

Feminist Conundrums of Working on Men and Masculinities: Global Perspectives

Dialogue hosted at the NGO CSW67 Forum

~ by International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Nirantar Trust, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and American Jewish World Service (AJWS)

Tuesday, 7th March, 2023 | Church Center for the United Nations, New York

The last few decades have seen significant progress in women's collective voice, leadership, and agency. At the same time, socio-political and economic shifts in recent years combined with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have not only stalled change, but have also led to regressions in gender equality and increasing anti-feminist backlash particularly among men within families, communities, and broader structures and systems. Simultaneously, the past three decades have been marked by growing recognition of working with men and boys on masculinities to transform gender power relations. Men and boys are increasingly being included in gender programming to address gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR).

The simultaneous push towards working with men and boys in gender programming, and increasing backlash from anti-feminist men's rights groups, have generated multiple debates, tensions, and dilemmas among feminists. While many feminists recognize the need to engage with men and boys on masculinities, they caution against the risk of feminist work being 'hijacked' to reinforce, rather than challenge patriarchy, co-opting the language and arguments of feminists to reassert and reinvent patriarchy. Also, within an increasingly hostile and constraining funding environment for women's rights work, especially in rural areas, the institutionalization of masculinities programming also represents a threat, as men "jump on board" and compete for resources with feminist groups.

These dilemmas and debates have also pointed towards the lack of conceptual and pedagogical engagement with the socio-political category of masculinities, where men and boys are only instrumentalized as pathways for gender equality. Masculinity continues to be seen only as a trait of men and boys, rather than being constitutive, constructive of values and ideologies that dominate societies across the globe. This, of course, is underlined by the concern that there is not enough engagement with the masculinities of women (cis and queer), trans and non-binary folx.

In this context, ICRW, Nirantar, UNESCO, and AJWS are hosting a dialogue at NGO CSW67 Forum, New York on 7th March, titled as "Feminist Conundrums of Working on Masculinities: Global Perspectives". It will bring together experiences, dilemmas of practitioners, along with that of researchers, and scholars, to identify key spaces/sites of feminist conundrums of working on masculinities. In doing so, the intent is to generate or build a process that is not only outcome driven, but is reflective, can hold discomforts, and drive a feminist approach and intentionality of working on masculinities. Such an approach and intentionality should

recognize power structures, but also the multiple negotiation within those power structures, where privilege and marginality are not seen as a near binary. The intent is to root this dialogue in lived experiences, while building critical takeaways to influence the next-generation work on men, boys, and masculinities.

The dialogue aims to bring together experiences from different spaces where work on masculinities take place including academia, research, global policy-making and advocacy, multilateral platforms, feminist activism, and community awareness-raising. A global perspective as well as those from the Global South will be represented especially of people associated with the feminist movement in South Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle-East. These experiences will bring together reflections from engagement from the movement, discourse, and the ground, the various conundrums that are generated at all levels/spaces, their interplay, and ability to respond to each other.

This dialogue will focus on the following questions/entry points:

- Why does it matter for feminists across the globe to engage with masculinities, and how have specific contexts of South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle-East looked at this 'why'?
- How are the feminist spaces in these contexts working on masculinities, with whom are they working, with whom they are not able to work, who benefits, and who doesn't?
- Is the 'why,' 'how,' 'whom' of working on masculinities able to generate a space for feminist reflexivity, deep reflection, or any kind of political reimagination of feminism to engage with the challenges, conundrums and impasses that arise of these processes? If yes, how, and if no, why?
- Why does it matter to talk about these conundrums? What does it mean for feminism, its engagement with masculinities and collective spaces?

Please note: This is an in-person event, with an expected audience size of 175-200. The event will be preceded with social media promotions, and other forms of publicity and mobilization, to generate enough traction for the event. The event partners who will join ICRW and Nirantar, will be a part of the promotions, and it is hoped that the partnerships will also help in thinking and working around the structure and format of this event. ICRW and Nirantar will document this event in creative ways, endeavour to bring in some immersive and multimedia modes of engagement within the event itself.