Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Women stand at India Gate in New Delhi, India, at the launch of a national campaign on the prevention of violence against women Oct. 2, 2009. (Wikimedia Commons/Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India)



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As the year 2021 ended, my heart was overwhelmed with feelings of gratitude and appreciation, especially as I considered my encounters with the marginalized women with whom I work and relate. I have been inspired by many of their stories about how they face life's challenges with determination and resilience.

At the same time, I empathize with a few other women who are feeling hopeless and helpless as they struggle to cope with their day-to-day challenges. These women have resigned themselves to their current situation, even to the point of being unwilling to accept any help. Seeing them in this state of constant helplessness intrigued me, and I sought to understand this situation in order to reach out to them.

Psychologists Martin Seligman and Steven Maier developed the concept of learned helplessness. It is a mental state that occurs after a person has experienced a stressful situation repeatedly. They come to believe that they are unable to control or change the situation, and so resign themselves to it, to the extent that they would no longer try, even when opportunities for change are available. This is manifested in behavioral traits such as low self-esteem, low motivation, low expectations of success, less persistence, refusal to ask for help and the inability to handle situations.

Such experiences of learned helplessness are multifaceted for average Indian women, beginning with their early childhood and continuing as they mature into adulthood. Their manifestations of learned helplessness start early in life. Their disadvantageous position begins in the family because they are born as girl children, resulting in both obvious and subtle forms of inequality regarding food, clothing, education and household chores — all of which seem to reinforce and legitimize discrimination against them.

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In later life, women have few choices in deciding their marriage, and in bearing and rearing children. They face neglect and ill treatment from their spouses, and this continues even as they age. Unfortunately, instead of seeing the true reality that they have been made to suffer through no fault of their own, women internalize

these sufferings and blame themselves for it. I recall a painful episode when a woman shared her experiences of domestic violence in her marriage. She said things like "it's all because of me" and "I have to live with it because there is no solution to it."

When I began to understand her situation through the lens of learned helplessness, I became less judgmental about her. Instead, I learned to listen to her sharing without being in a hurry to suggest possible solutions to her problems. In the process, she was learning to grow out of her state of learned helplessness and I was learning to grow in patience.

Another example was a woman who owned a roadside tea stall, a member of our social outreach center's vendor income generation program. Despite her tireless efforts, she faced repeated setbacks in her business. She became too discouraged and nearly gave up on the business.

With my experiences of a similar nature with other women, I understood that offering her alternatives wouldn't help, for she was in no mood to listen. I resisted the temptation to offer her any advice. Instead, I invited her to attend a few programs organized by our social outreach center here in Mumbai. She came. Over a considerable length time there was a transformation within her — her outlook about herself and her micro-business changed for the better. Later, she shared how the good doses of positive affirmation received during the group sessions helped her evolve into a self-confident woman. The importance of affirmation was an important lesson I learned from this instance. I also learned that learned helplessness can be unlearned!

Considering these experiences awakened in me a paradigm shift in my attitudes and actions as a woman striving to work with these women. The paradigm shift in attitude was from a *giving* mode to a *being* mode, where understanding the core of the issues is more important than being judgmental towards these hapless women. Another part of the paradigm shift convinced me to use the power of affirmation to enable these women to move from hopelessness to hope. It also led me to action: I now design programs — aimed chiefly at adolescent girls — that address the thought processes, belief systems, self-concept and the various subtle forms of patriarchy that operate in human interactions.

Today, I understand that reaching out to women cannot be at a superficial level, and my call is to get to the core of these issues — namely, learned helplessness. A

challenging task, but this is the need of the hour!