

## WOMEN PLUS

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**L**ao jimanai dangor nohouk xodai pator tol is an Assamese proverb which conveys that no matter how ripe the gourd is, it always has to survive beneath the leaves of its creeper. I have often heard of it also being used in the context of women, i.e., *lao* and *pat*, i.e., society. It is one of the most celebrated patriarchal proverbs and, therefore, it has become necessary to orally pass it down from one generation to the next. Such proverbs, idioms and phrases continue to thrive even today in a dangerous manner. In other words, these have become tools to constantly remind and keep women within boundaries set by the society and thus, protect gender stereotypes. Such controls disadvantage women in many ways. It is not that simple. It wields toxic masculinity in the Assamese society and has been the cause of different forms of deprivation, discrimination and abuse faced by women and girls.

When a woman is articulate or assertive or accomplished, there is an entire community waiting to say and remind her that despite all these, she continues to remain subordinate in the eyes of the society. Therefore, it has made boys believe that they are the superior, privileged lot and can wield their powers of control and domination over girls. There is patriarchal consensus to their behaviour and actions and by the time we realise that, it's too late. The damage is done as we have internalised that *Puruxor kotha xilor khuta* (a man's word is the final decision, engraved in stone). In Assam, the age-old proverbs which degrade women exist within the institutions of family, marriage and religion. Now, these have been passed on even to social media in different forms; the underlying objective is to justify and sustain disrespect and abuse of women and girls.

There are new tools which are seen on different internet platforms.

# Prejudiced proverbs

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



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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. Socialisation 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. Lakhi *suwali* 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 matir bera, ek ghosa marile xori pora* (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.