Good Women/Bad Women

Overview: Society works in ways that divide us. At one level, this is done by establishing a set of rules about what "women" (and "men") should and should not do. When we do not play by those societal rules, we are seen as different and not a part of our communities. We start thinking that those who are different in some way or don't play by the rules are not "good" women. But playing by the rules does not keep us safe or guarantee that we get the things we need to be healthy and fulfilled so we need to question this division and categorisation. We need to ask what it means for our movement building work - if we only collaborate and mobilise with people who "look" or act like us, can we be strong? Can we create a world where everyone is safe and welcome? How can we work together, creating alliances that complement our diverse strengths and capacities?

Purpose: To explore how society works to divide us into "good" women and "bad" women, and to examine the origins of that division and its impact on our movement building work. The specifics of your analysis will vary according to context, class, culture and a range of other factors. A certain level of trust is needed for this exercise as it involves intimate aspects of women's lives where sensitivities may exist. There are two versions of this exercise – one for smaller groups (no more than 20) and one for larger groups (over 20).

Time: 90 minutes

Materials and Space Needed:

- Two empty boxes labelled "good women" and "bad women"
- 20-30 sets of different statements, pro and con, each on a separate strip of paper

Credit: Anna Davies-van Es and Patricia Ardon, with inspiration from Hope Chigudu and Youth Vision

Note: Probably the easiest way to do this is to type up one full set of statements for each category, with several spaces in between each statement to allow room for cutting. (The statements below are suggestions, and can be changed to be more culturally appropriate.) Make enough photocopies for the numbers of participants, then use a paper cutter to separate the statements into strips. Create the number of sets necessary—each set should contain about 8-10 strips with a balance between "good" and "bad."

"Good" women:

- This woman does not work outside the family home.
- This woman is solely responsible for taking care of the children.
- This woman kneels or bends down when she serves her husband/parents-in-law
- This woman always has sex with her husband when he wants to.
- This woman had never had a sexual partner before she got married.
- This woman does not disagree with her husband's points of view or decisions
- This woman tends to the flowers and food at the church/mosque/ synagogue (her place of prayer?)

"Bad" women:

- This woman works outside the family home.
- This woman expects to be pleasured during sex.
- This woman has had sex for money.
- This woman has had sex with other women.
- This woman had sex before marriage.

- This woman does not want to have children.
- This woman speaks out in church/mosque/ synagogue

Process:

Note: There are two versions to this exercise. For both, begin by reviewing the purpose and the overall process you will be using.

A. For smaller groups (less than 20)

Individually:

1. Pass out the sets of statements about women, mixing pro and con, to each participant (approx. 8 -10 cards each).

2. Have people read the set of statements each has been given and decide whether according to the standards of your society, the woman is a "good" or a "bad" woman.

3. Have them place each card in the box provided for a "good" or a "bad" woman.

B. For larger groups (more than 20)

Note: As a facilitator, follow steps below for version B (for version A start with step 5). You might want to write these instructions up on a flip chart or power point so everyone is clear about the process.

1. Divide the participants into smaller groups of about 6-8 people.

2. In groups, read the set of statements you have been given. Discuss each statement and decide whether according to your society, the woman is a "good" or "bad" woman.

3. Choose one person to take that statement and put it in the box provided. If the group is not able to agree, keep that statement to one side.

4. Give the groups time to discuss. When they have finished, bring everyone together in a circle with the boxes at the center.

5. Ask the group – what was that like? Any thoughts/feelings about dividing up the women based on one thing that they do? Were there any that you could not agree on as group? Or difficult for you as an individual to decide?

6. Start emptying the boxes, start with the "good" women first – ask the group – how do you think the women in this box feel? Read some of the statements. Why did you put this woman in this box? Why is that thing she does, her behavior, a good thing? Where do we learn that it is good? Who says it is good? Is it always good? Do you think that if that woman stopped doing that we would still work with her? What would happen if the woman stopped behaving like that?

7. Move to the box of "bad" woman – ask again, how do you think the women in this box feel? How did it feel to put a woman in this box? Why did you put her in the bad box? What if she did all the things the woman in the good box did, but she also did not want to have children/another statement? Does that make her bad? Why? Why would she do that? As the group discusses how women do many things, act in many ways and maybe those ways are not bad, ask if we should move her into the "good" box.

8. Take it to a more abstract level – and ask – do you think all of the women in the "good" box are okay? Are they healthy, happy, fulfilled? Where would we put ourselves? What should we do with these women (good/bad), should we work with them? Would we help them, collaborate with them?

9. Summarize some of the key points from the discussion, emphasizing ideas from the following: Society works in ways that divide us. At one level, this is done by establishing a set of rules about what "women" (and "men") should and should not do. When we do not play by those societal rules, we are seen as different and not a part of our communities. We start thinking that those who are different in some way or don't play by the rules are not "good" women. We hold ourselves up to these rules and can feel bad when we break them in some way. We even play a role in trying to ensure others play by those same rules and may even support the punishment of women who break those rules – for example, by shutting them out of the community, preventing them from accessing resources, or gossiping about them. These stereotypes about who is good or bad, about what is proper behavior tend to create divisions among us. If we want to create a different kind of world and build movements for change, we need to understand how these divisions and stereotypes are false and serve to pit women against each other. We need to question these expectations and divisions. We must also ask what all this means for our movement building work - If we only collaborate and mobilise with people that "look" or act like us, we will be weak. Feminism is not about judging women nor is it about all of us thinking the same or making the same choices; it is about making space for everyone, understanding where our judgements and ideas come from and supporting others to make their own choices that may be different than ours.