

MAHILA SALAH EVAM SURAKSHA KENDRA(MSSK) – A COUNSELLING CENTRE FOR WOMEN – RAJASTHAN MODEL*

➤ **GENESIS**

In order to uphold and ensure justice for women, organisations addressing women's issues have negotiated spaces for dialogue with the Home Department of the Government of Rajasthan, Rajasthan police, district administrations and other Government agencies for the last several years. Significant among them has been the setting up of a platform for redressal of grievances with the Rajasthan police under the chairpersonship of the Home Commissioner of the State since 1996. Similarly, fora for redressal called the Zila Mahila Sahayata Samitis, have also emerged at the district level under the chairpersonship of the Collector. While the work graph of both these fora show ups and downs, from almost becoming defunct to being meaningful, that such platforms need to exist has been reinforced from all quarters.

02. In spite of these fora, those of us working on issues of violence against women realised that most women get very little or no redressal to their problems. Instead experience indicates that there is an increase in the brutality of violence against women both in the public and the domestic sphere. The number of cases coming to women's organizations have also increased. It was in this context that it was realised that a fresh intervention strategy within the Criminal Justice System was needed to be addressed collectively. There was a need to address these issues on scale, the timing of intervention also needed a shift, to be available to the woman from the point of her reaching a thana, to make the intervention more comprehensive.

* This module was conceptualized during my stint at Police Hqrs as DIG, Crime, Jaipur, Rajasthan (1998-2001). Ms. Jasveen Ahluwalia, a leading woman activist from Jaipur, an alumni of Tata Institute of Social Services, presently with Oxfam, Lucknow, was a co-partner in conceptualizing this module.

03. It was felt that all the three issues of scale, timing and comprehensive intervention required both collaboration with the Government and police as well as building public opinion with the State and other institutions of society through other modes that violence against women was non-negotiable. It was also clear that no collaboration with the police would be effective if it would not be with women groups as a collective. Towards the end of the year 2000, this idea was shared with the police.

04. The decision of setting up the **Mahila Salah Evam Suraksha Kendra(MSSK)**, emerged out of a series of meetings between senior officers in the Rajasthan police and women's groups. At the behest of women's groups, the Rajasthan police circulated a draft proposal of collaboration as early as February 2001. The proposal consisted of the setting up of counselling centres at the two Mahila Thanas (women's police station) of the city (Jaipur), which would assist the police in bringing about reconciliation between spouses in matters of domestic violence. The groups however, were unwilling to limit their intervention to just cases of domestic violence. They felt that such cases not only needed multiple interventions but a shift in approach which would give the women the right to make an informed choice when subjected to violence.

05. The Rajasthan police agreed to deliberate with fresh ideas and in the month of September, 2001 a meeting with experts on this subject was organized. Anjali Dave, the founder and coordinator of the special cell for women and children¹ of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai and Sreedevi Goyal, Inspector General of Police, Mumbai (Atrocities against Women) were invited along with Kaveri Sharma of Lawyers Collective, Delhi who has been working in close collaboration with the Crimes against women cells in Delhi. Representative of women organisations from Jaipur and senior police officials from the Rajasthan police and the State Women's Commission participated in the meeting.

¹* The special cell for women and children is a joint effort of Mumbai police and TISS to address issues of violence against women and children in the city. It has been in existence for the last seventeen years.

06. It was clear from the evaluation studies presented of the Delhi model of crimes against women cell that it had limited its role to only attempting reconciliation, so much so that a victim woman was even denied the right to lodge an FIR in a police station unless sanctioned by an Assistant Commissioner ranking person. It was felt that this model instead of assisting victim women to obtain justice was further victimising them. The Delhi model was a total police affair with no role for any civil society institutions or any specialised training of the police to handle the psychological and social needs of the women seeking assistance.

07. The experiences of the Mumbai special cell for women and children instead showed how a genuine space to struggle for justice could be created for women within the mainstream establishment of the police. The active role of professional social workers, provided by Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, was critical to the creation of this space.

➤ **THE RAJASTHAN MODEL**

08. The Rajasthan police officials and the representative of women's organisation took a joint decision that the Jaipur strategy of intervention should be built from the learnings of the Mumbai model. The Jaipur model is a further shift from the Mumbai model as the partnership of the police in this case is with a collective of twelve women's organisations and not one, as seen in Mumbai. The first such holistic redressal center for women facing violence called the **Mahila Salah Evam Suraksha Kendra (MSSK)** started in Jaipur at the Bajaj Nagar Police Station in January, 2002. It was manned by two social workers and two police officers attached from the Mahila Police Station. A team of lawyers and representatives of diverse social support agencies also constitute the Kendra.

09. The objectives set forth for the MSSK are as follows :-

- (i) Providing support to women facing violence by way of :
 - assisting them to negotiate their way through the Criminal Justice System.
 - settling disputes through alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.
 - providing rehabilitation to women survivors of violence.

- (ii) Establishing Counseling, Advisory and Redressal Centers in twelve districts of Rajasthan;
- (iii) Identifying and strengthening of support groups for these centers in the 12 districts and building their ownership towards the MSSKs in the districts;
- (iv) Create support groups of various stakeholders to respond to the issue of violence against women;
- (v) Provided requisite legal aid to women facing violence;
- (vi) Establish critical linkages for referral services to women facing violence in some of the selected districts;
- (vii) Build a resource unit at the state level to provide research, documentation and training inputs to the district MSSK.

10. The concept underlying the centre is that of providing a comprehensive strategy of redressal for women who come to the centre, for support can seek diverse help in one place itself. The single window assistance can range from mediation, to legal aid, to intervention within the police system and the judiciary, to economic rehabilitation, to trauma counseling, to shelter and care and economic relief from the Government, if entitled. Women have easy accessibility to the centre as it is located in a women's police station. According to studies, the police station is the first public space that women reach out to when all personal channels fail to prevent the violence from happening.

11. The partnership between police and women's organisations consists of infrastructural support being provided by the Police Department, which includes a workspace, telephone, furniture, and computer. Occasionally vehicles are made available for field visits. The police department (local police station) has also provided two police constables to work as functionaries of the centre.

12. The role of women's organisations at the centre consists of making available necessary assistance needed by women in distress. The centre functions through the services of two full time social workers and representatives of women's organisations who come on a voluntary basis regularly. Regular service from a team of lawyers and a psychologist has also been provided by the organisations at the centre. The centre runs on all days of the week including Sundays and public holidays, as a section of the public finds time on only such rest- days for interaction with the centre. The resources for the salary of the social workers and running expenses of the centre are raised through public contributions.

13. The centre has linked up with several organisations in order to provide effective relief to the women seeking assistance from it. For instance women seeking shelter have been put up at Shakti Stambh (short stay home for women run by Rajasthan University Womens Association (RUWA) with assistance from the Central Social Welfare Board) and children needing care and protection are sent to Balika Sadan run by a private trust in Jaipur. Adolescent girls needing rehabilitation have been sent to Urmul Trust, Bikaner that runs educational camps for girls. The centre has sought administrative support in order to provide financial relief in cases where victims of violence are extremely poor. Doctors at the Government run psychiatric centre, Jaipur have been providing support to women who need psychiatric help. Women's Rehabilitation Group has been providing soft loans for income generating activities.

14. The running of the Centre has consisted of weekly reflection and planning meetings by women's organisations and the team at the centre. A record of these meetings is maintained. There have also been occasional review meetings with Senior Police functionaries of the district. Intervention of senior police officials is also sought through the two platforms set up at the level of the Home Commissioner, Govt. of Rajasthan and the IG Jaipur Range-I. The access to police whether in the district or Police Head Quarters is easy and has played a significant role in establishing the centre and supporting its work.

15. The MSSK built on the Mumbai model of the "Special Cell" of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences has emerged as an excellent strategy for providing relief to women facing violence. This converges with the understanding presented in the report of the UN Special Rapporteur's on Violence Against Women (2003) submitted to the United Nation's Economic and Social Council in its 59th session. The report states that " The most successful initiatives often involve partnership between the criminal justice system and women's organisations. Women's groups provide victims of violence with support services such as legal, medical and psychological counselling, which the police are not able to provide, enabling a victim to have support through the different stages of the process" (para 33) .

16. The Rajasthan Police in its circular of the 7th of February, 2005 has stated that victim women's access to justice, security and relief is enhanced if there is a coordinated effort between the police, women's organisations and other community agencies in providing support. According to the police this dimension does not need to be proved any more, it is self evident. Thus the Rajasthan police after the success of the Jaipur Model issued orders that a Mahila Salah Evam Suraksha Kendra (MSSK) be started in all the women police stations, thus expanding the collaboration between women's organisations to remaining 10 districts in the State.

17. The location of the Mahila Salah Evam Suraksha Kendra in twelve women police stations of the State can be looked upon as an effort of ongoing training of the police force in these stations and other stations in the district jurisdiction by women's organisations and other agencies. In fact, the women's movement of the State has decided to take up the challenge thrown to it by the Rajasthan police to collaborate with it in establishing more such centres.

18. The concept underlying this understanding of the Rajasthan police seems to mirror para 31 of the UN Special Rapportuer's report on violence against women(2003) "Besides legislation, sensitisation and reform of the criminal justice system are necessary, as they are generally insensitive to the needs of female victims. Some countries have set up special police stations or police desks staffed by women to be more responsive to the needs of the victim. However they frequently lack the necessary resources. Officers do not receive appropriate training and in addition they are often located in only a few police stations in the urban area and women in the rural areas still go to the main police stations where the police see the problem as a "woman's issue". The provision of specialised services in the form of special police stations or desks is welcome but there is no substitute for training in domestic violence and other forms of violence against women issues for the whole police force so that they are aware of the issues and the type of measures that should be taken."

➤ **The Approach**

19. The first step consists of providing a safe and non-threatening space and environment to the women seeking help in order to initiate a dialogue with her. It is our contention that the women should be treated as a human being rather than “wife”, “mother”, “daughter”, “daughter-in-law”, "mother-in-law" or by any other relation.

20. The process of putting together the story of a woman in distress is her story is a creative and participatory process. An application written by the woman herself is a step in that direction. It often consists of the woman articulating her problem for the first time. The social workers have the important task of weaving her story together and getting the right facts of the case. Part of the system of providing redressal consists of cross checking on the facts with others actors involved in the story, with the concerned police station if they have been approached, or the agency or the individual that has sent the case. Each case that comes to us it is documented in three places-the **Case Register**, which has the facts and brief notes on intervention, **the individual case file**-which has her application, all concerned papers and details of intervention and the **daily dairy** maintained by the full time social workers.

21. Where need be the opposite party is made to sit with the woman and a dialogue between them is attempted. This effort serves several purposes, especially in cases of violence within the matrimonial home; woman can confront the people who have inflicted violence on them, which is an empowering process for her in certain situations. They help cross check facts and help us do a realistic assessment of the situation, and the dynamics between the various actors in a case also come to light. This is to ensure that a dependency is not created and the woman feels empowered by the process and capable of solving her own problems. There is a conscious effort to be non-judgmental. In cases of violence within the matrimonial home, alternatives are suggested when the woman has decided that she wants to pursue legal options and does not want to try reconciliation or where reconciliation has not worked out.

22. Seven non-negotiables determine the intervention. These non-negotiables emerged in the three monthly review meeting organised by the centre which had senior police personnel from the police Head Quarters and experts from Mumbai to facilitate the review. They are:

- no compromise on the issue of violence against women
- principles of self-determination for clients
- no political or societal pressures of any kind
- creating a democratic environment
- accountability is towards the violated women
- confidentiality in cases to be maintained
- free services

➤ **Present Situation**

23. Acknowledging the achievements of the Jaipur Mahila Salah Evam Suraksha Kendra, Rajasthan Police issued an order for expanding this concept to 10 other districts of the state. IFES Rajasthan was keen on providing support for this expansion work. The expansion work was given to Vishakha, a Jaipur based NGO which is the nodal agency for this work.

24. The districts selected for the new Counseling Centers were: Ajmer, Bhilwara, Chittorgarh, Udaipur, Bikaner, Jodhpur, Alwar, Bharatpur, Barmer, Kota and Jaipur rural. Each Counseling Center has two trained social workers and one trainee worker and two police constables, one male and one female deputed by the police. There is atleast one lawyer and doctor attached to each centre to provide legal and medical aid. The Counseling Centers are accessible to all women and children from all over the district in which it is located and no fee is charged for the services provided.

25. The project goals are listed below:

- (i) To establish MSSKs, on the model of the TISS Special Cell and the Jaipur MSSK, in 12 districts (Jaipur, Ajmer, Alwar, Barmer, Bharatpur, Bhilwara, Bikaner, Chittorgarh, Jodhpur, Kota, Phagi and Udaipur), in collaboration with the district-level police system and local community groups.
- (ii) To build and strengthen local NGO networks (in the form of District Support Groups) that will, in the long run, assume ownership and management control of the MSSK, allowing Vishakha to transition into a resource agency (rather

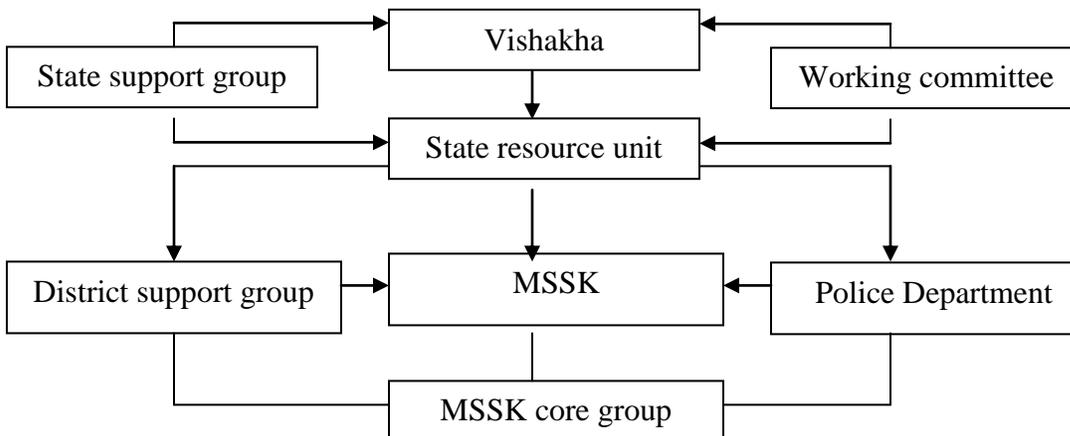
than administrative supervisor) for the project.

(iii) To establish each MSSK such that it:

- legitimises a woman's experience of violence.
- introduces a women's and human rights framework to help a woman analyse her situation, articulate her needs and strategise for immediate and long-term relief.
- provides a range of redress options (legal, medical, psychological, economic, emergency) and assists a client as she implements her choice of remedy/ies.
- provides an alternative dispute resolution mechanism to a woman and her family.
- collaborates with the police and community groups to create a network of support for victims of violence against women (VAW).

➤ **The Program Structure**

26. The program structure includes a state support group that gives overall direction to the program and a state resource unit, the main responsibilities of which are to train and build capacity of the counseling center workers and other stake holders, and oversee advocacy, research and documentation. There is a working committee which consists of a small group of specialists from different disciplines who make important programmatic decisions. This group is responsible for the overall implementation of the project. In each district there is a district support group which consists of organizations and individuals working on issues of violence against women in the district. This group coordinates to provide support services, and reviews and monitors the work of the counseling center. This is the group that will gradually take over the running of the counseling centers in their respective districts.



27. To ensure that the maximum number of women can avail themselves of the services provided by the Counseling Centers, outreach activities are undertaken by the staff on a regular basis. The Counseling Centers also build partnerships at various levels with the police department, women’s organizations, health professionals, and others.

28. Needless to say, the MSSK is the crux of the project. Located at the district level, and working in close partnership with the District Support Group (DSG) and Rajasthan police, each MSSK has the following composition:

Position	Number	FT/PT*	Responsibilities being fulfilled
Case worker	2	FT	Client counseling, mediation between parties in dispute; referral to police, legal, medical, psychiatric, emergency shelter and employment services and helping clients negotiate these services, case follow-up, coordination with DSG and police, outreach, networking and advocacy; formal and informal gender/VAW sensitisation of all stakeholders, conducting internal, DSG and other meetings; attending monthly case worker meetings; data and information management, routine administration, mentoring of trainees; participating in capacity building exercises.
Trainee	1-2	FT	As a result of the MSSK internship, to form part of a cadre of gender sensitised social work professionals, centre observation, administrative assistance, participation in internal, DSG and other meetings, participation in capacity building exercises. At present seven of the nine MSSKs have trainees.
Male police constable	1	FT	An employee of the state police, the constable accompanies case workers on field and follow-up visits, delivers call letters; serves as police presence at the center, provides administrative assistance as needed, participates in internal staff and DSG meetings. As per IFES funding guidelines, no formal gender/VAW training is provided to police personnel.
Female police constable	1	FT	— as above —
Legal advisor	1	—	A volunteer lawyer who provides legal advice to MSSK clients. The legal advisor may provide clients other <i>pro bono</i> services such as the preparation of affidavits and legal representation in court. In most MSSKs the legal

			advisor visits the centre once a week and is also available for phone consultation and emergency assistance. The legal advisor receives a modest honorarium.
Medical support	—	—	Case workers connect women with gynaecological and psychological care, although the latter remains a state-wide challenge.

➤ **District Support Group (DSG)**

29. The DSG is a group of local experts (members in their individual capacity and representatives of organisations) working on issues of social justice (especially gender and violence against women), that provides coordinated service support and networking to the MSSK. The DSG helps the MSSK liaison with police, judicial and medical agencies and provides referrals to local service providers (shelters, economic rehabilitation, etc.). Given their community presence and reputation, DSG members give the MSSK grassroots legitimacy, given their history and experience, DSG members serve as invaluable guides to the MSSK in matters of principle and practice. Furthermore, according to Vishakha, the DSG is the most productive way to plan for the eventual devolution of MSSK ownership and management and ensure long-term programme sustainability.

➤ **State Resource Team (SRT)**

30. Located at the state level the SRT is responsible for project implementation:

- (i) Establishing and supervising MSSKs in 12 districts.
- (ii) Creating and strengthening the district-level partnership between the MSSK, DSG and police.
- (iii) Developing networks for referral services and district-level advocacy.
- (iv) Capacity building of MSSK staff, DSG and other stakeholders (government officials, NGOs, women's and human rights activists, lawyers, doctors, etc.).
- (v) Crisis management of MSSKs.
- (vi) Research and documentation (including the publication of a bi-monthly newsletter, annual journal and miscellaneous resource materials on gender,

VAW and MSSK-specific information).

(vii) Development and implementation of an information management system.

31. In addition to coordinating the project's activities from Jaipur, each SRT member spends a minimum of three-four consecutive days per month at each MSSK for which she/he is responsible.

32. These initiatives now need to be further intensified and more intensive engagement with the police department needs to be initiated if it is to become part of the formal structure.

33. To conclude, the aim of the Mahila Salah Evam Suraksha Kendra is to ensure a space for women where victims of violence can feel free to come, share their problems and seek advice. It has been visualized as providing a for a for women's experience within the criminal justice system and as a space where all the concerned parties – the victims of violence, their families, the police, lawyers, medical jurists, the judiciary, women's commission, activists from women's organizations can debate and discuss issues from different stand points. It is hoped that the learnings emerging from the experience of the centre will be incorporated within the police, medico legal and the judicial system in order to recast them as more just and gender sensitive institutions. It is important to note that the centre has not been perceived as a substitute for the police but to play a role that the police system is unable to play in its existing framework-to view violence against women not, just as a crime but as an act which requires diverse interventions by society and its various institutions.