

Visit of the project in February 2016: “Bottom-up non-violence in action”

On this year’s visit of the project I was accompanied by a group of seven dedicated Swiss women.

We had the opportunity to gain insight in all the different fields of activity of CEWAS:

We talked to people concerned, whose cases have been dealt with at CEWAS, attended a meeting with group leaders from about 30 different villages and had discussions with women’s groups in two villages.

Case studies: “Patience and Persistence”

We meet with about 20 women at the CEWAS drop-in centre. The women recount under which circumstances they searched for help at CEWAS and what kind of support they received.

Several women have witnessed domestic violence as a result of alcohol abuse. Allegedly in most cases the men could be convinced not to batter their wives any longer. Some of them agreed on being sent to a rehab centre. According to CEWAS leaders, alcoholism seems to be the foremost problem. Through counselling of the affected families, violence can be reduced, however, alcoholism cannot be stopped.

One of the villages shows growing numbers of precipitated school enrolment. Teachers fear to lose their jobs, unless they have sufficient pupils and therefore put pressure on parents to either falsify the children’s date of birth or to force premature enrolment. The fact that the age of enrolment does not accord with the birth certificate can lead to tremendous problems later on. By means of writing letters, CEWAS has been trying to stop such habits. This can lead up to suing teachers.

Other women recount disputes concerning possession with their parents-in-law either linked to widowhood or dowry claims for young brides. In such cases CEWAS works at the base and convokes the parties concerned to find a solution.

Sathya, the coordinator of the field missions, has been working for ten years for CEWAS. She points out that such case studies are quickly told, however, there is always a long story behind them. There are cases with which the CEWAS workers have to work on a daily basis: a lot of phone calls, meetings with different groups in the village, at the drop-in centre or at the police station.

CEWAS allegedly needs a lot of perseverance and patience, which pay on the long run.

Visits to villages: “It’s a place where you can tell anything”

The Swiss women are surprised about how openly women of the CEWAS group talk about their problems. In many instances these are family problems which would under no circumstances be discussed with others. Family issues are regarded as family secrets and, if ever they become known publicly, can harm the family’s reputation considerably. This open way of communicating was inexistent ten years ago, when the project first started. In the course of the years, the women have learnt to name problems and trust the group – knowing that whatever has been said will remain within this group.

Analakshmi, a leader with longstanding experience with NGOs, has been working for CEWAS for two years and appreciates the open atmosphere of the discussions. She claims to have learnt a lot herself in that respect.

Sathya, who has worked with the village groups for the longest period, is very familiar with them. She is convinced that due to this culture of communication the rate of suicides amongst women could be reduced in the villages. She claims that CEWAS offers solutions to formerly considered hopeless situations.

CEWAS’ strengths: “Bottomup non-violence in action”

Saravana reports that some of the regional NGOs have tried to imitate the CEWAS approach, however, most of them are said to lack the local foothold. It’s the village women who work for the women in the villages. She says that it is not sufficient to pay one or two visits to the villages to lecture about women’s rights. What distinguishes CEWAS is the fact that they are constantly present. CEWAS does object to using violence, however they are persistent in their gentle way. Persistence,

perseverance and patience as well as the local foothold are the pillars of a non-violent approach as defined by Ghandi. Moreover, they lead to sustainable changes within the CEWAS group.

Staff's feedback to our visit

"Through your visit we feel supported and happy."

"More people come to see our work and spread the word about our work. This makes us feel that our work is important."

"We like our work. Through these ten years we have managed to change some people's lives."

"We are surprised how flexible you people are and adjust so well to our food and clothes."

Visitors' feedback

"I'm utterly convinced by the project, mostly because it works on grassroot level and commits itself to people's needs, without wanting to change things that foreigners might appreciate. A strong point of the project is, that women from the villages act as leaders and that no people from outside should assume these roles. I was also highly impressed by the women's perseverance, be it the leaders who start a new women's group or the participants who are then to solve the problems and fight for their rights. In my opinion it is an excellent example of empowerment and a starting point to change things within a society."

Nathalie Peyer, March 2016

Translated by Marie-Anne Pinheiro