



Exploring Masculinities in South Asia

A Forum

A report compiled by Nithila Kanagasabai

Prajnya 16 Days Campaign Against Gender Violence.
6 December, 2013



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Introduction

As part the 2013 Prajnya 16 Days Campaign against Gender Violence a forum to facilitate conversations on men, masculinities, gender and gender violence was organized on 6 December, 2013.

While we have largely focused on women and gender violence in the past, we think it important to make visible and comprehend masculinities for a more rounded understanding of the issue. The discussions were an attempt to engage with the everyday performance of gender, and how this in turn plays out in the larger discourse of gender violence.

We twinned two important new resources to inform the conversation at the Forum.

- A [UN Study released in 2013](#) found that male violence against women was pervasive across Asia. Men were most likely to rape intimate partners and this largely came out of a sense of entitlement. However, as local patterns varied, it was possible to also find that not all men are violent. Context matters, the study underscored.
- [Let's Talk Men 2.0](#) is a new film series aimed at drawing boys and men into discussions on gender and violence prevention.

Three films that are a part of *Let's Talk Men 2.0* were screened as part of this event.

1. Kesang Tseten's [Men at Work](#), a film that looks at the workplace of boys and men;
2. Rahul Roy's [Till We Meet Again](#), which explores through the everyday of four men the experience of a changing Delhi and how it intersects with their marriage, children, families and work.;
3. Prasanna Vithanage's [With you, Without you](#) a feature film on how a Sri Lankan married couple, one of whom is a Tamil and the other is Sinhalese, grapples with ethnic differences.

Each of the films was followed by a discussion. The following is a report of the proceedings. We invited **Anil Srinivasan** to anchor the discussions. Anil Srinivasan is a classical pianist educated at the University of Southern California and Columbia University, New York. Anil is passionate about music education for children cutting across all strata of society. His work with schools is in association with *Rhapsody – Education Through Music*. Anil speaks regularly on music and its effect on human behaviour, organisational processes and related topics at various forums.

Rapporteurs for the event: Prema Ravi, Bharati Kannan and Shyamala Sundararajan.



Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It?

The forum began with Dr Swarna Rajagopalan introducing the agenda for the day and making a presentation on the UN report.



The UN study of 10,000 men in Asia and the Pacific, found that overall nearly half of those men interviewed reported using physical and/or sexual violence against a female partner, ranging from 26 per cent to 80 per cent across the sites studied. Nearly a quarter of men interviewed reported perpetrating rape against a woman or girl, ranging from 10 per cent to 62 per cent across the sites. Men were interviewed across nine sites in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea. The study, entitled 'Why Do Some Men Use Violence Against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Quantitative Findings from the UN Multi-country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific' was conducted by Partners for Prevention, a regional joint programme of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Women and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme in Asia and the Pacific. It asked men about their use and experiences of violence, gendered attitudes and practices, childhood, sexuality, family life and health.

Presentation: <http://prajnya16days.blogspot.in/2013/12/presentation-on-un-study-on.html>

Video: <http://prajnya16days.blogspot.in/2013/12/exploring-masculinities-watch-this.html>

Till We Meet Again

a documentary by Rahul Roy

89 mins | 2013 | India

In 1999 the film, *When four friends meet*, ends with the promise that the four young men who are the main protagonists of the film and the director will meet again in ten years. They do meet again in 2012 and the world seems to have changed in the years that have gone by. The four friends are now married, have children and entirely new ideas like the share market have made an entry into what was a working class resettlement area of Delhi. The documentary explores through the everyday of four men the experience of a changing Delhi and how it intersects with their marriage, children, families and work. The documentary criss-crosses between 1998 and 2012 to set up a story that spans more than a decade and brings us up close to the unpredictability of life as well as continuities that belie any simple answers to the idea of the city, its working populations, change and men.

When the four friends meet again...they share with the camera stories from the past and their complicated present. Bunty, Kamal, Sanjay and Sanju, best of friends and residents of Jehangirpuri, a resettlement area of Delhi are trying to make their lives in a city that is no longer as distant as it was in their teens...it has consumed them and they are now the city, it's everyday...their childhood memories of deprivation a source of amusement for the children...marriage that fearful future is now their present...relationships are no longer a romantic song sequence but an everyday negotiation, a reality...violence always lurks round the corner...responsibilities are not a romantic goal but a crushing detail...today is not yesterday...it cannot be...and tomorrow remains uncertain.



TRAILER

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhEOI0A1zWQ>



Discussants

Tishani Doshi is a writer and dancer. Her first book of poems, *Countries of the Body*, won the 2006 Forward prize for best first collection. She was also the winner of the 2006 All-India Poetry Competition, and a finalist in the Outlook-Picador Nonfiction competition in 2005. She works as a freelance writer and has worked with choreographer Chandralekha. She graduated with a Master's in Creative Writing from John Hopkins University.

K Hariharan has directed films in Tamil, Marathi and Hindi. He has also made films for the Children's Film Society. His 1982 Tamil film *Ezhavathu Manithan* won the National Film Award for the Best Feature Film in Tamil and was nominated for Golden St. George (Best Film) at the Moscow International Film Festival. Currently, he serves as the director of L V Prasad Film and TV Academy, Chennai.

Discussion Notes

Construction of Masculinities in a patriarchal society: The discussion began with an examination of the construction of masculinities in a patriarchal society. Normative conceptions of gender mean that boys are socialised into a certain kind of masculinity at a very young age. For instance, they are reminded often on that they are the 'stronger' sex, they cannot exhibit emotions freely, they must eventually become the 'providers' and head a family. The film also throws light on how a culture of violence against women is considered integral to this idea of masculinity.

Imbrication of different kinds of violence: The forum discussed the many kinds of violence that the filmmaker had tried to forefront through the film. The violence of the city – the harsh conditions that the protagonists encountered in their everyday lives; the violence of capitalism – emasculation of men that happens within the family when the man of the house fails to provide

for the family, or sometimes even if he is unable to meet the extreme expectations fuelled by a capitalist economy, and the violence within a household. In fact, the UN study on masculinities underscores this imbrication by reporting that a large proportion of the men surveyed reported high work-related stress, depression and suicidal tendencies.

Class asymmetry between the filmmaker and the protagonists: The participants in the forum were deeply discomfited by the apparent class difference between the director of the film (who also functions as the interrogator) and his subjects. While it was acknowledged that the director has had previous interaction with the four men (while shooting for *When Friends Meet* in 1999), it was felt that that was not enough to bridge the socio-economic imbalance between them. Issues of power equations and consent were discussed in detail.

Need to address violence against women in the upper classes: The discussion then veered towards the media discourse that emerged immediately post the Delhi gang rape case. Participants felt that the popular discourse on masculinities always tended to focus on a certain class on people and superficially link socio-economic conditions to the propensity to violence. In light of recent events, with men like Tarun Tejpal and Justice AK Ganguly accused of sexual harassment, the participants felt the need to address the prevalence of violence against women in educated, upper middle class households. The incessant profiling of only certain masculinities under the rubric of gender violence, the tendency to speak of masculinities only in relation to gender violence and the abject absence of other narratives, the audience felt, needed to be redressed.

Entitlement: The discussants said one of the most striking features of the documentary was the sense of entitlement that the men exhibited towards the women in their lives. From making a silent wife answer the questions of the filmmaker-interrogator, to giving her instructions about everyday things, to even making decisions regarding birth control without discussing it with her. This resonated with the findings of the UN report that points out that the most common motivation that men reported for rape perpetration was related to sexual entitlement – ‘men’s belief that they have the right to sex regardless of consent.’

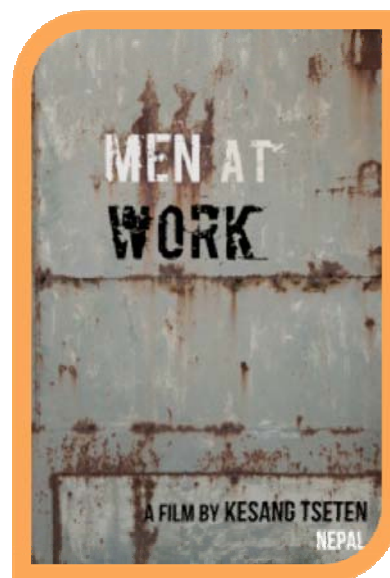
Resistance of the women: The participants pointed out that while the women in the film were subject to violence, their resistance was also evident in small but significant scenes. For instance, one of the women laughs uncontrollably when her husband claims that he partakes in household chores; in another instance, an outspoken wife clearly denounces her husband for not caring about her desires.

Men at Work

a documentary by Kesang Tseten

64 mins | 2013 | Nepal

The film looks at the workplace of boys and men and in doing so becomes an ode to the remarkableness of the everyday. By its framing of routine work settings of boys and men, the four distinct chapters of the film become narratives of the making of the self and its relation to the work space. A *young male domestic worker* creates an imaginary and magical world for himself, even while he attends to his lonely daily chores; *men in a motor garage* repair and refurbish vehicles that have long seen their best days; *boys at a residential institution* learn the adult rituals of becoming Hindu priests; and *young Gurkha men* vie desperately to become soldiers in the British army. With its intimate gaze of the ordinary, the film becomes witness to the everyday rituals that make up the world of men.



TRAILER

<http://letstalkmen.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Men-at-work-Trailer.mp4>



Discussants

Raj Cherubal is the Director-Projects for Chennai City Connect or CCC. At CCC, he has initiated and participated in various projects on traffic, transportation and urban planning. Raj has written and worked to promote decentralisation and good urban governance. He also focuses on promoting economic freedom for entrepreneurs, especially the poor, such as street vendors and others in the informal sector.

Poongkothai Chandrasaan, actress, humanitarian and filmmaker, was born in Sri Lanka and moved to Chennai with her family when she was three. Poongkothai's films are usually political in nature or centred around human rights issues. She has also served as director or writer for a number of feature-length documentaries. She is actively involved with social causes through her work with the refugee community in Chennai.

Discussion Notes

Production of masculinity: The discussion began with an exploration of the condition of dominant masculinity. The need to understand the different spaces that produce different masculinities was articulated. The director, stating the objective of the documentary, writes that he wanted to take a few situations and settings that are 'men-ly,' that have the 'smell of men' and film observationally, allowing action to speak. The four narratives that are covered include: a young male domestic worker, men in a motor garage, boys at a religious, residential institution and young Gurkha men trying to make it to the British Army.

Cycle of expectation and conditioning: The discussants felt that the film foregrounded the cycle of conditioning and expectation that men were subject to in a patriarchal society. This, they felt, was highlighted best in the part that dealt with boys in a religious institution. The young age at

which they are separated from family and even that rare phone call home is time to discuss his progress in studies, the near-complete absence of women in these spaces, the rigidity of the system and the absence of a space for emotional learning were discussed. Methods of training, control and discipline which are a part of the systems were also debated; for instance, when a young Gurkha tells his interviewer -- a woman from the British Army -- that he cannot think of anything that would make him above-ordinary, he is reprimanded strongly for his lack of self-esteem. Thus issues of religion, caste and colonialism play an important role in shaping masculinities.

Relationships amongst the men: The film also focusses on highlighting the relationship that young boys share with their male mentors. In most cases, this was a rigid, strict, relationship with conversation limited to 'work.' There is almost always an underlying sense of the young boys being bullied. According to the UN report 86% of the men surveyed reported experiences of childhood emotional abuse and neglect. Though the film does not tackle this issue head on, it remains a constant subtext of the film.

Absence of women: The absence of women for most part of the film is telling of the clearly separated realms the genders are forced to occupy. Inclusion, and thereby de-exoticisation of a gender, it was discussed, is an important step to bridge the assumed gender-divide.

Structural Violence, Intersectional Violence: The film also addresses violence that is embedded in socio-cultural practices and sometimes not even considered 'violence'. The film also looks at how different identities are woven together to form a complex matrix of power and powerlessness; how religion, caste, capitalist economy, globalisation interact with masculinities to produce layered identities and realities.

With you, Without you

a fiction feature by Prasanna Vithanage

90 mins/2012/Sri Lanka

When lonely, distraught pawnbroker Sarathsiri (Sinhala) meets and marries the beautiful, enigmatic Selvi (Tamil), he thinks he has finally found a way to put his past behind him. But a chance visit from an old friend opens up wounds that threaten to tear open the barely healing fabric of a mutilated nation coming to grips with the unspeakable cost of a thirty year civil war. Will love help them cross the bridge? Or will the past continue to colour the present?

<http://withyouwithoutyou.com/>





Discussants

A S Panneerselvan is the Readers' Editor at The Hindu and Executive Director, Panos South Asia which has a presence in five countries and works in three more with the help of local consultants. Mr. Panneerselvan, apart from being a regular columnist, is also a journalism teacher and is an adjunct faculty member of the prestigious Asian College of Journalism, Chennai. He has been covering Sri Lanka since 1984. Travelling extensively all over the island, his reports from Colombo, Jaffna, upcountry and Ampara were widely reproduced in the Indian and international media. He has presented more than 20 major papers on the question of devolution in various national and international seminars. As an advocate of global nuclear disarmament, he has written extensively on nuclear issues.

Discussion Notes

Conflict and Gender Violence: The relationship portrayed in the film was discussed in the context of the conflict situation in Sri Lanka. The power relations within a household that are influenced by the conflict outside of it, the different ways in which this power equation is reinforced time and again (when the man reminds his wife that he saved her from getting married to an old man, dismisses her small joys and exerts his power over her in business matters). Mr Panneerselvan said that he was not being able to see the film without thinking about it as a Tamil who was conscious about the war and what it meant. He talked about the peaceful idyllic surroundings asking if they were chosen to obfuscate the violence of the situation that obtained just a little while ago.

Multiple victimisations: The participants drew attention to the multiple victimisations that the female protagonist was subject to. She loses all members of her family to the war, she is viewed as a burden by the family she lives with, her husband thinks of himself as her saviour and only later accepts that he had married her in the hope of redeeming himself from his past.

Legal systems to recognise gender violence: The panel also discussed the need for the judicial-political system to recognise and address the various forms of gender violence that areas in conflict are prone to.

Concluding Notes

Wrapping up the discussion the participants suggested a few things that could take this conversation forward

1. Need to promote non-violent masculinities from a young age
2. Need to broaden conversations about masculinities to go beyond the rubric of gender violence
3. Need to have the conversation on masculinities in varied settings
4. Improve communication between different groups – men & women, young & old, between different classes, between politico-legal structures and grassroots activists
5. Address male sexual entitlement
6. End impunity

Other Resources:

[Interview with Prasanna Vithanage, Director \(With you, Without you\)](#) Dated 26, November 2012

[Article in The Hindu that discusses the series](#)

[Difficult Loves: Hope and Heartbreak on the fringes of urban India](#)

[A hunt, the aftermath, angry Indian Men and a tragedy – Rahul Roy](#)

[40% men are hardcore sexists: Study](#)

[Prajnya Info Tweets from the 16 Days Campaign Against Gender Violence](#)

[Dissecting Masculinity in the South Asian Context](#)

[The Freedom of the Beards](#)

[Men will be men](#)

[In Conversation with Kesang Tseten, Director \(Men at Work\)](#) Dated August 24, 2013

[Rape and the crisis of Indian masculinity](#)

[Male Sexual Violence: Thoughts on engagement](#)

[From 'Mantastic' to 'Real Men': How masculinity in India is problematic](#)