

Let's Talk Modern Masculinity

Findings from the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

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Introduction



Introduction:

The #MeToo movement, which began in 2018 in the U.S., has been a force to reckon with in shifting the public discourse on sexual harassment and sexual culture across the world, including in India, which witnessed its own #MeToo movement in October of 2018. Women from all walks of life – journalists, academics, actors, etc. came forward with their testimonies of harassment and abuse they faced at the hands of their (male) supervisors and colleagues in their workplace, and to demand accountability and justice. In fact, in the U.S. the conversations went beyond the harassment that women (and men) face not just in their workplace, but also within intimate relationships. This also engendered thought-provoking discussions on issues pertaining to consent, communication, and pleasure within sexual and romantic relationships.

Amid all these discussions, however, not much attention has been paid, especially in India, about how the #MeToo has shaped, or is beginning to shape, (young) men's views around gender, sexual relationships, intimacy, consent, etc. A key question remains – how are men responding to these conversation and discussions? Moreover, are they engaging with these issues at all, or have they tuned out of the conversations? How are they thinking about their (changing) role in the world? What are their impressions of the current discourse on #MeToo and around changing norms about masculinity?

At Love Matters India, we therefore, set out to seek some answers to these questions, by conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) with diverse groups of men in Delhi. The objective was to assess and understand their views, opinions, dilemmas, and concerns about the current discourse on issues ranging from #MeToo and consent, to changing paradigms and prevailing ideas about masculinity in contemporary India.



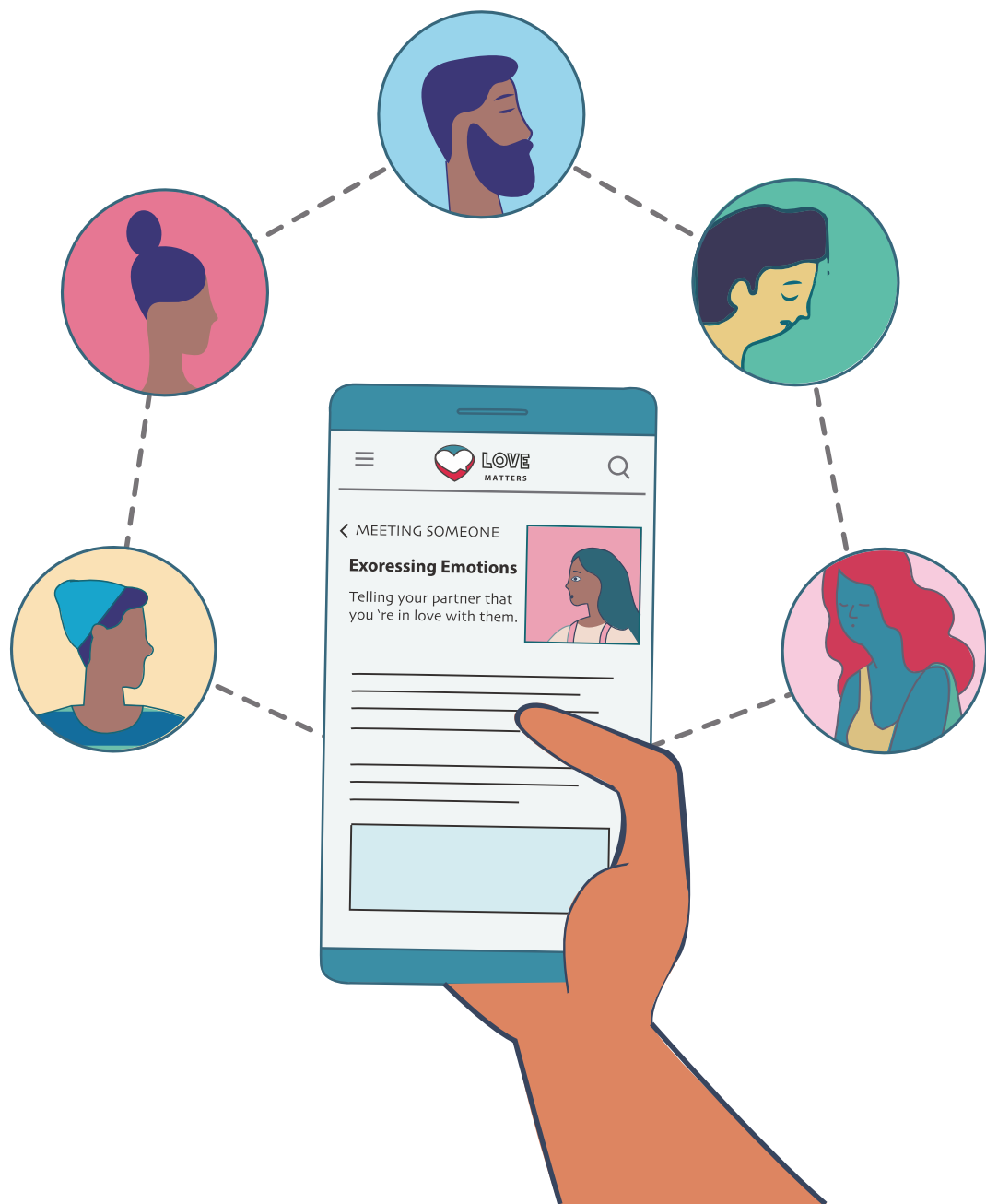
About Love Matters India



About Love Matters India:

Love Matters is India's first digital initiative that provides gender friendly and pleasure positive SRHR (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) information to young people and engages them to talk about love, sex and relationships in an open, honest and non-judgmental way. It is also the first project in India leveraging technology for providing rights based SRHR information to young people in India. Love Matters India has been awarded as the most innovative sexual health project in the world by the World Association of Sexual Health in year 2013. Love Matters India also uses social media and new media tools like virtual reality and augmented reality for social impact in the **SRHR field**.

<https://lovematters.in/en>



GLOSSARY

MEN

GENDER

MASCULINITY

LOVE

FEELINGS

POWER

SEX

RELATIONSHIPS

EXPLORE



Glossary

Masculinity: The characteristics that are traditionally thought to be typical of or suitable for men. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Toxic masculinity:

1. Ideas about the way that men should behave that are seen as harmful. (Cambridge Dictionary)
2. A social science term that describes narrow repressive type of ideas about the male gender role, that defines masculinity as exaggerated masculine traits like being violent, unemotional, sexually aggressive, and so forth. Also suggests that men who act too emotional or maybe aren't violent enough or don't do all of the things that "real men" do, can get their "man card" taken away.

Many people confuse the difference between Masculinity and toxic Masculinity. However, one can be masculine without having toxic Masculinity. (Urban Dictionary)

#MeToo movement:

The 'me too.' movement was founded in 2006 to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls, and other young women of color from low wealth communities, find pathways to healing. Our vision from the beginning was to address both the dearth in resources for survivors of sexual violence and to build a community of advocates, driven by survivors, who will be at the forefront of creating solutions to interrupt sexual violence in their communities.

Our goal is also to reframe and expand the global conversation around sexual violence to speak to the needs of a broader spectrum of survivors. Young people, queer, trans, and disabled folks, Black women and girls, and all communities of color. We want perpetrators to be held accountable and we want strategies implemented to sustain long term, systemic change. (**metoo.** <https://metoomvmt.org/>)

Methodology and Approach



Methodology and approach:

We applied snowball sampling, using our networks and our partners' networks to recruit participants. Three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in the month of February-March 2019 in Delhi, India, comprising of men in the age group of 21-25 years old, with the exception of three participants – one aged 19, another in his mid-30s, and one who was 50 years old. A total of 20 men participated in the FGDs (combined total across 3 FGDs), with two FGDs comprising of 5 men each, and the third FGD comprising of 10 men.

Although we did not collect data from the participants about their socioeconomic status (SES), the groups of participants were quite diverse, from different walks of life – students, public and private sector employees, working in NGOs, etc. Moreover, none of the participants self-identified as GBT (gay, bisexual, trans).

All three FGDs were facilitated by a male team member from Love Matters India to ensure that all participants feel comfortable to share their views and opinions freely during the FGD. The FGDs was conducted in both English and Hindi, and each discussion lasted for around 2 hours, with a break in between. The key themes explored across the three FGDs were as follows:

1. Understanding of masculinity
2. Men and feelings
3. #MeToo movement, sex and relationships

Limitations of the FGDs:

Given that only 3 FGDs were conducted and the sample size is very small, both in terms of the numbers and geographic location, we can't assume that these findings are representative of the large population of young men in India, which is itself a very diverse and complex demographic group. Therefore, to corroborate these findings, it is recommended that further research is undertaken with a bigger sample size in different locations across India.

FGD Findings:



Findings

Following are the notable findings from the three combined FGDs as per each of the themes:

Understanding of Masculinity

- Although the idea of men and women being different was prevalent across all the three FGDs, the participants did not support discrimination of women on the basis of gender. However, they were of the opinion that men and women are not inherently equal and are treated differently in social context
- Society in general and also an individual's upbringing has a very important role to play in terms of what men are expected to do, and most participants agreed that being a man meant protecting one's family and providing for them by being the breadwinner
- Family and media have a huge influence on how men think of masculinity and what it means to be a man in the Indian context, which was also further supported by social media, Bollywood movies, and traditional gender norms:
- Participants gave examples of looking at colors as gendered, even toys that they played with in terms of gender, looking at their own family members (mom at home, dad working), from movies/TV shows, schools in terms of how boys and girls were segregated in seating
- One participant said that for him the first realization of what it means to be a man came during puberty when he started experiencing attraction towards women, while another shared how he really liked the color pink as a child, but his family and friends always tried to influence him by saying that pink is for girls and that he was a boy
- Most participants said that the definition of what it means to be a man was relative, and they believed more in individual and subjective definitions rather than one definition of masculinity that fits everyone
- Moreover, they considered masculinity as very contextual and something that changed based on states or location within the county - It is very different in Haryana ("where men like to show off, exert their dominance by means of marital rape") as compared to West Bengal ("where females are more powerful") – were some perceptions shared by the participants.

Views on toxic masculinity:

- Most participants had heard of the term "toxic masculinity", but didn't know what it exactly meant
- They defined it as "excessive", "wasteful masculinity" or "abuse of power", and it was basically male domination or suppressing women
-

“It is what is not masculinity, like if my father drinks and beats up my mother and when children see it, they learn it.”



- In contrast, a “good man” was defined as not being egoistical, respecting others (both men and women), being sensitive, while also rational

2. Men and Feelings

Are men able to talk openly about feelings and emotions?

- All participants said that men can't express their feelings and emotions openly
- The fear of being judged, even by other genders was a constant fear that prevented men from sharing their feelings and emotions
- Moreover, men tend to take time to open up because sharing of emotions and feelings is something that is considered inherent to women, and a sign of weakness for men

“*I can show aggression but can't share something that is eating me from inside, can turn that into anger and then show it.*”

- Lastly, there is always a pressure for men to suffer through everything, and also fix things with an expectation to prove themselves; this prevented men from being open and vulnerable
- One participant made an interesting observation:

“*it's an irony that men are expected to be not emotional but then we are so emotional that we are always ready to go to war with each other.*”

Who did they share their feelings with (if they chose to do so):

- Participants mentioned talking to their mom, close friends (male or female), sister, girlfriend/partner/wife; but interestingly they spoke only about certain topics and could not share everything
- One important thing to note was that nobody mentioned father as the person they shared their feelings with, indicating the pressure to not be emotional or weak in front of the other male member in the family. Instead, they all were comfortable discussing mostly major life plan issues with their father's
- Some were also apprehensive of sharing their feelings given that it could lead to exploitation, both by men and women
- The fear of being judged, especially in the professional space, as men who were seen as emotional or sensitive were stereotyped as being unable to make rational decisions. This resulted in them not getting opportunities for growth and career advancement and thus limited men from sharing their emotions
- Also, all the participants agreed that there



were very few spaces for men to share their feelings, or rather they don't exist in reality, and there needs to be more spaces for men to open up and talk

- The idea of gendered safe spaces came up, where some participants mentioned diary for women and gyms for men

3. #MeToo movement, sex and relationships

Had they heard about the #MeToo movement?

- Most participants knew what it was about, and said that #MeToo was a movement where cases of sexual harassment in the past and present have been talked about openly and given a space to women to come forward and talk about the kind of harassment they faced in workplaces
- They believed it was an important and progressive step, but at the same time it was class specific and has now become a propaganda for media to raise TRPs
- Also, while #MeToo is a wonderful platform, they said that there were two sides to it, as there were incidences of fake cases being reported and the movement had no “real” impact
- Some also said that they don't believe all women blindly, some of these are just allegations and that women need to follow due process while reporting such cases.
- Lastly, few participants also asked what happens if women level false accusations, and if they are punished too.

4. Views on Sexual Harassment

- Some participants defined sexual harassment as asking women for sexual favours, without their consent, making someone feel uncomfortable, stalking, public harassment etc.



- One participant also mentioned that sexual harassment was a gender agnostic term and the person who experiences it should define it
- However, most participants believed that this sort of harassment was worse in the “lower classes”, and that #MeToo movement has mostly been about upper class/celebrity women, and not about women in lower classes, small towns and cities. But the participants agreed that sexual harassment is a reality for women in India
- Another belief was that sexual assault was the action of older men, mainly in the age group of 35 – 40 years, and not of the young generation of men that were part of our FGD's

Conversations about #MeToo or Sexual Harassment with their friends

- Some participants said that they had spoken about #MeToo with other men, and now there was a sort of fear among men regarding

interacting with women

- Most participants agreed that they were not able to talk to women frankly anymore, as even normal conversations were misconstrued as flirty or as having sexual intentions.

“ I called my exes to check whether I have crossed a line; a constant fear is always there. ”

5. Men, sex, and relationships

- Most participants said they spoke about these issues with their friends, but were shy to discuss these topics during the FGD
- Some said they talk about relationships and sometimes about sex
- One participant mentioned the number game and bragging among men about how many women they have had sex with
- They also spoke about hook-up culture, but mainly as an upper-class phenomenon and how it's seen as something to brag about, and if they don't agree with this notion, they were ridiculed
- One guy said

“ Once I said no to casual sex, and I was ridiculed. ”

- Most participants agreed that there is a belief that men don't want emotions or feelings in sexual relationships, and said that it was a misconception that men were only interested in physical aspect of the relationship – both from other men and also women
- One participant said that some men attach their ego with sexual relationships, and hence Engage in the bragging and the number talk. Instead, the relationships should happen with maturity and should be linked to discipline, and “not act as animals”.



Discussion



Discussion:

The findings outlined above provide some insight into how young men in contemporary India are articulating their ideas and views of changing and evolving notions of gender roles and masculinity at the individual, community and societal level. It is no surprise that families, especially parents, and broader popular culture, are often the first line of influencers on how people form perceptions and notions about gender, masculinity, and relationships. It is notable, however, that although all participants agreed that women must not be discriminated against, it is also important to be cognizant that there are some inherent differences between men and women which must be acknowledged. This can be a point of contention for many, however, it also provides some interesting inroads into getting men on-board in conversations around feminism, gender equality and justice. In addition, using popular culture and media as ways to engage with young men on these issues can play an important role in shaping new ideas and notions of evolving gender roles and ideas around modern masculinity.

With regard to perceptions around #MeToo, it is evident that although young men support women raising their voices and demanding action against sexual harassment, there is an underlying misconception that the movement in India has largely been an “upper class phenomenon”, which isn't true, and also the discomfort with the idea of false accusations, which is also a common feature of discussions around rape and dowry allegations in the Indian context. It is, therefore, important to take these misconceptions head-on and address using facts and evidence, personal testimonials, interviews with experts etc. and relay it to this demographic in a way that resonates with them. In fact, Love Matters India can take a lead in dispelling these misconceptions and popular myths, given that our audience on our online platforms is 70 percent male from across India.

Talking about sex and relationships was the most taboo among the participants across the FGDs, and they felt it was the first time someone was asking them about these issues so openly. Many felt a lot of discomfort and shyness opening up about these issues, however, they also mentioned that there are more open spaces required where men can freely talk about their feelings and emotions within the domain of love, sex, and relationships – without any pressure and judgment, either from other men and/or women. In fact, some participants confided that often it was women who judged them about being emotional and are labelled as being “like a girl”. Hence, it's important to recognize and acknowledge that such gender stereotyping can and is also propagated by women, and there is further research and discussions required to assess how this can limit and influence (young) men's experiences of dealing with emotions and feelings in contemporary India.

Next steps:

- Love Matters India will utilize these findings to create diverse online and offline multi-media content that caters to this demographic and addresses variety of issues covered within this research study.
- These findings will also be incorporated into planning and implementing a campaign by Love Matters India in November on the theme of “Let's talk modern masculinity”
- A report compiling these findings will be shared with relevant stakeholders, including groups/organizations working on SRHR, masculinity, digital media, etc.
- Contingent on funding and resources, Love Matters India would also like to take up further and more in-depth research on this theme in the future.





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