

ON ACHIEVING AS A WOMAN IN INDIA: AN INTERVIEW

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Anu Peshawaria is a former tennis champion and a practicing lawyer who works for women's rights in India. She has won many awards for her achievements in tennis and "as a lawyer assisting women in distress." She came to the Philippines with her sister, Ms. Kiran Bedi, who, like her, is an achiever and won the Magsaysay Award for Community Service in 1994. We have edited the interview such that what follows is substantially what Ms. Peshuwara has to say, in her own voice, about her life and work.

My childhood in our country was very unique. We are four sisters; my parents have no son so growing up was very different for us. We were treated as persons, not as boys or girls. We were given the opportunity to do whatever a man could do so our childhood was very different. I am the youngest of four children, the youngest of the four sisters. Therefore I had a lot of love and affection from both parents and my elder sisters. Normally, everything that these sisters would do could be improved upon so that anything that my parents could find that could be improved was always offered to me because I was the youngest.

New Delhi is a very, very interesting city and it is very advanced. We have all the facilities that you find in the West... and we have all kinds of chances for women to come up, that is, if they

are willing to work hard, doubly hard. We were taught right from childhood to be achievers in our life and all the time. Every evening, our father used to ask us about what special thing we had achieved for the day.

With regard to my parents' influence, well, we are a product of what our parents have taught us. Our father belonged to a very rich ancestral family. However, his father, my grandfather, used to want to give money to our father only if he would listen to his (my grandfather's) whims and fancies which my father did not want to do. My father wanted to bring up his children in his own way. He did not want to marry us off like other parents in India would do. If he did so, he knew that any amount of money would not secure his daughter's future. However, the education given to her would be a kind of... we call it dowry in India... would be a better dowry for her, for his children, because it would last them a lifetime whereas money could be taken away and it has no value at all. This was what was taught to us by our father.

My mother used to accompany me on all my tennis tournaments when I was in the 18th and 19th years of my life, when I played match after match every week—in India, in Europe, in America, in Canada, in Mexico. I travelled all over the world and all over India, in the suburbs of each and every city and won tournaments every week. My mother used to accompany me and she looked after me so much. She used to take care of my food, look after my board and lodging. She used to literally press my legs when they used to hurt. That's the kind of dedicated mother my sisters and I have. My father's guidance was always with us and my mother's constant support. So it would be very difficult to choose which of my parents has shaped my life more... I think it's a combination of my mother and father. Without either of them I could not have achieved being the country's number one tennis player at the time; also I could not have won tournaments all over the world.

I did have an opportunity to know my grandparents but since I was the youngest in the family, I had very little time with my grand-

parents. But whatever little I remember of them was that my grandparents were very aristocratic and belonged to a very wealthy family back in Punjab, and they had all the facilities in life. However, they wanted to dominate their children and guide them to do things the way they wanted them done. So therefore at that stage, I felt that my father was right, because he brought us up in a different way. That is why we are different today, and we... all of us... are able to decide for ourselves and achieve in life what we want to. I think that is the biggest thing that we all have, that is, we can choose our own careers, we can decide to spend how much time we wish to on our careers, and it's all our decision. Our parents have made us very independent. My aunts, uncles, cousins... they do play a role in my life in that we kind of differ from them quite a bit..... Their bringing up is more of the usual kind so, in a way, we're quite different from them. I feel that their influences were there but we chose to be different.

I attended a school called Sacred Heart Convent in Amritsar which is in Punjab. It was a wonderful school because the teachers were all nuns. We had a convent education and now I feel that it contributed a lot in forming my consciousness. What I liked most in my school was the moral education classes which we used to have. And we were taught how we were to behave to our parents, to our family, to our neighbors and how to be good. That was the education which we had in the formative years of schooling. So, those qualities have gone a long way in making us help others and in doing good to others. There were a lot of teachers who, I know, influenced us and most of them came from Germany. They were all very patient and kind with us, and those qualities I found very endearing.

I did not go to a co-educational school; however, since I was a tennis player, I had been travelling with men from a very young age and usually I was the only girl in a contingent of large numbers of boys. So I really could relate to boys very well and I had absolutely no problem with gender differentiation. However, in our

country, we did not face any gender differentiation. If a woman wanted to come forward and achieve, there was nothing to stop her. But it was she herself who had to make that decision.

My college years were spent in St. Stephen's College, New Delhi...but I had very little time to attend to regular college or regular school because I was a professional tennis player. So I used to keep travelling and I used to be in time merely to take my examinations. So my college years were usually spent travelling and playing tennis, and I used to win laurels for my College... and the College used to help me by allowing me attendance privileges, for the period that I was absent. Well, in college I was usually very impressed with the teachers. I wanted to do a lot of studying, but each time I could not be regularly available so therefore I had not so much of closeness with my immediate teachers. But whichever teachers I had, I remember I used to interact with them during my examination period. They would say "this girl comes after playing matches for the whole year but she comes back and still takes a first in the examination" which they used to say that they were very proud of. So then they used to give me credit for attendance; that's when I thought that sports combined with education makes a complete person because the education that we get in sports is all practical training. All the moral education which we were taught in school was very, very easily available to me on the tennis court because I used to experience each and every thing which I would read in the book. That practical experience went a long way. It's like when you shake hands after losing a match—that means that you are a very courageous person who can take defeat very courageously and come back again from the depths. You know when you're losing that you can come back again from defeat and you can change defeat to victory. These are the kinds of values which we learn through sports. So those values which we have through sports were the points I learned during my college years.

The present career which I launched myself into came through a very strange stroke of coincidence. I wanted to go totally into

professional tennis. However, my career came to a sudden halt because I developed a spiral disorder and I was advised by the doctors to discontinue playing tennis totally. In the beginning it came as a very big shock to me because I was at that moment being taken by Canada into their team and I was to have gone there to play professional tennis and to play the American circuit. So it came as a very big shock to have a sudden end to my developing career. So here I was—used to being at the top all the time, used to being recognized, when all of a sudden my tennis came to a complete halt. I found myself in a very big dilemma—wanting to do something yet not being able to because tennis was my career. At that time I decided that I must do something different which would bring me some more satisfaction in my career. I became a banker; I worked for a bank for quite some time. But during that time I felt that my mind was not very well exercised because I knew that I had more capabilities and I wanted to do something which would be more interesting and would benefit a larger group.... would benefit the country at large. That's why I set on this other task of legal advising because I had a first class in law also.

Side by side with my tennis I had continued with my academic career and I had got my law degree. I decided to put the law degree to work. That's how I came into contact with a lot of women who were distressed; who used to come to me with all sorts of problems—and I used to find many places in law and many, many loopholes where I felt that a woman could not... would not find herself a loser. Helping these women get a better deal and win their cases gave me a very strange sense of confidence. For each and every woman who would come to me, I would try to get her either maintenance from her husband or help her with whatever problem she came with—whether she wanted a divorce or whether she wanted to get back with her husband; it depended on what exactly she wanted, what security she wanted for her children. I used to strive to achieve that for her through my law degree because I could fight out her cases in court and fight against gender discrimination wherever I found that. So this is how I launched myself into my

present legal career and through this I started helping women into achieving what they wanted to get because there was always some discrimination in the law. There was always discrimination because of the cultural background. So to make them come to an equal level, I used to fight for women's rights and privileges through the legal aid board and defend their cases in courts of law.

The women's issues that I deal with are usually what you call in your country battering of women by their counterparts, the males; sometimes it is by the father-in-law or mother-in-law, because in our country when the woman goes to a home when she gets married she deals with the whole family, she doesn't deal with only her husband. She deals with the parents of the husband, sisters of the husband, the brothers, etc. All of them, when the woman gets married in our country, have a lot of desire to get money from her, gifts from her. So with all that in the mind, if she doesn't give enough to satisfy them, they'd deal with her differently. Many of them have beaten the women, some others have even gone to the extent of treating her with mental cruelty, so as to drive her to commit suicide. While in other cases, they have even murdered her. So there are so many cases of bride burning and many other cases like that which happen in our country.

Some women's issues are also a little higher because those issues relate to the custody of children... whether a woman who's earning as much as her husband is entitled to the custody of the child. Whether she has property rights along with the property rights of the husband; if there's a difference of opinion and if she's thrown out of the house, what are her rights? These are the kinds of women's issues that I deal with.

As far as the first issue is concerned, if a woman commits suicide in our country, we have a law that if, before seven years of marriage, the woman dies under shrouded circumstances, the onus of proof will go against the husband. He has to prove otherwise—that he has not murdered her. So that makes a lot of difference.

This is a new law in our country that if, before seven years of marriage, she is found dead in circumstances which they cannot explain, the direct evidence is that the husband and the parents-in-law have connived to make this happen. Unless they prove otherwise.

In other women's issues relating to husband and wife problems, we also have a very good law in our country relating to mental cruelty. Now what is mental cruelty? It is described as inflicting cruelty on a woman's mind, to drive her to commit suicide. It should be something of such a magnitude as would drive her to commit suicide and that could be anything. So if it is proved that there is mental cruelty on the part of the husband or the in-laws, the woman can go to court and fight the case under the Indian penal code and the man can be convicted with seven years imprisonment. That is another issue which we take up in court.

The third issue relates to the dowry problem which we sometimes face. When a woman gets married she brings gifts for her in-laws; that is prohibited by law in our country but yet through the back door sometimes these articles and these gifts are given. At that moment the woman brings them as her own gifts along with herself. However, if there's a difference of opinion she can take them back and if it is proved that a dowry has been taken by the in-laws, again they can be convicted under the dowry prohibition act. So there are issues, there are laws for women but the most difficult problem in our country is to get the women to come forward, to come so these can be explained. The woman is afraid of breaking up the home, or of problems which may crop up with the husband after she raises these issues because she feels sometimes socially insecure without a man. This is the difference which we feel, so therefore in dealing with women's issues we require a lot of counselling. We need to tell them that if the husband does not understand your problem it's not worth it; the woman must come forward, raise an issue and be equal with her husband. We tell them that by raising an issue they would not be losing anything; they

could gain their husbands' confidence and they could be together still, but they should still not compromise on certain issues like battering, etc. and they could decide not to.

So, many a time, once these counselling sessions are done, I have brought many husbands and wives together by explaining to them many other issues where there is no use of breaking up because of the children, because the children lose a lot in the bargain. The husband and wife could go either way, but the children are the biggest sufferers. By explaining these things from personal experience to the parents, in many cases I have been able to successfully bring the couples together again. This is one very strange thing because lawyers usually like to have a fee for breaking up homes; they don't get anything if they bring husband and wife together but sometimes my conscience does not permit me to make a divorce happen. If I find that there's a chance of them reconciling, I spend more time and help them reconcile because of the family, because of the children.

In my case, I got married when I was about 21 and it was definitely a traditional Indian wedding. By traditional, I mean just the religious ceremony; there was no dowry and none of these other things but definitely some gifts. My husband's family did not object—they had a lot—but some gifts were given to them. It was not some form of a dowry but because I was marrying into the family, some gifts were distributed, etc. Now, at that moment, when you get married you have your own earnings and you buy things together. That was the kind of marriage we had. We did not have that other kind of traditional marriage where the people demand one thing after another. It was not like that. My husband is in the hotel business. He's also a lawyer. We met in law college where we were together but his career interests are more into the hotel line, into the corporate side. He's into corporate law, he's an MBA in corporate law.

What did he feel about me having a career? Well, he seems to be happy about it at the moment but I am the kind of woman who

doesn't give anybody a choice. I like to do what I want to do and he likes that; he's with me and if he's with me that means that he must be liking it. That's how it is, but yes, I feel that I have a double burden to maintain but I like it very much. I made my choices and I stick to them.

I have only one son and he's six years old. He's now growing up and I'm very close to him because he notices and he looks for redefinition from all of us. He's very, very close to me and is very protective of me. He sees me as a busy lawyer in Delhi. He knows that I have less time for him. However, I see that all his needs are met, including his tennis, his studies, so that he gets all opportunities like any other child... he would not miss any. I would like to make him a tennis champion, if he shows interest in tennis, which he's doing already and I would like to send him to the best tennis academy in the world. That's why I work very hard so I can earn enough for him... he knows that. At a young age of six, he understands me very well. He understands why I have a little less time for him, because again he understands that this is because "my mother is working for me." He feels very proud of us. He's very proud of me.

I look after my son independently. As you see, he's with me in the Philippines. Yes, we've come together. Wherever I travel he is with me. I spend time with him a lot even when I'm doing my legal cases. I see that he sits there sometimes just to learn if he wants to take it up as a career. So in these experiences I feel that marriage is companionship and as long as you value each other, that's as long as marriage should really last. I started raising a family about five years after the marriage but I had a problem in raising a family because I had a spinal disorder... so the doctor advised me not to have a family. However, I still went ahead and decided to have one child because I felt that I would want very much to be a mother.

The values which I would like to transmit to my son are exactly those qualities which I value most. Among them are that you

must value each and every thing that you get in your life and you must be very humble, very patient and the more success you have, the more humble you should get. These are the kinds of values he's already learning. And to respect your elders because your elders have more knowledge and are able to give it to you. The dream which I have for my child is that he should be a very good person because he may achieve the best in the world but yet being a good person is the most important thing, and he should learn good values. He should have a moral education; that's why I put him also in a convent school—in St. Columbus school in New Delhi, where again he's learning the same values which we learned when we were children.

Back to the women's movement in India—it has become a very, very major issue nowadays. There are so many NGOs; the women's organizations have taken over the country by storm. These legislations which I was telling you about are all recent enactments. They were all done because of the women's movement which has taken up these issues in our country. I also represent the National Commission for Women. And I am the legal adviser of several women organizations in India and that's when some cases are referred to me when they find there is discrimination. I fight those cases on merit. Sometimes I even go behind the enactment of law and talk to the judges on the issues of the spirit of the law and in such cases I'm able to get justice for women.

Apart from the questions in the parliament which are being raised now on property rights. I think that we're really looking forward to a lot more changes coming. In fact, we have something called the Crime against Women's Self all over the country, where a woman can go in times of distress and lodge a complaint. And that complaint, if she wants to take it back, she could also do so and be reconciled with her husband. So sometimes it helps, because if she complains, the man knows that there is an addressing forum where she can go. Many a time, reconciliation takes place and they go back home happily but sometimes it ends up more in

that she gets her rights through the court. So the Crimes against Women's Self works as a medium between the court and the woman in distress.

At the least I would say that in our country, the women at the top are really progressing because probably they are in charge of their lives; if they want to remain at home and be housewives and achieve nothing else, they can do that also. They have a choice but they have to work doubly hard, that is for sure. Because sometimes in building a home a woman has to look after her child—the way she looks after the home is usually different. A man contributes in his own kind of way, but a woman must have to shoulder much, much more responsibility if she wants to achieve and if she wants to become a special person and not a non-achiever in life. I know because I am the President of the Delhi Police De-Addiction Center and the Managing Director of the Sports organization. I have two jobs in the country. In my vacations and when I'm off for more work, I combine so many things and I'm able to combine them very beautifully. So it's not that we cannot do anything. We can provided we want to. So we make our choices. Women in India do have the opportunity, it's not that they don't. They have the opportunity; they can make a choice. It all depends on the individual person. There are some people who would work in the office and they regret it because of not having time to spend at home, but there should be a choice. They should have no regrets about it. They should stick to their decision: O.K., if I'm working in an office I'll spend less time at home. Then they should be happy about it. That's where I find the difference between a positive woman and a negative woman.

I'm not just talking about women in the city. I'm also talking about the women in the villages; they also have land to plough and can work. They don't necessarily have to stay at home and just make food for their husband. They can do something. Of course, it's simpler for the women, who are not living in the villages—who work much much harder than the women in the cities, be-

cause they're ploughing the fields day in and day out. These laws which we are helping to make are going to go a long way in protecting the interests of those women because through education they would come to know there are these laws.

Among the more enlightened, the husbands do help when the woman does not have domestic help. But it's not a problem getting domestic help; I know because I have domestic help. I work so that's how I am able to manage. And then we have very good family support; my parents are at home so they are able to look after my son. That helps a lot.

Are the women in my generation better off than those of my mother's generation? You see when we talk about my mother's generation, I have a feeling that it's a wonderful comparison, because if my mother were not there, I would not have achieved today as much as I have. This was because she was at home to help me achieve. So I would say that my mother's generation in itself was very good. Also, they have to wait for us, you see, because I feel that if she is there she stays that way. At the same time we have progressed so much that we are able to set trends for the future. So I feel that in no way was my mother's generation worse or disadvantaged. It has had its advantages, just as every generation has its own advantage and its own contribution.