The people of Mumbai and Pune cheered and supported Oxfam India in one of the world’s most challenging fundraising team event Trailwalker held in the Sahyadris recently.

274 participants set out from Garudmaachi, Mulshi to Lonavala at 6 am on 15th November to take up the challenge of walking 100 km in 48 hours. Part of the funds raised from Mumbai Trailwalker will go towards supporting Oxfam India’s projects to reduce violence against women and to improve the lives and livelihood opportunities of tribal people in the Sahyadris and other areas.

Milind Soman, runner and activist, Nisha Agrawal, CEO Oxfam India, and Deepa Ghosh, Director Brand, Marketing and Communications flagged off the event.

The fastest team to finish the challenge was ‘Every Mile Counts’ who hit the finish line in only 16 hours 28 minutes 20 seconds. Vikas Singh, the team captain said, “We set out to finish the trail as the number one team and trained ourselves accordingly for the challenge.” The team included Daniel Plane from Australia, for whom this was the 25th Trailwalker that he was participating in.

74 year old, Usha Soman, was the oldest walker amongst the participating teams. Determined and steady, she completed the 100 kilometers walk in 41 hours 08 minutes and 54 seconds with her daughters and bagged the medals at the finish line.

The youngest support crew member Ishaan was part of his father’s support crew. He enthusiastically looks forward to being part of the event in the future and says “This time papa participated. Next time my mama will participate and papa will be the support crew.”

As the teams reached the finish point they deeply thanked the team of doctors from Jehangir Hospital, Pune and physiotherapists from M. A. Rangoonwala College, Pune who they credited as critical partners in their success.

Harpreet Gondal from ‘Pace Setters’ the fastest women’s team to complete the challenge in 38 hours 21 minutes and 16 seconds said, “I hope more women teams participate and become a part of this experience.”

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The Right to Education Act was exuberantly welcomed when it came in 2009. However, as the years rolled by, poor implementation has not only dampened the exhilaration but also planted a feeling of a lost opportunity. Civil society members in Delhi including Oxfam India who were deeply involved in the passing of this Act have come together yet again to campaign for proper implementation of the RTE Act.

On 11th November, the Delhi Right to Education Forum - a platform of teachers’ unions, prominent educationists, children, parents and civil society groups including Oxfam India, launched a campaign called “Vote for Education”.

The forum developed its asks into a ‘Charter of Demands’ which looks into the issues of a) discrimination and exclusion in schools, b) equitable quality education, c) checking privatization of schools, d) ensuring community participation and ownership, e) institutionalizing Grievance Redressal mechanisms and f) increased budgetary allocation for education and its effective utilisation.

The ‘Vote for Education’ campaign involved the public to take up the above issues and demanded immediate setting up of Functional School Management Committees with a parent as the Chairperson through a proper process. It also aims at ensuring the right to education for all children under 18. The campaign demanded EQUITABLE QUALITY EDUCATION WITH SOCIAL INCLUSION for every child in Delhi.

In 2 weeks, the campaigners went from house to house, conducted rallies, street plays and public meetings to garner support for the Charter. Volunteers covered over 80 residential localities covering 9 districts of Delhi and 20 prominent public places, including ITO, Pragati Maidan and Connaught Place, and collected 1,00,000 votes from ordinary citizens.

The campaigners also made people aware of the RTE violations like shortage of schools and classrooms, poor pupil teacher ratios, continued persistence of corporal punishment and the complete absence of functional School Management Committees. Parents who were interviewed shared that they were dissatisfied with the quality of education being provided in the schools. The irony of the situation is that the Delhi government has been claiming credit for the best implementation of the RTE Act.

The campaign is another step urging political parties to be more serious about the RTE Act and its effective implementation.

One lakh people are actively demanding education with the hope that they will be heard.

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Corporates with maximum number of teams

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<td>HSBC</td>
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During the 100 km journey many friendships blossomed, hardships were overcome together and success was celebrated collectively. What was remarkable was that members who had to drop out due to injuries, didn’t go back home but decided to stay back and encourage their team members from the outside as support crew.

“The response we received in Mumbai/Pune is phenomenal. I am sure that the next Mumbai Trailwalker will see participation from many more teams and corporates. It is a movement where people are getting together to stand up for the rights of people and fight poverty and inequality.” said Nisha Agrawal, CEO Oxfam India.

Registrations are open for Oxfam India Bangalore Trailwalker (24 – 26 January 2014).

Register at http://trailwalker.oxfamindia.org/bengaluru
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ONE LAKH PEOPLE DEMANDING EDUCATION. ANYONE LISTENING?
Last week I visited two of the largest relief camps in Muzaffarnagar with the Oxfam humanitarian team. My only previous trip of this kind was to flood relief camps in Bihar a few years ago and I suppose I expected something similar: stories of deaths, heroism, luck, some mixture of initiative and callousness on the part of state officials, families contemplating their changed lives and how best to rebuild them, slowly making their way back to what they had left behind. Over the course of the day I realized how much harder it is to find relief from human conflict. Responses to it are intensely political, facts often misrepresented and the prospect for a return to normalcy remote.

The first surprise was the almost complete absence of state relief. The Malakpur camp, which was our first stop, had 649 families and 1,157 children of school going age, none had seen a school since they fled their villages in early September. Several children had been born, either in the camp or in a private facility nearby. No health officials had visited and the few women who travelled to the public health centre in the block (Kairana) or the district hospital in Samli were either confronted with empty facilities or were told their treatment was too complicated to be tackled there. Miraculously, the state ambulance service at 108 did respond within a couple of hours but only did one-way trips. Mothers and their newborns were to make their own way back.

The camp was located on forest land and the district authorities had allowed it to be cleared by local villages to house the refugees, but no food was subsequently provided. In contrast to this state apathy, support from the local Muslim community had been overwhelming. They first shared their houses and then regularly provided food and labor and anything else that was urgently needed. The big remaining problems of daily existence were the lack of cooking fuel and toilets. The sugarcane fields that were used would soon be cut bare, denying them what little privacy they had. Sugarcane also provided work as agricultural labor but most men struggled with this, having been petty traders with no experience working on the land. That income would also end with the harvest.

An obvious question, in their minds and ours, was What Next? Every one of the dozens of people we spoke to was clear that they were not going back. Repeatedly we heard “hum mar jayenge par vapas nahi jayenge”. The surprise here was that nobody reported a history of violence. The Muslims were small minorities in their villages and could no longer trust the Jats even though they had both lived there for many generations. The “nafrat ki deevar” had no antecedents and yet was now solid and undisputable. There was talk of families receiving a grant of Rs. 5 lakh each to start a new life, but it was not clear where. No family in the camp had received this so far.

In the slightly smaller camp at Loi, about 25 kilometres from Muzaffarnagar, life was easier in some ways. The camp was close to Phugana, one of the worst-hit villages, so some children could continue to attend their former school. A few government rations had come in and there were bundles of firewood by one of the tents. But the terror and trauma were greater. There were stray killings every few days. Many of the families had locked themselves in their houses when the violence had started. Their calls to the police had not been answered and they were finally rescued by army trucks. Memories were fresh and bloody and poured out painfully.

As I was rushing out of the house early that morning, I hesitated before placing my usual bindi on my forehead. Driving back, I was glad it was there - a symbol that empathy could and must cross sectarian lines to start the process of healing.

Rohini Somanathan is Professor at Delhi School of Economics. She is also a Member of Oxfam India Board.
The recent cases of an alleged sexual assault on two woman employees by senior colleagues (who are also very public figures) has probably sparked more debate, on how workplaces are geared to deal with the issue of sexual harassment, than the actual passing of the Act in the early months of the year.

A similar situation was witnessed after the brutal gang-rape and subsequent death of the young para-medic last year and the more recent one of the young journalist in Mumbai. There finally seems to be a chipping away at the culture of silence that has existed around the issue of violence against women.

Support for the survivors of violence and their struggle for justice, both within the family and in the public, seems to be on the rise. There also seems to be a shift in pinning the blame where it should be – on the actual perpetrators of this violence rather than the women. More and more far-silent stakeholders have started championing the cause of eliminating violence against women in different innovative ways. All of this is definitely creating the necessary political will, wherein parties are posing the safety and security of women as an issue in the upcoming elections in the states.

Do we take this as a possible indication of a shift in the thinking that violence against women is not just a women’s issue, but rather an issue that affects the entire country? Specific laws to prevent and address different forms of violence, as was seen in the passage of The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 and The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013, are much needed legislations. But without the appropriate budgetary allocations, speedy formulation of the Rules for these Acts and other mechanisms for their effective implementation, these laws remain powerful only on paper.

For a long lasting and deep rooted change towards elimination of violence, it involves the questioning of our individual and collective beliefs and actions in public; and most importantly, in the private sphere of our daily lives. Only when women begin to respect themselves, believe that they occupy an equal status in the household and not submit to being beaten or abused as a norm, will change actually take place. They will then raise their children – boys and girls, in an environment of gender equality. Only then, would we be able to witness the same kind of nationwide public outcry in every incidence of violence - in a rural village of Bihar with a poor Dalit woman or in Chhattisgarh with a poor tribal woman, or in Uttar Pradesh with a poor Muslim woman.

These 16 Days of Activism (25th November to 10th December celebrated worldwide every year) are definitely a reminder to all of us to do just that – to shape a better world where every woman has an inviolable right to a life of dignity free from violence.