Prejudiced proverbs

Sexist proverbs used in everyday parlance need to be done away with.

The COVID-19 pandemic is tragic for women – as they have been affected disproportionately in many ways. When the lockdown started, different online sites unleashed a flood of sexist memes, idioms and phrases, songs, jokes, cartoons, videos, statements, pictures, etc. Many, both men and women, justified them by saying that these were mere outlets to enjoy some humour in the midst of the gloom. Little do we try to realise that these are actually gears which are used to laugh at women’s bodies bereft of beauty parlour therapy, or of pitying a man who needs to be staying with his wife 24X7 because of the lockdown. These have always existed and have now just intensified.

During the pandemic, we addressed several domestic violence cases faced by women in locked-up homes. We also noticed online abuse of young girls. It was midnight when a girl sent an urgent message to one of our helpline numbers which are managed by women counsellors at Gramin Mahila Kendras. The message carried texts which were sexually coloured and was an indecent proposition to meet post-lockdown.

It also had images of a boy’s genitals. Petrified, the girl reported the case to the North East Network’s Kendra. We got in touch with the State Women’s Helpline (181). The calls were traced. Later on, we learnt that she was being abused online as she had refused to submit to the boy’s advances. These are criminal offences and punishable under the law. Despite the support from us, she declined to lodge any police complaint. Women and girls dread to take the next step due to fear of repercussion of violence and also stigma that might jeopardise the family honour. Socialism instills fear in girls. Families expose children to gender-biased lessons and behaviour very early. Girls are raised to be like Goddess Lakshmi, who symbolises prosperity in a home. Lakhari sawali or a girl is supposed to remain quiet and not protest. Hence, girls continue to internalise and normalise abuse on them. Any girl who speaks up is quietened down, allowing males to enjoy all liberty. Apologetic arguments in defence of the dominant role of boys and the utter dismissal of narration of abuse by girls leads to high participation of boys in violence. It is crucial to look at social conditions and cultures in which people are raised. After all, no human is born violent. We raise one to be.

It is time to examine and shed the age-old pandemic of prejudiced proverbs and maxims. Let’s not believe that Tiri matri bera, ek ghosa marile xoripora (women are like mud walls and will fall off at one punch). No, they will not fall off; they have a voice of their own which needs to be heard. In doing away with such proverbs, we will remove attitudinal barriers for a girl to live a life of dignity and safety. In fact, if we take a small step and decline to participate in sexist ‘forwards’ on social media platforms, even boys will learn to shed the pandemic of prejudices.

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