

## 'We Can': From Innovation to Sustainability and Empowerment

A campaign's success lies in its turning a crucial corner -- where knowledge dissemination of the issues it address translates into acceptance of the issues and its practice in everyday life by the community.

As 'We Can' campaign reaches its second year in five countries, attitudinal change is definitely beginning to take root. There is a perceptible shift in the dominant cultural ethos -- both amongst ordinary people and opinion shapers -- in the areas where the campaign is active. Change is happening, slowly but surely.

Ordinary men and women from different cross sections of the society are beginning to unlearn bias, discrimination and prejudice against women. They are beginning to openly talk of their acceptance of the two messages that the campaign repeatedly communicates -- 'Women are no less valuable than men' and 'Violence against them is unacceptable'.

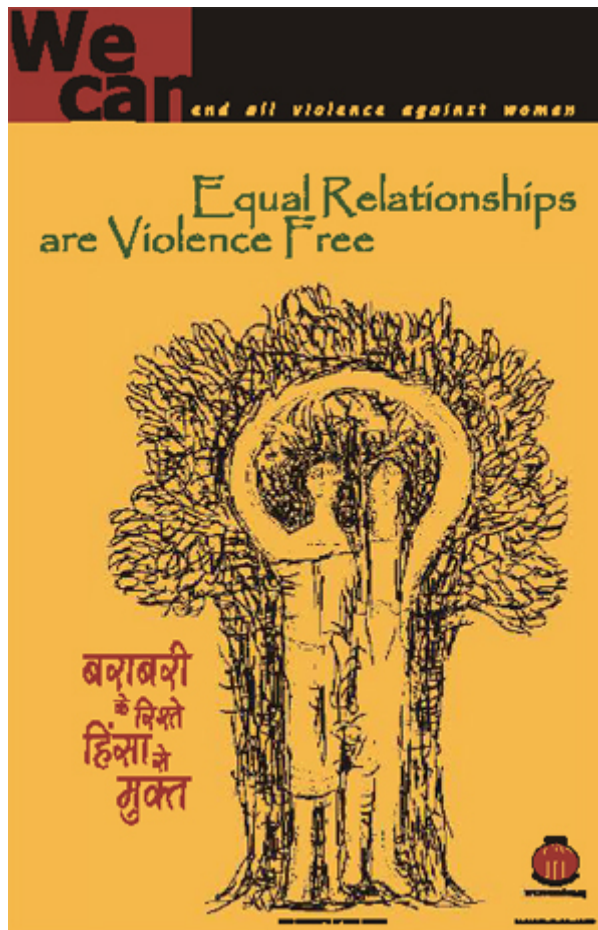


There is understanding of the concept of the violence against women, an acceptance of violence as violence, questioning of the issue and a reflection on it as well. Efforts to accept new ideas and enable women, men and children to live safer, violence-free lives are underway. Men and women are together unlearning socialised ways of expressing power and beginning to develop alternatives that are more equal, respectful and mindful of individual dignity.

At the moment, change is happening more at the level of the individual. It is gradually spreading to the level of the family and community as people help other people change their perceptions and practice. As individual change cannot be sustained without a supportive social environment, a large number of people are being motivated to break their silence and reject ideas and beliefs supporting violence against women. Over the last two years, the campaign has evolved into a large-scale people's movement.

Though at this stage, it is hard to quantify the extent of change, there are enough oral testimonies and stories of lasting altered attitudes to show that attitudinal change is here to stay.

It is fair to say that the campaign has been successful in transiting to its second phase. Its ideas and innovations are beginning to be sustained among large numbers of people in the five countries. Campaign allies do understand that violence will not end overnight, but they believe that individuals and communities can be empowered with ideas to change the relationships among men, women and children. That is what they are doing now.



## The Question of Power

The question of power is central to gender inequality. Says renowned economist Amartya Sen, it throws into sharp focus the real 'capabilities' that women and men respectively have -- the powers they respectively have to do or be what they value.

In his book *Capabilities, Freedom and Equality: Work from a Gender Perspective*, he argues, this can vary from such elementary powers as not being subjected to physical abuse or violent assault and the freedom to lead unsubjugated lives (where power can enter in a very crude form) to having the opportunity to develop one's talents and to achieve self-respect and the respect of others (where power can take more sophisticated forms). Sen argues one type of power asymmetry leads to, or helps to facilitate, power asymmetries of other types.

The 'We Can' campaign makes visible the underlying power imbalance in men-women relations within families. For instance, the campaign builds on the existing power that men have in their relationships and thus encourages them to recognise their actions as violence or discrimination and initiate a change by becoming Change Makers (action). Women are encouraged to action by recognising their experience as violence (and not 'normal') and their right to a violence free life.

As we said earlier, it is extraordinarily difficult to express attitudinal change in numbers or statistics. Instead, we bring you instances of changed lives and active community engagement.

## Changed Lives

Bijla Tirki is a resident of Hathiya village in Ranchi, Jharkhand. He has three brothers and a sisters. As compared with other families, his is affluent. In his words, "My childhood and adolescence was spent in playing with friends, getting up to mischief and teasing and harassing girls. I hated attending school and would very often bunk classes. If my parents forced me to go to school, I would burn my books and uniform in protest. My interest in playing truant from school was to spend time at a place where girls were given employment on a daily basis."

Continuing with his story, he says, "One day, I managed to persuade a young girl to run away with me. But within six months, I realised that I could not support her financially. We returned to the village. I fell into old habits and used to waste all my time wandering around with friends. One day, these friends pushed me to fall into line with their plan of robbing homes. We were inebriated on the day we planned to break into homes and I stabbed a young man who I thought was challenging us. I was arrested and spent six months in jail."

After he was released from jail, he took up some work but his lifestyle did not change. "I continued to harass everyone at home. I used to beat my wife mercilessly and no one would interfere for fear of being rebuffed or attacked. I would not allow her to step out of the house or talk to strangers. I used to drink rather heavily too. It was around this time that I came in touch with the campaign. I began to see how my behaviour impacted and devastated the lives of others around me."

It shook him up, he says. "Today, I am a reformed person. I am no longer violent towards my wife. I have begun talking to members of my community and persuading them to respect women and ensure violence-free homes for women. By doing this I hope to heal myself and secure the future of women."

Eighteen-year-old Moumita Ghosh lives with her mother, maternal grandmother and a younger brother in Balakhali in West Bengal. The women shoulder all the responsibility of running the household. They work in the fields, tailor and give tuition to run the home. Moumita is determined to do her bit to add to the family income. She helps in every way she can. She also volunteers for a campaign ally and has received training in first aid, adolescent issues, HIV-AIDS and reproductive health.

Before she joined the campaign, she says, she was very hesitant to challenge attitudes and practices. " I would just bear and tolerate abuse." But after being sensitised to the campaign, she says she summoned courage to stand up against violence and also intervene in a case of domestic violence where the woman was being brutally assaulted.

"The fact that I was able to help the family gave me immense courage. I now assist people in my community when they have problems. People listen to me though I am very young. I have vowed not to part with dowry in my marriage and I have convinced my brother not to accept dowry when he marries. The campaign has helped me change my own attitudes. The change within is unbelievable. I hope that I can pass on what I have learnt and a changed mindset to all my friends and neighbours."

"I am a teacher; if I say something to my students, to their parents or anyone ...they listen to me." Amina is not only a teacher but also a 'drama activist' at Bagerhaat in Bangladesh. In her school, the Bemorta Girls High School, she teaches girls from standard six to ten. And, she is devoted to using her power to improve the lives of women around her and raise awareness about gender equality and violence against women.



For years, she says, she thought domestic violence was a normal situation to live with. "I did not understand what violence against women was. I did not expect there to be anything like women's rights. It is only when I saw a drama by a campaign ally that I realised the gravity of the matter. My husband accompanied me too but understandably he was more reluctant to appreciate the idea." Eventually, Amina Khanam managed to convince him. As a result her husband who is businessman has become a Change Maker himself.

She has no idea how many people she may have impacted because she is always inviting her students and their families to various cultural shows and meetings on gender equality and violence against women. Every month there is a discussion about violence against women in the school compound and her students and many times their parents and relatives come willingly, "They come willingly because they want to know how to make their life peaceful. The cultural programmes are always on holiday afternoons and it is entertaining at the same time it is educational so people enjoy it."

In Sri Lanka, 20 girls and boys from different parts of the island have been trained to communicate campaign messages through the use of comic books. Rushdhi is one of the boys trained so far. " I had no idea how to draw. Now I feel confident of communicating ideas through visuals." He is in the process of training 300 university and school students to do what he does. Campaign visuals and messages are on the move.



### **'We Can': Feeling of Empowerment**

The stories of Bijla Tikri, Amina and Moumita go to show that that campaign approaches to confronting attitudinal barriers are open and supportive rather than being directive. In the last two years, 'We Can' has effectively built knowledge and capacity of men and women in communities to initiate change in power relations. This means those people convinced about the need for change first bring changes in their own lives and relationships and then take the process of change ahead by talking and convincing many others in their communities.

Ultimately, community efforts to challenge and change ideas and practices that deter gender equality will determine the campaign's success. Encouraging alternative and more equitable attitudes, gender relations and behaviour will have to come from people themselves.

"We Can' can say with pride that it has begun the process of attitudinal change with a sense of empowerment. Over the next four years, allies and five million Change Makers will play an essential role in building a people-based movement to end violence against women.

