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Dina and Yamuna have just given you a glimpse into the bright side of Krsna consciousness. I'm here to tell you of my experiences. From Yamuna's talk we can understand Prabhupada's equal treatment of his male and female disciples. As in all of his dealings, he acted in accordance with the teachings of ancient, sacred scriptures, and set the example for his international movement. It is an unfortunate fact, though, that some men in the Krsna consciousness movement did not take up Srila Prabhupada's example with regards to dealings with women in ISKCON.

I joined ISKCON in 1975 after a serious search for truth. Srila Prabhupada was not to be with us much longer, and access to him by this time was limited. But I was happy to participate in the movement. I couldn't think of a better way to express my appreciation to Srila Prabhupada for bringing transcendental, blissful knowledge of Krsna, God, than to try to share it with others. And others were happy to receive it. The spiritual exchange I experienced in giving Krsna consciousness to others was so wonderful I decided to focus on this work and nothing else. At this time I had little reason to interact with males in ISKCON, and I didn't notice the situation of other women in the Krsna consciousness movement. Quite frankly, I was young, naive, and oblivious.

But circumstances in my life changed. Soon I had a son and shortly afterward became a single parent. I found myself executing managerial duties, moving in ISKCON's male-dominated managerial hierarchy. My position and abilities were unwelcomed publicly, and males especially threatened by me tried to remove me from my responsibilities through politics. Initially I thought I was just dealing with a local problem, but the situation became so acute it became evident that the obstacles before me were due to my being a woman in ISKCON.

All of a sudden one day I had a shocking vision of just how askew the whole situation was for women in ISKCON. This was in the early '80s, and I began contemplating my years in ISKCON and what I had seen and experienced. Examining my experiences led me to believe that chauvanism in ISKCON was not only prominent, it was a serious problem. The living arrangements at the various temples I stayed at were almost all inferior than the men's. Women were not allowed to give the lectures. Whenever women were discussed in classes it was inevitably with reference to them being less intelligent and objects of enjoyment whom men were to dispise. In fact, in the late '70s and through the '80s there was rarely a positive, wholesome reference to women in public forums within ISKCON. The mind-set formed by the constant negative references to women developed a social atmosphere that could only lead to problems. Women had inferiority complexes that led them to silence and acceptance of unhealthy relationships. Women were barred from certain temple worship functions. Certainly I didn't see any women in a position of managerial responsibility extending beyond the kitchen, the nursery, or the altar. In every sphere women were barred by unspoken laws instituted by male leaders. And those laws were not placed by Srila Prabhupada, nor supported by scripture. Rather, in my tracings of the history of female

oppression in ISKCON, it was instituted and enforced by men in the movement and it was only counterproductive.

I began speaking with senior women around the movement and traced back to when women were made to stand in the back of our temples, when they were stopped from speaking the scriptural lectures. How they were barred from ever entering the managerial levels of the movement. I saw and heard about abuses to women in marriages which men justified based on the prevalent understanding of women as unintelligent, untrustworthy and possessions of their husbands.

The more women I spoke to, tracing history and current events, the more I saw a very grave situation in ISKCON. The social ills for the women, children and family were undeniable. The commonly accepted view of a woman in ISKCON left the ladies insecure, without any self esteem, and in the words of one man who astutely judged the situation, "systematically de-empowered." I saw many unhealthy marriages; many not lasting. Some female children didn't like being girls because they were prohibited from certain activities they liked; and male children were sometimes punished by being made to stand in the back with the women--a fate very embarrassing for them. One day my 10-year-old son told me he didn't have to listen to his teacher because she was a woman. I couldn't say with absolute knowledge how rampant the problems were; I just suspected it was very widespread from visiting ISKCON centers around the world and being fairly well-connected around the movement. Something had to change.

From my studies and knowledge of Prabhupada's teachings I determined that none of the chauvinism I experienced in ISKCON had a basis in what Srila Prabhupada taught us by his words and actions, nor were they supported by scripture. The prevailing attitudes seemed to be a misunderstanding of how to apply principles of renunciation and separation of male and female for spiritual benefit of both of them. It seemed to me that certain males had their own agenda for position in ISKCON. Some men, though earnest about their spiritual vows of renouncing the world, ignored the needs and rights of others. Some men were probably chauvinists before they arrived at ISKCON's door, it appeared so engrained in them, and some people just didn't seem to have any common sense about how to apply strict spiritual teachings within a social structure of males, females and children.

But whether the reasons for the problems were innocent or profoundly calculated, I found it impossible to remain silent. I had to speak out on behalf of the many, many women who could not tolerate the injustices any longer. I could not live in denial of the situation; I felt absolutely compelled to be honest, at whatever cost. And there would be a cost to address the situation, for the status quo was deeply engrained and regularly and systematically promoted. To challenge it would literally be heretical, and I would be ostracized. Though an international society, ISKCON was in one way very close knit; therefore, I was risking significant social repercussions. The social pressure was such that no other woman--or man--was prepared to speak out with me, though behind the scenes I had supporters.

After much thought about how to speak up, I wrote a letter addressed to a friend in 1988 discussing points of major concern and backed my statements with scriptural quotes and examples from Prabhupada's life. The letter was widely circulated in ISKCON, and put in the hands of every leader worldwide. It was translated into other languages. As to be expected, it drew antagonism and some actual hatred, and yes,

labeled me as the rebel in our movement. But I had given a voice to hundreds of women and they gradually came forward with heart rendering stories and expressed their deep appreciation and relief that discussion had finally started. For some people it took years after my letter was circulated to feel safe enough to come forward.

For a long time the letter I wrote in 1988 was largely ignored. It was quite easy to label me and set the matter aside. But gradually the support from men and women increased, and without a doubt at least dialogue had begun. Some dialogue was negative, some positive, but it paved the way for changes.

I could be patient. I understood that deep-rooted social situations take time to change, and the atmosphere for women was still such it would be impossible for me to make changes any other way than by forcing dialogue in a nonconfrontational way. But things were moving a little too slow; men in positions of leadership were all too willing to keep the status quo. In fact, when I asked the highest governing body for ISKCON law to include resolutions allowing women access to different activities in the society I received a response saying that no law was necessary since no law existed prohibiting women from the activities. So the unwritten laws continued to reign.

Dialogue seemed to be dying a bit, so in 1990 I began an international newsletter to examine social issues in ISKCON. My editorial mission was to create frank, uncensored, but mature, dialogue that would reach upper level management and allow the rank and file person to express themselves--this was nonexistent at that time. The circulation quickly increased and people from all age groups and backgrounds around the world began participating.

Dialogue raises awareness and promotes education. When there is dialogue there is an opportunity to increase understanding. From the dialogue about women in ISKCON that began in 1988 many changes have come about. ISKCON still has a distance to walk on the road toward proper treatment of women, but the situation is much improved. There is great hope for further change, and change needs to be instituted evenly throughout all the centers. Right now, not all temples embrace changes or proper views of women and family.

But today if you were to walk into an ISKCON temple you may meet a woman temple president, or hear a woman deliver the class. In some temples you may hear a lady leading the sacred chanting. At least one woman sits on North America's highest managerial board, though they are not yet allowed to sit on the highest international body. This was unheard of 10 years ago.

My experience didn't shake me from the conviction that the path I had chosen was right and the path I wanted to follow for life. I currently still practice Krsna consciousness, though I no longer live in a temple. I've worked in mainstream society for the past 10 years and own an international print brokering business. I have a warm and satisfying relationship with my second husband of ten years. I've enjoyed seeing my son grow, who is now almost 18. And, as you might imagine, I'm deeply satisfied to see the positive changes for women in ISKCON. I hope to see more; they are needed. And if I can be a part of helping nudge those changes along I will feel honored.