

“If women can stand against gender-based violence, why can’t I?”

An Interview with the men of ‘Swayam’

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“If women can stand against gender-based violence, why can’t I?” - Introduction

‘Swayam’ is an NGO based in Kolkata that provides psychosocial, legal and economic support to women survivors of domestic violence. Women who reach out to Swayam or are referred to the NGO for help are provided with legal advice, economic support as well as financial counselling so they can try to become financially independent. Most importantly, they are provided with psychosocial counselling and therapy in order to recover from the trauma of abuse and violence they have faced. The children of these survivors are also given therapy if they seem to require it. Apart from that, Swayam also tries to create a healthy peer group for the survivors and organizes extracurricular activities such as music or drama groups. These help the women adjust back to a social life and regain self-confidence while interacting with other survivors like them.



During my fieldwork at Swayam as a part of my course, I saw how Swayam did not just restrict itself to women but also depended on male volunteers and employees. Swayam regularly conducted awareness campaigns in various slum and suburban areas to spread information about domestic violence and what can be done to prevent it. In order to conduct these campaigns, Swayam heavily depended on its youth groups which consisted of young teenage boys as well as its male employees. The youth groups allowed the group of teenage boys and girls (mostly from

middle to lower socioeconomic backgrounds) to sit together and interact while unlearning patriarchal ideals and learning more about women’s rights and feminism. They participate in various workshops and sessions where they learn more about toxic masculinity by using examples from their real lives.

The men behind the ‘Soch Badlein, Baat Badlegi’ campaign

During my fieldwork, Swayam was actively working on a campaign titled ‘Soch Badlein, Baat Badlegi’ which encouraged men to change the way they thought about gender hierarchies in society. The aim of the campaign was to create a safer space for women without the fear of aggression or sexist behaviour from men as men would unlearn toxic hypermasculinity and become sensitized. As a part of the campaign, I met Rahul who worked in the Khidderpore branch of Swayam and was one of the primary faces of the campaign. Along with Rahul, I also met some other male (or male-identifying) employees and volunteers who were actively involved with Swayam and its various campaigns that sought to create a more gender-sensitive society.



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My interview with Rahul, Wasim and Ashraf is an attempt to understand how these men defied the notions of hypermasculinity, recognized their actions as sexist, unlearned them and helped others do the same as well.

My interview with each of the men did not follow a rigid, structured format but was almost like a conversation which was free-flowing in nature along with a few questions that I had previously determined to guide the direction of the conversation. I started by asking each of them about their “journey” - why or how did they start working with Swayam and what changes did they notice in themselves through the journey.

Rahul’s journey towards learning men can also make mistakes

Rahul’s journey consisted of internal as well as external changes in his own behavior and perceptions. He spoke of growing up as an entitled only son in the family where he was taught that men “cannot make mistakes”. He confessed to being a chauvinistic man who often burst into episodes of rage. As the only son of his aged parents, he became a controlling man who thought he knew the best about how the household should run but also believed that all the household duties were to be done by his mother.

The first turning point in this journey was when he reached out to Swayam in 2010 not as a volunteer but as a man who needed help to navigate the complicated situation he was in. Without explicitly stating the incidents that had led him to Swayam, Rahul said that he had done something in one of his previous relationships which he was not proud of and he was not getting a space to discuss it with people who could guide him on what to do next. Swayam provided him with a safe space to express his views and understand the harm that could have been caused by his actions. He also noted how significant it was to him that Swayam did not judge him for his actions but accepted him for who he was and even supported him with sympathy and empathy. Rather than channeling his rage through other destructive modes, Rahul was finally learning the importance of being attuned to his own emotions and the importance of validating them.

In 2011, Rahul joined Swayam as a volunteer - not completely changed but still a very different man from the imposing, dominant man he was before. He thrived in the accepting atmosphere at Swayam where there was mutual respect and understanding for him and the other male volunteers. He also experienced a desire to do something “good” like he saw the senior women

mentors at Swayam do on a regular basis. **He asked himself that if women could stand and work against domestic violence and abuse against other women, why couldn't he?**

He was part of the 'Yuva' group at Swayam which gave gender-sensitivity training to college students. After becoming an employee with Swayam, he was more involved with the awareness spreading campaigns (he also mentioned that this was his work now because he drew a salary from the organization).

At the end of our interview Rahul said, **"We are brought up in a certain environment where we internalize many of these notions.** It has taken me a lot of practice to change those thoughts and my behavior. I had to change the tone of how I speak and how I act with my parents to actually implement what I have learnt." (translated)

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Working with men to challenge patriarchy

JHINUK MAZUMDAR

■ A 35-year-old man would expect his wife to behave in a way that suited him. He wouldn't let her go out of the house without his approval.

But in the last five years, he has realised that his wife is a "human being" who has her own choices, a partner with whom he can make family decisions and share his anxieties.

■ A man, now in his 30s, had hit his partner 10 years back but was too "manly" to admit it and seek forgiveness.

Much later, he confessed what he had done at a public event but was not branded a "woman beater". The experience helped him change his attitude and realise how he should be, which is different from what a patriarchal society expects him to be.

Calcutta: A women's rights organisation launched a campaign inviting men and boys to think and work for equality.

On Thursday evening, Swayam, which has been working to end discrimination and violence against women for 25 years, launched "Soch Badlein, Bat Badlegi". The campaign urges men to "challenge patriarchal thinking and change the way they think, behave and act".

"This campaign tries to make men look inwards, to break free from patriarchal thinking and to be who they are. To not be scared and not subscribe to the narrow point of view of masculinity that is prescribed by patriarchy," said Amrutha Kapoor, the director of Swayam.

The organisation launched two 35-second films that show a change in the attitude of men.

One of the films shows a schoolgirl on a bicycle trying to navigate her way on an uneven road as three men look on. If these roads are built properly, these kids wouldn't face difficulties going to school, the men say.

In the other film, a woman during net practice throws a yorker and the batsman is stumped out. She'll get picked for the Indian team, say two players watching her play cricket.

The films then say: "In a world where men talk like this... Women will always feel safe and equal."

Swayam has partnered with advertising agency Ogilvy and a production company Lazdifer's Circus to make the films.

Swayam has been working with boys and men for the last four years and has noticed a change in them and a positive impact on their lives.

Kapoor said changed thinking changes one's actions and behaviour and this will initiate a change in society.

"Stop thinking of women as inferior, stop thinking of women as objects and start looking at them as equals. The moment you do that, there will be a shift in the way you treat them. You will treat them equally and the result will be a happier society, a happier you and a safe and equal world for women as well," she said.

The films, available on the social media pages of Swayam, want to take the message to the ground and start a discussion to provide men the space to share their stories.

A 30-year-old man who works with Swayam said that when a woman is subjected to violence, it not only has an impact on her but her family, including men, too.

"My sister was subjected to violence at her 'in-laws' for dowry. Being the sole-earning member, I had to run from pillar to post to make arrangements for it. I was also subjected to torture," he said.

Another man said that treating his wife as an equal has helped him reduce the aggression in him.

"I treat her as equal and can discuss my problems with her and resolve family matters together. It has led to mutual respect and a stronger bond between us," he said.

Amli plays Ranji and he's struggling. women will always feel safe and equal. In a world where men talk like this...

Still from the two videos released at the launch of the "Soch Badlein, Bat Badlegi" campaign on Thursday

In a world where men talk like this...

A still from one of the videos; (right) Amrutha Kapoor, director of Swayam, at the launch

Wasim and his fears about social activism

Wasim is a youth volunteer associated with the Diamond Harbor branch of Swayam. He spoke of how his class 10 history books had parts about the women rights' movement but he experienced a mild cognitive dissonance when he saw how despite the rights women had acquired for themselves, they were still treated unjustly in society. He could also see and observe from his own environment (in the suburban areas with a population primarily consisting of people from lower socio-economic strata) - how men and boys enjoyed considerably more freedom than women and girls did.

Wasim also said, "Sometimes I do want to speak up against the injustice that I see happening to women but I am also scared. *What if something happens?*"

Through his own community, he met Azizul - another volunteer of Swayam and he joined the change maker group under the organization. He liked the "serious" weekly meetings that they had where they were trained in a gender-sensitive manner about how they could recognize their own male privilege and sense of entitlement. Wasim even started helping his mother with the household chores once he realized that there was no legitimacy to the household labour division that he had been taught.

Feminist group's gender equality drive inspires men to 'change how they think'

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Kolkata: A feminist organization committed to advancing women's rights and ending inequality and violence against women and girls has launched a campaign that invites men and boys to think and work for gender equality.

The new campaign, introduced with two 35-second films, shows how men changing the conversation can create a safe and equal world for women and girls. Titled 'Soch Badlein, Baat Badlegi', the campaign informs men that changing how they think will lead to a change in the conversation, and the world will also change.

One film shows men commenting when a girl passes by on a cycle. The other shows boys whispering to each other when a girl bowls



A screen grab from one of the short films released for the campaign

out a batsman. In the first, the men actually remark if roads were better; it would be safer for kids to go to school; in the second, the boys say the girl has the potential to make it to the Indian team.

"Patriarchy promotes toxic masculinity that dehumanizes

men and fosters discrimination and violence against women and girls. This campaign urges men to look inwards, examine the kind of masculinity they want to embrace, free themselves of patriarchal learning and reclaim their humanity. It aims to inspire men to trans-

form the way they view women, talk and behave, thereby creating communities and families where women can live violence-free and equal lives. It shows men who view women as individuals deserving respect, not as objects," said Swayam director Anuradha Kapoor.

Sk Ashraf Ali of Metiabruz who grew up believing men have to be rough and devoid of emotions, said it distanced him from his family. "It is only after I became aware that being emotional was not a sign of weakness, that the relationship changed and we began to have meaningful conversations," said Ali.

Kapoor said once men's attitude towards women changes, women will feel safe. "Men don't have to play the role of a protector or saviour. All they need to do is treat women as their equals," she said.

While he was scared of being the only one to protest against sexual harassment (“eve-teasing”) in his locality before, he was very proud to announce that the incidents of eve-teasing has lessened since the time he joined the change-maker group. He was also instrumental in stopping a child marriage in his area and sought legal help for the underage bride. Interestingly, when I asked him if he knew why stopping child marriages were necessary, Wasim answered that not only was it illegal but marrying an underage girl would also lead to physical problems during pregnancy.

Ashraf’s perspective about how men are affected by violence too

Ashraf also echoed the same reflections as Rahul and Wasim. At the very beginning he frankly said, “**Nobody thinks as much about women’s rights so we did not either.**” He had read about the articles in the constitution that ensured equality between the two sexes but he was still aware of the differential treatment meted out to men and women in his society.

Ashraf was the first to point out that he felt a need to be aware and get rid of his internalized notions on masculinity because men were affected by violence too. He spoke from a unique perspective of how male relatives are also affected when the women in their family have to get married with a lot of dowry or get abused by their in-laws.

A part of the change-maker group as well, Ashraf was also part of the training as well as awareness programs in the community at the grassroots level. He also shares the household duties as “I share the house with my mother and sister, so it is my duty as well”.

The continuous process of unlearning for each of these men

What struck out to me during the interviews was the contentious issue of decision-making. My experience with the women who approach Swayam for help regarding domestic abuse and violence as well as the feedback forms that I analyzed showed how lack of confidence and self-respect was a major issue that held these women back. After enduring a prolonged period of abuse at the hands of close family members, most of these women took several sessions of counselling and therapy to regain their own ability to make decisions about their own lives. In sharp contrast to that, all three of the men casually revealed that before they unlearned the notions of toxic masculinity, they took absolute control of the decision-making in their respective households. Often in collusion with their fathers, they dictated what their mothers should do or what their sisters should wear or where they should go.

Their individual “journeys” also reveals the fact that violence against women through mental or physical abuse for a large part of their lives was perceived as “normal”. All of them confessed that at some point “*Ami nijeo orom chilam*” (I was like that as well). It is only after experiencing or observing this violence indirectly did they feel that their notions about discrimination must be wrong. Through intervention from Swayam and their consequent involvement with the NGO, they have gone through a monumental process of change and are still going through it. They continue to unlearn their biased practices and share what they have learnt to the newer groups of youth volunteers as well.

Their actions have brought about positive and progressive changes in their immediate community and they are confident that they will keep working for gender justice on a deeply personal, individual level as well on a wider scale in their society.

What I learnt from my interactions with Rahul, Wasim and Ashraf in ‘Swayam’

When I first came to ‘Swayam’, I was curious to know how they worked to provide survivors of domestic violence and abuse with holistic help and support. After spending more than a month, I realized the tight-knit system they had built in the organization where the caseworkers did not just provide help to those who approached them but also kept in touch with these women regularly and asked for updates regarding their lives. The physical space in ‘Swayam’ also felt quite safe and comforting because there were mostly women employees in the caseworkers’

department or the administrative department. This is why I was quite surprised to see Rahul attending the all-employee meeting as well, participating upon important issues that concerned the employees of 'Swayam'. However, the campaign introduced me to almost 10-15 boys of varied ages who were parts of Swayam's youth volunteer groups.

Speaking to three of them made me realize how deeply they were trying to change the very community they were a part of. Coming from a background of privilege that is afforded to students of private schools, I realized that these boys were engaging in social activism while still in school - an act that I had only started to do once I joined a college where the students were politically active.

While some of their views matched with mine and the kind of feminist perspective that I had developed over the years due to the kind of pedagogy I am exposed to, it did strike out to me that not everything they said was not strictly "politically correct". For instance, Wasim's motivation behind stopping dowry-related violence seemed to extend to the fact that the men in those families had to gather the dowries desperately and not the fact that it was the women who were facing violence in the first place.

This view was quite different from my own as Wasim saw domestic violence only stemming from dowry and hence, the violence which permeated to the male members of the family as well (procuring the exorbitant amount or suffering from shame in case they cannot procure it). His view was from a different and more masculinized perspective which can be presumably attributed to his social position with respect to his gender and socialization. For me, domestic violence is a gender-based violence which primarily the wives or women in the family have to face. The effects of domestic violence on women are far more tangible - a perspective that was missing from Wasim's view just like I had not actively considered the indirect effects of dowry-related violence onto the male members of the family.

However, I also realized that my attitude was reflective of my own urban biases and privilege where I expected these boys and men to be experts in feminist thought. As young men in a suburban/rural area in a tight-knit community, it takes a lot of courage to join an NGO's youth volunteer group and actually help spread awareness when they could simply be going about their teenage life while their mother cooks for them and their sister serves the food. While I hoped Wasim would gain more insights into gender-based violence as he worked more with Swayam, I

already knew he was making a difference by asking uncomfortable questions in his own community and breaking the status quo that patriarchy has carefully built for men.