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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## **“MISSION FIGHT BACK: SAFETY IN OUR OWN FISTS”**

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*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.*



*In India’s mythological magnum opus ‘Mahabharata’, Draupadi, the main female protagonist of the literary work, is insulted and is being disrobed in the King’s court since her five husbands lost her on the gambling table. Lord Krishna’s divine intervention saves Draupadi’s honor. Till Krishna intervenes nobody rises to save her or to speak against the disgraceful act. Even the elders watched in confused silence.*

*In today's time, Draupadi's shame continues and society remains largely silent. However, Krishna the saviour, is missing...*



My parents would never allow my brother and I to watch violent programs on television. My father, an officer in the Indian army had seen enough of it during the counter-terrorist operations he was part of in the disputed territory of Kashmir and during his UN peacekeeping missions in Africa. **But that one day, he didn't even notice us children staring at the screen. That is how immersed he was when the news broke about the horrifying rape of a 23-year-old girl.** I was nine years old at the time and studying in a co-ed Army School. Initially, I couldn't process what I saw and heard. It was 16 December 2012 and the entire nation was either glued to their TV screens or protesting on the streets.

On that fateful day, after going to the movies, just another girl like me and my friends, a physiotherapy student and her male friend boarded an off-duty bus. There were six other men including the driver in the bus. After beating the young man unconscious, the six ruthless men gang raped Nirbhaya multiple times as they took turns driving the bus. They also tortured her: biting her body all over, they proceeded to insert an iron rod through her vagina and anus and pulled out her intestines using bare hands. If that wasn't enough, she and her male friend were then thrown out of the moving bus, naked. The horror was further compounded by the callous passer-by who remain apathetic, looking at the two naked bodies without doing anything to help them until a police van finally came to their rescue. Nirbhaya died thirteen days later from her internal injuries.

That fortnight, I remember the school discussions, the living room debates and candle light marches focused on women safety. **And then it was over and forgotten, life was moving on, but we, young children kept feeling scared and vulnerable. So, one day, while trekking through the woods with my father, I took his hand and asked him to teach my friends and me to fight.** To fight back rather, and to learn how to defend ourselves. I told him about the way young girls like me were followed by men, lewd comments thrown at us, cat calls, body shaming by senior boys and the general air of insecurity that we felt especially the girls in the middle and senior schools.

Four years later, my father now retired from the army, was discussing the grim situation of crimes against women in our country with his friends after the news of yet another horrific child rape had surfaced. **Statistics were being thrown around, 120 reported rapes every day, add an estimated 400 unreported rapes and nearly 10.000 assaults, sexual harassments (or eve-teasing as it is known in South Asia) and acid attacks daily. India now holds the sad record of the most dangerous country for women and especially for young teenage girls.** That night, my fears came back, and I asked my Dad again to teach me how to defend myself. I explained that most girls I knew were terrified to venture alone outside of their homes. What I couldn't bring myself to tell him was that I too was being harassed and stalked by a senior boy from

my school. He had slapped me once in school because I wasn't listening to him and had threatened to physically harm my ten years-old brother if I didn't pay better attention. My teacher, though a heavily built man, who was a witness to the incident had turned around and disappeared in the hallway. **He could have stood up for me and ended my ordeal but perhaps he was more bothered about his own safety or maybe he was just indifferent like most men in my country.** I was being psychologically and mentally harassed each day and for the first time, my grades started to go down.

I couldn't bring myself to tell my father, I felt weak, helpless and ashamed.

One night, driven by the need to tell my father about my tormentor, I lay down, unable to find sleep. I was angry at my own helplessness and kept wishing that I would be trained enough to defend myself. By morning, the idea of training other girls in combat techniques had started taking roots in my mind. **Over breakfast, I told my father that I wanted to develop a mobile application which would be voice activated when a girl was in danger, controlled by a command center, it would mobilize trained girls to come rescue the person who had triggered the panic alarm.**

He listened to me with an amused smile on his face and asked questions. Meanwhile, I finally mustered up the courage to tell him about the harassment I had been facing daily for the past year. I cried but telling him made me feel lighter. I had never seen my father so angry before.

He immediately spoke to the school principal over the phone and filed a complaint with the police. The reaction of the school was shocking, the next day in school I was met with hostile stares and sarcastic comments and lectures from teachers and principal. Surprisingly, most of the negative reactions came from female teachers. My harasser went missing after the principal and management pre-warned him to buy time. The police were less callous as a respect to my father's army rank but they remained non-committal about future actions.

My father carried out the complete investigations alone and managed to track and apprehend the boy in two days and hand him over to the police. My brother and I were shifted to a different school.

A month or so later, my father and his friend Raj Khatri along with two other friends from the army called to ask me if I wanted to be part of a new program called MISSION FIGHT BACK (MFB). My father had brainstormed about my idea with Raj and together they had decided to develop the women’s safety mobile app and to start training girls across schools and colleges pan India. Further, Raj felt that training wasn’t the only solution, he wanted to broaden the scope to include psychological wellbeing. The idea now was not just to stop rapes but prevent them from happening at the initial stages itself. Apparently, he had carried out a little research and met a lot of police officers, victims, NGO’s and psychologists to understand the problem being faced by girls.

The problem was that women were not speaking up and if they were; they weren’t being heard....

We soon realized that we had embarked on a journey with centuries of deep-rooted social conditioning in the minds of the people, those thought processes and rules were simply the outcome of rigid Indian traditions, family values, social necessities and taboos. The first challenge was not about training the girls but bringing about a revolution in their minds. We needed to equip them to fight conservative traditions and to make them fearless enough to come forward and speak up. The second challenge was to change the way boys and men treated women. **Social stigma, societal shame and family reputation played a big role in keeping incidents under wraps, in some cases the girls were even married off to their tormentors. Burning women alive for dowry was still rampant as was honor killings based on caste and religious lines. All this with the tacit support of the political parties and law enforcement agencies.**

Mission Fight Back now consists of three intricately woven programs, a 28-day self-defence training by levels, a series of psychometric analysis tests called leadership programs and a mobile safety application.

The leadership program helps red flagged girls who are either unable to speak or are not being heard regarding the harassment they confront. Such cases are brought to the attention of the school/college and parents by the MFB psychologists. **We further developed an idea of involving citizens, especially women, by raising a volunteer force of trained girls/women acting as first responders to assist any girl/woman in distress after activation of an alert by the app.** Uttar Pradesh, one of the largest states in India has decided to adopt the concept of first responders as a pilot project. So far MFB has trained nearly 3000 girls in various schools in India and has could identify future victims and potential perpetrators, thereby preventing rape/molestations /harassment at an early stage.

Mission Fight Back was like a vision a daughter had one night without realising that her father would convert it into a mission. I am in my eleven grade now and I keep myself occupied with the program besides my studies. It is alarming to find that girls younger than me have so many psychological issues; I keep the team abreast with the latest in the teen world and I also help the team as a part-time photographer. **To the girls of the world I say this: love yourself enough to stand up every time you are pushed, fight back hard for yourself, fight tough, speak up speak up speak up, shout on the top of your voice till you are heard, stand up for each other for there is strength in numbers, do not outsource your self-defence to men. This is our world too, let's claim it.**

