



By ALBERTINA ALMEIDA

#MeToo, Male Entitlement, and Goa

Male Entitlement is one of the key expressions being bandied around ever since #MeToo imploded on the Indian scene. This is apart from expressions like culture of impunity for sexual predators, calling out of perpetrators, creating a culture of believing survivors of sexual harassment (or not simply dismissing the allegations as untrue), a missing perspective on boundaries and collapse of due process.

Women in Goa are actually uniquely placed to understand the concept of male entitlement. True, the sense of male entitlement from simply being male is felt not just in Goa. But women in Goa have also had to battle with a particular sense of male entitlement from the domestic tourists that comes from a heady combination of patriarchy, casteism, and global capital, all rolled into one. This particular male entitlement issue is one that women's groups in Goa have been grappling with since a long time now.

In fact, one of the impetus for the formation of *Bailancho Saad* (of which I used to be a part and which I continue to support) was disgust at the sense of entitlement displayed by many domestic Indian tourists, especially towards Goan women wearing frocks. Growing up in Goa at that time (the 1980s), it was not uncommon to be nudged by tourists on the streets, in buses or on the beach, and it was made to seem like we women in Goa enjoyed this nudge from total strangers.

But the expression 'male entitlement' did not exist in our vocabulary then. We condemned the propagation of the myth that women in Goa are 'easily available'. This was short hand for 'women in Goa are man hungry', 'women in Goa enjoy sexual contact with anyone and everyone', or 'women in Goa welcome everybody with open arms and open legs'. So strange men are entitled to touch these women, specially if they wear short frocks, and the woman's opinion or consent doesn't matter!

We could see some immediate provocations for the creation of this sense of male

entitlement, and felt it needed to be addressed. Our sense of anger started as a reaction to the harassment we ourselves (that is, those who were banding together in an effort to launch a women's rights organization) were facing. What was immediately then staring us in the face were the commercialised Carnival parades, and the advertisement of these parades. We strongly felt that these commercialised Carnival parades, which involved vehicular floats on which women were expected to dance with skimpy clothes and send flying kisses to the crowd, created this image of Goan women being available. These floats were sponsored by commercial magnates who saw them as a vehicle to advertise their product, which included hospitality in five star hotels. Clearly women were being commodified. There was a double whammy here, in that, besides advertising the specific products, the tourism industry, with which the Government of Goa was in cahoots, was also using the Carnival parades as a means to advertise Goa.

In doing so, the tourism industry with the aid of the State, were hard-selling certain components of the 'product', and one of the components was Goan women. There is a commodification of women and of Goa as a whole, through sexualized depictions. The imposition of casinos is but a continuum of the same promotion of consumerism to sell Goa to a consumerist male tourist who is looking for something different from what he thinks he may find in other parts of India.

All this has created a sense of tourist male entitlement, that is, that there is a product that has been advertised, namely hospitality in Goa, with clear hints about what can be made available. The person who follows the advertisement then comes to Goa with that expectation. Therefore a lot of tourists, particularly domestic tourists, have been coming to Goa looking out for the 'available' Goan girls/women. "*Ladki kahan milegi?*" (where will I get a girl?) has been their first question as they descended on their port of call. They even presume that every woman in Goa is 'available' and that there is no question of getting consent from any woman in Goa before making sexual overtures.

There has also been another factor that has contributed to this sense of male entitlement, that is, an equation of skirts or short frocks with availability, which is placed in the same continuum as sexual availability. It is not surprising therefore that even a woman Chief Minister of Goa, when confronted by a group of women from the coastal belt (part of the Old Conquests) about the problems that mass tourism posed to them, dismissed their concerns

with the implication that Western cultural practices invited these realities. The logic seemed to be that an Indian male is entitled to sex with a woman without her consent, if she wears Western clothes, and especially frocks. In those days, by and large, only Goan women wore frocks in large numbers. As in, women in the Catholic community, which forms a sizeable population of Goa, wore frocks across castes, unlike the present day scenario where largely women from upper castes and classes from the rest of India wear what is termed as Western attire.

The revealing character of the *sari* or the *kass* never figures in these narratives. Although it has been proved time and again through various studies that dress has nothing to do with rape or sexual harassment, that women wearing full burkhas where only their eyes are visible, also get raped and sexually harassed. So certainly sexual harassment has nothing to do with dress. Women don't claim entitlement to sex with either a toddy tapper or a white man wearing a tight jockey on the beach because of the dress he wears. So these senses of entitlement, and their triggers, are being deliberately created, and fostered through the creation of a nationalistic other (the Westernised Goan woman) and a consumer-serving agenda, feasting on already existing patriarchal entitlement tendencies. It is in fact, an entire ideological apparatus at work to feed this sense of male entitlement, though it is made to feel like 'natural male tendencies'.

Therefore the sense of male entitlement of tourists, with the prevailing dominant constructs of Goan women and Western women, is the additional baggage that Goan women have had to carry in their struggles against sexual harassment. This specific experience of Goan women over the years cannot be dismissed and in fact needs to be taken on board to facilitate an understanding of the various forces that go into the making of this male entitlement.

The other side of the same coin of this male entitlement is the reaction of middle class Goan males because it has only reinforced the objectification of women. Let me explain how. Better to live with it, rather than disturb one's peace by making an issue of it, seemed to be the norm that Goan women followed when they were faced with sexual harassment by tourists. But patriarchy has another prescription for this, which is male protection. Therefore, over the years, there have been something like turf wars. How dare you sexually harass 'our' women? Sometimes there is this ring of "do it with your women if you wish to". In a strange

sense, this indirectly reinforces male entitlement albeit to *one's* women, i.e. it reinforces the male ownership and control of women, who are then placed under codes of regulatory behaviour, to seek entitlement to their protection. #MeToo, Male Entitlement, and Goa

So then boundaries are determined by stereotypes of what constitute entitlements. It is made to seem that a woman dressing in a particular way prompts a male entitlement. Women interacting freely with men, prompts a male entitlement, according to them. So also they sing the song that behaving in a 'Western' manner causes male entitlement. Women singing and dancing causes male entitlement. One cannot also divorce this discussion from the conflicts that Goa has been engaged in with the Indian state, whose sense of nationalism treats Goans as the 'other' on the one hand, and as a pleasure periphery to which it has an entitlement on the other hand. So patriarchy and global capital (consumerism) prove to be an explosive mix – mutually feeding each other and accentuating or aggravating patriarchy, which in fact has caused this explosive moment of the spurning of the entitlements.

This pitch on #MeToo in Goa, however, cannot be complete without speaking of a lot of MEs on Goa's firmament who spoke out before the #MeToo s. Long years ago, Goa, in fact made a tryst with herstory. There was a simple Me – a young not-elite typist who, by her speaking out, brought a powerful man in the sanctum sanctorum of power down, by voicing the sexual harassment she had faced. Several other women working at the same place then issued a character certificate to this powerful man. Clearly, power also forces the women in these places to issue denials. That was in 1989. Not a single complaint was filed by her at any forum. How could she in that environment, in those times, when there was no Vishakha Judgement or the present Sexual Harassment Law to back her up? When even with these, there have been issues about how due process actually works in a patriarchal society.

But public outrage and protests in Goa, and calls for solidarity and responses of solidarity from all over the country, resulted in the short term in the powerful politician stepping down from his position, and in the long term, contributing to a mass interrogation about the adequacy of existing laws, that in turn led to calls for specific provisions for preventing, prohibiting and redressing, sexual harassment at the workplace. This was one of the scenarios which, along with various others, not least of them being the well-known Bhanwari Devi case, that created the atmosphere for Vishakha, a Rajasthan-based organization to file a Writ Petition before the Supreme Court.



More recently, there was also the case in the media where several women who accused the same journalist, where he was working in different establishments, did not feel comfortable to use the 'due process' option (by way of Internal Committees being constituted after the outcry) simply because of the stated connections of the accused journalist with people in positions of high office, and the level of comfort that he had enjoyed in these workplaces, despite, according to them, their knowledge of his doings. Solidarity for these women journalists also came from the Network of Women in Media, India.

Still more recently, out here in Goa, several women who have called out, on social media, a man, who was their employer, as their sexual harasser, are not native Goans. Attitudes where this kind of grievance is ignored because it is articulated by and against those who Goans call 'outsiders', becomes the slippery slope through which male entitlement becomes normalized. Injustice to anyone is a threat to justice to everyone.

The road is long and arduous, but once in a way a movement such as a #MeToo movement comes along that helps catalyse the road to justice. The culture of male entitlement and impunity gets called out. The State as well as dormant local society is forced into deliberations about securing a more enabling work environment and generally a more enabling safe environment for women. And in these deliberations, what better way than factoring all these various voices and experiences, which both #MeToo and the MEs that earlier called out sexual harassment have?

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