

DISCUSSION PAPER



Engaging Men and Media



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A Discussion Paper by Dinesh C Sharma

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Summary

We live in an age of information, media and communication. Every day we are bombarded with information from a plethora of sources – newspapers, radio stations, television channels, movies, indoor and outdoor advertising, social media and mobile phones. The information takes myriad forms - text, sound, video, infographics etc.- and travels faster than ever before from one part of the globe to another. The near-ubiquity of the internet, mobile phone and 24-hour satellite television has ensured that people are constantly consuming information in some form or the other, no matter which part of the globe they are. In 1986, the amount of information exchanged via communication networks like the internet and telephony was informational equivalent to 2 newspaper pages per person per day. By 2010, this figure had climbed to 20 entire newspapers per person per day.¹

The concept of information generation and consumption is changing rapidly. It is no more passive communication from newspapers and television channels to readers and viewers. Information is constantly being generated and shared by consumers themselves. In 60 seconds, it is estimated that Google receives over 4,000,000 search queries, YouTube users upload 300 hours of new videos, Pinterest users Pin 9,722 photos, Facebook users 'like' 4,166,667 posts, Twitter users post 347,222 tweets and Apple users download 51,000 apps.

² While social media is exploding in terms of its

reach and acceptance, this in no way diminishes the dominant position of legacy media like newspapers, radio and television. These forms of media continue to grow in many developing countries as literacy rates rise and consumer markets expand. Though some newspapers may be closing down in developed markets or print circulation there may be stagnating, it is growing in many countries like India as literacy improves. Second, social media thrives on content generated by mainstream news organizations. This is a significant portion of content on social media, even though a lot of 'user generated content' is growing. Third, advertising also forms a key component of social media messaging. This is particularly significant from gender discourse point of view. This means that if sexist stereotyping of women is an issue in mainstream (traditional or legacy) media, then it is only getting amplified in the emerging media scenario dominated by social media outlets.

This emerging scenario of media is important from the gender justice standpoint because media has been one of the central themes of feminist activism and gender-related discourse for several decades now. Several research studies have established that media content reinforces stereotypes that link male identity with violence, domination, independence, aggression and power, while women are depicted as emotional, vulnerable and sensitive and dependent on actions of men.³ Women are usually projected as sexual objects or even as mere body parts. Female nudity in magazine

advertisements increased significantly globally between 1983 and 1993. Female sexuality is represented not as the sexual liberation of gender tend to represent women as victims or as those responsible for the violence of which they are victims. The presence of women in the process of news gathering is also very low. Popular music, movie characters and television soaps also denigrate women. The explosion of media, particularly social media consumed through digital devices, has further intensified such stereotyping. It has made women even more vulnerable to violence, abuse and aggression. Therefore, it has become all the more critical to engage men in countering such trends through media.

Masculinities and Media

Having recognized problem of gender stereotyping and related issues in media as well as underlying reasons for it, the focus must shift to addressing it upfront and exploring possible ways to intervene. It is imperative to develop strategies in which media construct, audiences, narratives and themes can be influenced to increase engagement of men in gender discourse. In several countries, groups engaged on women's issues, population and communication have begun experimenting in this direction and have achieved reported a great deal of success. There is an urgent need to share these experiences and learn from them so that they can be adapted locally in different cultural and socio-economic settings.

Gender justice advocates have often used media and communication tools like posters, films and documentaries to spread messages about gender equality, gender justice and run campaigns on specific themes like violence against women. These are all well established advocacy tools. However, these tools have

women but as the availability of women for male consumption. News reports of violence of

limitations in terms of reach and are expensive to execute, particularly documentaries and television spots. As a way out, it is emerging that it is better to engage with people who are engaged in creating content for various media like television spots, films and entertainment programmes, and try to sensitize them about gender issues including engaging men. This kind of advocacy can include a range of professionals and organizations – from script writers and copy writers in ad agencies to bodies like advertising councils. In this regard, the experience of Population First (Mumbai, India) is interesting.

Dr A L Sharada, director, Population First, sums up the objective: “we wanted to know can we create brand values and brand identities around commitment to gender? There are many companies who really understand the importance of gender equality and gender justice. Can we coax them to build their brand identities and values around gender?”⁴ Regular analysis of television commercials on popular consumer products showed that they focused more on stereotypical constructs rather than aspiration part of advertising. Advertisements take tentative steps towards being different but get back to the security of stereotypes when it comes to advertising of traditional product categories. They show man a still being the controller or the benefactor of the woman. The point of advocacy with creative people in advertising thus focused on reaching out to aspirations of younger generation that wants a better gender equation.

It is also important that the focus of gender discourse should be right. While commoditization of women, indecency and

unjustified use of women models in ads is a dominant issue, gender insensitivity and inappropriate gender representations in ads often go under the radar though they can make advertisements more offensive. An example of is a commercial of Mother Dairy, an Indian dairying company. It shows a woman standing next to a man, serving him food and after he finishes his food, she tells him “your trophy's broken”. The man goes berserk telling his wife “how dare you touch my trophy. Why did you clean my stuff?”etc., while she keeps saying sorry. Then she comes out of the room and tells her son, who has been watching this drama from behind the curtain, “don't play cricket in the room next time.” While the commercial does not depict any indecency, it is still offensive, according to Sharada. Besides bad parenting, it shows that there is no negotiation between the husband and wife. He keeps shouting and she keeps listening, reinforcing stereotypical ‘housewife’ and ‘wife’ roles.

On the other hand, a television commercial of online matrimony company, Bharat Matrimony, makes a bold departure from stereotypes and shows how man can be engaged in gender equations. It shows dining table conversation between parents and their son. Parents tell him why he lets his wife work even though he earns enough for a decent living. The son asks father ‘you are retired and still you work. Why do you that? Because you love working. It’s the same with my wife. She works because she loves working.’ The ad breaks gender stereotype that women need to work only when their husbands don’t earn enough. The *Hawa Badlegi* (winds of change) campaign of electric appliances maker, Havells, has also broken new grounds by reflecting changing attitudes towards girls and women.⁵ Sustained advocacy with creative media professionals can bring about a change,

integrating gender justice within regular content.

Redefining gender roles in advertising

While a bulk of commercial advertising may be reinforcing existing stereotypes and traditional gender equations, some brands are attempting new and bold gender representations. Santosh Desai, advertising and marketing guru, presents some such examples that echo new kind of representation and gender negotiation.⁶ Such ads attract a lot of attention and become a point of conversation beyond the brand they seek to promote. It is worth noticing that some of the traditional product categories like jewellery are attempting to break gender stereotypes. They are depicting changing gender discourse, gender negotiations and new gender narratives.

In one commercial for diamond jewels, the film opens with traditional setting for an Indian wedding. As the bride is getting ready for the ceremony, she spots a young girl and walks to the stage along with her. Just when the couple begins to walk around the sacred fire, the little girl too wants to walk along, and in the process reveals her relationship with the bride by addressing as mom. The bride tries to hush up the little girl. At this stage, the groom intervenes and takes the little girl in his arms bringing smile to the face of the bride. The commercial ends with the girl asking groom if she can call him dad. There are several new elements in this commercial that challenge stereotyping – the bride is dark skinned; it is her second marriage; and man in the film is engaging. In another jewellery commercial, the woman is engaged in running the household while the man is on a sabbatical writing a book. This prompts a friend to comment that this means “she is man of the house” since she is

earning. To this, she replies, “no, I am the woman of the house”. Such commercials, according to Desai, are trying to challenge gender stereotypes and present new forms of negotiations.

A commercial of a telecom brand has generated lot of discussion in recent years. It shows a female boss setting a tough deadline for a male subordinate, and leaving for home. In the next scene, it is revealed that her own husband is working late and she is shown cooking dinner for him as soon as she reaches home. What appears to be two parallel stories converge when it is revealed that her husband is her subordinate whom she is trying to get back home early with an enticing video of her cooking. It was a rare ad in which a wife happens to be a husband’s boss, yet at home she chose to cook for him. Is it ‘false progressiveness’ because it shows that though wife is the boss in office she is forced to perform her traditional duties like cooking at home? In a way, progressive action is balanced with voluntary submission to tradition. In Desai’s interpretation, this commercial shows that “change often comes in the form of a gradual dilution of the resistance that the past displays towards the present. This dilution, which happens organically and imperceptibly, needs a combination of change and continuity. This strategy has been used many times over in extracting more freedom in a structure that resists this. Sneak in a big change by re-affirming a smaller act of continuity.”

Engaging men on the ground

While depiction of women in mass media (news and advertising) can be influenced to make it gender sensitive through advocacy and engagement involving creative people in media industries, bringing about change in attitude

and behaviour of men and boys in communities could be more effective when strengths of traditional media channels and new media are leveraged, along with community level advocacy. This is what Breakthrough, a US-based global human rights organization working to stop violence against women and girls, has experienced with its campaigns in India and the U.S. “When we talk about norm change, we’re really talking about cultural transformation. And in this, the role of media, art and technology can be an extremely important one,” asserts Mallika Dutt, President and CEO of Breakthrough.⁷

Addressing violence against women happening in homes and communities is a challenge as domestic violence is often seen as a private matter. Just working with women to end this kind of violence is not enough. It is important to bring in men who perpetrate such violence but also men in communities who remain mute spectators to such atrocities. Engaging men in a dynamic conversation around this issue is critical. This thinking led to development of a highly creative campaign in India, *Bell Bajao* (Ring the Bell) in 2008. A short video (public service advertisement) was created showing a man stepping up and ringing the bell of his neighbor to interrupt overheard domestic violence. The video led to a series of PSAs, inspired by true stories, showing men and boys stepping up and ringing the bell to interrupt violence against women. These PSAs were shown on television, reaching some 130 million people. They were screened shown on video vans that traveled through cities and villages, involving communities through games, street theatre and other cultural tools. The tools and messages have been adapted by individuals and organisations in several countries including Canada, China, Pakistan and Vietnam. In Dutt’s

words, “when we're talking about transforming gender norms, we're also talking about transforming power and we're also talking about taking responsibility and accountability for what one is doing.”

With the success of *Bell Bajao* in India and other countries, Breakthrough launched another global campaign, *Ring the Bell, 1 Million Men, 1 Million Promises*, in 2013 to deepen the conversation with men and boys. A high point of this campaign was endorsement by Sir Patrick Stewart, acclaimed actor and activist. He talked very compassionately about violence against women and revealed how this had affected his own life. He shared his experience of how his father perpetrated violence against his mother behind the closed doors of his home. The event was being watched live by about 10,000 people with the internet globally, and people started tweeting about it instantaneously. After this event, Breakthrough started receiving hundreds of stories from men talking about how violence against women had affected their lives. They told stories of how growing up in homes where either they had been abused or assaulted or where their mother or another female family member had been abused and assaulted had had a profound impact on them. This is very critical because studies have shown that boys who grow up in violent homes may end up becoming perpetrators themselves. The campaign, which was amplified due to extensive use of social media, thus began a serious conversation on domestic violence.

Breakthrough has also been engaging with men in the arena of sports and in college campuses in the U.S. where sexual violence is a serious problem. Its “Be That Guy” campaign which urges men to take a stand when they see

women disrespected is now shown on Jumbotron screens during major sporting events like NASCAR Indy 500, Daytona 500, Miami Speedway Championship, Brickyard 400 and Packers tailgating events outside Lambeau Field. Jumbotrons (large video screens in stadia and sporting arenas) are one of the most visible, mainstream media spaces in America and very high audience reach. After watching Breakthrough’s PSAs, 44 percent of viewers noted they were “more likely to take action” in response to witnessing incidents of disrespect against women. In order to address campus sexual violence, Breakthrough has partnered with Kappa Sigma, collegiate social fraternity and has developed animated PSAs called “Be That Guy”.

Radio can also be used to engage men in gender discourse, as exemplified in the experience of *Radio Educación* in Mexico. “*Among men without shame, ‘scoundrels’*” is a popular radio magazine on gender related issues, particularly focused on engaging men. Gender mainstreaming is part of the core philosophy of *Radio Educación*. Therefore, it believes in inclusion of perspective of women in everyday programming. Men as gender still have much to contribute to the construction of masculinity in keeping with the changing times. A variety of themes – relationships, health, education, economic problems – are discussed during live programming with experts in the studio. Men share their experiences, ask questions in an informal atmosphere full of wit. Audience interaction is facilitated through social media channels. The series is called “*Entre Hombres Sin Verguenza*” (Between men with no shame). “*Sin Verguenzas*” is a phrase used to refer to men who are shameless; who are the types who will touch your hand when taking a beer from you and based on this duality, which happens

with many men in my country, there is this idea that emerged, which in general terms was meant to provide a platform on radio to discuss what men were thinking, the manner in which they live their masculinity,” explained Guadalupe Cortes, an experienced broadcaster from *Radio Educacion*.⁸ The radio broadcasts are supplemented through online resources to reach out to wider audiences in different states of Mexico. Testimonies are collected of men, activists and researchers from different states about activities linked to the subject of masculinities. Some of them are included in two 15-minute radio programs every week for each state and sound files are uploaded on microsite of the program on the *Radio Education* podcast portal. This way the reach of radio is further enhanced.

Thematic films to Engage Audiences

Another means of engaging men and boys in gender discourse could be through sharing stories and experiences on platforms like thematic film festivals. Mainstream cinema is so male-dominated that some films have to be singled out for being ‘women-centered’ or ‘women-oriented’. Films have women playing several roles but they usually fail the ‘Bechdel Test’, which is based on three simple questions - Are there two or more women in it, who have names? Do they talk to each other? Do they talk about something other than a man? “While this is a wonderfully ironic and largely accurate way of identifying sexism and tokenism in mainstream fiction films, we needed something else. Pick any ten films running in nearby theatres or being shown on TV, and chances are that most, if not all, will fail the test, but that is precisely the point: popular culture is all around us, and we can consider its overt and hidden messages any time we care to do so,” notes

Smitri Nevatia, who curated a festival of films that are concerned with on masculinities more purposefully.⁹

There is no dearth of good films made around women's experiences of, and struggles against, misogyny and gender discrimination, but their narratives tend to foreground women and girls. “Since we were trying to bring the discussion into the male camp, as it were, and look at ‘what men do’ rather than at ‘what happens to women’, this festival specifically called for films and videos that brought men and boys into sharper focus,” explains Nevatia. The idea was to look for films that had men telling their stories, living their lives; men trying to change their problematic behaviours; men showing what being a man can mean, and what it need not mean. This meant getting films about soldiers, workers, artists, jobless men, child labourers, bullies, gentle men, gay men and feminist men. The effort resulted in a unique festival titled “Men and Boys for Gender Justice”, organised jointly by the Centre for Health and Social Justice for and the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT), India.

The festival featured 71 titles from 23 countries – about one third are from India, across several genres (animation and short fiction, public service ads, commercials, talks and illustrated lectures, personal stories and testimonials, sati and skits, community videos and student films, long and short documentaries. They were divided into seven thematic “tracks” around which symposium were organised for discussions. The tracks were – violence ; health and wellbeing ; poverty and work; caring, relationships and emotions; sexualities, identities; peace building, social justice,

inclusion; the making of men: from masculinity to humanity.

Screening of films in each track was followed by in interactive discussions between film makers, experts and audience. Each track had its own flavour. For instance, films on theme of 'violence' raised questions about many forms of violence beyond the obvious. The whole gamut from male violence against women to self-harm and the need to see how these various manifestations of violence are related was one of the key questions for deliberation. The discussions highlighted notions of private and public, state sponsored and emotional violence as realities that need to be addressed and brought out of the closet in mainstream discourse. Films from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Chile explored how poverty and lack of suitable livelihoods was making it impossible to live a life with dignity and self respect without compromising on health and safety of self. Films in "the making of men: from masculinity to humanity" highlighted and critiqued traditional, cultural and social rituals that marked the entry of young boys into being men and performing masculinities. The track included selections from a mainstream media campaign, a social media campaign led by young people, fiction and documentary films that addressed these issues upfront and in diverse ways. They framed men's experiences of and participation in violence as a critical area for intervention through primary prevention efforts.

Though the film screenings and discussions could not attract huge audiences, the festival was successful in highlighting arena of masculinities and men within the discourse on gender. Many members of audience shared that they were able to use this lens to look at many other films and popular culture narratives. The

diversity of audiences enabled discussion between laypersons, activists and filmmakers. This enabled the festival to bring diverse issues and filmmaking practices to people in an accessible and engaging manner. "Many of the audience members at JNU were students and other youth and film screenings as a methodology worked well to engage young people in the themes and the issues being highlighted," notes Nevatia. The festival evoked interest from various groups in hosting film screenings and sections of the festival in their own communities, groups and initiatives. This demonstrated the potential of curated film package as a resource that can be used to create dialogue and action towards positive masculinities in diverse settings.

Conclusions

While a bulk of mainstream media (newspapers, advertising, television, films and social media) continues to portray stereotypes around themes of gender and masculinities, there are green shoots of change noticeable in different strands of media. For instance, gender roles are being redefined in more and more television commercials and other forms of advertising. Television soaps and radio programmes in some countries are beginning to reflect concerns relating to gender justice, as a result of sustained efforts to sensitize media professionals and creative heads. Projects and campaigns to engage men in gender issues, such as Bell Bajao, are gathering momentum to make a difference on the ground. The involvement of celebrities and use of social media is helping multiply positive messaging. Gender sensitivities are being integrated with sexist arenas like games and sports. Documentaries, public service announcements and other forms of visual communication are

being made on themes relating to men and masculinities involving diverse groups and cultures. All this is helping create an

environment in which a meaningful dialogue can occur and new spaces for discourse in gender justice can open up.

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