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to advance gender equality**

WORKING WITH YOUNG MEN AND BOYS FOR ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY

by

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Opportunities available for youth to get involved in advancing gender equality

Although gender equality is such a burning issue, not many youth in India get an opportunity to get involved in advancing gender equality. I was very fortunate to be given a chance to become involved in advancing gender equality while in university. My experiences in school have helped to build the skills I use every day to help other young men gain the same opportunities I had.

It was my academic advisor at my university in Varanasi who first helped me form a world view with a gender lens because he was involved with the MASVAW network (Men's Action for Stopping Violence against Women). As a student and after professionally associating with MASVAW, I began to think about the meaning and causes of gender discrimination and learned about opportunities to get involved in activities that challenge harmful gender norms. I have come to realize that men are not born violent and that, when given a chance to see a new perspective, behavioral and personal change is possible among men and boys.

My MASVAW peer network helped me turn attitude into action when I became involved in capacity building trainings on how to lobby school officials to create an anti-sexual harassment committee and to implement a gender-sensitive curriculum. When I later began working for MASVAW, I helped to ensure that MASVAW remained an effective tool to intervene at a critical development stage in young men and boys' lives in order to help them become active advocates for gender equality. ***MASVAW believes that academic institutions provide many key opportunities for youth to become involved in these equality campaigns.***

Why do young men and boys get involved?

Young men and boys all over India have had many difficult experiences regarding gender inequality and sexual violence but traditional societal structure discourages them to be open about these issues. Youth join MASVAW because this network provides an outlet for youth to freely share experiences and concerns. Young men and boys also get involved in MASVAW and other such initiatives because they seek recognition of their alternative masculinities.

Beyond escaping limiting gender roles, young men and boys also join networks like MASVAW as a reaction to their family gender power relationships which they sometimes perceive as unjust. If men, as perpetrators of violence, are part of the problem of gender inequality, they should be part of the solution as well. Men should join the fight to end violence against women because this issue does not only concern women, but society as a whole. The inherent desire for justice and equality is sometimes within themselves and sometimes guided by mentors.

Obstacles

Rigid religious and familial norms present barriers to young men and boys trying to get involved in gender equality campaigns. Religion, which defines sometimes harmful gender roles, is an integral part of Indian society and perhaps other societies as well. Therefore, many people believe that to challenge gender roles is to challenge God. Religion also dictates family life so when one person deviates from set family norms they are also seen as deviating from much-respected religious tradition.

The Indian family structure can also inhibit involvement because of the ideas of honour and reputation. Traditionally, each person is seen as a representative for one's own family, so each

action is a collective action and reflects on the honor of a family. Therefore, if a youth is affiliated with a group or a movement that his or her family disapproves of, the reputation of both the individual and the family are perceived as damaged. This dual stigmatization is an obstacle for youth who wish to become change agents and active participants in ending violence against women.

Social controls are imposed by religion, family and also society. MASVAW believes that negative gender conceptions are conveyed to youth through media, religious leaders, parents, school, peers, etc. Due to continued reinforcement of these sentiments from a young age, the stereotypes are difficult to challenge both personally and with others. Subsequently, youth often experience harsh criticism from family, friends and institutions when joining gender equality initiatives.

There are many young people who face criticism or are feeling inferior among peers and others due to non-conforming behaviors related to gender or can't get recognition as successful men as per the traditional masculine qualities. These stereotypes and inequalities do not only affect women but are also oppressive to young men because their actions are limited based on the societal definition of masculinity.

How gender stereotypes hamper young men's development

From MASVAW's experience, we have seen that young men are hampered by gender stereotypes in the following ways:

- They have difficulty facing failure as it is seen as a threat to their masculinity
- Because they are not encouraged to share their feelings, tensions, or concerns, many young men facing difficulties must suffer alone
- In Indian society, boys learn at an early age that conflict can be resolved with physical violence, thus transforming creative energy into violence.
- The privilege awarded to boys at birth creates expectations and pressure that hamper a boy's ability to practice loving, caring and sharing.
- Society teaches women to be attracted to men who are domineering and physically strong, so men feel pressure to live up to that expectation. Trying to rise to that standard and be seen as attractive to women can trap a man in his constructed gender role.

Strategy to overcome the obstacles

Gender stereotypes are perpetuated when discourse on the subject is absent and people are not encouraged to critically think about the harmful nature of certain beliefs. MASVAW believes that in order to overcome obstacles of negative gender stereotypes, a path must be paved for open and candid discussions, education and advocacy aimed at erasing myths surrounding these stereotypes. MASVAW helps youth to play a role in advancing gender equality by teaching young men and boys to facilitate these conversations about the possibility of change at home, at school and among their peer group through the forums, trainings and events that MASVAW leads. Youth can also form pressure groups to lobby for justice for survivors of violence and for the sensitization of their peers. Young men can create watch dog groups to monitor and reduce acts of violence at the community level.

Tools for positive change

MASVAW has implemented the following tools which we believe can be employed to change social attitudes:

- **Capacity building/training-**
 - Film show and discussion
 - Regular interactive session on gender issues in universities (department of Social Work and fine art, National Service Scheme camps)
 - Poster making competitions and street exhibitions
 - Debates
 - Developed special games which can be played by either groups of young women or men that help to break gender stereotypes.
 - Activity books for school children on gender issues
 - Encouraging young men to write and publish stories about gender equality and to be role models in their peer groups
- **Network building-**
 - Creating a youth-led youth forum on campuses and in communities to facilitate formal and informal meetings with men and boys
 - Using the forum as a peer group
 - Youth use technology such as: Mobile phone and text messages (SMS), e-mails and online social media networks such as orkut and facebook, twitter (more for urban youth)
- **Advocacy-**
 - Demanding for committees against sexual harassment in academic institutions
 - Work as pressure group within districts and state for effective implementation of domestic violence act 2005.
- **Campaigning-**
 - Rallies, peaceful demonstrations, literature distribution, drafting memorandum for government, street plays, Candle light vigil, Human chain

Youth involvement in policy making

The voices of youth are virtually absent from the gender equality policy arena in India and political representation has thus far been weak and ineffective. Social welfare initiatives from government bodies such as the National Rural Health Mission and the Ministry of Women and Child Development have not been drafted with the help of youth and thus youth's needs are not being recognized. When youth's potential to be arbiters of change is not recognized by government officials, youth involvement in inclusive policy-making initiatives is hampered. However, a recent increase in youth participation in voting represents a vital interest in getting involved in policy making process.

Also, SAHAYOG in 37 districts of Uttar Pradesh is campaigning for youth policy in Uttar Pradesh, India by implementing a participatory approach with youth. As opposed to government officials who sometimes do not respect the opinions of youth because of their general belief that youth are inferior and ignorant, civil society representatives act as a bridge, working *with* youth to make their voice heard in government.

An example of good practice of youth organizing themselves

In 2005, MASVAW led a successful campaign at Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidhyapith University in Varanasi around one case of sexual harassment which ultimately led to the formation of an anti-sexual harassment committee on campus. When a female student reported that she was sexually harassed by one of her teachers, a group of male students supported her by helping to file a police report against the teacher. The accused teacher was ultimately punished and dismissed. After this incident, female students felt empowered to come forward about their personal experiences with sexual harassment at school.

A campaign led by Lucknow University student in Uttar Pradesh for safe public transportation for girls and women is another example of effective youth organizing. The youth forum at Lucknow University spear-headed and independently organized this campaign for which MASVAW provided logistical support and guidance.

Conclusion

My personal fight for gender equality began at school, and I know from experience, both personal and professional with MASVAW, that great potential for organizing and norm changes lies in the educational arena. If young people's potential and courage are recognized, progress will be made toward establishing gender equality in educational institutions through compulsory gender education starting from the primary level.

I also feel that youth must be provided appropriate venues and platforms for facilitating gender equality campaigns. Comprehensive steps to strengthen these platforms, which might include youth and sports clubs as well as student and youth organizations and unions, should be taken in order to discuss action plans for the creation of a more gender-equal society.