

Gender Log

Sexual Harassment in Schools: What To Consider as Delhi Police's Operation Nirbheek Is Implemented Citywide

By ISHAN MARVEL | October 14, 2015



DCP Veenu Bansal conducting an Operation Nirbheek session at the Rajkiya Pratibha Vikas Vidyalaya, Yamuna Vihar, Delhi. Operation Nirbheek aims to educate school-going girls about sexual abuse.

In the first week of August this year, the Delhi Police of the north-east district in the city launched an effort that aims to educate children about sexual harassment and abuse, apart from providing them with a platform to report such incidents. The initiative, which was earlier called Operation “*Sakhi*”—friend—has now been renamed Operation “*Nirbheek*”—which translates to “without fear.” Under this programme, police officials visit schools that fall under their jurisdiction and conduct interactive sessions to spread awareness about sexual harassment and crimes.

With the help of *Komal*, a short animated film, produced by Childline India Foundation—a non-governmental organisation that works with the ministry of women and child development—the officials explain the concept of “good touch” and a “bad touch” to school children, and encourage them to report instances of the latter. Thereafter, complaint boxes are installed in each school, for the children to file

written complaints if they want to. A female constable from the local police station is assigned to make weekly visits to the school in order to receive both verbal and written grievances. The police officers at the station then go through all these complaints, and decide the necessary course of action. This entire process is conducted under the supervision of the office of the deputy commissioner of police.

The idea for Nirbheek was reportedly conceived by the deputy commissioner of police for the district, Veenu Bansal. When I met Bansal on 30 September, he told me that Operation Nirbheek had covered around 270 schools of the north-east district. “There has been a deluge—we have received over thousand verbal and over 150 written complaints. Of these, seven were serious complaints, so FIRs [first information report] were registered and arrests made. The victims in these cases were all girls of class fifth to tenth,” revealed Bansal, before concluding that the over-all response from students, parents and teachers had been overwhelmingly positive. “There can be no resistance except from perpetrators,” he declared.

“Most of these crimes are not reported since they are usually committed by acquaintances or within the family,” Bansal told me. “So we are reaching out to the children and providing a conducive forum for their voices.” On 7 October, a standing order was issued by the Commissioner of Delhi Police, Bhim Sain Bassi, to implement Operation Nirbheek across all girls’ and co-educational (co-ed) schools in the city. The order appoints the assistant commissioner of police (ACP) of every sub-division as in charge, to be assisted by the Station House Office (SHO), who will be the chief co-ordinator. It also directs that the SHO appoint a female constable who is “a courteous, disciplined upper or lower subordinate woman police officer as ‘Nirbheek Woman Police Officer’ [NWPO] for each girls’/co-ed school under his jurisdiction.” Further, the order details the duties of the NWPO. In addition to the role noted above, which includes speaking with the girls and handling the Nirbheek Complaint Box, the report also suggests methods that the constable could use to “allow girls to express freely and unhesitatingly,” such as “group plays, projector shows, Natak [sic], speech by participating girls etc.”

The order also states that the DCP of each district will hold monthly meetings to keep a check on the programme, and that the Joint Commissioner of Police for each range will “periodically review the quality of implementation” of Operation Nirbheek. “It was my initiative, and now it has been adopted across Delhi,” Bansal said, with a hint of pride.

Bansal’s enthusiasm for this endeavour is not misplaced. A **nation-wide study on child abuse in India** that was released by the ministry of women and child development in 2007, estimated that nearly 150 million girls and 73 million under the age of 18 have faced one of more forms of child abuse. It further noted that 50 percent of these cases involved a person known to the child. Earlier this month, Justice P S Teji, a judge from the Delhi high court dismissed a plea to quash an FIR against a man who was accused of sexually abusing an 11-year-old boy for three years. As he delivered the verdict, Justice Teji reportedly noted that, “Child sexual abuse is an epidemic.” He also observed that child victims and witnesses were often compelled by circumstances to not bring true facts to the court. In fact, various child rights activists and researchers that I talked to over the course of my reporting, stressed that it is at this point in the process—beyond the reach of criminal law—that the greater problems arise within the social domain, amid the simmering notions of shame and dishonour associated with abuse. After following a particular case reported through Operation Nirbheek, I couldn’t help but wonder whether this ambitious project is sufficiently equipped to engage in a comprehensive manner with the complexity of the issue it intends to resolve.

Shortly after meeting Bansal on 30 September, I spoke to Anand Kumar Mishra, the assistant commissioner of police (ACP), Seelampur. He told me that so far, he had conducted eight or nine sessions at various schools. While describing his methodology for conducting these sessions, he said that he first engaged the children with small talk and techniques to break the ice, before moving on to more serious subject matter. “The main problems are stalking, staring, eve-teasing or passing lewd

comments—so these are also tackled in the awareness sessions. The focus is on reformative rather than punitive action in such minor cases.” When I asked Bansal whether police officers such as Mishra, who were conducting these sessions, underwent a formal training process, he responded by telling me, “We are currently engaging NGOs for that.” The main objective, he said, was to help children report on sexual abuse and related crimes.

“It has been a very satisfying experience, for it feels we are doing something meaningful beyond our regular duties of catching thieves and solving crimes—it’s a beautiful feeling,” Mishra told me during the course of our conversation. Earlier, as I was waiting for Mishra, I spoke to a constable at the station. When I told him that I was writing a story on Operation Nirbheek, he laughed and shook his head, “*Haan, ab sanskaar dene ki duty bhi police ki ho gayi hai.*”—It seems that it is now the police’s job to impart values as well.

The standing order also mentioned that the project’s main focus was to “educate girl students about various aspects of sexual offences of which innocently or inadvertently they [sic] become victim.” The NWPO’s duties too include directions on only interacting with girl students. When I asked Bansal about whether Operation Nirbheek was reaching out to boys to educate them as well, he told me that in the case of co-ed schools, he said that although boys are not excluded, “it is primarily targeted towards girls.” In other words, given this focus, it was unclear how the sessions would deal with boys present for them.

On 1 October, at around 11:30 am, I visited Victor Public School in Maujpur—also in north-east Delhi—which had hosted some of these sessions. The three teachers I spoke with praised the sessions, and claimed that the students in their school seemed more aware about their surroundings afterwards. I was then introduced to two students from the ninth standard—a boy and a girl. The girl told me that she felt safer after the sessions, since her faith in the police had been strengthened. Her classmate sheepishly added that the boys had been asked not to behave like Bollywood heroes who chase girls or indulge in eve-teasing. They both agreed that they now felt more comfortable discussing such matters with their elders. Mukesh Kumari, the lady constable assigned to this school, re-iterated this sentiment. “The kids tell me their problems, and I relay them to my superiors. So far, we haven’t received any serious complaints here,” she stated, before adding, “Once the trust is established, it feels good to speak to the children, *aur ab yeh bhi duty hi hai*—and this too is our duty now.”

On the afternoon of 3 October, I visited Seemapuri police station to meet assistant sub-inspector (ASI) Pista Sharma, the investigating officer for the first FIR that was registered under the Nirbheek. The complainant involved a 15-year-old girl studying in tenth standard at a government school in Dilshad Garden, who had accused her father of sexually harassing her for two years. In her initial complaint, the girl claimed that her father had often tried to rape her and threatened to kill her, and that when she complained to her mother, she was told, “*Jaise main sehti hoon, waise hi tum saho*”—Suffer silently, just as I do.

The case was registered on 12 August, barely two weeks after Nirbheek was launched. ASI Sharma visited the girl’s school the same day, along with Samvedna Singh—the welfare officer from special juvenile police unit (SJPU) for the north-east district of Delhi—and verified the complaint. The girl then underwent counselling with Singh, and was taken to the Guru Tegh Bahadur hospital, which is close-by, for medical tests, before being admitted to the child welfare committee (CWC) ashram in Dilshad Garden. The accused, her father, was also arrested the same day. “But he got bail from Karkardooma district court on 24 August. Now, he is in Tihar jail for some other crime,” Sharma told me.

When I visited the girl's house in Bhopura, Ghaziabad, the door was answered by her younger sisters. They led me inside to speak with the girl and their mother, who is a housewife. "*Kuch nahi hua hai, sab galatfahmi hai,*"—nothing happened, and this is all a misunderstanding—stressed the mother. The girl too dismissed her earlier statement, "It's all a lie, I wrote those things in my diary because I was angry with my father. But my friends saw it, and after the [Nirbheek] session, they convinced me to file a complaint. I didn't think it would come to this," she told me, before bursting into tears and pleading, "Please *aap mere papa ko chhudwa do*"—please get my father released from prison.

The father, who, his wife told me, sells clothes on a pushcart, was taken into custody from the girl's school when he reached there to pick her up as usual. Until his arrest, the family had known nothing of the complaint. "No one from any NGOs [non-governmental organisations] has come to help us. It's becoming difficult to even get one square meal a day—*karza badhte jaa raha hai, aur aas-pados mein jo bezatti hui woh alag*—our debt is increasing, not to talk of the shame we are facing within our community," the mother added. According to the mother, the girl was kept at the CWC ashram from 12 August to 16 August, while the father received bail on 17 August, before being arrested again soon after. The family refused to divulge why he had been arrested again. I asked the girl why she had confirmed her statement to ASI Sharma if it wasn't true. "I was afraid," she replied.

In February 2013, a report titled *Breaking the Silence* that was released by the Human Rights Watch—an international NGO—noted that, "The fear of attracting social stigma can result in families trying to cover up the most horrific treatment of children." It further stated the criminal justice system, from the time the police receive a complaint until trials are completed, requires urgent reform because of "the inconsistency in the way the system currently handles cases." On 5 October, I spoke with Vidya Reddy, who works at the Chennai-based NGO, Tulir Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse. Reddy told me that cases such as that of the girl in Bhopura are all too common. "Justice cannot be served only through the legal form. The idea is to help the child regain a semblance of normality—because most times the victims do not want the offending family member to go to jail, they just want them to stop," she explained. Reddy also stressed the need for psycho-social support within the community, lamenting that "We simply don't have enough qualified people who can appropriately address sexual violence cases, and the social factors beyond institutional frameworks." Other factors that add to the problem, she said, are what she calls the "conspiracy of silence in the great Indian family" and its "distorted understanding of sexuality."

On 8 October, I visited Madhu Mehra, the executive director of the Delhi-based research organisation, Partners for Law in Development (PLD) at its office in Jangpura Extension. The PLD has, in the past, worked extensively with child rights activists, victims of child abuse and their families. While discussing the Bhopura case, she elaborated on the folly of relying entirely on criminal law in the absence of quality support services and welfare systems. "The law can't be lenient—it is a grave crime! The parent may be arrested or the child removed to a protection home—the conditions of which are abysmal. The only exit then would be denial," She added, "One can't leave the victim in a vulnerable situation again—most times, people aren't even aware about things like victim compensation. The situation needs to be dealt with on case-by-case basis."

When I discussed this case with DCP Bansal over the phone, he told me that the girl had testified before a magistrate at Karkardooma district court. "But these things happen—witnesses turn hostile—and we tackle such cases accordingly," Bansal said. "We already have DLSA [Delhi State Legal Services Authority] on board, and we are trying to integrate more people, such as professional counsellors and NGOs for comprehensive action." I asked the DCP what the next steps in the process would be. After some probing, he said, "Among other things, we are looking to ensure victim compensation, but it is currently in process."

In September, when I had first met Mishra, I had posed similar questions to him. As we sat in the cramped cloak room of the Jaffarabad police station—surrounded by police uniforms on hangers hung at varying heights across the room, haphazardly placed desks, a tiny fridge, and a cot—I asked him if he could comment on the silence that is characteristic of most cases of child sexual abuse in India. He in turn asked me if I had read the work of the Hindi poet Ramdhari Singh Dinkar. I said I had. “Dinkar has a line,” Mishra said, “*Jo tattasth hain, samay likhega unka bhi apraadh*”—History shall indict even those who watched from the sidelines.

LINK : <http://www.caravanmagazine.in/vantage/sexual-harassment-schools-delhi-police-operation-nirbheek>