Session: Dialogue With The Women's Movement
Developing an Agenda for Engaging with Each Other

*Addressing the main resistances from women's movement
*Is binary between women's movement and men and boys movement for gender equality artificial
*Are men encroaching on space of feminist movement and on resources for gender justice
*How to frame discussions without alienating each other
The session ‘Dialogue With The Women’s Movement,’ held during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 — Men and Boys for Gender Justice, organised in New Delhi from November 10-13, 2014, deliberated on how the women’s movement should engage with other social movements on issues of masculinities and work with men and boys. Participants were prompted to develop a set of questions critical to advancing dialogue between movements and then taking it forward in the different contexts they engaged with. Moderator Srilatha Bhatiwal, AWID (Association for Women’s Rights in Development), India posed the question:

“What do you feel are the burning issues that need to be on the agenda in a dialogue with other movements? If speaking from a women’s movement perspective, what would you put on the agenda for dialogues with other social and political movements? And if speaking from another social movement’s position, what would you put on the agenda in a dialogue with feminist movements?”

**GOING BEYOND NOMENCLATURES TO COLLECTIVE INTERESTS**

Juan Guillermo Figueroa, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico

“I would like to put on the agenda some of the resistances from feminists. Some of them tell me men’s social vulnerability is artificial; others say men’s silence is a complicity between men. My question for feminist friends is, do you think there is any possibility of misunderstanding men’s silence or that their silence may be enforced? Next, are you interested in understanding men’s experiences, or is it just that men have to understand women’s necessities and then act in relation with that? Finally, feminists tell me the violence experienced by men on different grounds is not gender violence; gender violence is what men exercise against women. Okay, if that is the definition, how can we understand and name the violence men are experiencing?”

Dean Peacock, Sonke Gender Justice Network, South Africa

“I think we fall too easily into a problematic binary of a men’s movement and a women’s movement. There isn’t a neat divide down the middle of the work that happens with men and boys for gender equality and women’s rights work. We’re clear at Sonke that we’re not a men’s organisation; we are able to call ourselves a women’s rights organisation just like other organisations in the MenEngage alliance that have men and women working together for transforming gender norms that restrict women and men in different but harmful ways. The divisions and nomenclatures we impose on ourselves get in the way of the potential of working together strategically on a broad range of urgent issues such as militarism, neo-liberalism and state accountability to gender justice.

The elephant in the room is the question about resources. Do organisations that do gender justice work with men and boys represent a drain on the resources for women’s rights work? We are seeing a very problematic trend in terms of the globalisation and neo-liberalisation of donor assistance; the big money for gender work is going to big international NGOs and private sector corporations, bypassing local civil society organisations. We need to converse among ourselves how to push back against this instead of fighting each for resources; that does not serve our collective interests. It’s also important to see how only a tiny fraction of gender work resources goes to the work with men and boys. Sometimes we have skewed perspectives that meetings like this represent a significant drain on women’s rights resources. We want to make sure that doesn’t happen, and our assessment based on numbers is that currently this is not the case.”

**NEED TO EXAMINE BROADER STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Gloria Careaga, social psychologist,

Juan Guillermo Figueroa, National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico

Dean Peacock, Sonke Gender Justice Network, South Africa

Gloria Careaga
National Autonomous University of Mexico, Mexico

“What I would like to see in the feminist and masculinities work is to recover and include the gender perspective. And as I would like to see gender in a broad perspective, I would also like to see sexuality. I see that the masculinities work is working more on the intimate and the personal, not taking into account broader structures.”

Uma Chakravarty, activist and writer, India

“Striking a slightly discordant note, in South Asia our most urgent need is to open free discussions between the women’s movement which has been held to have not responded sufficiently to the caste question, or to the specific historical location of women across the social hierarchy. We’ve been more successful with the sexual choices movement, partly because it cuts across the class and caste divide. Another big failure on our part is we haven’t actually thought of how to address questions of sovereignty and national identity.”

Bience Gawanasi, Advisor to the Minister of Health, Namibia

“As a student in the UK participating in the liberation struggle we as feminists set a dialogue that our issues as women were subservient to that of the national question. Our experiences derived first and foremost from being dehumanised as a people, not as women. And until such time that I as a woman and as a human being get to a point where my human rights are respected and I can live as a human being, that’s when my woman-ness also comes to the fore and then I can ask a number of questions.

I also think that in our discussions we alienate rather than embrace. It’s the way we frame our issues so that it becomes ‘us’ and ‘them’. To give an example, when we talk about gender-based violence it is clear who the perpetrators and victims are, and because of that we don’t engage with men to the extent that we need to. I always say to people, men have not come from Mars or Jupiter, they live next to us. The final issue is that it seems we are very protective of spaces. If we gain a little bit, we don’t want to let go or open up for fear that space will also be taken away from us. But I want to say that it is not just a gender space, it’s a democratic space and it depends on how we engage with that space without wanting to overprotect it.

I have always maintained in the discourse on equality that if we look at each other as people that hurt equally, get hungry equally and who can abuse power equally, then we’re talking.”

Question of Leadership Must Top the Agenda
Kamla Bhasin, SANGAT, a South Asian feminist network

“I am very happy men have finally broken their silence. But in some cases I sense a paternalistic patriarchal approach. Once again, he will be the agent; once again, he will protect women from violence; and we know there is hardly any difference between protecting women and controlling them.

We can work with men but we don’t blindly support every slogan they give us, otherwise the potency and the politics of other movements will disappear.”

Audience

“My question for this dialogue would be for us to figure out how we can frame issues better to avoid backlash. How does engaging men for gender justice translate beyond global dialogues to community-based practitioners who have to address on a daily basis for example people saying they are tired of affirmative action as women are now equal to men?”

Finally, I think masculinity as a question is not something we’ve addressed directly even though the women’s movement is oppositional to any form of arbitrarily exercised power, mainly held by men, although it may be just a fraction of men because many men are actually disempowered and many men are actually not in the classic box of patriarchy even though there’s a little bit of patriarchy in a lot of men, despite the fact that they’re marginalised in some ways.
"In our discourse how do we talk about what kind of development we agree to pursue? We can’t just talk about gender issues and not talk about development issues because how we pursue development has a lot to do with how men and women are looked upon in society."

"I want to raise the issue of the first and second line leadership of the women’s rights movement. Some feminists have a whole historical background and dismiss younger feminists by saying ’These men, you’re trying to engage them? It’s a trap.’ We need more first-wave feminism to reflect and give space to others and realise that holding men accountable for everything done hundreds of years ago, seeing them only as perpetrators, is not going to bring the world we want."

"I want to ask this question of trust between the so called ‘men’s movement’ and the feminist movement. There are views that the involvement of men’s organisations in this sphere is encroaching on the space of feminist movements thereby imposing and bringing in patriarchal tendencies. How do we move forward ensuring the nuances and complexities debated here inform us so that there is no ‘us’ and ‘them’ in going forward in the post-Delhi agenda."

"I want to put in the dialogue agenda that the engaging with men movement should reflect the struggles of the women’s movement. It’s about time we say men must give up leadership. In the liberation struggle in South Africa there was a conscious decision that the movement would be led by black African people for the simple reason that it’s they who know what it means to be black in apartheid South Africa. So it is that women throughout the world understand what it means to be a woman and oppressed. The question of leadership should never escape this agenda."

"My question would be that in a conversation between organisations working with men for equality and organisations working as part of the women’s movement what space is there for conversations around poverty, class, equity and unemployment? When are we going to start the big dialogue between the feminist movement and all other social movements fighting against inequality? Let’s accept that the feminist movement has gone into a middle class cocoon and we don’t have a language to share with tribals and Dalits for example. My call to all of us would be let’s focus on the bigger challenge of poverty and inequities rather than what divides us as movements."