

From unpleasant conversations to meaningful decisions

Arti Manchanda Grover

The adage “change starts with you” holds true for the whole team at community radio Alfaz-e-Mewat FM 107.8, an initiative of S M Sehgal Foundation, as they ventured into a new domain of gender programming on radio—a journey of change—in thought, perceptions, and sometimes self-belief. As the team expected at the very beginning, the transformation was not overnight. The journey started two years ago when a women’s rights organization and media and arts collective joined hands to work with community radio stations across India to work on issues of gender.

Operating in an area with low development indices, especially the low literacy rate, as well as within a strong patriarchal culture, the radio team was apprehensive about even participating in the orientation training to embark on this collaborative journey. Two male radio reporters attended the training, which still stands afresh in their minds because it took them out of their comfort zone.

“Training is fine, very relevant for the times we live in, but would we be able to talk about gender issues with the community and make programs for radio? We were really unsure,” wondered radio reporter Fakat, a local middle-aged community member and father to two boys and two girls.

Fakat incorporated many new concepts and ideas into his own life after undergoing a series of trainings to build his capacities for working in gender programs. He was closely involved with the research and development phase of the series based on community learning program methodology, facing a lot of challenges, and making the gradual changes that transcended various facets of patriarchy and conservative tradition. Starting with his own perceptions and thought processes, Fakat said he almost underwent a mental revolution since his first association with the program. His emotions hovered between guilt and pride as he realized how far he had come in his own psychological journey. He shared that his wife was the first person to notice a change in him after he began the training, a change he attributes to his ability to understand and relate to the views and opinions of his wife, something he was not as sensitive to before.

The group was very apprehensive in the beginning to talk about the various kinds of physical, social, and emotional changes in adolescents, but trust building with the adolescents paved the way for conversations. Fakat remembers the first time he organized a group discussion and the doubts he had about how to approach the students. He would go to the school, seek permission from the teacher to talk to a small group of boys about a radio program and give them just enough information so that no objection was met.

When the discussion began, the boys bit their nails and wondered what the team was up to, but even so there was eventually a willingness to talk about how changes in adolescence affected them. Initial discussions were one-sided with not much sharing. Then a few boys asked, “When will you come next?” Slowly, meaningful interactions started to happen.

After reporter Anuradha Dubey met with a girls group, she said, "The girls told me 'Please don't talk about all this. Let us talk about something else.' I understood and stopped probing further. But once we started to become friends, the girls shared without me asking them to do so."

Based on what they gathered from community discussions, Fakat and Anuradha are now confident that their work focusing on changes experienced by adolescents was entirely appropriate and much needed.

Continuing with the response received during the series on adolescents, the team plunged a further with a second series, discussing "eve-teasing," bullying, etc., that falls under the purview of sexual harassment. The goal was to work with the same groups of girls and boys as earlier, and this succeeded to some extent. A few girls stayed and so did the boys.

The response from community members was so overwhelming for both series. Fakat sometimes had to cut calls short. He also observed that the progressive views shared by some community members who called the radio station have the power to inspire many others.

Fakat was reassured when a *maulana* (religious leader) in the village called him during an episode to show his support toward the series, saying, "Women should be given equal opportunities and respect that they deserve." Such a response is what the team hopes for in promoting conversations that will lead to a gender-just society. Radio programs bring these conversations into the public domain and encourage families to have these types of conversations in their homes. The new awareness leads to well-informed and meaningful decisions.

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