

Eastern Region Report

Eastern Regional Symposium held in Kolkata from September 19-20, 2014



More than 200 participants attended this regional symposium that was hosted by global symposium partners Swayam and Kolkata Rista. Researchers and practitioners, advocates and activists, youth and the donor community took part in it from West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar and Orissa. The main objectives of the Eastern Regional Symposium were:

- * To create a space for different practitioners from civil society to present their work strategies, methodologies and challenges being experienced in their work with men for gender equality and social justice
- * To create a platform for young people/youth and men to voice the issues, dilemmas and concerns that affect their lives and engage them on the issues of gender justice
- * To chalk out strategies on how to take this work forward in the Eastern Region

Through the event an understanding was built about

- Masculinities and gender equality
- The need for men and boys to take action towards gender justice
- The existing efforts being made by men and boys to address gender inequality and violence against women and the challenges faced.

The first day started with a cultural performance, followed by panel discussions on themes like the importance of working with men and boys on gender justice and sharing of approaches and strategies. Speakers included eminent persons like Kaushik Gupta, Indramani Sahu, Ruchira Goswami, Philip Peacock, Dr Payoshini Mitra, Anuradha Kapoor of Swayam, Anand Pawar from Samyak, Pune, Sarmistha Dutta Gupta from Ebong Alap, Kolkata and Rahul Mehta from Forum to Engage Men, Ranchi. Each spoke about engaging men and young men especially in their work, and the strategies that were successful. Other significant participants were Bhawani Prasad Nayak from the Institute of Social Development, Bhubaneswar, Dr Santosh Kumar Giri and Madhuja Nandini from Kolkata Rista and Satish Singh from CHSJ.

The symposium workshop sessions 'Sexuality, Identity a workshop Kolkata Rista and Anand Pawar. a workshop on women', and organised a 'Masculinities and



saw several parallel being organised. and Violence' was organise by moderated by Swayam organised 'Violence against Ebong Alap workshop on the Media'.

The key points of deliberation and the main focus of each session in the two day symposium was gendered violence and identities. While some sessions were geared at discussing strategies to overcome violence and challenge the fixity of gender based identities, others were aimed at self-reflection through discussions. Thus, the purpose of the sessions was both to share strategies and promote discussions and debates on the issue in order to broadly promote gender equity and justice.

Speakers talked about gendered violence, resistance to the movement for equality, the creation of gendered identities and the importance of the role of the media as the fifth pillar of democracy in reporting and highlighting abuse of women. Discussions were held on how the artificial binary between masculine and feminine is constructed.

A participant highlighted her experience of working with women with intersex variation in competitive sports. Others spoke on how the education system is resistant to education geared at gender awareness and sensitization. The church's resistance to gender equality and its "existence as a last bastion of unchallenged patriarchal power" was raised. Everybody highlighted the difficulty about the acceptability of talking about gender and gender equality in spheres of education, public and media, the church and with the government.

Ebong Alap's work on sexuality education in a remote rural school in the Sunderbans was shared, along with its strategies such as starting discussions in mixed groups. It was also pointed out that by not categorising themselves as a women's group or a group that works with men, Ebong Alap actually loses out on funding which also points to the way category-formation in gender occurs.

The multifarious meanings and perceptions of violence against women was discussed. Participants felt it was important to recognise this and take on the various conceptions of violence to launch an effective campaign to combat violence. Participants suggested any strategy to combat violence should include the following:

- Changemakers to work for the cause
- Involving women's representatives in workshops
- Spreading awareness and conceptual clarity for young people in their developmental stage
- Spreading legal awareness and arranging for training of police personnel
- Engaging men in these processes

Samyak's work with young men bringing about change on an institutional level and not just on the level of the individual was discussed. Samyak presented an innovative checklist of indicators for the 'Changed Man', which were as follows:

Is he homophobic?

What does he think of Pakistan?

What are his opinions on militaries and militarization?

Does he believe deodorants attract women?

How diverse is his friends' circle?

This emphasised its point that a really changed man would not just respond in a certain 'learned' way to how to treat women but be an individual with a comprehensively different worldview - more tolerant and less jingoistic.

In the final Session Satish Singh started by pointing out how patriarchy was detrimental to men as well. He said that from his experience in working in rural Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand he has realised that power and stigma are strong motivators of behaviours in men. The social expectation from men is that they will demonstrate power and any difference or deviance is met with harsh socio-cultural consequences. Further, gender equality is feared as a loss of power by most men. To work for social change in such contexts, the following, according to Singh needed to be kept in mind:

-It must be taken into account that not all men are aggressive, but they are all silent.

-If a man speaks alone, then that is a problem for them; they must be helped.

-There are many women who cannot accept changes in men.

-Community mobilization is as important as changing the individual.

-One must focus on the capacity building of all men.

Bhawani Prasad Nayak pointed out that Odisha ranked 11th in the list of states for crimes against women. Rape, kidnappings and abductions were rampant in the state, said Nayak, including cases of drug-related violence, rape, custodial rape, workplace violence, domestic violence etc. The impediments to the work on gender and masculinity were the following, according to Nayak:

Low literacy, which leads to resistance to the message as well as an inability to understand it.

Adherence to customary practices in the name of tradition.

Social norms associated with men and masculinity.

Impact of media in propagating stereotypes.

Absence of gender-related policy and program in the government sector.

Prevalent patriarchal attitudes towards life.

The slogan for Institute for Social Development was 'Naye Mard ki Nayi Soch' roughly translated as 'New Thinking of the New Age Men'. Madhuja Nandini talked about her own struggles as a transgender woman. Although she has had sexual reassignment surgery and is biologically a woman, she said still identifies herself as transgender to keep in view the struggles that marked her into becoming who she was today. She pointed out that this struggle is a reality today as there were hardly any fora where one could engage about the struggles of transgender people within the mainstream gender discourse. She mentioned the positive role played by Kolkata Rista in this context.

Dr Giri spoke about Kolkata Rista's journey as having been very fruitful in highlighting and starting discussion about the transgender community and bring their issues to the fore. However, some of the biggest challenges they faced was involving cis-gendered men. The organisation tries to involve men as volunteers and also works with local clubs, political and non-political leaders as well as the police to raise awareness on their issues.

In the workshop on 'Identity Sexuality and Violence' a number of exercises were carried out to look at identities which were then revealed to be fluid, contextual and relational. Similar exercises were undertaken with sexuality. Roop Sen observed that there must be those marginalisations that have not even begun to register in discussions of marginality yet. In the workshop organised by Swayam there were specifically designed games to identify safety, fear and violence and how these are gendered and relational.

In the Ebong Alap workshop, participants mostly comprised young students, both men and women. After being shown a series of clips - advertisements, public campaigns (like M.A.R.D) and film clips, the discussion on masculinity and media was commenced. A lot of students had questions which were then answered by others in the group. Many questions came from the experiential realities of participants - the way in which they were gendered in their childhood and how that has impacted them as men/women and sexual beings as adult. Of note was the discussion on family as a sphere where gendered identity develops, as well as how the media upholds certain stereotypes.

There was a sharing session followed by a discussion on suggestions for the Global Symposium. Among the suggestions were ways to maintain contact and cooperation beyond the workshop through social networking websites.

Overall, the main discussions at this regional symposium revolved around power, violence and masculinity and how that affected the lives of women. There were also discussions on how patriarchy affects men but these were far less detailed in scope and depth. It seems that engaging men and the discussions on masculinity still primarily revolved around the need for engaging men for the sake of their role in perpetuating violence against women. There was a real sharing space at the symposium for different groups with similar concerns, and many different strategies to combat problems were shared. However, as Roop Sen pointed out there were no concrete roadmaps for what actually works in effecting the changes among men.

Recommendations emerging from the symposium were that the composition of the symposium seemed to reflect the regional balance of power in some ways with no involvement from North East India and North Bengal, and only Kolkata based organisations dominating the participation from West Bengal. The power-politics of language, English- Bengali-Hindi came to also signify a certain divide not just in actual language but the language of activism among those present. There was little or no discussion on these. Perhaps a more self-reflexive approach was necessary rather than giving organisations space to talk about their own achievements. There was also very little discussion on failures in strategies by the organisations and activists present.

