

HYDERABAD • FRIDAY, MARCH 7, 2014

# The peacemakers

In the last year, My Choices has peacefully resolved over 500 cases of domestic violence in the city. On the eve of International Women's Day, the team tells ZEENAB ANEEZ how and why they do it

Wednesday mornings are a busy time at the My Choices centre at Lakdi ka pul. The steady stream of women coming through the door is not deterred by the dark clouds that loom over the city, threatening to break into rain that begets slushy roads and traffic jams. Women, most of them clad in burqas, occupy a mat that is laid out for them, talking with each other, comparing notes and occasionally consulting the senior counsellor, Pearl. These women, the peacemakers, are the foundation of My Choices and are committed to helping victims of domestic abuse in their local communities. Through them, the NGO has been working on weeding out domestic violence from the grassroots upwards, empowering many women to fight back against their abusers and reconciling many families through education and counselling.

The organisation was started early last year and has since trained 80 peacemakers and opened 678 cases, 77 per cent of which have been peacefully resolved. We met some of the core team members including co-founder Anjali Rudraraju, senior counsellor Pearl Choragudi, team leader and legal aid Archana Rao, programs manager Farzana, junior counsellor Sarah Metpalli and head of marketing Hannah Norling to hear their side of the story.

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WORKING TOWARDS HAPPINESS Team members of My Choices who conduct counselling sessions for women in the city  
PHOTO: NAGARA GOPAL

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Elca and Anjali met "randomly" at a charity event; the only thing they had in common was a background in finance and banking and a desire to contribute something meaningful to the world. Although Elca originally came to India to start a micro-finance organisation, her interactions with several women and groups led her to realise that the area of violence against women required attention. "We wanted to start in Old City because there is more of a requirement there and we wanted something that is easily accessible to those at the grassroots," says Anjali, who spent two years doing wealth management and banking in New York.

My Choices, hence works through its 'Peacemakers' - local women who work towards solving cases of domestic violence (DV) in their own neighbourhoods. "Opening a centre is not enough; we need women and girls to reach out to the community. They don't need to be very highly educated, some of our Peacemakers have only studied till class 8 while we also have a few who have finished college," says Anjali. "We found that about 60 per cent of these problems start from home; we thought if we tackle that we might be able to cover the gamut of child abuse, sexual abuse and other types of violence. The DV Act, 2005 itself covers all of these, including dowry harassment, so we thought it would be a good place to start from."

If a woman is interested in being a Peacemaker, she can go to any My Choices centre where she, along with others, will be given a brief orientation about the challenges of the job. After this they can decide if they want to interview for the role. "We make sure we pick strong and sincere women who are not doing this for the money," informs Anjali.

Once selected, the Peacemakers will be working as part-time social workers for Rs. 3000 month going through a four week training period and a two month in-



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ternship before starting full time. "We train them how to identify signs of violence, how they can approach a victim, how to explain to the victim that counselling is important, how to empathise and not resort to judgement during counselling and how not to make decisions for the victims," informs Pearl, the senior counsellor. This last point underlines one of the philosophies of My Choices. "It's about what the victim wants, not what we think is best for her," says Anjali. "We are not here to save someone from a bad marriage; it is her decision whether or not to stay in the marriage, but what we do is to guide her through that process through counselling."

Not stopping there, My Choices also has young Peacemakers who do outreach and awareness at schools. Twenty-one-year-old Askiya who was encouraged to join the program by her mother, also a Peacemaker, has visited several schools along with fellow Peacemaker Neha, 18. "We have a flipbook which we use to talk to girls about DV, rape and child marriage," they inform us.

The first My Choices centre



ONE STEP AT A TIME Clockwise: The women who keep the wheel turning, Elca Grobler at a training session, a counselling session in under way, Pearl speaks to a few Peacemakers PHOTOS: NAGARA GOPAL

was opened in Falaknuma in May 2012. They now have two more centres in the city - Lakdi ka pul and Golconda - and are hoping to open one in Secunderabad as well. Since early 2012, My Choices has peacefully solved over 500 cases of DV with about 150 more works in progress. The centre at Golconda also has a production unit where seamstresses have been trained to create simple products like bags and scarves. "We want to make sure we are sustaining ourselves and not waiting for funds," informs Anjali, adding that as of now most of the funding comes from founder Elca while she herself pitches in whenever she can.

A Peacemaker's job is not an easy one. It first involves

convincing the abused to seek help and come for counselling.

If the Peacemaker is not able to close a case, she is free to bring it to the centre where Pearl or any other counsellor will speak to them. According to statistics put together by core team member Hannah, over 85 per cent of the women who received counselling had never sought help before meeting a Peacemaker, to another 68 per cent, the Peacemaker was their only source of help. Counselling at My Choices involves not just the victim but also the perpetrator of the violence and the victim's family. "It is also wrong to assume that the woman is always innocent," says Sarah Begum who has been a Peacemaker for almost

a year now.

"We must make sure to listen to both sides and make both the husband and wife understand their faults," Sarah is working on total of 11 cases, 6 of which have been resolved. "Out of that 2-3 cases were impossible cases with a 99 per cent chance of divorce," she says proudly. "This is how we differentiate ourselves from many NGOs and women's group who settle divorce cases and hold 'morchas'," says Anjali. "We aim at solving the issue in a peaceful manner. We sometimes have victims who come to us and say, 'Why can't you just scare him?' and we have to explain to them that that's not the way to do it."



Although the State has a framework to deal with cases of DV following the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005, the infrastructure is simply not sufficient to deal with the cases in the city. "All of Hyderabad has one lady who handles counselling for DV cases and she has about 3000 cases sitting at her desk right now," informs Archana, who handles the legal side of things. "The act is there but the implementation isn't," adds Farzana. "Very often, DV cases are filed under Section 498A (dowry harassment) resulting in the husband being sent to jail," informs Archana. "This makes reconciliation

more difficult because now he also feels he has been wrongly punished." To minimise such cases, My Choices also works with the police who send many victims of DV to My Choices for counselling before taking any drastic legal actions.

"The definition of violence is more than just physical; it is verbal, sexual, emotional and economic as well," says Pearl. "People also think that DV only exists in lower class households but that's a myth. One woman who reached out to us through our website used to earn about Rs. 28 lakhs per month and she still felt helpless."

However, those from

more affluent backgrounds know that they can turn to counselling while women in the areas we work in don't think they have the option or can afford it," adds Anjali, stressing why they chose to base their operation in these areas. However, the My Choices website is accessible to all and their phone helpline receives calls from across the country. "We have many people from the North reaching out to us through our SMS helpline so we try to link them up with organisations there," informs Hannah. My Choices is also launching an app on social network Mxit, where they can provide free online counselling.

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