HT-AKSHARA ROUND-TABLE CONFERENCE

CAMPAIGN

'Sensitisation, not just conviction'

GENDER VIOLENCE Women in assault cases should be made aware of services at their disposal; society must change attitude towards survivors, cops need behaviour training from the get-go, these were suggestions by experts who advocated holistic change



Nikhil M Ghanekar

nikhil.ghanekar@hindustantimes.com

when cases of gender violence attract attention, the emphasis is always on securing a conviction instead of on the dearth of socio-psycholegal help available to the women. This was the consensus at the HT-Akshara round table conference to make Mumbal safer for women. The conference, comprising professionals and academicians, discussed the importance of a smoother and sensitive medico-legal system, healing and support services, a sensitive police force, weeding out police discrimination against mimority and marginalised women and trials in separate court premises. The second of the four round-

The second of the four round-table conferences, held on January 30, focused on the policing, legal and justice issues involved in gender violence. The three-hour discussion led to over 30 recommendations, which will form a part of the HT-Akshara plan to make the city safer. The plan, with a charter of action points, will be submitted to chief minister Prithviraj Chavan.

The panel included Tata Institute of Social Science professors, Anjali Dave from the Centre for Equity for Women, Children and Families, and Vijay Raghavan from the Centre for Criminology and Justice; well-known feminist lawyer and co-founder of Majlis, Flavia Agnes; Padma Deosthali from Centre for Equity into Health and Allied Themes (CEHATT); and women's right activist Hasina Khan. Nandita Gandhi, co-director of Akshara, an organisation devoted to research and advocacy of gender justice and Smruti Koppikar, HT's Editor (Special Assignments) moderated the discussion.

MORE ACCOUNTABILITY

"The police often act as counsellors which is not their job. There should be a review and overhaul of procedures they adopt to deal with women who have suffered sexual violence," said Anjali Dave.



HTCOVERAGE

Over the past two months, HT and Akshara have undertaken several audits of public spaces in the city such as a gardens and beaches, to ascertain how safe they are for women. HT has also been conscientiously reporting on crimes against women.

the thrust of policing should be on prevention of crimes against women, rather than reacting to such crimes. Diligent policing of the city is a must, they said.

"The two-finger test is still carried out regularly across public and private hospitals, despite the amendment in law last year. The medical staff needs to be accountable for flouting medico-legal documentation protocol," said Padma Deosthali. She argued for greater accountability of hospital staff and police.

"What's happening is that there's a conflict between the rule of law society that we should be and the deeply feudal and patriarchal society that we are. The criminal justice system is part of this and must change," said Dr Vijay Raghavan.

AWARENESS OF NEW LAWS

Following amendments to the Criminal Law Act, 2013, several strong provisions that have armed women, are yet to be become common knowledge. 'If a police does not file an FIR, a policeman can be penalised under the amended law. These things should be made known to common public," said Flavia Agnes.

Several cases of crimes against women arise from poorer sections of the society which is traditionally discriminated against by the police. Women from such sections and belonging to minority religious communities are given second-class treatment and the police often try to bounce back such cases to their community leaders, putting the women in a tight spot.

"There have been cases when husbands have divorced women on social media and the cops have failed to acknowledge the woman's plea that such a thing isn't valid. The woman doesn't receive help from the community and she faces



The panel of experts (above), comprising academics and activists, is working on an action plan for women's safety. ANSHUMAN POYREKAR/HT

ACTION POINTS

Here are some of the recommendations made during the conference. These will be part of the comprehensive plan to be presented to the CM















Increase honorarium of government counsels to improve justice system. The judge to population ratio needs to increase

Cops mustn't discrim-

inate against mar

ginalised, minority

cases with "help of community leaders"

Need consistency in

women, stop sealing



Need to follow protocol of medico-legal documentation, improve methods to train doctors to deal with sexual crimes



expertsay



"We need to have a continuous conscience raising among the police rather than only gender sensitisation. The police need to set-up units in the force and interact with ditizes on the issue. Also, the police must set up a back office within the system and create data about violence against women, as they have done for, say cybercrimes. And, the police must have dairly about the roles of different professionals involved: counsellors, doctors, lawyers."

ANJALI DAVE, professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences



women is not treated as a health issue at all; this must change. Also, the stereotypes of sexual violence in

the health system need to be banished. When a sexually assaulted woman or rape survivor comes to a hospital — public or private — the hospital staff should first listen to her instead of carrying out tests mindlessly. There has to be accountability in the system."

PADMA DEOSTHALL, researcher and campaigner, Centre for Enquiry Into Health and Allied Themes (CEHAT)



"In the police, there still exists an 'us and them' attitude on the basis of religious and class divide. Women from

Women from the marginalized and minority sections of society are discriminated and shamed if they repeatedly raise their voice against exploitation and sexual harassment. Also, the police station is even less welcoming of minority women than women in general."

HASINA KHAN, women's issues campaigner, co-founder of Muslim Women's Rights



"Women and the criminal justice system have two interfaces: women as victims and women as accused. The second group doesn't

get any attention. In our justice system, discrimination against women begins with poor access to legal rights and aid. Also, there is a need to constitute co-ordination between home, law and judiciary, education, women and child development departments and civil society representatives to take stock of implementation of laws, policies relating to women"

VIJAY RAGHAVAN, professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences



"Fast-track courts do not guarantee speedy justice. We need a victim-friendly environment in courts; they need to be less intimi-

dating and provide support to vulnerable witnesses. The concern should be how the criminal justice system is able to respond to the needs of victims so that it does not cause secondary victimisation and additional trauma. The state should provide socio-legal support to victims of sexual offences from the time an FIR is filed till the end of the trial."

FLAVIA AGNES, women's rights