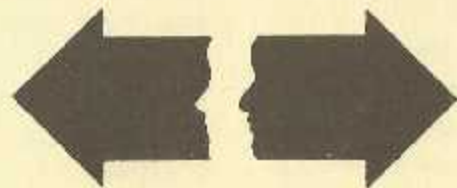


# GENDER WORKSHOPS WITH MEN

EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS



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## *Gender Workshops with Men : Experiences and Reflections*

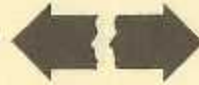
### *My Experiences of Working with Women and Men*

**I** have been organizing and conducting informal discussions on women's issues with working class rural and urban women and with women workers of NGOs almost since the beginning of my development work, which was in 1972. These were participatory and exploratory discussions, where each one of us was not only looking for answers but also struggling even to formulate the right questions. I became a development worker/activist first and only five or six years later found that I was gradually [also] becoming a feminist; which at that time meant recognizing that amongst the poor women were the poorest, amongst the oppressed and exploited castes and classes women were more oppressed and exploited; women lagged behind their men in health, education, social and cultural status; women experienced myriad forms of violence etc. The

realities of rural India taught me my first lessons on wo/men's issues and made me take the long and arduous road towards understanding feminism and becoming a feminist. I realized much later that this journey has no end and no predetermined path. Each one of us has to find her own path, stops and destination.

Because many of us feminist, development activists came to feminism via political, trade unions or development path, we did not think all women were oppressed and all men oppressors. Our feminist politics was always connected to our class, caste politics. This meant some (few) sensitive, fair-minded men were always our comrades or partners even though they often fell short on their gender sensitivity.

In 1983 I organized the first systematic and long [seven weeks], all women workshop for women development activists from Bangladesh, India,



Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This was much before gender and development or "gender-sensitization" workshops became the in-thing in South Asia. In fact this was even before the word gender gained its present popularity. In addition to visiting innovative women's development / empowerment programmes in Bangladesh, Nepal and India, collectively evaluating and reflecting on them, we had a four day session on concepts and theories related to women and development conducted by Kumari Jayawardena and Bina Agarwal, both feminist scholars and activists. The response from activists to conceptualization was, to my surprise, overwhelmingly positive. That experience led to my organizing and conducting a series of short and long [four days to four weeks long] workshops on women's or gender issues at the local, national and South Asian levels. By now several hundred women have participated in these residential, very intensive, integrated workshops during which we grapple with a large number of issues related to women and development. We begin these workshops with the personal experiences of the participants and we try to understand the patriarchal nature of our societies as well as the reasons for and the process of the origin of patriarchy or the hierarchical sexual division of labour. We try to break the barriers between the

personal and the political, personal and professional, rational and emotional, objective and subjective, work and joy; we break barriers between trainers and trainees, experts and non-experts. Physical exercises, yoga, films, songs, role-plays are interwoven into these workshops, which are quite creative, energizing and full of new information, knowledge and insights. Because as a facilitator I do not follow any fixed module and each time begin with the experiences, needs and desires of the participants, every workshop is novel and full of learning and excitement for me as well.

Since the very beginning, in these workshops we have tried to understand patriarchy in all its different forms and manifestations and the patriarchal nature of all societal institutions i.e. family, religion, education, economic organizations and markets, political institutions, legal and state institutions, media etc. Since we were analyzing patriarchy, we were looking at gender relations without using the term gender. **Men and women both were under scrutiny in these workshops.** It was always stated that it is important to look at patriarchy as a social system and to understand that both men and women are turned into "feminine" and "masculine" through gender indoctrination. To understand women, we have to understand men and vice versa.



Since women were subordinated by patriarchal structures and they were suffering much more than men, our focus was obviously more on creating a large number of women activists who would lead and/or initiate activities to challenge patriarchy. It was only after several years that we started doing separate or mixed workshops with men to understand patriarchy, men and masculinities and to work out ways of moving towards gender equality.

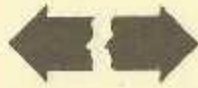
### *Demand for Sensitizing Men*

It was around 1990 that desires or demands were expressed/ heard for workshops on wo/men's issues for/with men and these came from different quarters and for different reasons, like -

- Rural women, who were members of rural groups, said they were now quite aware of wo/men's issues, it was time that their men were given a proper "brain-wash" [*dimaag dhula*]. One of them told us "you should now put your "cassettes" into our men's "recorders".
- Aware women activists/development workers found the tensions increasing between men and women workers within NGOs, trade unions, and people's organizations. These women were increasingly dissatisfied with and also more

articulate about subtle and open discrimination against women within these organizations and felt "charity must begin at home". They felt; NGO men needed to critically examine their attitudes and behaviour. Such tremors were felt also in donor organizations/Northern NGOs where the women staff were refusing to accept discrimination and double standards within their organizations. They felt it was time that their male colleagues, specially their male bosses [bosses are invariably male even in the development world!] were trained/sensitized.

- As a response to the increasing awareness on women's issues, brought about by the global women's movement, several (progressive) donors started suggesting/insisting on "gender sensitization workshops for male leaders of NGOs supported by them.
- After doing considerable work with women, some of us women involved with training and keen to challenge patriarchy within development organizations also recognized now the urgency need to have a dialogue with senior male workers/decision-makers of different development organizations. Clarity and informed commitment at that level, we felt, was absolutely necessary for promoting women's empowerment and a women's perspective on



development. Although everyone could make some "correct" statements on women, most NGO leaders had not yet seriously analyzed patriarchy in society and within their own organizations, nor critically examined their own behavior, attitudes and assumptions towards and regarding women. Women's issues had indeed been discussed but as a distant topic, which is "outside" of us, "out there" somewhere, "someone else's problem". Very few men had sat together as a group for any length of time, to look at women's subordination as a system, to understand when and how this system came into existence, to look dispassionately at themselves, their own beliefs, attitudes, propensity to mis/use power; to look at their own families, their own organizations, religions, and customs most of which perpetuate patriarchy and women's subordination. Very few NGO men had seriously reflected on how, as decision-makers and people in authority, they treated their women colleagues and viewed their personal and work concerns. In fact around this time several cases of sexual harassment of women within NGOs had also come to light and this gave another push to the demands of discussing men, masculinities and gender relations.

Not only was there a need and demand for trainings for men, some of us were also ready, to take on the challenge of initiating serious dialogues with them on wo/men's issues. We felt confident, both as facilitators/trainers and as feminists, of handling this task. By "we" I mean myself, Nighat Said Khan (Pakistan), Vasantha Kannabiran and Abha Bhaiya (India), Khushi Kabir (Bangladesh), Indira Shrestha, Meena Acharya (Nepal), Sunila Abeyasekera (Sri Lanka) who have been my partners/co-facilitators in workshops with men. As development activists we now had enough experience of work at different levels, as trainers we were well equipped and confident and as feminists we were less angry, more patient and less confrontational to manage a useful and sustained dialogue with men on sensitive issues. Some of us also by now, had enough gray hair, some wrinkles and spectacles to make us look old enough to be "accepted" as trainers by male decision-makers [yet again, we realized that women have to be twice as good as men to be considered as equals]

### *Men Can and Must Change*

Here I would like to mention that my willingness to have a dialogue with men on wo/men's issues was based on my belief that men can and must change



their thinking, attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis women, especially if they wish to have a more just and equitable society. I also believe that it is necessary for women to help challenge or persuade at least those men who are our partners/comrades in different struggles and movements, to reflect on wo/men's issues because without a common understanding and shared commitment to change unjust gender relations it is now difficult to be partners with men [or with women for that matter] at home, in organizations and in movements. I also start with the assumption that if, I as a middle class person can work with and in the interest of the working classes, men can work with and in the interest of women (an in their own long-term interest) in the hope of a society without gender hierarchy. Like in all other trainings, in these trainings also, I begin by affirming the participants, trusting them and believing in their capacity to change, however painful the process of this change may be.

### *Workshops with Men in Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*

During the last ten years I have conducted quite a few (more than thirty) workshops only with men and

about the same number of mixed workshops. The male participants in these workshops are men in decision-making positions in NGOs, Governments (in the Maldives) and in UN Agencies. The NGOs represented vary in size and outreach. Some of them can be small, working in a few villages with a team of 10 to 20, while others can be very large with a staff of over 2000 and outreach to millions of people in thousands of villages (e.g. Proshika, BRAC in Bangladesh, UMN in Nepal).

Several (not all) workshops in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh were conducted jointly with Nighat Said Khan, Vasantha Kannabiran, Abha Bhैया and Khushi Kabir and Fawzia Khondkar respectively and in Nepal I conducted them alone with some sessions facilitated by Meena Acharya and Indira Shreshta. In Sri Lanka Sunila Abeyasekera joined me but in the Maldives I conducted them alone. These workshops had 25 to 45 [men] participants, they were of 3 to 5 days duration, they were all residential, normally held in quiet and very simple places (NGO training centers, small lodges or a large room in a village) away from distracting cities.

In several of these workshops we found that some Heads of NGOs who had confirmed their participation did not turn up at the last minute and



that too without giving any valid reasons for their absence. Some of us could not help feeling that this low turnout of big bosses was due to the low priority given to wo/men's issues. They probably feel that a session or two, squeezed into a larger conference is enough to deal with gender and one does not require a whole workshop on such an issue. Another reason for the low turn out may be the fact that women's issues are considered so common place that every one considers himself an expert on them. Serious classes, study groups etc. which are found necessary for understanding issues like class, caste, community organization, environment, even account keeping, office management are not considered necessary on gender issues. "What is there to learn on women's issues" or "I have three daughters. Who should know more about women than me" seemed to be the attitude. This reminds me of a thickish, beautifully bound book I saw in a Feminist Book Fair entitled "All you need to know about men". On opening the book, my curiosity was replaced by laughter because every single page of the book was neatly blank. Although this book was meant to be a joke, it seems many men seriously believe there is nothing to know about women or gender. More than anything else it is this attitude of men that all of them know everything about gender,

which used to be and often still is a major hindrance in the way of serious reflection on the issue.

### *Two Kinds of Gender Workshops*

If we look at the objectives, the underlying premises/ ideology, contents and methodology of the gender workshops/ trainings being done in South Asia and perhaps elsewhere too, we find that they are broadly of two kinds:

- Those, which are, project efficiency oriented, which want women to be integrated in the present development paradigm and system
- Those which are transformatory in nature; they aim to transform gender relations and the present paradigm of development which is ecologically unsustainable and socially unjust.

The purpose of most gender sensitization workshops done by official agencies using consultant trainers for male and female policy makers, planners, implementers seems to be to look at gender relations in order to enhance the effectiveness of development projects, programmes and policies; to involve women in development programmes in order to 'tap' their "productive usefulness" and to ensure that women





also benefit from these programmes. These trainings mostly use pre-determined, pre-packaged modules, mostly developed in the North.

The "official" gender modules do not normally question the mainstream development paradigm which, NGO analysis shows, has further marginalized the poor, specially women amongst the poor, third world and nature herself. These modules plead for the integration of women within the present system and paradigm of development.

Gender analysis is done mainly to understand what exists in the context of the project. Women's lives are however larger than the projects and they cannot be seen in fragments. If women are to be empowered [which is what women and many NGOs now want] and not just "integrated" into programmes coming from above, then it becomes imperative to understand and challenge the whole system of patriarchy which requires looking deeply at institutions like - family, religion, culture, law, markets, and the state.

Most gender packages also ignore the whole question of power in gender relations, they depoliticize the issue by giving the excuse "we

cannot interfere with local culture". As if these projects do not interfere with just about every aspect of local life and local culture! What women and NGOs want is gender justice but these words seldom appears in these gender modules.

The usual gender modules also do not question the patriarchal nature of development organizations nor do they challenge the experts, policy makers and implementers to reflect on their own personal attitudes and behavior. The whole exercise is "outside" dealing with problems "out there", and making no connections. Threatening local men through gender-analysis is fine but experts, it is argued, cannot be threatened because that will alienate them rather than win them over for the "gender-cause". This is another example of fragmented and compartmentalized thinking, which according to many feminists and many NGOs, needs to be shunned rather than dished out in attractive and well funded packages/modules.

Most official gender and development workshops also do not talk about or create linkages between development work and the women's and people's movements for gender equality, environment, peace, democratization, secularism, human rights etc.



These modules are now also being used by some well funded and connected big NGOs in the South. There is no denying that these modules are useful, in so far as in the context of some projects they make women and their contribution visible, they involve women and also try to ensure that some benefits reach women. These modules are however, inadequate for a large number of NGOs who are seriously questioning the thinking, rationale and outcome of many development policies and programmes; who are interested not only to "invest" in women but also to empower them and to challenge patriarchy not only at the grass-root level but to challenge the patriarchal nature of development policies, programmes and development organizations; who are keen to see the connections between gender hierarchy and hierarchies of class, caste, race, North-South etc.

Many of us in South Asia have made attempts to make our workshops **transformatory** and in keeping with feminist thinking, we have tried to make them integrative and holistic. In these workshops our attempt has been

- To provide conceptual clarity and to help evolve a common understanding of concepts and issues.
- To create an atmosphere which encourages the participants to critically reflect on their own understanding of gender relations and gender issues, their attitudes and behavior and to help them understand and if possible accept the feminist slogan "the personal is the political".
- To become aware of, analyze and challenge patriarchal attitudes, behavior patterns and institutions.
- To develop an understanding of patriarchy, gender and gender relations in the context of other hierarchies of class, race, caste, north-south.
- To help participants analyze the nature of development policies and programmes in general and policies and programmes of their own organizations in terms of their impact on women, ecological sustainability and equity.
- To familiarize them with feminist thinking and women's movements and other people's movements in their countries and globally.
- To collectively evolve a vision of an equitable and gender just family, community, society and to develop a strategy to move towards its realization.



- To create a network of like-minded people and organizations who are committed to gender equality.

### *Reassuring the (Men) Participants*

Our first task in these workshops is to dispel some of the anxieties, insecurities and hostility [male] participants bring along to a workshop of this nature. Since almost all the participants of these workshops are attending a workshop on gender for the first time, some of them are quite anxious, a little insecure, not quite sure how to respond, behave or say. Their insecurities and anxieties stem also from the fact that perhaps for the first time for them, the facilitators/trainers are women and those too women who are known as strong feminists. During the first few hours of our informal interaction we hear remarks like:

"So now we are in your hands"

"We are ready to be butchered"

"We have come to be brain-washed"

"So, are you going to convert us"

"You should really not bother to train men, because it is you women who are your own enemies"

In a recent workshop for UN staff, seeing a woman participant eating *gulab jamuns* (brown flour balls in syrup) a male participant said, "oh, now our balls are being consumed". Many men and women went "ha, ha, ha", many others weren't sure how to respond. I took up the statement on the second day, after everyone was at ease.

These statements come without any provocation from us, and in spite of our best efforts not to be provocative. Often anxiety takes the form of aggression, hostility and child-like stubbornness. But, I suppose the very fact of calling men for a gender workshop is provocative enough, specially for those men who know that a discussion on wo/men's issues will raise uncomfortable questions about matters which are normally not addressed. We find that participants who come from large and hierarchical organizations, and who are in top and mid-level management positions are the most insecure and therefore more hostile.

Here it needs to be mentioned that there are many men who are willing to analyze and challenge patriarchy, who are willing to do soul-searching and who believe changing the present hierarchical gender relations would benefit everyone.



### *Clarifying Concepts and Creating a Common Vocabulary*

After detailed, informal introductions we request the participants to write down on a piece of paper what according to them is gender and what they would like to discuss in the workshops. In every workshop we find that not more than one or two persons can define gender precisely. This is quite amazing considering the fact that they have all been hearing the word for many years. It seems no one has bothered to explain to them what the concept means and why it was introduced. They have also never bothered to ask or to pick up a book to understand what it is. Most of the answers are "it is men and women both", "it is women's issues", "male and female sex", "equality between men and women", "inequality between men and women".

There is no understanding of the concept but there are many misconceived notions "it is a western concept", "women want to be the same as men", "it is breaking peaceful families", "it is against our culture". All these statements are made by very senior NGO managers, government officials who repeat the word gender in all their policy documents.

Another belief which was articulated by some senior men in two recent workshops was that gender

issues are being raised as a conspiracy against the third world specially against Muslim societies. "Their own families are collapsing, their women are not getting married or giving divorces, or they are not keen to have children. They want to do the same here." Another gentleman, who had followed international human rights debates said, "the western countries are imposing their own ideas on the rest of the world. They now want us to accept and endorse "homosexuality" in the name of human rights. All this is totally against our beliefs and religion." (These gentlemen seem to think gender equality or gay rights have been achieved in the West or everyone there believes in them, or there is no backlash against feminists there !!)

In two recent workshops conducted in May and June 2000, these questions were like a wall and in the first two sessions it seemed I might not be able to scale or dismantle it. Their misconceptions and anxieties had taken the form of aggression, hostility and total resistance. Finally, the women in the workshops reprimanded their senior colleagues and requested them to at least give me a chance to explain things. However, once all their unfounded doubts and anxieties were dealt with, both these workshops went off very well and most participants came to me personally to say they had learnt a lot



and they had no objection to the way I looked at and explained gender. I smiled broadly and thought to myself "Oh Boy!! That was some achievement".

Tremendous gentleness and diplomacy has to be deployed to convey to them that they do not know what is gender and to go on to explain the concept and a number of other concepts/words like gender relations, gender division of labour, gendered, gendering, gender-bender, gender blind, gender sensitive, gender neutral, gender transformative etc.

### *Beginning with the Personal*

Like we do with women, in every workshop we try to make men talk about their personal lives and experiences; their personal relationships with women at home, at the place of work and in society at large; to make them see how men benefit from patriarchy; to make them realize that unlike other issues, gender can not be dealt with merely as a subject of study, as an intellectual discourse. Changing gender relations, we emphasize, challenges each one of us to critically reflect on ourselves and to change, if necessary. Each one of us (man and woman) needs to recognize the "patriarch" sitting inside us wanting to dominate and

we need to get rid of this tendency. In other words we challenge the men to nurture recognize, value the feminine in them.

Since the session on personal introductions perplexes some participants, we explain the need for and the importance of personal introductions in a programme like this. Getting to know each other well, we explain, is the basis for developing a common understanding and creating solidarity; and in order to know each other well, we have to see each other as a 'whole'; we have to break the usual compartments between the 'personal' and the 'official', the private and the public. We tell the participants that according to us challenging patriarchy requires a broad based movement and for building that movement we need people who have a common understanding and commitment to gender issues, and who feel close to each other. Because the objective of the workshop is not only to create better professionals, but also to make better, more just human beings, the personal and the public have to be merged.

It is stated many times in the workshop that a person, who is sensitive and has empathy for the vulnerabilities of others, would also be gender sensitive, class/caste/race sensitive. Ultimately it



is a question of our INSAANIYAT (humanity), our sense of justice and fair play, our human values.

Starting with the personal also gives everyone a chance to speak and to realize that everyone has something to share and to contribute. It helps in creating an atmosphere of warmth, closeness and equality. At the same time it gives us resource persons an idea of the language skills of participants, where each one of them is at and what areas we would have to discuss and explore. All this makes it easier to plan the contents of the workshop and the level at which the discussions should be pitched to suit every participant.

Sharing our lives and our experiences also helps root our discussions within our local realities, and to help make sense of these realities. Thus, none of our discussions become 'academic' impositions, or purely intellectual exercises.

### *Clearing the Ground*

Knowing well that feminists are easily misunderstood, we make it a point to begin by explaining that we do not look at gender issues in isolation; we see them in the context of larger economic, political, social and cultural systems and

we believe that changes in gender relations would require changes in other social systems and vice-versa. In this context, we inform them that our own past and present involvement and experiences have been not only with wo/men's issues but also with issues related to poverty/development, caste, class, environment, human rights etc.

We also make it clear that we neither have ready made answers for everything nor do we believe in dishing out the "correct line" or solutions. We ourselves are searching for answers and this search; we believe, will and should be an on-going, dynamic search. In these workshops our attempt and desire is to initiate an honest and earnest dialogue and search for answers and if possible create a shared commitment to challenging patriarchy and other hierarchies.

We also clarify that we look at women's subordination as a system and therefore for us it is not a question of men versus women. We know that women can also be patriarchal and hence we see the need to challenge also women's views and attitudes. Men's views, attitudes, behavior patterns are also largely created by their up-bringing, socialization, hence we need to understand the overall system and not just blame individual men or women.



In addition to these reassuring or placatory explanations [made not to "mother" men but to facilitate a dialogue] we try to relax the atmosphere by inviting everyone to sing during breaks, by showing films related to our discussions and generally by making the workshop very informal, participatory, and non-hierarchical [which is exactly what we do in the workshops with women].

### *The Issues*

Although the final list and sequence of issues discussed at these workshops emerges only during the workshops based on all the questions/doubts participants have, the issues tend to be more or less the same in every workshop and they are the following:

- The situation and position of women and men in the society we live and work in.
- The concept of gender, gender relations, gender division of labour, gender formation etc.
- Patriarchy as a structure and as an ideology and the origin of patriarchy.
- The patriarchal nature of social institutions like marriage, family, religion, law, media, economic and political institutions, the state and NGOs.

- Analysis of mainstream development policies and programmes in terms of their impact on ecology, on the poor, [especially on women] and on the Third World.
- Analysis of NGO structures, policies and programmes from the perspective of women and strategies and programmes for the future.
- Frameworks and tools for gender analysis and gender planning and concepts related to these.
- Feminisms and women's movements in the country and globally.
- Vision of families, organizations and societies without gender and other hierarchies.
- Strategies for sustainable and gender-just development.

On every issue, our attempt is to move from social realities to generalizations and concepts. In order to get everyone to speak we encourage small group discussions to thrash out most of the issues listed above. As resource persons, our task is to fill in the gaps in the discussions, add our views as and when necessary and provide conceptual/theoretical inputs. On issues with which the participants may not be familiar or on which they may have wrong notions [according to us] we do not hesitate to give lectures. Such issues are normally - patriarchy,



feminism, gender, women's movement, feminist analysis of development etc. (The contents of these sessions are fairly well covered in four booklets written by me, "What is a Girl, What is a Boy?" "What is Patriarchy?" "Understanding Gender", and "Some Questions on Feminism" by Nighat Said Khan and myself. This is why this paper is basically about the process of the workshops and some ticklish issues.)

Although, the participants are not familiar with the concepts most of them have a good understanding of the realities of gender. Most participants are aware of and some quite articulate on :-

- The double burden of work women carry
- The active participation of working class women in production activities and their contribution to household incomes
- The lack of participation by men in child-rearing and household activities
- The widespread prevalence of discrimination against girls and women in matters of food intake, health care, education, etc.
- The lack of participation of women in major decisions within the family and in all decisions in the community
- Violence against women

When invited to do so the participants are able to generate enough empirical data regarding the subordination of women within and outside the household. It is also fairly easy for them to see how the official development programmes and also most NGO programmes have been male planned, executed and male oriented. In fact, the participants themselves provide most of the examples to prove these points.

### *Glimpses of Some Ticklish Issues*

The problems, however, arise when we try to draw conclusions on the basis of all the information and facts they provide. This is when we sense a certain uneasiness, resistance and hostility. To give an example - to explain the position of men and women in the most "intimate and crucial" social unit, the family, we ask the participants to put on the board all the oppression women and men may suffer within the family. The women's column gets filled in a few minutes. Each participant can narrate something or the other - female foeticide, female infanticide, sexual assault, psychological harassment, control over women's work and income, discrimination in providing health care, education, so on and so forth.





When it comes to listing the oppression/discrimination men face within the family the participants have to think really hard to come up with something. All they can think of and often that too with our prodding are things like "men are not allowed to cry", "men also have to submit to stereotypes", "they have to look after women", "they have to earn", etc. However, many participants get extremely upset when based on their data we conclude that we have to look at power relationships within the family or when we say - family can be the location of a lot of injustice and discrimination against women. Suddenly we find some men accusing us of "wanting to break peaceful families", "attacking local culture" etc. They start expressing fears about the disintegration or the collapse of the family which would ofcourse mean loss of authority, comforts, and power for men.

At such times we encourage the participants to look at their own reactions and to reflect on them. We also argue that looking critically at the realities of the family and removing the prevalent inequalities and injustice will actually strengthen the family and not weaken it. We encourage them to look at the family from the point of view of women, who are at the receiving end of inequalities. We also provide a historical view of the family to show how the

institution of family has been changing in response to the changes in the mode and relations of production and within the family gender relations have also been changing. We try to argue that it is not feminists but all the inequality, injustice, power struggles, which exist within the family, which are weakening this institution. The best way to save and make the family a happy place for all, we suggest, is to scrutinize it and change it wherever change is required. We also try to make them see and realize how POWER operates within the family.

### *You Mean Patriarchy is a Conspiracy by Men Against Women?*

Similarly, some men participants find it difficult to cope with the concept of patriarchy. They are quite happy to describe all the atrocities against women, but they resist looking at them as a system. In fact some of them actually say "you can describe women's oppression but you don't have to look at it as a well thought out and planned system. We men are not that vicious. Do you mean to say it is a conspiracy by men?"

We find there are some standard responses to patriarchy e.g. "We Indians had to subjugate our



women when the Muslim invaders came" [As if women in India were free birds before that.] This theory of "foreign hand" is used not only by politicians!

The second very common response is - if there is any problem with women, it is created by other women. "Woman is woman's worst enemy" theory is put into full force with real life examples of vicious mothers and daughters in-laws. It is almost comic to see men who very deftly and passionately analyze caste and class as a system, so afraid and resistant [or intellectually dishonest?] to look at patriarchy as a system.

Of course, biology is held responsible for women's subordination by many.

Another response, normally articulated as an accusatory question, is "If you are against patriarchy, are you for matriarchy? Is that the solution?"

Incidentally, all this can be said in highly charged tones and voices, it is almost as if the women resource persons are in the dock. Another accusation hurled at us is "you feminists want to be the SAME as men and this is against nature".

Some men advise us women "not to give up our superiority, and nobility by trying to copy men." They are of course quite happy to let men remain "inferior", 'base' 'ignoble' etc.

In a workshop in India, one of the participants quoted some "great" Indian man (he couldn't name him) who said "A woman who wants to be like a man becomes a *Raakshasi* [a female demon], a man who tries to be like a woman becomes a human being." The very well meaning man, who quoted this, never questioned why men are like a *Raakshas* [demon]. He was only worried about some women becoming demons [like men]. We tried to suggest to this friend, that it would be more helpful if those men who want to save women's "divinity" and "superiority" would also question and reduce men's demon like nature and encourage men also to be gentle, noble and superior.

*It is the System, which Needs to be Changed, Not Us*

While some participants get worked up when women's subordination is conceptualized as a system, there are others who feel totally relieved, because they are now happy to put the blame for



everything, which is wrong with gender relations, on an abstract system. "You only said, individual men [or women] have nothing to do with it, it is the system" is what is said to avoid all scrutinizing of personal behavior and attitudes. This of course requires another lecture from us on how all systems are kept going by individual actions; women are raped, battered, insulted not by an abstract system but by men. All of us together make up the system and therefore we are responsible for what exists and we have the responsibility to change this system. Therefore, we have to oppose not only the unjust system but also all those men and women who keep this system going, etc.etc.

In response to the question, whether we feminists want to replace patriarchy with matriarchy, we actually wish to pick up our bags and leave but being feminist missionaries (or masochists?) we don't. Trying to hide (but not always managing well) our frustration and anger, we tell them that generally feminists are not so stupid or power hungry that they would like to replace one unjust system with another. It should be possible, we tell them, to visualize families and societies without hierarchies and inequalities. We also explain that what feminists are asking for is equality and not sameness.

Women do not wish to be like men (especially not like the usual domineering, insensitive men) but they wish to have equality and equity. We tell them, that if gentleness, caring, nurturing, selflessness are considered feminine qualities then we would actually like men to be like women, because the world is in urgent need of these qualities. In several workshops we have had a long discussion on male and female qualities after which we conclude that to be fully human, men and women both need positive feminine and masculine qualities. The present division and separation of these qualities into male and female, we argue, has been good neither for men nor for women. Here is a brief description of this exercise, which we feel clarifies a lot of issues.

### *An Exercise on Gendered Qualities*

After explaining the concept of gender, we say spaces, languages, resources and even qualities may be gendered. The participants are asked to write down on separate pieces of paper what according to their community is a male and a female quality. These are then put on the floor and all of us sit or stand around these. This is the list, which emerges.



### *Male*

Rational  
Strong  
Smart  
Self-centered  
Outgoing  
Aggressive  
Competitive  
Brave  
Creative  
Devious  
Fearless  
Impulsive  
Honest  
Tough  
Violent  
Hardworking  
Opportunistic  
Insensitive  
Extrovert  
Dominating

### *Female*

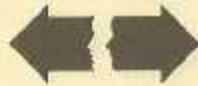
Emotional  
Weak  
Beautiful  
Sacrificing  
Caring  
Nurturing  
Submissive  
Shy  
Calm  
Polite  
Sensitive  
Cunning  
Soft  
Introvert  
Compassionate  
Enduring  
Persevering  
Quiet  
Timid  
Tolerant  
Fearful  
Stupid

The next question is –which of these qualities on both sides are negative. Aggressive, self centered, dominating, devious, violent, insensitive male

qualities and weak, fearful, shy, stupid, female qualities are declared negative without any hesitation. But there is a lot of discussion on whether ambitious, competitive, go-getting, and subservient, obedient, emotional are negative or positive qualities. Is it a weakness to be emotional, to feel and to show these feelings? Can anyone be only emotional or only rational? Isn't it a burden for men to be told "men should not show their feelings" or "men don't cry". Being ambitious and competitive is seen as positive by some and negative by others.

At this point some participants point out that the negative female qualities like subservience, shyness, self-abnegating, harm the women themselves; whereas "male" negative qualities like aggressiveness, dominating nature, selfishness are qualities which harm others who are dominated, controlled etc.

The next point explored in this exercise is, that masculine qualities are those which are required for people working in the public or "male" sphere, which requires competition, self centered behaviour, toughness. Female qualities are those which are necessary for the domestic or female sphere, which needs nurturing, caring, building



communities. This means there was/is perhaps a logic in inculcating male and female values in societies where the public and domestic spheres are clearly demarcated and assigned to men and women respectively.

However, we question, is it wise or possible to have two separate and opposite set of values for these two spheres. Moreover, today because of women's large-scale participation in the public/male sphere, this logic does not quite hold good any more. It is pointed out that women who work in senior positions in organizations face conflicting demands. Their organizations expect them to be go-getting, tough, competitive, but their families want them to be subservient, sacrificing. It is often very difficult for women to cope with these conflicting expectations and demands.

The next question raised is-if we replace male and female by "upper" class and "working" class, "urban" and "rural" and "first world" and "third world", which side will belong to whom. It is obvious to most that what is male would be "upper" class, "urban" and "first world" and female qualities would be those which are ascribed to the "working" class, "rural" people and the "third" world. Women, the working class, third world and rural people are supposed to

be stupid, emotional, subjective, subservient etc. as opposed to men, "upper" classes, urban people and the first world, who are meant to be rational, scientific, hard working, competitive, ambitious.

Suddenly, it becomes obvious that male and female qualities are qualities of those with power and those without power, hence instead of being "natural", they are cultivated. The insights gained during these discussions are found to be quite fascinating. Suddenly one of the participants would say excitedly, "Well, this shows that in a way men treat their women like the urban people treat the rural people, the upper classes treat lower classes and the first world treats the third world. There is exploitation and domination in these relationships!!"

The next question is "okay, on which side are qualities which are considered superior and prescribed by our religions?" The answer is-the "female" qualities like loving, caring, nurturing, and sensitivity. Buddha, Jesus, Nanak, Mother Teresa, it was pointed out, aspired for, practised and prescribed these qualities. So, are women superior to men? Actually aren't these qualities human qualities?



All these questions are not necessarily answered in this very session. They are raised in the hope that the participants will start reflecting on them and start finding their own answers. Here the point is made that although the feminine qualities might be considered superior, but normally doesn't the present development thinking hold the first world, upper classes and the men as the goal everyone has to move towards? Isn't everyone encouraged to become ambitious, and competitive; and doesn't competition require being self-centered, even being dominating? Does it mean the present development is pushing the world away from superior qualities? Is this why there is so much disparity in the world, so much wasteful overconsumption in the midst of extreme poverty and misery, so much plunder of the environment, so much war and conflicts, so much destruction of community life, even family life? Is this why development has become, in the words of UNDP Human Development Report, jobless, rootless, ruthless and futureless? Endless questions...

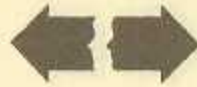
The next question raised is, in order to move towards sustainable development and regeneration of natural resources (which everyone is talking about) which qualities do we need to practice more, the "male" or the "female"? Of course the female

qualities, was the answer. Then does it mean that in the name of development and progress, if more people take on the "male" qualities, the world will become a more difficult place to live in? Should men become gentler, caring, nurturing or should women become more aggressive, competitive?

The final set of questions are-

- Is it correct to call these qualities male or female? Aren't all these human qualities and anyone can decide to practice one or the other?
- Doesn't a good human being need the positive qualities found in the two lists? Wasn't Mother Teresa both strong and gentle, rational and emotional, confident and yet caring, nurturing, sensitive?
- Aren't human beings incomplete, even a little sub-human, if they have only one set of qualities?
- Doesn't this compartmentalization lead to oppression and domination and harms men, women and society?

Here I may go on to ask a deeper (spiritual?) question-shouldn't gender equality mean creating a balance in the positive "male" and the positive



"female" within each one of us? Essentially, gender equality can be achieved only if both men and women give up their lust for power and domination, and get rid of their powerlessness, subservience and submissiveness. Masculine qualities, behaviour patterns (machoism) come in for a lot of discussion here.

The next question raised and discussed is, are development people doing enough to preserve, inculcate and/or promote human values and principles like love, caring, nurturing, sharing, justice, equality? Haven't these values been neglected and marginalized and the only value emphasized is dollar value? Isn't it time that we spend at least as much time, resources and efforts on building people with values as we do on building strategies and programmes? The best of strategies come to nought if the people implementing them are corrupt, selfish etc. The unanimous agreement is that we indeed need to focus much more on people, their capabilities and their values. The participants accepted that the dichotomy between spirituality and development, economics and ethics, science and mortality need to be questioned and removed.

This exercise leads to a lot of discussion also about

the methods of functioning of NGOs, their culture and life styles, their decision making patterns etc. It becomes quite obvious that if we are serious about sustainable development, we have to review and restructure our organizations, methods of functioning, leadership patterns as well as our personal attitudes and behaviour patterns. All these have to be based on positive human values. And, it is said that doing this can not only be very challenging but also very gratifying. Inner peace and harmony, it is stated, is much more peaceful and valuable than outer (material) abundance.

Here I share my belief that men will become more gentle, caring and nurturing only if and when they start sharing reproductive work at home, start looking after and spending more time with children. It is the practice of mothering and fathering which would change men faster than only discussing these issues in seminars and workshops. We need to start a "movement of men towards families and family kitchens". It is only when we spend time nurturing children or nature do we embody or internalize the value of life. If men spend more time in family kitchens and children's playgrounds they will have less time playing war, be it in the battlefields, in football grounds, or street corners or within families.



## *Feminism: Much Maligned and Misunderstood*

In most workshops the largest number of questions are about feminism and women's movement and this is how they are articulated—

- Isn't feminism or the women's movement imported from the West and isn't it alien to our culture and religion?
- Isn't feminism an urban phenomenon and therefore quite irrelevant to rural people?
- Isn't feminism confined to "five star", elite women who have no idea of the lives and issues of poor, rural women?
- Is feminism woman versus man?
- Don't feminists promote free sex?
- Why is feminism confrontational? Won't it destroy the most important unit in society i.e. the family?
- Why talk of feminism? Why not talk of humanism?
- Why do women want to be like men?

The way these questions are formulated and expressed by some participants makes it quite

apparent that they are really allegations, they betray discomfort with feminism, feminist formulations and also with some women who call themselves feminists. Although we face such questions all the time we must confess we are surprised and quite disappointed when we find NGO leaders who claim they have been working for women's development for years, share all the usual misconceptions about feminism and the women's movement. We do expect that at least the senior staff would be a little clearer and better informed, would have read and thought seriously about these issues.

We normally ignore such subtle allegations on the first couple of days and pick up these loaded questions only after establishing a degree of rapport and covering some ground on women's oppression, women's development etc. We realize that it would be futile to combat their questions with ready-made answers. Instead we ask them to list on the board the issues women's movements or feminists have raised in South Asia and then examine them one by one to see which of them are Western therefore not relevant to South Asia, which are urban and not relevant to the rural women, which are elite women's issues and therefore not relevant to poor women.





The board gets filled quite fast with the list of issues women have taken up - dowry, rape, sex-determination tests, female foeticide, equal wages for equal work, income generation, education, property rights, land rights, alcoholism, ecology, unionization of self-employed women, job reservations, child-care, sexism in media, pornography, political rights of women, the list is unending and those who had made all the allegations against feminists, also contribute to this list. Even a cursory look at these issues shows that none of them are Western and most of them are related to working class women. Issues like dowry, sex determination tests, pornography which might have been confined to the middle class earlier are no longer so today.

After dealing with the main misconceptions about feminism/women's movement we try to discuss the reasons why they exist even amongst sympathetic men. We also speak at length about feminism and women's movement, their main features, their relevance and significance etc.

### *How do you Question Religion and Tradition?*

In several workshops with men religion and tradition

is another very ticklish issue, but one which can really not be avoided. While trying to understand patriarchy or gender hierarchy, it is not very difficult to show that other than a few biologically linked functions (child bearing, breast feeding, impregnating) there is nothing which a man can do and woman cannot or what a woman can do, a man cannot. But how do you argue when it comes to faith and belief. Some participants resist any questioning of their religion or even a historical analysis of religions. What surprises us is that many of these men are dressed in western clothes, speak English and practice many things, which their religions wouldn't allow.

However, in some workshops it is possible to discuss religions historically and to see that all modern religions were started by men, the leadership is entirely male (in most women are by definition excluded) and the interpretation and religious discourses are male dominated. It is also pointed out that when they started, many religions were very revolutionary because they challenged existing religions and established new ones which were more contemporary and more just (Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism). Perhaps it is this questioning nature of the founders of our religions which needs to be emulated rather than following everything



which was prescribed a long time ago. Because of increasing communalism and conflicts it is becoming more difficult to have dispassionate discussions on religion and culture, but so far we have managed to discuss this issue very well in some workshops and not so well in others, depending on the openness of the participants.

### *It is Imperative to Discuss Masculinity in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

In a few workshops I have been able to share the following thoughts...and have a discussion on them-

... In the 21<sup>st</sup> century perhaps the biggest issue and threat to human survival is conflicts and wars. Conflicts, violence and wars of all kinds (mainly economic, but also religious, communal, ethnic, gender) are tearing apart the fabric of our nations, communities and also our families. Some people are making big money on wars. Weapons, pornography, violent films are billion dollar industries and they are all in our homes with the help of TV and Internet. Young boys are proving their masculinities by joining actual wars, or playing war games, or shooting dead their school mates or having coercive sex with their "girl friends"; men

are killing men in football stadia, or shooting down men in economic markets after losing money etc. etc. Lust for money and power, insatiable greed, killing ambition, ruthless competition, individualism are rampant. In common parlance all these are masculine traits, preoccupations and past times. Normally men are masculine but women can also be and are violent, greedy, and competitive. If we wish to change the world, then perhaps masculinities need to be addressed more; men need to change more.

- But if some men are the problem, there are other men who have been the symbols of solutions-Buddha, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama.
- Not only masculinity but also the whole notion of power needs to be re-examined.
- Who is more powerful-the one who has power over others or the one who has power over himself/herself? Is Hitler more powerful or Gandhi? Is a dictator more powerful or Mother Teresa? Is war more powerful or love?

If inner power or power over one's emotions, greed, envy, fear is real power then men and women both need empowerment. In this sense there may not be any competition between men



and women, they will both be working for true human development.

These questions have always found a resonance in most participants. One very senior NGO leader, who was earlier dead against gender workshops said, "if I had known all this is gender, I would never have opposed it".

### *Open Dialogues Help Clarify Issues*

Because there is ample time in these workshops (I refuse to do workshops of less than three days) we are able to follow things through and discuss them to the end, rather than leave them mid-way to fester more misunderstandings. For example, we ask participants who make statements like "all feminists are urban, middle class women, with no understanding of the local culture" to substantiate their statements by giving examples. In each case we find that the statements have little basis, they are based on general discomfort with feminism, or on some anti-feminist propaganda in the media of which there is no dearth. In some cases the anti-feminist sentiments are based on a single encounter with "an aggressive woman" or "a woman who smoked". The only plea we make, when we face

such generalizations is, that judging a large movement by the behavior of one or two women can obviously neither be correct nor fair. We also do not hesitate to say that for many of us becoming a feminist is a long, arduous journey, none of us are perfect, nor do we have well thought out positions on everything. Very few of us are able to practice everything we believe in. In this we are no different from socialists or Gandhians or environmentalists who are not able to practice everything they believe in and propagate.

We find that such dialogues, conducted with as much honesty as we are capable of, do help in reducing hostility, misunderstandings and misconceptions. By the second or the third day there is much more understanding, warmth, acceptance and a desire to study and learn more about gender issues. We tell them that in three or four days one can only learn what all there is to learn and actual learning will require a lot of reading, discussion, practice and reflection.

In these workshops, invariably there are men who are gentle, who participate in household work, who bathe and clean children, who have supported their sister or wife to get educated etc. The presence of such men is very helpful in communicating that all



men are not the same, just as all women are not the same. This is why the issue is not biological, it is socio-cultural and if we want we can transform society and culture.

Once we are through the ticklish issues and basic clarity is achieved, it is fairly easy to discuss and explain issues related to development; how gender blind planning has been marginalizing and disempowering women; the main tools and frameworks for gender analysis and gender sensitive planning etc. We familiarize the participants with all the terms/concepts being used to understand gender relations e.g. condition, position, practical gender needs, strategic gender interests etc. Basically the attempt is to simplify and demystify things, to impress upon them that there is nothing complicated, it is all very common sense. All we need is sensitivity to recognize injustice and desire and commitment to challenge inequality and injustice. The tools can be picked up easily.

The written evaluations done at the end of every workshop are on the whole overwhelmingly positive. Most participants state that they have learnt a lot, they have been forced to think things through, they have been challenged to reflect on their own beliefs and behavior etc. At every workshop the

participants recommend that such workshops should be mandatory for all men working in development organizations.

Many participants appreciate the connections, which are made between gender and other hierarchies of caste, class, race, North-South. This, they say, makes it easier for them to understand gender and gender relations. They also appreciate the fact that all discussions are linked to local realities.

The improved understanding and a desire to move towards better gender relations is also evident when towards the end of the workshop the participants discuss their perspective and future strategies for women's development. What they come up with is clear, quite comprehensive and concrete.

This is not to say we succeed in winning over all the men. With one or two men the tensions just never subside and according to us these are those men who are unable to accept women as trainers, and who are not open to admitting that they may also need to revise/change their attitudes or ideas. However, even they go with a lot of questions, unease, and that is good enough as a beginning.



## *Workshops with Men Are Quite Different*

During and after these workshops with men we have wondered how these are different from the workshops we do with women. There are obvious differences. The level of personal sharing is much more in an all women's workshops. Women are more prone to talk about their personal experiences while men are much more guarded.

We find that men are quite happy to deal with theory, which is abstract and impersonal, but they have little experience of talking about themselves and their emotions. They seem to suffer from the "brave boy", "strong man" syndrome. Men can quite easily talk about the suffering of poor women, their subordination, but are not that willing to look at their own families. They seem to be trapped into a terrible insecurity, anguish and fear of the family structure collapsing, their position disappearing from under their feet.

We realize that for women, talking about themselves is not only easy but it is also a release; because they feel oppressed and do not often get a supportive atmosphere to talk about, they welcome such an opportunity. It is much more

difficult for men to look at themselves as some one who is privileged, who might be oppressing his wife/sister consciously or unconsciously or who might be enjoying the advantages of being a man. Although we want the men to talk about themselves as a son, husband, father; what they have experienced, whether they think they enjoy privileges which their women do not have, what they feel about these privileges; do they ever reflect on the gender differences within the family etc., but somehow discussions on these are never really focussed or intense. We are not sure whether this is due to lack of time, proper planning, our inability or due to resistance from men participants. As opposed to this, the personal sessions in women's workshops are very intense and emotional. In almost every workshop, while talking about the discrimination they have faced, the oppression or neglect they have suffered, women break down. With women such sessions often get prolonged into the nights, but men resist making a shift from the mind to the emotions, from the public to the personal. The rare male participant who is keen to explore his personal relationships does not find many male partners and ends up discussing these issues only with us women. We have seen three or four men with moist eyes in the last ten years, while innumerable women have cried



unabashedly and others have joined them. Typically female eh?

Another difference is the subtle resistance by men to looking at women's subordination as a system. Women, on the other hand find it very liberating to look at their subordination as a system and to name that system. For them this naming of the system, looking at it dispassionately is the first step towards challenging and dismantling it. This is also understandable because it is in the interest of women to name and change the patriarchal system. This is not so for men and hence there is resistance and defensiveness amongst men to discuss patriarchy, specially when it comes to discussing it in their own, personal context.

Another difference between our workshops with men and those with women, we feel is, in spite of our over 20 years experience and abundant gray hair it is difficult for some men to accept us women as resource persons and to admit that we could teach them something. The men who consider themselves leaders are very hesitant to admit that they have not studied or thought seriously about the issue. Some of these men constantly intervene, divert the issue, and bring in irrelevant issues.

The women resource persons are perhaps also always considered an "interested party" in the issue. The fact that it is easier for men to accept male authority became quite obvious in one of the workshops when on the fourth day a male observer came and spoke eloquently about religion and culture being the most oppressive for women. Everyone listened to him in great silence, while we had been heckled for saying things half so strongly. This and other similar experiences have made us realize that as women facilitators/ trainers we have to learn to use power and authority, use it judiciously, but use it. In workshops with women we never feel the need to use our authority or power but with men, to be effective and to move the discussions forward, we cannot always reject the use of power completely.

We feel it might be a good idea to have a sensitive male as a co-trainer, someone who can speak as a man, who can have a "man to man talk" if necessary, who will not be seen as an interested party. A man in the trainers team may also blur the divide between men and women, which exists when women are trainers and men participants and the subject being discussed is patriarchy. However, I have conducted all the workshops without a male co-trainer and in the end all workshops (even those



which were tough in the beginning) have been very positive. Except for a couple of men who might have gone back angry, all others have gone back as friends even if they did not agree with us completely. The proof of what I am saying is the large number of invitations/requests I now receive for workshops with senior managers. I have conducted six workshops each for the senior managers of BRAC and Proshika, three for the entire team of UNFPA, India, two each for UNICEF, Bangladesh and Maldives, three for the partners of SIDA in India, three for the NGO partners of EZE, Christian Aid, ICCO and Bread for the World in India, two in Bangladesh, others in Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

### *Need to Tread Even More Gently*

We realize that as trainers we have to be much more patient in workshops with men. We feel, in gender workshops with men we should not always go "head on", calling a spade a spade, as we do in workshops with women. We should also not be confrontational all the time. Much against our nature and thinking, we [perhaps] have to learn to be circuitous, to take one-step forward and another side ways. After all, the purpose of these workshops is to make allies and not more enemies. Secondly, we must always remember that if for us

women, developing a feminist understanding and consciousness is a long, painful process, it will be several times longer and more painful for men to change. These short workshops can only be the first steps of a long journey. But we also realize that whatever approach we take there will still be resistance and conflict specially if we do not locate gender issues only "out side", if we want to discuss the personal, if we scrutinize family, culture, religion, language, etc. with women's eyes and perspective.

We feel quite satisfied with all the workshops we have done. On the whole they have all been positive. We feel the workshops make enough dents even in those who resist. However, we need a far more sensitive approach to the way men are oppressed by gender. We have to realize that men who try to break certain gender roles also pay a price for it and that unless one is able to feel the same sympathy and gentleness for their oppression, without constantly trivializing it by comparing it to women's, we are not likely to go very far in this effort. The problem before us is how to look at men's oppression seriously and sincerely without at the same time depoliticising or diffusing the issue of women's subordination. We have no easy answers.