

No.4 // December, 2017.

By My Choices Foundation



OPERATION
PEACEMAKER

EVIDENCE FOR TRANSFORMATION



**OPERATION PEACEMAKER
AIMS TO REDUCE DOMESTIC
VIOLENCE IN INDIA THROUGH
THOUSANDS OF PEACEMAKERS
WHO ARE TRAINED IN FAMILY
AND MARRIAGE COUNSELING
AND ALL ASPECTS OF THE
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ACT.
OUR INNOVATIVE APPROACH
USING LOCAL WOMEN AS
CHANGE AGENTS HAS PROVEN
EXTREMELY SUCCESSFUL
ACROSS TELANGANA.**

CUMULATIVE PROJECT DATA

5 years of peace in the making



5 YEARS
OF FOCUSED WORK
IN TELANGANA



204
PEACEMAKERS
TRAINED



4,359
CASES HANDLED



119,938
*FIELD HOURS



74,842
COMMUNITY MEMBERS
AND SCHOOL GIRLS
TRAINED



IMPACTING SEVERAL
THOUSAND
OTHERS

IMPACT SNAPSHOT

*Field hours is the time spent by a Peacemaker providing "in-field"/"in-the-community" support through counseling, basic legal aid and case management to clients outside of the counseling center. This support is often provided inside the home of the client, or another safe space preferred by the client.

SHAKTI PROGRAM

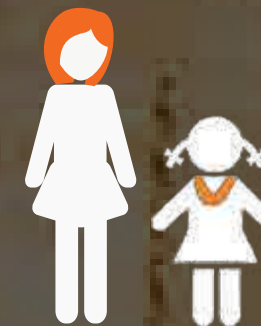


13
SHAKTI CIRCLES
ESTABLISHED



206
GIRLS IN LONG TERM
MENTORING PROGRAMS

IMAGINE if Indian girls could be given Shakti. Shakti literally means “to be able”, conversationally translating to power or empowerment. The Shakti Program is a program designed specifically for vulnerable adolescent girls to give them the support and education they need TO BE ABLE to take control of their lives and make decisions about their future that will keep them safe from violence, abuse and exploitation. It is in essence a long-term (12 - 15 month) mentorship program for girls journeying through adolescence. They face harsh realities, and usually have no one to turn to who will help them problem solve. Through Shakti we use a multifold approach in helping girls, where girls are: connected to a peer network; supported and empowered to recognise risk and develop strategies to resist pressures of child marriage, dangerous work, and being pulled out of school; provided access to services; trained to negotiate for themselves; supported to articulate aspirations and take steps towards achieving their life goals. The peer network that provides the girls a safe space to talk about their lives is the foundation of the Shakti program. It is incredible to see the girls giving and deriving strength from each other!



28,099
SCHOOL & COLLEGE GIRLS TRAINED



46,743
COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

OPERATION PEACEMAKER is now reaching a greater number of girls, in a wider age range. We are doing this through partnerships with local NGOs.

The girls we train get so excited that someone is finally talking to them about issues like relationships, abuse, and harassment. Most teachers are well-meaning, but they do not feel equipped to talk about important safety issues. The older girls are especially interested in discussing these issues. At one college, the girls asked to lock the doors, so they felt safe sharing their experiences of dating violence and abuse.

When we talk to school and college girls about gender discrimination and domestic abuse, we can see them nodding in agreement that these are real issues to them. It is so important for young girls to be taught about their right to safety, and to have the confidence to raise their voice. We are so grateful to be able to train these girls at such a young age and equip them to be knowledgeable and confident in their rights.

USHA KIRAN, PROGRAM OFFICER

DURING our Basthi Meetings, I can visibly see the participants become more relaxed and calm. The fact that topics of abuse and right to safety can be spoken about in public is a big relief to them. Most participants are shocked that someone wants to hold a meeting to discuss domestic violence, because all their lives they have been asked to keep quiet about it and accept it. These women don't have any information about abuse, or about services available to them. Our sessions are so informative that the participants eagerly ask us to come back so that they can bring other women from their community to attend the next meeting.

**ANNA VILASINI, SECUNDERABAD COUNSELING
CENTER COORDINATOR**

GRASSROOTS PREVENTION

COUNSELING

PROFILE

84%

INDIVIDUAL
COUNSELING

38%

FAMILY
COUNSELING

63%

*COUPLE
COUNSELING

25%

RECEIVED ALL FORMS
OF COUNSELING

*We are very proud that well over half of our clients are able to include their husband (usually main perpetrator) in counseling. This inclusive approach to solutions is what we believe is the hallmark of our success in finding permanent peaceful solutions to domestic violence.

OUR Counselors are the backbone of Operation PeaceMaker. They are responsible for the case work for every client. In addition to handling their own cases, they also support between 7 -15 PeaceMakers in their case management, field work and capacity building. Our Counselors offer so much of themselves to each and every case. Each case demands something different from them: Sometimes they have to stand up to a police officer who refuses to file a case; sometimes they have to be fearless in the face of violence that comes from the home to our Counseling Center; and other times they have to hold the hand of a client through the process of ending abuse and starting a new life "from scratch". We are grateful for the incredible women who carry this load on behalf of the thousands every year who benefit directly from their courage.

EACH CASE UNDERGOES AN AVERAGE OF
6.5 SESSIONS BEFORE CLOSURE

A CASE IS OPEN FOR AN AVERAGE OF **122 DAYS**
FROM START TO CASE CLOSURE

77% OF CASES REACH A
PEACEFUL RESOLUTION

14/1000 OF ALL CASES WENT TO COURT

*Mid-2017, Operation PeaceMaker hired one additional full-time legal aid and decided to strategically expand the range of legal support we can provide. In 2018 we expect to see the percentage of cases that have received legal support to increase sharply.



Top Left to Right: Aparna Adhikari, Kavitha Krishnaraj and Reena Doulaghar
Bottom Left to Right: Noorjahan Siddiqui, Tajwar Lodhi and Ratna Sri

WE DID AN 8 QUESTION RAPID-FIRE INTERVIEW WITH EACH OF OUR COUNSELORS TO HELP YOU GET TO KNOW THEM BETTER!

Q. Tell us about you, your background and what brought you to My Choices Foundation.

A. I have my MPhil and am working on my PhD in psychology. I have also completed two decades of work in the development field. Yet, I had a strong passion to find a job that would allow me to work towards empowering women and girls. My Choices Foundation has helped me satisfy this passion. I found my purpose here, supporting disadvantaged women and their children with meaningful rights education. - Aparna Adhikari

Q. Every day you meet women facing very serious issues and heartbreaking abuse. What keeps you from filling with bitterness after hearing so many stories like this?

A. I would be lying if I said that I never have bad days when I experience bitterness towards the abuse my clients face. Self-care is essential for each of us Counselors in order to manage our stress and emotions. Personally, I make sure that my weekends are full of things that keep my mind joyfully occupied. Above all, I feel blessed that I am given the opportunity to help these women. I stay rooted in the cause I'm working for, and that is my inspiration to keep going. - Kavitha Krishnaraj

Q. Use only 5 words to describe your emotions during a "normal" work day.

A. Hopeful, Angry, Empathetic, Frustrated and Sympathetic. - Combined Answer

Q. To get through the day, you must need a great deal of patience, strength and inner serenity. Despite having these things mastered, what can still seriously frustrate you?

A. Sexual abuse being used as a tool or technique to control and punish a woman. Abusers use sexual violence against women, knowing that they will hesitate to tell others about their pain due to embarrassment, lack of awareness about rights, and fear of public perception and ridicule if they say something so "gross" and "personal". These tactics of manipulation make me so upset! - Kavitha Krishnaraj

Q. You are a beacon of hope for so many women and girls who rely on your guidance and support. What is something that you think every girl needs to know?

A. I would like to tell her, that she is the most beautiful person in the whole world. She is unique, she is irreplaceable, there is a purpose for her living, and she must never, ever give up no matter what happens. She must always believe in herself and keep discovering the purpose for which she is created for. Each person is responsible for her happiness, which is an attitude. No one can take that away from her if she decides to be happy. - Aparna Adhikari

Q. As a Counselor with Operation PeaceMaker, you've worked on many cases. Do you feel any change in society or a change in the situations and stories of the women who come to you?

A. I wish I could say that I do see comprehensive, systemic change, but in reality this is going to take more time. At a societal level, we are seeing the same experiences of abuse affecting women's lives. There is hope, though! What I do see is a change in the women themselves. They are more aware of their rights and choices available to them, and they are more aware of what they want for their marriages, families and homes. This is a big step towards empowering communities, and eventually society as a whole. When enough women are talking about change and living out examples of transformation, it starts to inspire those around them. Word of mouth is powerful, and we're seeing sparks of hope being lit in communities where our work has brought peace to the lives of women and families. - Tajwar Lodhi

Q. Hearing so many statistics and stories of abuse against women can paint a negative picture of men and boys. Men could even start feeling guilty for just being a man. How do you ensure that negativity isn't the only aspect of men's involvement in this issue?

A. I totally agree with My Choices Foundation's belief that men are at least 50% of the solution, and NOT just a part of the problem. While each individual case of a man abusing a woman infuriates me, I cannot use those stories to generalize or conclude that all men are evil. If we don't look at men as stakeholders in the solution, we will never be successful in transforming society as a whole. We can't afford to leave half the population out of this conversation. We need the good guys, and we need to work with men as much as possible to create more good guys. - Kavitha Krishnaraj

Q. What motivated you to work as counselor?

Before joining Operation PeaceMaker, I worked on various issues to help the community but I always had the desire to work exclusively on domestic violence issues not just to empower/help women to live abuse free life, but I also wanted to help men understand the negative impact of violence on women. Counseling provided me with this excellent opportunity to engage men every day through the sessions to bring change in their perspectives and bring for them a peaceful solution. - Noorjahan Siddiqui

Q. Where would we find you when you are not at the counseling center?

A. With family, cooking, hosting friends, at movies, concerts, and much more! - Combined Answer

MEET OUR COUNSELORS

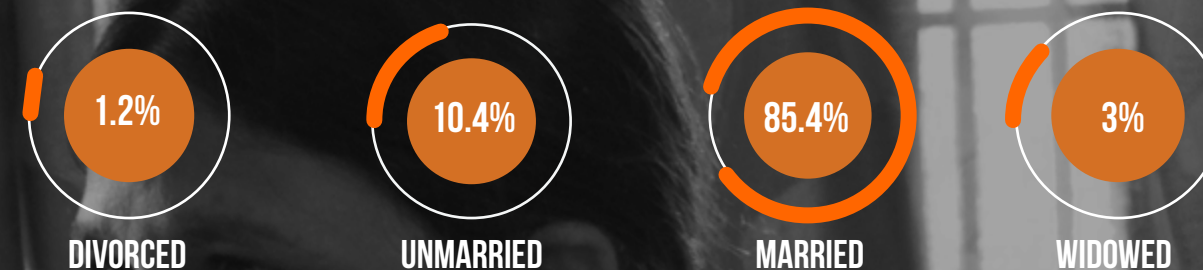
PEACEMAKER PROFILE

WE have trained 204 PeaceMakers, in just over 5 years of operations. Currently, we have 71 active PeaceMakers at our 5 Counseling Centers and will be training more in the coming year. To have 71 strong, passionate and capable PeaceMakers is something we are very proud of.

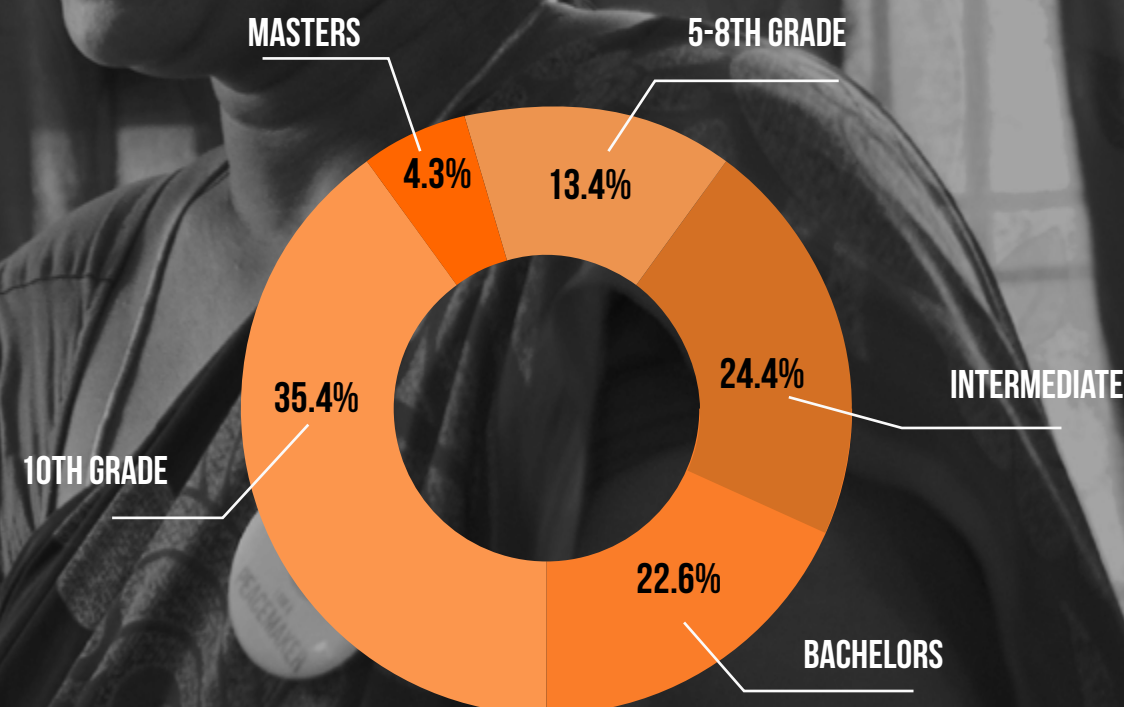
Our PeaceMakers are exceptional in their communities. Most of them do not come from communities or households where women are encouraged to work. Many have personal histories with domestic abuse, which they were strengthened to overcome during their PeaceMaker training. Whether they work outside of their role as a PeaceMaker or not, they are busy women with a myriad of responsibilities as mothers, wives, and members of tight-knit, traditional families. When there is a major life event in their life or that of their family members, they are often required to prioritise other responsibilities. For example, if a PeaceMaker becomes pregnant or if her sibling gets married, she is expected to stop working in order to fulfill duties for that life event.

Each of our PeaceMakers is different, and some of them choose to keep working, no matter what event comes and goes. However, some prefer to follow family traditions. So, while 70 PeaceMakers out of 204 may seem like a low retention rate, it is actually remarkably high. Given the background and communities that these women come from, it is amazing that many of them begin work to begin with, let alone with an organisation that empowers them to be change agents. Many of our PeaceMakers who “drop out” due to life events, eventually come back to work. For those who don’t, we know that their communities continue to benefit from having an empowered, well informed, change agent in their midst.

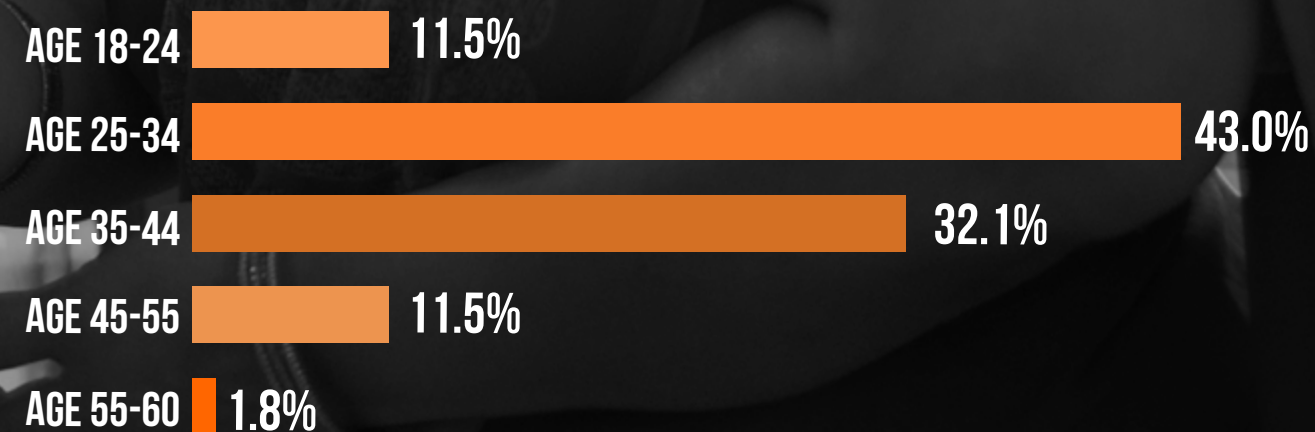
MARITAL STATUS



EDUCATION



AGE BREAKDOWN



SURVIVOR PROFILE

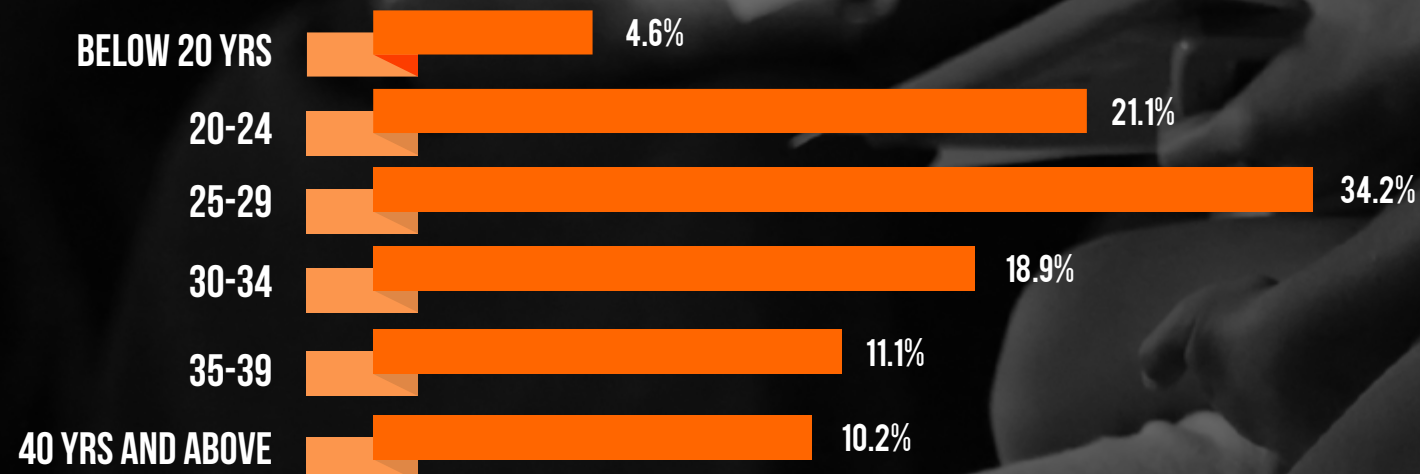
THIS is the first year we are not providing the full survivor profile. Instead, we are highlighting a new data set focussing on a more in-depth understanding of the intersection of the issues of domestic abuse, early marriage and childbearing.

If you have looked at previous Impact Reports, you already know that the data we collect on our PeaceMakers, our clients, and the abuse profile is extensive. What we are now expanding into is more complex analytics. This year, we are giving you a preview of this work.

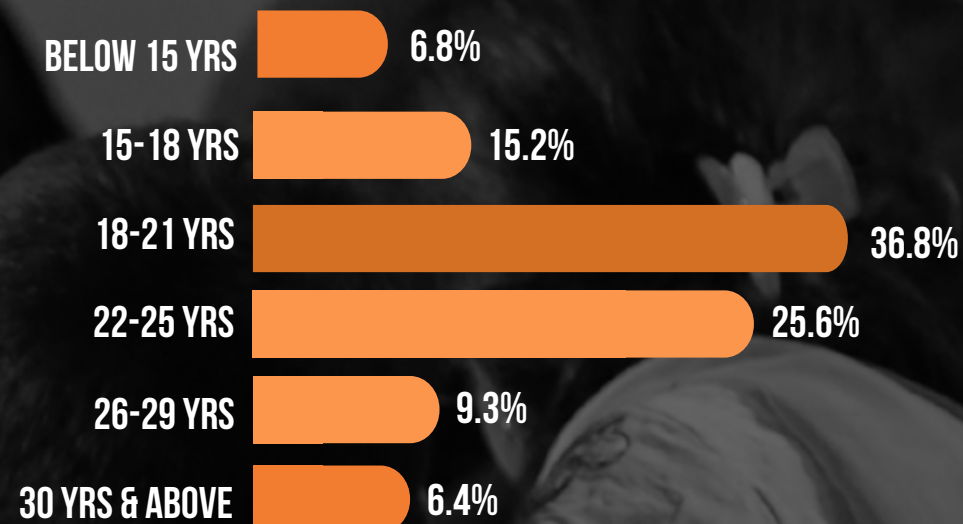
Since May 2017, we have collected a more detailed age profile on a section of our 1,390 clients for this year. We now know MORE than how old the client is. We know what age they were when they got married, and when they had their first child.

22% of our clients were married before the age of 18. This is not only illegal in India, but also has severe implications for their health and susceptibility to violence at home. 17% of our clients had their first child before the age of 18. Childbirth is still the leading cause of death for girls aged 15-19 globally. It is also a precursor to many issues to girls' development.

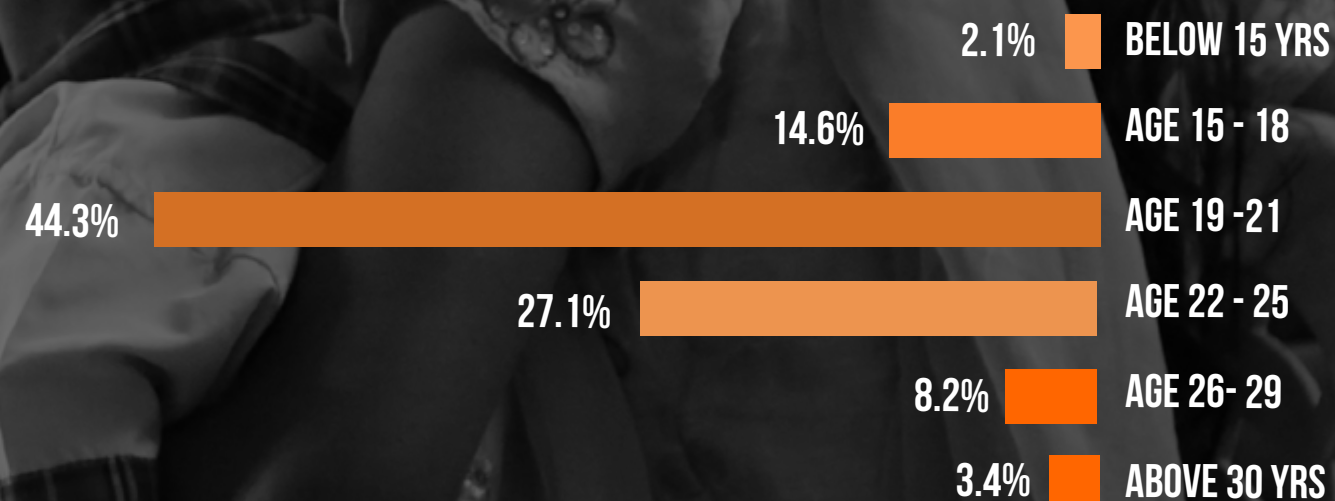
SURVIVOR AGE BREAKDOWN



SURVIVOR AGE AT MARRIAGE



SURVIVOR AGE AT FIRST CHILD



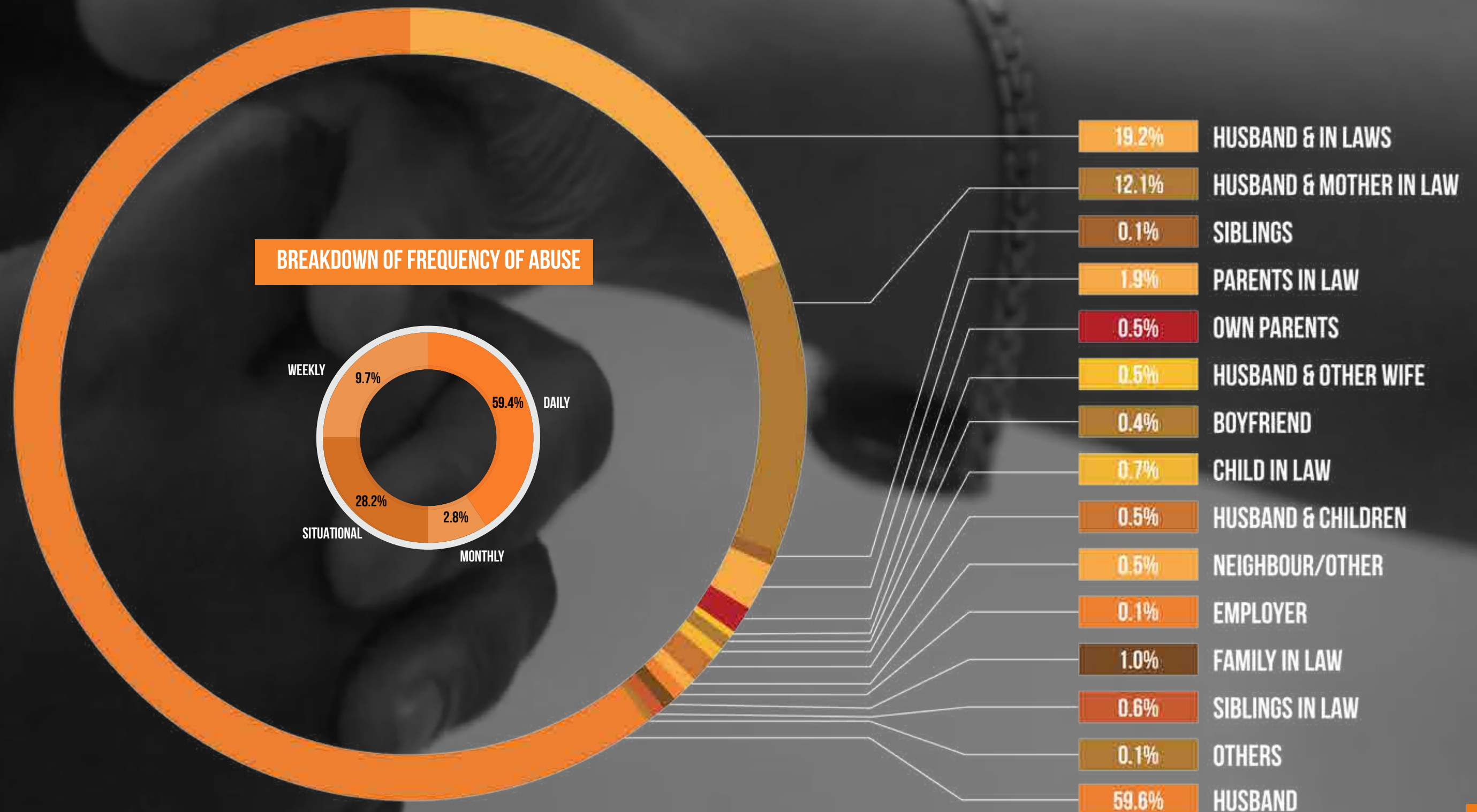
THIS year, we will be widening our data sample by collecting age data on all of our clients. We will also be conducting analysis to determine the relationship between early marriage and childbirth and abuse.

We will be asking, how does early marriage and childbirth relate to:

- Frequency and severity of abuse
- Relationship of victim and abuser
- Type of abuse experienced
- Time taken to speak up and to get help

ABUSE PROFILE

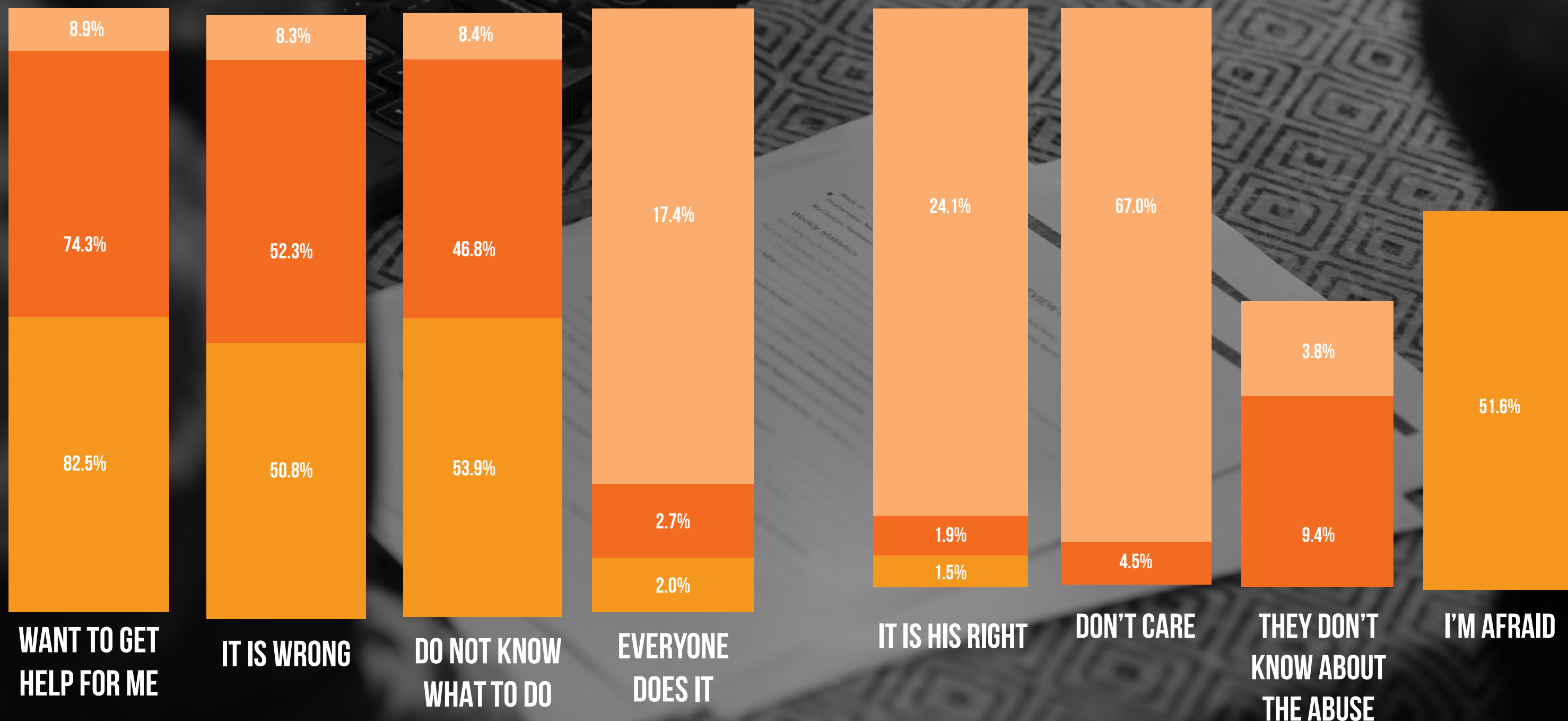
THE percentage breakdown identifying the perpetrator of abuse has changed substantially between 2016 and 2017, with the percentage of cases where the husband is the single abuser decreasing. Husbands who act abusively against their wives are often goaded on by other family members. Domestic Violence is not just an issue of warped masculinity, as many assume. It is the side effect of a culture that undervalues women and seeks to oppress through humiliation, power and control. Empowering the victim is critical, but far from a holistic solution. Putting family and healthy relationships at the center of solutions helps include all members of the community in the transformation. Empowering couples to establish their own identity and boundaries apart from their families has proven to be an essential strategy, allowing them to build shared respect, trust, dependency, and hope on a clean slate.



*VIEWS ON ABUSE



*INFORMED BY THE PERCEPTION OF THE SURVIVOR





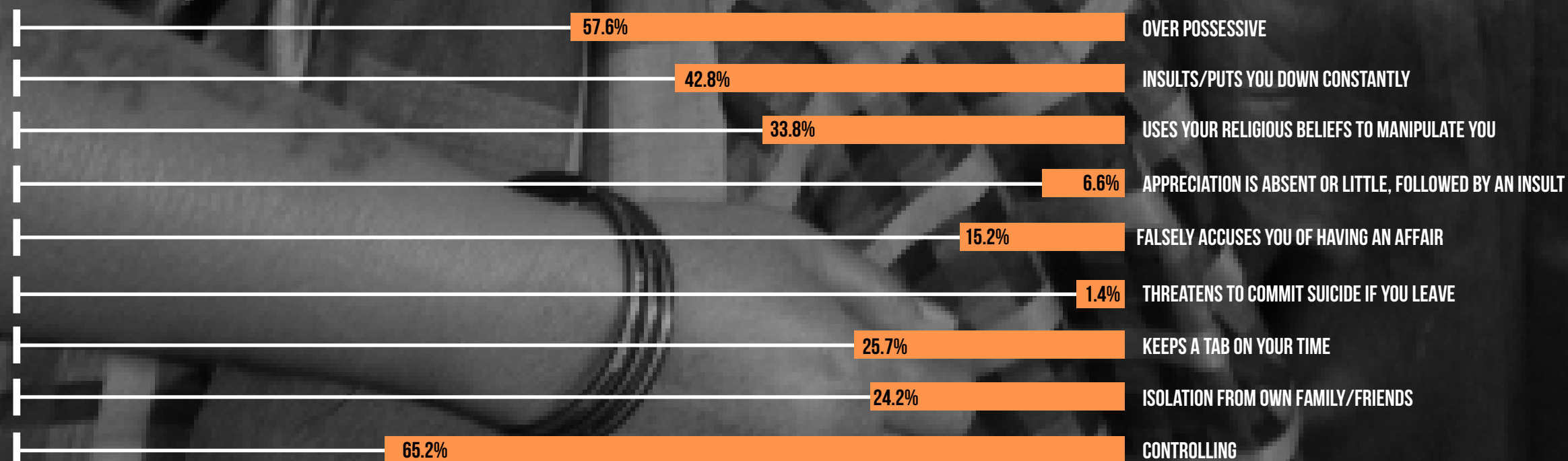
22.8%* OF TOTAL CASES INVOLVE SEXUAL ABUSE



*Percentage of sexual abuse reported in our cases is much lower than the reality experienced. Our Counselors report that sexual abuse is prevalent in around 80% of all cases. Sexual abuse remains a taboo that our clients and even our own PeaceMakers are reluctant to discuss openly and is therefore under-reported even when it may have been a part of PeaceMaker counseling.

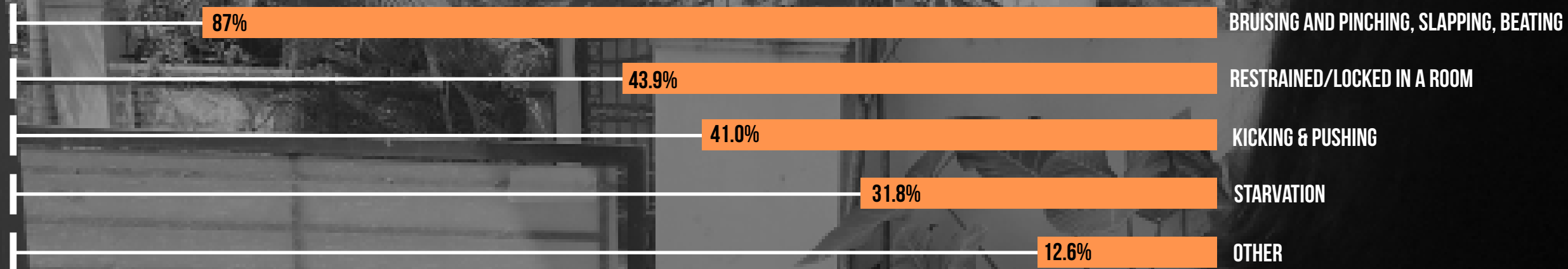


79.4% OF TOTAL CASES INVOLVE EMOTIONAL ABUSE

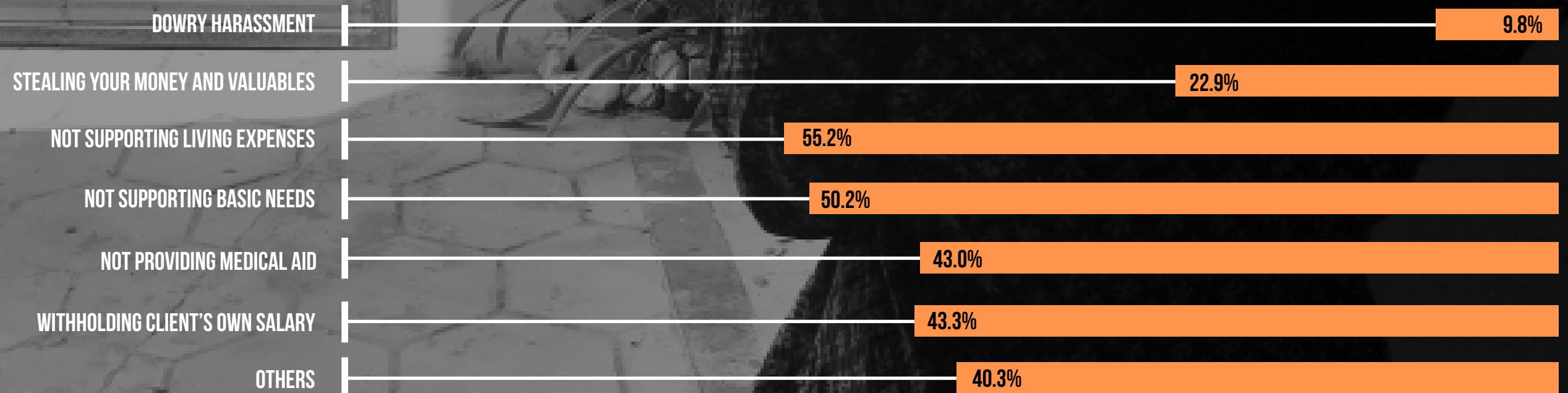




64.3% OF TOTAL CASES INVOLVE PHYSICAL ABUSE



67.1% OF TOTAL CASES INVOLVE ECONOMIC ABUSE



OUR STORIES

YAMINA'S STORY OF SHAKTI

SUNDAY is my fun day in the week. As I walk to pick up my best friend Beena, I take a deep breath and enjoy the time alone. Beena lives just a few houses away from mine, and I enjoy my walks with her every week. On our way to the Shakti Center, Beena always asks me if I'm carrying my Pink Book. I would never leave home on Sunday without it. It is the book that I use to write all my dreams and plans for the future. During the week, I keep it in a safe place to hide it from my brothers and sisters. Every Sunday, I take it out and write more in it.

Beena and I go to the Shakti Center every Sunday. The turquoise coloured walls have become a symbol of safety and warmth to me. It's my second home and a place that I get to be the real me. At first I was timid, and didn't want to say anything during the sessions. Over time, I have learned that this is a place that I can share anything that is happening to me or bothering me.

I never wanted to come to the Shakti Center. When Mrs. Hajera knocked on the door of my house a few months ago and told my mother about the program, I didn't want to go. Sunday is my only free day, and I didn't want to give up any time on my one day of rest. My father is a rickshaw-puller, so my mother works to help support our family. She is a saree embellisher and works with beautiful fabrics. Two years ago, when I was in 6th grade, they pulled me out of school to work with my mother. I always enjoyed the fabrics, but I get exhausted. That's why I didn't want to spend my Sunday at the Shakti Center.

When Mrs. Hajera told my mother that I would be with other girls and learn about safety, rights, and education, my mother gave me no choice. The only reason I thought it might be nice to go is because my friend Beena was also going.

Now, I wait all week to go to the Shakti Center. Each week we discuss the stories of other girls. We use our red books to write down our thoughts about how other girls could have used their rights and made better choices. We also write about our own painful stories, and how we wish they had been different. Most of the girls in my Shakti Circle are younger than me, but I can see the pain in their eyes when they write in their red books. I know our Shakti Leader sees it too. We use our pink books to write down our own dreams. We are taught to become the woman we dream of being, and not to let anyone else tell us what we are worth. As long as we believe that we are precious, strong and proud, then no one can tell or treat us differently. We have named our Shakti Circle the "Precious Stones". We want to be strong on the inside, but beautiful on the outside and able to bring a sparkle of light to our community. This is what Precious Stones means to us - to be strong, confident and good.

Mrs. Hajera always takes time to ask me about my life. She asks about my sister who has been ill, and she helps me plan to make sure the dreams in my pink book come true. That's how she found out that I want to finish school and start a tailoring business. She has been able to convince my parents to let me go back to school. We worked it out so that I can go to school, work with my mother, and attend Shakti in the week. It has been really difficult to catch up in my school after missing two years! I keep working hard because in my pink book I have written down my dream of finishing school, and starting my own tailoring business. My school also teaches tailoring, so I'm working towards my dream day by day.

I can't wait for graduation, because I have some big plans. Some of them I have shared with my friends at Shakti, and some of them only my pink book knows!

Yamina's story as told in her Shakti Circle, and written by Supriya, Shakti Program Manager
*Name and identifying details changed to protect the identity of a minor aged client.

OUR STORIES

BILQUIS BEGUM'S STORY

BILQUIS, 38, has undergone severe abuse for the full 20 years of her marriage. She was married at the age of 18, and very next day she was introduced to marital rape. She eventually resigned herself to the belief that it was the fate of every married woman to obey the demands of her husband at any time. If she refused or resisted her husband for any reason, even if the reason was that her children were in the room, she was beaten horribly.

Bilquis was embarrassed by the bruises that would show on her face and body when she went out in public, but that was the least of her worries.

The sexual abuse was the most degrading for Bilquis, but she would have put up with it if the violence at home did not affect her children so badly. Bilquis was treated like a maid at home, looking after her in-laws and her alcoholic husband. Yet her husband and in-laws refused to provide her or her children with basic needs like food. Bilquis ate once every 2-3 days. Her children got used to sharing 1 bowl of rice that their landlord would smuggle to Bilquis' eldest daughter a few times per week. If Bilquis ever got a hold of enough money to buy a packet of milk, she would keep the milk with the neighbors and go to their house to have a sip. Her aunt would come home every 2-3 days to take her out of the house and get her a meal.

Bilquis' family and neighbors cared about her, but did not have the resources to help her live on her own. They did what they could to help her get food for her and her children every couple of days. Her in-laws were also complicit in the abuse she faced. They encouraged her husband's doubts about her character and encouraged him to beat her upon suspicion that she was having an affair with her cousin.

Bilquis finally took the bold step to come out from the abusive relationship. She spoke out about the abuse after approaching an Operation PeaceMaker counselor. The sexual abuse was

particularly difficult for her to share. She had never spoken to anyone about any of the abuse before. After counseling, she realized that she has a right over her own body and violence is not justified. After several counseling sessions, she gained her confidence and made a conscious decision not to suffer any longer.

Now, as a single mother, she is taking small steps towards growing in her role as a provider. She got so used to her husband being the "string master", and she being his puppet. Now, she is taking back the reigns of her life. She is trying to increase her income by growing a business.

Her dream of living peacefully with her three children has finally come true. She is very firm that she will give a good education to her two daughters and son. Her elder daughter is 17 now, and everybody in the community is trying to force her to get married. However, Bilquis is very clear that she will educate her daughter first, and only get her married when she is ready. Bilquis wants her daughter to decide for herself when to get married.

Bilquis plans to educate her son not to violate anybody and to respect all women, and to educate her daughters to never be silent victims of abuse.

Bilquis felt that to raise her children with the knowledge they need to grow up compassionate and educated, she needed training herself. She joined the PeaceMaker program, to become equipped to affect change in her community and ensure her children grow up knowing their rights. Bilquis still works as both PeaceMaker and pappad-maker (bread maker) and is saving to start a tailoring business.

As told to Counselor Tajwar Lodhi on 17/Feb/2017



OUR STORIES

SAROJINI'S STORY

If Sarojini looks familiar, or you feel like you have heard her story before, it is because you most likely have come across her story before. However, you have never really met Sarojini before.

Sarojini is the real name of Sandhya, whose story was featured in a 2016 fundraising campaign, and in our 2016 Impact Report. Why reveal her real name, and why feature her story again? Of course, there are many client stories we could choose from. Since our last Impact Report, Operation PeaceMaker has helped resolve an additional 2,000 cases of abuse. Yet, Sarojini's story stands out. It is symbolic of just how much our work has grown, and just how powerful the hope that we carry for our clients is.

Sarojini ended 16 years of abuse through a middle-of-the-night escape with her two little daughters in tow. The abuse she experienced was so severe, her escape so dramatic, and her triumph in setting up a new life so inspiring, that her story reads like a script from a dramatic movie. However, it is the progress that Sarojini has made since 2016 that has made us highlight it once again in this year's Impact Report.

Sarojini's indomitable spirit, and irrepressible joy for life is something we are inspired by every day we get to see her. To think that this time two years ago she was still living under constant fear for her and her daughter's lives is nearly impossible.

In 2016 we announced the beginning of Saath-Saath, our very first self-help group initiative. Sarojini was one of our very first group members. Now, Sarojini leads several Saath-Saath groups, and is a guide for many other women while they navigate the pain, processing, self-discovery and healing at various stages of their recovery journey.

Sarojini is now also helping to lead Basthi Meetings, the community-based workshops providing prevention and awareness education to local women. She is a powerful speaker, who shares from her experience, and motivates women to be strong enough to stand up for themselves. She speaks with the confidence of a survivor. She tells women that they have a choice, and that they must make the safety and peace of their own lives their first priority. Critically, Sarojini tells women that it's okay to get help, and that there are PeaceMakers waiting to hear their stories and support them.

Sarojini does all of this volunteer work with Operation PeaceMaker in her spare time.

She is hard working and entrepreneurial. Her first job after starting her new life was as a tea-seller. She then got a job as a cook, which afforded better pay and hours that allowed her to be with her daughters in the afternoon when they came home from school. Before Sarojini escaped her abusive home, she single-handedly ran a scrap shop. She managed everything from logistics and supplies to finances. It is her goal to save enough money to start her own shop again.

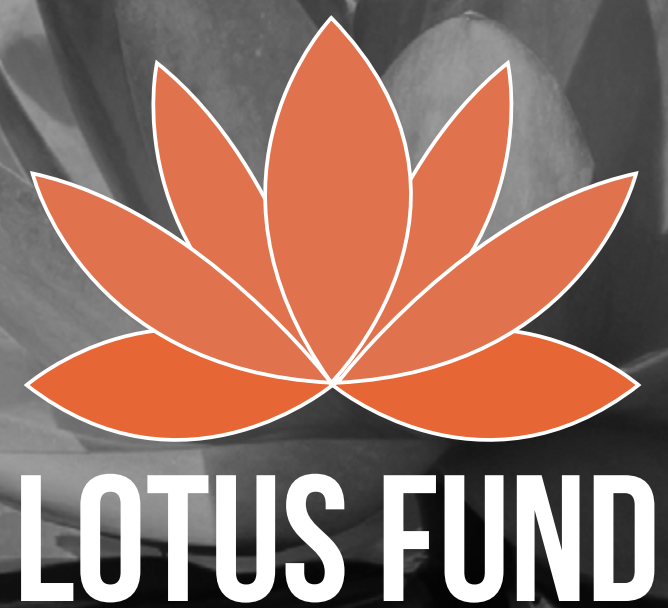
Sarojini has two goals to fulfil through starting her own shop. First, she believes that setting up a local shop will help her build a community of friends and neighbours. She wants her daughters to grow up with strong roots in a community where they have many well-wishers. Secondly, Sarojini knows she can earn a lot more running her own shop. Both her daughters plan to be doctors, and Sarojini knows she needs to save a lot of money to get them through university.

Sarojini is the perfect example of what women are capable of, once they are supported with the choice to live a life free from abuse and violence. However, she would not be where she is today without the help of the Operation PeaceMaker team, and some very generous donors.

Sarojini was the first ever client that we provided crisis funding to. We didn't do it because it was a strategic objective of ours. In the past, our team worked internally to pool in and provide occasional crisis support. In this one instance, we decided to give the opportunity to donors to be generous. The result is that Pavani and Pallavi got a long term donor committed to funding their school fees while Sarojini works to build up some savings. It was the first time that we formally offered financial support to a client, and the result was deeply impactful for both Sarojini as well as the donors.

Since our initial one-off crowdfunding campaign, we have had other clients with serious, mid-crisis needs. The victim support system in India is almost non-existent. It is even difficult to find a safe home for victims, let alone financial support.

Inspired by Sarojini's success, and in response to a persistent and tremendous need, Operation PeaceMaker has decided to build a combined crisis and start-up fund. We have named it the Lotus Fund.



LOTUS FUND

A NEW BEGINNING...

In India, there is a crisis in the victim support system. Essentially, there is no guaranteed support for survivors of domestic violence, even if they come forward with the courage to file a case. So-called Safe Homes are rare, and often perpetuate abuse against survivors. There is no system for reliable support for women and children in crisis. For some of our most critical cases, this means that the choice is often between staying with an abuser to ensure they can provide for their children, or taking the risk to escape abuse knowing that they may not be able to make ends meet.

The Lotus Fund is an internal fund aimed to provide crisis and start-up support to women like Sarojini who are faced with zero alternatives.

Sarojini's journey has had a special impact on our work, and we wanted to honor her through the name of the fund that would be dedicated to helping more women like her. Her name happens to mean "lotus flower".

The lotus flower is a symbol of great resilience in spite of adversity, of the ability to let go and become detached from trouble, and of purity and beauty. It is a symbol of rebirth.

The Lotus Fund will be a niche focus of our fundraising, providing donors with the opportunity to connect their donations with the lives of families in desperate need of a little extra support to get started.

The Lotus Fund will strictly fund emergency needs within the first year of recovering from abuse including:

- Tuition fees for children of survivors
- Essential school-related costs (like textbooks and uniforms) for children of survivors
- Short term, emergency needs like food or emergency medical attention for survivors and their children
- First month rent for independent accommodation for survivor
- Basic kitchen utensils for survivor who is moving from a safe home to her own home
- Partial support for vocation initiation, like a sewing machine or set of work cloths

Our mission is to provide every woman facing abuse with choices to end it. The Lotus Fund will help us offer critical, holistic support to many clients who feel they have no way out of abuse because of the limited options for support.

BEYOND TRIPLE TALAAQ:

WHAT MATTERS TO MUSLIM WOMEN

AN ARTICLE BY DR. FARZANA, OPERATION PEACEMAKER PROGRAM DIRECTOR

*For the purpose of this article, the term “talaq” is used in place of the word divorce.

MARRIAGE can, perhaps, be the most beautiful relationship of all, if it is based on love and mutual respect. For some, it can be their most significant inspiration in making life worth living.

Yet, as we all know, sometimes a marriage does not work out the way it should. In some marriages, there is no mutual love, no mutual respect. Sometimes, there isn't even mutual adjustment and compromise. Such a marriage becomes an oppression, a curse. To keep such unwilling partners bound together would be cruel to them and would also be a detriment to their community. For such cases, Islam provides talaq (divorce).

Unfortunately, without codified law defining the process for talaq, instantaneous triple talaq has become common in India. It has also become the topic of a national debate, stirring up heated discord among citizens, clerics, law-makers and more.

For us, an NGO whose mission is to support women and their right to peace, safety, and justice, the debate is informed by the real lives and stories of Muslim women. The impact that this debate has on Indian law has enormous implications for the lives of our clients, and therefore our work.

For women like Rehana, an Operation PeaceMaker client who was married to a man 12 years older than her who eventually abandoned her without any child support, it is the mystery surrounding divorce that is more demeaning than the actual act. For seven years, Ruhana lived with her parents, wondering if her husband would ever come back home, or help her support their daughter. Only with the support

of an Operation PeaceMaker Counselor did Rehana discover that her husband had issued Talaq through the local Kazi 6 months prior. She could have gone years without knowing that her husband divorced her, and this was permissible in accordance with their local Kazi, who is responsible for administering marriage and divorce procedures.

What is Triple Talaq?

Triple Talaq, as discussed in this article, is the act of stating the word “talaq” three times to initiate the end of a marriage with immediate effect. The word is stated verbally, in writing, and even digitally. It is entirely different than Talaq-e-Hassan, which is the method of talaq permitted in the Quran, which involves making the statement of talaq three times over at least three months.

Is it legal?

The legality of triple talaq is what had been hotly debated in Indian courts in 2017 to now. Finally, in August 2017 the Indian Supreme Court blocked triple talaq, affirming that the practice was a violation of women's rights. However, it stopped short of permanently banning the practice. As I write this article, the issue is being presented to Parliament to be permanently banned, and to add to criminalize it.

Is it Islamic?

Whether or not triple talaq is Islamic is the real point of the debate! Indian law allows Muslims, Christians, and Parsis to operate through their own family laws. Muslim family law is not codified, which means it is largely left up to the interpretation of local clerics. However, Triple talaq as it is practiced now is not Quranic, meaning there are no verses in the Quran that support the practice. Instant talaq is not even mentioned in the Quran. Where it exists in modern society is a complete departure from Quranic teachings. There are only two options for talaq in the

Quran, each of them requiring the husband to wait at least three months before the talaq is finalized. Triple talaq is actually the process of declaring the intention for divorce three times over a period of three months. Quranic talaq also requires that the relatives of both the husband and wife try to help the couple resolve their issues before the husband initiates a talaq. If reconciliation fails, the husband declares talaq, and the waiting period completes, the talaq becomes complete and the husband has to pay his ex-wife a sum of money. Ideally, he should also provide his ex-wife with an additional amount to help her maintenance to end their marriage with respect and dignity. Nothing about this process is instantaneous, informal or undignified.

Why is it such a big debate?

The debate on triple talaq in India is highly nuanced. First, you have those who believe that there should be no law dictating religious practices for Muslims. Second, you have those who mistakenly believe that banning triple talaq is an effort to protect women from divorce in general. Both these groups fail to understand the intention of the law. The law intends to preserve the right to divorce, clarify its lawful process, and ultimately protect women from discriminatory practices that are unconstitutional and unIslamic.

The constitutional bench of the Indian Supreme Court has already declared triple talaq unconstitutional. Now, the debate is whether or not to criminalize the act of triple talaq with the punishment of 3 years of imprisonment.

I believe that while banning triple talaq was a win for women's rights and ultimately for Muslim families, that criminalizing the act would be highly problematic. If we are guided by the real stories and experiences of Muslim women in India, we can immediately see the issues that arise with criminalization.

Criminalization is a hasty measure that aims to punish the offending man, but does not actually protect the affected woman. It can lead to several negative outcomes for the woman, including increasingly severe abuse or desertion. For example, under the terms of criminalization, if a man attempts triple talaq, it will lead to immediate imprisonment and a sentence of 3 years. While he is in jail, he is not obligated to pay maintenance to his family. So the wife and family are left without support. When the husband is released from his sentence, what's stopping him from punishing his wife through abuse or marrying another woman?

Alternatively, triple talaq can be a way out for men avoiding their responsibility of paying maintenance. Some men may find it easier to utter triple talaq, and serve jail time than to take responsibility for their families. This may sound bizarre, but we have experienced many cases where men show a shocking level of commitment to do anything to avoid accepting responsibility for their families. For men like Rehana's husband, talaq was an impersonal process that could be conveniently arranged through a religious official who took his side.

How can the law protect Muslim women?

There are too many women like Rehana, who suffer

CRIMINALIZATION IS A HASTY MEASURE THAT AIMS TO PUNISH THE OFFENDING MAN, BUT DOES NOT ACTUALLY PROTECT THE AFFECTED WOMAN.

unnecessarily demeaning and confusing processes simply because it is left to a local cleric to decide what is appropriate or fair.

The way to address the problem with triple talaq is to define the proper legal process for talaq in general. Currently, there is no codified law outlining the due process of talaq among Muslims. Muslim Family Law leaves interpretation up to local clerics, and it is only in the instance that the case goes to court that legal processes are considered. Indian courts have repeatedly knocked down the right to instantaneous triple talaq, but this has no bearing on practices across the country because the legal process has yet to be codified.

The result of the August 2017 Supreme Court ruling blocking instantaneous triple talaq without any codified legal process, that we are seeing more cases like Fadilah's. Fadilah was abandoned after one month of marriage, when her husband moved to Dubai without informing her. She was pregnant when he left, and waited a year and a half without any hope that he would return. Her husband eventually sent his divorce notices in intervals through a lawyer to Fadilah. Since his delivery of talaq was not instantaneous, and delivered through a lawyer, it did not violate the Supreme Court ruling. There is no law prohibiting this type of divorce, or making it mandatory that the woman agrees to the divorce or be able to ask for arbitration.

Indian law should categorize instantaneous triple talaq as domestic abuse, and allow the same options for recourse that are provided to women the Protection from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 or Indian Penal Code (IPC) Section 498A, which are civil and criminal options respectively. These laws protect women from emotional abuse, and provide a mechanism to ensure that proper maintenance, residence, protection from violence, and custody of her children.

Further to these legal measures to punish offenders, the government should work to sensitize Kazis (local religious magistrate) who facilitate nikah (marriage) and talaq processes. If these Kazis are found guilty of assisting instantaneous triple talaq, their license should be revoked.

In order to provide meaningful protection to Muslim women from experiencing abuse through the practice of instantaneous triple talaq, the government must make two steps. First, codify the legal process for talaq, thereby eliminating the possibility of discriminatory and unIslamic interpretations of Muslim Family Law by local clerics and abuses of

interpretations by malevolent husbands. Second, provide legal recourse for women whose husbands try to use triple talaq, recognizing it as domestic abuse rather than categorizing it as a criminal offense. Criminalizing triple talaq is likely to further silence women, and hinder them reporting the issue out of worry that it will ruin any and all chance of reconciliation. Providing recourse through existing laws for domestic violence would help guarantee that the woman receives the protection and support she needs.

Beyond these two basic requirements for Indian law to support Muslim women, the government must recognize its responsibility to provide services to disenfranchised women and children. A woman facing a legal battle with her husband is often left without home or money to keep her life afloat. Victim services like safe homes, vocational training, employment, etc. are critical to ensuring that it is possible for women to secure their and their children's future through divorce or desertion.

For women like Rehana and Fadilah, a codified process for divorce will provide them with a dignified and fair divorce process, and could also help protect them from ill-intentioned marriages with abusive husbands in the first place.

Want to help affect change? Operation PeaceMaker will be initiating a change.org petition asking for the Government of India and the All India Muslim Personal Law Board to codify the legal process for talaq, and provide Muslim women and families adequate protection under the law.

**THE WAY TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM
WITH TRIPLE TALAAQ IS TO DEFINE THE
PROPER LEGAL PROCESS FOR
TALAAQ IN GENERAL.**

THIS IMPACT REPORT IS DEDICATED TO

Mehek*, who lost her life to the fear of never escaping abuse; to every woman and girl facing abuse and dreaming of peace; and to our PeaceMakers and Counselors, who refuse to give up.

Operation PeaceMaker is privileged to step into people's lives to help them replace violence with peace. We are privileged to witness the courage of women who have faced years of abuse, step up to stop it and provide a life to their children that is violence-free. Sometimes, however, the burden of years of violence and abuse does irreparable damage to a woman's spirit. Even though we do as much as we can to offer choices and support, sometimes the abuse is so severe, the perpetrator so manipulative, and the woman so defeated that we are faced with the horrible reality where a mother of five children sees no escape and no future, and takes her own life.

***Mehek was married at 13, and had her first child at 14. She was never equipped with the maturity and skills to handle abuse. At 26, all she knew since childhood was abuse and control. It is for these girls, and women that Operation PeaceMaker exists to offer CHOICES.**

*Client's name changed for the privacy of the 5 children she left behind, to whom Operation PeaceMaker is providing ongoing support to ensure they are raised in a violence-free home.

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