

# INDIA

## REDEFINING MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY FOR TEENS

By **Bula Devi**

Delhi (Women's Feature Service) – What is 'mardangi' (masculinity)? Who is a respectable girl? Is a boy 'smart' only if he has a gym-pumped body? ... When it comes to dealing with conventional notions of masculinity or femininity, questions like these baffle the minds of young women and men. Living in a predominantly patriarchal society leaves them little or no room for independent thinking on such subjects.

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Nowhere was this more evident than at a unique workshop, organised by the women's resource centre Jagori, as part of its on-going 'Safer Cities Programme Delhi', which is supported by UN Women. The workshop, conducted in Badarpur – a low-income resettlement colony on the margins of South Delhi – brought together a motley group of youngsters, aged between 14 and 21 years, to discuss "hamara samuday, hamari pehchan" (our identity, our community), what constructs masculinity and femininity and how that affects their community.

For starters, the youngsters were given three cameras and everybody was instructed to take pictures of the participants in their group. Excited at the prospect of being photographed, they happily posed for these shots, some more readily than others. Then as their reactions were sought on the results, interesting observations popped up. "She looks like a 'goondi' (masculine person); she is dressed in a 'bold' manner," commented the boys looking at a picture of a girl in jeans and a shirt with a few buttons open.

In contrast, compliments poured in for those who wore the traditional salwar kameez: "She looks like a Barbie doll; her beautiful smile has lit up the photograph; her simplicity is the best part of the picture; she looks so innocent and quiet," commented one young man. Yet another picture – of a sombre-looking girl dressed in jeans and a simple shirt – drew the comment: "She looks good."

What did the girls have to say? While some reflected on the facial expressions of the boys



(Credit: Bula Devi\ WFS)

Jyoti Chowdhury, 14, Savita, 19, and Jyoti Chauhan are articulate young women who took part in the discussions on masculinity and femininity. Chowdhury wondered: "why boys whistle or pass lewd comments when an unknown girl rides a scooty or walks alone on the street?".

(“He looks serious” or “Is he sad and depressed?”), others remarked on bodily features (“He should have shown off his muscles” or “He looks like a villain in a South Indian film!”).

The reactions were almost predictable. The image of the girl with the top buttons of her shirt open was widely deemed as “unacceptable”, even though her outfit was not revealing in any way. Male participants opined that while “men can wear anything girls need to be more careful”. For them, respect for a girl emerged from factors like “how politely she speaks” or “how presentable she is”. In their eyes, girls with their hair cut short are immediately typecast as lacking “good character”!

When 14-year-old Anita, heard these observations of the young men, she was amazed by the hypocrisy inherent in them. She remarked, “Why is it that boys whistle or pass lewd comments when an unknown girl rides a scooter or walks alone on the street? They wouldn’t do this if that very girl happened to be the sister of someone known to them. They would then immediately get protective.”

None of the boys had a convincing reply to her question but clearly the general view was that while “good girls” have to be demure, the rules are completely different for boys. Being ‘manly’ entailed the display of physical strength: ‘Mardangi unki taqat mei hoti hai’ (manliness reflects in their strength); ‘mard woh jo kabhi rote nahi hai’ (real men never cry), ‘mard bahut dard sah sakte hai’ (men can endure a lot of pain). Recalled one boy at the workshop, “Earlier when I used to cry sometimes, I used to be ridiculed. ‘Sab bolte the, kya ladkiyon ke jaise ro raha hai’ (Everyone used to say you keep crying like a girl).”

While patriarchy has certain expectations from women, it also makes demands of men. Not one of the male participants had been given the space to reflect on the real notions of strength and pain. No one had ever asked them to think about whether a man could endure even an iota of the pain a woman bears during child birth, or whether their sisters ever got to eat as much as they did or play as freely or be able to build the physical strength they are so proud of flaunting. The reality is that girls are usually confined within the four walls of their homes and instructed to help out in household chores while boys are allowed the freedom to do what they want.

When the youngsters were asked to share their life ambitions, more underlying biases emerged. At one point many of the girls present expressed an interest in becoming doctors. This left the boys dumbstruck. Said one, “I always thought that girls only wanted to become beauticians or housewives.”

What was heartening was that these young girls from Badarpur consistently expressed the desire to take up a profession in order to make themselves “self-reliant” – some wanted to become air hostesses, others, law enforcers; some even wanted to join the police and do something for their country. Anita, for instance,



(Credit: Bula Devi, WFS)

Nishant, 17, wants to make a Hindi film on violence against women.

wanted to become a high-ranking police official and Meera, 19, saw herself in combat uniform or heading a management team in a five-star hotel. Anita justified her choice by saying, "Our local police is not able to stop crimes against women so I want to become a high ranking officer to be able to make a difference."

The boys, too, had their preferences. Amitabh 15, for whom masculinity meant "wearing dark glasses and walking with a swagger", wanted a secure government job. The eldest son of a taxi driver, he was keen to pursue his studies and take tuitions on the side to supplement the family income. Mohan, 17, shared his dream of making a film on women, a reflection of his thoughts on the recent spurt of rape cases. "Nobody has time to read books these days. So I want to make a Hindi film on women in an effort to bring change in society," he said.

The idea of the workshop was to make visible general attitudes. Observed Sanjay Muttoo, the resource person working on gender issues with Jagori, "Through the dynamics of a workshop like this, one makes boys and girls more sensitive. For instance, while the pain a woman has to bear during child birth may not be a parameter or benchmark of strength for these boys, a sustained, close engagement through such sensitisation efforts helps them explore such notions."

The close link between stereotyped images of the body and violence becomes apparent in such workshops, just one of the multiple events organised under the 'Safer Cities Programme, Delhi', which have given a platform to bring young people from different backgrounds and localities in Delhi together. Youth members from Bardarpur have led public events to fight violence against women and also conducted safety audits in their neighbourhoods. Two youth members are core members of the much talked about Must Bol Campaign, which uses new forms of media to speak out against violence and usher in social change.

According to Muttoo such articulation is the first step to learning. "I find workshops particularly an effective way of communicating the idea of gender equality," he reiterated. As if to underline his words, one lad spoke up, "We men should certainly change. When I go home I will tell my father that we should all chip in to do the housework and not leave it all to my sisters and mother."

JAGORI ('AWAKEN, WOMEN') is a women's documentation, training and communication centre with the aim of spreading feminist consciousness to a wider audience using creative media. Established in 1984 Jagori is rooted in the experiences of the Indian women's movement with a vision to *help build a just society through feminist values*. It defines its mandate as building feminist consciousness through identifying and addressing the capacity-building, information and networking needs of women, particularly those belonging to oppressed groups in rural and urban areas.

**Mission Statement:** To deepen feminist consciousness with diverse stakeholders at the national and local levels through advocacy, perspective-building and supporting struggles against human rights violations of women and generating new body of knowledge.

### Our Objectives

- Action research and production of creative feminist materials
- Consciousness-raising and leadership development on women's rights and gender equality
- Supporting women's struggles against all forms of violence ensuring access to safety, dignity, justice and rights
- Creative campaigns and educational materials on key feminist concerns to respond to the programming and resource needs of women's groups, community and field organisations, media and development organizations
- Advocacy and Networking to enlarge and claim democratic spaces and strengthen women's movement building efforts



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