

RESEARCH PROFILE No.11  
(FILE: MAPPING/INDIA/PROFILEBangalore070405.doc)

**Violence as Indivisible:  
Women in Black, Vimochana and the AWHRC  
Bangalore, India**

In India the best known and most sustained manifestation of Women in Black is in the city of Bangalore, in the state of Karnataka. I joined their vigil one Monday afternoon in early December in front of the city hall. It was an impressive sight. At least forty women were ranged along the steps, still and silent, holding the bold messages I'd watched them prepare earlier that day, painted in white on black card. The theme was tolerance and non-violence in the face of communalist extremism. As the sun went down, people travelled home from work through the crowded streets and the kites and parakeets flew to roost, the women lit candles and stood on in the darkness.

**The organizational framework**

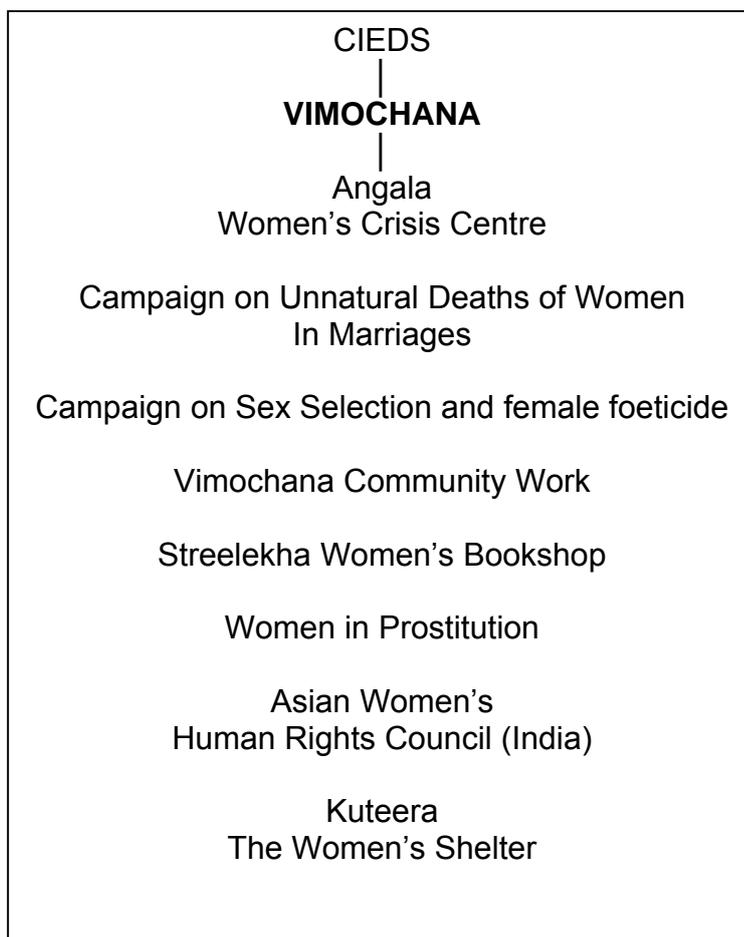
To locate and understand the WiB phenomenon in India, though, you have to climb back through a complex structure of organizations and programmes. As in many countries and cities of the world, WiB in Bangalore is *not an organization as such, but an occasional activity*. The women who 'do' Women in Black belong to an organization called Vimochana. Vimochana exists within the frame of an organization comprising both women and men called the Centre for Informal Education and Development Studies (CIEDS) which has given birth to many forums / organisations including Vimochana and AWHRC. Please see the diagram overpage.

The various projects related to CIEDS collective are housed in a beautiful brick house in Bangalore, with sloping tiled roofs, constructed round an open courtyard – because one of CIEDS' creations is a Centre for Vernacular Architecture. These architects have adapted traditional design and materials to create an environment of breezy spaces, shade and greenery in a hot climate. On the stairways of this busy house one can bump into the women of the various areas of work of Vimochana, or the men and women of CIEDS collective, which include for instance the Bangalore Film Society, the Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Development, Save the Western Ghats and various community-based activities the precise nature of which I never did quite get to grasp.

**Transcending the Left**

The history of CIEDS collective goes right back to 1975 when it was founded by Corinne Kumar, who has been the moving spirit behind spreading the idea of Women in Black worldwide. Apart from being the Regional Coordinator of AWHRC, founder member/President of Vimochana, International Coordinator of the Courts of Women, she is currently the Secretary General of El Taller

International – an international NGO based in Tunisia linking countries of the global south.<sup>1</sup>



A woman who joined CIEDS some years after its foundation is Madhu Bhushan and it was she who along told me about the origins of their various initiatives.

The group of friends who founded CIEDS along with Corinne were part of the Trotskyite Free University movement. What distinguished them from others in the movement was a theoretical turn away from its 'democratic centralism', positivism, utilitarianism and narrow rationalism. They saw the Left as an authoritarian structure, dogmatic, subsuming all struggle into itself. While they shared its politics of social justice and equality, they felt it was hardly different from the Indian elite in uncritically adopting Western notions of 'progress' and 'development' that were inappropriate in Asia. Their alternative philosophy set store by local and regional discourses. It combined collective responsibility with individual autonomy and creativeness.

<sup>1</sup> El Taller International was formed in 1992 to work with NGOs and social movements which 'challenge structural causes of the dispossession of peoples, the destruction of cultures and the deepening of poverty'. It is a woman centred but not woman-only organization. See the website [www.eltaller.org](http://www.eltaller.org)

## Vimochana (Liberation)

In the late seventies the women and men of CIEDS collective were developing a critique of patriarchal gender relations. In 1979 some of them created a distinctive space within CIEDS and in the public arena that they called Vimochana, which means Liberation. As Vimochana grew in the early 1980s it became a specifically an all women's forum. The group of women involved at first they called themselves 'socialist feminists' but later they would say 'we crossed beyond the Left', 'we draw from it but don't take it as our own'. In other words, they were one among the founders of the autonomous feminist movement in India. In many of their activities today they work within local, national and international alliances of women's groups, organizations and campaigns.<sup>2</sup>

One of these founder members, Donna Fernandes, is now the coordinator of Vimochana. Unfortunately she was away at the time I visited them, so I couldn't interview her. I sat down with Madhu, Celine, Shakun and Lakshmi, who told me how Vimochana works.

There's a good deal of continuity and cohesion – the core group has been almost the same women since the mid-eighties or before. 'But' Madhu said, 'there's plenty of space to grow in the organization. If someone has a new idea they're free to develop it. We grow with our interests.' All decisions are taken by the collective, which numbers twenty or thirty women. Responsibility for each of the sub-projects is taken by a team with its own coordinator. Celine Suguna, the coordinator of Angala, told me 'We share, we fight. We feel free to do that. It's our birthright. But we don't walk away. We don't leave each other. Or only for a little while – we try to put people back together.'

I asked my usual clumsy question about the composition of Vimochana in terms of ethnic and religious background and self-definition. Though it's uncomfortable to raise this issue in a collective where the principal values are anti-racism and anti-nationalism, there are two reasons why it seems necessary. First, I lack the ability of people raised in Indian cultures to intuit something of an individual's background without asking – principally by observing physical phenotype, name, dress and primary language. Second, in the community in which they work there are severe tensions precisely between groups of different prescribed identity (especially religion/ethnicity, and caste). The self-definitions and relations within a project are therefore not without relevance.

In Vimochana, I learned, most of the women are from this locality and they would be understood as coming from a range of Hindu, Muslim, Christian and other backgrounds. Among the languages spoken are Kannada, English and

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<sup>2</sup> In India there is a National Coordinating Committee, which dates from the first India-wide conference of the women's movement in Bombay in 1978. It organizes such national conferences every two or three years. In Bangalore the women of Vimochana form an occasional alliance with other local women's groups, for instance for activities on International Women's Day. Then they call themselves Mahila Okoota (Women's Togetherness).

Tamil, with some Malyaran, Telegu and Hindi. The women tend to be identified by others, however, less by their cultures of origin than by their politics and practices – in particular their secularism and feminism. Madhu said

What people tend to see us as is women of no faith, with no husbands and no children. In reality most of us are married – although some are single, divorced or in relationships. But in our work we challenge accepted norms and family values. People can't believe that a woman could have a husband and be able to run around as we do.

### Opposing violence

From the start, the core issue for Vimochana has been the *violence in Indian society*, particularly as it is *experienced by women*. Their practical work is directed towards empowering women to survive and contest this violence. As shown in the diagram they have a number of sub-projects. One is Angala, a women's centre and meeting place in the city. Angala also comprises a purpose-built refuge for women escaping violence. This is some hours distant in the countryside, on farm land where they grow organic crops. It houses up to fifty women and has a staff of six or seven. Another Vimochana project is Streelekha, a women's bookshop. Vimochana used to have a vocational training project for girls (motor vehicle maintenance) and they still have several community-based outreach projects, including liaison with the police concerning violence against women. They also do research, and are currently making a study of dowry deaths.

The scale and nature of the violence that Vimochana addresses became clear to me from a reading of the many leaflets produced to accompany their activities and actions in recent years. Some of these practices are specific to Vimochana, others have involved them in alliances with local and national NGOs and movements. The violence they problematize ranges from personal and communal violence at the level of the Indian home and street, to structural violence<sup>3</sup> and war at the level of global society.

- For example, these activists have a powerful critique of the universality of the dominant human rights discourse and the violence of *imperialism* as it continues today in new insidious forms – the dominance of western knowledge paradigms, mandatory notions of development, imposed neoliberal market processes. One of their leaflets for example appeals for local protest against the commodification of water: the Indian government is selling life-sustaining water sources to Coca-Cola and other multinationals for bottled water and soft drinks.
- They also address *militarism and war*. At the time of the hostilities between Pakistan and India, that took place in Kargil in 2000, they protested against the aggressive postures of both states. They strongly

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<sup>3</sup>Johann Galtung proposed a distinction between direct violence, structural violence and cultural violence. In this typology structural violence means exploitative social and economic systems causing 'avoidable insults to basic human needs' identified as the need for survival, well-being, identity and freedom (see for instance Galtung 1996:197).

oppose the 'weaponizing' of India's supposedly peaceful nuclear programme and on the occasion of the test explosion of a nuclear device at Pokhran in 1998 they wrote 'an open letter to Gandhi' evoking his philosophy of non-violence. In 2003 they addressed an appeal to Kofi Annan calling for resistance to the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies. At this time they were noting the 'exportation' of war to the third world by the first world. They have challenged the effects in India of the US-proclaimed 'war on terror' and call for the repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Their position on the repression of self-determination movements in Kashmir and the North East is to 'tell the Indian Army to get out'.

- An important context of their activity has been the increase in *communal violence*, particularly the extreme violence against Muslims with the growth of the Hindutva movement since the late 1980s. Immediately after the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in 1992<sup>4</sup> they denounced the communalization of politics and fundamentalism in all religions, appealed for tolerance and called for a 'gathering of women and men of diverse faiths'. They demonstrated against the wave of violence by the dominant Kannada-speaking community on the immigrant tamil population (particularly in urban slums and farmers in rural areas) over the sharing of the cauvery river waters between the two States of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. They have supported the rights of untouchables (*dalits*), tribal people (*adivasis*) and other groups oppressed by caste, class and ethnic hierarchies.
- And of course Vimochana clearly identifies and challenges *patriarchal violence*. There's a gender analysis running through all the above. For instance, they have represented the pursuit of weapons supremacy by the Indian state as 'macho' posturing. They speak of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as 'wars of militarized faiths rooted in a hypermasculinized polity'. They describe the fascist Hindutva movement too as 'hypermasculinized'. But it's particularly the violence experienced by women in the increasingly brutalised patriarchies, prevailing to some degree in all Indian cultures and sub-cultures being reconstructed in the regime of this hyper masculinised modernity, that preoccupies Vimochana.
- Of vital concern are the many unexplained deaths of married women (an average of three a day are reported in Bangalore alone) that are likely to be either murders or suicides on account of dowry disputes – the failure of a bride's family to satisfy the expectations of the husband and his family in terms of dowry wealth brought to the marriage. Many of these deaths are by burning, murders made to look like domestic accidents and to cover up evidence of physical abuse. Also of concern are instances of violence in the name of family or masculine honour –

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<sup>4</sup> On December 6, 1992, a mob of Hindu extremists, apparently with official sanction, demolished a Muslim holy place, the Babri Masjid mosque, to recover the site of an earlier Hindu temple at Ayodhya. This evoked widespread triumphalism in Hindu communities throughout India, while Muslim communities and organizations massively protested. Many died in the ensuing violence (Bose 1999).

for example disfiguring acid thrown in the face of women who are deemed to have stepped out of line. In some tribal societies women are burned alive as witches. Vimochana's analysis of such cases locates them not in 'tradition' but in modernity. Intransigent demands for dowry, for instance, they see as related to the new consumerism. Witch-burning in India was revived only as the mines closed, male jobs were lost and the community was impoverished. In a leaflet they write of 'an explosion of new and grotesque forms of violence... in an increasingly consumerist, aggressive, macho, intolerant society'.

- Many cases of rape come to the attention of Angala women's centre, and they include rape inside and outside marriage. There are frequent cases of rape by the police when a woman is in custody. Rape was widespread during Partition and has been characteristic of inter-communal violence since. It was a key feature of the attack by Hindutva extremists on Muslim communities in Gujarat following the Godhra incident in 2002 (see my Research Profile No.10). Within Karnataka, the state within which Vimochana is situated, the rape of women as representatives of their supposed communal 'identity' remains endemic.
- In addition, Vimochana have called for an end to the trafficking of women, and to the stigmatization of prostitutes and the double standard by which law enforcement victimizes women and fails to punish the men who gain from the sex trade. On grounds of girl children's right to life, they have criticized the selective abortion of female foetuses made possible by ultrasound scanning during pregnancy. In certain Indian states the ratio of females to males in the population has fallen to 60:100 – one of the lowest in the world (National Centre for Policy Analysis 2005). When the Miss World Contest took place in Bangalore. Vimochana protested at this commercialization of women's bodies. At the same time they criticized the violence of the rightwing opposition to the contest, in which women sensationalized the issue by threatening to immolate themselves on moralistic grounds that exposure of women's bodies was against "Indian culture" ..

Like the women I met in Mumbai, then, these women in Bangalore see violence as a continuum and look for non-violent and creative means to address every part of it. I forget now who it was who said to me: 'We didn't start as women against war, but as women against violence against women. Through that we came to take a stand against violence in the wider society.' One of their slogans is 'Violence-free homes make violence-free communities. Violence-free communities make a violence-free world.'

### **Women in Black, Bangalore**

Women in Black actions in Bangalore have at different times addressed all these aspects of violence. WiB is a strategy of Vimochana for 'taking things to

the public'. Someone said, 'In our day-to-day work we see personal violence. We connect that personal violence to violence in the wider society. And one of the ways in which we make these connections is through Women in Black.'

They held their first Women in Black vigil in 1992, in the immediate aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition. (This makes Bangalore WiB one of the oldest groups in the movement, preceded only by Israel, Italy and the former Yugoslavia.) At first their response to the attacks on Muslims had been practical. Shops and houses in the Muslim areas were being ransacked, crow-barred. The police, in the name of controlling the mob, were deliberately killing Muslims. Shakun said. 'We went straight to the affected areas, we went to hospitals.' At a personal level it had been a hard time for everyone, uncovering hidden feelings and bringing new divisions within hitherto harmonious families.

The women had began to feel the need for a different kind of action, 'No more shouting and screaming. Nobody was listening to all the rhetoric.' Corinne one of the founder members of Vimochana and involved deeply at the regional and international levels on issues related to peace, militarisation and human rights issues who was inspired by the Black Sash movement and the other WiB actions in Israel, Palestine and Belgrade sensed its effectiveness and brought the spirit of this action to her work in Bangalore. 'It touched us.' So they adopted the WiB formula. Their vigils, now as then, are classic WiB events, formal, silent, featuring black clothing, black placards, black banners. Celine remembers one of those early vigils, in the pouring rain. 'But nobody left. We stood there, paint pouring off our placards.' At times of crisis, vigils have been held regularly on a Thursday, at first in Cubbon Park, later in a variety of sites. Now they are occasional. Sometimes the women break out of the vigil form and take drama to the streets – for instance parading cut-out images to represent women victims of dowry killings.

The women of Bangalore introduced the formula of Women in Black to other cities in India like Madurai, Delhi, Kerala etc. They also helped form WiB groups in Nepal and the Philippines. Corinne Kumar who was particularly active in this, working within and through Vimochana, the AWHRC and EI Taller. It was Corinne who inspired the huge Women in Black vigil at the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995. The leaflet that called women together for this action is interestingly explicit in framing the issue of WiB not as war but as *violence*.

We are the Women in Black [they say] – silently protesting the many forms of violence which are increasingly becoming intrinsic to our everyday realities in our different cultures and communities.

Everywhere women are breaking the silence; women are naming the violence. Women are making public the many forms of 'personal' violence against women -- wife battering, female circumcision, pornography, sexual assault, rape, dowry burning. Everywhere, women are unmasking the many horrific faces of more public 'legitimate' violences -- state repression, communalism, ethnic cleansing, nationalism, wars... Violence in the name of development, in

the name of reproductive technologies, genetic engineering, and the feminisation of poverty.

### **AWHRC, El Taller and the Courts of Women**

The basic leaflet of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council describes its origins as follows.

The insights and experiences gained from [Vimochana] led us to initiate the Karnataka Commission on Women's Human Rights from where we felt the need to have a larger Asian forum. This idea crystallised into the Asian Women's Human Rights Council.

Despite the use of the term 'human rights' in its title, the AWHRC aims, in tune with the original philosophy of the CIEDS collective, to redefine 'rights'. It attempts to shift the Enlightenment notion of 'right' away from its universalism towards the specificity of 'global south' realities, and away from the primacy of the individual towards an emphasis on the collective. The Council describes its focus as

the escalating violence against women in the context of the growing militarisation and nuclearisation of the nation states in Asia and the Pacific and the wars, fundamentalism, communal and ethnic conflicts that are enveloping the region; of the development model and the increasing feminisation of poverty; of the brutalisation of patriarchies in the time of modernity and the violence of rape, dowry, burning, trafficking and prostitution, honour crimes, female infanticide; the wars against women.

The Regional coordinator of the Asian Women's Human Rights Council is now Corinne Kumar of the India Secretariat where the secretariat is at present housed can be located, within the framework of the CIEDS collective, and Vimochana in Bangalore. There are other regional secretariats in the Philippines, Nepal and Australia.

One core activity of the AWHRC has been the series of events they call Courts of Women. As described by Corinne in "South Wind : Towards a New Political Imaginary" who has conceptualised the Courts and been the International coordinator of the Courts held so far:

*"It is an attempt to define a new space for women, and to infuse this space with a new vision, a new politics. It is a gathering of voices and visions of the global south, locating itself in a discourse of dissent: in itself it is a dislocating practice, challenging the new world order of globalisation, crossing lines, breaking new ground: listening to the voices and movements in the margins.*

*The Courts of Women seek to weave together the objective reality (through analyses of the issues) with the subjective testimonies of the women; the personal with the political; the logical with the lyrical (through video testimonies, artistic images and poetry) urging us to*

*discern fresh insights, offering us other ways to know, inviting us to seek deeper layers of knowledge; towards creating a new knowledge paradigm. The Courts of Women are public hearings: the Court is used in a symbolic way. In the Courts, the voices of the victims/survivors are listened to. Women bring their personal testimonies of violence to the Court: the Courts are sacred spaces where women, speaking in a language of suffering, name the crimes, seeking redress, even reparation.*

*While the Courts of Women listen to the voices of the victims/survivors, they also listen to the voices of women who resist, who rebel, who refuse to turn against their dreams. They hear the voices of women from the women's and human rights movements; they hear of survival in the dailiness of life; they hear of women and movements resisting violence in their myriad forms – war, ethnicity, fundamentalism; they hear of women struggling for work, wages, their rights to the land; they hear of how they survive – of their knowledges, their wisdoms that have been inaudible, invisible. They hear challenges to the dominant human rights discourse, whose frames have excluded the knowledges of women. The Courts of Women hear of the need to extend the discourse to include the meanings and symbols and perspectives of women.*

*It speaks of a new generation of women's human rights."*

Between December 1993 and the present, twenty-two Courts have been held, in the Asia Pacific region, the Arab world, Africa, Central America and the Mediterranean. The thematic focus is violence against women in all its forms, ranging from reproductive technologies, through trafficking and sex tourism, to racism, economic violence (the US blockade of Cuba for instance), and the violence of war itself.

One such court, a World Court of Women on US War Crimes, was held in Mumbai on occasion of the World Social Forum in early 2004. Iraqi women spoke of the effects on women of the invasion and occupation by the US and allies. Ramsay Clark, the former Attorney General of the USA, presided and made a strong statement. Currently Courts are planned for London, New York and Istanbul. The events as a whole are professionally filmed, and the videos reveal them to be extraordinarily emotive, expressive and colourful occasions, with very moving testimonies by women survivors who have travelled from often very distant countries to tell their personal stories and think collectively about the meaning of the violence they've experienced collectively.

One of this series of Courts, on 'Women and War Crimes' was held in Tokyo, in 1994 that focussed also on the issue of comfort women as a war crime. Comfort Women came forward in one of their early public testimonies to speak out against a violence that had been hidden for 50 long years. Later, in 2001, also in Tokyo but quite separately, other women would organize a women's 'tribunal' on enforced military prostitution during World War II. They would bring former 'comfort women' from the Asia Pacific region to give evidence against the Japanese military, charging the Japanese government

with the crime of sexual slavery. The Tokyo Tribunal had a judge, who made a ruling. By contrast, the Courts of Women are not mock trials of this kind. The witnesses are not cross-examined, they are believed. The jury, composed of women chosen for their wisdom and experience, does not find guilt or innocence but rather listens, understands, reflects and synthesizes what it hears.

Vimochana, the AWHRC and El Taller, together with the Italian women of *Donne in Nero*, may have done more than anyone to internationalize Women in Black. They took a bold step when they organized the mass vigil at the Beijing Forum in '95. Subsequently they've held large vigils in association with the each of the many Courts of Women. This has carried the symbolism of WiB to far-flung countries – Egypt, Kenya, South Africa, Australia, Cuba. A WiB vigil of several thousand was associated with the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January 2004. And as I write, a year later, Corinne is in Porto Alegre at the current World Social Forum, organizing an 'African Court of Women' and another international WiB event.

### **Contacts:**

My first contact with Vimochana, AWHRC and El Taller International was in telephone conversations and e-mail exchanges with Corinne Kumar. I visited Bangalore in December 2004 and was very lucky to be able to spend two days with Vimochana. In particular I learned a lot about the history of CIEDS and the present of the AWHRC from Madhu Bhushan, and about Angala's work from Celine Suguna. A big thank you to them and to Shakun, Lakshmi and other women who gave me their time and the information on which this profile is based.

This profile was sent in draft to Madhu, Celine and Corinne. The amendments and additions I received back have helped me to improve it. I now have Vimochana's agreement to making it available to others by putting it on my website.

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This document is one of a series of local and regional profiles that will appear on this website in coming months. They are interim products in a two-year research project *Women Opposing War: Organization and Strategy in the International Movement of Women against Violence and Militarism*, being carried out by the author from her base in the Department of Sociology, City University, London, during 2004/5, with the support of several charitable trusts. The profile is not intended for publication in its present form. I would be grateful if you would not quote it in published work without first seeking my agreement.

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April 2005