

VIMOCHANA

Vimochana, b. 1979. A Bangalore-based feminist collective. The interview is with a group: Donna Fernandes, Madhu Bhushan, Celine Suguna, Kalpana and Shakun Mohini.

[Interviewed by Laxmi Murthy]

Laxmi: That's exactly what I want to hear.

Donna: Which we don't.. it's not part of our memory when we talk of Vimochana. Because Vimochana when we talk of women, it starts from the time we started Vimochana as a group. But we were doing things before that, like working in the slums with women and Vimochana came in a more organized way later, in '79.

L: Ok, let me just backtrack a bit here. We are here in the Vimochana office. It's the 8th of December. There is Madhu Bhushan, there is Kalpana, there is Donna – very longtime activists and we have Celine just walking in with a cup of coffee (laughs) it's being recorded Celine – no, no please join. So what we are trying to do is actually just look at your memories of the early times of the women's movement, specifically the '70s and '80s. Looking more in terms of moods, feelings, descriptions how things went and just now Donna was reminding us that the women's movement didn't start with the setting up of a women's organization and that many activists like her were working on issues – women – so if we could start with that Donna?

D I think among the four of us I am the oldest – literally and figuratively (Madhu- “*she is a dinosaur*”) (laughs) but I think see when we came into – we were first - before Vimochana started I was part of CIEDS ok – the Centre for Informal Education and Development Studies. We didn't call ourselves at that time as a collective – it was more as a team because I think conceptually it was you know against all hierarchy. Team still meant a kind of a more inclusive way of being – so we were a team. We had various areas of work, you know. We were young and full of enthusiasm. We were involved in different kinds of work – each of us like human rights, peoples rights, disarmament

L Which year was this?

D I am talking of '77 – I came into CIEDS in '77

L So this was just after the Emergency?

D Ya and CIEDS started around that time '75. The founding years of CIEDS was around that time. It really consolidated in '76-' 77 like that but it was – there was a prior group of young men and women with Corrine heading it of course - all of them armed with their books of Das Kapital and all moving around. At that time, ya so those were my memories – I had just passed out [from college] and come to Bangalore. I still remember – I have very

L Where you came from?

D No, after I finished. I studied in Bombay and I came back and I worked with a GRAIL at that time. In '75 I started work. And I still remember them you know David and all of them, Arun Subramanian all of them with their books armed meeting – wherever they could get place and you know – they would be having their study groups and things like that. So Corrine said come and join CIEDS, you know Corrine was a friend of mine whom I met at the time of the Bangladesh war. We went out – we were students and we used to go out to collect money for the refugees. And we had really had a great time collecting money from the streets and roads –in something '71 we collected 25, 000 which was a hell of a lot (Madhu-*'still hasn't lost her urge to collect money'*) – we used to collect money that's how we got to meet Corrine and we got to know Corrine and things like that. Then Corrine said 'Why don't you come' – but that was really a fantastic time. My God, I can still relive those moments when we used to go and ask and at the racecourse people would just put hundreds of rupees and we used to come back and count all the money – hands used to become black counting all those coins and everything. It was really fantastic and the young students from college and later later we had the tidal wave – the thing which struck Andhra in 76-77 and then we had made all these groups of students – and you know students –compared to today were very different. They all jumped at the thing. They all went to all the coastal areas where it was hit by the tidal wave and everything. And they went in teams and camps. I remember all those memories of going to the station to see them off. Their parents coming to see them. It was such a really fantastic moment, ok . Then after that Corrine said why don't you come and join CIEDS and I went and joined CIEDS on August 16th 1977 (Madhu - *'Hey I joined on August 16th too'*) Chris and I joined on august 16th 1977 (Madhu - *'My God! I joined in August 16th 1983'*).

L How do you remember the date? Why is it that so important?

D I don't know. But I just remember. 'Independence Day' (L laughs) No it was the day – we would have joined on the 15th but because it was a holiday we joined on the 16th. So it was really I joined in CIEDS , of course was not really very sure you know what- how we are going- where we are going but Corrine was a good friend and you know she was already in this – she was in ISI [Indian Social Institute, Bangalore] and I used to meet her as a student – with her we interacted a lot. Actually I found myself – of course she has been a very influence in many of our lives, but I can talk about myself. In my life she has been a very strong influence and she has really helped me to see things a lot differently. I owe a lot to my friendship with Corrine and I have come into this, no I was drawn into this work because always I remember as a student I remember we would be part of the NSS and go the slum and rub and scrub the children, which I used to love to do- these little children they are so sweet (*'she still does it'*) – take them to the well for water – bathe them and all. Work in the slum – you know we were there. I was in AICUF which was a students movement and Corrine was also there so our paths crossed. So naturally I would when she asked me to come. Then in CIEDS, ok it was a team. It was just after the Emergency. It was a very political group, but for me at that time politics – political –*kuch nahi* – I didn't know anything. All I know is that we wanted to work and

we wanted to – we had no agendas, we had no direction, we had no politics – nothing, just the feeling that we wanted to do something, you know for ...we wanted to something – so then as part of CIEDS while they talk this big rhetoric and politics, Karl Marx and Communist Manifesto – and all this was very important in CIEDS that we had to have a study group. They used to be a work group and a study group. And Study Group Rajan Chandy and people like that- they would take classes for us –poor ones who didn't know anything, you know and this this Communist Manifesto would be told to us about three times. You know, how much of it we remember. They would talk a lot. We had lot of discussion on Karl Marx and you know all this kind of thing. And Anshuman Rai send nuclearisation and dumping – who understood all this – but we just sat and listened in awe. And we used to have a lot – in CIEDS we used to have a lot of– what you say – 2-3 days sem – study groups – books and study material would be prepared. We would stay up till 9 o'clock 10 ten o'clock – cyclostyling and all. And people worked and never thought about anything timings and leave. And you know there was not much technology – everything was so painstaking, you know – but we all were there – we used to do it. So many images are coming to my mind now. So as part of CIEDS ok – we used to work in the slum, because it was really – at that time it was not all these issues were – women's issues - we never looked at middle class women and upper middle class women having any kind of ...Our main concern was focused on women in the slum areas who are – who really poorer of the poor kind of thing. Now I am using words like empowerment and powerless, but at that time we didn't know anything. We knew that their situation was not the same as their husbands or their fathers – they were suffering. So you know it was a question of sanitation and water – again I must say that feminism was a word which was very – it was an unspeakable word. You couldn't say feminism, you know. Talk about women but not about feminism. So we would look at issues also were more class-oriented issues.

L Was the word feminism around – not speaking about it?

D No, not yet at that time but we felt, you know I am talking of 1977 -78 – we were working with women while the men looked at larger issues pertaining to men – we women like Shobhna and myself were the two women over there actually at that time – we would look at forming women's groups in the slum and we would take up issues like water. Water was a huge issue. I remember showing that film – 'Tanni' or something – and having discussions on them. You know Panchamma would gather all the women to come and we would sit. We would discuss sanitation issues and things like that. And every August 15th we would have a program – Oh Who got independence? Its really Tata – Birla (laugh) – All the songs and all. At that time you know we used to do a lot of cultural – cultural activities were much stronger like street plays, singing, postering, wall writing – there was a lot of that. So we used to have programs. So a lot of work in the slums were around this. At the same time – in these two years – I think 77 or 78 – there was this Rohini Khadelkar I think – she was this chess player and she was not allowed to play. It came in the newspaper that she was not being allowed to take part in the championship because she was a woman because she was a girl whatever. We were so outraged! We didn't know anything about all this but we were so outraged – that chess is a matter of the mind and that is has nothing to do with your physical whatever – so how can you discriminate? How can you say you cannot play only on the ground –

so the first thing we did – call for a meeting. I still remember calling for the meeting - Rajan Chandy, Corrine, Karad somebody somebody – we all met together and we said we should oppose this and we should write a letter. So we wrote a letter – strongly coming on this and saying this is a discrimination. That time there was no thing of constitutional rights – its in the constitution and all that. You know we never used words like Constitution and Democracy but still we worked. Today it's the most abused words that you can hear – Constitutional guarantees – Democracy. It's so foul a word because its being mouthed by the left, right, center, everybody – no difference at all. But at that time we never used these words but still it had a meaning. So we wrote that and after that we sort of began to look at women's issues – talk – discuss – what was the real issue. So we wrote a letter to the National Sports Authority or whatever and she was finally, I think allowed to play. At the same time if I am not mistaken there was a SAARC meeting and at that time the SAARC meeting (Madhu – it was much later that was in 80 – 85) Krihsna Iyer came yes. But after Rohini

L Was it the Mathura case?

D Mathura case came in '79. Mathura case led to the rape bill and rape law and all. But there was somebody. So we started getting - then we would need to talk and discuss all that kind of thing. (Madhu- We started reading Engels Private Property and State). That was coming with Karl Marx – Engels, 'Private Property – Family, Origin of the Family, Private Property' was at the time we were reading the Communist Manifesto and all this kind of thing because we were very leftist, ok and we didn't know what were left out of – we were that kind of thing. But for us it was all really new. I came – we came from social work backgrounds which were very status quo oriented – very you know whatever. But Corrine and all were much more the - we saw them as intellectuals in the group – Rajan Chandy, James, Banajee – Rohini Banajee all of them. We used to look at them in awe – didn't understand – kept quiet. There was an atmosphere where we could ask but we were too frightened to ask because we thought whatever we ask was wrong. So like that way – but these things – discussion and. Then in '77, I cant remember what all we did inbetween, but I know we did a lot of work in the communities we were working. One was the Someshwara slum and one was Vinod Nagar Slum. We were really organizing the women and we would take out morchas and dharnas to the Water Supply Board, here, there – demolitions – these were the issues before we started Vimochana. These were the main basic issues – very clearly singularly focused on the poor in the urban slums and urban communities. Then in 1979 – I think '77 I remember also we used to meet and we used to study Nirmala Fenn from SVM. Then was the Emergency at that time. And I think we did not get so much involved in the Emergency- though Corrine had asked us whether we want to go house to house and campaign, because everyone was saying Indira Gandhi had to be thrown out, but we were not so political at that time. So, then in '79 I think the Government fell and we had mid-term elections. I can't remember what all the things we did from '77 to '78 but in '79 – we did- we used to do I am not sure a lot of postering. In '79 my mind is very clear that in '79 I came across something of the Sri Lankan Government – how when they had elections – they used the women's issues to reach out to the public during the time of elections. So, you know that was the pamphlet I had come across in the mail or whatever. So I said why don't we try to reach out to people during the time of elections. Though it was in '77

– 79 and much before November that we started collecting all the people who were like thinking –intellectuals, quite a different thing – who were not the usual kind of things, you know. We got them like Babu Hetu, Shetty, Mira Chakravarty who runs Manini and you know Lalitamba who was from... these were lecturers. They were also all intellectual thinking out of the box kind of people and from CIEDS – Chellum, and who Jerry and Chris and Ashwath (Ashwath came later) and then I don't know – the women who were part of CIEDS were there. We met – we had no place to meet – so we met in Central College. And we started talking how we should use this moment for raising women's issues. Using the moment of the elections and I think the first thing ...we used to meet in the Reserve Bank of India – we used to get things there. Again because there were people from the Union there who were a little broad minded and allowed us to use the space there. So we used to meet at the Central College grounds or the Law College they have the steps over there –we used to meet on those steps, you know – every evening. (Madhu – famous steps of Law College) So we would meet there and we would – we decided how we could use the elections to raise the issue of women. So I very vividly remember us standing over there – Babu Mathew was also there as part of the whole group meeting and we decided, you know to launch a campaign – talking of –I don't know what we actually used. Before that also I remember a seminar at Institute of Engineers where people like Imaran Qureshi and people like that. It was a seminar on – what was that – the liberation of women is *inextricably* linked up with the liberation of society – that was the theme, you know. So all along we had this notion that women's liberation was inextricably linked up with liberation of society and so we always went along with that kind of thing – you cannot see women's liberation outside the liberation of society. Socialism – little little later we used to call ourselves socialist feminists – we felt it was safer. No one would throw stones at us if we called ourselves socialist feminists. We kept mouthing these things because we felt it was the right thing to say and not to be excluded because the group of people today is of course much wider and you have a lot of people in this space for a lot of ideologies to co-exist, but at that time – You had to be this or you are out. And specially we had CPM – we used to work with them also and they would not like– Suryanarayan Rao and ITC factory – they could never think of us talking of women's things as a separate thing because they thought we are trying to break up the working class that was the (Madhu – when was that whole Prasanna incident?) we had a lot of stuff that we were CIA funded and all that kind of thing – they wrote about us in their – when they had their central (I think it even came –Prakash who wrote – Prakash Karat) Not Prakash Karat (somebody had written an article where CIEDS and Vimochana were mentioned)

L Prakash Karat. There is this booklet about funded but that was much later that was

D I think it was beginning of 1980. Anyway we started this and we brought out a pamphlet – again the pamphlet was very clear where wewe workand ...we are teachers – we talk of all these things but not really talking about the specificity of women's issues. Again in that we felt more comfortable in talking about women as workers. And even we looked at the whole issue of rape – we – we tried to delink ourselves from the way rape is understood in the west. Because I think there understanding of rape was very different whereas we understood rape mostly as a

weapon in the hands of the more powerful classes like the landlords. You know, how – so it was very clear. It was not...it was not an assertion of male supremacy or male power – we never saw it like that – it was more as a class thing. So we talked about all these various issues but from a very class perspective or class angle. This way we did a lot of wall posters, we did lot of wall writing, we went around campaigning – telling people vote for the candidate who will do something for women’s rights, ok. That was very, very short-sighted. I wouldn’t say very short-sighted looking at it from today’s thing I would say, but at that time we felt that since political consciousness was very high at that time – it was nice to introduce it. Not that we wanted to say that some RSS fellow – you vote for him if he is – because you know everyone just uses....but just to raise the issue – bring out the issue into the public – on women’s rights, women’s rights – women’s issues that we used this movement. So we went around saying – vote for the candidate – if you read all the manifestos – none of the manifestos talk about women’s issues. And yet women are working like this – we are being paid less wages even though we do equal work. We have no maternity benefits. Very class oriented issues that we put into the pamphlet. And then said Vote for the candidate who will do something for women’s rights, ok. Of course there were many questions raised – so if this man comes you will vote for him, if this man says this will you vote for him...but we were not getting into those debates because we knew at that time nobody was going to use women’s issues – include it in their manifestos. So it was just a way of trying to provoke or to push and make women’s issues as part of – and that’s how the beginning of Vimochana started. It started with that campaign and then soon after this I think the whole Mathura rape case campaign began. ‘79 November we started I think January ‘80.

L When you say Vimochana ‘started’ – what exactly do you mean? Did you formally launch it?

D In Vimochana, the initiative was taken by people from CIEDS but it included people not only from CIEDS but also included people from outside. Like I told you Babu Shetty, Meera Chakravarty, Babu Mathew – there were Lalitamba – there were lot of other people in the very beginning when we started in ‘79 (Madhu – and Meera named Vimochana) Yes, and Meera she gave the name of Vimochana to it. Chellum and the men from CIEDS (that’s a controversy) Chellum didn’t give the name. (Chellum came around ‘79- ‘80). He came when I was not there. Chikmangalur elections he was there – ‘79 he came and I went away. Anyway Chellum was there when we were starting Vimochana (Madhu – maybe you talk to some of the men. It will be interesting..) So they came into it

L Do you remember the day – you said ok this is Vimochana and now have launched it

D (Madhu-Ya what happened, what was the moment, even I’d like to know) (Celine-What was the triggering moment of saying) No I know that Meera brought the name Vimochana and we were standing in the Central College campus. We were standing – we had no place to sit and you know, I remember that I...somebody else’s memory may be better – ask Chellum if he remembers. It was not a great thing. It may look now. At that

given moment it was not anything great. Because the whole environment was very different

L Why? Do you remember why you actually felt the need to actually start a women's organization? Because you were working anyway on women's issues so what made all of you feel that you actually need an organization with a name you know.

D I don't know what we felt at that time but we just knew – it was just that we were working, ok (Madhu-I think it was also linked to the Forum – the initiatives). We called it that Rohini Khadelkar's thing - we called ourselves the National Forum for Equal Rights for Women because it was a question of denial of equal rights for women. So in that case we gave it a very specific name called it the National Forum for Equal Rights for Women – Rohini Khadelkar's case. But then you know that was a very specific need, but as I told you we were working in the community –in the slum in a very disorganised way. We did not have anything uh (Madhu- wasn't it a reaction to this whole left...) No, no there was no reaction, there was only action which we wanted. We were having no reactions (Madhu – the Forum politics) No I don't think – I just said that we had – it was just the moment of the elections, ok and you know generally we feel the moment of the election – there is heightened political consciousness. Because everyone is trying to, unlike today – I mean I see such a vast difference in the elections of the past and elections of today. Today its all becoming you know what you get, what will you give – you know with all these freebies and all these. It wasn't like that before – people **genuinely** engaged (Madhu- So this campaign was done in the name of Vimochana at that time?) It started. We were meeting to – we were meeting to intervene in the political process – so we felt the need for the organization so we started Vimochana. Also because I told you – I did come across this pamphlet which was used in the Sri Lankan example of election. And I thought it was a good which we could also use – really believe me Laxmi – we didn't know anything! We just knew we had to do! And we felt. We didn't have any clear cut thought processes or anything that we have today, you know we have all that – but not at that time ok. We just knew we had to start. This was the moment for us to really bring the women's issues into the public. It was as simple and limited as that – to make this issue public. I am using these words now – I wouldn't have used these words then – like making women's issues public and unthinkable and all that wasn't there. What was thinkable was that we just wanted to start this – start a women's organization.

L But then at that time were you aware of similar kind of groups in Bombay and Delhi and so on or there wasn't that kind of national consciousness.

Madhu/Celine: It was only after eighties we started having links. (Madhu-No Mathura – it happened at the time of Mathura).

D: Ya I will tell you. Mathura's case again was started in I think early 1980 – we started this in November-December of 1979 and around this time as we finished this political campaign, you know that we had this you know campaign for reforming rape law and we got into that rape law. Again (Madhu-How did you hear about it?)

L Did you attend that meeting in Bombay which was Forum against Rape meeting?

D No

L but somebody from Vimochana did?

D Nobody, because at that time there was suddenly Vimochana. I mean just a few of us were there

Celine: I think we went – I think I went for Bombay when they had the first meeting

D: But not as Vimochana. I don't know –but what I remember clearly is us meeting in YWCA we used all the public spaces the pizza . The YWCA on Infantry Road and we startedwe had a lot more connect with the colleges and students – younger students. And I do remember – in the slums we worked with (That was later) Ya – she is one of our followers. Then we used to do street play and we used to go back to the slums where we were working and we started this rape campaign, you know. We started – there was this Bill for amending and we took this Bill and we went to the communities and we discussed the Bill with the women's groups we had to talk about the rape Bill and how whether we wanted to change – and to know about the changes we used to do street plays on this thing. I remember doing street plays and people participating. And there was Aruna from Chennai and she collected over a thousand signatures which we sent to Rajiv Gandhi from the people (Madhu - Rajiv Gandhi?) Ya, it was Rajiv Gandhi's time we had eighties (Madhu-No, Rajiv Gandhi came after Indira Gandhi) ..but the Cabinet he was there, he was the one who brought the amendment to the rape law (Madhu-Rajiv Gandhi?) Rajiv Gandhi came after '84 (Rajiv Gandhi came only after Indira Gandhi died) No, wasn't the Bill amended during Rajiv Gandhi's (That's the Muslim Women's Bill)

L Muslim Women's Bill and the Dowry Amendment – 86

D Then the rape law amended in Indira Gandhi's (Madhu- Yes Donna) So that law we had a whole kind of campaign – a limited campaign on the whole issue of (Can I come in?) (No you can't)(No you can't) (I have lots of space here) Go and sign that letter first – its going now. I told Anita to explain everybody and to please take the signatures because it has to go today. So we did this but again as I told you – it was something much more with the communities where we were working and we had our connections that we had this. We also used to bring in some women and girls we had contact with – we used to in the beginning we used to meet a lot – we used to have a lot of contact women – working women you know – banks and people whom we knew – we used to keep on inviting. And of course many of our meetings would be at the University Law College steps. At that time I think there is where Shakun and Celine and I don't know how we got in touch with Celine – How did you meet us?

Celine: you have very conveniently left me out! I came into Bangalore in 78 and I really enjoyed it and in 78 from CIEDS – CIEDS was working in the slums in Vinoba Nagar with Shobna. The priest – Father Andrew or somebody – he came to IYD and he said

can we come in and do work. But Pandirajan was my Director and he said No – there is an organization called CIEDS who are working there. You better go and meet them first. The priest is from that area but he is coming and calling us and there is already an institution. So that fateful day I stepped into CIEDS to meet somebody and I was really (Shakun- fortunate?!). Ya, fortunate!

L Do you remember the date?

C Ya sometime in May '78. I remember because we had to take up that project. I was – I returned from Delhi working in Nangloi and then (telephone ringing). It was at that time really we had all these campaigns and. She only picked me up in IIM (Madhu-How will she pick you up) Bharat Jhunjhunwala's working in Langford Town and in of those meetings – because this was all on workers. For me like she said – like social work background more. I had worked in Delhi, before that it was YCS – Young Christian Students and AICUF – that background. From school – church. In college days it was attending all these groups there was one PSU Socialist group. They are all not directly party but groups were coming together on worker's rights. So it was more of poor people, the worker – so we used to attend this meeting and in that meeting, worker, class thing, class background. So these people meet and I very clearly remember the campaign for basic amenities in the slum. So we used to work in – Drive-in theater was there behind that - that slum we used to work. I also didn't know – for me also feminism didn't exist. But after Nangloi I knew only women were responding. We were doing a TB program for the medicines and they would say – *khane ko kuch nahi hai –itna davai kyon khayega* . And it made lot of sense to me at that time. These are illiterate people and they were saying such things – they were not even having enough rotis to eat. So when I came to Bangalore – this Pandirajan, we were one other organization called SCN– it's an international organization – he said – you do what you want. So I said I want to work only with women. No feminism. No women – there was no word like women's rights or something like that. So that's how I got connected and we are talking about – I remember this word – Vote for the party candidate who will do something for the woman in the slums. So we started after that something called – Inter-Slum Activity, where Pakri, that's Ruth [Manorama's] husband used to work in Tilak Nagar with girls who were rolling agarbattis, Shobna from Vinoba Bhave slum and me from that slum. So we used to arrange inter-college, inter-slum youth activities. Once it will be in Drive in and then others. And then I started participating in CIEDS programs. All kinds of meetings and things like that. The first day I enter – I had such a uh controversial experience. These three fellows who caught me questioned me. I was a little one. Who this was – Raju, Kutty and one Manohar. Raju, Kutty and Manohar – what are you doing? Which organization? What is your vision? What is your aim? Poora, poora! All this very left. I felt like a! Then Corrine walked in – she said “Hi, new face or something that casual thing – this is Celine from IYD. How is Pandiranjan?” It was so different, her voice, her mannerisms from these three rakshas, I felt. There questioning me. Then after one hour or two hours – when she was going – she said “Bye Celine”. I said Oh My God how she remembers my name two hours back. Then I started participating in – because for me I think it was a natural kind of attraction, I guess very much. In Central College we had this meeting for the election campaign and Mira did say we should call ourselves Vimochana – Mira Chakravarty at that time. Chellum came one year after I came

because Shobna said, *ondu walley hudga bandidaney CIEDS ge, thumba talent iddey*” [a very talented boy has come to CIEDS] No, no, no it was much later. By then we had this Inter-Slum Activity going on. I think Donna was travelling to Sweden or somewhere (I wasn’t there) 7878 (Donna - I was in Paris at that time) ...somethingI remember she walked in with a pink saree – in that garage we used to hold the meetings CIEDS 7 Balaji Layout and she came from inside the kitchen and all the people forgot the meeting and were asking her about her hand or something. She had an accident or something – I still remember that. And then – it was not a kind of conscious launching of anything. In the lawns of Central College we were all sitting, but there wasn’t clearly expressed needs or something. There was this need that we should call ourselves (Donna-We were looking for a mail and Mira who is a Sanskrit lecturer – she gave the name and we all) At that time there was no Manini I think, Mira used to come for meetings (Shakun- part of Vimochana) There were people from different – like I was not from CIEDS, I was from IYD. So I used to attend all these kinds of meetings which they used to have and very interesting meetings – big big words I didn’t we wouldn’t go. It was basically very strongly from class struggle – like we supported this ITC workers over – they are behind us (laughter). ITC factory – they had a massive gadbad and they were throwing out. It was the same time I think – Solidarnosk like Walenska over there. It was collecting somewhere – we didn’t even know where Poland was (Walanski , Walanski) So everybody will go like this – some films will be shown – all the black and white films, Solidarnosk, with the workers and all the meetings used to happen in CIEDS till 2 o clock in the morning or something, cyclostyling all that ink kind of thing

L There were also women workers in ITC?

C No, no no no no. So the whole background was so kind of part of CIEDS. (Donna -ITC and all came because there were people working on worker’s rights – Ashwath and all). They used to also organize film festivals. Not women’s film festivals – that came much later after Vimochana. Even in Vimochana we did not say it was feminism and all in the beginning. It was just responding to issues.

L This seems to be more like going out and organizing women in slums and all of this but what about women coming for help – when did that start?

Madhu Much later

Celine: Not really, Madhu. Even when the issue of the hostel was taken, Brunton hostel or something. (Donna- No no, it was much later). But right from the beginning we were attending to women who were coming – Shanta and all (D –ya ya they came in eighties but before that what happened was.

Celine - When was Rameeza Bi?

Donna - Rameeza Bi was 1980. The first major action that we did in Bangalore was the ICSW hostel. It was our first very big public action, it was 1981 I think. And I know Imran just got a job in *Deccan Herald*, because he gave write up on this and he put ‘Damned, Destroyed and something’. He said, how do you like the title – we said yayaya

we were so happy it was newspaper printed and everything. You know it was a case of hostel warden. She was above thirty years old. She was from Kerala – Alykutti. This warden was a Gandhian or supposedly freedom fighter and he was about in his sixties and all that. He was the general secretary of a women’s hostel which came under the Social Department. This fellow Jaychilan, ya (Madhu - this hostel was in the Rest House road). Ya Rest House Road Corner. She was a spinster and he was I don’t know what and he used to point out to her breasts and say will you give me a place there? (laughter) And then she came and complained to us. I don’t know how she came to know about us. It was ’81 I think. So she came and complained to us and then we listened to her and we like big shots – laughs – we thought we knew too much – We took up the case and then we went, I don’t remember the sequence but I do know finally we went and met all the people on the Hostel Committee – all these very you know bourgeois women, who are... We had Stella Fariaand Manorama.....was the Minister. So we went to her. I remember very clearly going to her in the morning and telling her this is this is happened. (Madhu - Early morning meetings with ministers!) Ya we used to go 7 o clock and in a very callous way she said – ‘Oh today girls are going to America and why can’t stay’ – some shit like that. And no one was trying to listen to her, you know. And then I remember Mrs. Mandana – Jaji Mandana we went to finally and we met her. We went to the Assembly and got this issue raised. The Chief Minister referred the issue to this Committee of Women. And this Committee of Women, they said ‘But no no he is such a good man. He is a freedom fighter. There has been no history or record of complaints about his behavior. So this can’t be true. This girl is not ok. And Stella Faria whom I fought – now she is my good friend – at that time we fought with her. She says – No , I was willing to take up – you know they wanted to take up, forget – we will give you a good job for 300 rupees and a place to stay and all in Whitefield. You should come. Forget about this. They didn’t want to address the issue. So then we got all very upset and agitated with all this. And I do remember we took out a demonstration. (Others: So that was the first demonstration) (Madhu – it was ’81) about 100 women and the funny part was that it rained – it rained –it rained –all of us were walking in the rain

Madhu: Women in black we had. Corrine(and we looking at each other’s backsides – raining away). Ya but that was our first and ..

L When was this? Do you remember?

D ‘81, I think it was in ‘81. (Madhu- MG Road we were). Reports are there in my diaries)

Madhu: Donna’s diaries will be a ...[treasure]

D: It was in 81- I remember very clearly we had this demonstration. We got good support from the press. And then I think it got referred to the Women’s Committee – Jaji Mandana was the Chairperson of that Committee. That was one of our first (Madhu - that was in ‘81) ’81.

L So when did women start coming for help? When did you start like a crisis center?

D From that. From '81

Celine: Something like a violence sector. Somebody...a problem- it was a personal problem in a way – of course we were not really very clear. But it was (Donna- Shashikala was the first) (Shashi was the first)

Donna- She was the first Dowry case. Shashikala came and the first time since the law on dowry was passed in 1961 – for the first time a case got registered under that – for the first time. (Madhu- We wrote about it in Kriti I remember - Streetshit..) Streetshit, streetshit really we did so many things. So (Celine- The first play we did was on that also) I think Cecilamma and all this case happened to come up. Shanta, Shashikala (Donna- Shanta my goodness I look at her) We went to Shanta's house – she works in the Reserve Bank of India

L: Shakun, now we need your story.

Shakun: From very early I started

Madhu: Start from where you came into this whole thing

Shakun: It started long before I came into this whole thing.

Madhu: So start with that

Celine: What was your grounding? She and Susheela.

Shakun: No, seriously...I was not a very academic person. No ideology, nothing. I was in Central College, doing maths. Actually I wanted to be an engineer. I couldn't be an engineer. I must also mention that. I couldn't be an engineer because my mother and father felt that because my brother was doing his diploma in textile engineering, I couldn't go to graduation. So they didn't let me do it. So I went to Central College. Then I was working in Vijaya Bank because I had to do a job, otherwise I had to run away from home. So I was in the bank and you know, in the bank, just before nationalization, the bank, in the private bank, they started a union, the bank union. I had nothing, no ideology. I had read Marx, everything. I had read everything in print. But nothing, no beliefs. But in the union, I was the only woman in the whole bank who joined the union. So they made me Central Committee member because I was the only woman. And I was very brash in those days, no? (Madhu – what makes you think you have changed?!). I was defying everybody – management, everybody, and I was in a punishment transfer. Those days punishment transfers was Gangenahalli. I was in the bank, on a punishment transfer and very active in the union. I was also very dissatisfied. Emergency was happening and all that. I was facing a lot of victimisation, I had two cases by the bank against me. They were in courts – saying I had passed things. (Madhu – what were you were fighting about?) They created two cases against me Madhu – I was a loan officer - . The management – it was a created case. I was fighting my own cases, and I was also the

Lioness Secretary. I was the Lioness Club secretary. I was with Vasanthi – Vasanthi was my senior colleague in the bank. She was my first boss also. She was very – she had much better reach than most other women in the bank. SO I became her natural friend. She was the one who brought me to Vimochana meetings (oooooh). That was '79. You know when Shironay came in – when the first discussion group started on the rape bill. (That was in 1980 -)79) 80 then. I came in that group. And I felt what am I doing in the Union it really doesn't mean anything. It was like a – really – I was just thinking. I was also an outsider who is just sitting and listening. (Vimochana was outside – it wasn't ...But at the same time I really wanted to somewhere – you know I wanted to like really do something different from what I was all this time, so that I could learn a little bit. Everything was really alien to me. The ways of doing, if not the theory. You know we used to – I remember having a meeting on Engels and theory. And having a meeting – so many meetings – all these meetings – learnings and all that, but more than that I really wanted to do something. So I joined the street theatre group which was totally (laughs) remote ...(Madhu – It was the first Vimochana play). I opted for it only because I wasn't expected to be on the street first of all and last of all a play- I am not a theatre person. And I was – I used to wear silk sarees and lipstick and that kind of thing. And I really wanted to – just wanted to change. So I became a street theater but I couldn't act for nuts. (The first play...). I had to say one sentence in Kannada- I didn't know Kannada. So much – I used to get such bad vibes from everybody else. That one sentence because everytime – mine was the first sentence – Babbu ke haal kursi bartini ...laughter I was so traumatized. Then I used to think tomorrow I must do it just in one shot. Anyway that was my – reminds me at that time CPI – Kashi Ram of Baldwin school. They were organizing the workers there- Babu Mathew and all. They wanted a street play. They made me Mrs Kashi Ram. Kashi Ram wouldn't know Kannada. And I used to go there and Malti Saroj was something in the whole thing (I was a door). That was much later

L What was the play about?

Shakun That was – it was a agricultural scene – violence against women (No, no, no – it was the life of a girl child) girl child-woman. From birth to how she is killed. (How boring)

L What was the name of the play?

Shakun We don't know. We had a chorus song Obele obele, obeleThat was the line to show the welcome to the girl – how education is denied, how she gets married (Walter trained everybody in some) (Walter) (No, yar that was later) YWCA (wherever we were practicing in the church, YWCA and then she gets married

L Do you remember any other song from the play?

S This was running – connecting from she was born – then going to school that is denied education – then getting married. And in that play we brought saying Yeshtu karti ya – though we were not clear about dowry and all at that time (I was the mother of

the child). I was really traumatized – I don't know how – everytime that line came (I have a picture if you want to use that?)

L Yes, ofcourse

S You can see Shakun's photo.shobhna who was so big. All trying to ...One line was there

L How did you manage your job and

S I managed it. I was a union representative. Then in 80 –(When did you go to Israel?) 82 I went to Israel. I stayed for six months. (Your great friend has been waiting) I know in South Canara. So this onewith the Union because the Union was so patriarchal and they had only this one thing against the management. No broadening. But here in Vimochana where I used to get the other kind of inputs. ...(She really got radicalized!) I don't know whether I got radicalized (She did away with her lipstick) (more than that) I had to unlearn a lot. Really! For the next two years I did my MA in sociology, because I wanted to – because I came from a Maths background – I decided- I was doing my French at that time _ I left my French and started MA. Because I said – I have to unlearn. Because all these people used to talk such theory (Cries of rubbish) (you used to talk!) I only remember talking Union, Union, Union. So I said I have to unlearn many things- rather than learn those things – I have to unlearn the way I think, because I am very logical – math and that kind of thing. So I had to reorient myself so I did my MA. (...very illogical) She was the first who started working on the computer if I remember. Bangalore never had anything and Vijaya Bank (first one) so 82 I went to Israel and six months I was there. Many things. I actually wanted to stay away but returned. It was a learning process for me also because first of all in Israel I had to write my thesis or whatever my paper and then I had to go to Europe and US meeting different unions. It was really for me I think – I had a lot of time to look at the unions in Europe. It was so different. It was nothing like what I would imagine. I didn't have very clear ...and when I went to US – AFLCIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO) guest –in front of the White House. And it was a mafia really! By then I was quite disillusioned, not actually I had learnt a lot. And then I wanted – I was thinking what am I doing in this Union – you know they are all really CIA. Anyway. We are affiliated to AFLCIO –which was thrown out of India by Mrs. Gandhi. So, anyway. So when I was in Israel – I did not even apply for a US visa. The US Embassy called me and gave me a visa (That's their strategy) They gave me a one-year working visa. When I went to US after their three months of tour and all that – suddenly I get a call from the AFLCIO chairman saying – 'you know you are the first Indian woman who has been granted the George Meanie scholarship –six months in Harvard. And I got a shock. What! What did I do to get it? I didn't do anything. I said No, but I told him I have hardly worked in the Union. Have gone for one election and I won it, that's all. But I am not really done anything. So I told him No, no, no I don't think. He said No, you should be proud and then I am getting a congratulatory call from my Secretary General from Bombay saying Shakun, please don't say no. Because I told him LV (?) – I am really not staying here and also I had other personal plans. So, I said LV

no I am not staying here. I am not taking that scholarship. Any way they were insisting. Every day he would call me. 11.00

Shakun: I was not interested in taking that scholarship. They were insisting. Everyday he would call me. No e.mail or anything, no. Everyday he would call me So then I just ran away. I went to Italy and I stayed for about four-five months there. And I just...I didn't give my address to anybody except my sister in the US. I said don't tell anybody where I am. I mean really, I had other this one. (Madhu – other this ones...very naughty). I mean really, I was really uncomfortable with the position I was in. So anyway, when I can back to Bombay, Femina, I remember, they had interviewed me. Sakuntala Narasimhan did the interview, and she mis...this one. She said something like, "You're not married, do you hate men?" she asked me in the interview. So I said, "I have nothing against men, but I do I have something against marriage." So the way it was printed was, she put it down as, "She loves men but doesn't like marriage" (laughter). (Donna – But she's not wrong!) That's the kind of thing....This was '83 when I came back, and for something like that to happen. What?! (Donna – I like that - she like men but doesn't like marriage). And there was a lot of pressure on me from the union to take a two year sabbatical on full pay. And then they said, organize women in banks all over the country. And they offered me some fantastic terms. So I was really...I mean.. and then again I ran away from the bank. I took one month's holiday and went and met Ela Bhat. Because she was also a fellow of the same institute that I went to in Israel. I think going to Israel was also a plan. So I went to Ela Bhat. And she told me, she said, Shakun, AFLCIO – there is a CIA organisation, and they asked me to give credentials to get them. Those days it was necessary for an American organisation and I refused. They just gave me some small help for one of my units and then they expected me to. When I went to AFSCIO, I saw how they pull people in. I am feeling very uncomfortable. I was quite new. She said, Shakun, I am so glad you came to talk to me, but don't get pulled into this. I can tell you your union is definitely within that whole thing. They are not...what do you want to do? I said, see, they sent me all over the world. I can't just say no. I will do it, but I won't accept their terms. I will do it on my own time. I took loss of pay, I took leave. But of course the bank also used to give me a lot of leave. Because of the union. And I went all over the country, but I didn't accept their terms. I did the organization part of it. And after two years, I said I am not going to stand for elections. By '84, by then I was quite involved with Vimochana, and the actions and everything. So I didn't stand for elections. From '85-95 I had been out of the union, so I didn't stand for elections. I said I would just be a member.

L: How do you see the experience in the union reflecting in the work you are doing now, in terms of organizing sex workers and things like that.

Shakun: It is not only sex workers. It is also women working. Women and work. Really, when you say women working, even in the bank, it's nothing to do with money and what you earn. Whatever you do, it is always a little lesser. Always you are striving to be as good as the men. Even in the best conditions, best working conditions, this happens. In the bank it was very obvious and I had lots of fights. Lots and lots. Apart from the personal cases that they had put against me, apart from that I used to represent the women. And even in the union, I remember in the union, one of the General Body

Meetings when I was the only woman. And I always used to be elected. I have never ever been co-opted. I was always elected. So they were talking about transfer policy. These women want protection, they ...this is the question that happens even today. They don't want to be transferred, a big fight happening. So they all looked to me and said, Shakun, what do you say, how can you expect protection. So I just went up to them and said, all of you have come from different banks. You're not only representing men, you're also representing women. I have been elected, I have been elected by men and women, and if you think I am the only one who should have an opinion on women's transfers, I am going to write an open letter to all the women in all the banks, all the members, saying that I am your representative, don't vote for any men, vote to me. I mean like really, it was so irritating. They expect you to be in the I am going to do that. I am going to send an open letter. I had already sent two-three open letters to women all over. I mean really. They must have considered me as a little bit of a problematic thing. They were quite relieved when I said I won't be part of the Union. And also the Federation split at that time. And I was at the wrong side of justice. So I was very uncomfortable with that. So I just left. I left. I was a member of the Union but I didn't want to hold any position there. And also I was very involved with Vimochana's work by then. I used to – all of us used to do cases those days no everybody and I used to take -most of my leave used to go. By the time I left the bank – I had three and a half years of loss of pay. (Lot of meetings and) But final vindication came from the bank when – just two years before I left. I went to the Union times – General Body meetings – special meetings on women's this one. And then the Bank gave me a letter giving me special leave and said we are very proud of you. They didn't know what they are talking about. (laughs) (.....)So I just left after that. I was in the computer section. I was pretty autonomous even in the bank. And the like with the sex workers now I always felt – there is always you know, even in Vimochana – we have never handled – Women and work we take up lot of times. The very fact that we started with hostels for working women. Then we tried to start a working women's union, remember? (Madhu - Yes WWU working women's union)(Donna: and there was this women's political party also) there were these kinds of leanings towards women and work, but not until 85 when we went to Nigeria – where we looked at equality – what was that slogan? In Nigeria, not Nigeria – Kenya – Nairobi meeting was when we – attended a lot of women and work meetings then because Devaki was doing the DAWN report that time. I was coordinating that in Bangalore. Because of my interest in working women, not working women – women whoever did paid work. That's when this inequality. Like you only look at women and work, but you also look at women working in different contexts, different status, different locations, economic, political – different locations. So that was my interest in work. So when this came around. When I was leaving the bank and I was seriously thinking of doing something in Vimochana. At that time HIV Aids program was – it was so – it was the program to do to get funds. In '90s, no late '90s. It was like when all these HIV groups started. We had a request from Samraksha – 2000 Madhu but I started in '99. So Samraksha had sent a letter saying will Vimochana look at the violence issue because we don't have the capacity to look at the violence issue with the peer workers we are working with. So that's where for two years we just – several groups like Sangama, there was Vimochana, ALF and many groups PUCL. We used to just sit every week – once a week. These women would come. 2000 -2001. (Madhu- When was Meena's courts story) That was 2002 . It was 2001 I remember. I didn't come to the Court thing because

I had gone to some other meeting. So, anyway. So that's when I started. I looked at the women. It took me two years to just not look at them as working - as women and work, but as women who are really marginalized. So that's when - whether it was garment workers, then I was also part of the study of hijras - transgender and sex work. Looking at prostitution from different angles. And then trying to understand what the women needed from us. You can't just intervene in a community and tell them what you want because they were already being told by the HIV movement. So it took two years to really understand what they really needed - form that support group for the women, you know ALF, PUCL and Vimochana. That's when it started. I was also doing - 2002 I was also part of (Madhu - from 70s and 80s to suddenly 2002 uh?) Madhu in the middle many things happened which you will tell. Then

L When was the organization launched formally? Was there a formal launch?

S 2003

L Ok

S 2004 it was named as Sadhana.

L Ok

S Because there was a split in that. About 40-50 women used to come mostly from HIV programs. Then there was a split because they started this concept of CBOs. So suddenly Swati Mahila Sangh became a CBO. So Sangama wanted a - Manohar wanted a union. We said no, we are not ready for a union. Let the women decide. And he said every woman must say that she is a sex worker. We had problems with that. (Donna: First, we have a problem calling sex work). People who accept it as sex work - let them accept it as sex work. But there are lots of people who don't want to accept it (Donna: Many say) So we had lot of those kind of issues and so then it formed up with ALF and PUCL and Vimochana on one side. Manohar of course went ahead - 2005 he started the union. And then Swati Mahila Sangha became a CBO. So that's when

L But you were all together at Karnataka Sex Workers Union?

S Sex Workers Union -No, no that is only Sangama's KSWU- they have transgenders and women

L And Sadhana is only women?

S Only women. They have women, transgenders, kothis, men everybody - different - So that's when it started. Then I was also doing a lot of work with garment workers. You know, I was part of the First Report on garment workers which this Boston group of lawyers - one of them was Chitra - earlier from ALF. She was at Boston at that time and so she contacted GAP and all these people. They didn't have a presence in Bangalore at that time. Now everyone of them has a presence. So they sponsored this study. I remember Babu was heading it - Babu Mathew and several like about eighteen people

were involved. We couldn't go the factories – there was no union at that time. So we went to the homes of the workers – actual garment workers in Nayandahalli, Mysore Road, Bomanhalli. So we went to the homes and did the study for two months. That really opened my eyes also to what we call “women workers” so easily, you know - they are mired in so many so many locations, really. And almost 3 out of 5 women had or had had TB. Things like that, really. And of course 90% were from outside Bangalore – rural areas and so. And then the sex workers came. I was also working at the same time with the women. So that's how it started. Looking at the whole issue of work from the Vimochana perspective on violence – really, I mean like that also. I felt that was a gap. Work is never looked at as violence.

Celine: I think we had a very very concretizing period from the time we took up all these issue of workers – whether a woman or whatever. From that time to making our focus very much on violence against women. Again without – without a

Madhu: We took a long time. I think it just evolved over time.

Celine: And on many issues- which deepened our understanding on issues. Like I, for me this was one of the first dowry deaths. We used to read in the paper – one year we used to be having meetings- nothing emerging. Then we said we will go out and meet. We will read on the third page fourth column –some woman was killed– found hanging or burnt. And the last line will be the police said they think it's a suicide, because they had to break open the door. We used to go to the house where the girl was done to death, hospital, mortuary and nobody was speaking at all – hushing up and things like that. For me one of the cases, which was really like a slap on my face where the father they had kept the girl's picture and all, but they said that is her fate. It seems she had come out saying come and take me back. So they went and said “A girl who has just got married...I don't know, let her stay for more days”. And when then they took her back and they burnt her and she was alive for three days. And we heard the story from the girl's friend. She told about this. When we tried to talk to the father about this they said it was her fate. So for me personally – it was a very this thing to understand- how the parents – very ordinary house – struggled so much – gave everything, you know just accepted saying *Hane bhara* (destiny). So it was more starting to look at the family. Much later it was the panchayat or the religious head. But when it came to the police and the court – it was all very different things. But I think what really helped us and it was very mutual – attending to women in crisis

Celine: It was really opening different doors, you know. So we think we can go to the family and the family wants to close up. They wouldn't come. Then we used to do dharnas and then the police will come and take us – saying you can't take the law into your hands. And they'll take us to the police station. One year I think March 8th decided to do something about police atrocities – not only the Vimochana women and other invitees. People who came to do shopping – it was one utility building – next to Mayo Hall – Everyone was rounded up and taken to different police stations, where we were all (Shakun: That was Brunton roadNo, no.....)

Celine: What happened was, the kind of actions we decided opened many many doors. Every step was learning. You get to see the police so closely, you know. We used to be shivering. Then we learnt that if they keep us for one hour – they are supposed to give us coffee. So we will demand coffee and they are not used to it. Which police station was it? There was some police firing and al. Because we were together- the whole group. Just on the phone– mobilizing people. This is happening here – please come and you'd just see some people over there. I think there was nothing – very clearly for Vimochana it was not like you have an aim, objective, programs – it was not like that. Somebody was in trouble – we heard or we learnt about it and we go over there. Doing blunder things and from then it was a kind of learning ground. (Madhu - 81-82 I think we started responding to individual cases. Before that it was large issues –mobilizing at that level. I wasn't there but I am sure it has gone into our collective history. This whole refugees thing. Corrine was the one who has always got this global international perspective Refugees were ...her first love. There were lots of issues. At that time there used to be lot of Iranian refugees in Bangalore – so I think there was that – you should talk about it because I only heard about it.)

Donna: We had the Indo – Iranian Solidarity something. (demonstration) And in the demonstration there was - the pro Khomeinis attacked the anti- Khomeinis. The anti-Khomeinis . One fellow was stabbed. And everyone went helter-skelter. It ...Central college was at the centre of it.)

Madhu: I remember the first meeting – public hearing which was also in Central College where Ceciliaamma spoke. That was the first public meeting. I remember it so well and I remember thinking - My God we are telling her to talk in the open. I almost had kind of - what' s it going to mean to her? What's it going to mean to everybody? Is it really ...personal is political – that was the time

L What was she speaking about?

Shakun: Her life. She was ..our first case actually. Married to a doctor. I was the one responding to her and I came. Before that she came. Madhu I remember she used to come .) Me and Rajee used to do gone to Horohalii much before you came). No, no I was going there almost every day – Everyday I used to go to Harohalli. I used to go there more often. No I didn't do it but I remember going with Rajee.

L Going back to the case work part dealing with cases, one question I had was with those of you who have been doing it since– you know now about 20-22 years

Celine: My God 30 years

L Have you experienced any kind of emotional burnout and how do you deal with that?

Celine: See this is one of the questions which Delhi group started may be late 80s. Then what had happened was – like Bangalore Vimochana was establishing with its own actions and making our own network within Bangalore. But I think even within

Bangalore, network was not so conscious but we automatically had this network with the other groups. Like Bombay organized something on the first rape thing. And then they organized something on this girl – you know, the film maker Madhushree Datta (Madhu: That was much later) But all things - all this kind of networking which happened was also a kind of input, you know. So you were getting something. This kind of question I would think came late '80s or '85, mid '80 to '90. First time we heard from Bombay group “we are burnt out”. Then we heard Delhi group we can't – the talk was we have to build a movement. You can't be attending to individual cases (Shakun: That was an argument) Because every woman was going through a problem. (Including Ruth) We cannot go on dealing with this thing. Everybody in the group, I mean we didn't have great discussions or conscious kind of 'no, no -we'll do it'. It was a very spontaneous feeling because we knew that by attending to that only we were getting more stronger. And we wouldn't say no we will build a movement and things. I think that was one of the things that nobody (Kalpana: It was also the fact this whole CIEDS value, not value – one of its principles being the praxis approach – I think that informed lot of Vimochana's work. That's why also the fact unless you do these cases you will not be able to inform your whole thinking about it. (Shakun: And you won't be able to change – otherwise you know get fixed in a kind of bind)

Madhu: And our whole understanding of violence and strategy and our ways of responding to violence changed drastically once we started actually responding to it. Before that I response used to be very ok, by, by. I remember this whole thing. Shaming was a strategy. Shanta come out of the situation because her husband used to beat her. Leave him and come. So everyone everybody was most confused why did she go back? Cecilamma then for me it was a personal turning point as far as cases and responding to women – a turning point – traumatizing experience. Before that we used to believe that women are strong and we should empower them. We should tell them to come out of a violent situation. Reject the family. Reject the community – they are all structures of you know patriarchy whatever whatever – we also used to be full of that kind of (Shakun: Structural violence) ya structural violence ..there was an article in Sanghursh structural violence.

Celine: And me and Madhu we were in the film festival, where, Pune and when we heard that Cecilamma died. So I came back, because that year we did a program - I came back, you stayed because you were the organizer. I got into the bus) Also I came back stupid idiot. You had to be there (Madhu: I had to make a presentation and I cried my way through that) I remember I got into a train. What is that – Pam something that girl – Parminder ..organised the film festival . There were different things happening

L How did you deal with activists actually getting emotionally affected? Did you then take turns at it?

Donna: We never got affected. We never got burnt out, believe me. We used to get angry.....and emotionally affected ...emotionally affected. I also feelwe didn't get burnt out.

Celine: I think the emotional kind of trauma like Cecilia's (Madhu: That was really a trauma) because she really died. Speaking like that and she told her children not to tell Vimochana that her husband had come back. It was a slow poisoning case.

Madhu: I remember we had gone. I met the husband that Kamaths – that Kamath at Nrupathunga Road. That was the last meeting I had with the husband and Cecilia. He had come back. He was saying all this kind of thing - how he wants to get back. (She was very very strong) she was already fighting her case. She was already fighting her case. She was fightingcase against her husband. How she came to us? Somebody she met in the courts and she came to us and we were supporting her – going with her to the courts and all that. Then she wanted to start a Vimochana in Harohalli – she was very. I remember the meeting we went in Madras also which Sharda, Chuchu, Cecilia and me. And we have the photographs also, where Cecilia spoke.

Donna: And we worked with students. We used to have lot of public meetings. We also tried to balance our actual crisis interventions with larger campaigns and larger issues. That is the one that keeps – you give up here and you get a lot from the other kind of thing.

Celine: Answering your question, no – this is very much from – we used to discuss these Delhi feminists are a different species. We used to have very much this North – South kind of. Even we have it nowshe refused to speak to groups from the North, so anti ...This question which you asked no, whether we were getting traumatized. This whole thing of that we are getting drained outwe are getting drained out; we are getting burnt out. I was talking with Sandhya and also Bombay groups saying We can't do. But I think because of the point she said – we were doing other kinds of programs which was enriching – we were not getting drained out or anything. I think the most horrible cases gave us the push and conviction also to continue our work.

Shakun: Also it was a little bit of consciousness that we need to keep our self a little vulnerable – otherwise we will not look at nuances which we miss otherwise. After some time what happens – you will just be listening and you are already thinking of solutions. We tried to avoid that, at least, even today.

Donna: One thing ..I don't want the credit now but I can say the work – the sustained work of Vimochana has really changed the environment towards women's issues. To bring it into the public domain. To really challenge the police in their response at various levels. I think that has come about a lot over the years of sustained work.

Celine: Even any issue we took up, no – with the Baldwin school issue and that worker's issue (Donna: I know I became Kashi Ram ..) we used to write and write and next night they will white wash. Same night we'll go off to write – will get white washed.

L What was the Baldwin's issue?

Celine: Worker's issue. Worker versus management. (Donna: Babu Mathew was organizing) and he was writing and writing and they spent so much money writing and whitewashing everyday that solved the problem. Then we decided we have to do

something else. We took the tar – I broke my leg because we were running because the police came in the middle of the night. This was the first time. I had to jump over the fence behind and we used the tar. Then they had to take two days to scrape it like that, you know. Like that even the media when we got involved – media was doing these posters (Madhu - Kashi Nath, Kashi Ram)

Donna: Then the posters of films.

Celine: That was much later. At that time we pulled the poster down.

Shakun: Nowadays we would never ask for a ban on anything.

Madhu: We were behaving like those BJP women.

Celine: By the time we finish in Imperial and come back – they will put up the poster again.And what did they do – strategic part – they put a black sticker here and here (laughter) and that drew more attention.

Shakun: Then we went into much deeper understanding of the media. (Classic classic My god) Which one? March 8th no? It was always used to be a mega event in those days.

[Lots of disagreement about dates and events follows]

Hari is the one who want to plan 20 events at the same time – one after the other –thak-thak-thak-thak was also at that time. No.....87 Prabha Rao ...Kashi Ram ...Begu ..police atrocities – Beggars Home .. Krishna Iyer ..Kashi Ram was much later ...No, no – seven issues we planned (UCC – Union Carbide –Bhopal) We will do a play in that place – tore all the thingsKashi Nath’s film – we decided to go watch the film and after some time but I think we couldn’t. Remember that scene and Chitra went running . We had decided to sit quietly and watch. We bought tickets ..Kalpana ..Majestic ..I remember Kalpana ... I remember we all bought the tickets and slowly we spread out in different parts. We had not planned anything, but we had sent some men to buy the tickets. But what happened. The first obscene scene which came up – Chitra got very emotional sitting in the third or fourth row – She went straight to the screen and said “Stop!!” “Close it” laughter and we were almost mobbed. I ran to Chitra to help her.

Madhu: We were mobbed because they put off the film from the screen. People got angry -the audience got so angry with us because paid Chitra was caught in between Challam was beatenbeaten up. I stoppedThe classic one was – since we are going up and down ...laughter

Donna: Another one was - it was so classic - communal violence. She was from the Christian community in the stomachPrabha Rao ...no ..initially before she ..IPHshe was in VimochanaIt was a riot. There was some this thing – communal riot happened in Begur. This lady goes there- ya between Christians and Hindus– pregnant and all she goes there. She calls all the women to come to her – She is a woman like us

and they all came when she called them. The moment they came to her – she just blew a whistle and gave a signal for the police to lathi-charge. The police went riot – lathi charging all the men. So we took out a huge – this was March 8th – a huge rally – demo.

Madhu: It was really a huge rally right from the main road tothe DGP's office. We went straight inside the DGP office and we called them. This was the best part – a few of us went to meet N.....we said its women's day – we have so many women outside, you know waiting to see you...very thrilled – some women have come inside to call me and all that. He came out – very happy with himself and all that, smiling and very gracious.We did thisplay. We reenacted the wholeno, noI had taken her to the hospital. There were two incidents Shakun

Celine: Prabha used to professionally kick womenthe play wasit was ...Madhuand Prabha was also kicked with the police shining boots and all in Ula. Begur – they beat them with lathi and they really focused onOne of the big things we took up. Ulalu was a slum that was – because they wanted to put up a police research institute. So Nizamuddin [police DGP] comes out....police brutality...He thought he will come out and graciously address all these ladies who have come on March 8ththose days ...perception was ladies...You could see the slow burn. Smile on his face and then some thing happened and Challam got up to say something – something happened and Challam got up. You should have seen that fixed smile – it turned into a snarl. If we were not all around he would have probably shot Challam. [Shakun: He called Challum a drug addict!]. Challam had this beard

Celine: Later that same Nizamuddin – he did speak about with very much high regard. Meeting I rememberafter that new courts complex came – some police meeting – something was there – I remember long back. I think he was still or he had just finished – he was one of the chief guests for that and I remember. I knew about all these things. I knew that he is going to recognize me or something and he said – Oh the firebrand! She has come! You have to be very careful – something like that and all. So though in their tenure they were kind of not very openly in the earlier stages. Later stages I think – Ramalingam, SMS Murthy, Sridharan – we also started working with the higher authorities with the police – training and other things. So that also changed the nature. We were fighting but we..also talked to them. There was a balance ...concerned department laughter ...whether it was the legal body ..laughter ..the judiciary which we continue or with the police, you know or with the management

Shakun: Also IPS officers have learnt to become more suave ...yaThey don't show their true colours...they all are the samebecome more sophisticated.. He was a Commissioner or a DIG Vasant Kumar who will always say that see when ladies come here I will offer them the seat and all and then I will sit ...

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