

India Mahila Association

P.O. Box 67714, Station O, Vancouver, B.C. V5W 3V2

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Meetings between a few women in 1973 led to the establishment of the India Mahila Association. We are a group of Indian women and for us being Indian means sharing a common cultural heritage. We come from all over the world including Pakistan, Bangladesh, East Africa, Fiji, Europe and India. Ours is an organization of mothers, sisters, daughters, wives, married, unmarried, separated, divorced and widowed women of all ages.

Historically society has negated women if they are not attached to men. We have been denied an independent identity. Women have only been defined and acknowledged in relationship to men. You are a man's wife, a man's mother or a man's daughter. People are not able to relate to you as an independent person with a distinct personality separate from that of your husband's. Contrary to this tradition whether a woman is married, divorced, separated or kicked out of the house, she is treated as an equal member of the community by us.

Women in our group may have individual political affiliations or sympathies but as a group we are not affiliated with any one particular political party, nor do we abide by any one political party program. When anyone of us speaks in public in the name of the association, she expresses not her individual point of view but the collective opinion of the group.

Our objectives are to provide emotional support for each other, to share our skills and information with our sisters, to help one another become aware of our rights and how to defend them. Very often people look at women's organizations as a threat to the family unit. It is our aim to make the family life in our community much more harmonious and dignified. We simply ask for the same rights that men have ie: the right to self respect, dignity and equality. And if these rights are not being given to us, it is not our weakness, it is the weakness of the community as a whole which deprives us of these basic rights. By gaining these rights we will make the community strong. Is there anybody that can say that by gaining equal rights for women and by becoming a stronger community we are committing a crime?

Over the years we have supported groups that have worked on issues such as women's rights, farmworker's rights, racism etc., and we will continue to do so. We have also worked with other organizations such as Folk Fest, South Vancouver Neighbourhood House, Multi-cultural Women's Association, Community Schools and other social service agencies that work with immigrants, in order to create a better understanding of our Culture. One of our latest projects is the establishment of a women's column in two of the local newspapers - The Link in English and The Indo Canadian Times in Punjabi. We hope that this column will create an opportunity for debate, discussion and awareness around the position of women in our society.

Recently our community has faced quite a number of violent attacks. Violence against women is on the increase and it ranges from wife battering and rape to murder. We are all aware of at least the murders because they cannot be as easily concealed as wife abuse. There is no justification for this violence. Violence exists in almost every sphere of our society. But women have been victimized more brutally and frequently. This issue has been of great concern to us as an association for many years. Recently because of the frequency and the brutality of the violent crimes against women, this issue has become a major concern for our community as a whole.

Violence against women is an affliction that we have to get rid of. One need not count the debilitating effects that violence has upon women and families. One need not relate the stories of butchery and brutality that happen in our community around us everyday. The question that arises, and one that must arise is - How are we going to deal with this violence? It is very easy to sit in the comfort of our living room and denounce violence. It is very easy to stand up here and make speeches. But to fight against violence in a manner that does not beget violence is a test that is going to need the attention of all of us. We want to proceed in the direction of tackling this task in a way perhaps unprecedented in the history of our community. Our struggle is not directed against any particular individual, it is a struggle against violence against women. The manner that we have chosen is based on non-partisanship. It involves addressing the problem of violence against women directly and forthrightly. It involves no intrigues and we feel that only those that believe in this manner of struggle, can work together to achieve the goal that we have set out to achieve, the goal - to eliminate violence against women.

During our discussions with certain community organizations we were led to believe that organizations in our community would work with us to stamp out violence. We are prepared to work with any organization in our community that wishes to participate in this noble task.

We propose that an action coalition be set up, with representatives from various organizations and interested individuals from the community, to start developing a concrete strategy or plan to prevent violence against women. This committee should meet regularly to discuss the problems brought to it by women, women's groups and the community at large. This committee could organize activities to support the actions taken by the women's groups eg. meetings, demonstrations, literature distribution, lobbying etc.

We further propose that each and every organization examine itself as to whether or not it is affording a genuinely equal opportunity for women to participate in its activities as ordinary members or as office bearers. We believe that many of our organizations do talk a great deal about equality of men and women, but in practice there are very few women active in any organizations.

We also propose that a special committee be organized consisting of representatives from all organizations to deal with the question of cultural conflicts between our growing children and the parents. This committee can begin to address the problem of what we may otherwise call the generation gap. It may begin to first of all enumerate the specific problems that our faced by our teenagers in their day to day lives vis-a-vis their parents; and then it can begin to educate our community, including our teenagers, as to how best to resolve these problems.

We further propose that the media in our community be approached by this action group to positively, responsibly but vigourously denounce violence against women and discuss alternative lifestyles for women caught up by this vicious disease.

We urge that we chart a new path so far untreaded in our community, and that is the path of honesty, truth and justice; that we abandon any individual differences and dislikes and unite to build a better tomorrow for our women which means a better tomorrow for all of us.

Prabha I'm in a rush
 but hope these will
 help. The letter enclosed
 is what we are
 sending them
 There wasn't enough time
 to make too many changes
 but we want to really
 work on the press
 release in advance.
 Thanks