

He For She For Us

When Emma Watson speaks, the world listens. Or, half the world, anyway. Which is just as well, given that this International Women's Day, the actress will be talking about and taking questions regarding the program for gender equality she launched at this year's World Economic Forum: the HeForShe Campaign.

The initiative, implemented by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (or UN women), attempts to engage and enlist men as champions of women's rights, worldwide. Having drawn flak from several communities, self-styled 'meninists' and 'equalists-not-feminists', for claiming to strive for gender equality by only addressing the problems of women, HeForShe has nonetheless claimed strong backers with the likes of US President Barack Obama, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

In spite of the popular support that the campaign has garnered over the past few months, there are still some who would say that it fails intrinsically, because of the way it aims to achieve gender equality. A simple rebuttal to that argument is this: when trying to equate two numbers, if five is less than seven, you do not add two to both five and seven, lest the inequality persist. Granted, neither is exactly the perfect ten, but that's a bridge to cross when five and seven both come to it.

Closer to home, and Manipal in particular, given the name of the man taking to Pro-Show this Revels, is the social campaign M.A.R.D. (Men Against Rape and Discrimination). Launched by Farhan Akhtar in 2013, the year old initiative promotes much the same message as HeForShe, as stated in a tweet by its founder:

"If you are a man who respects women... her rights, her dignity,

her independence, her mind, her body, her life... you are a #MARD."

Also having amassed public interest with celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan, Priyanka Chopra, Hrithik Roshan, and Sachin Tendulkar being vocal in its support, M.A.R.D. suffers from the same problems HeForShe does: an unrelenting, corrupted mindset. The prevalent view that the problems men in India face are of the same in magnitude as that of India's women simply doesn't seem to be changing. Clear evidence for the fact can be found in the swift condemnation of women who stand up for their rights, and the rising popularity of the term 'feminazi'. As if a woman demanding, aggressively or not, a standard of living which her birth entitles her to could be compared to Hitler's Gestapo.

It is true that men face problems with gender roles and sexism much the same as women. A young boy is expected to play with action figures instead of Barbie dolls, and is expected to like blue, but not pink. A male teenager is encouraged to pursue passions such as sport and public debate, but his parents brush off his interest in cooking and sewing. Our society fails in many ways to accommodate both genders and their variable behaviours in a fair manner, but what it fails at most alarmingly, is the simple matter of safety for women.

A man's biggest worry when he's at work in the evening and the clock strikes nine is the chance of missing the match he forgot to put on DVR. A woman's biggest worry at the same time, is that after sundown, she has a target on her back. In a country as developed as ours, half the population shouldn't have to be uncomfortable on the streets of its neighbourhood without the presence of a man. A woman should not have to think twice about going to watch a movie in the same clothes she would wear at home, while a man will traipse outside in shorts and an undershirt, because she has to fear for her 'reputation'.

This problem isn't only limited to women over the age of eighteen, who the world deems appropriate to sexualise and brand with words and phrases like 'slut' or 'whore' or 'asking-for-it'. Conducted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development , the Study on Child Abuse India 2007 noted that more than 53% of children in India have been sexually abused, and have never reported their trauma to the police. It is estimated that 150 million girls under the age of eighteen have been subjected to forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence.

A popular statistic that gets thrown around is that the number of rapes reported per annum in the US and other western countries is higher than that in India. So how is it that we get thrown under the bus by the international community when the issue of sexual violence against women comes up? The answer is easy. It is estimated that more than 90% of the rapes do go unreported in India. This is in no small part due to the reason that (shamefully) marital rape is not regarded as a crime by Indian courts. The social stigma attached to admitting to victimhood is another major contributing factor. In a country where 'honor killings' is still a legitimate label for murder, the shame a survivor feels in going to the authorities only works in the favor of their attackers. Authorities that, mind you, handle rape cases with grace less than that of a one legged warthog, and a lack of sensitivity that often borders on harassment. This particular problem was highlighted in the documentary that has been passed around on the internet, in spite of the government's best attempts at banning it, India's Daughter. In one of the interview snippets, one of the main accused, brother to the primary perpetrator, is quoted as saying: "My brother has done such things before... He had the right to explain to them. He asked the boy why he was out with a girl so late at night. The boy said, "It's none of your business," and slapped him. There was fighting, beating. Those who raped, raped. They thought if they do "wrong things" with them, strip them of their clothes,

they won't tell anyone. Out of shame. They'd learn a lesson."

The ban on the film, directed by Leslee Udwin, does not have any clear reason. The general consensus lies with the idea that the government has cited the documentary's propensity to incite violent reactions across the country, and also with the notion that the government does not want to besmirch India's reputation at a time when the country is riding a wave of national pride, both economic and cultural. Regardless of what the truth may be, India's Daughter succeeds in one thing: highlighting the growing change in perception of women in India for the better, and, at the same time, the scourge of a school of thought that is holding back progress.

If India is to truly become a global leader, it must first take care of its own. The enactment of laws and the declaring of stringent protocols and curfews are but means of treating the symptoms. The larger, underlying problem of a backward mentality is the responsibility of the men of India. To educate themselves and their countrymen, to encourage the uplifting of women, and to act as effective agents of social change. Whether it's joining the conversation via a hashtag, or joining a movement to make the voice for equality louder, the simple fact remains:

This is our India. To change, for the better.