problems. EMRI diverted this call to Bhumika helpline. The helpline coordinator was successful in dissuading the girl from taking the extreme step by persuading her to share her woes, patiently listening to her and later reasoned with her to look at different perspectives of the situation and also to think about how her whole family would be affected by her actions. After a couple of days she called up to thank the helpline for saving her life.

### **Coordination through networking**

An activist from child rights forum in Nalgonda, called 108 to inform about an arranged child marriage where both the bride and the groom are underage. The helpline successfully stopped this by coordinating with the collect orate, protection officer and child line and other district authorities. Later gave counseling to both the parties involved.

### **Direct intervention**

Direct intervention cases are such that the helpline takes initiative based on the information received. The following is a particular case of rescue involving middle aged Janaki (name changed) from A.P. who went to Maldives as domestic help and later was sent back to Trivandrum, Kerala without any money or papers. Unable to find her way home she reached a short stay home in Trivandrum with the help of Kerala police. They contacted Bhumika helpline. With the help of her passport number the coordinator located her brother's contact number and informed him of her whereabouts, later followed up to ensure about her return. She is now happily reunited with her family in Visakhapatnam. She contacted helpline later to convey her thanks personally.

As a referral center providing guidance

The helpline has a huge database of information on a variety of service providers like the protection officer's phone numbers, legal secretary, legal services authority, important emergency helpline numbers, phone numbers and addresses of psychologists and psychiatrists, advocates, legal aid numbers, list of different government and non government organizations working on various issues like children, self employment, de-addiction centers, HIV AIDS, short stay homes, old-age homes, family counseling centers, anti human trafficking cells, swadhar homes (central govt. homes for women in distress), mahila pranganas (run by women and child welfare department, state govt.), list of helpline numbers in other state and countries etc.

### **Areas of growth**

#### **Training programmes**

During these past years (2007-08) Bhumika helpline conducted different training workshops for volunteers. Also gave training in counseling skills and management of helpline, to different groups of women from 8 districts under Indira Kranthi Padam, Velugu program.

These training programmes involve explaining various aspects of helpline like the purpose of a helpline, the role of a counselor, behavior of a counselor, establishing relationship with client and other basic helpline skills like how to receive a call, listening patiently, giving information, reacting according to the situation, taking notes etc.

After undergoing this training, these groups started their own helpline in their respective districts. This resulted in the reduction of the number of calls from those districts to almost nil. While training these women the counselor got a good understanding of the lifestyle of women at grass root level and different kinds of support they need. Thus these training sessions helped the counselors improve their own skills to a large extent, helping them gain more confidence in their work.

#### **Involvement of volunteers**

Over the last couple of years the number of volunteers registered with the helpline has very much increased. The helpline conducts volunteers meetings from time to time. In these meetings the coordinator and the counselors explain about various aspects of the

working of helpline and different ways in which the volunteers can help. The first and foremost role is to publicize the helpline number and spread awareness. Another major support is to meet clients in their area personally when requested by the helpline. Other than these they can distribute the helpline material like posters and stickers at various public places. Overall, the helpline received amazing response in this front.

### **Media attention**

Media both electronic and print played tremendous role in spreading the helpline number. Because of its wider reach, though less, the helpline is now receiving calls from remotest corners of A.P. like Adilabad, Srikskulam etc. Different programmes about helpline in television channels like T.V.9, ETV2 etc brought huge response from views especially during the days following a telecast. Most of these calls would be enquiry calls to know about the activities of the helpline or women directly seeking help.

A socially active journalist from the print media in Kurnool district approached the helpline for resolving a domestic violence case that he witnessed. When the helpline got involved, it spoke with the victim Sarada (name changed) and other people involved, contacted police and coordinated with the collect orate and other district officials to successfully resolve the case. This case was reported in all the local news papers. The helpline received a number of calls during that time period also. In this manner media played a key role in publicizing the helpline number and creating awareness among people from different parts of the state.

In the month of June 2007 Telugu news paper Eenadu has done a cover story on Bhumika helpline in their Sunday magazine. In that one particular month alone the helpline received around 2000 calls. This shows the importance of the role media plays in publicizing the helpline number. During this month alone the helpline received 350 harassment calls and 340 cases needing psychological counseling.

<b>Month/ Type of calls</b>	<b>Enquiry</b>	<b>Harassment</b>	<b>Psychological</b>	<b>Extramarital</b>	<b>Follow up</b>	<b>Legal</b>
<b>April</b>	33	112	9	6	12	0
<b>May</b>	38	24	18	0	12	16
<b>June</b>	58	35	34	19	9	29
<b>July</b>	6	14	6	3	3	3
<b>August</b>	8	22	5	7	10	6
<b>September</b>	15	24	5	6	3	10
<b>October</b>	6	23	4	4	6	5
<b>November</b>	18	22	4	1	4	12
<b>December</b>	11	8	3	4	3	15
<b>January</b>	8	13	8	0	6	3
<b>February</b>	14	14	7	3	2	8
<b>March</b>	21	8	8	4	8	16
<b>Total</b>	236	219	111	57	78	123

On an average the helpline receives around 10 to 15 calls per day. Most calls are made around 2 pm in the afternoon. Telugu news channel TV9 came forward to give a scroll daily during their afternoon women's show "Naveens". While this could be one reason for more calls in the afternoon as this show attracts huge female viewer ship. Another reason could be that, in general women in distress prefer privacy from family members while calling. Another observation which gives strength to this is that the helpline receives less or almost no calls during festivals and holidays.

### **Interaction with police**

The helpline is now interacting with police more actively. Today the helpline is in a position to call any police station in the state and seek their intervention when necessary. When required by the client, depending on the nature of the case of coordinator make calls to follow up the proceedings. The police also are very receptive and mostly respond in a positive way when approached by the helpline. They generally take the helpline references seriously.

### **Areas needing improvement**

#### **Increase in timings**

Bhumika helpline works from 8 am till 11 pm. The helpline hopes to increase the timings to 24 hours. As observed earlier most cases of domestic violence occur during the nights when husbands of victims are in a drunken state. 26 year old Parvathi (name changed) was rescued by police in the middle of the night by police from her drunken husband while he was trying to burn her. When the police rescued her she was totally drowsed in kerosene. She called 108 to help her. They coordinated with night patrol police and saved her. This case was later referred to the helpline.

#### **Involve more number of advocates to volunteer**

The helpline revives a lot of harassment cases in which some clients would eventually file cases against their husbands or in laws. In addition to this there are other legal cases like divorce cases, custody cases, maintenance cases, property cases etc. currently two advocates volunteer to take legal calls in the after noon's twice a week. Going by the number of cases needing legal advice the helpline needs more advocates to volunteer in this line.

### **Conclusion**

As compared to the previous year the helpline has definitely come a long way. The toll free number got more publicized with the help of media. More people are enrolling as volunteers. Increased number of calls shows that women are finally breaking their shells and putting their little steps forward in resisting domestic violence. Networking has gone up because of various training workshops, exposure visits etc. counselors gained lot of experience under the coordinators guidance and are now capable of handling distress

calls efficiently. The government also took lead from this helpline to start its own helpline for women.

The number of harassment cases has gone up. When a case is generally referred as harassment case the type of harassment varies from physical abuse, psychological abuse and sexual abuse from various quarters like husband, in laws, parents, brothers, sons, colleagues, neighbors and so on. It is amazing to see in how many ways women are harassed, tortured and still are conditioned to tolerate violence.

There is also an alarming increase in the number of love affairs or extra marital affair cases. Most love affair cases involved teenagers. Teenagers involved call in a depressed state of mind and are confused about their future. Generally these girls come round after one or two counseling sessions on the phone itself. Otherwise they are referred to counseling centers. Similarly women involved in extramarital affairs have very low self esteem and they easily submit to violence. While handling this kind of calls the counselors felt that movies and television are creating a negative impact on the minds of vulnerable women.

Every case is handled with compassion and sensitivity. People are calling for help and the counselor they and help in every possible way they can. They guide the callers by providing with protection officers numbers, helpline numbers, police station numbers etc. the client calls back saying the protection officer is not responding. The police are partial towards one party. Even when an accused is put in jail he comes back with bail and threatens the victims even more. All this create more hurdles in the victim's path for justice and violates her fundamental rights. There is domestic violence act, 498 A etc that provide protection to women. But only when the system works and responds with sensitivity, empathy and compassion the ultimate goal of a violence free society for women can be achieved.