

# MANY OF US DON'T REALISE WE ARE FEMINISTS WITH BAD HABITS

As many as 90% of Indian women say they dislike their bodies, 98% admit they have been molested and 95% say they have hidden this fact from their parents. These are the startling findings of **Deepa Narayan's** book *Chup: Breaking the Silence about India's Women*, based on interviews with hundreds of educated upper and middle class women in Delhi and other metros. Narayan, an international gender and development adviser, spoke to **Sonam Joshi** about the subtle ways in which gender inequality is entrenched in our everyday lives, and the impact of MeToo on India

**You spoke to 600 men and women to examine how inequality works. What was the difference between the genders?**

The words women used to describe themselves are nice, loving, nurturing. We absorb this conditioning and because it has an overlay of morality, and we all unconsciously want to be good, it is difficult to break these behaviours. Hence, there is a gap between our intellectual beliefs and how we actually behave. So, many of us are feminists with bad habits.

Women also use a lot of negative words to describe themselves: sacrificing, suffering, not achieving your dreams. No woman used the word leadership; in fact, they used the phrase potential unachieved. Men described themselves as leaders, as fun and adventurous.

What has happened is that we have got diverted by the glamour and the glitter of external changes, and have assumed that the cultural biases that held women as non-existent or unequal have changed. It is like a building, we have been rearranging the rooms and curtains but haven't changed the foundation.

**Did you find certain aspects of sexism and cultural conditioning to be unique to India or are they largely universal?**

I don't think it is unique to India. In Christian culture too, Eve was an afterthought. For instance, the training that girls get - chup raho (stay silent) - isn't different. In the US, research in corporations shows

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that women don't speak up and when they're in a minority and get more senior, they're even more afraid to speak up.

I had hundreds of stories from American friends that they were trained not to laugh loudly. Smiling is good, because you're pleasing others, but laughing isn't because it indicates a strong independent self. In film award functions, you see some women laughing with their head down and mouths covered, but the men will throw their head back and laugh.

**Your research revealed that women just don't trust other women. Were you surprised by this finding?**

I was surprised at how strongly it came out. Just about every woman said other women are mean and jealous. But the reason why this happens is because we are trained not to trust women. Within the extended family, if you don't trust other women, who are you going to turn to? So women say *akeli hun, darti hun*.

**Chup is about breaking the silence. MeToo was also about breaking the silence around sexual harassment. But hardly any Indian women have spoken up. Do you think there will be a MeToo in India?**

Every country has its own momentum. It will happen when women come together. One woman alone can't deal with the character assassination, the trolling and threats of rape. But if other men and women support that woman, and issues of sexual harassment are taken to court or to committees within organisations, it will start to shift. Men have to be trained to listen and women have to believe more in themselves and support each other.

**How are the concerns of the present generation of young women different from those of their mothers?**

One big shift I see is that there is much greater freedom in women expressing their sexuality outside of marriage, and before marriage. But in the homes, it is still kept a secret. This dichotomy makes women even more vulnerable to sexual abuse. Women want to own their sexual desire, yet it is happening in a very unequal culture of silence.

**You have organised the book into 7 harmful habits or behaviours that women are trained in. One bad habit, according to you, is that women are trained to please others. How does this shape consent?**

When you are trained to please, it becomes easier to be quiet and let it happen than say no. This makes consent a very complex issue.

**Did the book make you introspect and change something about yourself? Do you smile less and laugh louder?**

I have always laughed a lot but I did have to stop writing in between and finish unfinished business like owning my own body. In the book, I wrote about how after watching my elder sister I wanted breasts in my pre-teens, and then later in my teens grew to hate them and connect them to everything that went wrong, including the unwanted attention I got on Delhi's streets and buses. When I accepted that I was part of an unequal system, it helped me drop my lingering shame about being a woman.

