

Men in Women's Spaces

The question of exclusive women's spaces appears to have run dry in conversations within the women's movement. Particularly in the Asia Pacific, but also in Africa, women who identify with the women's movement, both feminists and gender advocates, have insisted that without bringing men into our dialogues and engage them in our discourses, we will not be able to advance the agenda of women's empowerment. This has been a particularly strong assertion with the rise of gender analyses and concepts of gender mainstreaming within both academic and development worlds.

Women's organisations, like Isis International-Manila, are often asked why we do not employ men as part of our regular staff, and why we describe our information and communications work as being in support of the women's movement. It appears that maintaining a women-centric focus is not any longer pursued by some sectors of the women's movement. While our agenda stand on the foundation of the feminist and human rights frameworks, we are very conscious of the fact that there are many women now engaged in different social movement who are also fighting for gender equality and fundamental social transformation. The women's movement itself, particularly that located in the South has begun to work on issues of globalisation, the impact of structural adjustment policies in the South, and the specific realities of nationalist and fundamentalist agendas in the South. We now see our role as also including the reaching out to other social actors, both women and men, and building bridges as it were, between the women's movement and other social movements.

We believe that the question of autonomous women's spaces is still very much a debate that we should have. While gender mainstreaming pushes for the inclusion of men as an effective strategy in pursuing the goal of empowerment, and there are indeed many more men now working on programmes and work, we cannot immediately conclude that maintaining physical and ideological spaces where only women engage is an outdated strategy. We do think that it is crucial that men become engaged in women's issues, and many more men need to do this, but, as Patricia McFadden, one of our contributors to this issue argues, not to reassert old heterosexist and nationalistic claims of women and men being located and engaged in the same spaces.

In this issue of *Women in Action*, there are several contributors who have shared the ways in which they have sought to engage men in their programmes on reproductive rights and domestic violence with varying degrees of success. There is also an interview with an exceptional man, Paul Sinnapan, who has himself been radically transformed by gender analyses and now actively seeks to educate other men in the cooperative movement in Malaysia to confront sexism within their movement.

Clearly, there is a desire amongst feminists and gender advocates to get men involved in our struggles, and there are many ways in which this can happen. And there are clearly exceptional men out there, feminist in their thinking and demeanour, who have taken on the challenge that their women comrades have posed to them. These men have overcome the pressures of the roles placed upon them as a result of societal

construction of men and women, while giving up some of the traditional privileges conferred to them through centuries of entrenched patriarchal dominance. However, we would argue that this is still the exception rather than the rule. In our conversations with women from the region, we hear about how women have to fight a very personal struggle for democracy and justice within their homes and within the most intimate relationships. There are still too many men who pay lip service to women's empowerment and notions of gender justice, who have yet to make any fundamental shifts in their own behaviour within their families and within their workplace. Women working in development agencies that promote gender frameworks within the work of their partners of the ground can attest to the ways in which gender hierarchies are reproduced and reaffirmed in internal structures of these very agencies. This is why the work needs to happen at all levels.

With this rich harvest of passionate women's and men's writings, we hope that we will stir up sufficient debate on this issue, and start the conversation from another entry point. The task of gender mainstreaming is not over, surely, but clearly there are visible gains in this area, and worthy of a reflection on how far we have gotten, where we are heading, and what we might be gaining and/or losing as a result of this project. We invite all of you to share your opinions by writing to us. We would love to publish more of your views on this issue in the editorial and letters to the editors pages of the next *Women in Action*!