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## **A woman with five children is ill treated by her husband**

### **A case study from India**

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“Mrs. M” was 29 when she first came to work for us from a village in Karnataka in India. She had five children after which her husband took a second wife. They all lived in their one room house with a small kitchen, which perhaps would be about the size of your garage or cellar. The house had no electricity or toilet. The villagers used the large open space as their toilet. Mrs Ms husband supported his second wife and asked Mrs M to move out of his house with her five children.

M found employment in a nearby Christian institution. She had to walk 6 miles to work and walk back 6 miles as bus service was poor. She obtained a loan and added a room to the house where she and her children could live, leaving the other room to her husband and his second wife. She also borrowed money through the government to deepen the existing well in a very small plot of land which they owned. The husband started ill-treating their ten year old daughter. Ms defence of her daughter led to Argument and quarrels. His drink problem aggravated the situation. He used to come home drunk and abuse the family. With the help of the village elders, she asked her husband to live in a separate house.

The government threatened to take their possessions if they did not return the loan. M rushed to the counsellor for help. The counsellor knew the local bank manager, and her husband - being the head of the Christian Institution - had influence and power. They approached the people concerned and averted the eviction. Later they gave a loan for Mrs M to clear her loan with the government. She was faithful to return the money to the counsellor later, though her husband who accompanied her to request the loan did not take any responsibility to clear it.

The husband continued to harass M and started abusing his daughter. She could not tolerate his abuse and being concerned for her daughter’s safety M considered various options including separation. The counsellor spent time listening, discussing and clarifying the various options. After much thought M decided to move to another village. But the elders of the village advised her against migration and asked her to stay on and adjust with her husband. They accepted the second wife as a natural phenomenon. Her quarrels were dismissed as a natural part of life. M continues to live in the same house, though she proved capable of deciding, earning and managing her affairs. The final decision remained with the village elders in whom lay the locus of control.

## Clarifications

1. In India people with status, power and position have influence to recommend people for jobs, admission in school college, hospital or an occupation. They can impose or avert a decision.
2. Not all villages can be portrayed as having no electricity, toilets and water supply.
3. M's husband was the eldest son in his home. In India the eldest sons are looked up to and not questioned, treated as though semi-gods. They make all the decisions in the family.
4. In the village council (panchayat), there are mostly men elders who decide and rule from a male perspective.

## Methodology used by the counsellor

Both directive and non-directive counselling were used as M had the capacity for self awareness and self criticism. The directive method was adapted and used. She had a sharp mind and was asked to think and reflect on her problems. As she gained insight she assimilated new perspectives. The counsellor facilitated the counselling process but refrained from making any decisions for M.

The counsellor allowed the counsellee to vent her feelings of anger, fear and hate both verbally and non-verbally and to cry aloud.

The difficulties faced in non-directive approach was that M always insisted to sit on the floor whereas the counsellor sat on the chair. The counsellor always managed to sit in such a position which allowed sufficient eye contact.

## Problems faced by the counsellor

The decision of M was overruled by her village elders who held the final say, not because she was a woman, but because the locus of control lay in the male patriarchal system or culture. Such culture enhances the dependence of women on male elders.