

Foreword to the Book 'Stories of Young Men Breaking The Chains of Masculinity'

Congratulations to MAVA for this inspiring compilation of 25 stories of young men trying to challenge gender norms and patriarchal constraints at the personal and community level. I'm glad that the initiative of documenting the impact of MAVA's work among young men has evolved into an independent publication, both in English and Marathi. The experience of MAVA's pioneering work with young men on issues of gender and sexuality at a time when these were taboo issues, and their gentle expertise on creating agents of change and critical self-reflection through innovative methodologies is evident in the narratives that feature in this book. This publication is more than personal stories; it makes the process of intensive capacity building and peer-education self-evident.

These stories reflect the lived realities of young men from various walks of life, ranging from rural youth who worked on farms or supported their studies through sundry jobs or manual work, and from urban poor youth to professionals in the IT or advertising and film-making. These young men have been part of the Gender Sensitization and Mentoring initiative that MAVA began in June 2007 in Pune district as *Yuva Maitri*, and later scaled up the endeavor to eight other districts under different names such as *Yuva Samvad*, *Maanush* and *Yuva Tarang*. Most of them joined MAVA's initiative as undergraduates, but there were some who were pursuing postgraduate courses in Social Work as well.

The young men featured in this book are on differential learning curves, yet, common to all is a high level of motivation, strong desire to acquire and use new knowledge, sensitivity to gender and sexuality matters, leadership traits and the ability to communicate and dialogue with their peers with perseverance. Whether their contact with MAVA was sustained and long-term, or short-term as in the case of a few men, these young men got motivated enough to change the course of their lives, including in the fields of education and careers. Harish Sadani's mentoring and encouragement was mentioned by almost every narrator as the turning point in their lives.

What is striking in all the stories is the endless pursuit for information and knowledge that MAVA's initiative created. One narrator sums up this feeling eloquently as "I discovered the clear stream of knowledge even before I had any desire to draw from it. However, instead of quenching my thirst, the presence of this stream incessantly increases my thirst for more knowledge".

A carefully and thoughtfully crafted process of identifying the most sensitive and interested young men for residential trainings, and of creating 'mentees and mentors' has facilitated incremental knowledge and enduring commitment to gender equality among these 'graduates'. While some continue to interact with or work with MAVA on current project, some others have taken their learning into their external workplaces, becoming trainers, natural counsellors, peer educators and sources of information on sexuality even to grown up or elderly men. Two of the youth have registered an organization with Harish's encouragement and support. The possibility that MAVA's decade long initiative can become sustainable in myriad ways is undoubtedly heartening.

Strong mothers feature in many stories. MAVA's trainings helped these young men to respect their mothers' resilience in the face of harsh life situations, and instilled the desire to alleviate their mothers' burdens. Further, their relationship with their fathers changed from being dominated to standing up for their sisters' right to education or to postpone an early marriage in the family. Sisters were earlier controlled by many of these young men - monitoring mobility, degree of freedom or interaction with boys, because the protection of girls was considered as the responsibility and right of men and boys in the family. Once this control was relinquished, sisters actually became friends of the young men; being able to discuss taboo topics such as menstruation or sexuality and share their dreams, aspirations and frustrations. Married youth discovered equal partnership with their spouses

due to their journey of constant learning and unlearning, and questioning male privilege that results in power, control and gender based violence. The stories show how young men have been equipped with the knowledge and skills to address gender issues, both in the public and private domains; one youth shares how he insists on women's equal partnership in finances and investment in his job as an investment consultant, and almost everyone has spoken about their participation in household chores. The methodology of MAVA's initiative has been to change people, not punish them, resulting in building trust among men of all ages, and in instilling the confidence in them that everyone can change for the better at any point in life.

A few narrators have spoken about the challenge of addressing deep aspects of patriarchy, such as equal property rights for all women, choice of partner (especially in the case of inter-caste and inter-religious marriage), and in dealing with the intersectionality of patriarchy with caste, class, religion and sexuality. Phule and Ambedkar's teachings that highlight the nexus of caste and patriarchy in India would be of intrinsic value here. MAVA has been one of the first groups to work with men in India, and has had an organic relationship with the women's movement during the past three decades. It is therefore reasonable to expect that the champions created through MAVA's deep engagement will recognize and respect the fact that only the subordinated can be the leaders of movements meant for their rights and dignity. That would include women's leadership while challenging patriarchy, LGBTQIA leadership while challenging heteronormativity, and the leadership of all groups marginalized on the basis of caste, religion, ethnicity or physical and emotional ability.

I strongly believe that the personal and professional ethics of MAVA's cadre of young men will grow exponentially over the years and that we will witness innovative ways in which men refute male privilege within patriarchy and accelerate their journey towards becoming human. I have personally seen the evolution and growth of some of MAVA's earliest batch (the *Yuva Maitri* initiative in Pune district) and have seen their increased engagement with social issues on the one hand and their tender engagement with their young children on the other. The stories of these 25 individuals will undoubtedly inspire anyone who reads them, and will reassure young men and boys that they can be allies in our quest for a gender-equal and gender-just society.

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