

# Changing Men: Challenging Stereotypes. Reflections on Working with Men on Gender Issues in India

Abhijit Das and Satish K. Singh\*

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**Abstract** This article describes the journey and lessons of a 12-year-long and still ongoing experience of the two authors in working with men at the community level in different parts of India. Starting with addressing domestic violence, the work has proceeded to address issues of power, control and autonomy within the context of deep-seated cultural beliefs and practices, challenging and changing the roles of men both within homes and outside in different institutions. This work has been spread over a number of 'projects', most of which remain interconnected, and currently is spread across a number of states in India. In reviewing the lessons from their practice the authors propose a set of precepts or a 'theory of change' for working with men and boys to challenge gender discrimination within the South Asian context. To conclude the article, the authors discuss some of the challenges and predicaments in continuing this work within the current development paradigm.

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## 1 Introduction

We came from completely different professional backgrounds when we started working together in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh over 25 years ago. One of us was an obstetrician and the other a primary school teacher but our common interest in the welfare of poor communities made us both development practitioners and social activists. Our work with men on gender issues began in 1998 when we started working with a group of young performing artistes in what is now the state of Uttarakhand. However our work with men within what we today recognise as a 'gender equality' and 'masculinities' framework started a few years later as a serendipitous consequence of two events. The first of these was a training event of male health workers of Mumbai Municipal Corporation in the year 2000. While both of us had earlier experience of conducting 'gender sensitisation' workshops with men, including doctors and health administrators, this was the first time we had worked with men who were from a subordinate cadre,<sup>1</sup> belonged to the lower middle class and who were also unionised. Having been forewarned that these men were not very sympathetic to the concept of 'gender', we were careful not to highlight gender

distinctions and kept the discussion limited to a 'social determinants of health' frame. However, we soon had a minor revolt on our hands as the men felt that we were trying to force them to acknowledge women's subordinate situation and that men oppress women. Many of them felt that they too faced oppression in many ways, including from women, to which the system was not at all sympathetic. We were faced with what we learnt later were the issues of 'intersectionality' and 'positionality' in the context of gender, and this remained an important lesson for our future work with men.

At the end of the day we decided that we needed to expand our gender-related work in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) to include men. A few months later, women's groups in UP started a campaign to raise the visibility of domestic violence called HISAAB (Hinsa Sahana Band Abhiyaan, or Stop Tolerating Violence Campaign). We were then associated with SAHAYOG, a non-profit organisation working on women's health issues in UP, and SAHAYOG, which had started gender sensitisation workshops with men. Many of SAHAYOG's partner organisations joined in this campaign, mobilising scores of women to attend

the mammoth gathering of over 3,500 women that took place in September 2001 in the state capital at Lucknow. In the aftermath of this event, we reflected that as 'gender-sensitive men' our role needed to expand beyond mobilising women on gender issues and we needed to reach out to men who were part of the problem but hitherto completely ignored. A few months later at the conclusion of a modest workshop of gender-sensitive male community development workers, MASVAW (Men's Action for Stopping Violence Against Women) was formed.

When we started our work with men through the platform of MASVAW, we had already been working on women's issues for over a decade, and our primary allies were women's rights activists. The responses we received from these allies were mostly of two types – a majority were supportive and some collaborated with us to develop a new approach to training men. The second response, though from fewer friends, was of guarded scepticism. While they were open to debate about the virtue of this effort, they felt it was far less important and detracted attention from the more fundamental task of empowering women and bringing about structural changes that affect gender relations. Despite their lack of enthusiastic support these friends agreed to continue their conversations with us. For us this alliance and engagement with women's rights activists has been fundamental to our core strategy and learning process. Over the years we have gained more supporters of our approach and the sceptics continue to be our friends.

## **2 Finding whether working with men works**

When we started our work with men, we had little beyond the conviction of our belief that such work was important. In a fundamental departure from our earlier work where we wanted men to become sympathetic to women's subordinate situation and encourage their empowerment, now we wanted men to work on their own privileges, to challenge their assumptions and change their own behaviours so that space would open up for women to express themselves. We knew this was desirable, but we didn't know whether this was possible and we didn't know how to go about it. We started with familiar territory – conducting training programmes with male workers of community development organisations in UP. This was during 2002–03 when there was a lot of momentum in the voluntary sector in India

around domestic violence. Incidents of violence were also being reported in the local daily newspapers, and it was convenient to start the discussion in these workshops with this externally located violence. Using Paulo Freire's<sup>2</sup> critical pedagogy we used these experiences to promote a deeper reflection on violence and male culpability. Having learnt from earlier experiences we were careful not to use gender as a single dimension of analysis and developed an appropriate exercise which allowed participants to critically introspect the role of class, gender, caste, age and levels of education on a person's autonomy at different points in life. Analysis of the distribution of power was a central facet of the workshop to allow participants to develop an alternative egalitarian conception of power. The learning approach we adopted was based on David Kolb's experiential learning cycle, moving from empathy to introspection to the adoption of an alternate value system and then planning for action based on this alternative value system. We encouraged our participants to develop personal change plans at the family and professional levels and to mobilise more men to attend similar workshops and form local MASVAW groups. In order to attract more men it decided to run one or two public campaigns by men on violence against women every year .

We secured modest funding support to conduct workshops, maintain communication between MASVAW groups and to run a common annual campaign. The idea that men can have a role in preventing violence against women attracted many men to join this effort, and soon MASVAW groups had been established in 40 districts across the state. We realised that the work with men could not be carried forward through development organisations alone as they are susceptible to funding cycles and funder preferences. We felt that the mass media and educational institutions were more sustainable platforms for incubating this new learning and for the knowledge transmission process. We started running workshops with district-level journalists and took our work to schools, colleges and universities, developing a series of innovative learning aids in the form of games, exercises and workbooks. Many of the schools were private and the university and colleges were public; however, the work went ahead because of 'champions' who wished to incorporate it within their existing work and our role was primarily to provide them appropriate support and opportunities.

As the idea of men helping to stop violence against women grew rapidly across the state of UP, we were both excited and sceptical. Young men like to engage in activities. There were hardly any opportunities for independent cultural expressions, and the MASVAW campaigns were excellent platforms to engage these young men. But were there any substantive changes taking place among these men? Were there any changes taking place in men's response to violence? Were men moving beyond paternalism and protectionism? Several rounds of documentation and two studies (Das *et al.* 2012; Mogford and Das 2007) were conducted between 2003 and 2010 to understand the nature of this change. From these exercises we gained the following insights.

- Some men can change. Such changes can take many forms and have many dimensions. A very important change is a shift in the conceptual framework of what constitutes violence and there is a greater acceptance of intentionality and culpability. This conceptual shift changes the interpretation of the same act from unintended or routine discrimination to intended violence. Men's ability to reflect on their violent and discriminatory actions was a supportive condition to change. Women in these men's families endorsed and valued these changes after initially resisting it. Even though the focus of the intervention was primarily around violence, there were changes in men's participation in routine household and childcare activities.
- Men who changed could count several gains. The most significant gain was becoming closer to their wife and children. While they lost some male friends, they gained through deeper and more trusting friendships. After a period of initial ridicule they also gained social prestige.
- Change for men also brought with it some risk of loss. The most significant loss for men was their position in their own/natal families. Married men could lose the support of their mothers and fathers. Men who believed in this change the most also ended up as missionaries or social activists against gender-based violence. Thus the gain in the value of a man's relationship with his wife and children was offset by the reduction in time available to nurture it.
- We also learned that the intersectional approach to gender helped men to become

sensitive to communal and caste-based violence as well as sexual diversities and rights.

### 3 Replicating the MASVAW experience

In the course of developing and understanding the process of change in MASVAW members, we learnt of other practitioners who were also working on interventions with men. Notable among these were PROMUNDO in Brazil, EngenderHealth in different countries in Africa and Save the Children in Nepal. In the meantime, we had both moved on from SAHAYOG to the Centre for Health and Social Justice. In 2009 we had the opportunity to implement a collaborative project with PROMUNDO, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW, USA) and others where we tried to replicate the MASVAW experience through a more intensive time-bound project and evaluation mode. This three-year project was implemented with three partners across three different locations (two locations were considered intervention locations, and the third was considered a control or delayed intervention) in Uttar Pradesh, in areas that did not have any prior MASVAW interventions. Our MASVAW experience had underlined the importance of local groups of MASVAW activists as forums for discussion, reflection and value clarification among men as well as a platform for collective action, and we wanted to replicate this group at the level of each village in this project. We trained ten men and ten youth in each of the 20 intervention villages, expecting that they would form men's MASVAW-like groups in their own village which would conduct campaigns and undertake community action to bring attention to the issue of violence against women.

When this three-year project was drawing to a close we came face-to-face with two crucial realities. First, this three-year global impact study had less than two years of operational time in the field. Additionally it was difficult to 'abandon' the field just because the project period and evaluation cycle were over. The second was that in preparing a rigorous experiment design the intervention did not incorporate a crucial lesson from MASVAW. MASVAW's growth depended upon the interest and enthusiasm of the activists who took the idea forward. In order to avoid selection bias, we had identified partners who qualified on interest and

capacity parameters and left those who were part of the core group of MASVAW. While we built capacity among the men and youth in the village, the partner organisations were unable to provide the necessary follow-up support. The quantitative evaluation that used the tried and tested GEM (Gender Equitable Men) Scale and associated behavioural indicators did not provide sufficient evidence of changes in gender-related attitudes or behaviours either at the level of the members of the groups or at the level of the community (Singh *et al.* 2011). However, a qualitative assessment of the project using sequentially analysed process documentation and stories (case studies) of change and resistance, gave us some interesting insights. We learnt that while quantitative methods can capture aggregate or 'average' change, the time required for the average to change is longer, which was not available in this project. The qualitative assessment provided an opportunity to capture less frequent but 'dramatic' changes in individual behaviours, relationships and community responses. While these dramatic changes can provide inspiration for more widespread changes in the longer run, it is also important to understand and nurture these dramatic changes. Through our sequential analysis framework we also learnt a few lessons about the process of change. We learnt that participants can emerge from a training event with a dramatic shift in their consciousness but have to face resistance even in doing simple acts such as household chores when they went home. This resistance can be very disappointing and the young men needed support through this period. We learnt how unmarried young men can emerge as champions for their sister's empowerment, their continuing education and in supporting delay in their marriage. Mothers were also seen to be more supportive of changes in their unmarried son's behaviours.

#### **4 New lessons about context and culture**

While we worked in the field and documented our experiences we were also keen to learn and proselytise. We had also become involved in a global alliance, MenEngage, which allowed us to share our experiences with others near and far. While we were keen to share our practice and associated tools we also absorbed from what we heard. In the course of these interactions we also developed relations with scholars and researchers working on men, masculinities and violence. We

realised that 'gender' is an important but perhaps not sufficiently comprehensive analytic framework to understand how men think and behave or what motivates them. We learnt about 'hegemonic' masculinity, an idea of domination that pervades men's thinking. We also learnt that our history and cultural context determine to a great extent how men think about themselves. While the idea of accumulation of power and domination is intrinsic to the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity', not all men are in such positions. This creates insecurities among men. These insecurities, in turn, create the desire to imbibe and reinforce the affirming 'identities' – which could be those of caste, religious, linguistic or nationalistic affiliations. We realised that the idea of 'gender equality' for men had to be located within a larger social justice framework, because contestations and violence were located in many domains, both within and outside the home. We also learnt that the hard and violent patina that men are socialised to adopt, is also very fragile, and once it breaks it leaves men vulnerable and defeated. Men's socialisation is all about celebrating success and they have few resources to cope with failures.

Coming together with other South Asian practitioners and academics we realised how in South Asia the common experiences of history, culture and colonisation had been destroyed by divisions based on religion and nationalism, making it one of the most violent, militant and militarised regions in the world. We learnt that South Asia provides the backdrop for one of the most culturally conservative gender regimes. Here the notions of *izzat* or honour sanctify honour killings, son preference has nearly universalised sex-selective practices and the spurned male considers it his right to commit acid attacks to stigmatise the woman for all time. Our exploration of South Asian history and culture has also allowed us to understand, interpret and apply lessons from the works of scholars like Sudhir Kakkar,<sup>3</sup> Ashis Nandy<sup>4</sup> or Amartya Sen<sup>5</sup> and disciplines like subaltern studies<sup>6</sup> in our work. We took strength from the profusion of alternate traditions in the region which we have learnt have always challenged dominant cultural paradigms. This has helped us to develop a 'South Asian' consciousness and build relationships with many activists across the borders. Today this understanding of cultural traditions forms a bedrock for our contextual

analysis that subsequently informs our community-level interventions.

### **5 Further expansion of our community-based work**

As community-based practitioners we have always looked for opportunities to integrate new learning into our praxis. We implemented two short-term projects that helped us maintain the momentum of our existing work while exploring new territory. One of these projects, implemented in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies in the UK, helped us experiment with the idea of building capacity among individual champions to challenge gender-stereotypical arrangements within institutional frameworks. We worked with a group of about ten individuals working within institutions as diverse as a five-star hotel, a trade union, a state-level political party, a university, students' unions, a few *panchayats* (local self-government unit at the village level), a *dalit* (a term meaning oppressed and used for people who were earlier considered untouchable because of their caste) non-profit organisation and a community-based organisation of *kothis* (male transgenders). The results of this work have been written up (Greig and Edström 2012) but we counted two additional lessons. The first was the experience of working with an entirely different set of individuals and institutions from what we had done earlier. The second was the experience of working with a 'group' of men with disparate identities, creating an environment of mutual trust and collective learning to support each other to challenge 'patriarchal' practices in different institutions.

The other one-off community intervention was a community-based campaign against the declining sex ratio. We designed this campaign without making any reference to sex-selective practice linked to pregnancy and its termination. Through our associations with women's health activists we were convinced that linking the declining sex ratio with pregnancy and the womb<sup>7</sup> created unnecessary pressures on women. It not only aggravated a woman's gendered vulnerabilities but also constrained her right to decide whether or not to continue a pregnancy. Building on our earlier learning that men who had been part of the MASVAW experience gained most through closer relationships with their daughters, wife and other women, we created a campaign with messages of men

cherishing these relationships across the life cycle, calling for greater equality in status and in numbers. With great enthusiasm we took this campaign to new locations across different states. Unfortunately, this standalone campaign, without any pre-existing mobilisation or any follow-up effort, did not take root in these locations. Later we included the same campaign idea within a more comprehensive intervention with men on gender and the idea was successful.

Our next big break came when the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) India agreed to work with us on a project aimed at improving gender relations across 100 villages over five locations in three districts in Maharashtra. This project is now in its third year of operation, and we have attempted to incorporate most of our learning to date within this project. Keeping an eye on the issues of 'intersectionalities' and of contextual diversity, the project is being implemented with five partners working in diverse contexts and with differing strengths and perspectives. The intervention builds on the idea of a champion/role model (animator) supported by a community-level group of men experimenting with new gender-related behaviours at home and supporting each other to do so. A recently conducted mid-term review of the project notes that it

has uniformly achieved the difficult task of motivating men to work at home. It has also created public opinion in favour of this change, beginning with the role model of the animator. Walking the talk has been the most persuasive way of convincing men. It has taken some time for women to take this change in their stride, but gradually women have accepted and appreciated this support and respect.

Using a 'realist evaluation' approach (Sridharan and Nakaima 2011) we are trying to capture the process through which the changes unravel in the community. We have already learnt that while some change is incremental, there can also be dramatic community-level transitions. Thus, while on the one hand men are trying to carve a space for themselves within the home and are slowly allowed to perform domestic chores, on the other hand entire villages are taking pledges against early marriage, the giving and taking of dowry or to make wives a joint owner of their property. This intervention reinforces the earlier learning that

both men and women feel that their relationships have become more trusting and intimate. In a step forward from our earlier interventions, this project also shows that men can become actively engaged in caregiving for infants and small children and emerge as friends for their older children. On a more practical level the use of contraceptives among couples has become widespread according to their own admission, indicating better couple communication and male involvement in contraceptive usage.<sup>8</sup> The animator has emerged as a community-level gender and health volunteer/activist, adding synergy to the functioning of the existing female community-level functionaries, the ASHA and the *Anganwadi* worker.<sup>9</sup>

Today two other interventions are also under way. One of them uses an intensive approach similar to that in Maharashtra, and it is being implemented across 30 villages in the state of Madhya Pradesh. A second more extensive community campaign-based intervention is being implemented across 1,500 villages in 50 districts in four states. This intervention builds on the idea of men's role as fathers to try to support men to become champions of children's rights, giving both protection and autonomy to their own children first. While on the one hand this campaign is part of a global MenCare Campaign,<sup>10</sup> it is also trying to bring together child rights activists and women's rights activists to discuss the role of men. This intervention is about a year old, and we have come to realise that there is a need to have greater conversation and consensus among all concerned on some issues. Two particularly relevant issues that need much more clarity include understanding the intersecting concerns of protection and sexual autonomy related to the issue of age of consent for children, and the confusion of women's right to abortion with the rights of the 'unborn child', in the context of declining sex ratio.

As our work with men has expanded across different domains and across different states we have made deliberate attempts to keep these activities interconnected at the level of ideas and activists, and by sharing community-level experiences. For example, while many MASVAW activists and groups have changed over time, the MASVAW experience continues to be linked with the more contemporary interventions in Madhya Pradesh or Maharashtra through the common

platform of the Fathers Care campaign. The effort has been to create a common learning community across different domains and locations rather than have a set of discrete interventions or projects in different locations. Through this exercise we are trying to facilitate sustainability and achieve scale through the medium of shared learning and organic growth.

## **6 An emerging theory of change for working with men to dismantle patriarchy**

We feel very privileged that we have been able to maintain a continuum in our work with men for over one decade now. Through our work we have been able to distil some principles that we can call an emergent 'theory of change' around work with men. These principles or propositions should not be considered fully developed theories and could include internal contradictions. However these provide us motivation and direction for our practice, and we feel it is worthwhile to share them here.

- 1 *Men can change.* While we are not sure whether all men can change, we are certain that in any society at any point in time, there are some men who do not feel comfortable with nor completely endorse the ideologies of division, domination and subordination that are part of the dominant discourse within that society. These men benefit from the privileges of patriarchy and are usually silent in the face of discrimination and violence. However, when faced with the adverse results or consequences of patriarchal privileges and norms, these men are open to questioning their privileges and changing their own expectations and behaviours. While patriarchy as an ideology and practice provides men with much greater benefits and privileges, the idea of equality and egalitarianism can be equally powerful. The history of South Asia has multiple instances of men who have espoused egalitarianism and spoken against subordinating ideologies. The fact that many of these traditions still exist speaks volumes about the power of these countervailing messages.
- 2 *The motivation for and pathway towards gender equality may not be similar for men and women.* In order to make men allies for gender equality one needs to understand the differing but complementary 'meaning' and 'gains' of gender equality for women and men. For girls

and women, gender equality implies more freedoms, a greater autonomy in decision-making and greater access to public spaces. While one would assume this gain for women would mean losses for men, our work shows that men count substantial gains in becoming more gender-equitable in their expectations and behaviours. But these are in the personal domain, within the home and through closer relationships with women around them. The home and the family have usually been viewed as the classical chains of patriarchy for women, and as women become empowered they move out of the family into the public domain. In the case of men the situation is the opposite. As men control the public space and allied resources, they have been cut off from nurturing values and relationships within the home and the personal space. Paradoxically, 'relationships' that are often considered 'chains' for women, end up being the key 'gains' for men as they become more gender-sensitive. The challenge for 'gender equality' then is to make both the public and the private equally accessible, comfortable and cherished spaces for both men and women.

3 *The 'gender sensitisation' pathway to gender equality assumes creating sympathy among men for women so that they provide more space for women.* This approach essentially depends upon the paternalistic goodwill of men to avoid contest. But instead, if men become champions of the women they are close to – their daughters, sisters, wife or mother – then the creation of greater opportunity and space for these women ceases to be a contest and instead becomes a shared aspiration. Thus, while the women's movement calls for reducing the emphasis on family and has traditionally seen family relationships as essentially constraining, the work with men for greater gender equality may actually need to emphasise the value of these relationships. This may appear to be an 'apolitical' approach. However, we feel the idea of progress towards gender equality through contest between women and men or as a 'battle of the sexes' is playing into a patriarchal construct. We may wish to challenge it through a more collaborative engagement of the sexes that is based on greater respect and concern for each other. Within this seemingly idyllic pathway, the 'acid test' would be to ensure the sexual and reproductive autonomy of women.

- 4 *In order to engage men with the idea of equality, we need to provide them with opportunities to use their power and privileges creatively and responsibly rather than making them ashamed of the power and privilege they enjoy.* Most of the men who are attracted to explore this kind of work do not do so because they have actively accumulated power and are using it to exploit others. 'Naming and shaming' – a valid human rights strategy to deal with the irresponsibly powerful – may not be most appropriate in this case. Here it is important to explore the different dimensions of power, including the idea of 'power to' which gives men a creative opportunity to use their existing situation to distribute their unearned power and privileges.
- 5 *Work with men on gender issues needs to move beyond the 'gender-sensitive' and 'gender-transformative' framework to include the different dimensions of social power hierarchies.* The ideas of intersectionality and positionality are of critical importance in the work with men because they allow for a nuanced understanding of the distribution of power. A simple or binary proposition of gender power relationships can make men feel threatened and resistant. We have seen some practitioners who emphasise the 'disadvantages' of men – an approach that resonates with the 'universal and shared experience of oppression' approach of feminist pedagogy. This could make men feel less threatened about their patriarchal privileges and then ally with the idea of gender justice. However, we do not agree with this approach because we feel that 'equality' cannot only be an aspiration for the oppressed because they are losing out, but must be a shared aspiration among all. In order to challenge the central ideal of 'hegemonic masculinity', we need to create a conceptual understanding of the divisive nature of social hierarchies and develop empathy, solidarity and relationships across different groups, while being conscious of our own position and privileges.
- 6 *Changing gender power relations in society is about creating social dissonance.* Creating and making visible new and more egalitarian gender relations meets opposition both within the home and in the public domain. However, this resistance may not be immediately visible or apparent, because society also appreciates the benevolent 'paternalist'. So one must be

cautious about the short-term success of such interventions and remain vigilant about the medium-term opposition. The successful engagement with this opposition creates the foundation of a longer-term and more fundamental change in the overall gendered expectations in society. Even though the desire for change may be limited to some men, the change in gender-related expectations can be much more universal.

7 *In order to initiate the social dissonance that is necessary for changes in gender power relations, some men who have the conviction but also the courage and the confidence to do contrarian actions must take a lead. We see such men as ‘champions’ or role models who provide both a transparent living example and the motivation to others to do similar things. Such champions do not champion women’s issues, but the change among men. However, a single person driving change may neither be possible nor desirable. A peer group is necessary as a mechanism for developing an alternative discourse. It provides space to discuss doubts, share confusions, discuss resistances, reinforce changed behaviours, engage in peer counselling and also function as a platform for collaborative action to promote alternatives and challenge violence and discriminatory practices in the community.*

### **7 Sustaining this work within the current global development paradigm**

A few months ago we had some international visitors who were trying to identify effective and scalable interventions with men in India. They had heard about our work, and assumed that we were associated with one of the evidence-based interventions they had read of. We told them that our interventions were different. While we shared our experiences we started mulling over issues like evidence-building, replication, scaling-up and sustainability and we would like to conclude by sharing these thoughts.

The idea of working with men for addressing gender issues is slowly gaining recognition globally as well as in India. The UN Secretary-General has called on a Network of Men Leaders and the *World Development Report for 2012 on Gender Equality* has made reference to the need for working with boys. In India increasing reports of and concern over violence against women have brought to attention

the need to address men. Some international development agencies have also started showing interest in the issue. In the face of what we see as a possible growing interest in working with men we outline here some of our concerns.

Our first concern is related to the popularity and popularisation of work with men, and this article may also be considered to be part of the same effort. While our work with men convinces us that men can change and that this work has great potential and can have a tremendous synergistic effect, it must necessarily remain complementary to work with women. The overall objective of work with men must include a focus on women’s empowerment and their increased access to opportunity and resources, including legal remedies. While calling for greater attention to the need to engage with men and boys we must also remain vigilant that this does not trivialise the comprehensive vision of gender equality and women’s empowerment or become reduced to the ‘flavour of the month’ approach that is soon to be replaced.

With the increasing internationalisation and globalisation of development efforts through mechanisms like common UN campaigns and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), one needs to be cautious about replicating successful work with men from one part of the world in another. We have learnt of the influence of local context, traditions, culture and history, in shaping ideas around masculinities. The nature of multiple social hierarchies and their interactions are distinct in different areas. The issue of ‘intersectionalities’ is of great significance in the case of men and masculinities. We feel that an understanding of the context not only helps analyse and identify the problems but also creates opportunities for the solutions. We know that some colleagues have been successful in adapting work across continents and have proven this through elaborate statistical tests. We worry whether replicating agencies pay sufficient attention to the context.

An allied concern is in the way knowledge or evidence production is mediated and consumed. Clearly it is not a level playing field. There are multiple hierarchies of what constitutes evidence, what constitutes the language of evidence production and dissemination, who has the capacity and resources to produce valid evidence.



Based on all these exclusionary criteria only a limited set of practices finally gets reported in the realm of evidence. Since the core business of these efforts is to challenge hegemonies, we need to think about how knowledge is produced and disseminated in this particular field.

The twin ideas of sustainability and scale have now emerged as crucial concerns in the field of development-related investment. Most donors are looking for the 'ideal' intervention that can be introduced on a large scale with reasonable management support. The assumption is that it will enable a set of good practices to become established that will then continue with little or no support for an extended period of time. When we look at our own experiences we do not see how this could be possible. When we started to work we learnt, when we failed we learnt and when we succeeded we learnt. While we do not want to valorise reinventing the wheel, we feel that learning through trial and error and moving ahead by incorporating what we have learnt into our practice has been a vital part of our experience in this relatively new field. A development intervention with men that challenges current social norms cannot be seen as a fixed set of interventions implemented in a particular sequence, which can be replicated over and over again, like building a bridge or laying a road. What we have done over the years is develop a methodology, but it is based on some contextual assumptions and we cannot predict its universality. We have also learnt that changing deep-seated traditions requires vigilant oversight and adaptability, and the ability to experiment while keeping one's principles in mind. The process of growth is also neither linear nor like a dose-response curve. It can grow, falter and grow again. Sometimes lack of progress is actually progress because it may indicate that the intervention has hit the bedrock of solidified social norms and one should anticipate some fallback before the process can move ahead. Social processes are dynamic. Adolescents become adults and householders, students move out of universities, young people migrate in search of jobs, people's priorities change over time. These changes affect the growth and development of social projects. In our review of literature around work with men we have rarely seen these processes described. Instead we see summary graphs and curves and sophisticated equations that could either

simplify or complicate the issue depending upon who the observer is.

Development interventions talk of sustainability but are usually time-bound. The time boundaries of three or five years are grossly inadequate to show change that will persist over time, especially in changing gender relations that have concretised over millennia. In order to sustain, not only do they require support for a longer period of time, but they also need to affect the fundamental relationship between people and their aspirations. We also recognise that society is dynamic and change is taking place all the time, but what we interrogate is whether this change alters the nature of the relationship between woman and man. There are more women now in public places, but we also are faced with more crimes against women in those places. More men are now faced with childcare duties as families become nuclear, but does this change fundamental gender relations? Probably it does, and probably the change also increases resentments and conflict. Sustainable change in gender relations may also require changes in public policy, and this is where development interventions and policy changes must have synergistic effects. Unfortunately in India the aspiration to changes in gender relations through public policy changes alone have not been uniformly successful. Despite immense improvements in economic status, levels of women's educational status and widespread changes in social norms, gender discriminatory phenomena like the declining sex ratio and dowry are on the rise. The challenge is to develop large-scale bottom-up solutions that can be incorporated into the policy paradigm. The search for such solutions leads us to the search for evidence of what may have worked earlier and elsewhere, and back to the set of challenges that we referred to earlier.

The challenge for us now is to take our lessons to an even larger canvas, and probably to the policy domain. We feel extremely privileged that we have been able to continue our associations with our colleagues across the years and in different states, sharing the crest of elation as well as the trough of despair, invigorating and energising the processes when necessary. We have been careful to ensure that our different interventions with men across different states remain organically linked so that they can share lessons and grow together. But now as we prepare to

share our learning to draw larger policy lessons we are anxious and apprehensive. Will it be possible to retain the reflective, dialogic and empowering processes that we tried to nurture? Will public functionaries be able to emerge as role model-activists to inspire and support change among their peers? Will men on a large scale be able to overcome the pre-existing social script of male privilege and hegemony and emerge as better fathers, sons, brothers and

husbands and become more concerned friends, peers and citizens?

We are curious and we remain anxious. Our work over the last 12 or so years has not only been professionally satisfying and a continuing source of inspiration, but it has also led to some enduring convictions. So despite our anxieties we remain very optimistic and eager to carry our work forward.

## Notes

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- 1 Government employees are classified into different groups in India. Group C and D employees can be considered subordinate compared to Groups A and B who are considered 'officers'.
  - 2 Paulo Freire (1921–97) was a Brazilian social activist and adult educator who pioneered this approach to adult education.
  - 3 Sudhir Kakkar (1938–) is a psychoanalyst and writer who has explored the influences on men's motivations and actions and issues of culture and identity in India in his books like *The Inner World, Identity and Adulthood* and *The Colours of Violence*.
  - 4 Ashis Nandy (1937–) is a political psychologist and social theorist who has explored the influence of colonialism in his book *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*.
  - 5 Amartya Sen (1933–) is an economist and philosopher, and Nobel Laureate whose work has been key to the creation of the UN Human Development Index. He has explored the influence of culture and history on contemporary India and develops the idea of heterodoxy or multiplicity of traditions in India in his book *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*.
  - 6 Subaltern studies is a discipline developed by a group of South Asian historians who look at history from the point of view of social groups who were excluded from the established political structures.
  - 7 The sex ratio among children (ratio of girls to boys) has been declining steadily over the last few decades across India. Technological advances like the ultrasound scan are used to detect the sex of the foetus and subsequently abort the female foetus despite laws banning sex detection. India has a liberal abortion law allowing abortion nearly on demand. However, the decline in the sex ratio has led to a widespread public sanction against 'female foeticide' scrutinising and limiting women's use of and access to abortion services.
  - 8 In a recent survey covering 1,662 members of these groups using a self-administered questionnaire, over 65 per cent of those who were married said they were using a contraceptive, compared to 33 per cent of 1,016 married men stating use of contraceptives during the baseline survey.
  - 9 The ASHA is a village-level female health volunteer and the *Anganwadi* worker is a female pre-school teacher cum women and children's nutrition worker. Both these functionaries are present in nearly all villages/habitations in India.
  - 10 MenCare is a global fatherhood campaign. Further details are available at [www.men-care.org/](http://www.men-care.org/).

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