

'We Can'

'We Can' is a six-year, six-country South Asian campaign to challenge and change deeply entrenched societal attitudes and practices that endorse gender discrimination and violence.

The South Asia Campaign to End all Forms of Violence against Women or 'We Can' was launched in 2004 in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Pakistan to challenge and change deeply entrenched gender-biased societal attitudes and practices that endorse gender discrimination and violence.

In these countries, social customs and attitudes tacitly condone and support violence against women, and are entrenched in families and communities. These attitudes are based on a deep-seated social belief that women are fundamentally of less value than men, clearly reflected in the unequal gender norms and socio-economic power structures.

Violence against women is, hence, intense and pervasive, both in the public and private spheres of life, but is completely ignored and unaddressed though it adversely affects individuals, families and the community as a whole. In the largely prevailing 'culture of silence and acceptance', there is no recognition of it as a grave human right's violation. What is worrying is the rise of the crisis in scale and severity.

Ending all forms of violence against women requires challenging patriarchal power relations -- the sense of 'entitlement' and 'control' over women that men naturally assume. Until society values women and men equally, the violence will not end. Achieving gender equality may not necessarily end violence against women but it will help establish a more equal power balance that will aid reducing abuse against women.

'We Can' has been envisaged as a six-year, six-country campaign to address the root causes of discrimination against girls and women by questioning the ideology that legitimises male domination. The idea of this ongoing and organised campaign is to break the silence, denial, shame and stigmas surrounding the issue of violence against women and bring it into public domain, consciousness and accountability. (The sixth country, Afghanistan, will launch its campaign in March 2007)

Though the empowerment of men and women will eventually have to be from within -- where they realise that they have the potential to change their lives and work toward ensuring violence free lives for women -- information, alternate ideas and social values will have to first come and be galvanised through external agents. 'We Can' acts as a trigger for this new consciousness in societal attitudes. It aims to unite men and women into an organised mass movement to transform existing power relations in society.

Change in societal attitudes is not easy to achieve. Violence against women will not end overnight. While reforms in laws, programmes, policies and international agreements support attitudinal change, deeply entrenched attitudes can be changed only by people; large numbers of people who understand the need for change and initiate the process by

raising awareness, breaking their silence and rejecting ideas and beliefs supporting violence against women.

'We Can', hence, currently works in the six campaign countries through a huge band of Change Makers -- people who actively encourage more positive attitudes and behaviour towards women within the communities they live and work -- and uses them as its central force to affect attitudinal change.

Using a direct, personalised, people-to-people approach, millions of Change Makers (with the support of the growing coalition of campaign allies) are currently disseminating information on gender discrimination and violence against women, making visible the underlying power imbalance in men-women relations within families, challenging gender-biased attitudes and stereotypes, questioning norms that 'normalise' violence against women, opening up a dialogue with their friends, neighbours and clientele and generating a public debate.

More importantly, by making changes in their own relationships, Change Makers are spreading the message that each person has the potential to change within and bring change in the lives of others. The actions of Change Makers may seem small and ordinary but their impact is not -- the gathering momentum of the campaign is evidence.

By 2010, the number of Change Makers is expected to touch five million with each of these five million people reaching at least ten others. The idea is to involve 50 million people in the five countries to oppose violence against women and to symbolically link up to 50 million 'missing women' in the region. (The figure refers to women and girls who have either died due to gender discrimination and violence, including unequal access to resources, or girl foetuses aborted through sex selection. See Klasen and Wink 2003, 'Missing Women': Revisiting the Debate, *Feminist Economics* 9(2-3), 263-99)

'We Can' is currently being taken forward by over 600 organisations, collectives and individuals in each of the five countries and at the regional level.

Campaign allies are now working on the 'awareness to action' process through highly visible and coordinated public mobilisation programmes, public education events (seminars and workshops), mass media and other innovative means of communication, a variety of institutions (universities, civil society groups, corporate bodies and private enterprises), peoples (students, housewives, teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, businessmen, policy makers, faith-based groups and rural populations, among others) and unique sign-up events and celebrity endorsements.

'We Can' Approach

'We Can' is making violence against women 'visible' and 'unacceptable'.

'We Can' is:

- raising mass awareness on the issue of violence against women through a host of conventional and unconventional methods
- making violence against women a visible issue
- bringing the issue of violence against women from 'private' realms into the 'public' domain and debate
- consistently spreading two messages: Equal relations are violence free. Violence against women is unacceptable
- using Change Makers to challenge dominant stereotypes, male behaviour patterns and gender hierarchies and inequalities and also to provide alternate views of masculinity and demonstrate more equal role models, behaviours and values
- engaging the community as a whole through mass mobilisation programmes to change norms and practices that discriminate and perpetuate violence against women
- facilitating people to speak out, take a stand against violence against women and build momentum for the campaign
- encouraging girls and women to defend their rights
- gathering support among various groups by building capacity to achieve reduction in violence against women (students, teachers, civil society groups, housewives, medical practitioners, police, media, judicial institutions, religious groups, actors and policy planners, among others)
- strengthening synergy and cooperation between institutions
- bringing together diverse local, national, regional and international efforts working towards ending violence against women
- gaining the attention and intervention of policy makers to ensure gender-just laws and policies

Ideas in Action

"I am proud to be a Change Maker. I am inspired by the 'We Can' mission and when I see crowds of people raising their voices for women rights, my determination and conviction are strengthened. Yes, We Can together end violence against women!"

Munawar Abro, a famous cartoonist from Dokri, Sindh, Pakistan

"I thought I was powerful and can beat my wife because she is weak. I assumed that beating my wife was natural. I realised how I had unthinkingly adopted a culture of violence. My father used to beat my mother regularly and I had inherited his attitude towards women. Now I realise my wife is a human being and that we are equal."

Elias Mridha, a radio and television mechanic from Bagerhaat in Bangladesh

