

Hemlata – 'No dowry grooms for me'



Areas of Influence

I Bled For My Ignorance

No one had ever explained to me what the menstrual cycle was. The first time I had a period, all my clothes got soiled and stained. My mother noticed, and got her sister to come over. My *mausi* (aunt) told me how to use a cloth. But she told me nothing else. Since no one said anything about it, I couldn't gather the courage to ask. I concluded that I had some terrible disease. I didn't go to school for three-four days. Then it happened again after a month. I thought I was losing a lot of blood and would become weak and waste away. I was under tremendous stress and tension. I stopped talking to people, and I was thoroughly miserable for quite a few months.

Finally I got to know what it was all about only when I went for those meetings. I understood that all girls go through this. And that I could smile and be normal like others. For the first time I began to understand things about my body. You cannot imagine what a relief it was, and what a revelation. I made sure that my younger sisters didn't have to go through the same ordeal. I taught them everything I learnt there.

Eve teasing

When I was 18 I began a tailoring course. By that time we had learnt a lot about dealing with eve teasing. I was part of a *natak* (play) that we'd done on eve teasing. In the play I had done the part of 'Meena'.

Once when I was walking to my class, a boy coming towards me yelled, "Meena, Meena," at me and ran past. A bunch of older boys standing around began following me chanting the name loudly and laughing. I felt intimidated and wanted to run. But I remembered one thing we'd learnt: if you don't stand up for yourself the first time, you'll be harassed daily. I faced them and asked, "Who're you calling 'Meena'?" One boy said, "You." And they all laughed and jeered. I just grabbed him by his collar, and told him where he got off. I was nervous even as I did that, because I was alone, but I didn't show it. They'd told us, 'Don't show that you're afraid.' They just shut up and left. When the girls at the meeting got to know, they walked with me the next day. But the boys never ever showed up again.

I was not alone. Each one of us got inspired by the other, and more and more of us began standing up to the eve teasers. I think after all this there was an overall lessening of eve teasing in Tigri.

Hemlata, when she first came to Swaasthya

"When I first came to Swaasthya, I was very shy, and quite confused."

Year joined Swaasthya : 2002

Age then : 14-15 years

Education then :
8th class, government school

Family background:
My mother was a housewife; Papa was a construction foreman. I had an elder sister who was married and living separately, two younger sisters, and a younger brother.

How I joined Swaasthya: The field workers used to make house visits, and my friend was part of the adolescent programme. I got motivated by what she had learned there. So I joined up too.

Programmes I attended: Weekly meetings; kishori panchayat; (one a month) FGD, SBM (1 week training)

Attended Programmes for: 4 years

Stopped because: My mother fell critically ill and passed away. I had to look after my sisters and brother.



I Can Talk To My Father

You know, before I came for all these meetings, I found it really difficult to talk to mummy and papa. Especially papa. I could never explain what I wanted to say. Every time I tried to put some view or need of mine across, it always led to my being upbraided, and there was this barrier between them and me. But at the meetings they were constantly telling us to trust your parents, to communicate with them. I found it difficult to believe at first that doing so would solve anything. Only after several meetings, and listening to the experiences of so many other girls did I gather the understanding and courage to speak up.

Hemlata Now

"When I get married the boy should share my views, and not ask for dowry."

Age now: 22 years

Family now: Father, sisters and brother.

What now: I am looking to get married...

Future: I'd like to persuade my future husband to let me pursue studies I want to become a teacher.

On the Swaasthya Experience

What part/programme had least impact: All programmes were good. We used to love the annual meetings

Rates the programmes on a 1-10 scale: 10

Anything you'd like added: They used to ask us right away what we wanted to talk about, and we'd tell them. This was built into the programmes.

My mother always resisted the idea of my going for the meetings and things. When I wanted to take part in a *natak* (play), we were told to get permission from home. My mother didn't directly refuse me, but fobbed me off by saying that papa would get angry. "If you want his permission ask him yourself," she said. She knew I was scared of talking to him, and thought that she'd effectively prevented me from pursuing the matter. But I broached the subject with him. He asked what the play was about. I told him straight that it was on eve teasing (though my heart was in my mouth). He merely asked for water and I knew I had the permission! This was my very first victory in communicating my needs to my parents. After that it just became easier each time.

Marriage and Vows

At the meetings, all the girls vowed to each other that they'd not get married till they were 25 years. I had even had an argument with my mother about this. We

all wanted to study a lot and become something to reckon with. If mummy hadn't died I'd have continued to study.

I have seen my sisters and brother suffer because there was so little money and so many of us. I wouldn't like to have more than two children. I'd only like to marry a boy who shares my views. We had discussed so much about the evils of dowry at the *Mahila Panchayat*. There were in-laws who beat brides because of dowry issues. I won't marry someone who wants dowry. My father is looking for a husband for me.

With the first boy who came to see me, everything seemed fine, and my father had given them to understand that we were interested. We went to attend the marriage of his elder brother too, and I was sitting next to the person who had brought us the proposal. She mentioned that the boy's elder brother had asked for and got a car in dowry. I said to her, "If the elder one wanted a car, the younger one will at least want a motorcycle." She agreed. So I said, "We can't give him anything, so I don't want to marry this boy." My father was first annoyed that I'd told them so directly instead of through him. But I pointed out that it would've been too late, and things might have gotten out of hand. And he saw that I was right. I have already refused two boys who wanted dowry.

