

## **Young adults learn collectively to end violence against women and girls: Experiences from India**

**Rajesh Tandon and Yashvi Sharma**

### **Context**

In Indian society, socio-cultural behaviour has its roots in caste, class and gender. Children are born male or female but learn to become boys and girls, growing up into men and women. After birth, social and cultural traditions start the process of 'gendering', transforming a male or female child into a man or a woman with qualities and roles they see as natural and inherent, suited to their specific society. Girls learn to believe that they deserve to be discriminated against. Such learning happens by seeing and observing mothers, grandmothers, and other women in the house. They are taught by fathers, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers not to question men. It is this process of socialization from early childhood that fosters the self-perception and experiences of young adults (boys and girls).

Schools, parents, media, and peers are great influencers and act as agents of socialization reinforcing the hegemonic myths that girls are vulnerable and that boys are strong and independent. Around the world, pubertal boys are viewed as predators and girls as potential targets and victims. Messages, such as do not sit like that, do not wear that, do not talk to him, boys will ruin your future, support the gender division of power while promoting sex segregation to preserve girl's sexuality (Blum et al., 2017). The way a girl carries herself, her mobility, and her sexuality is regulated by her parents and relatives. On the other hand, boys are encouraged to display male traits (Alkazi, Jain & Farrell, 2004). Simultaneously, boys and girls also learn neither to question nor digress from societally accepted roles because society holds such strong reservations against those who do not accept these norms.

The result is gender inequality and discrimination. This is based on the assumption that men are superior to women, and that women should be controlled by men and are part of a man's property. Women and girls who dare

to question or raise their voice against it are subjected to violence. In her book, 'Theorising Patriarchy,' Sylvia Walby calls patriarchy "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (Walby, 1989, p. 213-234). Patriarchy institutionalizes violence against women and girls as being systemic and legitimate for continued control and subjugation. The learning of patriarchy is so ingrained that we find that women often treat their sons better, and deprive their daughters, thus continuing the cycle of discrimination and violence (Alkazi, Jain & Farrell, 2004).

### **Participatory Research as a Tool for Social Change**

Knowledge has always been a major source of power and control. It has functioned as a factor reinforcing the division of society into "haves" and "have nots", or the powerful and the powerless. Participatory strategies of social transformation have emphasized the participation of the people themselves in bringing about desired changes. Participatory research is a method of inquiry, learning and change wherein becoming aware of one's reality and learning about it is in itself believed to be an act of changing that reality (Tandon, 2002).

### **Engaging Young Adults to Collectively Learn To End Violence Against Women and Girls**

*I cannot walk home alone at night  
I'm afraid and I have a million questions -  
For instance,  
Who is responsible for ensuring my safety?  
When I have to take longer routes  
To avoid eve-teasers and cat-callers,  
it feels like my safety is solely my responsibility.  
How do I convince them - a woman is a human first?*

*Jyotsna, 16 Years, KBC program in Bhubaneswar, Odisha*

In 2012, India marked the beginning of a new movement for ending violence against women, when newspapers broke headlines of the brutal gang rape of a young 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern in a moving bus in Delhi. When nearly all of Delhi, especially the youth, was seen joining the protests that erupted, it was clear - violence against women was no longer a woman's issue alone. When the anguished cries of the youth who were leading the protests echoed "Enough is enough, no more crimes against women", the entire country and indeed the world sat up to listen to their voices. It was evident that youth

were the new agents of change (Farrell, 2015). 50.1% of the population in India was aged 24 years and below in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). Young adulthood (15-24 years) is a revolutionary age where boys and girls possess enthusiasm to take risk and ability to question wrongs. Youth are drivers of change, said the UN Secretary-General António Guterres' at the eighth annual Economic and Social Council Youth Forum, 2019, remarking young people are a lightning rod for change. But simply telling youth that they are ambassadors of change will unlikely bring about the change. Young adults need to be actively involved in the process of change and need to be supported to question deep-seated prejudices and beliefs. The ability to question and challenge negative gender attitudes, behaviours and stereotypes that lead to violence need to be learnt. The efforts to prevent violence against women and girls must start early in life, by educating and working with boys and girls, and young men and young women, to promote respectful relationships and gender equality (Bhartiya Stree Shakti, 2017).

PRIA and Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF's) Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) program is one such example through which young adults (girls as well as boys) in different parts of India learn to question the status quo. They are engaged through a range of activities to stimulate dialogue and critical reflection on causes and consequences of violence, and attitudes and mindsets that result in women and girls feeling unsafe. Participatory learning activities include the use of drama, poetry, and song as well as sports (young boys and girls playing together). Youth learn a participatory safety mapping tool called Participatory Safety Audit (PSA), which helps them map out all the safe and unsafe spaces and the key spatial and social factors that impact women's safety in their localities.

### *The KBC approach*

The participatory learning approach underpins the KBC program. The program was initiated in 2012 after a learning needs assessment was conducted in various districts of Haryana, primarily to understand the perceptions of young adults about the gender challenges that exist at the individual and community level, and in accessing different kinds of resources. The findings from the assessment were used to develop various elements of the KBC program, such as supporting and developing leadership among young adults (boys and girls), providing a platform through which youth of all genders come together to take collective action on ending violence against women and girls in their own communities, and providing them with the skills and tools to lead this change. The program is guided by the belief that the root of ending violence against women and girls lies in changing gender relations and equations between men

and women. This goal cannot be achieved without the active participation of everyone in the community, especially boys and men, who must take a stand and support actions to prevent violence against women and girls. Hence, the KBC program thrives on a partnership model, where the youth work in close proximity with members of their communities and those individuals directly linked to their everyday lives. This includes parents, teaching and non-teaching staff of educational institutes, service delivery persons (public transportation officials, police, shopkeepers, etc.), local elected leaders and community leaders, among others.

### **Learning to Change**

Learning and change are interrelated. Learning is linked to curiosity. Young adults are naturally curious. This curiosity, when supported, helps them ask questions, and the search for answers leads them to learn different perspectives, different views, and understand different alternatives/choices. Therefore, in order for young adults to learn, it is important to stimulate curiosity among them and to exhibit this curiosity by asking questions.

To bring about change, young adults have to learn to use the answers to the questions they have asked to act differently from what they have been socialised into doing. For example, when growing up, boys and girls are often told that boys are strong (boys don't cry), and boys need to get educated to get a job and take care of the family (boys have to work and be the breadwinner in the family). Girls need to be caring and docile (girls do not speak loudly, they cook food for the family, and look after the children). So, to change, they have to replace this old way of thinking with a new way of thinking.

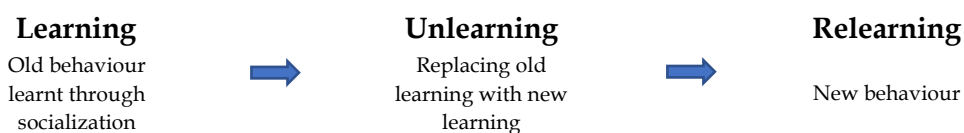
One such change is to begin to believe that girls can aspire to complete their education and join any profession for work. In a KBC session with girls about aspirations, a girl from Haryana said *"It is very difficult to manage school and household chores at the same time. I feel burdened. After coming back from school, I have to do all the household work, and then in the night, complete my school homework. I feel like quitting school because then my life will be easier."* This reflects the reality of many girls in India where household chores become more important than studying and completing their education. For these girls, socialized into thinking that becoming wives, daughters-in-law and mothers is more important, education is of secondary importance, something that can, and must, be given up. Societal aspirations assume higher importance than individual aspirations. In learning to think and act differently and relearning a new way, young adults need to unlearn the old ways of being, acting and behaving. This is not very easy - because unlearning the old and learning the

new can make them uncomfortable, cause anxiety and stress. Furthermore, what they learn and how they practice what they have learned is greatly influenced by the learning experience. If the learning environment is positive, where the young adult earns praise for being curious to learn, then they will be stimulated to repeatedly practice their new learnings, and eventually make it part of their daily lives. But, if the experience is disappointing, or the learning environment is not stimulating, then they won't be interested to learn anything new.



*The learning change diagram*

The diagram above describes the process of learning to change and the important steps involved in this process.



Let's apply these concepts to the situation of young adults learning to collectively end violence against women and girls.

- **What is the current reality?** There is gender inequality. Young girls are discriminated against. Boys in the house get priority for food, education, play, etc. Those who raise voice are subjected to violence.
- **What is the socialized behaviour boys and girls need to unlearn?** Women and girls are meant to be occupied with household chores, should be kept inside the house and should not aspire to step out of the home to work, earn and be independent.

- **What is the new behaviour boys and girls have to learn?** That boys and girls are equal and should be treated equally in the family, community and by society at large.

In such a situation, unlearning based on the current reality needs to occur, i.e., moving young adults from old behaviour to new behaviour. A collective process of unlearning and relearning facilitates change in families and communities. How does change in behaviours take place? Change takes place when external constraints or stimulus facilitate the learning of new knowledge and skills. An external facilitator can bring new information, alternatives and knowledge to stimulate young adults to question the status quo. Initially, one or two youth at the individual level begin to question their current reality. Boys may start thinking why do they need to be strong all the time, or why is the burden of protecting the women in the family theirs alone? Girls may begin to question why their brothers are allowed to go outside and play, while they have to stay home to do the housework. Why can't they enjoy the same freedoms that the boys in the community enjoy? After a period of time, groups of young girls meet groups of young boys (similar others) and they realize that all young adults in their community have similar questions. At this point, curiosity is awakened and they begin to collectively explore, reflect, and reason – in their search for answers.

Sharing curiosity with similar others provides the recognition that we are not alone, we are not the problem, that how we behave is not the problem. The problem lies somewhere else. Developing this consciousness and ability to value one's capacity to make choices, and to make decisions, is agency. Young adults, individually and collectively, begin to recognize and exercise such agency – for example, in choices of higher education, what job to do, choosing their life partner, etc. Developing agency includes taking risks to make choices, and having the confidence to face the consequences of that choice. Individual agency requires valuing one's capacity to make choices and to take decisions. Collective agency is similar but brings collective power, strength, and voice.

## Conclusion

*People say revolutions end in celebration  
 But truth be told, my heart breaks  
 To see women having to fight,  
 Every waking moment of their lives.  
 They must also want to be as free as a bird.  
 Everyone wants to live freely, equally,*

*Under the blue sky, cared for by Mother Earth.  
But this constant discrimination prevents it.  
However, when I am distressed,  
I think of the women who are brave and relentless  
Their daily struggles fills me with hope, pride,  
and a resolve to be a part of the change.*

*Jatin, 15 years, KBC program in Haryana*

The KBC program equips young adults, especially young girls, with agency – to learn to make choices, and develop the courage and confidence to make the change based on these choices. Groups of young adults use that agency to demand equal treatment of girls in families, and ask questions of teachers and service providers (like the police) in their communities, in a bid to ensure safety for women and girls in public. By sharing what they have learnt with young adults from different communities, they grow to learn the role of becoming agents of change in society at large.

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## **Young adults learn collectively to end violence against women and girls: Experiences from India**

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on engaging young adults to collectively learn to end violence against women and girls. It sheds light on PRIA and Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF's) Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) program as an example through which young adults (girls as well as boys) in different parts of India learn to question the status quo. They are engaged through a range of activities to stimulate dialogue and critical reflection on causes and consequences of violence, and attitudes and mindsets that result in women and girls feeling unsafe. Participatory learning activities include the use of drama, poetry, and song as well as sports (young boys and girls playing together). Youth learn a participatory safety mapping tool called Participatory Safety Audit (PSA), which helps them map out all the safe and unsafe spaces and the key spatial and social factors that impact women's safety in their localities.

### **Keywords**

Participatory learning , gender, violence, household chores, safety

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## **Les jeunes adultes apprennent collectivement à mettre fin à la violence à l'égard des femmes et des filles : expériences de l'Inde**

Rajesh Tandon et Yashvi Sharma

### **Résumé**

Cet article se concentre sur l'engagement des jeunes adultes à apprendre collectivement à mettre fin à la violence contre les femmes et les filles. Il met en lumière le programme Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) de la PRIA et de la Martha Farrell Foundation (MFF) comme un exemple par lequel de jeunes adultes (filles et garçons) dans différentes régions de l'Inde apprennent à remettre en question le statu quo. Ils sont engagés dans une série d'activités visant à stimuler le dialogue et la réflexion critique sur les causes et les conséquences de la violence, ainsi que sur les attitudes et les mentalités qui font que les femmes et les filles ne se sentent pas en sécurité. Les activités d'apprentissage participatives comprennent l'utilisation du théâtre, de la poésie, du chant, ainsi que du



sport entre les jeunes garçons et les jeunes filles. Les jeunes apprennent un outil de cartographie participative de la sécurité appelé "Audit Participatif de sécurité", qui les aide à cartographier tous les espaces sûrs et non sûrs et les principaux facteurs spatiaux et sociaux qui ont un impact sur la sécurité des femmes dans leurs localités.

### **Mots-clés**

Apprentissage participatif, genre, violence, tâches ménagères, sécurité.

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## **Los jóvenes adultos aprenden colectivamente a poner fin a la violencia contra las mujeres y las niñas: Experiencias de la India**

Rajesh Tandon y Yashvi Sharma

### **Resumen**

Este artículo se centra en alentar la participación de los jóvenes adultos para aprender colectivamente a poner fin a la violencia contra las mujeres y las niñas. Refleja y da información acerca del programa Kadam Badhate Chalo (KBC) de PRIA y la Fundación Martha Farrell (MFF), a través del cual los jóvenes adultos (tanto chicos como chicas) de distintas partes de la India aprenden a cuestionar el statu quo. Se les involucra a través de una serie de actividades para estimular el diálogo y la reflexión crítica sobre las causas y consecuencias de la violencia así como sobre las actitudes y construcción de mentalidades que hacen que las mujeres y las niñas se sientan inseguras. Las actividades de aprendizaje participativo incluyen el uso del teatro, la poesía y las canciones, así como los deportes (chicos y chicas juegan juntos). Los jóvenes aprenden una herramienta de mapeo participativo de la seguridad llamada Auditoría Participativa de la Seguridad (APS), que les ayuda a mapear todos los espacios seguros e inseguros y los factores espaciales y sociales clave que afectan a la seguridad de las mujeres en sus localidades.

### **Palabras clave**

Aprendizaje participativo , género, violencia, tareas domésticas, seguridad