

Sexist! boorish! misogynist! and this must change now

Paramita Ghosh, Hindustan Times

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Arpita Das, a criminal lawyer practising at the Delhi High Court, walks into an upscale coffee joint, looking as if she has been answering woman-first surveys all her life. Smart and well dressed, with experience of working on a team that has handled clients in Geneva and Milan, she could easily be, as a recent Nielsen survey has called the Indian woman, a "Woman of Tomorrow" — urban, assertive and well-travelled.

The designation, however, hides a sting. Among emerging and developed countries such as Mexico and Nigeria, India tops the list of overworked and undervalued women — 87% Indian women say they feel stressed most of the time, with 82% claiming they have no time to relax. Das admits to pressures: "From a court clerk to a senior lawyer, the vibe we get is that being a woman, if you are soft spoken, you are weak. I've learnt to shout."

The urban Indian woman has had to live with sexism for so long — at home, in the workplace — that sometimes it feels she is dusting out yesterday's baggage. Because she is so much better off than her sisters in the Other India outside of metros — her situation has been left unaddressed. But the rise of the middle-class and with it the middle-class woman — an important factor in India's emergence as an economic power — can no longer be ignored. Time to address her concerns. Sociologist Shiv Vishwanathan advocates: "The question of gender and inequality faced by urban women is a central middle class issue. It's a social issue and it could be turned into a legislative movement."

Indeed. Despite a sizeable number of women in the service sector in urban centres, many even calling the shots in high-powered boardrooms; chick-lits chronicling the urban woman's stories as a valid publishing genre; women's lib and women's rights as part of popular discourse; its defence and discussion by the media and other channels of popular culture in obvious and symbolic ways, the 'ideal' urban Indian household is still one in which the man is at work and the woman is at home.

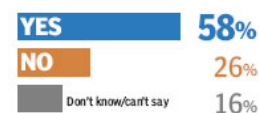
A 22-nation poll on gender issues conducted in 2010 by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project show 52% Indian women and 53% men feel that "enough changes" have been made towards making India gender equal. The findings from India are all the more astounding, and worrisome, as most of those surveyed are from metros. In 2011, the feedback remains more or less status-quoist. According to the HT-C fore survey of working men and women, conducted in eight Indian metros, 61% men believe the growing rate of divorce or breakdown of marriage among urban couples is because women have become too independent. "Does this behove an emerging economic superpower? Our mentalities must change," says Vishwanathan.

HT C-FORE SURVEY

Our survey on attitudes to women reveal shocking mindsets

Working men age group of 25 to 45 years

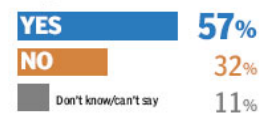
Do you think a woman should dress conservatively if she wants to avoid unwanted attention?



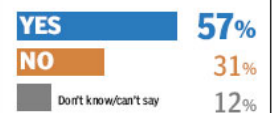
Are you more comfortable with a male boss?



Would you think your daughter is as capable of choosing her own life partner as your son?



Would you have more faith in the capabilities of a male boss?



Would you be ready to spend more on a son's education than a daughter's?

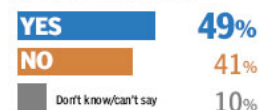


Is the growing divorce rate among urban couples because women have become too independent?

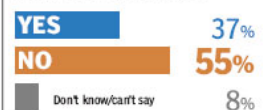


Working women (25 - 45 years)

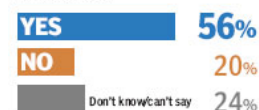
Do you feel male colleagues with the same skills get paid more than you at your workplace?



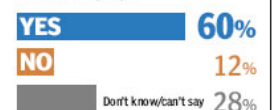
Are you satisfied with your husband's understanding of your sexual and emotional needs?



Do attitudes towards women of the people around you make you insecure and anxious?



Have women moved far more forward in mindsets than men, creating a communication gap?



METHODOLOGY HT-C fore Survey : Research organisation C fore (Centre for Forecasting & Research) conducted the survey in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, Lucknow, Bhopal and Kochi. In all a statistically selected sample of 1054 working men and women in the age group of 25 to 45 years were interviewed in these cities using a structured questionnaire. For women a secret ballot was used to maintain their confidentiality. The survey has a margin of error of 3 percent at 95% confidence level.

Blanked out, made invisible

The signs of this independence have invited hostility. And indifference in equal measure. Data on women in corporate India are not recorded. Slutwalk, a stand by many urban women in India to protest sexual insinuations based on their sartorial choices, have raised male hackles. News of sexism appear and disappear in newspapers without corrective laws. Women working late nights in call centres at the heart of the new economy are often raped. Their choice of clothes call for it, say cops. Sex determination tests are carried out to abort female fetuses. Parents pass off increasing violence and sexual harassment of women in public spaces as its reason, says a recent study by the Centre for Social Research (CSR). MPs have been allocated R5 lakh to spread awareness on the issue, "but no one knows where the money has gone", said Dr Manasi Mishra, a CSR team member, in an interview.

Government intervention, when it has happened, has continued the grim theatre. An analysis of Statement 20 (Budget statement according to which each ministry declares its gender-sensitive allocation) indicate that some of our ministries show "laundering of women's uniforms, and building of maternity centres — which should have been mandatory — as part of their gender-sensitivity expenses," informs Madhubala Nath of UN Women.

Madhu Mehra, executive director of Partners for Law in Development (PLD), a legal resource group working in the fields of social justice and women's rights, also points to "weakness in political will in introducing comprehensive laws for gender justice". For example, the bill on Sexual Harassment at Workplace remains pending, and infact, contains provisions that are counter productive to the object and purpose of legislation.

Mixed signals

Due to lopsided policy-making from above and the absence of sustained movements from below — the Indian feminist and other allied social movements were strongest in the '60s to the late '80s — the fight against sexism in India, say experts, has been an incomplete one: it could not make any fundamental change in the structure of the family or alter mindsets.

Economic progress, therefore, has not changed the paradigm. Earning more money has made us rich, but has it made us — Indian men and women — progressive? Women, too, dump stereotypes on men, making a chap defensive about wanting to be an artist, for example; be the guy who stays at home and pays the electricity bills; and be employed in 'unsuitable' vocations. You can't dream about the 'New Man' and then not want him.

"A rhetoric of sexual emancipation" among the upwardly mobile urban Indian middle-class alongwith the "rise in consumerism and commodification," says feminist publisher Ritu Menon, has confused the issue. "Living together does not mean a new sexual division of labour or that sexism is less or on the decline.... A real change would be when woman's labour at home is considered productive rather than reproductive, when she is in full control of her sexuality...the body is the medium through which a woman is most policed," she says. In our survey, too, 58% Indian men say women should dress conservatively if she wants to avoid unwanted attention, 68 % men would prefer a male boss. And yet, there

INDIA'S SEXIST BLACKLIST

The Karnataka Film Producers' Association banned actress Nikhita Tukral for three years, blaming her for the discord in actor Darshan's marriage. However, no action was taken against Darshan. (The ban was revoked this week.)

A recent CAG report on Air India says it's the matronly air hostesses that are its Achilles' heel. No word on portly stewards though.

Indian Railways is considering a proposal to introduce rail hostesses on Rajdhani and Shatabdi, "being efficient in such kind of jobs, women would enhance reputation of railways by providing catering services," said a rail official to a magazine last month.

In Bengaluru, a woman employee of a leading software company, charged she was unceremoniously removed from her job after she complained to the management about her manager demanding sexual favours from her. As many as 125 cases of sexual harassment involving different IT companies have been registered with the Karnataka State Commission for Women in the last eight months.

In 2010, a HIV patient levelled charges of "making sexual comments and for outraging her modesty" against an AIIMS doctor. A senior scientist complained against a senior doctor in forensic medicine department saying that the doctor had clicked her photographs with his mobile phone. Few nurses have alleged sexual harassment by staff at the operation theatres. So far, only two officials have been suspended.

SURVEYS SAY IT...

■ According to a recent AC Nielson survey, 87% Indian women say they feel stressed most of the time, with 82% claiming they have no time to relax.

■ The WILL KPMG report, 2010, indicates that the vast majority of women in corporate India have remained in the mid-level bracket for more than 15-20 years.

■ According to a Women and Child Development Ministry report, while the estimated Human Development Index (HDI) increased from 0.584 in 1996 to 0.648 in 2006, the Gender Development Index (GDI) score for India has remained lower than the HDI score over the 10-year period.



seems to be hope — 49 % fathers feel they would not spend more on a son's education and 57 % say their daughter is as capable of choosing her life partner. How do we explain this?

Control and compromise

In these times of high inflation, economics has played a part in restructuring power relations between men and women. Choice (letting a daughter choose her partner) and control (restrict her choice of dress) has come to exist side by side.

Bollywood, a reliable populariser of Indian stereotypes, has in two recent films, *Corporate* and *Rajneeti*, shown the limits of gender equality in our society. In *Corporate*, Nishigandha, the female protagonist, is shown to be on par with her male colleagues in potential and achievement, and yet has to play *The Game* to make an executive of a rival company divulge his business plans. In *Rajneeti*, Indu has all the right credentials — educated, charming, daughter of a rich business house — to live a liberated life, but finds her choices shrunk when she is forced to marry the man (a potential chief minister) her father wants in order to further his business interests.

So is this the way it has to be for women — even upwardly mobile women who are very much part of India's success story. In the name of showing the 'truth' are we strengthening stereotypes?

Documentary film-maker Paromita Vohra, in her film, *Where's Sandra*, counters another simplistic treatment by Bollywood that imagined Christian and Anglo-Indian girls, who worked as office secretaries in Bombay, to be racy, easy — and a threat to a male-dominated workforce. The truth is the reason for this kind of cultural stereotyping has roots more ancient than we think.

Radical scholar Silvia Federici, in her book, *Caliban and the Witch*, points to a similar picture — an unspoken agreement between men and the church in 15th century Europe to exclude women from craft workshops and the market by terming women who resisted it, witches or prostitutes, sexually aggressive shrews, disobedient wives. The motive — ban women from economic competition.

According to the Gender Sensitivity Benchmark for Asia 2011 report, India is the worst among the six top Asian economies when it comes to representation of women in the workforce at junior and middle-level positions. The lowest percentage of women are employed in India (24.43%), with Japan (33.62%) the second lowest, according to the study.

The WILL KPMG Report on 'In Pursuit of Balanced Leadership in Corporate India' (2010) also indicates that the vast majority of women in

corporate India have remained in the mid-level bracket for more than 15-20 years, says Poonam Barua, Founder Convener, Forum for Women in Leadership. "The pyramid is clear for women in corporate India — with about 35% at entry level and less than 1-3% at top-management level. It is unacceptable to believe that this is only because women are not 'talented' or do not have merit. This is a clear case of an unequal playing field," she says.

Role models — none

However, what needs to be clear is that men by virtue of being men are not sexist and women by virtue of being women, are not anti-patriarchy. According to the Pews survey, 84 % Indian women feel that when jobs are scarce it is men who should have more right to a job. Surprised?

As sociologist Dipankar Gupta points out, women's conservatism is hardened by the unequal environment she has been exposed to right from birth. "Caught in the kanyadaan complex of marriage — the bride-giver is inferior to the bride-taker — Indian women have learnt to prefer boys because she would then become a sociological male. Also, 93% Indian women work in the informal sector. With so many women outside it tells those inside they had better behave."

Women in power haven't helped either. Political analyst and editor-publisher, Sampark Publications, Sunandan Roy Chowdhury calls Indira Gandhi and Mamata Banerjee "aberrations, they have had no influence on the women's liberation movement in the country. Indira was Nehru's daughter...and not even 10% of Trinamool Congress activists are women". Finally, the fight for a non-sexist society has to be fought by both men and women. We all have to brush our own teeth.

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