

The 'We Can' movement - A Step Towards the Elimination of Violence Against Women

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Our guest blogger Dr Prasanna Poornachandra asks when will we see the elimination of violence against women and argues that the 'We Can' campaign's success at creating collective social transformation could be a crucial step towards that goal.

It is twelve years since the UN resolution that designated November 25th as the **International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women**. This event triggered millions of activities, campaigns, movements, policies and initiatives to protect women of all walks of life from discrimination and violence.

Why, then, was **15 year old Malala** shot for wanting education? And why was **baby Afreen battered to death** by her father for being born a girl? Where and when is the 'elimination' of violence that we have been promised? Will we be forced to continue to mark 25th November for all eternity?

"Now I know that we can be the strong one or the victim at any time. The choice is ours."

Hope may be found in the words of **'We Can' change makers**:

"...My mother taught me how to tide over a bad situation using inner strength. Now I know that we can be the strong one or the victim at any time. The choice is ours. We never lose just like that, unless we ourselves bow down to defeat."

Shahina, **'We Can' change maker**, West Bengal, India.

"We were only women before, but now we are bold voices as well. 'We CAN' not only gives us a purpose, but also a unique identity."

Rashida, **'We Can' Change maker**, Muzzafragrah, Pakistan

Rashida started an initiative on promoting adult literacy at her own home, beginning with her sisters-in-law, by convincing her parents-in-law of the importance and need to educate daughters.

The 'We Can' Global Network

'We Can' **change makers** from 14 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America, are potentially creating history by being the first step on the road to 'eliminating' discrimination and violence against women.

The 'We Can' strategy, thrives on the principle that resistance to change evolves at the community and societal levels, where efforts to challenge existing patriarchal systems appear contradictory to conventional perception and culture. Dominant ideologies that suppressed women and gave rise to violence are also beginning to change in the African continent, including Niger, Tanzania and Burundi.

"...now I have changed and I am able to say 'thank you', 'congratulations' and 'I am sorry' to my wife."

"...before the campaign I could never say thanks or show recognition to my wife, but now I have changed and I am able to say, 'thank you', 'congratulations' and, 'I am sorry' to my wife."

Male **change maker**, Tanzania.

People are realizing that violence against women is not a normal practice and that as a community they have to take a stand that violence against women is not acceptable.

*"..... before I became a **change maker** I used to witness acts of violence against women and I would always do nothing since I considered VAW as normal and part of our culture. But now I realize that I was being violent without my knowledge, therefore, the change began with me, and I decided to become a **change maker**. I started with my family then I went out to other community members educating them."*

Change maker, Tanzania.

"I considered violence against women as normal and part of our culture."

A social transformation trigger occurs when communities organise their perception-change in a more comprehensive strategy of collective action, steadily strengthening their ability to 'eliminate violence against women'. This creates a credible environment for the positive reception and implementation of State policies, which would be otherwise undermined by community attitudes and biases.

In Pakistan 582,800 **change makers** across the country have formed pressure groups at the community level for creating collective transformation. For the coming year, **change makers**

are focusing on creating role model villages where any form of violence is unacceptable and women have access to basic rights.

In India, in order to sustain the growing change, share information and carry out collective actions, nearly 700,000 **change makers** and 3,937 educational institutions from nine states have grouped themselves into structured coalitions with a common goal of taking forward the principals of the 'We Can' Campaign. Known as 'Mumkin Manch', which means 'We Can forum' in Hindi, these coalitions function with the belief and conviction that it is possible to end violence against women through positive collective shifts in attitudes and practices?

What has changed with the 'We Can' Campaigns?

The spectrum of mobilising change has expanded and now **change makers** have a broader arena in which to spread change and apply the 'We Can' Approach. Following the 2012 monsoon, **change makers** in Pakistan have been working alongside humanitarian organisations in seven critical flood affected districts to highlight issues of protection, harassment, and the needs of women in camps and settlements. 'We Can' is also working across 200 schools to promote the 'Right To Education Campaign' by mobilising students, teachers and parents and creating widespread awareness about discriminatory attitudes and basic human rights.

A quick glance at the 'We Can' movement dynamics in India and Pakistan shows the campaign moving in exciting new directions, predicting a shift from an individual change perspective to an organisational and structural one. **Change makers** are starting to look at new areas of social life that perpetuate violence, and act with instrumental rationality. 'Policy drivers,' can we call them?

The **We Can Global Network** (WCGN) joined the **Asian Girl Campaign 2012**, coordinated by the Garden of Hope Foundation in Taiwan, to mark the International **Day of the Girl Child**. Further, the network has opportunities in the coming year to share the 'We Can' Approach and learning with organisations from Singapore, Japan and Germany.

WCGN, was officially launched in November 30, 2011 to accelerate We Can's efforts. It functions through non-state actors and builds associations with other stakeholders such as the government and the private sector to strengthen country 'We Can' campaigns. It does this by sharing information, experience and actions, building the brand and visibility of 'We Can' as a worldwide social movement, and supporting the conceptual development of 'We Can' at the country and global levels.

Suitably adapted, 'We Can' could illuminate many areas of cultural, institutional and societal change and eventually lead to the permanent 'elimination of violence against women'.