

Oxfam India

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“When I play Kabaddi I feel as though I am flying along with birds in blue sky. Once on the field, all shackles of shame are released and I become a child without inhibitions”, says Sanju, a girl of only 16 years, battling her way through suffocating social norms in her own little ways. Sanju belongs to Musahar community; one of the most backward and marginalized communities from Bihar. The community is socially ostracized as ‘rat eaters’ and has been living on the edge as land less labours. Many rear pigs. Men are usually out herding pigs through the day. In some households, women brew illicit liquor at home, which is a good source of income. Villagers are often found drunk outside Musahar homes. Some work as labours on the farms of big landlords. The community lives on the periphery of the villages, devoid of basic amenities – a life without dignity. Violence against women is an accepted norm, which is rarely questioned or resisted.

With the aim of advancing gender justice, Oxfam India initiated the project *‘Mobilising and Engaging All for Normative Shifts (MEANS)’*, to reduce social acceptance of gender based violence within private spaces at individual, community and institution levels.

The project was simultaneously implemented in the urban and rural spaces, keeping a holistic approach of engaging all and excluding none. The key strategy thus was to engage with all possible stakeholders including men, adolescents, elected representatives, religious leaders, advocates, police, educationists and media. In Bihar, the project was implemented in 120 villages across five districts.

One year back when the project started, Sanju’s family was all set to get

Sanju married. She was only 15 years old and was awaiting her class 10 results when her family had almost fixed her marriage to someone much older than her. She argued against it with her family, and had almost given up all hopes when the social mobilisers from Nari Gunjan, Oxfam India Partner NGO approached her parents.

Sanju, Village Alauddin Chak,
PunPun

Sanju was attending the education center started by Nari Gunjan in the village and was known to be a bright student. The Nari Gunjan social mobilisers were confident that Sanju, if supported, could do exceptionally well in studies. They convinced Sanju's parents to prolong any discussions about Sanju's marriage until her matriculation results were declared.

Sanju cleared matriculation with first division, securing 61%; to be the first girl from her community to complete high school with first division. This was

something unheard of in a community which was deprived of education for ages and lived head to mouth existence. Sanju's success made her parents hopeful of better times. She is now studying in her first year of graduation and is an enthusiastic kabaddi player.

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Bihar is a northern state of India and is known to be deeply entrenched in gender power hierarchies. The general perception about the state is that it is an unsafe space for women with high crime rate and poor safety network for women. The state has high rate of human trafficking, child marriages, domestic violence and dowry deaths.

The prevalent social norms glorify women for qualities of forbearance, chastity and unquestioned obedience. A man is considered socially superior to women and thus has a right to assert his power over woman, correct or discipline her. Physical violence is an accepted way to resolve conflicts. *“Most men and women here do not perceive domestic violence criminal or condemnable. There is a certain acceptance of domestic violence as normal, both by men and women.”*, told Farzana Begum, secretary of Rahat, partner NGO of Oxfam India working in Kishanganj district of Bihar. Divorce is considered shameful and to report abuse is seen as disrespectful. Family's honor is linked to woman's behaviour and that a woman might disgrace family honour by deviating from sexual norms is one of the biggest fears expressed by men and women across sections. *“How do you expect a woman raised with daily dose of ‘your husband is god’, ‘family's honor rests on your shoulder’, ‘once married you must adjust with everything’, to question the prevalent social norms? Even if she questions, who will support her?”*, asks Sujit Kumar, social mobiliser from Nari Gunjan.

Though India has enacted the Protection of Women against Domestic

Violence Act (PWDVA) 2005, the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the Criminal Amendment Act 2013 to provide relief and justice to women facing violence, the poor implementation of the laws made it inaccessible to women and girls in general, and more so women and girls from socially excluded sections.

Analysis of power, during the course of project development, clearly indicated family members, mostly male members, as the biggest influencers in the lives of women and girls. All decisions regarding their lives are controlled by the family; influencing their mobility, social interactions and life choices. The voices of women and girls are often go unheard.

Musahar woman, village Alauding
Chak

“These restrictions are justified by the family members as

requisite for women's safety, never questioning why the world around is not safe for them and what can be done to make it safer", said Sujit Kumar, social mobiliser from Nari Gunjan. Social norms define individual's behaviour. The fear of social disapproval or punishment along with feelings of guilt and shame result in internalization of such social norms. Rarely are these norms questioned, further sanctifying them. The project interventions directly challenged the prevalent social norms supportive of and perpetuating violence against women. In Musahar community violence takes yet another dimension of caste. Poverty, caste based violence, dependency on bootlegging for livelihoods makes the women and girls in this community particularly vulnerable to violence.

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Child marriages are common, with girls as young as 12 years married away for the fear of losing 'family honour'. Education is not a priority and majority of men and women from the community are still illiterate. For Nari Gunjan, social norms perpetuating violence against women and gender discrimination could only be changed through education.

Musahar woman, village Alauding Chak,
Dist.Patna

Keeping Musahar community as its focus, Nari Gunjan worked in 20 villages in two blocks (Punpun and Phulwari) in Patna district, with the aim of reducing violence against women. During the project period, 20 groups each of men, women, adolescent girls and adolescent boys were formed, through which issues of violence against women and gender discrimination were broached in subtle ways.

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“It was easy to form men’s and adolescent boy’s groups. But the minute we proposed similar groups of women and girls there was resistance. Men were sceptical. We assured them that issues related to cleanliness, health and hygiene will be discussed during

these meetings. Slowly the women started to come. Many risked beating from their husbands, fathers and brothers”, tells Sujit Kumar.

Women's group meeting, Village Mahua
Bag

The key strategy here was to gain the confidence of ‘men of the family’ through a dialogue and conversations; working around them rather than against them. During men’s group meetings it was discussed why women’s participation was important for development. The men realised that the proposed women’s groups were not to entice women and pitch them against men, but to inform and educate them.

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“In the beginning when I would go for the group meeting, my husband would follow me and secretly listen to the proceedings of the meeting. I knew. Since there was nothing that was said during

the meeting which threatened my husband, he slowly became more supportive”, said Sunita Devi, from village Mahua Baug, PunPun block.

Sunita, village Mahua Bagh,
Dist.Patna

Sunita was married at the age of 12. Now 30 years old, Sunita has three boys and one daughter. *“Married when I was only in class 6, I did not even know what menstruation was. I had not seen anything, read nothing. Others decided on my behalf and I followed. Now after joining this group I know there is more to life than getting married and rearing children. Now that my childhood was destroyed, why will I do it to my daughter?”* asks Sunita.

Sports emerged as an important medium not only to empower girls but also to break gender stereotypes. Kabaddi is an Indian game known to be boisterous, rough and rowdy. It is a sport to be played by boys. It is this sport that Nari Gunjan chose to break the gender stereotypes and empower girls in the marginalised Musahar community. *“Here, a girl’s childhood ends by the age of ten. I have four brothers and three sisters. While all the brothers go out to watch movies, we sisters are not allowed to step out of homes. I often feel angry and suffocated. Playing Kabaddi, I forget all inhibitions. I feel light like a feather and joy flows through every inch of my body”*, tells Sanju, who is still worried she will be married away soon.

Girl's Kabaddi team, Alaudding
Chak

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The greatest fear of parents to send their daughters to play Kabaddi was that the girls will become rough and rowdy. The parents feared humiliation incase their daughter was stripped while playing. They were worried their daughters disfiguring their faces. *“Who will marry such a girl?”* asked Anita Devi, Anjani’s mother.

Girl's Kabaddi team, Alaudding
Chak 1

Anjani is one of the most exuberant and energetic Kabaddi player from village Allauddin Chak. *“Initially none of our parents were ready to send us out to play Kabaddi. We girls were adamant too. We would finish all household chores and then slip away to the open field, in the outskirts of our village. There we practiced Kabaddi for hours”*, tells Anjani.

Girl's Kabaddi team, Alauding
Chak 2

“She would return with torn clothes, smudged with dust. Every second day she had a torn frock. I would scold her, beat her, but these girls had turned so resolute that it was difficult to unnerve them. Once she returned with a broken jaw”, told Anjani’s mother, Anjani giggling sitting next to her. It was when this girl’s Kabaddi team won a village level Kabaddi match against the neighboring village that their parents began supporting them. *“There was a sudden transformation in our fathers and brothers who now started teaching us tricks and strategies to win the game”*, tells Anjani. *“We were the ‘heroes’ now”*. Kabaddi emboldened the girls. They now asked difficult questions and asserted their rights. While they did not have clarity about what they wanted they knew well what they did not want.

“None of us want to get married before the age of 18. We don’t want to stay inside the four walls of our homes. We can no longer be made to shut up and this is what they feared the most. We no longer can be tamed”, said Anjani looking straight into her mother’s eyes, who gracefully accepted her daughter’s accusation.

Anjani & mother Anita
Devi

“I was married at the age of 10 years. All I knew was that daughters should be trained to be ideal wives and daughters in law; that she should not let down her family’s honor. How could I

even imagine girl's playing something like Kabaddi? It is because I am part of the women's group that I know girls should not be married before 18 years. A child is not to be married. Child should be a child – play, learn and be healthy”, says Anjani's mother.

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Suresh Kumar Manjhi, a resident of village Mahua Baug, in PunPun block in Patna district is committed to teach the women from his village. Through regular interactions with the social mobilisers of Nari Gunjan, Suresh understood it was important for the women Musahar community to be educated if the community had to develop. *“Women are influenced by men. They do not have their own opinions on anything. It is only when they begin to think for themselves that they will ask right questions which will bring change”,* says Suresh.

Suresh Kumar Majhi, Mahua Baugh,
Dist.Patna

Women, he says have certain wisdom. With his efforts and support from Nari Gunjan, all the Musahar women from Mahua Baug are now literate. With education and exposure, both men and women can now understand the absurdity of social norms perpetuating subjugation of women and justifying violence on them.

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“We have become fearless now”, said 30 year old Chanu Devi, from Mahua Baug, expressing her happiness at being literate. *“If a husband beat his wife, they said it his way of showing affection. What kind of affection is this which is expressed by breaking someone’s limbs? They would say he would have beat her under the*

influence of alcohol. How come they don't go beat up the Pandit when drunk? Violence is wrong", she says.

Chanu Devi, Mahua Baugh,
Dist.Patna

Ram Parvesh Majhi is Chanu Devi's husband and a member of the village men's group started under this project. This group was formed a year back and there are around 20 men in the group – all from Musahar community. *"The discussions were around social issues concerning our community – lack of education, unhealthy and unhygienic ways of living, alcoholism and poverty",* told Ram Parvesh Majhi.

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These were very important topics for it changed our mindset. We

saw to it that our children got education, that they bathed and combed their hair; that our youth was not taken to addictions. Within a year we saw a difference in our lives. There were less conflicts and more understanding”, told Ram Parvsh Majhi. When his wife, Chanu Devi, went to the kitchen to make tea, he accepted that he would sometimes hit his wife. *“Now I feel if she doesn’t hit me back when she is angry then why should I hit her? She works as hard as me, then why should she be treated less than me”?* , completing his statement well in time for Chanu Devi to come out with cups of tea for all.

Ram Parvsh Majhi, Mahua Baugh,
Dist.Patna

He was 15 years old when he started working as a labour on the fields of rich landlords. Since then he has been working, herding animals, trying to make the ends meet. He was married to Chanu Devi at the age of 19. Chanu Devi was 12 years old then. They have one son and three daughters. *“For my children I have a truck load of dreams. They should lead a life of dignity”*, says Ram Parvesh Majhi. As the father’s perceptions changed, mothers too began to change. Thus, changing men’s perception showed ripple effects on a larger sphere of society.

The project interventions clearly are more inclusive and wide -ranging, where gender equality is a function of overall development of the community. Exposure to education and progressive thoughts is positively impacting the status of women and girls, reducing gender based violence in the Musahar community.

Musahar Household, Alauddin Chak,
Dist.Patna

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Rahat, Oxfam India partner NGO, works in Kishanganj. Geographically Kishanganj borders Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. Human trafficking in the region is high. Migration of men to faraway cities is common. Women, the elderly and children are left behind in the villages, making them vulnerable to violence, exploitation and trafficking. *“It is not possible to deal with violence in isolation. It is extremely important to understand the economic, social, political and religious context in which violence against women is perpetuated”*, says Farzana Begum, the founder and the executive head of Rahat.

Daula village, Dist. Kishan
Ganj

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In case of Kishanganj, one has to also consider the environmental or geographic context of violence. Kishanganj is a flood prone zone. *“During the floods, we are literally homeless for few months. We often go without food for few days. Our clothes are all torn and it all gets worst if a woman is menstruating. Since the men of the family are out in cities, working, we women have no support during such times. Bad things happen to women in such situations. Often men with wrong intentions cajole young girls and women to marry*

them, tempting them with food and clothes, selling them later to the brothels”, tells Firoza Khan, a 20 year old member of women’s group from village Khari Vasti, Daula Panchayat in Kishanganj.

Firoza Khan, Daula Panchayat,
Kishanganj

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Under the project, a women’s group was formed in the village by Rahat a year back. There are 35 members in this group trained by Rahat on disaster risk reduction. *“These days, when a girl in our village is proposed for marriage, we group members ask for information like their identity proof, residence proof and other important documents. Previously girls, as young as 12 years, 11 years were married away and sold somewhere else. We never got to see*

them again. Now we don't allow child marriage and we are always alert", told Ruksana, a 20 year old member of the women's group.

Ruksana, Daula Village,
Kishanganj

Ruksana had to leave school after the demise of her mother, to take care of her younger siblings. Ruksana however refused to get married and became an active member of the women's group.

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The group meets 4 times in a month, during which they discuss the issues of health, hygiene, child marriage, dowry, education, disaster, and violence against women. Both Firoza and Ruksana went from house to house convincing women to form a group. Today these 35 member women are a

rock support for each other. They are always alert and vigilant. *“In the absence of men, we had to create our support structure. We had to step out to manage our households. With the women’s group we can rely on each other for help, support and guidance”*, tells Farzana, 18 year old member of the group.

Woman's group, DaulaPanchayat,
Kishangaj

The group has brought about major changes in the village. Child marriage has been stopped completely. The members of this group facilitate women’s group activities in nearby 6 to 7 villages.

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“We have convinced men about the importance of family planning.

Initially they scolded us but they now understand our point of view. As poor farmers with small land holding we cannot afford big families”, told Firoza Khan.

Daula Village, Dist.
Kishanganj

Kishanganh has predominantly a Muslim population. Conservative interpretation of Islam further perpetuates existing gender stereotypes and discrimination. Polygamy is a norm. Child marriage is common. Marrying women much younger in age is acceptable. Every household has at least has 6 to 7 children. Women are deprived of education, resources and basic rights. *“To broach the topic of violence against women here was asking for trouble”,* tells Farzana Begun

The strategy we adopted was of convergence. So when we spoke to men's groups about making toilets in the household, it appeared we were talking about development but what we were achieving in the process was safe spaces for women. We spoke to them about violence in households as detrimental to the growth and development of entire village. Slowly we introduced discussion on patriarchy and how it is manifesting as violence, not only on women, but also on children, on youth and community", said Farzana Begun. The men's group in village Kocha, in Tevsa Panchayat, has 20 to 25 active members and there is a direct support and involvement of around 50 men from the village. The group has actively worked on issues of domestic violence, family planning and child marriages. *"Previously we did not interfere in case of domestic violence, thinking it was the personal matter between the husband and wife. Now we feel if there is violence in any family it is everyone's problem and it impacts all in the village. Violence at any level only leads to deterioration",* told Ayub Ali, who is the member of the group and an influential businessman from the village. Mainstreaming the issue of violence against women in the development discourse garnered the support of village leaders. *"It hurt the ego of elected village representatives when we showed the poor status of women in their villages – that the women in their village were not educated, they were deprived of resources, they had to walk for miles to fetch water, that their health was neglected, that they lived in fear. Suddenly it became important for the leaders to address issues of women in their villages",* told Farzana Begum. The men's group in village Kocha works as a vigilance group. In case of domestic violence they first do individual level counseling. If it doesn't yield

result, they seek the help from Rahat help desk. The group also works as a pressure group. That the members of this group will not tolerate violence and atrocity on any villager irrespective of cast, class and gender is well known in the village.

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It dissuades the potential perpetrators of violence from committing violence. *“The men behave themselves for the fear of social humiliation”*, tells Afazul Haq, ward member of ward number 7 of village Kocha. Rahat facilitated the formation of 20 groups each of men, women, and youth. These groups, which are called ‘dastak’, have now become influencers. With their changed mindset they now perpetuate an ideology of gender equality and a society free of violence against women. Not mixing men and women in the group was a conscious decision for it enabled an empathetic discussion rather than one blaming or intimidating the other.

Ayub Ali, elected village representative and Afazul Haq, influential businessman, village Kocha, Dist Kishanganj

Convergence emerged as one of the key strategies to reduce violence against women, through this project. The basic premise on which all strategies were designed was that it is the men who can stop violence against women, since it is men who control and influence society.

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They are in positions of power and influence. Unless and until their perception of violence on women changes, it is impossible to do much. *“Antagonizing men won’t help. If they feel threatened by women, they will use greater violence to exert their power. Men must be made to understand how patriarchy is destroying them too”*, says

Farzana Begum. The youth group in the village Kocha has 20 adolescent boys, in the age group of 16 to 20. All the members have pledged not to marry a girl under 18 years of age. They have all decided not to marry before the age of 25. *“All girls these days aspire to study, to learn and experience life. We boys travel and see so many different things. Often I wish my sister could see all the wonderful things I have seen. We support the girls in our village in their studies and help them in whichever way we can”*, tells Arif, a 16 year old member of ‘Yuva dastak’ or the youth group from village Kocha.

Arif, Youth group, Village Kocha, Dist
Kishanganj

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Shaming those who use abusive language or hit women is another strategy

adopted by this group. *“We tease the boys who do not do their own work and make their mothers wash their clothes and fold their beds”*, says Arif. This group works closely with men’s group and has stopped many child marriages in the village and in nearby villages. They have actively promoted family planning in the village. *“Every family here has 10 to 12 children. Men marry as many times as they want even when they are not in a position to fend for such large families. I feel it is a very irresponsible behavior. The younger generation is more aware and is conscious of not marrying a girl child. Things are changing”*, tells Arif, with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Making women economically independent through skill based education is yet another strategy adopted by Rahat. Through its government affiliated computer training centre at Kishanganj, the survivors of violence are encouraged to learn computer. *“Rahat runs a special class only for the survivors of violence. Currently this group has 16 students, all of which are survivors of violence”*, tells Sajiya Afrana, the course facilitator.

Raahat computer training centre in
Kishanganj

The students, survivors of abuse and violence, were identified during various field visits to villages by Rahat community mobilisers. Their families were reluctant to send them out for the fear of ‘loosing family honor’ yet

again. Victims themselves were in a state of shock and fear. The course helped these survivors to regain their confidence and be economically independent. *“Two of our students Nahida and Zeenat are now working as receptionist at the Hero Honda show room in Kishanganj”*, tells Sajiya with a sense achievement.

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Gaon Jodo Abhiyan, or connect village movement, is another important strategy adopted by Rahat during the course of project implementation. Through this initiative villagers from one village interacted with those from the other villages about changes they brought about in their community and villages. *“When the elected representative of a village tells how he changed his own village, those from other villages are also influenced and encouraged to bring about similar changes”*, told Farzana Begum. With the growing importance of education of girls, the community is open to educating their daughters, albeit in their own way. There has been a sudden increase in the number of madrasas for girls in Kishanganj in last few years. *“Sending their daughters to Madrasas for education was more acceptable and less threatening than sending them to public or private schools”*, tells Farzana Begum. This, however, only strengthened religious bigotry and orthodoxy. *“Sending girls to the madrasas ensured that they were not corrupted by modern thoughts and education. It was a way to ensure control over what girls learnt. It was therefore important to work with and within the madrasas to introduce the discourse of gender discrimination and violence against women”*, told Farzana Begum.

Four madrasas were selected – two for boys and two for girls. The biggest challenge was to get access to madrasas, its teachers and students. For

any interventions in the madrasas, it was crucial to gain the support and confidence of the religious leaders. Rahat got into extensive conversations with the religious leaders through community meetings, discussions and seminars. *“We were careful not to be blasphemous in our words or actions. We used the teachings of Koran to validate our views on violence against women. We subtly impressed upon the maulvis and ulemas that domestic violence impacts everyone in the society”*, told Farzana Begum.

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Regular meetings were held with the teachers and students at madrasas on issues of domestic violence and physical, sexual, mental and economical dimensions of violence and how it impacts the health and well being of the individual subjected to violence.

Girl's group, Village Nayatola,
Kishanganj

One of the challenges of engaging with men to end gender based violence is to check the tendency of men patronizing women. The line between being protective and patronizing is thin and often bends towards the later. If not cautious, there are chances of further strengthening patriarchy. This patronizing attitude of men will certainly take time to change, something the social mobilisers of both – Nari Gunjan and Rahat were aware of. What has changed is men and women openly discussing and analyzing prevailing social norms. That men from orthodox and conservative communities like Musahar and SherShah Badi, are ready to discuss issues of domestic violence, gender discrimination, rights of women is in itself a big achievement of this project.

In urban spaces, the youth became the catalyst for change. Oxfam India's strategy in the urban spaces, specifically in the capital city of Patna, was engaging youth to discuss, understand and critique patriarchy. The aim was to create 'Samanta Sathi' (friends of equality), a cadre of youth who would be the social influencers leading the society towards being gender sensitive and gender just. In one year of project period 100 young adults from four important colleges in Patna city were mobilized and trained to become Samanta Sathi.

This was achieved through series of online and off line courses on gender and patriarchy. Online course was designed to be a six month long course called 'Ek Saath' with modules on aspects of gender sex, patriarchy and gender discrimination. The offline course was in the form of gender analysis of mainstream Bollywood cinema, called 'Gender Nama'.

Meeting with Samanta Sathi,
Patna

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Diksha Foundation, Oxfam India Partner NGO, working in the area of empowering youth and children, approached four colleges in Patna. *“The criteria for the selection of these colleges was based on student attendance and access to computers and internet connectivity”*, told Sushmita, from Diksha Foundation. The course was designed for male students only.

Abhinav, Samanta Sathi,
Patna

Students were not coerced to enroll for the course nor were any additional incentives given for taking this course. The strategy which was most effective was to engage with students who were on the edge; the ones who felt suffocated within the patriarchal structure of their society but felt helpless at its magnitude and penetration; the ones who were seeking answers to many contradictions and conflicts.

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“I have always enjoyed cooking, but each time I went to the kitchen to help my mother with cooking, the members of my family

teased. I was scolded for sitting with the women of the family. I hated it but could never argue back with the elders in the family”, tells Anand, a 2 year student of Master in Social Work(MSW) at Patna University. Abhinav Kumar, a second year MSW student at Patna University, was frustrated of escorting his elder sister from the railway station or dropping her back. *“Didi is an independent woman, she is studying in Chnadigarh, where she manages everything on her own. But minute she comes to Patna, I am supposed to escort her everywhere – to the market, to the mall, to cinema hall. I don’t understand why”?* As a child every time I was bullied I was further shamed at home – ‘aren’t you ashamed of not hitting back’, my parents would say. *I have read that men commit more suicides than men and I think it is because they have this immense pressure of supporting the family, to earn, to succeed. No one ever asks us what we want”.* When students like Abhinav and Anand enrolled for the ‘Ek Sath’ online course on gender and patriarchy, they were seeking answers to many of their questions. *“I always wondered where protection ends and control begins and when you actually impinge upon the rights of the other. This course helped me understand this subtle difference. Often we put restrictions on others under the pretext of protecting them. I did that with my girl friend, justifying it as my concern for her. For my girl friend I was patronizing her. That’s the difference and I feel violence is often justified as it being in the interest of the other”,* says Anand Vijay. Making the initial connect with the students, the young adults whose priorities and interests were different from ending violence against women, was a big challenge. Sushmita, from Diksha Foundation, started her orientation lecture explaining how gender was different from sex. This initial orientation lecture was important in initiating the participants into the course. For almost all the participants this was unheard of.

“Violence against women wasn’t the topic. We spoke about patriarchy and how it impacted all of us - choices we made, our interactions with others and our own selves”, tells Sushmita. That gender is a social construct was the topic which helped break the ice. A ‘What’s App group’ of all the participants, the college mentor and representatives of Diksha foundation was formed. This helped in bringing trust, transparency and communication between all. Gender analysis of

mainstream Bollywood cinema was another tool which helped holding these young participants to the course and putting it in a perspective. Since the gender representation in mainstream Bollywood cinema strongly influences how men and women perceive gender issues, learning to critically view and analyse these films was important to address violence against women. Oxfam India approached, Priya and Sonam, the founders of a popular youtube channel – Patna Shots, to conduct the ‘film appreciation course’. Both Priya and Sonam were troubled by the negative perceptions of non Biharis towards the people of Bihar. *“Strangely those outside of Bihar assume that everything and everyone in Bihar is backward. We both wanted to do something to break this image of Bihar and decided to start a Youtube channel portraying various socio - cultural aspects of Bihar. We both travel to various parts of the state, documenting the local cuisine, art and craft, monuments, people and places. It’s been a very empowering and enriching experience to run this channel”*, told Sonam.

Oxfam India contacted Priya and Sonam to lead the film appreciation module of the course. *“We wanted the youth to take the lead in facilitating this entire campaign, rather than we implementing or*

organizing it ourselves. Our trainers, facilitators, campaign designers, event managers were all young and dynamic youth from the city who were rebelling against the social norms in their own unique ways”, told Sushmita Goswami, Oxfam India.

Sonam & Priya interacting with Sushmita about film appreciation module at Oxfam Regional office in Patna

The film appreciation course was conducted in the selected four colleges for the samanta sathis or the course participants. Two courses, each, were conducted in the four colleges. Using the clips from popular bollywood movies, it was explained how gender stereotypes are propagated in the society and how it influenced individual's behavior, identity and choices.

“Since the participants were all men, we as facilitators had the

opportunity to know their point of view. We could empathise with them and for the first time we, as women, understood the frustrations men have to deal with due to this gender biased society of ours”, told Sonam about her experience as the facilitator. The direct impact of such sessions was that the participants felt understood. *“Usually we men are attacked and*

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accused for everything that goes wrong in a woman’s life, never considering our frustrations, helplessness and limitations. During the course, for once, we saw how wounded we ourselves were. How damaged we were”, said Himanshu, MSW student from Patna University. Films enabled the facilitators of the course to contextualize the issue of gender differentiation and violence against women, with the local context. It made the concepts, the concerns and the issues more relatable leading to a greater impact. *“We always thought discrimination happens only with girls. That we too were impacted was something new for us. We have all are bruised by patriarchy and we all need healing”,* said Abhinav. This six month long engagement with Samanta Sathi culminated into a one day youth festival. The aim of the festival was to initiate a development dialogue with the youth from the city through various activities. The Samanta Sathi distributed pamphlets across the city posing questions on gender, sex and gender discrimination. They designed various activities for the event. Street plays were performed. A music band performed with songs specially written for lyrics. Songs which were inspiring, exhilarating, liberating and emancipating were sung. The youth festival demonstrated how the public spaces could be turned into safe spaces for women, where young adults could interact in an open and

friendly atmosphere devoid of any fear or social inhibitions.

That such an event devoid of inane and crass gimmicks which objectify women, can be organized and be equally entertaining and stimulating is what was proven through this event. *“We were cautious, at all levels of event management, of not further strengthening the existing gender stereotypes and biases. From advertising to the event comparing, a gender sensitive and gender just language, visuals and images were used. The lyrics of the songs were reviewed before being performed, for any gender bias or objectification of women”*, told Sushmita Goswami, Oxfam India.

Members of girl's group, village Alauddin Chak,
Dist.Patna

Through the project what has emerged is an urgent need to counter the

forces which thrive on perpetuating gender stereotypes which further leads to violence and discrimination against women. Engaging with all possible individual and institutional agencies which can break these stereotypes, at all levels and spaces, is what has emerged as the strategy.

That the men could empathise with women and at the same time acknowledge their own suffocation and frustrations conforming to the prevalent social norms, is the biggest achievement of this

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