

LETTER FROM INDIA

The Problem of Working With Men

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IRUMBAI, [INDIA](#) — I was sitting recently with a group of women in the fishing village of Thantirayankuppam. They were members of a self-help group, a cooperative that gathered regularly to arrange loans for members in distress and provide counseling to one another.

K. Kuppalaxmi, one of the leaders of the group, told me that it played a critical role in helping women deal with the vicissitudes of life in a poor, backward village. The biggest problem the group faced, she said, was the high number of female suicides. She had recently returned from a nearby hospital, where one of the group's members was in critical condition after setting herself on fire.

The woman had been driven to suicide by her husband, Ms. Kuppalaxmi said. He drank and gambled; he beat her. Such behavior, she said, was the cause of virtually all the recent suicide attempts in the village.

It's a familiar story around here, and it's one of the reasons almost all the self-help groups in this area are aimed solely at women. Talk to development workers involved in the groups, and they'll list all the reasons men are difficult to work with: they drink, they gamble, they fight, they bring politics into the groups, and they spend loans intended for the family on alcohol or entertainment.

In the 1990s, it became popular to talk about "engendering development." The stated goal was to include more women in the development process, to right historical gender inequalities and make sure that aid money flowed equally to both sexes.

These are laudable goals. But what often goes unspoken in the practice of engendered development is that aid agencies want to work with women not just because they have traditionally been excluded, but also because men are harder to work with.

Indeed, in many ways, and in striking contrast to women, men often represent something of an impediment to development. As Jerald Moris, who has been working in rural development for more than 20 years, said to me: "Working with women's groups is more efficient." He added that a rupee spent on women goes further than on men.

Such talk isn't politically correct, of course. The literature on engendered development is full of pieties about the need to include both men and women, and about the vital partnering role that men play in fostering economic and social progress.

But in the fishing hamlets and agricultural communities that dot this coast, it is true that men often seem less like partners, and more like obstacles, in the desperate quest to nurture and educate and provide for impoverished families.

Men generally earn more than women, but they tend to spend much of their income outside the household. Women, aid workers say, are far more likely to spend their meager incomes or loans received through self-help groups on the family.

Men are more likely to discriminate against female children, pulling them out of school early and marrying them off at a young age.

In many village households, fathers will insist that they and male children are fed first. If there is, for example, a limited quantity of meat, it might be reserved for male members of the family.

These are just some of the reasons that aid groups find it more productive to work with

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women than men. Their preferences are backed up by empirical studies. The economist [Amartya Sen](#), for instance, has often drawn attention to the fact that women's education and employment levels are among the best determinants of child mortality, fertility and other development indicators.

In other words, focusing resources on women is, to use Mr. Moris's phrase, a "more efficient" way of spurring general development.

I met Mr. Moris with his wife, A. Anbu, in their office next to the village of Irumbai. They run the Auroville Village Action Group, an agency that organizes more than 250 self-help groups, with around 4,000 female and 1,000 male members. It is one of the few organizations in this area to run groups for both men and women.

They cited the usual list of difficulties in working with men — alcoholism, irregular attendance at meetings, poor loan repayment rates, violence.

Men, Mr. Moris told me, were more likely to discuss and argue over politics, creating friction within groups and sometimes leading to their dissolution.

He told me about a conflict that broke out between two groups he had organized. Both groups received money to fix the same road. Rather than pool resources, they had a physical confrontation.

Despite such difficulties, Mr. Moris said he was determined to continue working with men. After the 2004 tsunami, he told me, when aid agencies poured resources into women's groups, he took it upon himself as a "challenge" to start groups for men.

It wasn't easy. Government officials were often unsupportive, and banks, citing lower repayment rates among men, were reluctant to make loans. Ultimately, Mr. Moris's organization had to put down its own money as collateral.

I asked Mr. Moris why, despite the difficulties, he had been interested in men's groups. He said that he had been struck by a sense of exclusion and discrimination felt by many men he came across in the villages. They complained that they were being left out of the development process. Some worried they were losing their status at home because it was easier for their wives to get loans.

He laughed when he told me all this; the irony wasn't lost on him. Still, he said that in his view development was a "holistic" process. You couldn't have real progress without including men.

It is perhaps hard to feel sorry for men: they drink, beat their wives, neglect their families.

But if the goal of development is to overcome obstacles to progress, then, precisely because they are often difficult and obstructionist, it would seem that men have to be part of the process.

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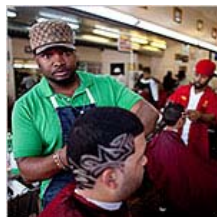
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