#16DaysOfActivism

Safety Circle

December 10, 2020

Recommendations on countering gender-based violence from Tibetan Barefoot Counsellors

Background
Barefoot counsellors are trained grassroots women leaders from the Tibetan community in India who use counselling as a tool for social change and promote positive living, reaching out to women in vulnerable situations. Since 2018, fifteen counsellors have been identified and trained in Karnataka’s TDL Bylakuppe settlement (estimated to have a population of over 70,000 Tibetans and the second largest settlement of Tibetan refugees in the world outside of Tibet, after Dharamshala).

The role of the counsellors in this settlement is to provide psychosocial support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, across different camps, including:

- Providing psychological support to the aggrieved woman
- Supporting and strengthening women in building self-confidence, self esteem and self-respect
- Referral of extreme cases to other agencies
- Facilitating workshops and meetings to create awareness on the issue of GBV in the local communities

The counsellors use standardised modules and referral mechanisms to provide and assist with the above. They have so far organised street plays, provided support to over 100 individuals, offered positive parenting counselling to over 60 parents, and couples’ counselling to over 70 couples.

Context
The Martha Farrell Foundation and the Central Tibetan Administration have had a long standing partnership to address the issue of gender and countering gender-based violence in schools, colleges and settlements.

On World Human Rights Day, and the last day of the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence, the Martha Farrell Foundation held a Safety Circle with 15 Tibetan Barefoot Counsellors from the Karnataka’s TDL Bylakuppe settlement.

The objective of the conversation was to gauge the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence in their world of work, the challenges they face in performing their tasks as
counsellors, and using a participatory approach, develop recommendations on a safer, more secure future of work for them.

Over the course of the conversation, the various challenges faced by the counsellors and their recommendations for safer, healthier and challenge-free workplaces emerged.

**Challenges Faced by Tibetan Barefoot Counsellors in their World of Work**

- Lack of private, safe spaces to hold counselling sessions with clients. This leads to fewer stories being shared and a larger threat of intimidation in public spaces.
- Clients are mostly unwilling to speak up about the issue they are facing. Counsellors are not trained to find ways to gauge the extent of the issue by coaxing responses from them.
- Counsellors face emotional fatigue in listening to the stories of the women they work with all day and all night. Measures to manage their mental health are not available to them.
- As they are not professional facilitators, counsellors are unable to share solutions to the issues that the women they work with face, they are only able to listen and provide emotional support.
- Counsellors often have to work over time, despite the fact that there are set session hours, because clients share their stories and it’s hard to break them off mid conversation. This impacts the counsellors’ ability to meet their other clients, and affects their schedule.
- Counsellors often become subject of gossip and given how small their community is, this impacts their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Often, the husbands of the clients counsellors work with are around when they are providing counselling services, and that becomes extremely stressful. Sometimes, counsellors also feel afraid for their personal safety as the men sit in the household and their wives share their stories. The men’s body language can also feel threatening at times.
- The clients are often unable to meet the counsellors without their family or husbands present, which makes them very scared, threatened and unable to actually share their challenges and stories freely.

**Recommendations for Safer Workplaces for Tibetan Barefoot Counsellors**

- Each counsellor must be trained to read and write, and given resource support and expertise to be able to offer solutions and ways forward to the women they counsel.
- Each counsellor should be trained on refined communication skills to be able to conduct sessions properly.
- Counsellors should be trained thoroughly on the laws that can help protect them in cases of instances of sexual and gender based violence in their world of work.
- Counsellors should be provided safe spaces where they can counsel the women without interruption or threat.
- Counsellors should be trained on being able to ensure continued protection of the women they work with, even after their counselling session is over.
- Counsellors must be given a set of clear guidelines and framework for reference in their world of work, so that they are able to support the women better, avoid putting their clients in danger and keep themselves out of risky situations, as well.