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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

MISSION FIGHT BACK – TESTIMONIES

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



What is a man supposed to do when his child is being stalked? Or when a wife is being beaten by her husband? What is a man supposed to do when a child is molested by a religious teacher?

Mostly, they won't do anything. Our society even has a way of re-victimizing people, alienating them altogether using shaming and rejection against survivors. **To hide their lack of professionalism and to maintain crime rates on the low side, the police doesn't even register sexual harassment complaints while domestic violence and marital rapes are simply not considered a crime in India.** Victims and their families also tend to look the other way and suffer in silence. But sometimes, they do unite and hit back exhibiting an extraordinary strength. Moral courage remains the backbone of their action but now, women and girls are adopting new initiatives such as learning combat techniques to preserve their safety and to enforce justice.

The Father

I raised Faith, my daughter, as I would a son, I rendered her fearless and ready to stand up for her beliefs. I remember an incident at a party we went to years ago. Boys were throwing nasty sexual comments at a girl who was Faith's friend. There, I watched my daughter stand her ground in front of them all and she demanded apologies from the boys; she was twelve. Then we started fighting and the sight of the father and daughter duo punching and kicking the boys was as funny to us as it was embarrassing to the guests and party hosts alike. **But it was the reaction of the girls that most surprised me. They hugged us tightly and said that perhaps their own fathers, who were present, standing and watching, would have told them to simply ignore the harassment.**

"You are our hero!" One said, and her words felt like a medal on my chest.

Later, came the negative gossips about Faith and what they called her 'un-lady-like behaviour.' Whether you want it or not, these things do have an impact on a child's psyche.

A couple of years later, we moved to a new town and my business kept me away from home a lot. Thus, it took me more than a year to notice the changes in Faith's character. My outgoing and outspoken girl had become quiet and reclusive. One night, my wife asked me to move Faith to a new school as she wasn't enjoying her current one and her grades had gone down. I wish I had spent more time talking to my daughter then, rather than shifting school without further inquiry into the matter. Another year passed and her grades went further south. One day, when I was back in town and having a drink with the boys, Faith called me up and said 'Dad, save me, I can't take it anymore'. Those words shattered me as I found out that **a senior boy from her previous school was harassing my daughter, he had even moved to the new school submitting fake papers. The boy was threatening her with dire consequences, which included acid attacks, if she didn't comply with his demands.** He had openly slapped Faith at school and apparently bullied and scared the other kids into silence using a knife and a gun. After initial assistance, the high-end school she was attending refused to even speak to us. The police maintain a nonchalant attitude that exasperated me, I had never felt more helpless and frustrated in my entire life. There was my daughter asking me for help and I had no idea how to ensure her safety. I only knew that the boy wasn't harmless and that he had done time in juvenile prison.

That's when I approached Mission Fight Back. Coronel Rohit Mishra's team trained my daughter to defend herself while helping me pressure the police into actively looking for the stalker and stop him from hurting people. **It worked and the boy was caught and sent to two more weeks in juvenile prison, however he came back with more desire for vengeance.**

However, this time around, Faith wasn't scared. The MFB team's psychologist helped her come out of her shell and brought back the Faith I knew: the self-defence training had filled her up with confidence.

Faith didn't get into a hand to hand fight with her stalker when he stopped her car and threatened her and her mother with violence if she didn't withdraw her complaint against him. **Faith remained calm, she took out her mobile phone and started recording the entire episode.** The training had helped keep control over herself and she and her mother drove to the police station with the recorded evidence. The boy was picked up and sent to juvenile again, as a repeated offender this time.

All this happened while I was out of town.

Today, my girl is back, with all her confidence and her smiles. Her grades have improved and she is the school sports team's captain. The boy is out of jail by now and understands the consequences of his action.

As for my daughter, she is now my hero and I shall remain her eternal fan.

The Wife

It's strange that the very man who physically and mentally abuses a woman can happily go out and pray to a goddess for his own success and happiness. I don't know if the goddess listens to such men, all I know is that she doesn't listen to us, women of India. There are millions of people like me, trapped in a domestic lockup with marital rape and physical abuse happening every other night.

Things are so bad for us that most ladies here never even understand the purpose of education because they never get to apply their acquired knowledge. Education becomes just another skill in our favour, one more box ticked in the list of assets a girl brings along apart from the dowry that determines her ultimate value.

I was married off right after I finished my Masters in Business Administration. My husband never allowed me to work even when we lived in bustling and cosmopolitan city like Mumbai. As for the beating, it started with a slap and a minor argument, and it never stopped.

I have often wondered if things would have been different had I stopped his hand from hitting my face the first or even the second time? I will never know. it's like the psychotic fear between a human and a snake. The human is scared (and disgusted) of the snake and a snake is just as scared of the human. So, it becomes all about who attacks first.

A friend of mine introduced me to Mission Fight Back and they trained me to defend myself mentally and physically. Then, the day came when I walked out of my husband's house with my daughters, head held high and with a fearless heart. I had just diffused his blow, pulled his arm and tackled him to the ground as taught by my Mission Fight Back instructor Gaurav Sir.

The education I received there was immediately put to use and I know exactly what purpose it serves. My daughter will never have to bow to sheer force and the cowardice that goes with it.

And if need be, she won't be afraid to be the one to attack first.

The Child

Did you know that sudden trauma can make you literally lose your voice? Believe me it does. I lost mine once, when I was ten years-old.

In my religion, education in a formal school, even an all-girls one, is considered sinful. Therefore, my parents were convinced that they were making the best choice when they decided to send me to a religious school, otherwise known as Madrasa. The comforting feeling was further reinforced when a religious teacher, a position socially revered in my world, came to our house and proposed to my poverty-stricken parents to educate me for free at a school that he ran: a promising future was opening for us. It was just perfect. Or was it?

The day it happened, I was feeling too lazy to get up and get ready. My loving and nurturing father coddled me but sent me on my way to school. My mother was away for work and my younger brother was still fast asleep, that's how my days usually started.

I didn't know then that what was about to happen would strip away my childhood even if the entire episode is still blurry in my mind. But I remember that when I came home that afternoon, I told my father that I wasn't hungry and I went straight to bed. **Later in the evening, I realized that I couldn't speak. Words would simply not come out of my mouth; meanwhile everyone else seemed to be speaking too loud.** I remember a discomfoting silence engulfing me. The next morning, while washing my clothes, my mother saw a suspicious stain on my undergarment. I was rushed to a hospital and handed over to a team of doctors.

Everything happened very fast after that.

I couldn't speak and by now, I was also scared to death by anyone touching me. But ironically, doctors said I was just fine. I couldn't quite understand why I was being hospitalized but then, I met Ashima didi (honorary name for sister) and I assumed that I was in there to play with her. She was good to me and very patient. It was always nice to see her but still whenever I would try to say something there would be no words forming on my lips. Fortunately, Ashima didi never forced me to talk while the others always threatened me into speaking. I tried my best but I just couldn't, it was all so confusing. My only solace was the one hour when I got to play with her. We would play with dolls and clay; **she would draw and colour with me or sometimes she would just sit with me, as quiet as I had become myself.** I felt safe whenever she was around but I don't know how many days passed before I could muster the courage to hold her hand. She responded with a smile and my grip tightened. Once, when I was playing with her, I hit her by mistake and with a sudden rush I said "Sorry" I panicked and quickly shut my mouth covering it with my hand. Ashima didi did not say anything. The next few days I went through many more incidents when desperate words struggled inside me wanting to jump out of my mouth. At one point, while we were playing, she was holding some papers and on one of them she had written an incomplete

sentence: “when I am alone I.....”. I just took a pencil and completed the sentence: “cry”. When she asked me about it, I started crying, Silently, she hugged me. I felt something lifting inside me and my silent tears turned into howling. I told her what the religious teacher had done to me. Initially he was just touching me which was confusing enough but he kept getting bolder. I am not sure how it happened but my father told me later that the police detained the teacher thanks to Ashima didi and some well-connected people she knew. Over the next couple of months slowly and gradually I regained my ability to speak.

Now that I think of it, I realise how crucial “playing” with Ashima didi was. Those sessions gave me not just an opportunity to express my trauma but also helped me rebuild my shattered self into a whole person again.

In a society blindfolded by the shroud of religion, there are millions of girls like me falling prey to the lust of men who use religion as a weapon to fulfil and achieve their aims every day. These sexual predators have been emboldened by our collective silence. We must learn to speak up and fight back, else we will keep suffering in the hands of the men who claim to be the custodians of religion and traditions. **I realised that I had lost my voice for some time but women have lost their voices for ages.** I know I want women all over the world to learn to speak up and fight back.

