

DISCUSSION PAPER



Working With Men for Gender Equality: A Dialogue Amongst Different Social Movements



Department for International Development (DFID)

A Discussion Paper by Anchita Ghatak

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Summary

This paper examines issues of gender equality that require greater dialogue amongst different movements and assesses how such openness and discussion may be fostered and sustained. Feminist concerns regarding male participation in women's struggles resulting in male domination, protectionism and competition are also addressed.

The understanding of gender has changed significantly over the past few decades. Although language and practice are yet to catch up, there is now a theoretical appreciation of the fact that we can no longer confine ourselves to the male and female binary in our discussions and struggles for gender equality. There has also been a shift away from heteronormativity. However, our analysis of patriarchy leaves no doubt that male power and privilege are a reality and males remain privileged. Of course, not all males enjoy the same degree of power and privilege. One's gender identity also intersects with other markers of identity like class, caste, religion, race, sexual preference and disability. An important question that this paper on dialogue between movements addresses is the

role of cis men in addressing gender inequality and promoting and advancing gender equality.

As far as violence against women and other forms of gender violence are concerned, men are seen as the perpetrators of such violence. Many men, over the years, have raised the question whether in the context of gender violence it is possible to think of men in roles other than that of perpetrators. Men, and especially boys, are also often at the receiving end of male violence.

Some men have become involved in campaigns and other action against violence against women because they have felt that it is not enough for men to refrain from committing acts of violence against women. They also have to work actively to end violence against women.

Feminists have always said that gender oppression and specifically, the oppression of women, is not just a 'women's issue' – everybody has to be engaged in dismantling patriarchal oppression. At the same time, there is the question of leadership and representation. Feminists have worked hard to make women develop a sense of their own oppression and

deprivation and articulate it. Queer groups too, are working long and hard to identify and articulate their oppression. Therefore, feminists are reiterating that working with men and boys on gender equality does not mean that men and boys can assume the leadership of feminist movements and strengthen the gender hierarchies that feminists have so long struggled to dismantle. Not only will men have to be prepared to work with others, they must also learn when to take a backseat.

Raising money to continue work has always been a challenge for social action organisations. The priorities and strategies of funders may not always match the priorities of organising work or research. Feminist organizations have undertaken research to map funding available for work with women. There are anxieties that work with men and boys on gender equality may curtail the already limited money available for work with women and girls because everyone will be dipping into the same limited pot.

The conversation about women's groups working systematically with men for gender justice started gaining ground in the 1990s and the 21st Century has seen many projects / programmes of work with men for gender justice. In this paper, the assumption is that we are talking about work with pro-feminist / feminist men or initiating processes to initiate men and boys into feminism. Examining male privilege is a non-negotiable principle of such

work. This discussion is not commenting on men's rights activists (MRA), who have an anti-feminist stand, although many of them use the language of human rights.

We have to think of doing some things together to further dialogue and strengthen our collaboration. We have to have projects that we need engage in. Maybe one project could be finding new language. Many feminist organisations have been struggling with the issue of how to stop talking only about women and some formulations seem rather awkward. We have to begin to think about some doable projects so that the dialogue is not about some deep conceptual issues and framings, but also about doing something together, a dialogue that is framed through action. Often it is that process that unveils and reveals the limits to our possibility for collaboration and the limits to our unity, but it also shows us new possibilities.

Introduction

It is not unusual for feminists, women's rights activists, NGO organisers, to name a few, in different parts of the world, to be told by the women they work with that women are questioning, growing and changing but men appear to be stuck in the past. If gender equality has to be established, they say, it is necessary for men, too, to develop a 'gender lens' and a commitment to gender equality. Working only with women is important and necessary but it is

only one part, an important part no doubt, of transformation in gender relations. It is important to work with men, too.

This exhortation from the ground became louder in the 1990s with international NGOs including funding organisations emphasising the importance of working with men to bring about gender equality. This created unease amongst many feminists, who had already been noticing the depoliticisation of the term 'gender' and an increasing reluctance within development circles to acknowledge gender subordination and male privilege.

Feminists have also often argued that many social/ political movements are male dominated and tend to leave out the questions of gender discrimination and subordination in different spheres of life, including such injustice within movements. It is as if questions of gender subordination are only the concerns of feminists. Most movements are male dominated and give the impression that other questions of social justice are weightier than questions of gender equality. Feminist / women's movements on the other hand, are also critiqued by other movements for being solely focused on women, resisting new ideas and approaches, and an inability to dialogue with others.

This paper examines issues of gender equality that require greater dialogue amongst different movements and assesses how such openness

and discussion maybe fostered and sustained. Feminist concerns regarding male participation in women's struggles resulting in male domination, protectionism and competition are also addressed.

Many people are of the opinion that the struggle for gender equality will gain more momentum if men and boys are brought into it. Women's movements point out that while they have emphasised the need for some women's and girls' only spaces, they have never kept men and boys out of feminist struggles and movements. It is important to note here that in this new conversation about bringing in men and boys the onus for joining struggles for gender equality is now no longer being left to males. Development professionals and activists working for gender equality are actively considering the question of male participation in their struggles, programmes and projects.

Only for women?

Individuals have reported that research on issues like fatherhood or reproductive rights and behaviour of men have met with scepticism, if not hostility, from feminists. Men are privileged, say feminists and men's rights are protected. Many men say that fatherhood is an affirmation of life and an understanding of fatherhood will further our understanding of masculinity and men's reproductive responsibilities and behaviour.

Feminists have worked on validating women's intimate and personal experiences in different spheres. Queer movements have focused on the necessity for listening to and understanding the experiences of queer people. An enhanced understanding of gender is making it apparent that if we have to change norms within families, in communities and in personal relationships, we have to understand men's roles, responsibilities, joys and vulnerabilities. Understanding men's personal and private roles and responsibilities will enable the dismantling of the public-private binary.

There is no question of discounting male privilege. However, even for men to acknowledge and analyse their privilege, it is important for them to develop an awareness of their vulnerabilities. Again, it is necessary to understand that work with men and boys is not to be seen as replacing work with women but as an additional element amongst multiple strategies possible for ending gender inequality.

Perpetrators of violence

In the discourse and action on gender equality, men are seen as perpetrators of violence. The ideology and practice of militarism is one of the defining features of our patriarchal world and it is mostly men who have been heads of state, politicians, cabinet ministers, senators, generals, civil servants, soldiers and policemen. Different forms of state violence including war continue to have a devastating effect on the lives of people.

Men are the perpetrators of violence in the community, on the streets and within the home. It is estimated that 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives. However, some national studies show that up to 70 per cent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime. Although little data is available—and great variation in how psychological violence is measured across countries and cultures—existing evidence shows high prevalence rates. Forty-three per cent of women in the 28 European Union member states have experienced some form of psychological violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. It is estimated that of all women who were the victims of homicide globally in 2012, almost half were killed by intimate partners or family members, compared to less than six per cent of men killed in the same year. In 2012, a study conducted in New Delhi found that 92 per cent of women reported having experienced some form of sexual violence in public spaces in their lifetime, and 88 per cent of women reported having experienced some form of verbal sexual harassment (including unwelcome comments of a sexual nature, whistling, leering or making obscene gestures) in their lifetime.¹

¹ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures#notes>

As far as violence against women and other forms of gender violence are concerned, men are seen as the perpetrators of such violence. Many men, over the years, have raised the question whether in the context of gender violence it is possible to think of men in roles other than that of perpetrators. Men, and especially boys, are also often at the receiving end of male violence.

Men and boys face violence in war. There is violence on males by policemen and soldiers during political meetings and demonstrations. It is well known that men and boys in prison are abused by prison staff, as well as other prisoners. There is male violence on men in gangs and during street-fights. All over the world, there are enough reported instances of abuse of boys and young men by male authority figures like teachers and religious leaders. Of course, then there is the whole arena of child sexual abuse within the family. While there is no denying that violence against women and girls is still significantly underreported, there is at least an acknowledgement that there is violence against women and girls – physical, psychological and sexual. Prevailing notions of masculinity make it very difficult for male victims of violence to report abuse, especially sexual abuse.

Activists working for equality and a violence free world are unanimous that we must

recognise that men too can be victims of violence. Feminists are clear that a violence free world means that there should not be violence against any persons, irrespective of gender. Violence is a brutal means of asserting power over other persons and cannot be condoned.

Male violence over women is a widespread form of gender violence. Surely, men need not only remain part of the problem in this sphere? There are several examples, in different countries, where men have come together to resist violence against women and other forms of gender violence. Some, like MAVAW (Men Against Violence Against Women), started as voluntary groups of men, who came together to resist violence against women – a major manifestation of violent patriarchy. From discussion and sporadic action, many groups have over the past decade begun programmatic interventions with men. Some men have become involved in campaigns and other action against violence against women because they have felt that it is not enough for men to refrain from committing acts of violence against women. They also have to work actively to end violence against women. Some activists have said that feminists have been very judgmental about men's silences regarding violence against women interpreting all of those silences as collusion with male violence against women. They wonder if feminists have ever discussed men's silences with them. Also, is it only men who are or have been silent about violence against women and

other forms of gender violence? Feminists too, while they have been in alliance with different social movements, have sometimes remained silent or not been vocal and active enough about different forms of violence. For example, there aren't too many instances of Indian feminists speaking out consistently against state neglect of people with disability or about the violence perpetrated by Indian armed forces in Kashmir.

Militarisation has been a concern within feminist and other human rights movements. The valorisation of violence in everyday settings – as a discipline measure and a means of defence, as well as an expression of masculinity – is closely linked to an ideology of militarization. Violence and killing during war is seen as noble and just. This idea of 'good' violence is then extended to other settings, legally and socially, for example, capital punishment allows the state to impose order; teachers can chastise children, as can parents; husbands can beat their wives; fathers and brothers kill women in the family for family honour; the state sets norms of sexual behaviour and punishes so-called deviance. Feminists point out that there hasn't been enough discussion amongst feminist movements about militarisation. There is an assumption that all feminists have a similar position on militarisation and its implications for other forms of violence, especially, violence against women. However, there is a need to have discussions amongst feminists, acknowledge points of agreement and difference, identify

allies both amongst feminists and other social movements and strategise for action.

Equally oppressed?

Feminists have always said that gender oppression and specifically, the oppression of women, is not just a 'women's issue' – everybody has to be engaged in dismantling patriarchal oppression. At the same time, there is the question of leadership and representation. Feminists have worked hard to make women develop a sense of their own oppression and deprivation and articulate it. Queer groups too, are working long and hard to identify and articulate their oppression. Therefore, feminists are reiterating that working with men and boys on gender equality does not mean that men and boys can assume the leadership of feminist movements and strengthen the gender hierarchies that feminists have so long struggled to dismantle. Not only will men have to be prepared to work with others, they must also learn when to take a backseat.

Men have also pointed out that males who don't conform to normative ideas of masculinity have a very difficult time and face ridicule, mockery and violence. For example, a man who would rather paint than play football is looked upon as a sissy. Gay men are often the targets of ridicule or even violence. It is important to recognise these instances of marginalisation, yet, it is appropriate to acknowledge that the suffering of non-conformist men should not be equated with

the centuries old oppression and marginalisation of women that is ingrained in patriarchy. Non-conformist men too, enjoy much male privilege. Feminists are apprehensive that working with men may result in women's organising and action being 'guided' by paternalist 'supporters'.

The question of leadership and representation is a contentious one for many social and political movements. Do workers lead workers' movements? Can able bodied persons represent people with disability?

Feminists have vigorously debated the questions of leadership and representation even within feminist movements. Black women have asked whether feminism is the preserve of White, bourgeois women. In India, feminist movements have been called into question by Muslim women, Dalit women, queer women, women with disability – to name a few. Young women across south Asia are challenging the entrenched, ageing leaders of women's organisations.

Feminist scholarship and activism has expanded the boundaries of feminism and deepened our understanding. While pluralism and diversity enrich our understanding, there is also much scope for conflict. Many feminists have stressed the need for dialogue amongst women's movements so that differences maybe acknowledged, pluralities embraced and solidarities deepened.

Where is the money?

Raising money to continue work has always been a challenge for social action organisations. The priorities and strategies of funders may not always match the priorities of organising work or research. Feminist organizations have undertaken research to map funding available for work with women. There are anxieties that work with men and boys on gender equality may curtail the already limited money available for work with women and girls because everyone will be dipping into the same limited pot.

It is important not to pit gender equality 'work with men' against 'work with women' but to see them as important parts of a whole and then look for resources and allocate them responsibly. A process of dialogue about gender equality amongst different movements will inevitably discuss questions related to financial and other resources.

In AWID's study entitled 'Where is the Money for Women's Rights' it was seen that the money available for transformative work with women was declining, whereas more funding was available for what many have called 'magic bullet' work for women, for example, give her a loan and she'll change the world, send her to school and she's going to change her whole village. There is a focus on investing in women or girls as individuals rather than in complex processes of building collective strength and power.

While it is critical to bring more resources and opportunities to every woman and girl, it needs more work to question, challenge and end patriarchy. Feminists have always worked with women, not only because they are the ‘victims’ of patriarchy but also because women are the frontline workers of patriarchy. Like all other human beings, women too, think and act according to well established patriarchal norms and practices. Feminist organising has emphasised the need for women to come together, reflect and learn collectively and take collective action. Feminists are asking if a focus on ‘magic bullets’ is somehow saying that collective learning and action by women is no longer necessary.

Looking back, moving forward

Dismantling gender oppression and inequality are now said to be integral to all human rights struggles. Feminists, largely cis women, have played an important role in securing women’s rights. Since the 1960s, during what is identified as the ‘second wave’ of feminism, feminists began a critique of how gender concerns were subordinated within other social movements. From the 1960s to the 1980s, all across the world, feminists participated in different political struggles, consolidated many rights for women and also continued to create and protect women’s only spaces. All this came to fruition in the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, where the Vienna Declaration

and Programme of Action unequivocally said that “the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.”

However, since the 1990s, the boundaries of feminism shifted. It became more inclusive and inter-sectional. The sexualised human form became something to celebrate and gender / sex identities were understood beyond the heteronormative and were accepted as fluid. At the same time, there has been an unease amongst different feminist circles that many activists, including feminists / organisations/ donors were moving away from traditional ‘feminist organising’ and focusing solely on individual gain and growth.

The conversation about women’s groups working systematically with men for gender justice started gaining ground in the 1990s and the 21st century has seen many projects / programmes of work with men for gender justice. In this paper, the assumption is that we are talking about work with pro-feminist / feminist men or initiating processes to initiate men and boys into feminism. Examining male privilege is a non-negotiable principle of such work. This discussion is not commenting on men’s rights activists (MRA), who have an anti-feminist stand, although many of them use the language of human rights.

In conclusion, it is important to keep a few things in mind. We need to talk about patriarchy and our different understandings of patriarchy or whether we understand patriarchy at all. It maybe possible that we are understanding patriarchy through some outdated frameworks and obsolete analytical tools that are really irrelevant in the modern context at a global level. At the same time, it is important to talk about patriarchy in specific rooted contexts and what that's about and what is it that we are trying to change in that context. We need to discuss with all our allied social movements and within and amongst women's movements on how we can remain focused on this fundamental reality.

Implementing a non-binary, non-heteronormative, fluid understanding of gender remains an important part of our agenda for social transformation and dialogue amongst movements.

There is a need to build new frameworks, new framings about what is our vision of development. What kind of economies and societies do we want to live in? The conversation about patriarchy has to be connected with our visions of development and resources. The question of funding is important. We need to discuss where funds are going, where they are not going and we can think of building a shared agenda around the resource question.

We also need to have a conversation about language and the frameworks that our language conveys. These conversations are about difficult and painful things. They are about self-interrogation. There is a need for self-interrogation within feminists, among women's movements and self-interrogation within other social movements about what they're really doing and where they stand on issues of deeply internalized patriarchy and the practices that emerge and the reproduction of those patterns of power.

We have to think of doing some things together to further dialogue and strengthen our collaboration. We have to have projects that we need engage in. Maybe one project could be finding new language. Many feminist organisations have been struggling with the issue of how do we stop talking only about women and some formulations seem rather awkward. We have to begin to think about some doable projects so that the dialogue is not about some deep conceptual issues and framings, but also about doing something together, a dialogue that is framed through action. Often it is that process that unveils and reveals the limits to our possibility for collaboration and the limits to our unity, but it also shows us new possibilities.

These dialogues within and amongst movements can be held in different places amongst different organisations and individuals. They could be at global, regional, national and local levels. It may

also be necessary for global platforms like Men Engage, UNWomen or AWID to convene some dialogues. It may also be important to give some thought to suitable interlocutors for such dialogues.

There is no debate about fighting patriarchy. Feminists and women's movements have succeeded in making gender equality a universal goal for all progressive movements. There are differences about goals, strategies and practices. It is also evident that even the least powerful

man derives considerable advantage from patriarchy. Therefore, it is not surprising that the participation and leadership of men in struggles for gender equality raises questions, doubts and dilemmas. This is the time to reiterate that working with men and boys is not to replace working with women. However, working together is an effective means to bring more people into feminist action and also create new transformative ways.

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