

GENDER ROLES: The Community and the Self

...

Recognising the subtle ways in which gender roles are inculcated in girls as they grow up, the author realizes that rural and urban society alike continue to foster and typify a woman's way of being

MY LIFE WAS WONDERFUL, especially because I was an only child. I was allowed to do anything I wanted and was frequently told by my mother, "*Tui amader sudhu meye nosh, amader chele o tui.* (You are not just a daughter but a son to us.)"

Oh! This was a prized compliment from my parents. But looking back, I wonder whether it really was a compliment or was it just another one of those endless gendered expectations imposed upon a girl. I am not sure of what it really was. The more I work on training women in the community about gender

roles, the more I realize how 'gendered' my own life really was.

Growing up, I truly thought that my parents were liberal, albeit just a little protective about my safety. My cousin brothers, however, would also be scolded like I was and I thought that we were equal. I went to a good school (girls only). I was never expected to do a single chore at home. My mother used to say, "*Ekhon onek somoy ache kaj korar, age porasona to kor, ranna poreo sikhte parbi* (You have got loads of time to do chores, first study properly. You can learn cooking any day.)" But as I grew older, I became responsible and began helping my parents in work.

It all started from the reflections I gained in all those trainings. The trainings were not only about methods and theories but also gender discrimination in practice. And from these learnings, I gained a deeper perspective about myself and my life.

I also went through a stage when I became lazy and started avoiding some of the chores, drawing such statements from my parents, “*Kaj na korle sasurbarir lokera bari pathiye debe.* (If you don’t do any work, your in-laws will send you back.),” or “*Ki je hobe ei meyer?* (What will happen to this girl?)” But it was said in fun (or so I thought) and I always took it lightly. Of the two, my father was always the more serious one and every decision was announced by him, after consultation with my mother. I was always a little afraid of him but I also knew that he loved me very much. He always corrected me, “*Eto jore hasar ki ache?* (What is there that you have to laugh so loud?)” or “*Pa choriye boste nei.* (Don’t sit with your legs spread out.),” or, “*Emon kore meyeder cholte nei, payer awaz howa bhalo noy.* (Girls should not walk like this, footsteps should not be heard.)” Upon reflection, I realize that such comments were never directed at the boys that I grew up with.

I am sure many of you will, by now, be thinking, “This is very normal,” and “This has happened with me as well.”

When I was young, I thought I had the most perfect life

any girl could have and that whatever my parents said was for my betterment as a woman. But realization dawned upon me later, thanks to all those years of education followed by my work at PRADAN. My experiences changed my outlook towards life. All the trainings that we conducted at PRADAN, especially the gender trainings, invested in the members an ability to recognize the language of discrimination. It was only then, that I understood what gender discrimination was and how and it played out in our lives sometimes, without our realizing it.

It all started from the reflections I gained in all those trainings. The trainings were not only about methods and theories but also gender discrimination in practice. And from these learnings, I gained a deeper perspective about myself and my life.

I saw that I was every bit what every other woman was, caught in the black hole of gender roles. I saw how I had covered myself in a robe, believing it to be a glamorous and shiny royal robe. I had been happy in my belief that I was supposed to perform certain responsibilities in my life and that

I would need to learn them when the time came.

I never learned how to cook properly. When I wanted to learn my mother would say, “Darling! You have to learn it someday. No need to come in now. Stay away and study.” I now realize that my mother was not being generous but was only enrobing me in the belief that I would someday have to take on the responsibility of cooking for, and feeding others, even if I studied and acquired a ‘high standard’.

I had previously believed that the women in the communities that we were working with were poor and were in the clutches of caste, class and gender, and we needed to really work with them on gender. But this assumption was shattered on the very first day that I walked into the community to preach about gender and gender roles.

I heard them say, “*Hume pata hai ki kya sahi hai aur kya galat! Lekin hum isi gaon mai rehte hai, dusre kya bolenge?* (We know what is right and what is wrong! But we live in this village, we can’t oppose the norms. What will the others say?)”

I thought of how we get into these gendered roles in society from childhood. We see it in our families and in society around us and that is how it becomes so internalized.

“Mai nahi ja sakti meeting me dada logon ke saath, wo log bolenge ki mai acchi aurat nahi hoon. (I cannot go for meetings with the men. They will say I am not a good woman.)”

“Didi, mai to jaise bhi kar rahi hoon, lekin apni beti aur bete ko sikhaungi.” (Sister, I am enduring all this in whatever way I can, but I will teach my daughter and son.)”

It is very frustrating to see that women are not able to take a stand for themselves. I have, on several occasions, become angry and, at times, have scolded them and then left. But later, when I have reflected, I have had a flashback of my mother and myself.

I am a woman from the urban areas where it is professed that life is less gendered and less conservative. I think of how free and independent women in the cities are. And then, suddenly, I am called back to look at myself. “Hey! Who do you think you are? You are not independent or free!” I, then, begin to think of all the instances when that is really not the case.

I began to realize that I was no different from the village women we were training with on creating

awareness of gender roles. My parents had always said, “You are a good daughter.” The definition of the words ‘good daughter’ is highly gendered because it speaks of a girl who never quarrels, respects everyone, speaks softly, does not have any addictions, is single and is untouched. These are all qualities to be portrayed to society. I am not ‘good’ because I am an educated, confident and fearless girl, who takes up challenges in life. I am not appreciated for who I am.

In the community where I work, I see girls getting married by the age of 16. Thank god! I have not been forced to get married by that age. I have not been subjected to that. I am happy to be different in that respect. Hey wait! Wait! Why am I feeling so happy?

I remember a conversation I had with my mother recently. Mother had casually thrown this at me, “You need to marry by the age of 26–28 years.”

I had responded, “Well, okay!”

Mother: “We will find a boy who is elder to you, tall, handsome with a higher paid job and belongs to a high status family.”

At other times, she has complained to me, “Why do you

need to do a field job? See, your complexion is getting darker day by day. Who will marry you?”

When I recall these conversations, I realize that I am no different from the village girl, who also needs to marry into a better family and to a ‘superior’ husband and where the girl needs to be homely and beautiful. I am supposed to be marrying to be a ‘wife’ and not a ‘partner’.

I thought of how we get into these gendered roles in society from childhood. We see it in our families and in society around us and that is how it becomes so internalized.

When I was pondering upon it after the gender trainings, I realized how deeply entrenched it was. I knew I was supposed to study, marry, bear children, take care of the house, cook and do a job. Is it expected of me because I am a woman?

One day, my mother called me up while I was in office. She told me that she felt worthless and was a prisoner in my father’s home. I was surprised at her breaking down before me. I consoled her and tried to pacify her. The next day, I went for a meeting in the community where I had a discussion about women’s lives.

The biggest dilemma that I face in all this is whether I can practice what I am preaching to the community. Am I ready to take on that challenge of confrontation in my own life as I am teaching the women to do?

They said that they are only wives and mothers. Most of them had even given up their hobbies and dreams after their marriage because they could not move out from their homes.

Sitting there, I saw a glimpse of my mother's life, or my life, in their stories. Deprived of resources or belongingness (a woman's so-called home is not really her own), she is just a housewife without any hobby to keep her entertained and no social life to speak of. At times, it strikes me that a city woman's life is even worse than that of the deprived women I am working with. At least in the villages, people like us are investing time and effort to help them better their lives. What about all those who face the same life in the cities? I would say that they are in a worse state.

The biggest dilemma that I face in all this is whether I can practice what I am preaching to the community. Am I ready to take on that challenge of confrontation in my own life as I am teaching the women to do? It is said that preaching is easier than practising what we preach in our daily lives. And I struggle with this dilemma every time I encourage women to take a stand.

The struggle is not because I fear I cannot fight for myself but because I would have to fight against people, and in this case, my parents and my loved ones. This brought to me the realization that we expect the villagers, who are already disadvantaged and who live in an environment where conservatism, gender, caste, class, patriarchy and poverty are the norm, to revolt against the system. This realization has kept me in check, and made me aware of the limitations of the solutions we present to them and an understanding of the choices they make. It has also helped me temper down my expectations. I notice that they are working more towards changing the life of the next generation. I am hopeful that this eradication of gender discrimination will be possible over time, over generations. We can only help them to progress towards that. In such a situation, I also see the struggles I went through and how I would not be giving my next generation such a life.

That hope keeps me going forward. On the personal level, continuous negotiations persist in various situations and, in most cases, discussions have worked in convincing my parents. It is easier to fight outside the perimeter of

our family and say, "Accept me the way I am."

Usually it does not stay at that level because the increasing intensity will one day put me in direct confrontation with my dear ones, when I will have to fight. Will I have the ability and the courage to fight in that situation? Will I be able to challenge them and not compromise?

I can feel the confusion ebbing and flowing like a tide and, oftentimes, flooding me. For the time being, I am sure of one truth and I would like to say this to my parents:

"Mai apki beti hi banke rehna chahti hoon. (I want to be a your daughter only.)"

Because, I want to be responsible and not fall into any gender role!

—

Aranya Biswas is based in Petarbar, Jharkhand