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GENDER SENSITIZATION OF ADOLESCENT BOYS AND ITS LINKAGE TO THE CREATION OF POSITIVE MALE ROLE MODELS

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents in India outnumber (in terms of the population dividend) their counterparts elsewhere in the world. With the future of our fast growing economy fairly rested on them, it is important that for gender inclusive growth to set in, adolescent boys grow up with gender awareness and sensitivity. This becomes all the more important in societies like ours, which continue to subscribe to patriarchal biases and rigid gender roles are a reality of the times. While un-conditioning and unlearning in adulthood can be a social exercise to build inclusive mind-sets, grass root level interventions that groom young boys to be gender sensitive individuals can aid our transition to an equal and inclusive future. This study was conducted in order to understand the current need in India for systematic gender sensitization interventions for adolescent boys. In the first segment of the study, a qualitative research was undertaken amongst principals and vice principals of 20 prominent schools in the Indian city of Chennai to understand the key challenges they faced with regards to gender sensitivity amongst their male students. The study conducted amongst the principals revealed that there was a huge gap in existence in conditioning young boys on the ethical tenets of gender sensitivity. The second segment of the study traced the adolescence of successful male role models from corporate India, who were surveyed to understand the impact of gender sensitization conversations they had in their adolescence in shaping their mind-sets in adult lives. The results established strong inter-linkages between a male leader's ability to inclusively interact and effectively lead diverse teams, with that of constructive gender sensitivity discussions he had in his adolescence.

KEYWORDS

Adolescent boys, Gender Sensitization, Gender Roles, Gender Stereotyping, Inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

India – the second most populous country in the world is comprised of 1.3 billion people, 48% of which are women ¹. Every one in five Indians is an adolescent (in the age group 10 – 19), as per the latest census. According to UNICEF reports, in absolute numbers, India is home to more adolescents – around 243 million – than any other country ². With a vast majority of them slated to become a significant part of the organized workforce in the next decade or so, the economy's growth (and impact) trajectory is squarely dependent on this cohort.

If we are to further look at the gender ratio in the adolescent group, more than 53% of adolescents are boys ³. In the Indian socio cultural milieu, where rigid gender roles continue to be a definitive characteristic of the societal norms, attempts towards inclusive growth geared towards a future of greater equality and parity, require the “adults of tomorrow” to be raised as gender sensitive individuals. While there is increasing intent in educating, empowering and enabling girl children to be part of an equal future, structured interventions to train and prepare adolescent boys to be part of this “equal future” are few and far in between. The absence of such interventions can result in subsequent gender gaps at homes, at work, in the society at large.

While previously recorded social movements towards equality were centred on “women/girl child empowerment”, the gears are now shifting towards gender inclusion – the men, the boys being significant contributors/participants of discussions towards an equal society. Against this context, this report is based on a study conducted by AVTAR Human Capital Trust (an NGO based out of Chennai) on the prevalent social need for gender sensitization on adolescent boys.

2. MALE ALLIES: THE CASE FOR INDIA

The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Report 2018 ⁴ established that India for the very first time has closed its tertiary education gap in 2018. 47% of University graduates in India being women (according to 2015-16 AISHE Report) ⁵ – stats that clearly indicate that schools and colleges in India are close to achieving parity, numerically that is. However, women's workforce participation rate in the country (currently at 25%) is one of the lowest in the world and has been on a decline in the last decade ⁶. While 27% of entry level workforce in corporate India are women, about a half of them quit careers at the altar of motherhood. Women's representation continues to dwindle across the corporate hierarchy with a mere 3% at board levels ⁷. Furthermore, crime rates against women (and children) are on a rise and according to the National Crime Bureau, the number of reported instances of sexual harassment has nearly doubled between 2007 and 2017 (Reported cases of crime against women increased 83% from 185,312 in 2007 to 338,954 in 2016) ⁸. While it is important that employers provide a safe, career enabling environment for women and women themselves invest on building and sustaining careers, what is also important to challenge status quo and usher in equality, is a “male ally” culture.

“Male ally” culture is a social construct under which the men (belonging to different generations) are gender sensitive and aware and act as gender advocates in teams/groups/communities they are

part of. Male allies can accelerate and power the social intent on inclusion, extremely critical when research world over has predicted that we are at least two centuries away from achieving gender equality. Thought leaders driven by the need for diverse and inclusive workplaces have today instantiated several reactive measures to curate a culture of inclusion – trainings on prevention of workplace sexual harassment, gender sensitization training and bias busting interventions to name a few. According to the Working Mother & AVTAR Best Companies for Women in India study, 94% of the Best Companies for Women in India formally train their workforce on becoming gender sensitive.

Grass root level interventions – ones that influence and shape young boys in their formative years can go a long way in creating a sustainable culture of male ally ship. A 2018 study - Wings 2018 report projects the prejudices amongst adolescent India boys towards girls in a similar stage of life. The study pointed out that a significant number of boys see a definite role of women in inviting trouble onto themselves – a clear indication of lack of awareness. The survey showed that almost one in three boys blame the woman for having provoked some instances of harassment. The study that covered both urban and rural India, found that 35% of adolescent boys felt that it is okay to slap a woman if she disobeyed orders – a shocking revelation of deep rooted biases in young boys⁹.

The increasing number of hours that women spend in educational institutions and the increasing interactions between boys and girls in (more so in urban India), make such interventions the need of the hour, an urgent, immediate actionable.

3. RESEARCH CONTOUR

The study was conducted by AVTAR Human Capital Trust (AHCT) in November – December 2018. In the first segment of the study, a qualitative research was conducted amongst 20 school principals and vice-principals in Chennai to understand the attitudinal disposition of the city's boys on gender sensitivity. The second segment of the study involved surveying 170 male ally role models (mid management to senior management levels) from across corporate India, working in different sectors/industries. This segment used a research questionnaire that explored the role of gender sensitization conversations/discussions these male allies had in their adolescence, in shaping their well-balanced adult lives.

4. KEY HIGHLIGHTS

4.1. STUDY SEGMENT 1

This part of the study involved a qualitative research with principals from 20 prominent schools in Chennai. They were heads of co-ed institutions in the city and the discussions threw light on the most common challenges they have observed in male adolescent students (in classes 9th to 12th) in their schools, with regards to gender sensitivity. The most important observations included:

1. 60% of Principals felt that poor information/misinformation on sexual and reproductive health amongst teenage boys, is a harsh reality in their schools.
2. 90% of principals opined that young boys had problems in dealing with mental/physical and emotional imbalances in the absence of appropriate gender awareness and sensitisation programs.

3. 70% felt that in the absence of few role models, majority boys showed a lack of confidence in accepting gender equality.
4. 70% of principals agreed that many boys still prescribed to patriarchal biases leading to gender stereotyped behaviour, further leading to gender oppressive behaviour and machoism
5. 60% agreed that boys in secondary and senior secondary classes were closely monitored to avoid any untoward instance of gender based violence
6. All of them said that there has been no structured intervention/Behavioural training on gender sensitization in their schools.
7. 80% of principals felt that formal training for the adolescent boys can help them appreciate gender differences, objectively
8. 90% felt that such interventions can help boys become more open to learning more and appreciate diverse views
9. All of them agreed to the view that such trainings can help boys become more consciously inclusive in their communications and interactions
10. All principals also agreed that such interventions can help reduce and subsequently stop instances of ragging and bullying of girls by adolescent boys

3.2. STUDY SEGMENT 2

This segment of the study focussed on 170 male ally role models from corporate India. They were all professionals with at least 15 years of work experience (mid to senior management levels) and they were surveyed on the role of gender sensitization conversations they had in their adolescence in helping them become male allies and lead well balanced lives in adulthood. Figure 1 shows the primary “source” of gender sensitization training for these male allies.

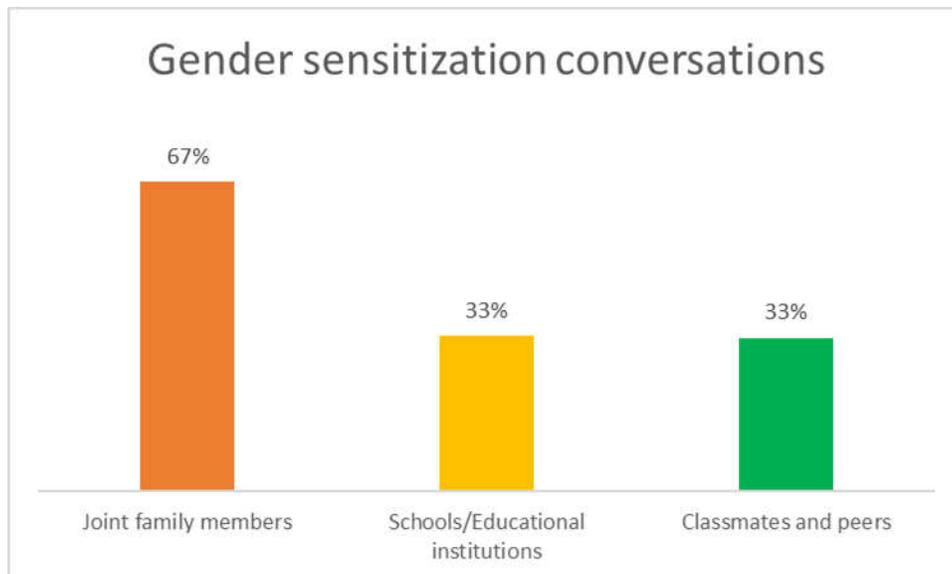


Figure 1: With whom did you have gender awareness discussions in your adolescence?

It is important to note that 67% of the role models opined that the most important discussions they had on gender awareness was with members of the joint family, they were part of. We live in times where the joint family structure is slowly disintegrating (more so in urban India) to be replaced by nuclear family models, which by construct, limits the number of every day social interactions that an adolescent has within the family. This necessitates the need for systematic interventions for adolescent boys to gain gender awareness from to substitute for the organic benefits, a joint family set-up provided to the generations before.

When asked about how gender sensitization conversations helped them lead well-balanced adult lives, the responses recorded from the male ally role models is as shown in Fig.2:

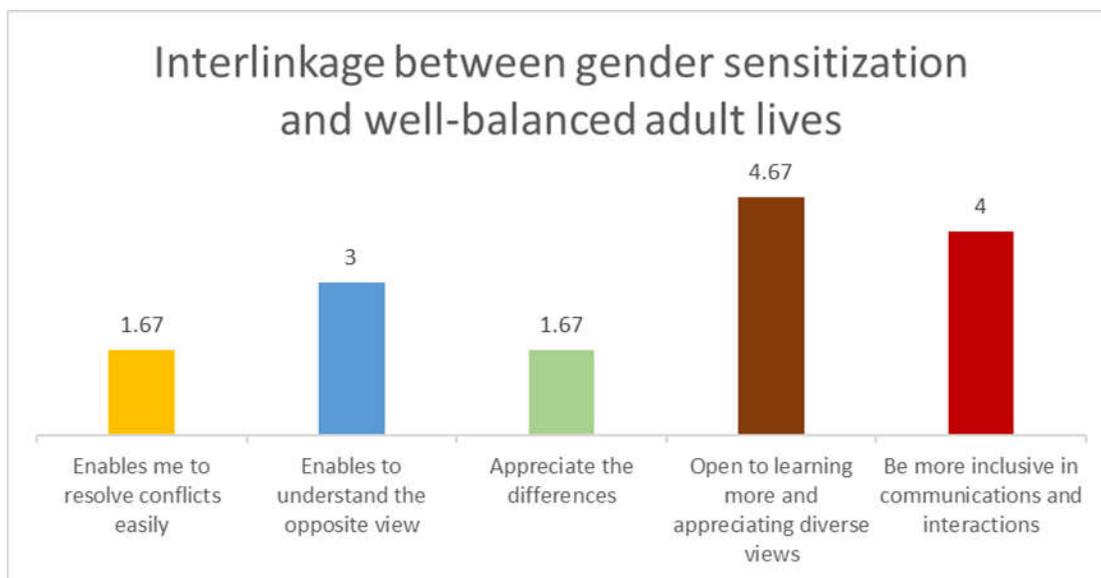


Figure 2: Interlinkage between gender sensitization and well-balanced adult lives, on a net score of 5

It can be understood from Fig.2 that the most important impact that a gender sensitization intervention in adolescence has on a boy, is that of him becoming open to learning more by being appreciative of diverse views. This is a very important trait that can improve one's life satisfaction and overall quality of life. As per several researches, this is an important trait that aids one in becoming an inclusive leader¹⁰. the other welcome consequence is that it helps one become more inclusive in communications and interactions, another win-win trait for effective co-existence in a diverse world.

The leaders were also asked on how gender sensitization interventions helped those lead more effective professional lives and the results were as shown in Fig.3.

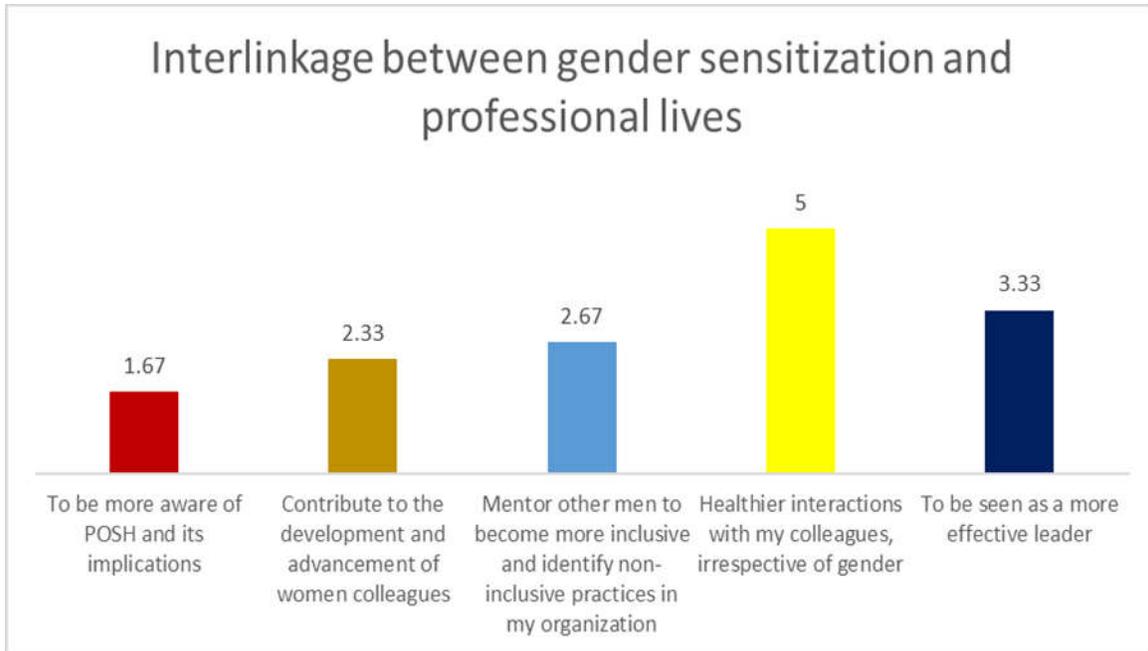


Figure 2: Inter-linkage between gender sensitization and well-balanced professional lives, on a net score of 5

All male role models unanimously agreed that constructive gender sensitization conversations they had in their adolescence helped them interact effectively with colleagues, irrespective of gender. Another key observation was that it helped them raise their profiles as a leader. Not only did sensitization help them champion women's advancement at their workplaces but also mentor other men to become male allies, creating a ripple effect of sorts.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study establishes very strongly the need for systematic interventions on gender sensitization for adolescent boys to lead well-balanced, effective and inclusive lives in the future. The need to work with boys from a young age through their formative years that define transition to adulthood become significant. For true equality to set in, boys are to be taught to understand how an egalitarian society is beneficial for all by questioning gender norms. As the adage goes, "Equality needs to be taught, inequality is learnt." Adolescence is characterised by rapid physical growth, social and psychological changes, sexual maturity, development of adult cognitive processes, and transition from childhood socio-economic dependence to relative independence. Gender sensitization that can result in conscious modification of behaviour by raising awareness of gender equality can help young boys become agents of social change, creating a culture of male ally ship, a definite pre-cursor to a 50-50 future!

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