Series ‘Challenging Masculinities and Creating New Realities’

Synthesis of Discussions at the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014

Session: Masculinities and Media
Tracking the Stereotypes

Use social media, other tools, to applaud good ads and question bad ones

Ensure all communications are rooted in gender equality

Engage with thought-leaders of corporates on need to build brand image around gender equality

Digital tools combined with place-based community organising amplifies message hundredfold
The session 'Masculinities and Media' during the 2nd MenEngage Global Symposium 2014 - Men and Boys for Gender Justice, held in New Delhi from November 10-13, explored how to raise issues and construct the media to engage men. Its panelists included film-makers and professionals working in the media including social media. They looked at the ways the media constructs audiences, narratives and themes. Moderator Michael Kimmel, Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Stony Brook University, New York, USA and founder-editor of academic journal Men and Masculinities said of the session, "We saw four different types of media and four different ways of approaching it - there are infinite number of other ones - but this gives you a good range of how people are addressing the media."

Building Brands by Rooting Out Stereotypes

AL Sharada, Director, Population First, India, explained her organisation is named so because it realises health and population issues are all related to the gender issue, violence and discrimination, at the root of which is the undervaluing of women and overvaluing of men's control over women's lives. And one of the most effective ways of correcting this social imbalance is to work with those who develop media content and advertising professionals.

Sharada said the field of advertising is important because it creates stereotypes. Even the most modern products like cellphones have regressive ads. One such ad shows the father come into the picture and ask the son why he hasn't paid the electricity bill. The son does it on the mobile. "The whole financial transaction is between the father and the son. The mother and daughter are there in the background but are nowhere in the decision-making or the conversation," Sharada pointed out.

Many companies however now understand the importance of gender equality and can be coaxed to sell their products and build their brand identities and values around gender, she said, adding that her organisation engages with the thought leaders of such organisations - owners, managers and creative directors of advertising agencies. It also dialogues with advertising institutions like the Advertising Standards Committee and Advertising Association of India "to bring changes in advertising so that we focus on the aspirational India, where the younger generation wants better gender equations," she said.

Population First also reviews the Advertising Standards Committee's guidelines and how they're being implemented. She spoke about the committee's ban on a vaginal tightening cream because it showed a 65-year-old woman buying it. "The ad goes on with the woman singing 'I am a virgin, I feel like a virgin.' The ban was the right decision, but for the wrong reason."

AL Sharada

Mallika Dutt, President and CEO, Breakthrough, USA, spoke about the role and importance of the media in transforming social norms. "I think the reason the media is such an important tool is because we're able to reach people in multiple kinds of ways. You can be...

Worryingly, she said despite efforts like holding gender workshops for ad agencies, ads continue to take a tentative step towards showing something differently, then regress two steps back.

"We need to keep working with every kind of communicator. It's not enough to say I have made a good film on the girl child, no. Whether it's promoting agrochemicals or any other product, we must ensure the communication should have its roots in gender sensitivity and gender equality."

Among contemporary trends, very few ads now glorify eve-teasing. Many ads also show women as decision-makers and men as sensitive and okay with women doing what they want. "Some companies such as HDFC, ICICI, LIC and Havell's have done amazing ads, showing much better gender equations."

Motivating Men to Stand Up

Mallika Dutt, President and CEO, Breakthrough, USA, spoke about the role and importance of the media in transforming social norms. "I think the reason the media is such an important tool is because we're able to reach people in multiple kinds of ways. You can be
sitting in your living room watching TV and you can be communicated with. You can be on your Facebook feed and you can be engaged with.

When we talk about norm change we’re really talking about cultural transformation, and the role of media, art, technology in cultural transformation can be an extremely important one. Breakthrough’s strategy brings together media arts and tech with community mobilisation. It’s very important for us, as an organisation, to be based at the community level. In India we work in five states. However, that place-based community organising is amplified hundred-fold when we also get our message out into the mass media.” Citing their game-changing Bell Bajao ad campaign on television, she said it reached 130 million people. “We’ve been measuring and evaluating over the years that when we combine our community organising work with transforming narratives at the media level and use technology and social media as a bridge to keep the conversation happening, then there are shifts in how people perceive the issue and how they show up and talk about it as well.”

"The lessons we learnt from it were, one, the power of social media because when we had celebrity Sir Patrick Stewart share his story in the second part of the campaign, we were live streaming and 10,000 people around the world were watching but at the same time people were tweeting it and we were trending for hours. We started receiving hundreds of stories from men about how violence against women had affected their lives. We ourselves started to understand more deeply how gender based violence and discrimination affected really everybody.”

"You can engage with the media at so many levels. It has become, especially through digital tools and the transformation in technology, such an integral part of all of our lives that it has helped break the silence. I see more and more men - in India and around the world - standing up and saying this affects me as much as this affects women and we have to change these norms. For me all of our collective stories are stories about how we are breaking the silence, and how we can continue to do that in very creative ways".

Show-man ‘Shows' how Women Being Objectified

Performing and activist Ben Atherton Zeman, National Organisation for Men Against Sexism, USA, in a show during the session said, "I always loved those sexy images of women used by corporations to sell products! I thought it was just fine, this sort of thing doesn't cause violence against women. Then I realised I was helping objectify women. I was creating a climate where violence against them is tolerated, expected and accepted. You've got to see women and girls as more than just faces or body parts. You've got to see women for more than their clothes and makeup. You've got to see women and girls as full human beings, deserving of respect, deserving being listened to, deserving of taking positions of leadership." Performer and activist Ben Atherton Zeman, National Organisation for Men Against Sexism, USA, in a show during the session said, "I always loved those sexy images of women used by corporations to sell products! I thought it was just fine, this sort of thing doesn't cause violence against women. Then I realised I was helping objectify women. I was creating a climate where violence against them is tolerated, expected and accepted. You've got to see women and girls as more than just faces or body parts. You've got to see women for more than their clothes and makeup. You've got to see women and girls as full human beings, deserving of respect, deserving being listened to, deserving of taking positions of leadership.”

The rapid growth of the internet, coupled with other events and circumstances, has helped people living in small regions to think and perceive as a whole, even if they continue acting locally changed with the advances in technology, Hernandez said a lot of work continues to be done to make men understand the need to cast aside the desire to be macho and instead learn to treat women as equals. "I also ask that why of the 27,000 suicides in my country, 24,000 are by men,' said Hernandez.

Maria Guadalupe Cortes Hernandez, Executive Producer of Radio Educacion, Mexico, that has been working for gender equality since the 1960s when it was an important broadcaster in Mexico, said that it had broadcast for 30 years a programme called Entre Hombres Sin Verguenza (Between Men With No Shame) produced by Emilio Ebergenyi who was also an actor. The programme viewed gender not only from the women’s perspective but also from the male perspective. It featured sexologists, health experts and social researchers who answered questions from writers, anthropologists, historians and others.

Today, though radio formats have changed with the advances in technology, Hernandez said a lot of work continues to be done to make men understand the need to cast aside the desire to be macho and instead learn to treat women as equals. "I also ask that why of the 27,000 suicides in my country, 24,000 are by men,' said Hernandez.
Thinking about how to prompt men to become active in challenging violence against women, Breakthrough and Ogilvy & Mather developed a TV campaign series Bell Bajao or Ring the Bell that brought men in not just as perpetrators but as a part of the solution.

Singing a New Tune

Recalling the songs played by Radio Educacion that were part of the La Trova musical movement in Mexico, Hernandez said a review of the programme by 38 writers and composers found that the manner in which women were treated in these songs kept changing. From viewing the woman as a princess under the moon and stars, singers and songwriters started considering her as an equal. “They began seeing her as someone with whom one could walk down the street, someone who could think and participate and fight and move forward.”

This synthesis paper is also available in other languages

For further details please contact:
CENTRE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
Basement of Young Women’s Hostel No. 2, Avenue 21, G Block, Saket, New Delhi – 110017