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MUMBAI LOCAL

TRENDS, PEOPLE, PLACES

# Emancipating men

**HARISH SADANI WON** an international award recently. And it's about time. The Mahim resident has spent the last 19 years battling gender stereotypes

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A college in Jejuri in rural Pune is no different from any other college in rural Maharashtra. Young boys and girls attend classes together but there is little, if any, interaction between them. Neither side knows how to begin to deal with the other.

So it was, that four years ago, three boys from a Jejuri college were given expulsion notices for harassing a female student by playing lewd songs on their cellphones. Out of college, they would have spent their time drinking or gambling or both, maybe working at a garage for a few extra bucks.

"Our volunteers pleaded with the college to reconsider and give the boys a chance to learn from their mistake," says Harish Sadani (43). "The boys never misbehaved again, and one of them ended the year as the college's top

**Sadani's effort is special. He has brought in an interesting turn by involving the next generation of men at an impressionable age**

MANISHA GUPTA, founder of Masum, a Pune-based NGO working for women's rights

NSS [National Service Scheme] cadet."

It is just this lateral, 'second-chance' approach that, last month, won Sadani and his four-year-old NGO Yuva Maitri the Ashoka Changemakers and Campus of Excellence award.

Ashoka Changemakers is an international online community that awards innovative solutions in various fields.

Yuva Maitri — Marathi for Friendship Among Youngsters — beat 155 global entries to win a \$5,000 (Rs 2.3 lakh) cash prize and an invitation to attend and

deliberate at the Campus of Excellence event to be held in Spain in October.

For Sadani, the award is recognition of how far he has travelled towards a goal he set for himself some 19 years ago.

"Growing up in a Mumbai chawl, I saw domestic violence at close quarters. That's why gender-based violence and the subjugation of women are issues I have always felt very strongly about," says the Mahim resident.

But for change to be effective, Sadani says, the men need to be sensitised rather than penalised, included in the process rather than branded perpetrators.

That's exactly what his statewide network of 120 volunteers now does, through workshops, a helpline (26826062) and their website ([www.mavaindia.org](http://www.mavaindia.org)).

"The best time to sensitise men is when they are young and amenable to changing their outlook," says Sadani, who has a Master's in Social Work from



SATTISH BATE/HT

■ Harish Sadani says even errant men need to be involved in the battle for women's rights, rather than excluded and condemned.

the Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

So, in 2006, Sadani went on a tour of six colleges in rural Pune. He had already been honorary secretary for 13 years of Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA), an initiative by journalist C.Y. Gopinath.

"The challenge was to evolve a strategy that would engage young men who thought they had everything to gain from the dominant patriarchal system," says Sadani. "So, wherever we went, we would talk to young men about how patriarchy was holding them back too."

Sadani would explain to the youngsters how the system was stifling them, clamping down on their creativity, particularly in female-dominated fields like cooking, art and dance.

Out of this initiative, Yuva Maitri was born in 2006, so named because it encourages young men to see women as friends and equals, rather than subordinates or sex objects.

"In Jejuri, an 22-year-old boy called Ganesh Phule defied the men in his family to stand up for his sister, who was being married off against her wishes,"

says Sadani. "Phule had been attending our sessions and is now one of our gender sensitivity instructors."

For Sadani, who has worked with child rights organisation Child Relief and You and in the corporate social responsibility division of a multi-national corporation, it's a long road ahead.

"My dream now is to expand the Yuva Maitri programme across the state, the country and through the Internet," he says, "so that anyone anywhere can reach out to us to understand why they act the way they do."