

Gender Struggle: Changing Beliefs, Challenging Patriarchy

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At the core of all the struggles, in history, is belief. The belief to be liberated, the belief to be treated as equals, the belief that we are not wrong! How does one fight for equality if we don't even consider ourselves as equals, or believe that men and women should have an equal space in society?

INTRODUCTION

"Didi, phir maine bhi bhaiyan ko ek thappad mara aur pucchha...dard huaa? Mujhe bhi roz aise hi dard hota hain. (Didi, then I also slapped bhaiyan back and asked him, Did it hurt? I feel the same pain every day)."

I can't forget that time, when the room with 40 people fell completely silent when Laxmi Bai said these words. Her large eyes were moist, conveying more than her words ever could. She told this story on the very day it happened, her face still bruised from the beating, but with a strange serenity in her demeanour.

This was one of my first experiences of interacting with women like Laxmi Bai and I thought to myself, that through this one act of courage, she has defied all her previous generations and altered a norm for generations to come. All it took was that one little retaliation in the form of a slap and a question, "Did it hurt?" A moment and that's all. How must she have felt after that? What would have gone through her mind? From where had she got the strength to say enough is enough?

WHAT IS THIS 'GENDER', *BHAIYAN*?

Many social anthropologists and experts have tried to explain gender. Some have identified gender as a framework, which is the genesis of all inequality of power and control, finding its relevance in the notion of patriarchy. For some, its centrality lies in describing and critiquing the attributes associated with one's sex, attributes of being feminine and masculine. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word 'gender' has been used since the 14th century as a grammatical term, but it did not become common until the mid-20th century. Every year, for the past six years, the women we work with have been innocently asking us this question, "*Bhaiyan, yeh gender kya hai* (What is gender, *Bhaiyan*)?" For them, gender simply implies all the discrimination and the biases they face by virtue of being born women.

Gender cannot be defined merely from the perspective of women and the oppression they face. Gender has much wider connotations. It is a way of understanding the life-politics of the social construct, the identity of the players and how each member of society—women, men, transgender, minority groups, other disadvantaged groups, etc.—is being affected by this process of socialization.

At PRADAN, however, we are consciously working only with women with the hope of changing their own views about their so-called 'destiny'.

WHY WOMEN?

When 'a boy' is born, the reaction usually is: *"Didi, yeh bhaiyan ko chaar betiyon ke baad akhir baap banne ka sukh mil gaya, pichle saal isko ek beta huaa (Didi, my brother has finally been blessed as a father. After four daughters, a son was born to him last year),"* said a *bhaiyan* referring to his brother, while his five-year-old daughter stood beside him, holding his hand.

At an age when a child should be sent to school, 'a girl' is: *"Hamara padhai karne ka mann tha par ghar me chhothe bhai-behan thay unko kaun sambhalta, aur ghar ka kaam seekhna bhi zaruri tha, is liye school nahi gaye.* (I really wanted to study, but I didn't go to school because I was the oldest and had to take care of my younger siblings and learn household work, which is also important)," says a woman, who is learning to write her name.

When 'a girl' is about to get married: *"Woh to didi bohat hi neech behan hogi, jo bhai se apni zameen mangegi,* (Only a woman, who

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doesn't have any morals and values, will ask for her share of land from her brother)," expresses an *anganwadi* teacher.

When 'a girl' has family: *"Ab bhaiyan thoda maarta bhi hai toh kya huaa...woh bhaiyan hi toh hain.* (If my husband beats me a little, so what...? After all, he is my husband)," says a mother of two.

In another such incident; a woman asked me, *"Didi aapki kitni umar hogi?* (How old are you?)."

"I am 26," I said

"Aur abhi tak shadi nahi hui; 20 saal mei to mere do bachey bhi ho gaye they aur operation bhi. (Really, and you are not married yet! By 20, I had two children and I even had a sterilization operation)."

I asked, *"Accha, operation aapka, ya bhaiyan ka* (Who got operated, you or your husband)?"

She replied, *"Mera (mine). Bhaiyan to nahi kara sakta na, woh bhari kaam karta hai, hal chalata hai.* (He can't get it done because he has to plough the land. It is heavy work)."

I asked, *"Aur aap nahi karte* (And you don't work, right)?"

She smiled and said nothing.

These are some of the discussions I had with women at various junctures. These represent the usual opinion of women about themselves and how the socialization process contributes immensely in formulating that image, ever since they are born. When a five-year-old girl hears every now and again, that four daughters combined don't have as much value as one

son, she begins to question her very existence. Was she a mere attempt for a son? Would she have existed if a son had been born before her?

Whether all these questions arise in her mind or not is not the relevant point; she is certainly going to carry an image of herself as an undesired child, which will come into play in all the crucial aspects of her life—education, access and control over assets, making decisions in family matters and, above all, her importance in her family, village and even society! She grows up as a carrier of inequity when she defends the physical violence of her husband, when she contributes the most to the labour force and still believes that her husband does the more difficult work, when she works day and night on agricultural land and yet cannot buy even a saree without her husband's permission.

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The Bhoura team in Betul district of Madhya Pradesh has been working on gender sensitization over the past few years. In 2011, we started holding discussions to design our engagement so that we could bring about a realization among women about the prevailing discrimination and we came up with a schema. We envisioned that in all the villages the women would talk about gender in some form or another. They would become familiar

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with the concept of gender and be able to, at least, differentiate between what is natural—sex—and what is acquired—gender. We hoped that momentum would be built among women through this process, that the discussions and consequent awareness would lead to realizations and the inspiration to join hands to change their situation collectively.

The broad strategy for moving towards this end, we thought, was to start with building an understanding of the concepts of gender and sex, power and patriarchy. We would begin the process with one or two women 'leaders' from each village, and, presumably, they would disseminate this understanding among the other women. Together, these women would be able to identify issues in their lives that arose from patriarchal thought and would begin to act upon them. The focus was also on planning some action so that the leader could take the movement forward, as well as plan the action on behalf of other women, who were part of the collectives.

LET EVERYONE BE A LEADER

When we reflected upon our approach to gender, through consolidating the sharings of women leaders, we found a major disconnect. The leader-centric approach, we realized, would leave the 'leader' feeling alone, without any support on a subject, which was so complex and so deeply ingrained in society. As a leader, she would face many impediments in her efforts to build some understanding of the subject with fellow women and also in moving forward.

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The appointed leaders would often demand that training be conducted for the women, "Didi, baiyan to aisee nahi samjhegi. In sabko toh aap chaar din wali training mei hi le jao (Didi, these women will not understand. Please give all of them 'that four day training')," referring to a four-day residential training session on gender and the manifestation of patriarchy, facilitated by PRADAN professionals. Sometimes, these leaders would face fierce criticism for even sharing their views on gender; "Yeh kya bekaar batein seekh kar aate ho. Kya yeh sab seekhne jaate ho (What rubbish you are talking about. Is this what you have learnt)?"

Added to this is the fundamental question, "Who is a leader?" Or, "Is there a need for a leader at all, when the fight is for equality?" We soon realized through these discussions that the only way was to consider every woman as a leader. A woman who is trying to change the situation of her own house is no less a leader than the woman who has been a *sarpanch* for 10 years. This churning and reflection needs to take place with as many women as possible, so that they can join forces while continuing to transfer this understanding to others. There is nothing technical about this struggle because the effort to bring about equality doesn't need any statistical analysis. It just requires the lived experience. It is a journey in which every woman has felt the pain and is aware of the struggle that another woman is going through. And this is what needs to be highlighted.

"We are weak. We get scared easily. We are afraid of going anywhere. Everyone calls me *bai*." These are the beliefs that the women live by. They are weak because no one has paid attention to their health. They get scared because they are never allowed to move outside, not allowed to talk to anybody and not allowed to participate in meetings. Everyone calls

them *bai* because they have only one identity, that of a woman. Their name has never really mattered. If their name were to be used, they would, perhaps, have an identity as an individual which, of course, would be a threat to the existing system.

When we talk to the women, we need to bring up these issues and invite them to share their experiences so that they can understand gender through these stories of struggle. This will have more significance for them than explaining a totally alien concept of equality to them first and then finding out where they stand. An understanding of gender and patriarchy is more helpful when it comes from the purview of the issues faced by the women because they immediately connect with these examples. To familiarize the women with the issue of gender, we need to work on the subjective identity of women and not impose upon them a leader-centric approach.

The primary focus of the team, based on its current understanding, is to work in concentrated areas. There has to be a focussed engagement of professionals in these areas/villages, providing inputs around gender so that a concrete understanding can be synced in all the women members in a short time span. The need is to unite the women as a whole, not just one, two or four 'leaders', but a collective that will inspire women in adjacent villages.

For this to take place, PRADAN professionals need to engage in the following first steps.

Make the village-level forum more reflective: There is need to motivate members to share with each other their day-to-day dilemmas, their self-image and what makes them happy and how they feel, being a part of this women's forum.

Provide conceptual knowledge through trainings to most of the women members: Through the reflections of women, in the village-level forums, it is hoped that the spirit of solidarity might develop. However, for a deeper and more thorough understanding, the women need to be equipped with some knowledge. This forum needs to have hands-on knowledge on, at least, gender and sex, and the root cause of these discriminations, that is, patriarchy and its manifestations in their lives.

Be a part of reflective discussions at village forum: Discussions that the women have need to be complemented with the knowledge of gender and its inter-play. Here, self disclosure of all members, including the facilitator, is crucial because the facilitator, too, is affected by this play of patriarchy, though the degree or intensity may differ. The experience and understanding of the struggle is not very different. It will be a process of discovering oneself and the immediate environment by analyzing the present situation. A continuous process of self-reflection supports and strengthens the sense of the collective, unity and oneness. The groups will themselves realize that the only means to end this disparity is to join hands and move forward together.

This is a cyclical process, in which these reflections will be shaped further by the experiences of the action taken by the women. They may require more conceptual clarity for including other women, who too are going through the same journey and want to take part in this quest for equity.

SAMAJH TO GAYE PAR YEH HOGA KAISE?

During the training, the women participants were heard repeating this sentence: "*Samajh to gaye par yeh hoga kaise?* (We have understood the concept, but how are we going to bring about this change)?" After every discussion, every reflection, these women were very motivated but were extremely concerned about how they would make the change happen.

Following are three villages that have taken steps in the direction of HOW. In the first one, they have understood the necessity of transferring the knowledge. Baby steps are being taken in the second for addressing the larger issues of discrimination. The third describes how women are right in confronting stereotypes and challenging the status quo.

TANGNA VILLAGE

The women thought that understanding the concept was a crucial first step. They decided to use the medium of a street play to sensitize women because everyone enjoys watching one. In it, they depicted the plight of a child, who is born as a girl. Their logic was, "If we discuss this subject with the women, there will be resistance and they won't understand it completely. It has to be presented to them visually. They will, at least, watch the play till the end...it will help."

PALASHPANI VILLAGE

Women from different villages underwent a four-day training session. One of the key discussions centred around the nutrition and health of women. Later, the discussion was linked with how health is inter-connected with many other aspects of the position of women in society. The notion of women being 'weak' was brought up. A connection was made between their weakness and nutrition and how they were the last to eat at home and

they ate only what was left over. They were also encouraged to question the low priority that the health of the girl child received, in every household. Since then, the women of Palashpani have taken the initiative to take care of the nutritional aspect of all the members belonging to a Village Organization (VO). The women have started weighing all the members in the VO. On finding anyone underweight, the VO takes the responsibility of helping her to gain weight by the next month's meeting. They support her by personally contributing food or money if she herself is unable to arrange for these. The members of the VO took up the health of the women as their collective responsibility. The VO has even collaborated with the *anganwadi* and asked the workers to take care of this concern by providing the required supplements.

POLAPATHAR VILLAGE

The women in this village stood up against domestic violence. If they heard noises indicative of violence, coming from any house, they immediately gathered in front of that house and made it clear that the violence was unacceptable and had to end! Even if there was a meeting going on or a fight took place at an odd hour, a suggestion of violence was all that was required for the women to act. By now, they have many achievements to recount. It is not just that they help the woman in that moment; if domestic violence takes place regularly, they support the woman completely. In a few incidents, they have even resorted to some coercion. For example, they once tied a man, who even after several warnings did not mend his ways, to a chair and left him like that for the whole night in the backyard of his own house. The message was clear to everyone!

That there is some transformation in the attitude of women is evident from these stories; beginning from sensitizing others

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about gender to putting an end to the discrimination finally. However, it has not been a smooth journey. The foremost challenge was to talk about such a deep-rooted and sensitive topic, which basically questions the moral values that people

hold very close. Our interactions with the women in village-level forums helped us to, at least, initiate the discussion and motivate women to talk about the subject among themselves. Another challenge was to free women from the belief that patriarchy is the 'normal/accepted/cultured' way of leading a life. Here, a four-day residential training proved quite fruitful because it focuses on being logical and reflective. It directly targets the psyche of women.

The women we work with have come a long way to establishing that equality and they practice it in their families. This only came by deliberating on their current state, by involving others in this journey, by taking action and by reflecting on their journey regularly, by sharing their life experiences and by building an understanding for moving ahead.

Our (professionals) focus is to engage as co-travellers and help build these village-level forums and encourage the women to be reflective and open to sharing as much as possible. Another crucial point has been the attitude of the team. We are not engaging with the villagers as professionals or as people with all the solutions, who are supposed to get things done and who are always ready with a plan A or plan B. On the contrary, we ourselves are evolving with the community and accepting the change taking place within us. This is working like a catalyst in challenging our own belief systems and helping us refine ourselves, inspiring us to redesign our methodologies and our way of engaging with these women because change is the only constant thing in this world!