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**THE NEW ‘MASVAW MEN’:  
STRATEGIES, DYNAMICS AND  
DEEPENING ENGAGEMENTS. A  
CASE STUDY OF A NETWORKED  
APPROACH TO CHALLENGING  
PATRIARCHY ACROSS  
INSTITUTIONS IN UTTAR PRADESH**

**Empowerment of Women and Girls**

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Empowerment of Women and Girls theme.

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## THE NEW 'MASVAW MEN': STRATEGIES, DYNAMICS AND DEEPENING ENGAGEMENTS. A CASE STUDY OF A NETWORKED APPROACH TO CHALLENGING PATRIARCHY ACROSS INSTITUTIONS IN UTTAR PRADESH

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# Executive summary

Uttar Pradesh is ranked second among Indian states in 'crimes against women', which includes rape, abduction, dowry-related deaths, mental and physical torture and sexual harassment (Government of Uttar Pradesh 2006: 130). The majority of such crimes against women are committed by family members, but this gendered violence and inequality also permeates the broader economy, systems and structures that govern everyday life. During the past 10–15 years, the issue of gender equality has been raised by civil society and government, and there have been some positive changes too. Yet, there is increasing fear among some men about decreasing opportunities as a result of women's empowerment, reflected in the evolution of 'men's rights' organisations, with anti-feminist agendas (Chowdhury 2014). Bucking this trend, since 2002, a growing group of men have built an engagement for addressing gender-based violence (GBV), in Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women, or MASVAW. This case study explores the role of men and boys in addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) through collective action; a collaboration between the Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) in New Delhi, the network MASVAW in Uttar Pradesh, and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in the United Kingdom (UK). This partnership grew in an attempt to problematise and politicise the way the terms of the debate were being set in the broader field of engaging men in addressing GBV in the development field.

This case study looks specifically at the MASVAW campaign's experience in Uttar Pradesh in order to explore *the dynamics of a networked and institutionally nested approach to collective action*; one which is not based within one organisation, but which is nevertheless nested *within and across* institutions. In jointly planning the study, three central questions were agreed as the focus of this research, namely: (i) in what ways is MASVAW's networked and institutionally nested approach to addressing gendered violence with men and boys *appropriate and effective in the Indian context?*; (ii) given that MASVAW is a 'campaigning network', covering multiple levels, institutional settings and strategies, how can we best understand the *dynamics of their networked approach?*; and (iii) what contributes to MASVAW's *successes*, in which ways, and what *missed opportunities* can be identified to strengthen the approach?

## Conceptual approach

The approach to this study of MASVAW is an interactive, participatory peer-enquiry. Drawing on key insights from feminist theory, research on masculinities and on power, MASVAW's collective action is explored against a critical understanding of 'patriarchy' as a 'dynamic system' in which we are all involved. Focused on the importance of developing critical consciousness through collective action, the approach draws on insights into how policy influence can be wielded through contestation, linking: the role of actors and networks, set in constellations of institutional interests, to the (re/)framing of evidence and policy narratives. Focusing down on three institutional settings of MASVAW's campaign (work in universities, in the local Panchayat governance bodies, and with youth in local communities), the study explores four dimensions of the Uttar Pradesh context. It does so by applying a set of four gendered lenses on: (i) 'male centeredness' (in a representational or sociocultural dimension), (ii) 'male privilege' (in a material and institutional dimension), (iii) 'male supremacy' (in an ideological and political dimension), and (iv) 'male order' (in an epistemological or 'evidential' dimension). The first three are readily linked to the feminist calls for *recognition*, *redistribution* and *representation*, whilst the fourth calls for a pro-/feminist '*reframing*' of evidence, knowledge and study method.

## Study method

Based on a mapping of issues in addressing SGBV with activists of MASVAW (Shahrokh *et al.* 2015), the research was undertaken between August and December 2014 in Uttar Pradesh. The team developed a methodology for collective, qualitative and emergent inquiry, using a range of mixed methods: one in-depth group analysis workshop by 12 MASVAW activists, exploring and fine-tuning the identified research questions; ten semi-structured key informant interviews; four guided focus group discussions; and participant observation by researchers. In total, 50 local participants took part: 21 women and 29 men. The methodology offers unique advantages, such as relatively direct reflection and analysis and the ability to capture how processes and outcomes are perceived by different stakeholders from different vantage points, reframing questions and reflecting on the learning process itself. Triangulation of perspectives enables the building up of a nuanced and multidimensional account of a shared – if contested – reality. Findings are illustrative rather than definitive, and sometimes provocative rather than conclusive, thus resisting a male ordered and positivistic approach.

## Analysis

In exploring the question of how MASVAW's networked and institutionally nested approach to addressing gendered violence with men and boys may be appropriate and effective in the Indian context, the analysis centred on how MASVAW is 'building and nurturing activism across different settings'. There are multiple entry points for MASVAW engaging men – and pathways for nurturing action – on gender inequality, but there are also some common elements that connect personal experience, critical reflection, political action and structural change.

**Five common steps to mobilising men:** First, 'politicising the personal': the importance of disclosing personal experiences to peers and 'role modelling' how to engage differently as men has been key for mobilising men. Second, 'beyond the personal': one key feature is adopting a dynamic, yet structural analysis of patriarchy, where gender-based oppression becomes seen as intersecting and working through caste and social class in activists' own lives. Third, 'self-identification through critical consciousness': acknowledging that this change is a personal and emotional process means that mechanisms to support the internal sense of self and confidence are important in the process of reconstructing both personal and collective identities as activists for gender equality. MASVAW is made up of informal bonds among like-minded peers, which has contributed to their becoming more confident in themselves and in their roles. Fourth, 'deliberate, directed collective action': this strength enables collective action in response to specific cases, in support of those exposed to gendered injustice. Fifth, 'sustaining momentum by observing and describing change': activists also noted that where they see change in the lives of people around them and feeling able to support others, their motivation is strengthened.

**Building new constituencies for change:** An important 'inroad' for mobilising members and expanding the movement has been a focus on 'youth'; particularly visible in the community outreach work, both in and out of school. The framing of young men as 'agents of change' involves two key aspects, namely: (a) their more open minds as to questioning traditional gender roles and inequalities, and (b) a type of demographic momentum effect, as more enlightened young cohorts gradually shift prevailing norms, by numbers and over time. Another dimension to this latter effect appears to be tapping into a gradually changing make-up of families, with smaller and more nuclear families becoming more possible in Uttar Pradesh, as compared to the traditional set-up where young families typically reside with the husband's parents, or extended natal family. Here, again, role modelling is seen as important, as they point to real improvements in their lives to validate their dissidence, in the face of resistance.

**Institutional transformations from within:** Another key feature of MASVAW's approach is the way that specific institutions are targeted, and used, not merely as 'sites' where to carry out the work, but also as institutions to leverage for their own implications on gender justice. On the one hand, activists in the university are using their role in teaching to make visible the structural dimensions of patriarchy in order to raise awareness and recruit new members; on the other hand, they have also challenged their institution to establish anti-harassment committees. Similarly, whilst activists in the Panchayats are using the provisions of women's representation in these local bodies to support women representatives (e.g. through lobbying other male representatives) and to support women to utilise the space of the forum to become 'heard' (within this traditionally male-centred public space), both Panchayat members and local school teachers have challenged and lobbied their institutions to provide for gender-sensitive and safe, separate lavatory facilities for women and girls (thus reducing *de facto* institutional forms of gender discrimination). Importantly, it was also found that institutions have been used strategically against each other to wield pressure for redress on cases of GBV.

**Gender-relational alliances of change:** MASVAW's work in solidarity with women – for women's rights – provides a gender-relational dynamic crucial to their political approach, from interpersonal to institutional alliances. This is critical for MASVAW in order to learn across gendered perspectives; seeing manifestations of male supremacy as informed by experiences of women's subordination, or male privilege from a perspective of facing discrimination. Thus, the analysis of gender injustice was seen as deepened when working together. A number of women met also highlighted the importance of women and men coming together 'as a common group', although recognising that a space for men only within the campaign also remains essential to its purpose. Formal relationships have been started with a number of women's organisations working to support women survivors of violence and these partnerships were seen as transformative also in that they aim to recognise and promote women's positions of leadership, which itself shifts the male activists' perceptions of their own types of leadership roles in agitating for gender justice.

**Structures of constraint to progressive change:** In all the settings studied, *resistance and backlash* to MASVAW men agitating for changing gender norms came from both families and their broader home communities. It was also clear that the formal institutions, within which the activists live and work, provided sources of *institutional resistance*, sometimes co-opting progressive agendas to shore up their basic day-to-day functioning. We saw several examples of the former, where activists faced ridicule from community members or estrangement from families, although – crucially – this can be mitigated by activists' peer solidarity. The university itself provides an example of institutional resistance, where MASVAW has addressed institutional management around policies and procedures with the establishment of 'progressive' anti-sexual harassment committees, whilst it appears that the function of these anti-harassment committees is broadly seen as having been *co-opted* to primarily safeguard the reputation of the institution itself, with both the disincentives for reporting and pursuing cases and the common outcome of 'compromise'. As to the internal workings of the Panchayats, it was clear from women representatives met that even a 50 per cent proportional representation was seen as insufficient for them to be heard in the male-centred culture of the institution.

MASVAW faces a number of other *challenges and tensions* as well, including in the area of allying with women's organisations: it was suggested that many organisations are engaging women through a 'welfare' approach, as a patriarchal co-option of a 'progressive' cause; there is suspicion from some women that groups like MASVAW are not legitimate, or that men's groups may divert the resources away from women's organisations; and, some representatives of women's organisations highlighted that women cannot be full members of the campaign, asking what this might mean for the future of MASVAW's work with women.

## Recommendations for MASVAW

- A key question is: 'To what extent does "men" need to remain the defining – or exclusive – category?' A re-visioning and realigning of MASVAW's make-up and partnerships could be held in dialogue with women to ensure the process reflects the politics.
- MASVAW should build on the approach of combining a dynamic structural analysis with personalising the political with examples from activists' own lives, e.g. through developing accessible materials in Hindi for explaining complex ideas with real-life cases.
- Further development of practical methods for intersectional analyses is flagged as a need, to support new work with *dalit* groups, with children and for older people.
- MASVAW should build on its advances in addressing various institutions, by developing ways of documenting co-option of progressive policies, whilst protecting the safety of its members, by drawing on peers across institutions (e.g. in media), or student projects.
- Balancing further growth with support for new members will mean working out how to nurture mentoring connections, as the campaign branches into new settings.
- Action research could enable further in-depth exploration of what is working. For example, the issue of transitions within the network (e.g. students into leaders).

## Implications for broader practice and policy

- With little current constructive engagement of men in policies and laws against gender discrimination, policies should frame the role of men as equal and responsible partners.
- There is a need to create an enabling environment in the cultures and systems of institutions, for progressive policies to be effective, especially on GBV.
- Policy needs to create the opportunity to support progressive strategies for sustained awareness amongst men to challenge inequitable systems and cultures driving SGBV.
- But, men and boys must not be treated as homogenous groups – intersecting markers of identity and experience must be recognised in engaging men/boys as agents of change.
- Resist facile frameworks where men's engagement gets instrumentalised and co-opted through notions like 'men-streaming' gender, or reinforcing men's roles as 'protectors'.
- Challenge the instrumental and binary constructions of gender and the common misconception that 'funding gender equality' simply means 'funding women's groups'.
- Protect funding for progressive, effective work on women's empowerment; but crucially,
- Escalate investments in gender equality work overall, as it is fundamental to social – and societal – development, and to achieve goals of social justice for both women and men.