

## ‘Men also need to be liberated from patriarchy’

Efforts to tackle gender-based violence against women in India have concentrated on empowering women to assert themselves and prevent violence. Men have been insulated from the process of transformation, says Harish Sadani of Men Against Violence and Abuse. Until men are seen as part of the solution, the status of women will not change significantly



*In the male-female equation, women are clearly the victims and the problem is clearly men. Yet more attempts have been made to change women than to change men. Empowering women, discouraging discrimination and violence against them, setting up women’s organisations, legislating to protect women’s rights and ensure their protection have been some of the steps taken in this direction. But surely the biggest change of all must come from the perpetrator rather than the victim?*

*“Changing the male mindset is a key aspect to women’s liberation. Men also need to be ‘liberated’ from the shackles of patriarchy,” acknowledges Harish Sadani. To do this, he founded Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) in 1993, one of only a handful of organisations in India that are trying to change men’s patriarchal, chauvinistic and often violent attitudes.*

**What motivated you to try and change men’s thinking?**

I was born and brought up in community housing, and was exposed to gender-based violence, even in my own family. Being a reticent boy, I was often teased about being *bailya* (girlish) which I thought was less of a comment about me, more about the status of women *vis-à-vis* men. But it was clear to me in my growing-up years that being different and socially and economically vulnerable was difficult. So, people who questioned cultural stereotypes inspired me. I realised that it is these people who present an alternative to closed value systems. They are the people who keep the dialogue alive.

### **How did MAVA come about? What methods do you use?**

While doing my Masters in Social Work at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, my volunteering experience with a leading women's organisation in Mumbai made me uncomfortable with the male ostracisation approach that they adopted. So when a Mumbai newspaper appealed to men to come together to prevent violence against women, I responded, and that eventually led to MAVA. The focus of the organisation has been to enable men to examine the underlying causes of violence against women and, in the process, challenge gender stereotypes.

The methods used to engage men have been varied, innovative and youth-friendly. There is no set format. In some places, wall newspapers and focused group discussions are an effective medium, in other places, like Satara, street theatre has been used to communicate messages. In Mumbai, a telephone helpline providing counselling and guidance to distressed youths is being promoted among collegians.

The young men are from different socio-economic backgrounds, largely from the middle and lower middle classes.

Yuva Maitri was our first long-term focused initiative that used a range of tools to engage young men and promote a healthy dialogue on gender, sexuality, masculinity and related issues. We began with 33 male students in the 16-17 age-group, from six rural and semi-rural colleges in Pune district, who had some leadership skills and creative potential. We trained them as 'communicators' for a year, using interactive workshops, awareness songs, posters, film screenings, street theatre etc.

In the second year of the initiative, 17 trained student communicators began communicating with their peers on gender, healthy relationships, masculinity, etc. Wall newspapers were displayed on varied themes like healthy male-female friendships, ban on sex education in schools by legislators, farmer suicides, performance anxiety among men, sex-selective abortions leading to declining sex ratio etc. From time to time, trained communicators also took specific stands on incidents of gender-based violence against women in their area.

The initiative gradually spread to four other districts in Maharashtra.

### **What did you learn about male attitudes?**

In India, traditional efforts to tackle gender-based violence against women have concentrated on empowering women to assert themselves and prevent violence. This approach totally isolates and insulates men from the process of transformation, and keeps them embedded in the patriarchal mould. Patriarchy, apart from disadvantaging women, brings with it a set of behavioural norms and responsibilities that hinders men from expressing their fears, problems and vulnerabilities.

Men often become violent, aggressive and uncaring due to patriarchal modes of socialisation. Images of masculinity are linked with being strong and violent and to notions that men with 'power' are 'real men'.

We need to address how men analyse perceptions of masculinity and create appropriate alternatives. There is a woeful dearth of safe platforms to talk about problems that give rise to violent behaviour, including those relating to issues of gender and sexuality. There is also a need for positive male role models who are gender-sensitive and can engage young men in the discourse.

While the importance of changing norms and attitudes related to masculinity is widely accepted, there have been few sustained efforts at doing so. We must challenge perceptions of dominant forms of masculinity in men at a young age.

Our trained communicators provide safe, non-threatening platforms (physical and psychological) to young men to comfortably unwind, open up, communicate, share their fears, thoughts, dilemmas and concerns, become exposed to newer ideas on men and masculinity. And in the process of collectively addressing gender issues, they have been evolving and promoting alternative, positive models of masculinity that are gender-equitable.

The project taught us some interesting things.

Masculinity is intrinsically linked to men's 'performance' at various stages in life. One aspect of performance is the shouldering of responsibility to earn and sustain the family. In rural areas of India, the constant pressure to perform this role at an early age, even before completing their studies (compared to urban areas), and an inability to express these pressures, was evident among many students at the project.

'Opening up' in men is much more difficult and complex than with women. Men often do not have any experience, confidence, or even vocabulary to describe their innermost feelings related to sexuality and other related issues. By involving a pool of experienced men who were willing to share personal insights with the young men through the initiative, we facilitated this process of 'opening up', featuring in an annual magazine the firsthand experiences of men opening up and communicating their dilemmas, anxieties, vulnerabilities and other issues related to masculinity.

Overall, the motivation behind the men's movement is comparatively weak. It takes guts to renounce obvious patriarchal privileges and step down from a dominant position in order to win moral self-respect.

**Would you say that most of the men you have encountered, or who come to your sessions, are chauvinists? Do you discern any pattern in their thinking as regards violence against women? For example, that it's okay to slap/beat up women, or that women invite such violence, or that they are inferior in some way...**

Not all, but some men we have encountered have been chauvinists. There is a tacit acceptance of violence, including against women, in all spheres of society. While there may be men who say they are not violent with the women in their lives, they would still like to control and dominate them. Two years ago, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) highlighted the finding that 55% of women didn't consider it wrong if the men in their homes resorted to beating them; 51% of men felt that they had a right to beat the women. These findings are symptomatic of the tacit acceptance of violence to resolve conflict, rather than dialogue and peaceful means.

During our interactive sessions with youth, an oft-repeated argument by boys is that girls who wear transparent clothes invite violence by men. Our youth communicators take pains to refute this argument by posing counter questions and sharing their insight about how girls as young as five and older women too have been raped while wearing traditional Indian dress, underlining the fact that clothes are just a pretext; the real

issue is men's inability to control their sexuality.

**Would you recommend gender education (sensitisation) as part of a value-teaching curriculum in schools, in the same way as environment education is now compulsory?**

It should definitely be included. In many schools it has been introduced as a value that needs to be instilled. However, there is lack of effective teacher training on the subject and a dearth of child-friendly methods. A key aspect of any effective gender sensitisation programme is sexuality education, which teaches girls how to assert themselves and say 'no' to unwelcome sexual advances, and teaches boys to gracefully accept the 'no'. But we have seen how, over the years, our politicians have been stalling efforts to provide meaningful integrated sexuality education (even now, it's officially called 'adolescent life skills education'), even objecting to visuals used in proposed manuals suggested by the National Council of Education Research and Training (NCERT). There has been no serious effort to evolve a curriculum that takes into account all the key aspects mentioned above.

Men are seen as part of the problem, but unless they are seen as part of the solution and the process of transformation no significant change in the status of women will occur. Changing the male mindset is key to women's liberation. Men too need to be 'liberated' from the shackles of patriarchy. It calls for a paradigm shift in viewing the 'women's issue' as a 'gender issue' (equally, a 'men's issue') by all concerned.