

To Empower Women, Take a Cue From Rural Men in Maharashtra



These adolescent girls are empowered to speak their minds.

PUNE, India — They came at her with knives and other weapons so that they could disrupt her meetings and prove her ineffective. When Sangeeta Banne became the first woman to head a local government council in the state of Maharashtra she knew what she faced. The battle leading up to her election had been ugly.

Banne prevailed, helped by a program in the state designed to involve men in the quest for gender equality. The program was devised as a collaborative effort of the Center Health and Social Justice, a nongovernmental organization working on involving men in fostering gender equality in India, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Manikchand Dhanashetty, an animator by profession, is truly one transformed man. From once expecting his wife to wait on him hand-and-foot, even having her draw his bathwater, he is now bathing his daughter and helping conduct the first fair election to his local council in over 40 years.

“I would indulge my son at the cost of my daughter’s happiness, and when that changed, so did our family — for the better.” He said that small steps like watching a play together with his wife and children, or going to the school together to meet their teachers has improved their lives. “My friends would tease me about being a slave to my wife, but eventually they started to emulate us.”

Every individual transformation helps to loosen the stranglehold of regressive traditions. Frederika Meijer, UNFPA’s representative in India, said that “In this project, engaging men in breaking gender stereotypes has led to significant changes, such as the joint registration of property in the name of husband and wife and marriages taking place without the exchange of dowry.”

Dr. Shashikant Ahankari of the HALO Foundation, another nongovernmental organization working with the project, sees changes all around: “Men in villages are being encouraged to be part of every conversation. This has tangibly reduced violence against women. Physical abuse is easy to spot, understand and prevent, but sexual, financial or psychological abuse go unnoticed. It is not just about the man-woman relationship; caste, community, religion and economics also come into play in this equation.”

Ninety-nine percent of the babies in the project villages are now delivered at local health centers, and contraception is discussed more openly, said Sadhana Dadhich, representing a nongovernmental organization in the city of Pune, one of five groups chosen to run the project in 20 villages. “When issues such as child marriage, dowry and sex selection are scrutinized openly, it forces everyone concerned to examine their own belief systems closely. This sows the seeds for societal change.”

This article was adapted from one that appeared in Women’s Feature Service, in New Delhi.