Session: Inaugural of 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014

The Game Changer in Gender Equality - Engagement of Men and Boys

* Delhi on world gender map after December 16, 2012 incident’s massive public protests
* Global community sets expiry date to break back of gender inequality by 2030
* Root of gender injustice is relationship between power and powerlessness
* Not enough for men and boys to engage — they must engage in the right way
Standing on the mark to run for gender equality’ defined the symposium’s inaugural session in which moderator Jashodhara Dasgupta, Director, SAHAYOG, India and head of the symposium’s programme committee and India Organising Committee said, “This is an inspiring call to all of us to turn into human rights defenders in the quest for gender justice.”

Global Community Sets an Expiry Date

Abhijit Das, Director, Centre for Health and Social Justice, New Delhi, India and a member of the MenEngage Steering Committee as well as convenor of the symposium’s secretariat, set the ball rolling. “Two years ago Delhi was just another city on the gender map of the world. But in December 2012 a shocking gang rape and fatal assault on a young woman in the city left the nation aghast and the city ashamed and angry. Thousands of people including many men poured into the streets in sorrow and solidarity. Two years later we are assembled in the same city - over 1,100 registered delegates from 94 countries, to find new ways of achieving gender justice in a rainbow world.

For many decades women alone carried the torch of the struggle for gender equality the world over. In this symposium we want to reaffirm a framework of gender justice that includes all groups; we want to share thoughts and experiences about the ways in which men and boys from all walks of life are able to reflect on their patriarchal privilege and join as allies and partners in the common quest for gender justice.”

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women, set the crowd cheering when she exhorted, “As a global community we have gathered here to set an expiry date for gender inequality. From 2015 to 2030 is the last mile.

This is game changing because what we are doing here is redefining the battle of the sexes. Numerous studies have shown if we continue the way we are right now it will take 81 years to reach gender parity; so it will not happen in our watch. We are here to see how to shrink that period because there is real danger it will not happen unless we strengthen our resolve. We need scale and we need to do this together. We need to be able to say in the framework of the sustainable development goals that we have taken down each of the major defining features of patriarchy and have entrenched systemic change so that we don’t come back with these same issues.

We need to extend our reach beyond our traditional constituencies, and for feminists like myself working with men is getting out of our comfort zone for all the right reasons.

Beating the Drums of Change

Soul-stirring cultural performances during the inaugural highlighted the symposium’s themes. The group Dalit Drummers that leapt onto the stage for an electrifying performance that gave the symposium an unbeatable start, belonged to the Chhinda community from Andhra Pradesh in south India. They got panelists and participants drumming on various percussion instruments in response to their beat. The drummers are part of the dalit social justice effort aimed at building self-esteem for an extremely marginalised community in India. The performance by Sufi and Baul singers Shabnam Virmani and Parvathy Baul drew together strands of the masculine and feminine, Hinduism and Islam, into a seamless quest for bridging social rifts.
The gender equality agenda has been laid down by the women’s movement for many decades, benefitting women and girls immensely. We must continue our efforts but this is not a one sided task. We see this engagement with men and boys - the other half of humanity, as the game changer that will shorten the road to be travelled ahead of us.

This is why I have also launched on behalf of UN Women a HeForShe campaign, of which MenEngage is a part. We are trying to recruit a mass of men who go out to be change makers for gender justice.*

*Gender justice at its root is not about men and women, it is about power and powerlessness, and in the polity of the intimate as much as in the polity of the public. Our conceptualisation of the category of the man must be further explored, as we have done so significantly for the category of the woman. That category of man is just too small - if you are raped you are no longer a man, if you cry you are no longer a man, if you care for children, if you are not in charge - out you go! We must release gender and its intersecting identities, to flow out into the fullest contours of human potential possible.

Our departure point is rightly with men and boys, but we journey forward in the interests of women and girls too, to an ultimate destination that is humanity for each of us, to the exclusion of none of us in the interest of all. No compassion without justice, no inclusion with impunity, no engagement without accountability, no hope without human rights.

So we go forward committing to action for empowerment with BOYS - By Owning Your Standpoint, By Observing Your Significance, By Organizing Your Solidarity. We go forward to action for gender justice with MEN – More Energy Now, More Engagement Now, More Equality Now.*

The Primary State is Humanity, Not Masculinity or Femininity

Kate Gilmore, Deputy Executive Director, UNFPA, said, “We have this opportunity to galvanise a tipping point for change.” She cited Ban Ki Moon, UN Secretary General who had said, “Violence against women continues to be the most heinous, systematic and prevalent human rights violation. It is a threat to all women and an obstacle to development, peace and gender equality in all societies. It is always a violation of human rights, it is always a crime, it is always unacceptable.”

Gilmore said, “Women and girls must be fully free - from preventable maternal mortality, from gender based violence including child marriage and FGM, able to be in charge of their bodies.

Preeti Sudan, Additional Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, said, “With globalisation and rising aspirations, the need to engage with men and boys in our policy and schematic interventions is both urgent and imperative. Frankly, the government’s engagement with the public has been largely activity based; we got so embroiled in activity and programmatic details that we lost the need for essence of dialogue on core issues.

Our ministry’s new scheme called Saksham for holistic development of adolescent boys is a small attempt to have a dialogue with men and boys in an institutionalised manner. Parenting and schooling have an important role in instilling values of gender equality and humanity. There is stereotyping of the man as a provider-protector, one who does not display emotions, for whom violence against others is an acceptable means of demonstrating strength and control. This kind of socialisation into the Macho Man cuts really a very sorry figure denied the pleasure of demonstrating emotions and being human.

“ I am sure this symposium will show not only how to engage with men and boys in an international forum like this but also how to institutionalise events like this within governmental policy and schematic interventions.”
Engaging Men in the Right Way

Rahul Bose, actor and activist from India, pointed out, “It is not enough for men to engage, they have to engage in the right way. Gender equality is not about men protecting women or allowing them to do what they want, and it is not about taking decisions sensitive to women. It is about understanding that women will exercise their own power and do as they wish. For that men will have to do something that is right now not in their DNA – cede control.”

Giving a personal example, he said, “When I was young and used to go to my friends’ houses for lunch, I would always ask - is your father ill? Why is your mother in the kitchen, shouldn’t your father be cooking? And they would ask what are you talking about? People from the subcontinent will understand how unusual it was - my mother never entered the kitchen, my father loved cooking, so we grew up with a father who cooked and a mother who didn’t.”

Syeda Hameed, former member of the Planning Commission, Government of India, said “In the working together of so many organisations the silos have been broken and people have come together regardless of personal domains to create this powerful gathering from across the world which is going to send a signal of something which after the December 16, 2012 incident we could only dream would happen. I think this immense tsunami built up here will be the turning point and we will definitely run for it like Phumzile said and we may even live to see the day when gender equality becomes a reality and all of the aspects of violence that have been spoken about are obliterated.”

Joni Van de Sand, MenEngage Global Co-coordinator, present at the panel along with the other Co-coordinator Oswaldo Montoya, spoke of how since the first MenEngage Symposium held in Rio de Janeiro in 2009 many more stakeholders are becoming increasingly involved; in the media and elsewhere the topic of working with men and boys is getting a lot of attention; important lessons have been learnt about what approaches actually work to make men and boys change behaviour and change masculinities; and community activities and advocacy-work at the national level is getting translated into government policies such as granting of paternity leave.

She ended the session by putting on stage reflective gaps and questions for everyone to carry along during the symposium. “How can we reach large numbers of men and boys to build clout for social change? How can we scale up activities that work? How can we ensure institutions and sectors in government pick this work up? How can men be vocal among anti-feminist groups that are countering women’s rights and also among other fundamentalist groups? How can we communicate the positive opportunities in working with men and boys on gender justice? And how can we make sure that our goal remains sharp, that it does not become about men and boys but about the ultimate goal of gender justice?”

This synthesis paper is also available in other languages

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