



Women Empowerment Program Cuts Through Male Resistance

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Pune: 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 sarpanch of Chapalgaonwadi, a small village in Akkalkot taluka of Solapur district in Maharashtra, she knew she had her work cut out for her.

The battle leading up to her election had been ugly. Not only had the incumbent been holding on for over 10 years, even the concept of a female political leader was pretty novel for the villagers. “It was only because of the Samajhdaar Jodidar programme and the support of the men in my family that I was able to unfurl the tricolour on Republic Day this year after I was voted to power,” she shares.

The Samajhdaar Jodidar initiative, a collaborative effort of the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), is specially designed to involve men in the quest for gender equality. “Men, who are the other half of the gender construct, have been left out of sensitisation efforts for the longest time,” points out Sadhana Dadhich of the Pune-based Nari Samata Manch, one of the five non-government organisations tasked with the implementation of this project in 20 of the 100 chosen villages in the state since 2010.

The programme seeks to draw men and boys out of the age-old patriarchal mindset towards sharing a more equitable relationship with the women in their lives. “It is complex, messy work where sometimes you have to take a step back to move ahead.

Resistance comes not just from the men, but even the women themselves are not ready to look at their sons and brothers as equal partners. Initially, the idea of using male animators to take the message to the grassroots in itself was questioned.

The problems ran the gamut, from an extreme initial resistance by the prospective change agents – there was a 90 per cent attrition rate of trained recruits in the first year – to resentment against individual animators for what was being misconstrued as an overt interest in other women when they tried to intervene or counsel in their villages. And all this was before we could sink our teeth into the actual issues that afflict women in villages,” elaborates Shakti Jamdade of the CHSJ, who supervises the programme in Maharashtra. However, with some finetuning, like selecting animators from within the villages, so that they would be in situ as members of the community even in case of attrition, and instating group interventions instead of individual actions, the efforts gathered momentum. Over the last four years, several child marriages have been prevented; reproductive, maternal and infant health indices have received a major boost; and reconciliations in marital estrangements have noticeably increased.

From expecting his wife to wait on him hand-and-foot, even having her draw his bath water, to bathing his daughter and helping conduct the first fair election to his panchayat in over 40 years, Manikchand Dhanashetty, an animator from Borgaon in Solapur, is truly a transformed man. Dismissive of the initiative initially, he experimented with small changes in his own attitude. “I would indulge my son at the cost of my daughter’s happiness and when that changed, so did our family – for the better. Watching a play together with them, or simply going to the school together to meet their teachers has improved our lives. My friends would tease me about being a slave to my wife, but eventually they started to emulate us. Now not only do women have an active voice in our community, we have elected a female sarpanch to voice our concerns and look after our interests in public life,” he says.

Clearly, in communities reluctant to alter status quo, every individual transformation helps in loosening the stranglehold of regressive traditions. Says Frederika Meijer, UNFPA India Representative, “UNFPA’s work in the field shows that the active involvement of men breaks patriarchal norms. 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 NGO working with the CHSJ in Akkalkot, has been closely observing the changes, “From mid-day meals at school to drinking water supply to supervised and monitored pregnancy and child birth, men in villages are being encouraged to be part of every conversation. This has tangibly reduced violence against women.” He admits that while including men and boys in the fight against gender violence has not been easy, it has paid rich dividends. “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.”

Of course, many challenges still exist. Shivanand Sonkamble, an animator, states, "Powerful, upper caste people find it hard to accept anyone else as motivators of change and that limits our growth."

Naturally, centuries of conditioning cannot be done away within a short span of time feels Dadhich, but maintains that continued debates and conversations will definitely seep through the layers of indifference and orthodoxy. Ninety-nine per cent babies in their project villages are now being delivered at the local Primary Health Centres and contraception, a reproductive right, is discussed more openly - tangible short terms gain. "When issues such as child marriage, dowry and sex selection are scrutinised openly, it forces everyone concerned to examine their own belief systems closely. This sows the seeds for societal change," she believes.

Attesting to the gains from the effort, Venkatesh Srinivasan, Assistant Representative, UNFPA, says, "This intervention has brought about substantive changes in these 100 villages. Men are more involved not just with their families and households, but also within their community. There is a sense of ownership and involvement in local governance, which has in turn raised the quality of life for everyone. Whether it is demanding buses and toilets to enable girls to attend schools, ensuring street lights in their villages or being more active in the panchayats, the difference is extremely encouraging and augurs well for the future."

The results are heartening, agrees Anuja Gulati, Programme Officer, UNFPA-Maharashtra. "Encouraging men to become more involved and supportive of women's needs, choices and rights has enabled men and boys to step away from the rigid roles ascribed to them. They are now more involved in caring for their children, sharing sexual and reproductive health responsibilities as well as household domestic chores, in saying no to violence against women, in seeking health care for themselves, and in creating safe spaces like play grounds for girls, which are generally considered the domain of boys."

To see young women being encouraged to get an education, riding bicycles, playing sports and even having a say in the Ganapati celebrations clearly indicates that they are working in the right direction. Women across the three districts of Solapur, Beed and Pune are no longer mere silent spectators. Their contribution to the family wealth is finally being recognised and they are gaining their rightful share in it legally. They have a say in their reproductive health and many are free from the hang up of bearing a male child. There is a definite shift in perspective and women are coming out of the shadows – all with the support of their 'better' half as well as other men in their communities.

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