Dimensions of Change
Stories and Interviews
from the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014
Men and Boys for Gender Justice
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Men and Boys for Gender Justice

New Delhi
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Introduction

The 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 – Men and Boys for Gender Justice, was held in New Delhi from November 10-13. Organised by MenEngage Alliance, UNFPA, Centre for Health and Social Justice, UN Women and Beijing +20, as well as a host of other Indian and international partner organisations, it had 1200 participants representing 95 countries from every corner of the globe. Activists, policy makers, government representatives and heads of international development organisations were some of those who participated in the symposium. Experiences and ideas were shared over 62 formal sessions and numerous other deliberative spaces at the symposium, and a set of positions developed for engaging with men and boys in the post 2015 sustainable development scenario.

A multilingual melange of English, Hindi, Spanish and French in which the symposium was conducted reflected the full diversity and complexity of gender justice issues. The symposium offered an impressive breadth and depth of discussion and debate on reshaping masculinities and the role of men and boys. The Delhi Declaration and Call to Action emerging from the symposium summarises the thrust of the gender justice issues that need to be addressed and lays out a framework for action and advocacy.

Picking up threads from the numerous discussions, opinions and experiences woven at the event by renowned experts as well as other deeply involved participants, this compilation of specially commissioned stories and interviews are snapshots of the current gender issues of the day that impact our daily lives everywhere around the world and need to be known by all.
Dimensions of Change: Stories and Interviews from the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014
Watching boys playing a game in northern Lebanon, close to Syria, Anthony Keedi, a psychologist working with ABAAD - Resource Centre for Gender Equality in Lebanon, heard the boys use the Arabic name of the fundamentalist group ISIL for one of their groups in play, and realised that all conflict resolution by these kids was done through violence.

"The violence is internalised – as boys they are given guns to play with; when they grow up, they are given guns to kill. Using a gun is not foreign to these boys. The centrality of violence in our societies is the key to our upbringing. We need to see how men and women are being socialised. There is nothing surprising about the levels of violence that exist in our society," says Keedi.

"These children were merely following what is being practiced in their societies where in order to win the game, you must learn to become powerful, and resort to dominance in order to win. Being vulnerable and caring is not going to help you win in a conflict. Those who are not willing to play this game are called emasculated and become outcastes."

Speaking at the global symposium at a session focussed on men's participation in violent conflicts and also in areas of peace building, Keedi and others explored whether militarised masculine identities contribute to conflict and if it was possible for these identities to be transformed into non-violent identities.

Keedi said his group, along with the Arab Foundation for Freedom and Equality, had launched a nationwide campaign to change individual men and boys' understanding of what is termed "acceptable" behaviour as an essential component to ending violence against women and children.

A Men's Centre was set up as a space which allows men to relieve stress. Here they are taught both how to manage anger and also how to behave in a less aggressive manner. ABAAD is presently conducting a study asking both men and women how gender roles have changed in the last 30 years, as "both genders need to understand the prescriptive role that has been given to them from birth." Keedi believes it is important to transform society's cultural understanding of what it means to be a man into an understanding of masculinity that is beneficial to men and women and is more in line with the principles of human rights.

**Imperative to Involve Women in Peace Negotiations**

Isabella Geuskens of the Women Peacemakers Program in Netherlands spoke out strongly against the "militarisation of men's lives and the high emotional costs they had to pay for it in terms of high depression and suicide rates."

She maintained that war had an enormous impact on the lives of women and therefore it is imperative for governments to involve women as active partners in promoting peace negotiations and initiatives. Geuskens along with other feminists, has started a pilot programme to promote gender equality especially since gender remained all about power. "Our object is to strategise and ensure that society follows non-violent solutions to achieve policy goals," she said.

Her observation is that violence has a success rate of only 26 percent whereas the observance of non-violence is a much more effective tool to diffuse a crisis, a fact agreed upon by political scientists and sociologists.

"We are witnessing increasing amounts of militarisation around the globe as also a proliferation of weapons that are being used against civil society. We need to invest in disarmament, demilitarisation and conflict prevention," she said.

Australian Cate Buchanan who works on the...
Surviving Gun Violence Project concurred, saying "Women have been excluded from peace making. All mediation remains male dominated, but there is weak accountability when gender is overlooked." She supported her point by highlighting peace agreements that had taken place in the last 20 years, regretting the absence of women from these processes.

Buchanan linked the use of arms to male patriarchy. A survey of victims of small arms had found that presently 2.7 million people are living with gunshot injuries worldwide, a gross underestimation said Buchanan, as the numbers of victims suffering from the global burden of gun violence were much higher than what these estimates suggested.

The Loss of Masculinities

Advocate Onen David, working on the Refugee Law Project in Uganda, focussed on the sufferings faced by men who were victims of sexual violence. How do these men struggle and come to terms with their own masculinity? What does it mean to engage with these survivors in order to make sense of their sexuality, gender and masculinity? These were questions that people working with these male survivors confronted.

Some of Onen's conclusions were that, "The survivors feel a distorted sense of sexual orientation. They believe they cannot marry and have children any more. And being in this frame of mind, many of them end up being abandoned by their wives and families."

Their plight is worsened by the fact that these men suffer from a sense of community shame. "Being called a survivor is equated to being called a homosexual," he said.

David believes groups like his need to interact with the government in Kampala to ensure structural and policy changes for helping the survivors regain their lost masculinities.

By Rashme Sehgal

War has an enormous impact on the lives of women and therefore it is imperative for governments to involve women as active partners in promoting peace negotiations and initiatives. Yet, women are excluded from peace making. All mediation remains male dominated, but there is weak accountability when gender is overlooked.

Engaging with the Military

Dr Robert Egnell, a visiting professor at Georgetown University, USA, and also a captain in the Swedish army reserve force, spoke about his interactions with the military and his attempt to try to humanise the military machinery in both the US and in his own country.

"The military is about violence. It uses violence as an effective tool to achieve its political goals. In order to achieve these goals, it has to create and propagate a culture of violence," said Egnell. Society needs to defend itself and in order to do so, it needs to create and maintain military institutions. "As long as we are unable to stop this cycle of war, we cannot overlook the military. It is therefore important for us to engage with the military," said Egnell.

Part of this engagement is by teaching the military about gender issues and the importance of women's rights. "There are two ways to engage with the military. The first is to create a cadre of people who can work from the outside. The second way is to work from within which is what I am trying to do. The military is a huge bureaucracy. We need to change their mindsets," Egnell maintained.

He admits the need to strategise and work within the constraints of "a limited approach. If we go all out against the military we will meet with resistance. We must engage with military organisations as their partners," warning that "it cannot be forgotten that from childhood boys like the military and identify with it."

By Rashme Sehgal
Dr Lori Heise is presently leading a team of epidemiologists who are investigating partner violence. "I have been working on this issue for the last 35 years in several countries around the globe. It is a very challenging job given that we have to try and understand what we need to do in order to ensure primary prevention. I work with groups to help survivors who are caught in abusive relationships. The question is - how do we restructure society so that families and children do not face such challenges?" said Heise.

In Heise’s experience, partner violence is being faced across all continents and has a major presence in the US, UK, Canada, Australia and Europe. She has led a World Health Organisation (WHO) multi-country study, 'Women’s Health and Domestic Violence' which interviewed 24,000 women in 15 cities.

Women in India were also interviewed and Heise points out that in some parts of Delhi, abuse levels are so high that 80 percent of the women interviewed complained of having been abused.

"The extent of wife beating and partner violence depends on the norms related to the acceptability of such an occurrence. Where such a practice is accepted as being a man’s right to beat his wife, we will witness higher levels of violence," she said.

Domestic Violence Linked to Nature of Masculinity Propagated by Societies

In an exclusive interview Dr Lori Heise, who has played a leading role in getting gender violence onto the international health agenda, analyses why partner violence is so prevalent across continents. Dr Heise teaches Ethics, Global Justice and Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK

Partner violence is being faced across all continents and has a major presence in the US, UK and Europe. The extent of wife beating depends on the norms related to the acceptability of such an occurrence.

"The problem of wife beating is also related to a woman’s status in society. In my experience, a woman who has attained a higher secondary education degree, has entered the labour force and has greater access to property rights is less likely to face partner violence," she said, adding, "This is not to say that rich women do not face partner violence. They do but this has to do with the characteristics of their partner and the kind of relationship they have entered into."

Heise has also extensively studied cases of men who perpetuate violence. "We look at whether he was abused as a child and whether he was exposed to violence. There is a higher likelihood that he will repeat violent behaviour, though we believe that the vast majority of men are not likely to repeat patterns. It is however one more risk factor. A history of alcoholism also increases abusive behaviour, as also if there is a great deal of conflict in the relationship," she added.

"In India, many women say that if I have done something wrong then it is ok if my husband beats me," she explained. When asked what they believed "wrong behaviour" meant, two examples given were, "going out of the house without my husband’s permission or not preparing dinner on time when he returned from work."

When men were questioned about this, they claimed they had resorted to violence because if they did not do so it would reduce their standing amongst other men. She believed partner violence was an endemic problem in India.
Maldives Shows the Way in Asia

Her research had led her to conclude that Maldives had amongst the lowest levels of domestic violence in Asia. She believes this is directly linked to the nature of masculinity being propagated in a society. "When masculinity is linked to control of women, men adopt the role of aggressors. But where men are brought up to be restrained and generous, their relationship is different. Also, despite Maldives being a Muslim society, women are free to leave relationships without facing censure from the community. Such an attitude also helped ensure lower levels of partner violence," Heise said.

"We see similarities in Africa (with Asia) where also there are strong patriarchal ideologies which women are expected to obey. Violence and wife beating are accepted as a form of dispute resolution. But their attitude to sexuality is different. There is more pre-marital sex, more openness and an acceptance of multiple partners in Africa," she said.

Heise has helped set up three NGOs. These are the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE), International Research Network on Violence Against Women and Global Campaign for Microbicides which focuses on protection of women against HIV/AIDS.

She pointed out that issues such as domestic violence were earlier not commonly discussed in public domains. "Now however they are receiving widespread media attention. Increased attention does not mean men are getting worse. It just means that there is more social space to have these discussions," she asserted.

She believes domestic violence is showing a downward spiral in South America which is also witnessing a great deal of social change. Countries in South America are achieving higher levels of education with more women joining the professional work force. "The result is that there has been a corresponding lowering of domestic violence," explained Heise, who believes South America’s construction of shelters for women facing violence has also proved advantageous.

She opines that women in Asia and especially India need to have greater equality before the law, especially since the law is implemented by people raised in a certain cultural milieu which reinforces discriminatory mindsets. "We can have a good law in the book but that will not change anything on the ground. It also needs to be enforced. Police will not inform the judge about the correct details thereby ensuring the law does not get enforced," she pointed out.

Heise therefore believes it is important to focus on how we bring up our children, ensuring they are brought up in a more equitable way with less discrimination against the girl child.

It is important to link research to advocacy, she said. Incidents of domestic violence are similar around the globe. The classic response by men is to say, "Of course, I do beat her (my wife)," and then they will provide any number of justifications for their behaviour. Heise says her job is to help deconstruct these patterns of violence. She strongly believes it is only when people change their beliefs that there will be a corresponding change in their behaviour.

By Rashme Sehgal
There has been a quiet but perceptible shift in the focus of women’s movements across the globe over the past two decades. The battle of the sexes is gradually being redefined. Brayburning, militant feminism and male-bashing is no longer the order of the day. The conversation is no longer about “Them Vs Us” or “He vs She”. It is surely but slowly moving in the direction of how men and women can work together as partners to achieve the goal of gender justice. In other words, men are now seen as part of the solution and not the problem.

This change stems from a growing recognition that when women continue to face all-round discrimination, when instances of violence against women are on the rise and when women’s right to choose continues to be restricted, it is imperative to involve men for gender equality since they continue to wield power and decide what is appropriate for women.

The call for a partnership between men and women was first articulated at the international level at the 1994 Cairo conference on population and development in the context of reproductive rights. It was broadened the following year to include sharing responsibility at home and at the workplace when Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Beijing World Conference on Women, famously declared that it is “now the turn of men to join women in their struggle for equality.”

This was eventually included in the platform for action subsequently endorsed at the conference, marking a major change in the approach adopted by activists whose initiatives so far had focused exclusively on women’s empowerment.

Predictably, this radical shift was not easy to come by. Activists, who had waged a long and arduous battle against gender discrimination at the grassroots, were unsure about travelling down this path. They were nervous that the gains they had made over the years would be diluted and that the spaces they had painstakingly created for women would be lost.

Bandana Rana, president of Saathi, a Nepal-based NGO who was at the Beijing conference when women activists and policy makers from across the globe debated the issue of engaging with men, recalled how uncertain they were about changing tack.

“I was a young activist when the Beijing conference was held. There were a lot of discussions then about involving men and boys in women’s battle for gender justice. There were serious apprehensions among women that by doing so, they will end up squandering the gains they have made so far and surrender the space they fought for all these years,” she said.

These heated discussions eventually culminated in a grudging acknowledgement that the battle against patriarchy will not succeed if women do not talk to men.

“The gender equality agenda has been led by the women’s movement for decades. But this is not a one-sided task. We see the engagement of men and boys—the other half of humanity— as a gamechanger in shifting power relations to end discrimination against women and achieve gender equality,” remarked Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of UN Women, at the global symposium.
Fears of Funds Diversion

Though the idea of engaging men has taken root and gained acceptance among women's activists over the past twenty years, some nagging doubts still persist. The biggest concern about working with men relates to funding. There is a growing fear, articulated by several speakers at the global symposium, that there will be a cut in the funds for programmes on women's empowerment and gender violence as money will be diverted to work on masculinities and engaging men.

“We see a clear crisis as women’s organisations working at the grassroots are chasing donors, smaller women’s groups are closing down. Where is the sustained funding for women’s groups so that women’s issues do not get left out? For instance, illegal abortions continue to take place but there is no money for this work,” bemoaned Tulika Srivastava of South Asia Women’s Fund.

Gary Barker, international director of Promundo and co-chair of the MenEngage Alliance, admitted that many women’s groups have not universally accepted the MenEngage Alliance as they fear a cut in funding for their movement. “Some women’s rights groups are worried about their funding and whether their funders will question inclusion of men in their work,” Barker said, but added that there is an acceptance that the, “work with men must be part of the gender equality revolution.”

While funding is an area of serious concern, the debate has also moved on to the terms of engagement to be adopted in reaching out to men so that age-old gender stereotypes are not reinforced. How do you dismantle structures of patriarchy and change mindsets to ensure that men and women become allies? How do you involve men in the movement without making it look like they are doing a great favour to the women by supporting them? These are some of the issues which are at the centre of discussions now.

Who is a ‘Real Man’?

The situation is particularly worrisome in the present Indian context when right-wing fundamentalist groups (as witnessed in the love jihad campaign in Uttar Pradesh) are whipping up passions to underline that a real man is the one who stands up to fight for his religion, community and women.

As a result, women’s sexual autonomy is becoming limited while patriarchal mindsets are being encouraged. Then there are numerous instances of traditional institutions like caste Khap panchayats (an assembly of elders in some clans in north India) openly sanctioning punitive action against women who dare to exercise their right to choose in marriage. Worse still, the principals of educational institutions in cities are prescribing a dress code for women and even restricting their mobility.

Kamla Bhasin, a feminist-activist working with Sangat, a South Asia women’s network and the Delhi-based women’s organisation Jagori, was clearly worried that the outreach to men will end up projecting men as protectors of women’s honour instead of becoming their allies in their quest for equality and social justice. The move could end up controlling women where a man is supposed to be the authoritative figure and a woman is expected to be tolerant and compliant.

Actor-activist Rahul Bose agreed, pointing to advertisements showing how men have to protect women. “This got me thinking that though it is important to engage men and boys in gender justice you have to engage them in the right way. It is not about protecting them but about understanding that women will take their own decisions,” he said, underlining that men have to learn to cede control. “They have to learn to let go,” he added.
Despite these odds and lurking doubts, the work with men and boys has made some progress over the past two decades. At the international level, a Global Network of Men Leaders was set up way back in 2009 as part of the Campaign UNiTE to End Violence Against Women while UN Women has launched the HeForShe campaign to create a critical mass of men who believe in gender justice.

Many countries, including India, have launched several programmes for adolescent boys and fathers while women’s organisations have started working with men to address issues of gender discrimination, violence against women, protection of child rights and child care.

A start has been made in the capital where Delhi’s Transport Department and a local NGO, Manas Foundation have joined hands to conduct classes on gender sensitization for the capital’s 40,000 autorickshaw drivers. Chandrakant Pande, who attended one such class, revealed that he was initially sceptica about these lessons but came back a much wiser man. “I have now realized the problems faced by women in Delhi….my attitude towards them has changed,” he said, adding he understood the importance of respecting women.

A special programme to change male attitudes towards women, spearheaded by the Centre for Health and Social Justice, is going on in 1500 villages in 50 districts in the four states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Jharkhand. The effort is to understand why men oppress women and urge them not to abuse their power.

These experiments have proved that it is possible for men and boys to become equally involved and interested in this process and gain from it too. Bandana Rana said their organisation decided to reach out to men through the highly-popular football clubs in Nepal.

Changing Mores is A Long Haul

Despite these successes, women’s groups face a long haul ahead. It involves a lot of work as old prejudices are well entrenched and gender stereotypes are proving difficult to shake off.

No doubt, women’s status has improved as their literacy rates have risen and they have become more visible in the workforce. But the social response to women’s growing autonomy has been poor, resulting in greater incidence of violence against women. Men are obviously ill-prepared to accept these fast-paced changes as they have grown up with fixed views about the role of women and how they should behave with them.

“Most men agree that women should be treated equally at the work place and at home and that women should not be subjected to violence but they do not translate this in their personal lives,” said Ravi Verma, regional director, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) which collaborated with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on a study on “Masculinity, intimate partner violence and son preference in India.”

For instance, men have grown up to believe that child care and household chores are the woman’s domain. Preeti Sudan, additional secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development, revealed that though the Indian government has a provision for 15 days paternity leave, few men avail of it. “The socialisation is such that men believe it is the woman’s job to care for the child,” she said.

Lakshmi Puri, assistant secretary-general of UN Women, disclosed that when she spoke about the concept of shared work, a UN delegate’s immediate response was, “So now we will have to ask our breadwinners to stay at home.”

Verma maintained these stereotypes could be addressed during the formative years of boys and girls by transforming schools and revising textbooks to show boys and girls as equal partners.

Despite this ongoing debate, women’s groups have carved out a new path to achieve their goal of gender justice and equality. Men are gradually coming on board but women’s groups and policy makers still face the tough task of changing male attitudes which have been inculcated since childhood. And although there are instances of men assuming a leadership role in this movement, the journey ahead is long and arduous. As one delegate put it: it can be difficult for men to acknowledge that they can be a part of what women had started.

By Anita Katyal
Dismantling Patriarchal Structures in Namibia

Bience Gawanas, Special Adviser to the Minister of Health, Namibia, is a lawyer who has held several important positions in her country. She was a Commissioner on the Public Service Commission in Namibia and an Ombudswoman in the Namibian government. She has been a lecturer on gender law at the University of Namibia and secretary-general of the Namibian National Women’s Organisation. As chairperson of the Law Reform Commission, she oversaw the passage of the Married Persons’ Equality Act. In an exclusive interview during the global symposium, she spoke about the importance of reaching out to men, the status of women and the women’s movement in Namibia.

How do you look upon the shift in the women’s movement to engage with men in their battle for gender equality?

I look upon this issue from two perspectives. I still believe there’s need for space for women, and that there are a lot of issues which have not been resolved yet. That dialogue must continue. Meanwhile, newer challenges have come up before the women’s movement. For instance, are the modes of communication that we used still relevant with younger women in the movement, how do we take the movement forward?

But it is also true that we will not move forward alone, men and women have to move together. You see, men have not come from Mars. We have to make men realise that there is something in it for them and for this we have to frame the narrative differently. The broader issue is social justice for all.

In Namibia we found it was much easier to fight against colonial domination than patriarchal domination. Colonial domination has come to an end but patriarchy has survived and continues to do so.

After all, I didn’t come into the world through a mother alone but also a father. I share a world with brothers, sons, uncles. I cannot wish them away. My past experience has shown that I can only be a whole person if everybody around is also whole. Men will move ahead with women if there is something in it for them.

Tell us a little about the struggle of women in Namibia and the status of its women’s movement?

During the liberation movement when we lived in refugee camps, we all had one goal and that was to free Namibia. Patriarchy did not exist in that context. During the liberation movement both men and women faced the same challenges and there was never any doubt that our chief focus was liberation.

But once we obtained liberation and our wonderful Constitution ensured gender equality and a right to vote for women, the reality emerged as far different...women who fought side by side with men in the liberation movement just disappeared from the equation as if we were no longer human beings. Patriarchal structures existed everywhere - in the media, political parties, you name it.

The question which confronted us was, how do we dismantle these structures and mindset. We found it was much easier to fight against colonial domination than patriarchal domination. Colonial domination has come to an end but patriarchy has survived and continues to do so.
What we are asking ourselves is whether we have a women’s movement and how strong is it to influence policies and issues concerning women. Because of the nature of colonialism we had a far stronger women’s voice during the liberation movement than we have today. After we got freedom, we became complacent.

**Any particular efforts being made in Namibia to remove gender discrimination?**

We have realized that the gateway to power is through political parties which are largely male dominated. During the last five years, women in political parties insisted that quotas be provided in party structures and party lists. It took a while but the ruling party Swapo’s constitution was amended to provide for equal representation of men and women in party structures.

We have adopted a zebra-style list which means that 50 percent of the candidates on lists submitted for elections will be women. We managed to push through this amendment and it’s a big achievement for us but the struggle is not over yet. But if there is a discussion between men and women from the beginning, there will be no need for quotas.

**I am sure you must be facing strong resistance from men who don’t want to relinquish their powers.**

Of course, there is strong resistance. Whenever there is talk about gender equality, there is talk about religion and culture which is used to reinforce and strengthen existing patriarchal structures. Questions are then asked, are we doing something which is against our culture? But even so, we have had some successes.

For instance, when Namibia enacted the Married Persons Equality Act removing a man as the head of a household and abolishing his marital powers, it generated a lot of debate. Men accused women of breaking up families and homes. But our reply was: we did not participate in the liberation movement to be treated as second class citizens. We lobbied hard for the passage of this law with men, women, parliamentarians, chief whips. Fortunately we had our President’s support.

**What are the main issues currently dominating the discourse among women in Namibia and how do you reach out to men in this fight for gender equality?**

The issue of violence against women is a matter of great concern in Namibia. The increasing number of women who were being killed by their partners led to a lot of talk to a point where the government stepped in to call for a national prayer day to end gender-based violence. This issue brought men and women on a common platform as gender-based violence also impacts men. They are seen as perpetrators of violence, they are seen as potential rapists. Efforts are being made to reach out to men. We are telling them that we would like to work with them to address this issue.

This symposium has been an important conference. I would now like to start a MenEngage movement in Namibia. This conference has thrown up issues like how do you engage with men on different issues, where do you start? We have laws on gender violence, rape and so on but those implementing them must be made gender sensitive.

By Anita Katyal
Lessons on Breaking the Gender Binary from Indian Bhakti Poetry

“My body and mind are grieved for want of Thee/ O my beloved!
Come to my house/ When people say I am thy bride/ I am ashamed;
for I have not touched/ Thy heart with my heart/ ... Kabir is restless; he is dying for the sight of Him”

Why has the tradition of medieval Indian Bhakti (devotional) poetry used the feminine voice and persona to express feelings of love and surrender towards a masculine and hegemonic God?

This theme was explored at the global symposium by the singer and documentary film maker Shabnam Virmani and writer–translator Vipul Rikhi in the session 'The Woman's Voice in Mystic Poetry' where the two used conversation and song to reflect on the vastly influential poems of the fifteenth and sixteenth century mystic Indian poets Kabir and Mira Bai. They reflected on how the poems, often written by male poets, adopted a feminine voice to express feelings of love and surrender. They also sought to explore whether the poems were an attempt to resist and defy binary gender identities.

Traditionally, the poetry of the Bhakti movement has been perceived to be feminine in nature and it has viewed God as the masculine husband towards whom all devotion is directed.

There are several explanations as to why the feminine voice was adopted. One explanation is that women were seen to possess a heterogeneous nature that could extend between virtue and sexuality, weakness and strength, even as the nature of men was defined by some key characteristics namely chivalrousness, strength and machismo. Women were also seen to symbolise helplessness and dependence in relation to the male God and therefore male poets preferred to use a feminine voice to express their love for God.

The Beauty Myth vs the Macho Myth

Both Virmani and Rikhi shared their personal understanding of why poets like Kabir had adopted a feminine voice in their Bhakti poetry. Virmani believes, "They called themselves a sakhi or saheli (friend) of the Lord, because these words helped to convey the feeling of intimacy that women friends enjoy with each other and which men do not have access to."

Expanding on this theme, Rikhi said, "My conditioning as a man has seen me subjected to many limitations - this has left me deprived in many ways. Men see themselves as being an oppressor. They have to conform to male ways of behaviour and there is always pressure on them to be in control. Men have an intense macho image to live up to just as women have the beauty myth to live up to. It is a relief to come out of these behaviours and adopt different ways."

The use of the female voice to praise God at a time when Vedantic and Brahmanic ideals held sway in the subcontinent was certainly raising the banner of rebellion.

Virmani elaborated on how in one poem, Kabir describes himself as being a woman, "who has lined his eyes with kajal, is wearing the necklace of five senses in order to make himself beautiful as his beloved is standing by his side."
Poetry as an Enabler

Such poetry proved to be enabling for both genders. For a woman, the images it incorporated were expressive of radical autonomy, whereas for men it was alternate space which they could explore.

Virmani said, "Women use poetry and singing to negotiate power for themselves. They attend satsangs (congregational devotional singing) because these help to provide them with an autonomous space." This kind of poetry, she believes, allows for an articulation of individuality and subjectivity in the female voice.

Rikhi took this argument a step further. He said, "Part of our thinking is about how our experience gets gendered. Men are trained to be strong. The question to ask is how are they being trained to be strong? Part of this training is in the mind. The mind is always trying to be in control but spiritual poetry is about letting go. Mystic poetry is expressive of another way of being – of being more connected with the heart. This poetry talks about another kind of knowledge which is the knowledge of the heart."

Rikhi expressed his regret that the masculine experience is revolved around violence and fear. "Traditionally, men have been cut off from the nurturing and caring aspects of life where one can show softness and concern."

It was discussed that the modern Indian poet AK Ramanujan has also written about how men have taken on feminine roles and spoken through a female persona who "yearns for the male god as women do for their lovers."

Kabir often donned the guise of a woman and has written in a poem, "My body and mind are grieved for want of Thee;/ O my beloved! Come to my house;/ When people say I am thy bride,/ I am ashamed; for I have not touched/ Thy heart with my heart/ Then, what is the love of mine? I have no/ Taste for food, I have no sleep;/ My heart is ever restless within doors and/ Without./As water is to the thirsty so is the lover to the bride./ Who is there that will carry my news to my Beloved?/ Kabir is restless; he is dying for the sight of/ Him./"

Many of the Bhakti poets belonged to the lower socio-economic strata and spoke out strongly against the caste structure, the brahmanical order and ritualistic religion. Virmani stressed this point when she said, "These poets were cobblers, weavers, darzis (tailors) and the images they use in their poetry is of making ghee (clarified butter) from butter, or gur (jaggery) from sugarcane, drawing water from the well, bringing in firewood and churning milk, all activities that women indulge in, in their daily routine."

A bhajan (song) of Mira Bai illustrates this point beautifully when she says that true meditation is akin to a woman carrying a pot of water on her head as she makes her way home. She will stop and talk to her sakhis or attend to some other chores all the while ensuring that not a drop of water spills from the pot.

Rikhi emphasised that Bhakti poetry speaks about fear and surrender. Lord Krishna said as much when he told Radha, "I am afraid of the power of your love/ If I surrender to your love/ I will not be able to go to war."

Rikhi said, "A great deal of gender violence stems from fear. Men are more afraid of women than the other way around."

Both Virmani and Rikhi questioned whether the Bhakti poets were defying binary gender identities. There is scope for a third gender in Bhakti tradition which is neither male nor female and where gendered role reversals are the norm. Both Virmani and Rikhi said this third element needed to be explored in the oral and musical traditions which they represented.

By Rashme Sehgal
Warning Against Resurgence of a Different ‘Men’s Rights’ Movement

Srimati Basu is Associate Professor of Gender and Women’s Studies and Anthropology at the University of Kentucky, USA and a member of the Committee on Social Theory and the Asia Center Affiliates. Following an ethnographic study of feminist legal reforms, marriage, courts, mediation, rape and domestic violence law, she has begun fieldwork on men’s rights activists, marriage and domestic violence as the subject for her 2013-14 Fulbright Nehru Senior Research Fellowship in India. She is author of ‘The Trouble with Marriage: Feminists Confront Law and Violence in India’ and ‘She Comes to Take Her Rights: Indian Women, Property and Propriety.’ Excerpts from an exclusive interview during the global symposium.

What kind of legal anthropology research are you undertaking?
As a legal and anthropological expert I started visiting family courts in Kolkata in India as they are lawyer-less courts, and I noticed that anti-dowry and domestic violence laws are making a huge impact on Indian society. Groups of men facing such legal cases concerning marital dispute and violence are moving back and forth between family courts, criminal cases and mediation mechanisms. During the field work on how marital trouble is impacting individuals and society at large, I found people are confused about what to do with respect to police, courts and neighbours who generally shun them. Even though the men affected belong to diverse religions and ethnicity, very often the leaders of movements by such men are middle class professionals working in IT, marketing and sales sectors. Marginalised and shunned, they navigate between various options and tend to group together.

During my work with 'men's rights' groups to understand what they are objecting to, I found that in most cases, apart from custody of children the major concern is Section 498A of the Indian Penal Code’s Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Law. Men’s groups like ‘Save Indian Family Foundation’ are objecting to the legal burden put on them. The major problem they cite is that in case of dispute the wife invokes Section 498A which can result in the man's mother, father and other relatives being put in jail. With recent laws providing women a share in matrimonial property, there is growing anger and distrust among these men. This has led to the emergence of an anti-feminist set of people, including women, who have faced the brunt of Section 498A.

Do you think anger and frustration of these men’s rights groups would hamper the feminist movement?
During my visits to Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Lucknow and Nagpur I observed a big change. There is confusion about what marriage really means in legal terms and on laws about it. A recently enacted law regarding irretrievable breakdown of marriage has provisions about division of family property with a share going to the wife at the time of divorce. Many people are anxious and paranoid about it with rumours spreading about its possible impact. They are concerned about the judges’ discretionary power to decide what portion of property is to be given to the wife. It has also divided the feminist discourse, as one section of feminists now demands there should be some guidelines and specifications under the law.

What difference do you find between India and the US as far as matrimonial disputes are concerned?
The basic difference is that in the US the focus is primarily on custody of children. Society there being very individualistic, few people are concerned about joint matrimonial property. During research in India I found a different scenario as most men coming to the family court claim that they don’t have a proper job. They may be doctors or engineers but still claim to
have no money. They generally say that though they worked they got no salary, only some allowances. Moreover, they are generally legally disowned from the joint family property in order to prevent the estranged wife from making a claim over it.

**What is the difference you find on the issue of domestic violence?**

In India a resolution of economic issues is sought even in case of domestic violence, while in the US there is more focus on the safety of the woman and on child custody. Family courts in India being civil courts the judge cannot decide on criminal issues of violence, but can grant divorce or maintenance. The balance has gradually shifted in the case of domestic violence. When people involved in such disputes reach the police station, instead of talking about marital problems they mainly seek resolution of economic concerns like property or alimony. In India a lot of women are raised in a manner that they are not in the job market so in case of marital discord economic issues becomes their prime concern.

However, the situation varies for every case depending on the economic status or rural/urban background. Even between developing nations like India and Bangladesh the situation is quite different as each country has different historical, political, economic, gender and social rules and norms. In the US in the state where I live there is no problem of joint family property. There is provision of no-fault divorce so that one does not have to manufacture a reason to obtain divorce. No-fault divorce with no property issues involved and fathers getting custody of children is a common phenomenon. Since it is more visible in the US, there is no stigma attached to divorce and women also do not expect to get a portion of matrimonial property and are ready to move into the job market to support themselves.

**Do you think this global symposium will impact the feminist movement?**

In the US, along with women’s liberation a small wing of men’s rights groups is talking about masculinity. I am interested to find out at what level such a movement exists internationally. For some people working with masculinity, the conference is pro-feminist, that which recognises a notion of gender that is harmful to men as well as women. Including men into such discourse is important so that they can be a part of the gender justice movement. Pro-feminist groups are not shying away from this and are bringing men into the conversation.

**Recently in some cases women in live-in relationship have filed rape charges against men for refusing to marry. What are your views on it?**

I find it strange and it reflects the patriarchal mindset in India. Such incidents show us how people think about sexuality and marriage. It appears that sexual relations in such cases were based on consent for marriage. If one charges a man for rape after living with him or being in consensual sexual relations, then it appears that the woman had given a false consent as she was consenting to marriage and not to sex. It brings out the compulsoriness to marriage. I wonder why it is so important to get married?

At times families use rape law to stop girls from marrying the person of their choice. Such parents forget they are charging their own daughter as an accomplice in the crime. So, rape law is emerging like a property crime for families. If this is the way feminism behaves, then it is a pathetic way to think. When one feels that the location of sex is marriage only, it leaves no room for consent to one’s own pleasure. But laws are only as good as police and judges and the ideas and culture of the society enacting them. I hope the mindset will change in future.

By Annapurna Jha
Even though farmers’ suicides in India are often attributed to economic distress caused due to drought, floods and other natural calamities, the basic reason behind such a drastic step are ill-founded concepts of masculinity and the mismatch of aspiration versus ability among rural men, said experts at the global symposium.

An analysis of incidents of farmers’ suicides in the Indian states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab and Andhra Pradesh has revealed that in most cases the farmer committed suicide to prove that “he is a man, so he cannot tolerate insults,” which he often has to face from moneylenders or banks personnel if the crop fails.

In Andhra Pradesh a study of 132 families of farmers who committed suicide showed that in most cases the person killing himself was alcoholic or a drug addict. Since ambition and capabilities did not match, the person preferred suicide, regardless of its impact on his family. In most cases land was not transferred in the wife’s name, with the result that the wife is often driven away along with her daughters to her parent’s home while her sons are kept back, pointed out noted sociologist RS Deshpande.

The ill-founded concept of ‘rural masculinity’ was exemplified by an ex-armyman who kept a moustache and drank alcohol to showcase his masculinity. But when he incurred debt and his wife took up a job to cope with the financial stress, he could not deal with the challenge to his male ego and committed suicide, Deshpande pointed out.

The four day symposium deliberated extensively on the changing image and role of men in family and society in the new socio-economic paradigm. It was discussed that economic distress gives rise to human perversion in which masculinity manifests as an important component. Commodification of human beings, especially of girls being pushed into the flesh trade, has been witnessed in rural areas of Maharashtra and Karnataka during drought. The trafficking often takes place to save the ego or prestige of men. Household items and even children, especially girls, are sold. During distress situations like this caste barriers too break and traditional social and village systems fail, with upper caste women, who earlier remained confined to the home, being forced to come out and work in the field.

Globalisation, improved technology and contract jobs have adversely impacted men in the labour force. Trade unions face a major challenge in dealing with a shrinking job market that has no legal job security for workers, most of whom are men.

Men At Work – Women Bear Its Brunt

Dr Vivek Bengal, Professor of Psychiatry at NIMHANS (National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences), Bangalore, said, “Research has revealed that most often mental illness and alcoholism have roots in socio-economic changes and a lack of ability in juxtaposition to aspirations. Economic distress leads to migration, with young people becoming detached from family support. Once the psychological cushion of family is not there, people lose restraint and social norms slacken.”
He said this, accompanied with increased competition due to the depletion of resources, worsens the situation. Alien living and workplaces appear threatening to men and they experience negative mood swings, frustration, sadness and boredom. To deal with erosion of norms and values men often indulge in alcohol which triggers violence against women, both physical and sexual. Men in these situations also find it difficult to deal with increasing aspiration and the growing voice of women in the changed scenario.

A study of the tribal population of Nicobar Islands revealed that tribals who had migrated from Ranchi, Jharkhand were beset with greater alcoholism and intimate partner violence problems than the Island’s original primitive tribal inhabitants. This could be attributed to the socio-economic stress and dilution of social norms caused due to migration, explained Benegal.

Trade union leader Datta Iswalkar said, “Globalisation, improved technology and contract jobs have adversely impacted men in the labour force. Trade unions face a major challenge in dealing with a shrinking job market that has no legal job security for workers, most of whom are men.” Recounting his experience of dealing with the movement of trade unions against closure of textile mills in Mumbai that led to one lakh people becoming unemployed, Iswalkar said the economic distress led to children not being able to go to schools, and drug addiction, alcoholism and violence in which women and girls were the worst affected. However, women’s support to the trade union movement led to the government conceding their demand and giving land for constructing houses for the labour force.

Senior journalist Barkha Dutt of the television news channel NDTV highlighted how power equations played out inside news rooms of media houses. There is an unspoken rule under which jobs are defined, with men covering areas like defence and national security while women are given feminine subjects like human rights, health and women and child development. Dutt recounted how she had to always be on guard to break the glass ceiling. “I refused to show any emotion during even the most distressful situations while covering the Kargil war in Jammu and Kashmir, so that as a woman journalist I should not be labelled weak.” However, even young men are vulnerable, she admitted and called for inclusion of alternate sexual identities like transgenders into the gender justice discourse.

Professor of Sociology in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Sanjay Srivastava, said the image of masculinity was changing fast in this era of social media and its impact could be felt in the political field too. In the recent Lok Sabha elections in India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s masculinity was projected in a forceful way with a 56 inch chest to convey that he was powerful and decisive in contrast to the policy paralysis of the earlier regime. The establishing of a masculine image in politics was lapped up by people both in India and abroad. There was even a political discourse on Modi’s masculinity when opponents targeted him for being “impotent” during the Gujarat riots, with Modi’s image of masculinity being forcefully reinforced through political discourse and widespread use of the media, pointed out Srivastava.

In many countries like South Africa, Lebanon, Kuwait and Afghanistan, a special initiation ceremony is conducted to enforce masculinity, said Nolwazi Mkhwanazi, an anthropologist from South Africa. Young boys in the age group of 15 to 25 years have to undergo an initiation in which circumcision and exclusion for four weeks is carried out. During the initiation process the youth are forbidden to access hospital facilities. After the initiation, they become eligible to marry and acquire property, but the process leaves them with mutilated and amputated genital and psychological scars, pointed out Mkhwanazi, which impacts them lifelong.
British journalist and author and fellow, Promundo, Shereen El Feki has spent the last decade trying to give a voice to Arab women. Her best-selling book *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World* is an attempt to understand the changing sexual attitudes of men and women across the Arab world. It has been translated into Dutch, French, German and Spanish and the Arabic translation is expected to hit the stands in a few weeks. It has been nominated for The Guardian’s First Book Award and The Orwell Prize and her TED talk on sexuality in the Arab region has received almost one million views since 2014.

"I spent five years travelling across the Arab region, through Morocco, North Africa up to Lebanon to understand the social dilemmas facing the Arab world. I used sex as a lens to understand what is happening inside the bedroom in these societies, because what is happening in the bedroom is shaped by forces on a larger scale. I have always maintained, if you want to know a people, start by looking inside their bedroom," said El Feki.

Born of a Welsh mother and an Egyptian father, El Feki started learning Arabic following the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. Researching for the book turned out to be a daunting task. "Sexual issues including women’s sexuality and emancipation are not discussed openly in the Arab world. In fact, women are not allowed to realise their social rights," she said.

"Unlike India, we do not have the freedom to do research in Egypt," she said. She sought permission from the Egyptian government to research the sexual lives of young people in Egypt and went on to craft a survey in 2009 which was based on the survey prepared by the Population Council of India that asked an entire gamut of questions dealing with women and adolescent health including sexual preferences.

"Although we adapted the questions prepared by the Population Council of India to suit the cultural context of the Arab countries, we were informed that we could not ask questions pertaining to their sexuality. It seemed difficult to convince them (government) that unless we knew the problems it was going to be difficult to find the solutions or to understand what is going on," she said.

She therefore decided to give a face and voice to people who wanted to effect a change especially since, "the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has seen a closing down of public and private discourse around sex. This has happened because sex remains a powerful tool of control," she explained.

Her own paternal grandmother and father admit there has been a "closing down on discussion relating to sex even within families."

"They enjoyed greater freedom in their times where the subject was discussed more freely. The younger generation is using the internet to fill the gaps, often with a great deal of misinformation,' El Feki adds.

**Arab Spring Triggers Change in Sexualities**

She however insists taboos around sex are being challenged in Arab societies, particularly with the debates in personal life being a key to changes in economics, politics and the broader policy sphere. Some religious leaders and lawyers have challenged restrictive laws, she says. "The Arab Spring triggered this change. Earlier no woman would admit to being raped. Now there is a lively discussion on this subject."
Women have also gone public about cases of sexual harassment. Of course these cases are miniscule in number and this opening up is a very gradual process," she admits.

Some of the key observations in her book are that young women in the Arab region want to live in harmony and within their faith. "Some of these young people are opting for Urfi marriage which is a form of Islamic marriage contract but is not registered by the state. It is an informal system of marriage which young people are opting for because it allows them to realise the needs of the flesh and also reconcile them with the needs of their faith. It's an easier form of marriage but they do not have the same rights as if they had gone in for a regular marriage contract," she maintains.

Her interactions with young people have also made her understand the strong sense of frustration and alienation that the younger generation are facing in the present political system. "There is 30 percent unemployment in this region. If you are a man without a job, you will not be able to get married, you will not be able to have sex, not be able to have kids. Just imagine what this will do to the psyche of a man especially to their sense of manhood. They will become frustrated and violent and they will vent their aggression against women," she said.

El Feki feels women in the Arab world are under even more pressure. "There is much more control over them. Even though some family laws have been modified, women by and large are not in a position to benefit because it is their families that dictate every aspect of their lives. They lead highly restrictive lives and have to depend on their families for everything. Unfortunately, women also project very strong patriarchal attitudes. To cite an example, the decision to circumcise young girls is made by women. Deep veins of patriarchy flow in them," El Feki added.

She has interviewed hundreds of men and women for her book but the voices in her book remain largely those of women. This, she says, is because women have led more interesting lives and have more interesting things to say on sex.

Amongst other conclusions she arrived at was that while married men wanted a better sex life, they lacked the language by which they could communicate this problem. "Wives also wanted better sex lives but they did not want to appear to be 'bad women' before their husbands. This is in direct contravention to the tenets of Islam which says that a couple must take pleasure in sex and is also free to discuss this subject frankly."

She said men remained concerned about the honour of their wives with virginity being connected to a woman and to her family's honour. El Feki went on to add "The people in the Arab region who were most thoughtful about sex were gay men because like women they faced a great deal of restriction especially with homosexuality not accepted in these countries."

As Egypt is taken over by one more authoritarian regime she warns that change will come, "by evolution and not by revolution." And then with a sigh she adds, "India is the largest democracy. It possesses all the things that we dream about. You have all the structures but if you look at the sexual lives of the young people, one sees so many problems. We must make a connection between the political and personal lives. We talk endlessly about getting power in the public space but how much power can women have if virginity is not their own business."

By Rashme Sehgal
Re-define Gender Identities to be More Inclusive: Transgenders

Angry and frustrated over being ignored, their voices stifled, denied sexual expression and opportunities for education and employment, the transgender community is questioning the traditional way of defining gender identities.

“We want to be included as a separate group because of our gender identity and not just for our sexual orientation. There must be talk about everyone, including transgenders, only then can gender equality and inclusiveness be possible,” said an angry Santosh Kumar Giri, a transgender, while interjecting in a debate at the global symposium on UN Women’s HeForShe campaign.

Giri, Secretary of Kolkata Rista, a NGO working for the empowerment of the transgender community, was annoyed over the binary system of gender in which the rights of people with a different sexual orientation have not been given sufficient importance.

“Why is the campaign only HeForShe, why are transgenders not included in it? Why ignore us and our rights? Educational institutions like the prestigious IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) and others are primarily male bastions with some women entering it, while for us they are out of bounds as we are taboo,” says Giri.

At a time when even the Supreme Court of the country has asked the government at the centre and the states to consider transgender as third gender, why is it that adequate spaces are not being provided to them, wondered Giri. Moreover, even the LGBTQI (Lesbian, gay, bisexual transgender, queer, intersex) community is not uniform, so to establish gender equality and gender justice there cannot be a uniform narrative.

However, Giri admitted that it is for the first time that the LGBTQI community has been invited to a global event in such large numbers, saying however that the community demanded a greater say in the symposium’s policy and decision making processes. Giri also lamented criminalisation and social exclusion being faced by transgenders.

Pushing for Justice for All Genders

Giri received support from noted lawyer and human rights activist Vrinda Grover, who said sexual autonomy and non-discriminatory laws are the need of the hour as transgenders and other such sections of society face a lot of violence but have no place to go to for redressal of grievances.

Transgenders are not alone, however, in demanding a change in perception regarding their sexual identity. Actor-activist Rahul Bose, who is also a rugby player, demanded a change in the macho image of men which dictates that boys play with guns and men don’t cry. He said sensitive and successful boys and men like football star Ronaldinho do cry to express their joy after winning or their frustration after losing a game.

Around every sexually assaulted woman survivor, there are sad fathers, angry brothers and ashamed grandfathers, Bose pointed out. Men are also grappling with the question of what can be done to prevent and deal with such violence. Their pain is natural. Effort should be made to join such men to reduce their pain and work for gender justice so that women can enjoy peace and security. "A sustained gender sensitisation campaign must be run for men,” he said.

Giving support, Remmy Shawa, member of the High level group on the Commitment to Youth Sexuality in Eastern and Southern Africa, said women are fighting gender inequalities and are not safe either outside or inside their homes as they are subjected to many forms of violence, but women are committed for justice not only for themselves but for all genders.

By Annapurna Jha
Do you think the global symposium is covering men and masculinity concerns sufficiently?

The symposium is focussing on gender relations, equality and masculinity and patriarchy and I have come here with a man’s perspective. A lot of research has happened on masculinity. Sexual and gender based violence and men’s role in that and its impact on development are the areas where organizations that I represent are involved. I have always connected to work where men suffered to the same degree as women. Stereotyping of social relations and gender issues is prevalent. Research is going on in gender and social structure and power relations, this conference will name some issues and throw attention on them.

How are deliberations on masculinity going on?

Even though the conference’s theme is men and boys for gender justice, the field is under populated as far as men are concerned. Not many men are interested in gender and development issues. So the conference is a good space as you find a lot of men working on these issues and there is no sense of being a lone voice. I have come across a range of voices—some very critical voices to others that are very superficial.

For interventions, cross movement dialogue among men is needed. Some silences and gaps are to be bridged. To have conversation we need to connect with men, for example on issues relating to fatherhood, relationship and care. If there is no connection, then women will have double the burden of care.

There is the risk of appeal and going soft on patriarchal privileges. The notion is that men are responsible for being better men to ensure a better future rather than working on relations. So there is a problem in applying theoretical questions on the masculinity issue. Often masculinity is taken as part of the problem of gender equality. Nicer masculinity is helping, but it must be kept in mind that in doing so we can fall back into the trap of men’s entitlements and responsibility of being leaders. So there is challenge in that. Institutions, politics and material conditions drive men’s behavior as well as women’s behavior. So over emphasis on gender identity rather than relations may create problem. Political context, social and economic drivers could make people assume that by changing these identities men internalize things and that’s how you then change society.

However, the big question is that we have to reach out to men for gender equality. If we have to change the laws or change the way business is being run or social cost of child care, in all these areas men are the driving force. It will be a simplistic view to take that men have to be supportive to women to help realize equality. Also, we need to engage the people who are not there in such conferences. The problem is more prevalent among poor men who are abusive, drink too much and indulge in violence under the influence...
of alcohol, so attention should be on them rather than people who come here and make policies.

**Don’t you think that marginalised and deprived sections of society are left out in these deliberations?**

The problem of gender equality and poverty are multi-dimensional. There is a thinking that if we help poor people first, train and educate them, then they will rise out of poverty and the problem of gender inequality can be tackled. But gender inequality is in the system, it is in the laws and every other field. So it is a huge task that needs interventions and combined struggle. What is this struggle and who are our allies we need to find out. Land rights movement or dalit and feminist movement in India are some such sectors, we need to find out what structures of power are to be bridged. Identities as men and women and dalits and ethnic races are rising. Finding narratives that helps rise above these dynamics and address change and create allies is required.

For interventions, cross movement dialogue among men is needed. Some silences and gaps are to be bridged. To have conversation we need to connect with men, for example on issues relating to fatherhood, relationship and care. If there is no connection, then women have double the burden of care. Many feminists are working on these areas, but not many men’s organisations are supportive of that work in a visible way. Some gaps are systemic and involve gender dynamics in the context of power and decision making.

There is a big gap in women’s political and public participation and in the context of not listening to their concerns and issues either in governments or in powerful social organizations. Work now has to be done as to how to get men’s support in political power sharing with women. The way Parliament and politics work generally, progressive and feminist movements have to challenge it in some way.

**What is the scenario in the UK as far as gender equality is concerned?**

We have come a long way in equal representation and in equality for women not only in politics but in many other areas. In some sectors there are more women than men. In middle managements there is now more equality, but there are not enough women in boardrooms. In most countries of Europe there is 30 percent representation for women in Parliament, while in some countries and parties there is even greater equality. As far as the question of political class in Britain is concerned, some women representing the country are powerful feminists. Some shift is occurring also where men politicians and boardroom decisions are concerned. Intergenerational changes when older men are replaced by young men—who are used to working with powerful and equal women—structurally, historically and generationally brings gender equality. So definitely progress is happening in Europe. But there is a right-way swing in Europe which is anti-immigrant and nationalistic. It is ambivalent to equality and not interested in women and sexual rights issues. But generally the right wing trend everywhere brings fundamentalism and nationalism together. In this scenario both women and men lose out on gender equality.

**What measures would you recommend to bring gender equality and justice?**

After 15 to 20 years of age it is very difficult to change people. We need to train children in gender equality and parents alone cannot bring this change, peer groups and society will also have to work for it.

We need a new type of politics based on gender equality, human rights and respect for gender identities.

*By Annapurna Jha*
The widespread protests following the brutal gangrape in Delhi of a young woman in December, 2012 has broken the cycle of silence, stigma and blame which women facing sexual violence and rape experienced, but institutional biases and a slow and apathetic legal system still make women vulnerable to sexual violence in India. The phenomenon of rape and sexual violence by intimate partners, non-intimate partners is rampant not only in India but across the world, especially in conflict zones, pointed out activists at the global symposium.

While deliberating on the drivers of men’s use of violence, especially homicide, sexual violence and rape, experts felt that the absence of fear of police, an apathetic legal system resulting in low conviction rate and the successful avoidance of incarceration were prime reasons for increase in sexual violence globally.

Vrinda Grover, lawyer and human rights activist, highlighted how the Delhi gangrape case brought about a paradigm shift in the way rape and violence against women was treated. The work done by the Justice JS Verma Committee which was set up following the incident, has been path-breaking. “Earlier, the victim was blamed for having invited rape but the Verma Committee report held patriarchy and discrimination against women responsible for such sexual violence,” said Grover. The legislation passed by Parliament thereafter has emboldened many more women to report such sexual crimes, as revealed by the National Crime Records Bureau data.

Even though the definition of rape has been expanded, marital rape is still not included in ‘rape’, pointed out Grover, saying the issue needed to be taken forward. The impunity with which sexual crime persisted was due to the social sanction given to men’s entitlement of having ‘fun’. Even when Parliament was passing the legislation, arguments were given by some sections that voyeurism and stalking were parts of fun and so they should not be made punishable.

Even policies of the government and economic decisions have encouraged sexual violence against women, it was pointed out. Globalisation and liberalisation have caused displacement and unemployment, adversely impacting women and making them vulnerable to sexual violence. The government needs to first have fundamental economic policies in place to protect women, only then will having CCTVs or streetlights be of use too in protecting women, Grover said. Sexual autonomy and laws that are non-discriminatory are the need of the hour as transgenders and other sections of the population also face a lot of violence but have no scope for redressal.

Globally, 7.2 percent women have admitted to having experienced non-partner sexual violence which means that one in 15 to 20 women have faced rape and other forms of violence, said Rachel Jewkes, Unit Director of
the Gender and Health Unit of South Africa’s Medical Research Council. Sexual abuse by husbands and other intimate and non-intimate partners is also very common in South Africa. To prevent rape, perpetrators need to be stopped but data shows that in South Africa the vast majority of men who commit rape and other sexual crimes do not go to jail. Of 1700 men interviewed in three districts of South Africa, about 21 percent disclosed that they had raped a non-sexual partner in the past. “This takes it out of the domain of being an anti-social activity to something which is a norm, with one in four men perpetrating rape,” said Jewkes.

Analysing the Drivers of Rape and Sexual Violence

Jewkes said the technique of data collection in which confidentiality was maintained, with staff not knowing the person who committed violence, was replicated in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, China and Papua New Guinea and it enabled men to confess to their crime, that devastated women. Many men admitted rape while about 5 percent confessed having committed non-rape sexual offences. The survey revealed that gangrape is also much more common than people think, while rape of men is also common with one in ten men reporting it. However, intimate partner violence is a more serious problem in conflict situations. In Papua New Guinea, only 7 percent men reported having committed rape but in conflict situations about 54 percent had committed it.

An analysis of data revealed that most of the men indulging in sexual violence had either not gone to proper school or were very insecure. They had faced social marginalisation, been physically victimized or experienced homophobic violence which had caused a neuro-psychological impact of lower self esteem and even alcohol abuse. Their relationship with women therefore led to physical violence as the underlying idea of being ‘masculine’. Men engaging in violent, anti-social behaviour is an indicator of a ‘male’ cultural image also. Most men said they wanted to rape women to have fun and their interpretation was that if they wanted a woman they could go and get her. It was also revealed that these men had a criminal behaviour as their relationship with themselves was conflicted. They had been victims in the past and suffered poverty and acts of violence. Men from poor sections of society were found to have been exposed to childhood trauma, and emotional and physical abuse which resulted in their violent response with women. “Richer men committed rape as a sexual entitlement and as a benchmark of masculinity. Privileged men with power were in the high risk group as they had a hegemonic concept of masculinity,” said Jewkes.

Therefore, engaging men and boys for gender justice would go a long way in dealing with the problem of sexual violence and rape, she said. At the same time empowering women to prevent rape was also very important so that they could take action when threatened by men and say “no” to violence. Self defence training to women could be one such option to prevent rape and sexual violence, she suggested.

Alvaro Campos, a clinical psychologist and sexologist and Director of the Costa Rican Institute of Diversity and Masculinity, said his NGO works with boys and men for gender equality and violence prevention. Apart from running the crisis prevention centre, individuals are provided psycho-therapy over phone or in person. It helps such violent men to manage their anger and acquire proper communication skills. Participants also learn how to take care of their partners and children and improve their fatherhood skills, all much needed interventions.

By Annapurna Jha
Must Find Ways of Collaborating with Men

Jean Kemitare is Program Manager of Raising Voices, an NGO working to prevent domestic violence against women and children in Uganda. In an exclusive interview during the global symposium, she speaks about global similarities and differences in experiences of gender violence.

Do you think this global symposium will help in preventing violence against women at the grassroot level?

The global symposium will help us focus on promising practices to prevent gender violence and engaging men for gender justice. The tagline of the conference ‘Men and Boys for Gender Justice’ is really very important as it will sort out a lot of problems. I am excited about it as only by engaging both women and men can there be socio-economic change. Moreover, there are many promising practices, but we need to discuss how to do work with integrity and accountability. We need to learn what is happening at the country level and the principles on which work should be done in the community. Gender equality involves changing social beliefs and norms that at present make women vulnerable.

So I am both intrigued and interested in the discussions, especially since such large numbers of people have come for this global event.

What similarities and differences have you found in the condition of women in Africa and Asia?

There are a lot of similarities between Asian and African countries as far as physical, sexual and economic violence against women is concerned --- both intimate partner violence and domestic violence. Religious institutions and government machinery are reinforcing the patriarchal mindset. Areas with high rate of poverty and conflict have more gender violence. All this violence is rooted in poverty and the power struggle.

In Asia and Africa fundamentalism is rising and Christian rigidity is coming back. They are reinforcing images of women in domestic settings and the private arena. Laws that are being pushed lack on the human rights front which is being viewed with suspicion. Human rights are termed as a Western concept and rejected. A fertile ground for anti-human rights sentimentality is emerging and the political leadership is playing along. There is a lot of support for these fringe elements that reject human rights. They keep in power as political leaders look to them for their own benefit. This has created a situation where these groups have become powerful influences.

Caste based ‘Khap’ panchayats in parts of India are limiting women’s rights and even incidents of honour killing are not uncommon in the country. What is the situation in Uganda?

We do not have caste based institutions, but churches, mosques and the traditional leadership indulge in many such gender insensitive acts and they have support among people. The situation is more or less similar as far as the condition of women in society is concerned.

A British era law criminalizing homosexuality has been restored by the Supreme Court in India. Are homosexuals accepted and treated with dignity in Uganda?

Criminalisation of homosexuality is a Western concept but homophobic environments persist everywhere.

What is the situation in Africa as far as domestic violence is concerned?

Patriarchal attitudes are the cause of gender violence and discrimination. In Zimbabwe and Namibia if men speak out in favour of their spouses they are labelled as people who have been given love potions and are termed “not man enough.” It is the hard dominant concept of masculinity that needs to be challenged. There is need to engage and work with men and change this mindset.

Gender justice does not mean having 50 percent men and 50 percent women in a programme, it entails
a more comprehensive and sensitive approach. Including men in the gender discourse is crucial. Let them become the champions of the gender discourse. We need to find ways of collaboration between men and women on gender issues.

Women facing harassment for dowry, rape and other forms of sexual violence is common in India. Have you come across similar experiences in Africa?

Sexual violence is very common in African countries also. A study in 2009-10 revealed that the first sexual experience of 25 percent of women is forced or one of coercion. Intimate sexual partner violence is also widespread. But it is unacceptable and should be challenged strongly due to its harmful impact on individuals and society.

Also, female genital mutilation is very common in Uganda and other East African countries. In our country there is the practice of paying a 'bride price' for women to get married. Not only the connotation of 'price' for women is objectionable, but also the practice itself is objectionable – it was originally meant to give social protection to women, but has now degenerated and is being misused for early and forced marriage of girls. Apart from bride price, inheritance of property is only for men thus revealing society's patriarchal mindset.

African countries have faced a major burden from HIV/AIDS. How much has it impacted women and children?

The spread of HIV/AIDS is a major challenge. It has impacted the health and economic well-being of people, especially women who face a greater burden of HIV/AIDS. The problem is compounded by lack of power in sexual decision making. Men feel they have the right to demand sex when they want. Women have little negotiation power regarding sex especially safe sex. Multiple concurrent partners is also socially accepted and there is even polygamy. Though Christianity, which promotes monogamy, is the main religion, men are allowed to have multiple partners. This is the friction between religion and culture. So, multiple concurrent partnerships and lack of negotiation power in sex has compounded the problem of HIV/AIDS as far women are concerned.

By Annapurna Jha
Fathering a New Era

Experiences from around the world indicate that active, involved fatherhood is the portal to ending gender discrimination

Tyrone Buckmire comes from a typical Caribbean family. Like many other families in the Caribbean islands, he had an absentee father who had sired 22 children by the age of 35 years from 13 different women. Consequently, his mother was left to shoulder the burden of looking after the home and providing for the family.

He explained that most men in the Caribbean have grown up in a culture where fathering children is looked upon as a badge of honour. In fact, there are umpteen instances when a man has fathered as many as 100 children as there is a feeling of entitlement that a man can have as many children as he wants.

“I have consciously sought not to be like my father,” said Buckmire, who participated in the global symposium. Much to everybody’s astonishment, Buckmire decided he would not go in for multiple relationships or father innumerable children. In fact, Buckmire further surprised everybody by adopting a child.

Unlike his own father and other men who were not physically present to look after their children, Buckmire makes it point to play an active role in the lives of his children. Not just that, he has made it his life’s mission to persuade men to become involved fathers. He is an active member of the global MenEngage Alliance and is a leading figure of the Caribbean Male Action Network which works with men and women’s organisations to help men to understand their need to get involved in the lives of their children.

Buckmire is a member of a small but growing tribe of men who are shedding the stereotyped image of men as being distant figures viewed primarily as disciplinarians and providers, having a peripheral role in mentoring and nurturing their children.

Instead, these involved fathers spend more time with their children, look after them and share all parenting responsibilities with their partners. This is particularly so among younger men who want to be caring fathers and they even put up a stiff fight for custody of their children in case of a divorce.

Psychologist Francisco Aguayo, working with Cultura Salud, Chile, said that many men in Costa Rica and other countries are struggling to change the law so that they can spend more time with their children if they are separated from their wives, while an increasing number of men in Chile are present during the birth of their child and are equally involved in pre-natal care.

Not only does fathering help in building a healthy relationship with their children, but it also promotes gender equality and brings down the incidence of domestic violence. It has also been noticed that fathers who are actively involved in the lives of their children become role models to them to build respectful relationships in the future.

“Fatherhood is an important entry point to improve relations between men and women. There is greater respect for each other and less violence in homes where fathers are active participants in child rearing and caregiving,” observed Adrienne Burgess of The Fatherhood Institute, UK, who also participated in the symposium.

Realising the many positives of involving men in child care, a number of governments have adopted policies aimed at encouraging men to become equal partners in caregiving. While many countries, including India, have introduced a provision for paternity leave, others like Turkey have launched a special campaign called ‘You Are My Father,’ which tells men how they can benefit from communicating with their children. In the process, the campaign also promotes gender equality.
Pathbreaking Study Dispels Many Parenting Myths

A study conducted by the Canada-based White Ribbon Campaign on ‘Involved Fatherhood and Gender Equity’, shows that fathers who are involved with the caring of their children are far more appreciative of the efforts of their partners to do housework after returning home.

Similarly, there is greater understanding among working couples when fathers and mothers are both involved in childcare and domestic work.

In fact, men in this study said their involvement in the lives of their children had helped foster a better relationship with their partner. These fathers talked about the importance of supporting their partner and building equal relationships, stating that their involvement with their children was one way of enhancing their relationship.

Giving details about their study, Clay Place Jones of the White Ribbon Campaign, said the traditional male-female roles were no longer applicable as men remarked that it was not enough to be a father figure but that they wanted to fulfill the roles of both parents.

A participant in this study was quoted as saying, “I think being able to play both roles is a big deal. You know, you’re a father, but I think in some instances you need to be mother as well. So, I think that’s the biggest thing, is being able to play mommy and daddy. When mommy is not around, daddy is going to do it. When daddy is not around, mommy is going to do it.”

The White Ribbon study provides an interesting insight into how men have embraced activities and roles which were traditionally considered female in nature. They are also not shy to talk about being sensitive to the needs of their partners and children.

Another participant quoted in the study said, “You know, we’re expected to be out making money, the breadwinner etc, but an involved father is somebody who actually sits down, listens to their partner, listens to the needs of the family and works with the family, not independently.”

Burgess said their extensive research had dispelled many myths about men and child rearing. “For instance, it is commonly believed that men are not interested in children, are less sensitive than women and cannot cope with them without the help of women. But studies show there is no difference in the capacity of men and women to care for children,” said Burgess.

By Anita Katyal
There is all-round acceptance that women’s groups must work with boys and men on issues of gender justice but doubts still persist. Women are concerned that their work on women’s empowerment could fall by the wayside.

Most feminists have accepted that there is a need to engage with men. It is fine to work with men but work with women must continue. Let’s not forget that we have not finished working with women. We cannot stop attending to transformative work with women; in fact, it is instrumental to work with women. We must protect the spaces created for women. It is not about he or she but she for everybody. We should not lose sight of this.

What we need to do is to challenge patriarchy. I admit that men are also victims of violence but the impact of patriarchy on women is much greater. We should not lose sight of it. Our vision of development cannot be disconnected from talk about patriarchy.

And if the bigger agenda is dismantling patriarchy, you have to look at a larger global agenda - how do we work together on issues like climate change, food crisis, post-disaster reconstruction and how do we do that in a new way? We have to work in a more coordinated manner.

What is your take on the work presented at the global symposium and the issues raised here?

My takeaway from the conference is that I am delighted at the depth of work being done on the issue of masculinity. But I have concerns about how much work is being done in alliance with organisations working with women on issues affecting women. Rather than working in a disconnected way, it is important that organisations working on masculinity work more consciously with organisations which are attempting to empower women.

There is also the issue of funding. There is a fear that funding for women’s empowerment will shrink. But there should not be a situation where donors give money for work on masculinity without knowing about the role of women’s struggles.

Is it very difficult for women’s groups to work with men and women?

It is difficult for women to challenge patriarchy because patriarchy succeeds by co-opting those who are oppressed by it through a system of social norms and a reward system for being good women. They also have to deal with extreme violence, asking them to rock the boat is not easy at all. When we first started working with women, they would shoo us away saying don’t waste our time.

Women at the grassroots have always worked with men. You cannot work in a community without doing so. These women themselves are a huge force in engaging with men.
The difficulties of getting men on board are of a different nature. You have to start by talking about issues in which both men and women have a stake, issues like housing or livelihood. But our work with slum dwellers revealed that women are impacted much more even when it comes to an issue like housing. Women told us men can sleep anywhere, bathe anywhere, eat anywhere if they don’t have a house but women can’t do that. The scarcity of housing has different implications for men and women.

How would you then assess the achievements of the women’s movement over the past few decades?

Look what happened after the December 2012 gangrape of a young woman in Delhi. There were massive protests, both men and women, boys and girls were out on the streets to express their anger over this incident. This was the impact of 20 years of work done by women’s organisations in the field. It was the culmination of a complex process with multiple actors playing a role.

Tell us something about your experiences in the field.

Women at the grassroots have always worked with men. You cannot work in a community without doing so. There are always a few supportive men who have a sense of fairness, they then become the nucleus of getting other men on board.

Women have also come up with brilliant strategies which we never dreamt of. The women themselves become a huge force in engaging with men.

I recall an instance when women were not allowed to attend the meetings organised by the women’s collectives in the villages. It was the younger women who came with an unusual idea. They asked the older women in their families – mothers and aunts – to persuade the men to allow them to participate in the meetings. And the strategy worked as the older women were able to literally bully the men into giving their agreement.

How has the process of engaging men worked in the field? Any concrete examples?

The work done by the Stree Shakti Sangathan in Maharashtra has met with success. The organisation was able to ensure men’s support for women’s right to joint ownership of land and other assets. They also agreed on the right of the girl child to complete her education. Then the women along with the concerned men convinced the community that wife beating will not be tolerated.

By Anita Katyal
Dealing with Feminisation of Workplaces

Understanding the need to change the narrative on gender issues in offices, as more women step out of homes for employment

The growing "feminisation" of the workplace is forcing male employers to respond to questions like: do their offices have parity in wages for men and women, how are they dealing with the issue of women's safety and sexual harassment at the work place, how do their offices fare with regard to gender balance and are they genuinely inclusive?

But the age-old male prejudice against women resurfaces every once in a while. It happened recently when high-profile Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella let the mask slip with his controversial remark that women do not need to ask for a raise but should instead put their faith in "karma".

It is also not unusual for men to shrug off reports of rape and sexual harassment, saying, “boys will be boys.”

Discussing the issue at the global symposium, Bharath Sesha, President of DSM, India, suggested that a “business case” be made to encourage diversity at the work place. Employers have to be convinced that maintaining a gender balance will help the company grow faster. Making a strong pitch for the induction of more women in the corporate sector, he said diversity is not just about “ticking the boxes,” it is also about being genuinely inclusive.

Women’s representation, Sesha underlined, should not be reduced to tokenism. He cited an example of a typical office committee with eight men and two women, where males take all the decisions and a meeting invariably ends with a perfunctory question to the women, “Do you have anything else to say?”

He said it is important to ensure that women are included in adequate numbers at all rungs of an organisation, especially in committees entrusted with the task of hiring and interviewing new employees since men were found to ask awkward and incorrect questions from women.

Making a strong case for both diversity and inclusion, Sesha quoted a woman employee: “Diversity is like being invited to the party but inclusion is when you are asked to dance. An organisation needs both.”

His organisation DSM, Sesha said, had made a conscious effort to move in this direction by providing a women-friendly atmosphere at the work place. “We allow women to take off for six months and go on sabbaticals, and we assure them that they will not lose their promotions,” he added.

Senior journalist Nalin Mehta revealed that the molestation case against Tarun Tejpa, former editor of the news magazine Tehelka, alerted media organisations to the issue of sexual harassment at their own work place.

It is only after this incident that questions were asked if the organisations were following the Vishaka guidelines, had they set up committees to scrutinize complaints of sexual harassment, especially since women are well represented at all levels. In several cases the committees did not exist and even when such a panel was constituted, most women in the organisation were unaware about it.

Pushing India Inc to the ‘Next Level’

“The Tehelka case made us question ourselves,” Mehta said, adding that it was a telling comment about attitudes on gender and masculinity in the media.

Mehta said it is ironic that while the media is a mouthpiece for gender equality, it does not look within on these issues as it should. Citing his own example, he said when he was working abroad he was entitled to one month paternity leave but when he
returned to take up employment in India he was told the organisation had no such policy.

Vijay Chaddha of the Bharati Foundation India said besides focussing on issues of gender balance and diversity within the organisation, the Bharati group had utilised its corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds to promote education among the rural, underprivileged children with a special focus on the girl child. These schools have been set up in states like Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan where the girl child faces the worst kind of discrimination.

Chaddha maintained that their schools had helped change mindsets. Not only did they run campaigns on issues like drug abuse and empowerment of women, he said, they also work with community leaders to persuade parents to educate their daughters.

But for all the work which has been initiated in the corporate sector, it still has a long way to go. As Mehta pointed out the private sector in the US has moved far ahead as it lobbied hard with the government to change regressive laws. “India Inc should move to the next level, it needs to be more aggressive,” Mehta underlined.

The Indian corporate sector clearly likes to play safe. Most companies are willing to invest in education or livelihood issues but anything beyond that is a no-no. As one delegate put it, “The corporate sector is afraid to take up issues like safety of women, they worry that the issue could become controversial and could be seen as being against men.”

Chaddha admitted that the corporate sector in India is still in its infancy where promoting gender equality is concerned. “But attitudes are changing,” he added optimistically.

By Anita Katyal
Prof Dina Siddiqi is not given to mincing words. She describes the garment industry in her country as using women "slave labour" to allow global capitalists to make billion-dollar profits. The recent death of 1100 workers in the collapse of a garment factory in Dhaka has only served to reinforce this view.

The garment industry in Bangladesh employs several lakh women who are made to work 14-16 hours a day seven days a week to complete orders. While women dominate the work force, the management of this industry is entirely in the hands of men. This leads to discrimination and also sexual harassment of the work force, Siddiqi stated.

Bangladesh has high unemployment levels and a question posed to Siddiqi is why men are not employed in larger numbers in the garment industry. "Women are much more disciplined. They tend to go on less strikes. They are more docile. If the industry had hired trained darzis (tailors), it would have had to pay them much more," Siddiqi replies.

The garment industry earns 80 percent of the country's total export revenue. "But these women continue to be paid peanuts. Earlier, they were being paid 3500 takas a month as salary, recently it was raised to 5000 takas a month," said Siddiqi.

Why has this work experience not proved empowering for these women? Siddiqi, an anthropologist by training who has completed her Ph.D in the subject from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA, believes this large women workforce has created fissures within society.

"For one, it has created a tremendous hostility amongst the menfolk who feel these women have taken their jobs. All the jobs in this industry are being created for women and this has resulted in the marginalisation of the working class male," she said.

Elaborating on this further, Siddiqi explained, "Men in our country perceive this as a reflection of their failure as bread earners. The industry is concentrated in the cities of Dhaka and Chittagong where these women are very visible. They walk to their workplace every morning, returning home in the evening. The men believe this large women workforce is disrupting the social order of society," she added.

How do men give vent to their frustration? Siddiqi pointed out that rickshawpullers and others will heckle and harass the women. "A rickshawpuller recently pulled up his lungi and showed a group of women workers his penis. Boys believe they are showing their manhood by harassing these girls. All this is a reflection of male failure," she said.

This male backlash is a reflection of the lopsided development taking place in Bangladesh. If you think by empowering women everything is going to be fine, then you are making a major mistake. Everything will not be fine, you better find jobs for men also. This male backlash is a reflection of the lopsided development taking place in Bangladesh. "If you think by empowering women everything is going to be fine, then you are making a major mistake. Everything will not be fine, you better find jobs for men also," she said.
Call to Revive Traditional Dispute Redressal Systems

It is not the religious mullahs who are harassing these working women. "There is no religious backlash. It is everyday people who have been left out. This economic marginalisation of men is going to end up creating dysfunctional men," warned Siddiqi. Her study of garment workers in Bangladesh has led her to conclude that neo liberalism is having an adverse impact on male masculinity.

Siddiqi has also worked extensively on the subjects of Islam, transnational feminism and gender justice and on the non-state dispute resolution systems which are in place in society. She cites the example of 'shaalish' which helps resolve disputes through informal village councils and is basically an informal dispute resolution mechanism. Many of these disputes are over land.

Working with two local NGOs, Siddiqi has found that fatwas are frequently being issued against women. This is done often to punish a woman or to regulate her sexuality. The 'shaalish' intervenes in the power dynamics in a village.

"I believe we must work to make these traditional systems of dispute resolution more accessible. Members of this group know the affected parties. I believe the 'shaalish' is not always patriarchal. It functions within a defined community and we must work to make them gender friendly," she opined.

Bangladesh has better health indicators than India. The Muslim Personal Law has been reformed and the state has made registration of marriage compulsory for all couples. "If a husband abandons his wife, she can file for maintenance. Unfortunately, the Hindu community in our country has resisted any change being introduced in their own personal law," said Siddiqi.

Siddiqi has had a long association with Columbia's Institute for Research on Woman and Gender and regularly visits the US to teach at the University of Pennsylvania. What upsets Siddiqi is that the problems facing her society are seen by her American and English feminist counterparts through the lens of the 'war on terror'. Says Siddiqi, "Economic problems are misunderstood as being cultural problems, which is not the case."

By Rashme Sehgal
Dimensions of Change: Stories and Interviews from the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 | 39

Creating One's Own Gender Identity: Beyond the Binary

In my own life I have worked to dismantle the gender binary. At the age of six I became a girl; at the age of 16 I became a man. My name is 'Zethu' which means 'ours' and I am not willing to accept either 'he or she' in terms of sexuality.

Sex was being conceptualised as something changing and fluid, a multi-dimensional construct with important biological variations, as captured in the research. It was not possible to separate the category of caste from gender. Race, caste and class also served to define and construct gender.

Working beyond the conventional definition of sex and gender, a discussion at the global symposium between Zethu Matebeni from the University of Cape Town, Institute for Humanities in Africa, Chayanika Shah, an independent researcher from India, Reshma Prasad an Indian transgender activist and moderator Akshay Khanna from the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), UK, resonated with the experiences of lesbian, bisexual, gay and transsexual people keen to explore the connections and tensions around gender, sexual expression, identity and state and societal repression as their views often challenged the normal notions of the self and society.

The speakers put forth the view that while people popularly believe that sex is biological and gender a social construct, both these concepts are socially constructed and therefore subject to change.

Matebeni, who writes on queer issues and on issues of gender and sexuality, pointed out that, "Violence is a constant reality for queer people in South Africa." In her own life, she described the fallout within her own family of her fluid gender identity as having succeeded in leaving her "mother speechless" while her father "watched from a distance. What I was doing was unthinkable because I was challenging the way we lead our lives."

She spoke about how the transgendered activist in South Africa comes from a history of extremism and marginalisation, citing the example of Nicholos Hilbo, a homosexual who joined the army in the 1980's, his life reflecting the struggle the gay community faced while serving in the military in South Africa. She said Hilbo's struggles are significant because as a black homosexual he came to highlight the complex issues of identity faced by the black population, though Matebeni expressed regret that they still had not been able to develop a vocabulary in the country for expressing gender diversity.

A Multi-Dimensional construct

Shah pointed out that while the earlier feminist debates were understood in terms of the language of sex and gender, "Today, these words are understood very differently. We talk of masculine and feminine genders but there are many genders that fall within this nomenclature."

Shah highlighted how she along with other researchers had undertaken a study of 50 people who were asked what their gender was. "While 22 identified themselves as men. They were obviously negotiating on this entire issue and each understood gender in their own way."

Shah went on to assert that sex was being conceptualised as something changing and fluid, a
Shah believes that people live in multiple ways with many moving from one gender to another and it was important for all genders and sexualities to be respected and treated on an equal footing.

Prasad was extremely candid on the entire issue of the problems faced by transgenders. "We face both discrimination and violence. The only identity available to us is to be called a hijra. We are perceived as beggars. Because of the way we are treated, a lot of us are susceptible to mental illness. I know of a few transgenders in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh who are working as teachers and in banks but are afraid to reveal their identities."

Prasad went on to say, "The majority of transgenders are called lounda dancers. People question - how do they have sex? How do they manage? Eyebrows are raised each time they interact with us."

Prasad pointed out that, "Hijras are linked to just two or three professions but the transgender identity goes beyond this and must reach out into many spheres."

Prasad said the struggle for gender goes beyond categorisation. "How do we take it beyond the feminine and the masculine? People must be allowed to decide whether they want to be male or female."

"I want to create a language that is genderless. We must be able to create our identity. The Supreme Court has recognised transgenders as people falling under a third gender. It has granted them legal rights to identify themselves as neither male nor female and has directed central and state governments to provide quotas in jobs and education in line with other minorities."

Prasad runs a community-based organisation in Bihar called Dostanasafar that provides skill training programmes for transgenders, and she is keen that corporates come forward to help provide training in healthcare, media and entertainment so that these areas can absorb the transgender population.

By Rashme Sehgal
Dr Kausar Khan is at the forefront of working with poor communities in both rural and urban Pakistan, focusing primarily on the areas of child nutrition and women’s empowerment.

“Pneumonia and diarrhoea are two of the biggest killers of children in our country. I have been mobilising communities in the last two decades trying to ensure they take proper steps to end both pre-natal and neo-natal deaths,” said Khan.

She has been working extensively in the slums of Karachi and in the villages of Sindh and Baluchistan. One of her initiatives has been to get women to prepare nutritious meals for young children.

“We first work with mothers to make them understand what exactly constitutes a balanced diet. The government is presently giving Rs 7 per day per child in this feeding program. The money is given directly to the women so that they are convinced they are key actors in bringing about social transformation. For the women, getting these funds has proved to be a very empowering experience,” said Khan.

Khan points out that by working with the poor, they are following the practices that have been adopted in Latin America where scholars have extensively studied the pedagogy of the poor. “The oppressed is the main actor in his or her own transformation. I also believe the poor and powerless can retrieve their situation by accessing his or her own individual power,” she stated.

Have these interactions brought her into confrontation with extremists who frequently attacked those working in the development sector?

Khan admits to faced one unpleasant interaction with extremists in Baluchistan where her group is implementing a large scale programme on nutrition. Some extremists came up to her and her team demanding to know what the group was doing in the villages. “I told them I was working for the upliftment of the village communities. There is this misconception in Pakistan that the NGO programme is working for the US government. They went and checked matters out and realised that our interventions were indeed genuine. Health is such a safe entry for community action,” Khan adds.

“Though we have not faced any major resistance in our training programmes, increasing violence has made us more careful. For example, while moving around in the slums in Karachi, we have had to become a little more cautious,” she pointed out.

Linking Medicine with Social Sciences

Khan is also working on a major programme to develop the curriculum in the field of humanities, social studies and bioethics for undergraduate and graduate medical students. “The aim of the exercise is to get students to see communities as part of their learning experience. I believe that in order to be good doctors, medical students

Medical students also need to understand the social determinants of health. We tell these students if they improve the daily lives of women, the health outcomes will improve within one generation.
must be exposed to the humanities and the social sciences. They must understand the vulnerabilities of the poor."

"We are also providing teaching in bioethics. The focus of this teaching is that it assists in providing better medical care to patients. Doctors need to be taught how to maintain respect for their patient. In Pakistan, the government does not provide free medical care for the entire population. They have perforce to seek out private doctors for medical care. Our attempt is to sensitize doctors and highlight to them the kind of issues they will face once they go into practice," she said.

Medical students also need to understand the social determinants of health. "We tell these students that if they improve the daily lives of women, the health outcomes will improve within one generation," Khan maintains.

Students often fail to see the connection between studying the humanities and studying medicine. "They will ask us - why are you teaching us these subjects? Why have you introduced social sciences when we are bogged down with our medical curricula? These are challenges which we will continue to face because most students do not want to work in community health schemes. The dominant paradigm is for doctors to work in private hospitals and clinics where they can earn good money. Our job is to insist that the conceptual framework of health invites an interdisciplinary approach," said Khan.

What is the response of the state to their interventions? Khan mulls over the question before giving a response. "The present state is governed by the neo-liberal model were the poor are increasingly being forced to fend for themselves," she replies. But she is determined to help bridge the gap between the disadvantaged and the rich. "Several NGOs in my country are working in the health sector in their different capacities as service providers," she said.

NGOs in Pakistan believe the time has come for SAARC nations to join hands in order to improve the health of their citizens. South Asia has the most disadvantaged people and once their health indicators improve, the economy of these nations will also show an upward swing, she pointed out.

By Rashme Sehgal
Igniting A Global Movement of Solidarity

Ever since the Platform for Action adopted at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing shifted its exclusive focus from women to include the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality, UN Women has been consistently pushing this agenda with the world community. In an exclusive interview at the global symposium, its deputy executive director, Lakshmi Puri speaks about these efforts.

In 2014 UN Women launched the ‘HeForShe’ campaign urging men to stand up for the rights of women. The objective was to build a critical mass of men who will be sensitized and committed to gender equality. Speaking about her organisation’s strategy, Lakshmi Puri said, "UN Women has redoubled its efforts to spread the message across the globe and has also involved a number of celebrities to help in this effort."

UN goodwill ambassador Emma Watson was the first to support the campaign by extending a “formal invitation” to men to participate in the conversation about gender equality. In India, UN Women appointed actor-filmmaker-singer Farhan Akhtar as its South Asia Goodwill Ambassador. Akhtar, who is the first man to be chosen as a goodwill ambassador in the history of UN Women, is expected to serve as a strong advocate for the HeForShe campaign.

Underlining that gender equality will not happen on its own, Puri maintained that there has to be a sense of urgency about the scale of change which one needs to bring about. “You have to remember that women’s rights are human rights and human rights are women’s rights,” she emphasised.

"We hope to ignite a global movement of solidarity of gender equality and empowerment," said Puri. Referring to the earlier years of the women’s movement, Puri said women’s groups were initially focussed and rightly so on mobilising women themselves. It was important for the women’s movement to develop confidence in itself and establish its own identity.

It was at the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing that there was a self-realisation in the women’s movement that it should engage with men. It was felt that the other half of humanity has to be involved and engaged to bring about effective transformation in power structures. It was indeed a moment of reflection, Puri remarked.

"Men continue to behave in a certain way because many women allow it and do not challenge it," she said, adding that the only way to change this grim scenario is to see how men and women can work together to bring out social change.

Agreeing that women’s groups are apprehensive about involving men in their movement, Puri said women’s groups have been reluctant to co-opt men because, “they have had to struggle hard to reach where they have, they have been chronically under-resourced. They have had to carve out their own identity, so accepting men has been difficult.”

Women’s groups, Puri emphasised, should see men’s groups as allies, partners and even game changers. Development ideally should be looked at in a gender-neutral way. Working together is not an option but an imperative and a necessity.
However, post-Beijing, there has been a growing recognition that, “If we want to bring about gender equality we cannot be talking to ourselves alone.” Although work in this area has been going on for the past two decades, the MenEngage movement has picked up momentum and consolidated it in the last five years.

While Puri is clear that men and women have to work together for gender justice, she is equally clear about the terms of this engagement. “We don’t want men to patronize us. We want men to internalise that women’s rights are human rights and in that context, they should accord due respect to women in all spheres and help break down structural barriers which prevent women from exercising their rights.”

**Pushing for Equality in Post-2015 Development Agenda**

UN Women, she said, has been working overtime to get the global community on board in this endeavour. Over the past two decades, the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women has called upon men to take actions to end violence against women, and to act responsibly in matters related to sexuality. Earlier this year, the Commission called on government and other stakeholders to fully engage men and boys as strategic partners and allies in the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women. The role of men and boys has also been raised in the UN Security Council. In 2012, the Council recognized the importance of engaging men and boys as partners in promoting women’s participation in the prevention and resolution of armed conflict and peace-building.

An ambitious and universal post-2015 development agenda being drawn up by the UN system and civil society has listed gender equality and empowerment of women and children as among the 17 proposed goals, Puri said, adding that the targets set out by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals has a focus on issues that will address barriers to gender equality. Addressing the concerns of women activists, Puri said though this document does not explicitly mention the role of men and boys, there is a clear understanding that the achievement of gender equality requires the full involvement of both men and women.

Instead of listing it as a separate target, Puri said, this could be crafted into existing targets. For example, she explained, a target on unpaid work could include an indicator on the redistribution of care work in the household, such as the average number of hours spent on care work by men.

*By Anita Katyal*
Men Speak Out On Gender Inequality

Though the process of involving men in achieving gender equality has been slow in the past 20 years, it is picking up momentum with several men coming out openly in support of shedding old mindsets and promoting women's rights as human rights.

Twenty years ago, when the Beijing World Conference on Women decided in 1995 to involve men in the struggle for gender justice and equality, the decision was met with some scepticism. Women's groups were not sure how the men would respond to this outreach. There were serious doubts that men would agree to partner women in freeing them from the shackles of patriarchy.

Undoubtedly, the journey has not been easy for both men and women. While women were apprehensive that men would take over their role as agents of change, men were nervous about any change which challenged their dominant position in the family, community and at the work place.

Given the reservations on both sides, the process of involving men has been slow but it is gradually picking up momentum. There are men who have been convinced with the argument that women's rights are human rights and that they need to speak up for gender equality. This was evident at the global symposium where a number of men came out in open support for women's rights.

The tone was set by Indian actor-activist Rahul Bose who made a strong and passionate case for shedding old mindsets about gender roles and the need for men to engage with women in their fight for gender equality.

Pointing out that both men and women are limited by gender stereotypes, Bose said the first place to talk about these issues is in the home. In this regard, he raised a pertinent question: When you have to decide on what to wear for a family wedding, do you consult, your mother or father? Again, when you are deciding on what course you wish to study in college, who do you consult: your father or mother?

Bose cited his own example to point out that the home is the place to begin if gender stereotypes have to be changed and challenged. “When I grew up, it was my father who did the cooking, packed my lunch box for school and gave me an oil bath every week. That’s because my mother hated cooking and my father loved to cook,” Bose narrated. On the other hand, it was his mother who encouraged him to play rugby.

As a result, when he went to a friend’s place and saw his mother in the kitchen, his immediate reaction was, “Where’s your father… why is your mother cooking?”

Bose’s personal experience proved the point that boys and girls tend not to conform to gender stereotypes as adults if they grow up in a household where their parents share daily chores or where men don’t shy away from venturing into what is looked upon as a woman’s domain.

Rahul Bose’s personal experience proved the point that boys and girls tend not to conform to gender stereotypes as adults if they grow up in a household where their parents share daily chores or where men don’t shy away from venturing into what is looked upon as a woman’s domain.

Strong Political Leadership Needed to Bring Change

Like Bose, there are several other men who are speaking up for gender equality and are also leading campaigns on the issue. They are working in the
field to enlist the support of other men to join the movement for women’s empowerment.

For instance, Henry MacDonald, Permanent Representative of Suriname to the UN, is a staunch believer in women’s equality. “When you become the father of a daughter you automatically become a feminist,” he remarked, stressing that it is important for men to take up the fight for gender equality. “Men see it as a women’s issue, but it is actually the worst violation of human rights.”

MacDonald maintained that countries and societies can go far in achieving the goal of gender equality if there is a strong leadership which believes in pushing this agenda. He cited the examples of Nicaragua and Rwanda which have witnessed remarkable progress recently on the gender front. “The leaders in these two countries have realised that it is important to empower women if they want to progress,” he added.

MacDonald said one way of changing the discourse on women is to start by involving men in this discussion. For instance, Suriname is planning to use barber shops to initiate a conversation on issues like sexual abuse, violence against women and gender equality. “Barber shops are a good place to start this dialogue as conversation here usually revolves around three subjects - sports, politics and women. And women are usually discussed in stereotypical terms,” he explained.

Dakshita Wickremarathne, youth leader from Sri Lanka and member of the UN Women Global Civil Society Advisory Group, said he got involved in this area of work when he came face-to-face with the condition of women in his country.

He pointed out that though Sri Lanka has high indicators for health and education, it has been lagging behind in the area of gender justice and equality. “Women are abused routinely by their fathers and husbands who justify it saying - This is my tree, if I can’t pluck the fruits from it, who else will,” said Wickremarathne.

He admitted that initiating a dialogue with men on the issue of gender equality has not been easy. “It is not unusual for men who have been approached on the subject to point out - What happens if Nadal plays against Serena Williams? We all know who will win.” He said it has to be constantly stressed that gender equality is not like a tennis match. He said that in a bid to challenge gender stereotypes and notions of masculinity men should be asked questions like, “Is it okay to beat your wife?”

**Women’s Poverty Cannot be Removed Without Involving Men in Carework**

Gary Barker, International Director of Promundo, and Co-chair of the MenEngage Alliance, is another leading advocate of women’s rights and on the need for men to take up the issue of gender justice and women’s empowerment. “We cannot reduce or eliminate women’s poverty without involving men. Unless we can get men to support women’s full entry into the workplace by taking on their fair share of carework within the family, we are not going to achieve the illusory 50 percent share in terms of economic empowerment that women deserve,” Barker said.

He pointed out that women account for 45 percent of the world’s workplace and those women who are in work earn on average between 10-30 percent less than men. “The real challenge”, he said, “is getting men to question the attitudes entrenched in society, institutions and the family.” He maintained that this required men to shed their privileges and their entrenched views on masculinity and recognise their vulnerability.
Give some details of the work done by ILGA.

ILGA works on two aspects – enforcement and empowering its thousands of member organisations to fulfill their needs. It has been working hard at the international arena with organisations like the United Nations and institutions working to check criminalisation on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. This is a painstaking exercise and ILGA has been working with different governments, the main challenge being the true development of LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex) people. They have been marginalized and face criminalisation. Socially, they are treated as second class citizens. We want everyone to be first class citizens and fulfill their development needs.

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises gay and lesbian relations, has been reinstated by the Supreme Court. How do you view its impact on the LGBTQI community?

The problem is people are not clear for how long they have freedom of sexual behavior. This exposes them to exploitation by the police and other forms of oppression. There is also lack of commitment by governments at the international level. It is very unfortunate as human rights of all people are not respected and obstacles are put for some people because of the ideas and beliefs of others.

India is a country where there is a lot of gender expression and the government has to respect social and gender expressions of all. But there is not adequate political support for security and development of LGBTQI people. It appears the government does not want to reconcile with their ideas and self expression on sexuality.

Do you find the situation in Mexico as far as LGBTQI rights are considered different from that in India?

The situation largely depends on which government is in power at a particular time. However, politicians of all hues need to develop the right perspective on freedom and respect for the LGBTQI community, putting aside traditional ideas about them. In Mexico, the traditional attitude was prosecution and violence against the LGBTQI. But the situation is changing and respect for queer people is growing fast. However, there are still hurdles as far as marriage and adoption is concerned. Legal reforms in Mexico City and the northern states have taken place and many people have fought for their rights, but a well organised struggle is required for the protection of the community.
Do you find the present discourse on sexuality moving in the right direction?

Sexuality is a very important dimension for everyone. Most people link sexuality with reproduction and avoid other dimensions. Sexuality is used in social structures to control people. We should be working much more to understand the broad concept of sexuality. A narrow view of sexuality has adversely impacted everyday life and the working of the LGBTQI community. The deepening stereotyping of sexuality is neither useful for LGBTQIs nor for straight people. It is heartening to know that there is a feminist movement and another LGBTQI rights movement and their convergence is being focussed upon at this global meet. A lot of work is going on at the international arena and there are some inputs from India also. The deliberation would help everyone contribute to the subject.

Recently gay pride parades or queer shows have been organised at many places. Do these contribute to the sexual expression and development of LGBTQIs?

The parade symbolises the struggle of the LGBTQI to be seen and recognised for whatever their sexual preference is. In most situations they are treated with complete indifference, silence and kept invisible by families and society at large. So the pride parade is meant to deal specifically with that. They want to be visible and have their own sexual expression and be recognised. They want to break free from the control of society that has either hidden them or stereotyped them with an image. The parade is meant for better understanding and also provides a platform to interact with similar people whom they are generally not able to reach out to because of being hidden or driven away.

The sense of shame of the family or individual is the prime reason for these people remaining hidden in India. Is the situation similar in Mexico?

We need to understand what sexuality is all about. The idea of a straight society is a wrong idea. People need more spaces to reflect and discuss their sexual needs so that they can be understood better.

What is the impact of global attention on gay and lesbian communities in view of the HIV/AIDS epidemic?

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has brought different sexual practices and professions into focus. But this epidemic is not only related to homosexuality and men having sex with men. Sexuality is wider and more dynamic. Even people who identify themselves as straight have a wide range of sexual experiences. We need to understand this so that we do not put them into separate boxes. We have to work on the issue of social sanction and guilt aspects. We need to accept that this is the way a certain human being is. The dominant group has put labels and stereotyped LGBTQIs. We have to jump out of this together to understand our needs so as to lead a fulfilling life.

Do you think this symposium would help in achieving this goal?

It would definitely help us in identifying better the challenges that we are facing now. We have been working on gender equity, but the main obstacle is new patriarchal constructions. We need to understand recent changes and its impact. Social changes have not aligned to a progressive line. New obstacles are coming which need to be faced boldly. At this global symposium we have to develop a new system that works.

What about violence – physical, emotional and social, that members of the LGBTQI community face?

Even the families of lesbian and gay people face widespread discrimination. Also, parents sometimes do not know how to deal with the sexuality of their children. Because of lack of understanding of sexuality, they sometimes even strike their children. The world is not kind to the LGBTQI and they generally do not have the tools to deal with it. Parents feel guilty and are not prepared to deal with their ward. We need to give them tools to deal with whatever is there. Even among the LGBTQI, the families of transgenders are more discriminated. Such children are rejected from the school system and need to be protected. But to do that we need to have better understanding of sexual diversity. For that we need to put it on the table and push for accepting the sexual diversity of people. Fortunately, these are spaces where we can fight against the binary sexuality and better understanding of the LGBTQI people.

By Annapurna Jha
Women are facing adverse patriarchal diktats not only in countries like India where traditional caste-based institutions like Khap panchayats (assembly of elders in certain north Indian clans) forbid them from wearing jeans, eating noodles and using mobile phones, but in many countries around the world. The phenomenon is worldwide. Incidents of honour killing of young people by their own families on the direction of the Khap panchayats has brought into limelight the backlash that educated, progressive women face in democratic India. But the backlash is equally common in places ranging from the least-developed Sub Saharan countries like Uganda to highly developed nations like the USA where not only women but even men working for gender equality face discrimination and harassment.

This was highlighted at the global symposium where many of the 1200 participants from 95 countries raised the issue that deeply entrenched patriarchal forces are not willing to take lightly any challenge to their authority by the women’s groups working for gender justice and equality. Expressing concern over the backlash, deliberations were held on measures to counter it.

In India the anti-dowry legislation, strengthened by relevant amendments in the 1980s after prolonged struggle by women’s groups against the ‘stove bursts’ that selectively killed young girls not bringing sufficient dowry, is facing a major backlash as so-called ‘men’s rights' activists protest against ‘misuse’ of Section 498(A) of the law that makes harassment of women a non-bailable offence. The campaign by groups like the Save Indian Family Foundation and Akhil Bharatiya Patni Atyachar Sangh (organisation of those suffering harassment from wives) have in recent times even forced the government to consider revisiting the legislation, pointed out activists.

Entrenched Resistance to Moves for Gender Equality

Srimati Basu, a professor at the University of Kentucky, USA, said men who are jailed along with their parents and relatives for domestic violence and dowry feel left alone and bereft of kinship. Marginalised and mocked, these men have formed a community and to claim vulnerability they have even come up with a ‘Mothers-in-law forum,’ and are demanding amendment in the legislation.

Sanjay Srivastava, Professor of Sociology and Social Anthropology at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, pointed out that Khap panchayats are vote banks and enjoy political patronage. In the Indian social structure sisters are welcomed to tie rakhi (a thread symbolising sisterly love) to brothers and seek their protection. But they face severe backlash from their families and society if they demand their legal share in the parental property. The resistance to gender justice and equality is so much entrenched that there has been no change in the school syllabus on masculine identity, sex and intimacy in recent times.

Feminist-activist Kamla Bhasin, working in SANGAT, a South Asia network of women, and associated also with the women’s rights NGO Jagori, blamed the capitalist neo-liberal patriarchy for the rising intolerance and reactiveness against people working for gender justice.

She wondered how the patriarchal propaganda which was creating an environment against gender equality could be countered, particularly in a situation where
most of the mass media including TV channels were controlled by the corporate sector which in the first place determined discriminatory gender roles. At the symposium Bhasin, who is also a poet, released a CD of her songs against patriarchy, saying it was a way of bringing change.

Jean Kemitare, Program Manager, Raising Voices, a NGO working to prevent domestic violence against women and children, pointed to the huge backlash that the Ugandan legal system was currently undergoing. Progressive legislation in the country related to marriage and divorce was facing fierce backlash from politicians, media and some communities. In the legislation to check pornography, however, she said the emphasis was against women rather than against pornographic content. People are even feeling emboldened enough to take action against 'indecent' clothing of women by tearing women's clothes in public.

Rising fundamentalism coming from the sentiment of 'preserving our culture' is discriminative and oppressive to people, particularly women, Kemitare pointed out. It is fuelling anti-women sentiments that emerge from patriarchal perspectives. Even the media portrays progressive women as those who have forgotten how to be mothers and wives. Moreover, there is a growing resistance to human rights in Uganda with homophobic sentiments becoming prevalent. With society divided, the women's rights movement is caught in a trap, she pointed out.

Backlash is a Reminder of Progress Made

Gloria Careaga, a social psychologist and teacher at the National University of Mexico and former Secretary General of ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Intersex Association), highlighted the backlash being faced by gays and lesbians who are generally stereotyped. Lesbians and gays are treated as 'owners' of sexuality alone, she pointed out, demanding that sexual and reproductive rights must be taken up separately and not clubbed together.

“Gender identity change is a painful process for both men and women and we have to be sensitive of how people are dealing with this pain,” she pointed out. The backlash experienced by gays and lesbians even impact their parents and families who face deep anxiety and discrimination, she said, advising taking up an inclusive approach to deal with the backlash.

Michael Kimmel, professor at the State University of New York, USA, said that the backlash was annoying, but not lethal. In fact, it is a reminder of how much progress has been made. Kimmel read out hate mails he received on a regular basis from people who felt he was questioning their patriarchal privileges in working for gender equality. Their aim is to discredit men who are working for gender equality. The backlash and rage is expressed more on the internet in order to hide behind the curtain of anonymity. Men working on gender justice face discrimination and are project as not man enough. Many people reject the feminist movement in their college days, saying they don’t need it, but after facing discrimination at the work place they come back to it. Even in video games women are targetted viciously, he pointed out.

Lori Heise, Senior Lecturer, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK, cautioned against the so-called 'NGOisation' of the women's rights movement. She pointed to the rise of violence against women's and men's groups working on gender issues in Latin America. They are targetted by syndicates involved in narco-trafficking and in countries like Mexico, women are raped, sexually tortured and even killed by such patriarchal forces.

Suneeta Dhar, Director, Jagori, said that the backlash is being led by fundamentalist and misogynist groups who are apprehensive of gains made by the women’s rights movement. Nandita Gandhi, Co-Director, Akshara said that patriarchal forces are reconfiguring how to stop the progress being made for women’s rights, and the backlash needs to be strongly dealt with.

By Annapurna Jha
Bandana Rana has been a leader of the women’s movement in Nepal with more than 25 years of active engagement in promoting women’s rights and gender equality. She is a member of the Global Network of Women and has worked from the grassroots to the national and global level to address the concerns of survivors of violence. Excerpts from an interview with her-

Women’s organisations across the globe have traditionally focused on women and their empowerment. When did the idea of reaching out to men first surface?

The 1994 Cairo conference on population and development first spoke of involving men in the area of reproductive rights. This was taken forward in the next year at the Beijing conference on women. I was a young activist then but we were told about the discussions and debate which took place behind the scenes on the issue of engaging men in their ongoing struggle for gender justice. There were apprehensions that women would lose the space they had carved out for themselves. In the end, it was recognized that men had to be engaged to bring about real transformation. They had to be made part of the solution.

Eventually, the Platform for Action adopted at the Beijing conference made a special mention about involving men in gender equality. For the first time, women broadened men’s role to include shared responsibilities at home and at the work place. In the initial years of the movement, we were trying to build the capacity of women. But now the message about engaging with men has gradually spread as a number of organisations have started working in this area.

But how do you engage with men without putting down women or frittering away the gains made by the women’s groups?

We have to make sure we do not end up pleading for support from men. It should not look as if we are seeking a great favour from them. In such a case, we would only reaffirm male supremacy. It has to be a partnership, men and women have to be equal allies in this quest for gender justice. We have to tell the men what is in the alliance for them, how they can benefit from this alliance. This transformative work should take place in a big way, it should reach out to the masses.

Can you tell us about your work in this field in Nepal?

One of the objectives listed in the government’s national action plan for women is to create a critical mass of men and boys who will be sensitive to issues of gender justice. When my organisation Saathi started looking at how this could be achieved, we identified the most popular sport among men and boys in Nepal, which is football. So we signed a MoU with the All-Nepal Football Association which is a powerful and well-networked organization with clubs across the country. It reaches out to young men and is generally known as a disciplined body…a message sent out by its chief here is easily accepted. For us, it was a case of minimum investment with maximum mileage.

How did you get your message across to the men and boys, wasn’t it difficult to hold their interest?

We thought football was a good place to begin. We got in touch with all the 500 football clubs in the country and asked them to spare one hour for us. Our suggestion met with immediate resistance. They asked us why would their members listen especially when it is a subject in which they have no interest. We tried to convince them by telling them that so far they

Nepal Walks the Talk through Football

In an exclusive interview during the global symposium, Bandana Rana, president of the Nepali NGO Saathi, speaks about how the need to broaden men's role emerged globally and shares Nepal's experience of reaching out successfully to some of its men and boys.
had been idolised on the field but now they would get an opportunity to be idolised off the football field. They reluctantly agreed to give us 30 minutes instead of the hour we had sought.

When we got our chance to speak to the members of the clubs, we tried to grab their attention by giving out details of the profiles of famous football players who believed in gender equality. We cited instances of players who had married widows while another did not allow his mother to wear white after she was widowed. We spoke of them as real men.

**What was the impact of your campaign? How did it help shape attitudes on the ground?**

We conducted several discussions and organised a number of workshops for the players and eventually they started sharing their stories with us. One player told us that he helped in the washing of clothes at home but never went out to dry them as he felt he would be ridiculed by others in the community. After hearing us, he said he would not hesitate to go out and hang the washed clothes as he realised there was no shame in what he was doing.

We also distributed T-shirts printed with the message, “Respect women, be a real man.” Another senior player said women reacted positively to him when he wore the T-shirt. Many came up and told him they normally looked upon football players as being aggressive but they had now revised their opinion.

**How have the grassroots women reacted to the idea of working with men?**

Fairly positively. An elderly woman recently approached us angrily, she said all this time you have taught me about my rights but I am compelled to live in a violent relationship as I have no education, no employment, I have nowhere to go. She turned around and told us why don’t you also talk to the men because they need to change their attitude towards women.

By Anita Katyal
Finding a Role for the Development Sector in Masculinities and Gender Justice

A key issue that emerged at the global symposium was how to tailor private and public sector interventions to successfully address the needs of boys and men, a difficult area to tread especially since the needs of men are immediately juxtaposed against those of women.

Mehta candidly admitted he himself was not aware of the Visakha guidelines and had rung up the HR department to find out. "It turned out that none of the women in HR knew about the sexual harassment committee which had been existing for eight years. It was one of those forgotten emails which had been sent out to everyone and probably ignored by everyone," he added tongue-in-cheek.

Rakhee Bakshee, director, Women's Feature Service, emphasised the need to address gender bias in the media and examine whether gender stories were being prominently displayed or whether they were being relegated to the inner pages of newspapers.

Public and Private Sector Stay with Safe Issues

Mehta said he believed that at the level of advocacy India did not have a separate agency which fuelled change in the legal system, since the government proved to be a hindrance as compared to agencies in the US that actively worked for issues like rights for same-sex couples and paternity leave. Citing the example of the CEO of Apple who publicly announced he was gay, Mehta said, "No Indian CEO would own up to this." In the US, large companies like Facebook and Google have lobbied with the government to change regressive laws not simply out of altruistic concern but with the aim of catering to their customers in a better fashion. "Corporate India does a lot of work on safe issues but on social faultlines it has not done enough.

In the US, large companies like Facebook and Google have lobbied with the government to change regressive laws not simply out of altruistic concern but with the aim of catering to their customers in a better fashion. "Corporate India does a lot of work on safe issues but on social faultlines it has not done enough.

Nalin Mehta, a managing editor in India's leading newspaper The Times of India, highlighted the 'Tehelka case' in which the publication's managing editor Tarun Tejpal was accused of sexual assault by an employee, as an illustration of how the media reacts to issues of masculinity and gender. Mehta said he was working in the television channel Headlines Today when the story broke and he recalls feeling uncomfortable about reporting it. "Our channel did not carry the story that evening but two other news channels, NDTV and CNN-IBN went ahead with it," he said. "However, with the herd instinct being the rule in journalism very soon it became the lead story across every newspaper and channel.' His channel carried an interview of Shoma Chaudhary, then editor of Tehelka and under whose stewardship the magazine had campaigned for several women's issues. "When she was asked why Tehelka had not implemented the Visakha guidelines that are binding on all media organisations following a Supreme Court judgement on the matter, she broke down and started crying. The reaction to her breaking down was Wow! She's crying on live television!" Mehta recalled.
aim of catering to their customers in a better fashion. "Corporate India does a lot of work on safe issues but on social faultlines it has not done enough," he said, citing the example of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code that criminalises homosexuality as one such instance of keeping silent.

Agreeing, Tulika Srivastava of South Asia Women's Fund said both the "public and private sector need to become more active to ensure justice for all." Vijay Chaddha, heading Bharti Foundation India that oversees the Satya Bharti School programme running in 254 schools in villages in five states, said schools under the programme have proved to be catalysts of social change. About 41,000 children were being educated by Satya Bharti of which 49 percent were girls, even as 85 percent of teachers in its schools in Punjab were women as were 65 percent of its teachers in Rajasthan. Chaddha said, "The sarpanch in these villages have signed up to state they will not keep girls out of school and 97 percent of the parents of girl students are saving money to ensure their daughters can get a higher education."

However, Srivastava regretted there was no sustained funding for women-related issues, with funding being made available only when something drastic happened like a horrific rape."No funding is available in terms of preventive approaches or for creating awareness on women's issues. The result of this is that more and more women's organisations are being forced to close down," pointed out Srivastava.

"Donors are leaving Sri Lanka, for instance. Donors are also not looking at women's rights organisation. They have money for education and the girl child but the political views of women are being silenced," Srivastava said adding, "If we dilute the women's agenda to only a development agenda, then it will be most unfortunate; but this is already happening since the majority of funding is received for education and lifestyle."

Need for Reaching Out to Men
Sheepa Hafiza, director of the Bangladesh based NGO BRAC's Gender, Justice, Diversity, and Advocacy for Social Change unit, highlighted how effective political will can bring about change. "BRAC's Gender Equality Action Learning Programme is working in four lakh households in 12 countries to end violence in households and also to end sexual harassment of school students, with amazing results." Hafiza shared that BRAC's one lakh 'barefoot workers' or Gender Justice Educators were aiming to transform gender relations at the grassroot level by interacting with villagers and discussing basic cultural issues. "BRAC started out working in the field of diarrhoea but from the 1970s we have been working with men and associating them with our projects," she pointed out.

Taking the pointer, Preeti Sudan, additional secretary in the government of India's Ministry of Women and Child Development regretted that though the government has been engaging with women and girls it has not held similar dialogues with men and boys whose existing model of socialisation has caused them to miss out on several deeply fulfilling life experiences including that of fatherhood. Sudan said, "We need to prioritise a very aggressive attempt to engage with men and boys in a major way."

Luis Mora, chief of UNFPA's Gender, Human Rights and Culture Branch at its headquarters, said 20 years after the Beijing conference on women major danger signals were showing up. "Twenty years after Beijing, both at the global and regional levels we are facing a backlash with certain countries being unwilling to address critical issues such as sexuality and reproductive rights of women. In terms of international consensus we are actually in a weaker position than we were 20 years ago," Mora said.

He highlighted that a paradigm shift had taken place. Whereas earlier it had been believed that the global agenda of poverty eradication would help remove women's problems, that did not happen. Mora cited the example of a country like Finland witnessing high rates of violence against women despite Europe's population being educated and economically independent.

Sarada Muraleedharan, joint secretary in the government of India's Ministry of Panchayati Raj said by engaging previously unwilling men into taking gender equality measures through incentives, particularly political incentives, they had been able to ensure an attitudinal change in the psyche of men which was proving significant.

By Rashme Sehgal
Note on Writers

Anita Katyal has been a journalist for over three decades, having worked with The Times of India and The Tribune. She currently contributes to The Asian Age and the news website Scroll.in. She has written on subjects ranging from women and social issues, domestic politics and Parliament. She has covered several international conferences, including the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo and the Beijing plus five meet in New York.

She was an Alfred Friendly Press Fellow and has done a journalism course from the Berlin-based International Institute for Journalism. She is a founder-member of the Indian Women’s Press Corps. Based in Delhi, she has been participating in seminars and as a commentator on television news programmes.

Annapurna Jha is a Delhi-based journalist with over 24 years experience, covering the political beat including Prime Minister’s Office, Cabinet, Parliament and also issues of terrorism and the social sector. She has managed news flow from around the country for the news agency United News of India (UNI). She has been Assistant Editor, The Pioneer; Special Correspondent, UNI; and is Associate Editor of Central Hall, a magazine for Members of Parliament.

She is an office bearer of the Indian Women’s Press Corps and an elected member of the Press Club of India’s Managing Committee. She has received several journalism awards including the UNFPA Ladli Media Award for writing on gender issues and the K L Chopra Media Health Ratna Award.

Rashme Sehgal is a career journalist based in Delhi who has worked with leading Indian news dailies such as The Asian Age, The Times of India, The Telegraph, The Independent and The Indian Post. Having written on a variety of issues including politics, health, science and technology, literature and culture, in recent years she has specialised in reporting on social and human rights issues and has broken several significant stories on subjects like groundwater pollution, genetically modified foods, climate change and forests.

She presently freelances for the news websites Rediff.com and Scroll.in, both of which enjoy an international readership. She has also authored three books and is currently working on a fourth book of fiction.