Addressing Gender Stereotypes: Rethinking Policing in the Age of Gender Equality

The theme of gender discrimination and gender-based violence that is the central focus of the Bengaluru Safe City Police Training Programme includes a session that focusses on understanding and delineating gender stereotypes.

Violence against women transcends geographical, cultural and socio-economic boundaries. This form of violence against the 'fairer' and 'weaker' sex manifests itself in diverse forms including physical, sexual, economic, and psychological. As the first responders and law enforcers, the police play a pivotal role in curbing such violence and ensuring justice. Unfortunately, police responses are often influenced by deeply ingrained stereotypes and beliefs about gender roles and family dynamics, societal norms and expectations.

What are gender stereotypes?

As per the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a gender stereotype implies a generalized view or preconception about the attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by men and women. Examples of gender stereotyping include the belief that women are the sexual property of men or the belief that women agreed to a sexual act based on her inappropriate dress.

Key observations from the Training Sessions on Gender Stereotypes:

While women have made significant strides towards empowerment, societal expectations regarding their behaviour remain stubbornly rigid. Even though the society has progressed

towards gender equality, and made considerable efforts in empowering women through education, economics, and social opportunities, yet a persistent gap remains between these advances and traditional societal norms. The interactive sessions in this programme offer an opportunity to understand this gap and to recognise the norms that have crystallised into gender stereotypes.

1. Patriarchal Outlook: The foremost stereotype is based on the traditional patriarchal notions. There is a deeply-entrenched belief that women are primarily responsible for home and family. On the one hand, this perception significantly impacts women's marital lives and their position vis-à-vis their husbands and their families and on the other hand, the patriarchal beliefs held by men lead to a tendency of downplaying the severity of crimes against women, especially domestic violence and sexual harassment.

2. Family Reputation: During these sessions, a majority of male police personnel assert that women hold significant power within the household but the nuanced body language of female participants suggests otherwise. Women believe that traditional beliefs often prioritize familial harmony over individual justice leading a covert pressure and expectation that women remain quiet and resolve domestic issues privately, thereby, discouraging women-victims from pursuing legal action. Secondly, a prevalent tendency among police personnel is to adopt the role of a counsellor or mediator, particularly in cases of domestic violence. There is a palpable reluctance to intervene in domestic problems under the guise of respecting 'family privacy.' Such approach of the police hinders effective law enforcement and perpetuates a cycle of abuse.

3. Phallocentric Attitude: Women continue to be seen as extensions of men with their decisions and life trajectories often dictated by male figures i.e. through their fathers or husbands. This disparity is also evident in police responses to crimes against women buttressing the deep-rooted influence of gender norms on law enforcement practices.

4. Victim-blaming: An evident gender stereotype is seen in the form of 'victim-blaming.' Interaction with police personnel reveals the bias that police personnel hold against victims of gender violence. It has been observed that there is a widely held belief that the victim's lifestyle, attire, or conduct is an 'aggravating or contributory factor' for the violence committed against her. Women who challenge traditional norms by working late hours, pursuing unconventional careers, or enjoying nightlife are frequently stigmatized as 'inviting' harassment or violence.

5. Economic Disempowerment: Women are believed to lack an understanding of financial matters and often their decision-making remains restricted to the expenditure concerning the household. As a result, the economic power remains predominantly concentrated in male hands. While in some cases, women may hold jobs and earn incomes but decisions concerning capital spending or investment are generally taken by the male members of the family. This disparity contributes to a situation where women even though economically active are deprived a chance at economic empowerment. Ultimately, this lack of empowerment perpetuates economic

dependence severely limiting women's ability to escape situations of violence and abuse.

6. Sexual Autonomy and Reproduction: Decisions concerning sexual intimacy or procreation are believed to be made by the male partner. The prevailing norms frequently portray men as dominant and assertive in sexual contexts while women are often expected to be passive or submissive. This shows an inherent power imbalance between the husband and the wife which negatively impacts the position of the wife vis-à-vis the husband and keeps the wife in a position of perpetual subordination. The women participants testify that this imbalanced dynamic is a reality. While juggling demanding jobs, household chores, and childcare they feel pressured to acquiesce to sexual activity. Added to these factors, there is a societal expectation attached to women to reproduce and nurture a family.

Consequently, this unequal power dynamic fosters a culture where male sexuality is normalized and often glorified, while female sexuality is restricted, judged or controlled. As a result, men may feel entitled to initiate and dominate sexual encounters but women are pressured to conform to expectations of modesty and restraint. This mindset, unfortunately, extends to police personnel's acquiescence in contributing to harmful practices like victim-blaming in sexual assault cases.

What is the Bengaluru Safe City Police Training Programme aiming to achieve?

Despite advancements in laws and gender-sensitisation training, a significant gap persists between policy and the prevalent practice within the domain of law enforcement. Societal biases continue to influence the police's responses to women seeking justice. Instead of immediate support, victims often face questioning and suspicion, with their behaviour being

scrutinized rather than the investigating the perpetrator's actions. This undermines the progress achieved through legal reforms and advocacy efforts discouraging women from reporting crimes. Additionally, the prevailing gender norms and expectations continue to influence how crimes against women are investigated and prosecuted, often clashing with principles of justice and equality.

Through these training sessions, the aim is to help the participants identify the common gender stereotypes and enable a normative shift in their understanding and perception concerning sex and gender, gender-based violence and gender-based discrimination. A driving motivation for this programme is to contribute in creating a society where women can live free from violence and harassment, and to achieve this goal it is imperative that the police personnel are equipped to actively challenge and dismantle the gender norms to facilitate fair and effective policing practices.