

## **ON THE PATH OF GENDER EQUALITY**

**Fr. Varghese Paul, SJ**

“I understood that masculinity was the physical strength of a man. But now I understand well the different aspects of masculinity” said a lady participant in a seminar.

“I understood and associated masculinity with patriarchy and with coercive and overpowering husbands,” said another lady participant.

“I never listened to men. I have felt that they are not worthy to be listened to. But from now on I will pay attention to what they say,” said a third lady participant.

“I will try to give more and more representation to women in the organizations with which I am connected,” said an elderly man.

A two-day seminar was held at Vadodara in the Women Study Research Centre (WSRC) of M. S. University on the theme of “Boys and Men for Gender Equality”. The seminar was organized by Mr. Noel Parmar and coworkers of Sahaj Shishu Milap in collaboration with Ms. Swati Joshi of WSRC in August 2008.

The convener of Saurashtra–Kutch Network on Violence against Women, Ms. Punamben Katharia and the Director of Sahaj Shishu Milap (SSM), Ms Renuben Khanna led the two-day seminar. A total of 9 women and 36 men delegates from Non-Government Organizations (NGO) from Gujarat and Rajasthan participated in the seminar.

The seminar began with the delegates introducing themselves individually and their organizations or their areas of work. Then, the organizers explained the topic and the purpose of the seminar.

The speakers in the seminar like the wellknown Ragul Roy who has produced a documentary film entitled “A Little Book on Men” and written a book on masculinity with the same name led the discussions on the seminar topic. Mr. Roy said that masculinity is many sided. He used his documentary film “A Little Book on Men” as a powerful tool for gender training and explained various issues of masculinity and gender equality.

Mr. Roy explained in great detail the six issues of masculinity. First, masculinity is seen in the relationship with people. This relationship with one-another can often be filled with tension. A person experiences his/her strength and weakness in his/her relationship with all types of men and women. A man in the process of becoming a macho person experiences both protection or insecurities in actual situation. But men are always trying to establish their masculinities. This is always full of tension.

Second, a macho person can do certain things. But there are also things which he cannot do. A man can do many things according to his age, caste, community, education, village/city, culture and language, etc. But there are many other things, which he cannot do. Here too man experiences the tension of his strength and weakness.

Third, the masculinity of a man is such that it is not accepted everywhere. Those men who are at the top of the social ladder can do many things. In the social structure there are the people of different castes. The masculinity or the macho power of men decreases and their weakness increases in the descending order of the social ladder. So there is no masculinity which is acceptable to one and all in the caste system or social structure. The masculinity of a man is related to his social situation.

Fourth, masculinity is a changing thing. The masculinity of a man changes from person to person, from caste to caste, from culture to culture. For instance, a teenager voluntarily helps his mother to wash the cloths. But his peer friends do not accept his washing the cloths like girls do. So they tease him saying he is week and girlish to wash the cloths! We are often the slaves of our prejudices and ignorance.

Fifth, men often exhibit their masculinities jointly as a group or socially. If a man cannot fight his opponent then he brings others like him to fight his enemies. If a person does not have the courage to go to the police station, he takes others with him and together they go and register their complaint at the police station.

Sixth, a man in his authority experiences masculinity. But authority is not masculinity. If a man is afraid of losing his authority, then there is no masculinity. There is also no masculinity in imposing one's authority on another person.

In the two-day seminar the organizers and speakers discussed and explained the topic "Boys and Men for Gender Equality" with the help of documentary films and power point presentations. There were also discussions by the delegates divided into three or more groups. Thus the participants deepened their understanding and assimilated the ideas and thoughts shared in the seminar.

All the participants in the seminar said that their understanding of the topic "Boys and Men for Gender Equality" has deepened and that they are enthused to spread gender equality in their areas of work.

Discussing the future plans in the last sitting the seminar participants said that they would take concrete steps to spread widely the wholesome ideas and thoughts of masculinity and gender equality. "In our workshops, seminars and other programmes of training we will impart the wholesome and true ideas of masculinity and gender equality. We need to spread true ideas of masculinity and gender equality especially among boys and men," said a number of NGO delegates in their own words, mostly in Gujarati and Hindi.

Today patriarchy and overpowering men are realities in our society. Masculine power and authority is often exhibited in families, social organizations, schools, colleges and the places of work and business. Beginning with wife-beating many women is subjugated and harassed bodily, mentally and spiritually. Women are subjected to all sorts of harassment and persecution.

The inter-personal and social tension between men and women and the persecution of women do not end with having recourse to matriarchal system or feminist power. By accepting the gender

equality of men and women we can control the vulgar display of masculinity and macho power. By acknowledging and accepting the gender differences and gender equality we can make our lives sublime. By accepting and appreciating gender equality of all men and women we can also make our lives loving and peaceful.

But in order to accept gender equality we need to discard our wrong notions and prejudices. Both the men and women need to accept the wholesome ideas and practices of gender difference and gender equality without men misusing the masculinity on women and the women without rivaling against men with feminist power.

At the end of the seminar the organizers and the participants evaluated the whole two-day seminar. In the evaluation many participants expressed both the benefits they have got from the seminar and their decision to work enthusiastically for the gender equality. I have already quoted the exact words of a few participants who shared their personal experiences in the seminar. (contact the author: [ciss@satyam.net.in](mailto:ciss@satyam.net.in))

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