

‘Crime, Justice and Women’ by Indrani Raimedhi explores the hidden world of women and crime

INDRANI RAIMEDHI, an award winning journalist, author and columnist in her new book “Crime, Justice and Women” tries to unravel the stories of women in conflict with law, the fortitudinous of the women in uniform and women legal professionals who grapple with criminal cases. She also penned down the anecdote of the women cadres in the insurgent groups. MUMENINAZ ZAMAN talks to her about her seminal book which is expected to be a useful document for researchers and policy makers

Give us a brief introduction of your book, “Crime, Justice and Women” what is it all about?

The non-fiction, “Crime, Justice and Women”, is the outcome of a three year long journey, which is severed into three sections and unravels the life and survival of women, on the basis of two broad spectrums — one who breaks the law and the other who abides by the law. The first part of the book highlights the stories of the women who are either convicts or under trial prisoners. It comprehends the life of the women who commits crime, their struggle, and the circumstances which led them to take law in their hand.

During my visit to several jails, in Guwahati, Silchar, Tezpur, I came in interaction with the women prisoners and there I tried to scrutinize the crimes they have committed, the motive behind the crime and about their life and families. I also tried to explore the kind of circumstances under which these women are compelled to commit crime and their social and economic status in the society. It came to my notice that most of the women came from a very disadvantaged part of the society, they were illiterate, financially weak and were victims of domestic violence. Under such circumstances they usually adapt to crimes like murder, robbery and sometimes even sell their body.

The second part of the book revolves around the women leaders and cadres in the ULFA, who defied the state as well as the nation and joined the insurgent group. While unwinding the life, struggle and experiences of the women cadres who are also a mother and a wife, I interviewed some of the prominent women, including, ULFA’s lone woman executive member Pranati Deka, the outfit’s chief of women’s wing Kaberi Kachari, also wife of chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa, and senior member Runima Chetia Choudhury, wife of the outfit’s foreign secretary Sashadhar Choudhury.

They were active members of ULFA and were part of the leadership and through them I came to know, what kind of life they led in the jungle or in Dhaka and what was the motivation for joining the insurgent outfit. Moreover, I also tried to cover the role they played in the insurgent group and the kind of work they dealt with. Comparing the role of ULFA women with the women cadres of the Maoist outfit, the women cadres of the Jammu terror outfit and the women cadres from the LTTE, it came to light that they were minorities in all these outfits and though they worked a lot the men did not acknowledge them or their role.

The third part of the book deals with the women who used their education, skill, knowledge and their valor to defend their state and the law. In this case I have interviewed four women police officers of higher designation namely, Sanjukta Parashar, Indrani Baruah, Violet Baruah and Bonya Gogoi who have waged a war against ULFA or Bodo militant outfits and they have shown great courage in situation of extreme danger. They shared their experiences, challenges, difficulties and their satisfaction of being a woman police officer. The book is dedicated to the iconic police officer from Assam, Late Yamin Hazarika, a 1977-batch DANIPS officer.

The other group of women that I came across were the legal professionals who were abided by law. It is an extremely challenging job for the women who often have to face prejudice. Being a minority in this profession they have to prove themselves, since most people do not have much faith in women lawyers. To know the chronicles of the women professionals in this field, I interviewed, Justice Meera Sharma, who was a pioneer in the legal profession and was the first woman advocate of the Gauhati High Court, young advocate Nikita Baruah and senior advocate, Kuntala Deka. On a positive note the conclusion of the book comes with the interview of a forensic specialist Richa Pandey, the first forensic specialist in Assam as well as the entire Northeast. It was very surprising to think how a young lady who is a mother and a wife, on a regular basis dissects dead bodies and performs post mortem.

What inspired you to take up this topic?

I am an ardent lover of crime fiction, stories of murder and mystery has always fascinated me, so I used to follow a lot of real life cases. Apart from my interest in crime I always have a curiosity within myself that we being free citizens of a democratic country has the right to live our lives on our terms, but, “what about the freedom of those who are locked up in the prisons for the crime they commit?” and most importantly the women prisoners. I myself being from a liberal and well-educated family and is leading a comfortable life, but I was also curious to know about the other side of the society where women come from an underprivileged, oppressed and uneducated background. This curiosity has immensely inspired me to take up this topic.

What is your take when it comes to the criminal justice system? What are the experiences that women criminals face?

The criminal justice system has somewhere failed to maintain and uphold the integrity of the judiciary. Even though our country has a system of providing legal assistance to the convicts, but they hardly avail this system. The women, mostly being uneducated doesn't have the knowledge of court or legal procedures, they don't know whom to turn for help. Despite, their family members try to arrange lawyers, but to no avail, they cannot afford their charges. The prevailing justice system seems to be of the primitive stage, rather it should switch to the system of rehabilitation and reformation.

The very fact that a person is arrested and put behind the bars is itself traumatizing, this often makes the prisoners cranky and at times engage in fight among themselves. Moreover, they also experience mental disorders like insomnia, nervous breakdown and depression. In such a situation there should be some counseling provided to the inmates on priority basis by trained counselors. However, the irony is I have not seen it happen in the prisons.

Men who are engaged in some kind of work in jail usually get paid and are not only satisfied on their earning but also keep themselves focused on something constructive. However, in case of women I have observed that, even though the government are making some provisions for the women to work, but the women do not have the skills to work nor are they in a state of mind where they want to learn something new. They seem to be totally defeated, demotivated and demoralized. As such the need of the hour is proper rehabilitation as well as reformation.

Will the society accept them and give equal status like other women in the society? What kind of discrimination do they face after release?

This indeed is a tragic question to answer, since things are very pathetic. During an interaction, the women prisoners informed me that at least in the jail they are not facing that pressure, but once they are released and try to lead a normal life, nobody will accept them, even their own family will abandon them. Their husband has also deserted them and they are marrying again. Moreover, they do not get any help from their kith and kin and are left to rot in the prisons. They are afraid to face the outside world, since every finger will be pointed towards them. As I mentioned earlier, it is of utmost important that the women in jail should be equipped with some kind of professional skills, so that they can at least stand on their own feet.

You have also dealt with women on the other side of the law — police officers, lawyers, forensic specialists. Please tell us more about them.

This book would not have been possible without the inclusion of these brave hearts. The first two parts of the book left me a bit depressed about the prevailing cruelty, injustice and the darker side of the society. Then somehow it occurred to me, why not write the positive side as well? It was a unique experience interacting with these courageous women, who being a mother, wife, daughter or sister aptly responds to her call of duty. These women who work beyond their comfort level, on behalf of the law to ensure safety to people has left me awestruck. This kind of courage I can only imagine and it made me feel proud that there is still hope in the society.

It came to my notice that the lawyers, police officers, forensic specialist were well educated and they were given the liberty to pursue their careers. Indeed, they have excelled in their careers and shown leadership as well as success in their career. On the contrary to that, the women I came across in the jail have always been faced with inferiority. They were not properly educated, nourished and were married off at an early age and further they became victims of domestic violence. It is not surprising that going through such a pathetic stage of life when women are abused and discriminated, they sometimes fall prey to using unfair means. So here, without studying the stories of the privileged women as well as the under-privileged women, I could not have understood the extent of circumstances of the women in our society.

What were the challenges that you faced during the compilation of the book?

This book is a combination of interviews and a lot of research. Even though I am doing a full time job as feature editor in, “The Assam Tribune”, I used all my spare time conducting interviews, visiting the prisons or do paperwork. After meeting about twenty to thirty women

I would jot down their experiences, since I was not allowed to carry a recorder in the jail. As such I had to follow certain protocols.

The other challenge I faced, was to try to establish trust among the women prisoners, without judging them. To know their stories I had prepared myself to listen very patiently and develop a motherly figure so as to maintain the element of credibility.

Share your experience of the journey which you have undertaken to bring out this book.

The journey of, “Crime, Justice and Women”, was certainly an enriching experience for me. It was an opportunity for me to learn about the life and experience of women from different perspectives of the society. For me it is not just a book, but an adventure, I established contacts with the police officers or lawyers and as we interacted we had a lot of fun during the interview sessions. Surprisingly the jail, which is usually a dark, unfriendly and grim place would turn out to be lively when the women sang and danced along. At times of solitude, women in the prisons are friends to each other, they cheer each other and listen and share their stories. So this is something which has touched me and I feel that every woman should know this.

