

Gender Roundtable on Male Engagement for Gender Equality at Cotton University

Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) in collaboration with Centre for Women's Studies, Cotton University & North East Network (NEN) organized a Gender roundtable on Male Engagement and Gender Equality on 17th May, 2024. The session was chaired by Prof. Rakhee Kalita Moral, Professor & Head, Dept of English and Chair, Centre for Women's Studies, Cotton University, Anurita Hazarika, Executive Director, North East Network, Harish Sadani, Co-founder & Executive Director, MAVA and Nelson Deb, Founder, Bodhana Trust and moderated by Rashmi Lamba, India Council Chair, Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media.

After the introductory remarks made by Prof. Rakhee Kalita Moral and explaining how the Centre for Women's Studies has worked around issues of gender equity on various fronts, Dr Arindam Garg, Registrar, Cotton University inaugurated the session by releasing the MAVA training manual on *Transforming Masculinities* and remarked on small insights on gender in the household drawing on instances from everyday life. The manual aims to work as a guide book to engage men and boys for gender justice and train them in transforming their outlook from a patriarchal perspective to one of equality and shared responsibility.

The Roundtable had participants from HEIs, women's advocacy and rights collectives, legal experts, representatives from gender communities, media as well as entrepreneurs. Harish Sadani, of MAVA spoke about the establishment of MAVA and the activities it has undertaken so far. He dwelled on how effort to address gender-based violence has traditionally focused on empowering women alone and how these conversations excluded men altogether, speaking of the crucial need to create positive male role models to promote gender sensitivity and engage other men in dialogue.

Nelson Deb shared his experience in leading his NGO on gender rights and how he came to collaborate with MAVA that eventually led to the MAANUSH Initiative for upscaling Gender Sensitization and Mentoring.

The roundtable interaction began with Anurita P. Hazarika's insights on conscious efforts to engage men at an individual and community level and how earlier men were perceived to be the "barriers" of gender justice but endeavors have been taken to transform them into "enablers". Speaking of safe spaces where rigid ideas of masculinities were challenged, she stressed on how NEN trained young boys and men through a creative medium in the states of Assam and Meghalaya.

A highlight of the event was the screening of the short film "*Conversation Matters*" which featured gender experts from higher education institutions and was centered on the role of Nelson Deb as an icon of male engagement in gender equity in NE India, with particular focus on reorienting the gendered attitudes and behaviors of young boys and men.

Participants :

- **A member of NEN youth collective, Gyandeep Nath** spoke about his experiences on how initially he faced criticisms while working closely in the field of menstrual health and hygiene, which transformed into an empowering process of demystifying gender norms, through creative engagements like workshops, portrait making, poster making, etc.

- **Geeta Bhattacharyya, Nirantar Trust** shared about their special intervention for young boys in initiatives that initially included only girls, in the district of Dhemaji.

- **Nirju Moni Bharali, MahilaSamakhya** spoke about her interventions with livelihood entrepreneurs in Assam, focusing on fisheries which traditionally excluded women from actively participating in the developmental sector.

Rakhee Kalita Moral then spoke about the historical background of the feminist movement and the imminent need to engage men in such conversations. While speaking of the gender bias in education and curriculum, male-oriented infrastructure and resistance to women as administrators; she talked about different initiatives taken up by Cotton University- like the gender audit, introduction of the gender studies course in the curriculum several workshops on gender with special focus on Sexual harassment of women at workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 with the non-teaching staff.

Comments

- **Sabrina Iqbal Sircar, Pragjyotish College** shared how gender has always been seen as a “women’s issue”, and men have always cognitively excluded themselves from taking part in such conversations. She stressed on how violence against women are neo-normalised if it is subtle.

Alongbar Basumatary, a MAANUSH mentee, shared his journey of transformation from unlearning to re-learning of gender and patriarchy.

Comments

- **Debasmita Ghosh, lawyer** brought attention to the high maternal mortality rate of Assam and how the onus of the issue is not limited to one department alone.

- **Shakuntala Mahanta, IIT Guwahati** shared her perspective on filling the space of male engagement. She also questioned the use of abusive language, trolling, casual sexism and the terrifying role of social media.

- **Anupom Kumar Hazarika, Cotton University**, talked about broadening the definitions of masculinity and questioned the usage of western language models in rural contexts.

- **Rituparna Neog, Akam Foundation** stressed on bringing in different intersectionalities and their usage of different language in the prominent discourse surrounding gender.

The session finally reflected on the prevailing social views with Prof Moral suggesting that the discourse shift from one of male protectionism of women to one of trust and responsible choice. Moderator Rashmi Lamba's concluding remarks on the intrinsic power of film and media to encourage conversations centering around and bring in a collective change among the population established the need to engage in further discourses and conversations facilitating men and young boys as equal participants in dialogues surrounding gender, sexuality, masculinities and violence against women.

Some glimpse of the day





