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Rethinking Pro-Feminism: Men, Work and Family in India

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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Women don't live single-gendered lives. For those of us engaged in issues of women and empowerment its critical to acknowledge that empowerment is not an out-of-context politics divorced from women's lives. These lives include men. The key question for empowerment and equality is whether men can and will enable or hinder empowerment. Men's subjectivity is as central to gender domination. Equally, it is crucial for achieving gender equality. While the need to bring men into the picture as players and partners is necessary because women's existence is not single-gendered, a key question is how this is to be achieved? What's the practice (or sets of practices) that go into forming partnerships with men?

One strategy has been the creation of pro-feminist masculinities and pro-feminist men. Let me say right away that I use the term "pro-feminism" over the term "gender equality" with a purpose. I think the term highlights an anxiety at least on the part of some men who wonder whether being pro-feminist means a renunciation of their masculinity. Professing "gender equality" allows a kind of escape route for this anxiety to be driven underground, because gender equality draws from a lineage of democracy and human rights. It's hard to profess a belief in gender *inequality* without sounding anti-democratic, even inhuman. But everyone - both men and women- can refuse to be pro-feminist without sounding anti-*women*. Those of us who teach courses in gender have often needed to deal with the phrase "I'm not a feminist, but" The use of a term like pro-feminism therefore allows me to bring certain doubts to the surface as well as to draw on issues raised by feminist politics – one of which is the role men and boys can play in achieving gender equity.

One of the difficulties about establishing pro-feminism is the fact that pro-feminism itself is not any one unitary practice or politics. The history of feminism alerts us to the fact of different strands within gender politics. There is as much that distinguishes feminist politics as secures it to an ideological root. Similarly pro-feminism as ideology and practice needs to address diverse strands within itself- it is clearly not a unitary politics that seeks to create all men as the same.

While the fractures between pro-feminist and patriarchal male identities demand contradictory things from all men, what exactly these contradictions are dissimilar across cultures. Different categories of men across cultures and within a single society will experience and express the contradictions between being pro-women and all-male in different ways. Though much of the writing and reflection about being pro-feminist has emerged from the US, Australia, Canada and so on, I want to reflect on in this issue from a different context – South Asia, and within that primarily India with which I am most familiar. I frame my questions as follows:

1. What does pro-feminism mean in South Asia?
2. How do we understand substantive contexts of pro-feminism?
3. As a corollary to the first two - given the diversity of cultural and ideological contexts of South Asia what do we mean when we say “pro-feminist men”?

I want to explore these questions from the perspective of gender relations within and vis-à-vis family in India. In South Asia as a whole, family plays a comprehensive role in defining relations of gender. It is significant as an arena where the ideologies of gender difference are expressed and learnt, and where everyday forms of power and resistance are articulated. The choice of the family is an important starting point for the exploration of masculinity, pro-feminism and the role of men and boys in relation to gender equality.

My second choice is to concentrate on the everyday lives of ordinary men whose voices we rarely hear, or whose actions often remain invisible except when they appear in statistical profiles as “numbers” who migrate, or workers who give shape to the labour force. Thus it is working class men and their lives that I want to focus on. This is by no means a romantic decision of “giving voice” to a muted majority from the security of my own middle-class position. The key reason for this second choice is the inescapable demands of pro-feminist ideology itself. Any transformatory politics like pro-feminism demands a self-conscious orientation toward the processes through which gender is established as an identity and a role. It seems to me that the lives of ordinary working class men are a terrain that bring a critical issue to the surface - mainly- does such self-reflexive consciousness already exist in practice or does it needs to be “created” through interventions? Second, do the contexts of working class family-lives provide a picture of practices of male involvement as well as of male absence in issues of care and well being of women, children and dependant family members? Thirdly, how do we address questions of defining and ‘finding’ political agency that consciously defies or quietly re-orientes hegemonic formations of powerful and culturally privileged masculinities? Is any of this pro-feminist?

I will outline two contexts in which I see the struggles that pro-feminism confronts in South Asia, and therefore what pro-feminism “looks like” in India or South Asia. The first is context of reproductive health of women and male roles and practices here. The second context is also domestic – but here the domestic is transformed into a “workspace” in the sense that it is a place of earning. To my way of thinking these contexts share certain features – they are oriented to the family, they belong to the sphere of care practices, both are conventionally associated with women and working class families. The question of male roles within them has a resonance for the challenges that confront pro-feminist politics and practice, and the potential outlines of gender equality. I also think that these questions can be translated across class and culture though the precise practices will differ.

The work of reproductive care.

Over the last two years, the Population Council in India as part of its Frontiers in Reproductive Health program sought to actively involve men in the reproductive health of women. In the Men-in-Maternity program husbands were actively encouraged to accompany their wives to three health clinics set up in collaboration with Employees State Insurance Corporation. ESIC was chosen because it was an autonomous body (though under the Central Government) and it provided money and medical benefits to low-income industrial workers.

At the initial stages it was found that while husbands accompanied their wives to the clinics for pre-natal checkups, they would more often than not leave them at the clinic door and melt away. Research indicated that men did in fact want to know more about reproductive health and women were equally keen to have their partners involved in their reproductive care. But men in particular felt uncomfortable discussing aspects of condom usage or STI related issues in a mixed gender context and were more at ease when they were in a single-gender context.

Under MIM, men and women were counseled twice – once during early pregnancy and then again six months later. There was increased awareness of nutritional needs, maternity care and breast feeding as well as baby health requirements by men and women.

This program has been a success and highlights the fact that men are not averse to ensuring their wives maternal health by experts especially if they are made aware of difficulties of pre- and post natal processes.

In such campaigns the position and role of men in the maternal and reproductive health of women in the family is restricted to a single dimension of their subject positions within households - as husbands, but not as fathers or sons. As fathers or brothers, what is their role in care work and within the family as supportive partner?

There is no denying that the conjugal partnership is critical within the family. In South Asian families, young pregnant women are often the most vulnerable in the household, and need vital health and nutritional care. But it is equally important to be self conscious that “gendered interventions” which focus only on men as husbands mute whole sets of practices that define the roles and subject positions of men as sons, fathers and brothers. Taking these other roles into account enables an expansion of the idea of men-as-partners and expands the rights and claims that *women* can make on different categories of male kin. Women in Indian families count their fathers and brothers as key partners throughout the period of pregnancy, childbirth and the continuing care of their children. This dual orientation (toward the father and the husband) is important for women precisely because they can evoke their rights vis-à-vis both sets of men. These rights and entitlements do not remain static over the period of a woman’s life. In families of South Asia, a woman can and will claim forms of maternity care from her father during the period of her first pregnancy whereas in subsequent pregnancies her claims shift toward her husband and her conjugal family. Paying attention to the expanded family has a direct bearing on who gets counted as a supportive partner in different phases of a woman’s reproductive life.

There are cultural expectations of support toward women that need to be reinforced, not muted by a unitary focus on one category of men.

In the intervention of the Population Council a choice has already been made - involving husbands in women's health- and the agenda is to work out how best this objective may be achieved through strategies that involve rather than alienate the target group. The problem with intervention research is that it is not always self-conscious of own power position in relation to target groups. "Intervention" is a political word in that it expresses a relationship that positions the person who intervenes as "active" and the people toward whom this intervention is directed as "passive". In its action, intervention does in fact seek to penetrate a target audience with a set of agendas and in so doing it comes accompanied by the politics and the practices of power. In essence intervention echoes the same problems that lie in words like penetration. Feminist writings have alerted us to the power of penetration, which blanks out agency and subjectivities of those who are positioned as penetrated. Intervention, like penetration, involves notions of active bodies, influential points of view and powerful subject positions directed toward those who need to be altered, changed and transformed, as passive recipients of new knowledge, different roles and good practices.

As Michael Flood said in the on-line discussion organised by the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) from 30 June to 25 July 2003, "...its not necessary to re-invent the wheel..." to know this.

Doing Domestic Work

Two additional questions emerge from the brief discussion about interventions.

1. Do male support practices toward women already exist in some form or the other within families and households of south Asia? Do we always need to "create" them from the outside through intervention practices? Or is it possible to build on and develop already existing practices?
2. When we talk about men as supportive partners, can we also begin to address what *practices* are specifically "supportive"?

Most of us think of the world of work as something that lies outside the home. But in fact for many workers in South Asia, both women and men, domestic spaces are their worlds of work. Though some of the work relations mime formal and public worlds of work, domestic work is treated as an "informal economy", made up primarily of migrants. For example, in Indian cities labour agents registered with churches and migrant associations are a conduit for workers. They introduce formal aspects like work contracts and specify working conditions for domestic workers – maids, cleaners, drivers, security guards etc. However, these contractual conditions are not enforceable because [1] they are not the same across agencies and agents and [2] they exist outside the purview of labour laws. Domestic work remains doubly invisible by the fact that it is treated as a peripheral,

feminized sector and is under documented. Male domestic workers are even less represented in the literature and in labour statistics.

Thus, male domestic workers present a very specific context for understanding male power in the family. In numerous analysis of the household as a social and cultural unit, it has been adequately demonstrated that men have greater entitlements to household resources like property, family income, food, and so on. Does this entitlement and access remain true for men across all household contexts? If an individual man works as a domestic labourer in households and with families other than his own, does the fact of his gender and entitlements associated with his gender “move” with him, from his own home into the homes of others? Are both families and households identical in terms of the way in which he can translate his entitlements, define his power and articulate his subject positions? How does a male domestic worker negotiate and experience entitlement within different households?

Aspects of class, gender and sexuality enter to divide a household and family along lines of entitlement and deprivation. Male “maids” for example vacillate between being treated like women in the work they do, in their body language that replicate veiling codes, like keeping their eyes down and their hands folded in front of their employers of both genders; but are also treated as sexually dangerous. So police attention on male domestic workers is acute and they are the most subject to police verification drives and are the first suspects if there is an assault or theft in the house.

Why do men do this work? In some research conducted in the city of Delhi male domestic workers stated that they were “bound” (*mazboor*) to do this work because they needed to support their families. Thus even when gender divisions of labour exist, men cross the divide “for the sake of the family”. They do so in self-conscious recognition that this will mean a “loss” of their maleness. So while the ideology of the man-as-breadwinner remains the actual performance of work and the practices in the home-as-workspace present a contradiction that men do negotiate in articulate and self-conscious ways.

Do they carry back this experience of “feminine working practice” into their own homes? Or do the two sets of homes remain insulated from each other? Again, ideology and practice tell contradictory stories. This contraction between ideology and practice is expressed contrarily by different men. Older male workers rarely mention their work to their families. They will often go to some trouble to disguise what they do in the city by bringing back photographs that never show them in their place of work etc. But younger men who have worked as domestic labour go back at home and exchange recipes with their mothers and sisters. New foods like Chinese noodles and omelets are cooked by young male workers for their families. Many provide care for their children and perform domestic chores for their own homes like buying provisions on the way back home, dropping the children to school en route to work etc. The performance of domestic work does have a carry back effect in these men’s lives.

It is important to recognise that men and women confront and engage with change and transformation continuously in their everyday lives. Daily lives are altered by movements of migrants, by doing effeminate work, by expanding the role of child care toward a whole set of adult men. As researchers of all hues, we need to collectively understand the dynamics of these transformations, acknowledge their existence and then draw on them to think through ways of engaging with people's lives and their own conceptual capital as a source for our own practices.

What do these stories tell us about the possibility and potential for men to change?
Secondly is it possible to discern pro-feminism in these diverse contexts of care work?

Men-as-husbands (especially young husbands) may play a muted role in caring for wives and in fact have to be "encouraged" to do so. Fathers-as-partners on the other hand may already exist as support partners for their daughters. Might it be possible for policies to encourage fathers to draw their sons-in-law into the care work vis-à-vis their daughters in provisioning care? Here the father is a culturally "given" initiator who has a stake in the well being of his daughter, and a culturally charged language to effectively persuade sons-in-law to play a greater role. So while a father may not be able to persuade his *own* son to be good to his wife because of the inherent conflicts within this situation, the diffusion of his fathering role toward other young men is an effective measure. Within south Asian families the expanded role of the father toward non-biological children is a well-established social practice and can be enhanced in directed ways.

Men who work as domestic labour choose this employment self-consciously. There is a clear context of agency at work within the constraints and limits of employment options. Men in fact act as support partners for each other when it comes to domestic work; young male migrants in the city depend on each other for information about work, stand surety and vouch for friends vis-à-vis employers, and impart skills of domestic work to their friends. Friends become the conduits for information and skill and play a role not just in supporting their own families but also the families of their friends. For these working class men the doing of domestic work and doing support does not have a unitary orientation toward their families alone but also toward families of their friends. Valuing this as "care" work is something that needs to be recognized and acknowledged.

Talking about supportive practice and opening up the concept of "care work" enables us to discern practices of masculinity that have so far remained muted. These practices do seem to me to be pro-feminist in unselfconscious culturally given ways as well as expressive of an agency through self-conscious choices. I am by no means saying that men are already supportive enough nor arguing for a status quo. But it does seem to me that by asserting support as a frame we are enabled to hear/listen-into an aspect of men's lives, experiences and expressions of their subjective positions that are the building blocks for change. Policies that engage with existing practices building on them while simultaneously orienting them toward expanded contexts and different formations have a better chance of becoming culturally incorporated than those that operate "from above" and "outside". There is no substitute for expanding the contexts in which supportive, pro-feminist, gender alive practices are talked about and circulated.

It does seem to me that just as women were empowered through an increase and expansion of knowledge about their worlds and their own forms of creative power, it is necessary to enhance the knowledge of male support, of men's resistance toward patriarchal structures, and men's own reflections on violence. From this perspective, knowledge is a form of politics that can enable resistance to violence and violent practice and counteract the view that violence is "normal". The circulation of knowledge that uncovers the source of support and posits alternate formations of masculinity is a powerful tool to resist violence. Researchers of all hues need to think constructively about how men and violence can be addressed to resolve the problem through ways that draw men into creating gender democracy.