

Awareness.. Knowledge... ACTION!

VANDANA KALRA

IT'S not a mere movement, campaign or institute. Instead, "it is an effort to educate citizens about the several issues that prohibit us from calling ourselves a gender-just and democratic society," — that's how Medha Kotwal describes the aim of Aalochana.

Formed in 1989 by Kotwal and her group of friends, Aalochana has been working in several areas including female infanticide, sati, dowry, sexual harassment and so on. "These are not women's issue, men play an equally important role and are also many a time as much a victim of patriarchy as women," states Simrita Gopal Singh, another trustee of the organisation.

The array of activities that Aalochana is involved with, ranges from working at the grass root in several villages to the resource centre, library and film club set up by them in Pune and the regular interactive sessions. "Every issue is complex and these are just means of reaching out to people," says Kotwal.

Members of the organi-

sation therefore conduct regular tours in several districts across the State. "These focus on sensitising women, panchayati raj and government officials," reveals Singh. As Kotwal explains, "We do this at three distinct levels: First, we make the women aware of their rights—they are in a position to demand only if they are aware of the laws; this is followed

by discussions, where we analyse the current situation and thereby encourage them to form a perspective which is their own; thirdly we encourage them to stand on their own feet and instill confidence in them." The methods adopted to achieve the ends include debates, lectures, and role plays where women are asked to enact how they intend to face the authorities and demand their rights. "We record the role play and replay it in order to analyse their body language. While doing so, the counsellors suggest ways in which they could be more effective and confident," says Kotwal.

Talk of the town

Within Pune too, Aalochana conducts workshops and lectures in colleges and for general public. The

most recent one being on *Understanding Child Sexual Abuse*, held on February 18. This had Dr Shekhar Seshadri, an eminent psychiatrist from NIMHANS, Bangalore, speaking on the psychology of the sexual abusers and the trauma faced by a child who is recovering from abuse."

Networking with similar organisations across the world, Aalochana is currently working in collaboration with an international organisation, Isis-Manila on a project. This has five countries studying the traditional tools of communication like songs and folk art used while interacting and passing a message to the public.

Though much has been done, a lot still remains. Says Kotwal, "People are becoming more sensitive and willing to speak about the issues, but at the same time the horizon of the problem is also expanding... the work will continue forever."

Aalochana believes in reaching out to sensitise organisations and the public about the women's issues



The members of Aalochana have been working since 1989 and believe that knowledge is the first step to empowerment

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