



We want to Be HEARD

Exploring masculinity

Renowned women rights activist and gender trainer KAMLA BHASIN talks to Shamsuddoza Sajen, Sr. Editorial Assistant of The Daily Star on various aspects of masculinity and violence against women.



Shamsuddoza Sajen (SS): Why understanding masculinity is so important?

Kamla Bhasin (KB): For many years people have thought that gender means women. This is completely wrong. Gender means both men and women. We have not focused on men at all. We only talk about women because women are suffering. We ignored what was happening to men. Somewhere imbalance has been developing.

Women have been talking about rights. Our constitution also recognizes the equal status of man and woman. But our society is not following with freedom in the same way. Until recently, Dhaka University women had to get back before sunset. Men did not have to come back. So, we are only talking about women thinking that men have so many privileges in patriarchy. In the world, men control 99% of property- that means 50% of people control 99% of property. Men also control 90% of all provisions of power. We do not think of the other side of the story. 99% of terrorists are men, 99% of suicide bombers are men.

Men are the biggest losers in patriarchy. The biggest deprivation is when you are not any more a human. If a woman is raped, that is not a deprivation for her. Some idiots have done this. I do not think rape can finish a woman's life. It can only do that in a patriarchy where a woman has to be virgin. Instead of the rapists, women commit suicide.

In 1971, Pakistani soldiers raped thousands of women. They hated Bangladeshis. If we hate someone, we do not talk to him or her, or even look at him or her. So then why do Pakistani soldiers use their genital organs to rape Bangladeshi women? So, he makes his genital into a weapon of war. Will he use the same weapon with his wife when he goes back? Will he use the same weapon to produce children? How does he look at his body? I could not live thinking of my body as a weapon. They do not have emotions because society says men should not be emotional. They have left many children in the womb of Bangladeshi women. So they do not have relations with their children. They do not have relations with their body, do not have emotions, and even do not have relationships with their own children. Is this the life of a human being?

According to government of India, 40% of Indian husbands commit domestic violence. Are they human beings? That's why it is important to talk about men and masculinity.

SS: Talking about femininity is equally important. What do you think?

KB: Femininity is the exact opposite of masculinity. Masculine strong, feminine weak; masculine rational, feminine emotional. So it is the exact opposite. Both are defined by society. They are not biological categories. Actually a woman can also be masculine, and a man can be feminine. These are human qualities. A beautiful human is someone who has the best qualities of both man

and woman. When I am strong and gentle, when I am rational and emotional, when I am brave and compassionate like Buddha. A man can only be a Buddha if he has feminine qualities also. A Hitler can never become a Buddha.

SS: What is the relation between masculinity and power?

KB: In society, there is not only patriarchy- there is also class. An upper class woman is stronger than 90% of Indian men who are working class. An upper caste woman is superior to all the lower caste men. So men are not always powerful. And it is wrong to say that men are naturally violent, because men who work in the house are not violent. For example, in work one shows all feminine qualities in respect to his boss. But going home he becomes masculine. With your boss, you have feminine qualities, but with your subordinate you have masculine qualities. So masculinity is a question of power. So anybody in a position of power becomes masculine.

SS: The idea of masculinity and femininity is constructed. How does it work?

KB: Today media is more important than education. Children are consuming media for many more hours per day. Education is becoming more and more gender-sensitive because of criticism from women's rights groups.

But look at the media, which is working on children 24 hours a day. You look at the cartoons. They are all violent. All of them are trying to hit each other. There is so much socialization of boys and girls. We give a gun to a boy at two and a Barbie doll to a girl. We had our traditional patriarchy but now we have modern capitalist patriarchy, which is very powerful. The million-dollar pornography industry, million-dollar cosmetic industry, million-dollar toy industry and cinema. All of them are horrible. So, now, it is extremely difficult to fight for values of equality. Because, all of this are only profit-making bodies. They do not care for values of equality, human rights, justice and dignity. They are defining feminism in their own way. Those women who are stripping themselves in Bollywood say that they are feminists. Why does a feminist have to sell her body? Our bodies will sell only in patriarchy. In an equal society, my body will not sell because you and I are equal. The moment a woman becomes an object she is in a patriarchy.

We are suffering from our colonial mindset. In South Asia we are selling Fair & Lovely. In South Asia we are supposed to be dark. And there is a campaign going in India named 'Fair and Lovely' that means if you are fair, you are lovely. So three quarters of South Asia cannot be lovely. And it is insulting to South Asians. These are idiotic slogans. We need to condemn it. We need to shout about it.

SS: On which areas we should focus more?

KB: Men and women are human beings. As a woman, why should I always look pretty? Why is my body the most important part? I also have a brain. Why is that not ever valued? So we want to grow up as human beings with creativity and all that. Men and women have equal freedom and rights. Every man should not be forced to be a breadwinner. You have no freedom because your sister does not have any freedom, otherwise you could have said "I will stay at home and my sister will earn for us". Men have to understand that if women are not free they cannot be free. Because we live together, we are not enemies.

We have to work on language, religion and culture. Husband, Swami-like words should be taken out of the language. These are unconstitutional. If we change our constitution and say "we (read government) do not believe in equality and women are not capable," then I have no problem. Yet they have already signed CEDAW and the Human Rights Declaration, and women are still unable to walk outside after 6 o'clock without fear. Either say we do not believe in it or do something.

Justice comes after the rape of a woman. I am more interested in preventing a rape. How will I prevent rape? By changing the mindset of boys and men. By changing the mindsets of families who do not control their boys. We need to work much more on ourselves. I felt when those five men raped a woman that I was responsible for producing five rapists. They are not borne. We produce them. We know rape is not a crime of sexuality but it is a crime of power.

We have to work on implementing our laws. We have to really change everything because every-

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

A better Bangladesh for women and girls



campaign UNFPA is focusing on creating awareness among men and boys in order to help them become full partners in combating gender-based violence. UNFPA will also be working with young people across the nation to help them explore policy matters regarding to this prevalent human rights issue.

Beyond the 16 Days of Activism, UNFPA is engaged year-round in the fight to end sex and gender-based violence in Bangladesh. In the public sector, UNFPA is working with the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs to increase support and services available to victims of SGBV and child marriage in Bangladesh. Additionally, UNFPA is teaming up with the police sector under the Bangladesh Ministry of Home Affairs to increase support and services available to the victims of sex and gender-based violence (SGBV) and child marriage who report these crimes to the local police stations/thanas. In the private sector, UNFPA is working with BGMEA and the Ministry of

Labour and Employment to prevent and address violence against women in Bangladesh's garment sector. UNFPA is constantly striving for a Bangladesh where women and girls can live without fear of gender-based violence.

As we observe these 16 Days of Activism to End Gender-Based Violence, let us think about the women and girls in our lives. These 16 Days of Activism must be the foundation on which we build the campaign to end gender-based violence every day, year round.

UNFPA is working to end gender-based violence in Bangladesh and around the world.

Are we doing enough?

ELENA AHMED

PICK up a newspaper and you are almost sure to find a report or two relating an incident of violence against women (VAW). The number of reported cases is huge, but they constitute only a tiny part of the real figure. Very often the woman who has suffered an act of violence chooses not to report it, especially when it happens within the family. Why? Because she has grown up in settings where unequal treatment on the basis of sex is considered to be normal; and she also fears bringing shame on herself by making public the violence she has endured, as if she were to blame for this. This silence on her part is a role she is expected to play by the society.

Domestic violence is, however, just one aspect of VAW. VAW takes many forms, from eve teasing to acid throwing, sexual harassment at the workplace or school, stalking, hurling abusive language or passing suggestive comments. And they happen in all levels, starting from family to community to the wider social arena. Though there is no reliable data, it could be safely surmised that incidence of VAW remains a huge concern and a development challenge facing the country.

VAW, domestic and otherwise, is a manifestation of the gender equality that permeates across the society. The traditional gender norms and customs and misinterpretation of religious edicts place less value on girls and women compared to boys and men. A woman faces gender discrimination at every stage of life from inception through adolescence to adulthood. A girl is more likely to be denied access to education and drop out if poverty forces the father to choose between a boy and a girl. As she grows up her space shrinks, freedom and mobility narrows down while her brother gains freedom and has his opportunities

expanded. An adolescent girl is invisible because she is in the background, which is imposed on her often as a protective and control measure. She is considered a burden on the family and not only doesn't she promise any future return to the family, she is, on the contrary, a drain on family resources because she has to be married off with a dowry. So at no stage of life does she have the power to make decisions that affect her, and this relative powerlessness of women makes it possible to subject her to



violence. So the society's attitude towards women has to change before we see violence against women reducing.

Changing these deep-rooted attitudes that have survived generations and are held so dearly by a large part of the society is far from easy. At Plan we carry out activities that can be broadly categorised under the heading of short-term and long-term interventions. Short-term interventions are meant to address the more immediate needs, such as protection and livelihood opportunities for the survivors of VAW. We have a number of projects that directly or indirectly address the VAW issue. The Protecting Human Rights project, which focuses on reducing domestic violence, offers a comprehensive

package of services including legal and psycho-social counseling, medical support in addition to placement at shelter homes. Our Girl Power Project provides similar services. Plan does not operate any shelter homes on its own, but has established linkages or forged partnership with the NGOs who do. Plan just ensures that the survivors they receive get access to safe shelters.

Both the projects also provide a variety of livelihood opportunities in the field of tailoring, desktop publishing, livestock, poultry, beautification, nursery, nursing etc. Plan also assists the survivors in securing government-provided assistance such as VGD, VGF, as well as entry into food for work programmes and the 100-day programme.

While protection and livelihood opportunities are helpful for the VAW survivors to start life anew, they do not essentially address the root cause behind VAW. What is needed is a changing attitude towards women or bringing equilibrium in the power relation that is currently immensely tilted in favour of men. Plan seeks to bring that transformation through empowering girls, by promoting education and girls' sports like martial art and girls' football. Other interventions such as disseminating messages through street or popular drama, discussion and debate, nurturing a healthy and respectful relationship between boys and girls through cultural activities, engaging the people in position of power such as public representatives and local elites and making girls aware of their rights. These are all long-drawn efforts and will take time to bear fruit. But then, big changes do take time and we must keep working patiently to change attitudes towards women and eliminate violence against women.