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Working with Men & Boys for Gender Justice

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Abstract: Breakthrough uses interactive, creative educational outreach as a powerful tool to stimulate discussion on dominant gender norms and practices in South Asia. Gender is often perceived in binaries of masculinity and femininity. This perception propagates stereotypes, roles, and rigid norms for boys and men, women and girls. Challenging gender norms can result in chastisement, violence, abuse, ridicule and more. Negative consequences can also arise from adhering to gender norms, for instance, by perpetuating unrealistic and toxic expectations of what it means to be a ‘real man’.

Who or what is the ‘real man’? Men are expected to be masculine, but masculinities are not uniform or linear. Even within one category of masculinity, there is a plurality of experience, perception, and meaning. Interpretations of masculinity vary between individuals and societies. This paper explores different forms of masculinities in the stakeholder communities with whom the authors collaborate. Breakthrough’s work with men and boys follows a dynamic, iterative process that both ‘catalyses’ and ‘stimulates’ dialogue on notions of masculinity. Engaging men and boys as change agents helps to address gender-based discrimination and violence against women and girls, for a more gender-just society.

Introduction: about Breakthrough

Gender includes a range of identities, roles, stereotypes, and behaviours. It also includes notions of femininities and masculinities which define what and/ or who a ‘real woman’ and ‘real man’ are; it defines the identities with reference to each other, and creates a hierarchical, social and binary system of ‘norms’ that lead to experiences of discrimination, pleasure, shame, and/or violence. This paper explores how masculinities defines men and boys, their roles, behaviours, interactions, and relationships with self, each other, and people of gender identities different from theirs. The paper further shares the experiences that Breakthrough has had in recent years in engaging with men and boys, including them as social change agents



vis-à-vis gender based discrimination and violence against women and girls.

Breakthrough uses interactive, creative educational outreach as a powerful tool to stimulate discussion on dominant gender norms and practices. Educational entertainment programmes, curriculum development, trainings, media products like music videos, PSAs, interactive games, print campaigns, street theatre, theatre of the oppressed, comics, puppetry and dance are the various methods and approaches used to engage men in discussions on masculinity, stereotypes, expected roles and behaviours to adhere to ‘gender norms’, social responsibility etc.

All of Breakthrough’s work, guided by field-based research to develop communication strategies and products is informed by the premise that a model of communication for social change is not *linear*. For social change, a model of communication is required that is cyclical and relational, and leads to an outcome of mutual and collective change rather than just one-sided, individual change. The model of Communication for Social Change (CFSC) describes an iterative process where “community dialogue” and “collective action” work together to produce social change in a community that improves the health and welfare of all of its members. It is an integrated model that draws from a broad literature on development communication since the early 1960s. In particular, the work of Latin American theorists and communication activists was used for its clarity and rich recommendations for a more people-inclusive, integrated approach of using communication for development. This understanding underlies Breakthrough’s work with men and boys as well which places emphasis on dialogue – a cyclical process of information sharing which leads to mutual understanding, mutual agreement and collective action. The model of communication for social change¹ might be useful and appropriate to summarise Breakthrough’s body of work, particularly its work with men and boys in an effort to achieve gender equity and create a gender just society. The three broad goals of the work with men and boys can be summarised as:

- (1) Transformation of men and boys, empowering them to change their behaviours that perpetuate gender based discrimination, and become change agents and advocates for gender equality in their families and communities

¹ Maria Elena Figueroa, D. Lawrence Kincaid, Manju Rani & Gary Lewis, “Communication for Social Change: An Integrated Model for Measuring the Process and Its Outcomes”, The Communication for Social Change Working Paper Series: No.1, The Rockefeller Foundation and Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs, 2002



- (2) Empower communities and enlist their support through collective action to enable and create gender equitable spaces and sustain change
- (3) Mobilize institutional and human resources to address the issues of gender discrimination and use evidence-based advocacy to influence and change these discriminatory norms.

Much of Breakthrough's work and particularly its body of work with men and boys has been characterised by a dynamic, iterative process that has served to be a "catalyst/ stimulus" to initiate a dialogue on notions of masculinity. The [*'What kind of Man are you?'*](#) and [*'Is This Justice?'*](#) campaigns designed to address the transmission of HIV, and explore women's vulnerability to contracting HIV (along with the social stigma faced by HIV positive women and men²) are good examples of such a catalyst/stimulus to initiate dialogues on masculinity.

The campaigns were designed to respond to research findings³ which indicated that most of the new HIV infections were being reported by women who were in single monogamous heterosexual relationships. Thus, through the campaigns Breakthrough sought to stimulate discussions amongst the audience/community calling upon men to exercise responsibility in marriage and show their sensitivity towards their partners by using a condom.

They also sought to provide women the space to negotiate their safety in marital relationships. Both campaigns were directed at men and boys; addressing and engaging them to scrutinise traditional notions of masculinity with the underlying message that they were an integral part of the solution. Starting from an acknowledgment of culturally prevalent hegemonic norms of masculinity, the campaign serves as an important catalyst challenging its audience to examine hegemonic constructs of what it means to be a man.

The media messages and campaigns are significant in two important ways. Firstly, they acknowledge that men are part of the 'problem' (if it can be simplified as such) of gender inequity but more importantly are also part of the 'solution'. This dual approach 'addresses' men directly (by posing the problem) as well as 'engages' them by seeking solutions. The campaign and the media messaging do not take away the 'power' from the individual to change (by not indulging in shaming and blaming). Secondly, the messaging shifts the focus from *sexual entitlement* of men to *sexual responsibility* which is significant.

The shift in Breakthrough's approach to the issue of men and boys and their engagement with issues of gender equity becomes apparent

² 2006 NACO, UNDP, NCAER, REPORT on Gender and HIV/AIDS

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<http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/Is%20this%20Justice%20Evaluation.pdf>



when one does draws comparisons between its first production [Mann ke Manjeere](#) with its later products and campaigns like *Is this Justice?*, *What kind of Man are you?*, the [Bell Bajao!](#) campaign on domestic violence, and more recently the [Share Your Story](#).

Our most significant learning on engaging men and boys through our on-ground programmes and campaigns came from the communities we worked with. Especially women, with whom we did many of our community based trainings. These women would often say, “What you are sharing is very good, but do talk to our men as well”. In addition, working with youth, both young men and women, highlighted that for a sustained change we need to work with boys and young men. These were insights that we gained through the sharing of the participants at the training and community mobilisation programmes. Often, we would notice that when men and/ or boys spoke-up or intervened in support of the women and/ or girls, or shared about their experiences of challenging gender norms. Other men and boys in the communities would open-up and be more willing to engage in a dialogue. Once such transformation can be seen in this [video of the Breakthrough Desirable Men](#) which helped as a conversation starter, and encouraged other men and boys in the community to consider reflecting on and intervening to stop and/ or prevent the gender based discrimination and violence that occurred around them.

Transformation of ‘masculinity’, and the gender identities of ‘men, and boys’ could mean two things; one is doing away with the term itself, and second finding new articulations for the term and identities i.e. redefining what masculinities, men and boys mean. Doing-away with the term could indicate the removal of and/ or recreating new interpretation of the gender identities. However, a new articulation might not necessarily break the existing patriarchal structures of masculinities and manhood. Trying to achieve both these are difficult, and therefore, inform the insights and strategies of working with men and boys, and transformation among men and boys is important. Further, referring to masculinities studies shows that there are three key terms – Hegemonic Masculinity, Toxic Masculinity, Masculinity in Crisis, and New Masculinity that need to be understood and taken into account while working with/ engaging men and boys, addressing masculinities, and/ or working to transform masculinities, men and boys.

Just as different genders, ages, caste and classes etc., are hierarchically organized, similarly ‘masculinities’ are also hierarchically organized. For example, a Brahmin man is at the top-most level of power and privilege as compared to a Dalit man who will be placed at the bottom of the rank of men according to caste hierarchy. Or say, a well-built and tall man will be understood as the closest example of masculinity as compared to a thin and slim man. Simply put, at a



certain time a certain definition of man or masculinity is considered as ideal where other forms are a deviation from these prevalent ideals. Just by having a penis, facial hair, or a well-built physique etc., every man doesn't become equal in power. A certain typecast of 'being a man' is heralded as ideal and the rest of the notions/ images of masculinities as subordinate to it.

This understanding of masculinity comes from the observation that norms of masculinity and masculinity-markers differ across region and time. That is, cultures or norms of masculinity are always changing. The changes are mostly impacted by ongoing social, cultural and political changes that effects ideological, behavioural and attitudinal changes and expectations. For example, a couple of decade ago it was considered a shame or a taboo to a man's masculinity if he could not discipline or control his wife which meant that he was 'permitted' to use various forms of domestic violence. But recently, while there is still some normalising of the use of domestic violence, it is beginning to become unacceptable. Furthermore, disparities in accepted norms of masculinity across class, caste, and region can be discussed as the same changes may not apply uniformly across the society.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Toxic Masculinity: recognising men as perpetrators

The [*Mann ke Manjeere*](#) and [*Babul*](#) music videos were created as part of the album *Mann ke Manjeere* is significant in its approach to women and dealing with domestic violence.

On one hand the music video *Mann ke Manjeere* casts women in roles and scenarios far removed from the traditional frames, celebrates women's agency, resilience and ability to survive violent domestic situations —both by speaking out against violence and by leaving violent situations. This created the space for a broad popular audience of women to re-imagine their agency and explore their choices. For the most part, men in *Mann ke Manjeere* are depicted as the perpetrators of violence.

Not surprisingly, then, evaluations of *Mann ke Manjeere* revealed that the album and corresponding videos effected women far more powerfully than they affected men. Men, by contrast, rather than relating to the protagonist of the title track video, were drawn in by the cinematography of the video and the picturesque views of Rajasthan. Some men did not grasp that freedom from violence lay at the conceptual core of the production. The visual representations of men as perpetrators of violence did not invite men to critically engage with their personal role in perpetuating cycles of violence. Thus, while men were principal players in the creation of *Mann ke Manjeere*, they were not as effectively targeted as an audience for the



final production. However, the significance of *Mann ke Manjeere* lay in the fact that it provided the stimulus to bring the issue of domestic violence out into the public domain.

On the other hand, in the music video, *Babul* the men are seen as not just the perpetrators but also decision-makers of the household. Thus, they are viewed as capable of preventing women from becoming victims to domestic violence. They are seen as able to do this by not forcing their daughters to marry based on the notions of 'success', or socio-economic status of the prospective groom equated with wealth and thereby resulting in a happy married life for their daughters. The young girl in the video is requesting her father to not marry her off to a king, a businessman, a merchant, or a goldsmith. Secondly, it also shows men as 'capable of releasing women' from situations of violence in the role of husbands. The lyrics in *Babul* reflect, the young girl requesting her father to marry her off to a blacksmith so that he can break her chains and release her. In addition, this video also raises awareness to the fact of and breaks the silence on marital rape as a form of domestic violence, and helps the viewers to recognise the other forms of domestic violence – physical, verbal, and psychological. This video challenged men to re-think their roles as decision-makers in the family and consider the opinions of, and redefine the notions of well-being and a happy marriage of their daughters. This video portrayed women with little agency to participate in decision-making and choice regarding her life/ marriage, this is reflective of the lives of many women even today. Even today, young girls and women don't have a say in their choice of partners for relationships or marriage, and this further extends to a limited or complete lack of choices to speak-up about, and/ or walk-out of abusive relationships. These decisions are still dependent primarily on the male members of her family – father, brother, in-laws. More often than not, she is encouraged to make-peace with her situation in the interest of 'her' family's happiness. Thus, like shown in the video her best hope is to request the fathers and hope for a husband – 'blacksmith' in the video, who will 'allow' or 'give' her a certain amount of freedom.

Thus, at this point moving from viewing men as 'perpetrators' only, the narrative followed by Breakthrough recognised that men play the role of decision-makers as fathers, brothers, and partners. Therefore, it becomes all the more important to address men and their role of decision-makers and equally important for men to recognise and acknowledge that women and young girls have the agency to make choices and decide about their own lives.

The understanding of hegemonic masculinity in the mid-1980's included practices that were not limited to expected roles of men, and/ or identities of men. These practices were in the context of



continued dominance over women.⁴ However, hegemony was not referred to violence but that it could support violence, and the use of it reinforced through “culture, institutions, and persuasion”. The authors refer to Holter (1997, 2003) stating that the concept of hegemonic masculinity constructs masculine power from the direct experiences of the women instead it needs to take into account the structural subordination of women. Thus, needing to distinguish between patriarchy and gender. Patriarchy being a “long-term structure of subordination”, and gender being “a specific system of exchange that arose in the context of modern capitalism”. Therefore, the hierarchy of masculinities within the construct of gender relations cannot be treated as continuous with the patriarchal subordination of women. Thus, it becomes critical to factor in “the institutionalisation of gender inequalities, the role of cultural constructions, and the interplay of gender dynamics with race, class, and region.” (Connell, 2016).

In addition, toxic masculinities refers to “the narrow, traditional, or stereotypical norms of masculinities which shape boys and men’s lives.” These include expectations of aggression, toughness, dominance and more from men and boys. Flood goes on to explain that toxic masculinities has two interrelated impacts on the construction of masculinities. One, that it is bad for women, it “shapes men’s involvements in sexist and patriarchal behaviours and relations” this includes the use of violence and abusive behaviour towards women, therefore, creating gender inequalities. Secondly, he explains that it is bad for men by stereotyping men, creating norms, and constraining “men’s physical and emotional health, their relations with women, parent of children, and their relations with other men.” (Flood, 2018)

Consequently, toxic masculinities has to be seen as separate from hegemonic masculinities in the context of structural inequalities, use of violence/ aggression. Thus, *Mann ke Manjeere* aided in addressing both these forms of masculinities and questioning them. In addition, it broke the culture of silence and normalising of domestic violence as a personal or family matter to be settled-with or adjusted-to within the family.

Masculinity In Crisis: encouraging men to be responsible partners

The multi-media materials produced for the two campaigns [*‘Is this Justice?’*](#) and [*‘Are You Man Enough?’*](#) were designed to engage men and boys in a conversation about their masculine roles, and their

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https://www.etnologia.uw.edu.pl/sites/default/files/hegemonic_masculinity_connell_and_messerschmidt.pdf



responsibilities towards their women partners in a heterosexual relationship. The grass-roots education and community mobilization strategies worked with men, to interrogate gender roles that forge alternative notions of masculinity and worked with young men and boys to take leadership on these issues. Both the campaigns called upon men to take responsibility for their sexual behaviours and sought to sensitize the public on discrimination against HIV positive women who experience domestic violence because of their positive status. The popularity of the campaigns and its outreach can be gauged from the following numbers: The campaign '*Is This Justice?*' was mobilized in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. According to the Television Audience Measurement (TAM) and National Readership Survey (NRS), the campaign reached over 34 million people through television, 29 million through print and 18 million through radio in the three states⁵.

These conversations also highlighted the fact that men were willing to take on these new roles that challenged and changed the gender norms and notions of masculinities as can be seen in the video [Desirable Men](#). However, this does not mean that men don't face backlash from others in their family, or society. Often, during mobilization campaigns addressing issues of domestic violence, and the role of men in creating a gender just society, it has been often observed that various men who are the audience at these programmes often exhibit the 'masculinity' in crisis⁶. The crisis being created by the questioning of hegemonic, and toxic forms of masculinities that were considered 'norms' thus far, which include the acceptability of dominance over women and girls, use of violence against them, their positions of privilege, among others. Most often, these vocal and 'masculine' men of the community pass remarks ridiculing the community workers, or programme staff and when they do so the other men in the audience, who were listening (perhaps, because their sentiments were echoed at these programmes) often show embarrassment in front of these people.

To address this, Breakthrough added a strategy where they addressed these concerns through the interactive part of these community events. The messages included talking about violence and gender based discrimination leading to a more meaningful and trusting relationships with partners, and that since all men are not perpetrators it's time to break the culture of silence, and discourage

⁵ http://www.breakthrough.tv/o/wp-content/files_mf/1330801847Is_this_4_pger_LoRes.pdf

⁶ Kaplan, D., Rosenmannand, A., and Shuhendler, S. (2017). *What about Nontraditional Masculinities? Towards a Quantitative Model of Therapeutic New Masculinity Ideology*. Retrieved June 27, 2019, from Mens and Masculinities: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297718032_What_about_Nontraditional_Masculinities_Toward_a_Quantitative_Model_of_Therapeutic_New_Masculinity_Ideology



the invisibilising and acceptance of violence by calling-out their peers, intervening in situations of violence, and supporting the women who chose to speak-up, sought support and/ or report incidences of violence that occurred with them. While, this kind of change is not immediate in that moment it helped to acknowledge these ‘weak and silent’ men encouraging them to discard the taunts from their hegemonic counterparts.

Thus, the masculinity in crisis is about the a clash or conflict in terms of who gets the power or who get exemplified as the new ‘ideal’ masculinity between the existing hegemonic masculinity and the arising new masculinity – a constant power struggle. Most often, patriarchy has little to do with who wins it, rather it is dependent upon which becomes more socially accepted. Of course, though patriarchy is more about reinstating the existing hegemonic masculinity, but in case the new masculinity becomes popular and can’t be suppressed, then patriarchy comes-in to appropriate it into its narrative of ‘all control/ power to men’ irrespective of which type of men are we talking about. But it can’t be denied that this is where advocacy and social change becomes critical to address or work with in creating, de-constructing or re-defining ‘alternate masculinities’.

Change vs. transformation:

Taking from the learning above and the evolving understanding and perception of men and boys in Breakthrough’s engagement with the issue of gender based discrimination, and violence against women and girls, the critical move to actively engage men, and redefine their roles in the current context as fathers, brother, friends, co-workers, peers, and bystanders was essential. Thus, understanding the importance of change in behaviours and attitudes vis-à-vis transformation men and boys, the notions of masculinities, the relationship between power and patriarchy, led to explore the role/ engagement of men and boys in ‘newer’ roles as mentioned below.

New Masculinity: redefining the role of men

The transition from industrial to post-industrial society saw a “crisis of masculinity”. This brought about several changes in gender practices and power structures that were “interpersonal, social and political”. Thus, the reference to New masculinity as an ideology began to be used to refer to the the “gentler”, “sensitive new age guy”, and “the feminine-like”. (Kaplan, 2017), thus, refers to new accepted norms of ‘being a man’ or new trends of masculinity arising as a part of economical, political, social and cultural changes. These new changes often come when an earlier narrative of masculinity that becomes irrelevant and useless to changing social, cultural and



economic needs. Often, the new masculinity arises from the new needs of a changing society. For example, the roles of fathers as decision-makers are redefined as one being more inclusive of the women and their daughter's opinions. In addition, they are also encouraged to look at the notions of well-being and happy marriage. Thus, redefining their roles as fulfilling the duty with this well-being, safety and security of their daughters as the primary concern. Further, the coinage, understanding and usage of the term 'metrosexual man' or the new tag - 'naya mard' who respects women or who safeguards women. This understanding and usage became stronger after the [nirbhaya incident in Indian media](#). New masculinity can be seen as synonymous to 'alternate masculinity', which is often used when we think of transforming a man from his patriarchal mentality. This however, does not mean that the previous constructs of masculinities are done-away with entirely. It could just be adding the existing patriarchal norms, and validating the previous protectionist norms, and/ or reinforcing the old masculinities in a new/ alternate form in addition to question some aspects of the hegemonic/ toxic masculinities e.g. use of violence to violate another person (lower on the social hierarchy). However, the misuse of power, or deconstruction of power may not be happening at all, or be very limited under the "new masculinities". While traditional gender roles are being challenged we see that the 'new' or changed roles are still reinforcing the patriarchal structures and norms, for example: for men and boys who 'help with' household chores or care-giving of children are idolised and this comes from the notion of them being a 'better' man since they are going beyond their traditionally assigned gender role. On the contrary, working women continue to bear the multiple-burden of 'balancing' work within and outside homes, and managing relationships including social and community on behalf of the family. This is our observation from the work with women and girls in the communities, and factories,

Men as active bystanders

The television advertisement on Bell Bajao, begins with a man outside his house. The sounds emanating from behind a neighbour's closed door is a clear indication of domestic violence. After a moment of hesitation, the man rings the doorbell. When the perpetrator (a man) comes to the door, the male figure makes a pretextual request—to use the phone. The subtext of the visit, however, is clear: the visitor is signalling to the perpetrator that he is aware of the domestic violence that is occurring. In 2010, Breakthrough released a series of three new TV ads asking if people had "rung the bell" and taken action against domestic violence. Thus, unlike previous campaigns, the audience is presented with a clear action plan – To Ring the bell and to not be a bystander to domestic violence. Significantly, men are



important actors in the TV spots- as perpetrator as well as a partner in prevention of violence against women. This shift is in line with global trend where around the world, boys and men are challenging rigid ideals of manhood and actively participate to promote social change in their households, in their communities, and through their participation in public discourse. Towards this end, Breakthrough uses interactive, creative educational outreach as a powerful tool to challenge dominant gender norms and practices that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women. The educational entertainment programming models present alternative male behaviours that spark critical dialogue about what it means to be a man.

The [*Bell Bajao! campaign*](#) (2008) marks a clear shift in Breakthrough's approach to engage men and boys in gender inequity, particularly domestic violence. The campaign calls upon men and boys to take a stand against domestic violence. It encouraged men and boys to intervene especially, the bystanders - the neighbours, relatives, friends, colleagues etc. This helped to question the hegemonic or toxic masculine behaviours encouraging men to explore options of new masculinities; one which does not accept, normalise, or choose the use of violence against women. Further, this notion of new masculinities also encouraged men to support those who spoke-up against violence.

The campaign promotes the active involvement of men and boys as important actors *capable of intervening* to stop domestic violence. In developing the campaign, Breakthrough drew on global research findings⁷ on the ways in which men and boys respond to domestic violence. According to this research men and boys fall into three broad categories: those who perpetrate violence, bystanders and those who take action to prevent domestic violence. The research indicates that though few people take action when they witness domestic violence, over 50% of the people who do take action are men. Combining the significance of these research findings, and its own research on the issue, the *Bell Bajao!* campaign inspires men and boys who fall into the bystander category to take action to stop domestic violence. More significantly, the campaign addresses men directly and seeks to engage them in efforts to stop domestic violence. The emphasis shifts from men as 'perpetrators' to active bystanders in preventing and intervening to stop domestic violence in their families, communities, and societies.

The campaign helped to shift the way men perceived their roles in families and societies vis-à-vis domestic violence thus, becoming agents of change willing to intervene and stop violence. The

⁷ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>



deliberate act of choosing a ‘male protagonist’ to spearhead the campaign was thus significant to engage men and boys in a dialogue about transformation.

These dialogues led to men recognising that violence is not ‘a private matter’ and affirmed the fact that a woman ‘should not remain silent’ in a violent relationship and should seek family, community and/ or legal support.

Its approach to work with men and boys is strongly embedded in the understanding that men and boys are important partners who play a positive role in all efforts directed at achieving gender equality. It strongly negates the assumption that characterises men as perpetrators of violence against women who thus reinforce an aggressive masculinity that subordinates women. On the contrary its efforts are geared towards supporting an alternate expression of masculinities which challenges the dominant notions of aggressive masculinity and are partners in promoting and practising alternative and more gender equitable norms.

In addition, Breakthrough interventions have prioritised youth particularly young men who are more receptive to processes of personal and social change. Youth and particularly young men and boys constitute an important core group for all Breakthrough interventions catalysing change at the personal, family and community level.

Bell Bajao! inspired men to act by appealing to their positive emotions—such as the respect for women that drives them to intervene when a woman is experiencing domestic violence. In order to sustain and support personal change, Breakthrough has also invested its efforts in engaging with community leaders as effective advocates for change with the capacity to influence the institutions of their association, and emerge as effective advocates for a gender equitable society. Breakthrough also provides training to men in positions of authority such as police, protection officers and targeted government officials, so that they identify strategies and intervene in incidences of violence, and provide a stronger support system for the women who experienced domestic violence in their communities.

Men as decision-makers and allies

The role of men as active bystanders evolved to that of allies in the campaign [*Nation Against Early Marriage*](#) to address the concerns of the fathers for their daughters’ safety from sexual harassment, and marrying them off at an early age as a perceived solution. The social pressures and ‘norms’ that expected the fathers to fulfil their duties by marrying off their daughters were addressed through the [*Funeral Video*](#). This video also addressed the impact of early marriage on



young girls including vulnerability to domestic violence, and lesser negotiation or conflict-resolution skills in order to protect themselves from violence, and ability to take care of themselves and their family. This portrayal and understanding of men provided a space to engage in a dialogue with them to consider alternate options like education, career, employment, and self-confidence of their daughters. This helped to redefine their roles as decision-makers to become allies for their daughters to secure a better future for themselves. The video [*Rashmi Banegi Matric Pass*](#) highlights this aspect of the roles that men in the families, communities and societies can play as allies to ensure a better and more secure future for the girls.

Men as change agents, the next generation and challenging norms in communities

The campaign [*Mission Hazaar*](#) on gender based discrimination and gender-biased sex selection addressed men as change agents who challenge the norms that are discriminatory towards girls and women in their families, and communities. In order to be change agents, these men were encouraged to take actions that transformed norms and practices that were discriminatory towards girls starting from the celebration of their births, as is shown in the video [*Sanjay's Story*](#). It shows the father celebrating the birth of the daughter by beating steel plates usually done to declare the birth of a male child to the community. The celebration also includes distributing sweets on the occasion of the birth. Thus, as change agents the men were encouraged to celebrate the birth of a female child in the same manner to challenge and transform these gender discriminatory norms thereby increase the value of the girl child in the families, and communities.

The campaign [*Share Your Story*](#) encourages female family members to share their experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces and the impact it has on them, with male family members especially young men. This in turn, helps the young men to relate the impact felt by their female family members to those of other women and girls. The sharing of these stories, incidences, and experiences result in discouraging the men from sexually harassing women and girls, as well as preventing and stopping their friends or male peers from engaging in such acts. Therefore, the role of young men here is seen as the next generation of change agents who are capable of transforming norms from unacceptable practices of discrimination and violence against women and girls to that of an enabling, safer, and inclusive environment for them.

Key observations and conclusion

Some key concerns in developing a strategy of working with men and boys for gender equity, which informs Breakthrough's work are:



1. Exploring or working with men and boys to create alternative or emergent forms of masculinities shouldn't sound or get interpreted as giving men new agencies in determining or them becoming the beacon-bearer of new holistic gender roles and social norms. Rather it should be about them letting-go of their entitlements, of learning to share, and hold-back their authority vis-à-vis family and socio-cultural affairs.
2. There are chances that while exploring their roles as 'support for women', it could possibly become 'fetishization' of women's suffering when it comes to men expressing their support for gender equality. Most often, the narratives and testimonies coming from men for gender equality gets limited to a reiteration of a generic argument of how women are suffering and violated. Thus, this could mean that 'saving these women by supporting them' men and others begin to see them as 'saviours' thereby, feeding into, reinforcing or creating new patriarchal norms.
3. While women's movements are strengthened by personal accounts of women who have faced violence, we have very less or almost negligible accounts of men stating their personal accounts of when they used to perpetrate gender based discrimination and violence. One of the critical question is, is saying, 'I support women's rights', 'violence against women should be stopped', enough for a man who wants to become an ally or become a feminist? Should perpetrators be hesitant to speak of their past? Why must their account on women's rights get limited to advocating the changes or transformation that they are now and rarely about confessing their own mistakes prior to the transformation? Does acknowledging their past contribute to their holistic transformation or merely add to the use of 'politically correct' language, and actions in limited spheres?
4. Last but not the least, for example if men are doing household chores then do they deserve to be celebrated or are they just doing what they should have done a long time ago? One needs to be critical of the validation that one is giving. Somewhere there is a risk that the process of transformation instead of being a retrospective and reflective process, might become another way of men in claiming more accolades for themselves (which they are already over-entitled with). This is would reinforce the notions of gender based division of labour, mobility, income, employment etc.

Therefore, while working with adolescents including boys and young men through our [school and community-based initiatives](#), these are critical factors that Breakthrough considers while engaging men and boys towards a transformative change, and in becoming change agents. Thus, the two adolescents – [Pinky & Pankaj](#), who reflect on



some of these aspects through their conversations with each other by relating their experiences are key to help the adolescents we work with to understand, analyse, and begin the process of change for some of these notions of masculinity in their lives, and that of their peers.

About the Authors:



Pauline Gomes works at Breakthrough, a human rights organisation that works on preventing discrimination and violence against women and girls. She has worked on sexuality, gender, disability and human rights. As a part of the curriculum and leadership development team she creates products and publications for training, and community action tools, and facilitates interactive sessions with adolescents, teachers, parents, development sector professionals, among others.



Pavel Sagolsem is from Imphal, Manipur. Pavel is a vagabond at heart and a Queer Feminist by Practice. Storytelling is their passion. Pavel has written on Beauty, Sex and Sexuality for InPlainspeak, a digital magazine by TARSHI. Currently, Pavel is associated with Nazariya - A Queer Feminist Resource Group in Delhi and is also a co-founder of The Chinky Homo Project - a digital anthology project on lived narratives of queer from northeast India. Pavel has also worked with Centre for Health and Social Justice, Delhi in the field of 'Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Justice' and with Breakthrough India as a consultant for College Youth Networking and Engagement towards 'Creating a Safer and Shared Space for Women and Girls in Delhi'.

Aprajita Mukherjee has a Master in Philosophy Degree in Gender Studies, and has more than 15 years' experience in the field of social development especially on areas of gender, health, inclusion and broader social and poverty related issues. Aprajita has worked as a program and gender consultant to various international and national agencies and led gender audits. Her areas of expertise include participatory programme evaluation; developing MIS systems; situational assessments and analyses; and program management. Aprajita has several publications to her credit.



Urvashi Gandhi has been working in the development sector for 18 years on addressing issues of Child Rights, Refugee Rights and Women's Rights. She is currently working with Breakthrough as a Director for Global Advocacy. During her 14 years with Breakthrough, she has built extensive experience in developing national and international program strategy and plans; implementing state, national and regional level program on women's rights, adolescent empowerment, engaging men for gender equality and HIV/AIDS. She is an experienced trainer, has conducted many capacity building programs with various civil society organizations, government departments, youth, marginalised communities and corporate houses. Urvashi has a Master's degree in Home Economics, specializing in Human Development. In her personal life, she is a Reiki practitioner and loves travelling to the mountains.