

INDIA – WORLD: Patriarchy doesn't harm women alone

If men are engaged in the process of empowering women and towards a gender-equitable, violence-free world, it will benefit both

By Harish Sadani

LiveMint.com (25.01.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2kqMhEc> – At least five or six cases of various forms of violence against girls and women from different cities are being reported every day since reports of the New Year's eve incident in Bengaluru led to an outcry. Drawing attention to the seriousness of gender-based violence, there is a demand for stronger punishment for male offenders. But very little attention has been focused on what is being done to address the root cause of the issue.

If men and their attitudes are “part of the problem”, can we address the problem effectively without involving men as “part of the solution”? In our vision of a gender-just society where there is peaceful coexistence of men and women, does a person belonging to the “oppressor” gender have a role?

If yes, what would be that role? Are the empowerment and assertion of the oppressed and the sensitization and transformation of the powerful, mutually exclusive agendas?

Gender issues, including gender-based violence, are seen

largely as “women’s issues” by all concerned—a majority of policymakers, women’s groups, funding agencies and media. This approach insulates men from the process of transformation, reinforces masculine stereotypes and deepens the gender divide.

Patriarchy disadvantages women but it also brings a set of behavioural norms and responsibilities that hinders men from expressing their pressures to perform in adherence with traditional notions of masculinity. Masculinity, in its current form, harms not only women but also men in the long run. Men cannot cry or express emotions freely, they have to be always winners/achievers, bread-earners, caretakers, etc. They have to perform at various stages from bedroom to boardroom. They cannot do household chores without the fear of being labelled “sissies”.

If gender is a social construct, then men are not born violent and aggressive. It is faulty socialization and upbringing that promotes a macho image. Do we find alternatives to this model of masculinity?

There may be umpteen examples of women as role models for girls who are growing up, but there is a woeful dearth of positive role models among men; role models who can embody a gender-sensitive society and engage adolescent boys and young men in the discourse. We have examples of sportsmen like Roger Federer who have expressed what “healthy relationships” mean to them personally, but when did we last hear sportsmen in India talking about gender?

We need to address how men analyse perceptions of masculinity and create appropriate alternatives. But to do this, men must first feel the need to do so. Men can introspect on the existing dominant model of masculinity when they are able to relate to the issue; when they know the “costs” of increasing violence on women to them individually and socially.

If men are involved in any intervention that seeks to stop or prevent violence against women, it may help in making the lives of women safer and healthier, but what’s in it for them? What are they going to get out of it? Unless this is answered seriously, we will not come up with any meaningful strategy of engaging men in the long term.

A paradigm shift in looking at women’s issues as gender issues, which are equally men’s issues, is not going to be easy. With all our social sub-systems—family, religion, governance and media—reinforcing patriarchal, male-dominated attitudes, it will definitely be a process that will face periodic threats, hiccups and setbacks.

Apart from addressing men as a group, it calls for simultaneous interventions with different groups of men. For instance, we need to address men in the police not just as law-enforcing agents but also as men. Similarly, we need to reach out to men in the corporate and healthcare sectors, in Parliament, male bureaucrats, male journalists, religious leaders, school and college teachers and administrators.

A couple of token gender-sensitization programmes for these men is not going to change the male mindset. What is required

is focused, long-term intervention with a clear vision and purpose of “process-oriented” work by all stakeholders. There has to be a pool of male facilitators in all sectors who can engage men in a gradual process of transformation and humanization. It calls for investment, financial and otherwise.

The moot question is: Do we have a sizeable number of people who would like to invest their time and effort in engaging men towards addressing gender issues? Even if a handful of them do (like this writer, who has been working on the issue for 24 years), there is a dearth of people who would strengthen their efforts.

If men are engaged in the process of empowering women and towards a gender-equitable, violence-free world, it will benefit both. Men also would be liberated from the shackles of patriarchy. If they are liberated, their own lives would become humane, enriching and harmonious.

Gender-based crimes against girls and women will increase in this neo-liberal society of ours in the coming years. What will change is only the nature and forms of violence. There will certainly be more crimes by minor boys.

It would then be, perhaps, too late for all concerned to seriously examine the root cause of the problem.

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