

**Interrogating South Asian Masculinities:
An Inter Disciplinary Dialogue**

3 to 7 November 2008

Bellagio Center

Organisers:

The proposed Bellagio Conference will mark the end of a series of seminars on masculinities that have been held at 14 universities across south Asia and the beginning of a process to create a new south Asian platform of researchers and activists that will seek to generate more knowledge and a public discourse on masculinities and gender based violence. The principal organiser is **Rahul Roy** from Aakar, a research organisation and registered Trust based in Delhi, India. The Dialogue is being co-organised by **James Lang**, UNDP Asia – Pacific Regional Programme Advisor (Gender), **Dr. Sanjay Srivastava**, Professor of Sociology to the Institute of Economic Growth, University of Delhi and **Dr. Deepak Mehta** from the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi.

Context:

The concept of ‘masculinities’, informed by recent feminist thought and the women’s movement, has emerged as a means of renewing feminist discourse by encouraging a more relational approach to masculinity and femininity. This allows for the investigation, problematisation and interrogation of masculinity, equally with femininity.

Notwithstanding these enabling possibilities, however, ‘gender’ is still essentially deployed in contemporary social science discourse as a synonym for ‘women’, its relational aspect obscured and the invitation to interrogate masculinities largely ignored.

The inter disciplinary dialogue at Bellagio has been conceived from the position that the study of masculinity is important in that it “is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture” (Connell, 1994:71).

An important aspect of the dialogue will be to examine masculinities in the context of the rapidly transforming economic, social and cultural environment in South Asia and the range of conflicts that characterise the region. The contexts of momentous changes and practices of conflict are related, with gender being a significant suturing principle. To put it another way, masculinities are central to an understanding of the various ways in which a rapidly transforming present affects the lives of men and women as they grapple with new circumstances and opportunities. So, for example, change simultaneously provides the grounds for violence as a response to perceptions of threats to masculine identities, as well as opportunities for altered senses of the gendered self. Either way, it would appear that men are the central actors within the entire spectrum of violence. Why do men invariably find themselves at the centre of violence, both as victims and perpetrators?

Notwithstanding the grim reality of such a situation, emerging research on masculinities in South Asia and other parts of the globe suggests that men are not only guarantors for the representational claims of state power, but are also *made* in the image of such power. Alternatives in the form of gaps, openings and fissures do exist where ideas of gender equality and non-violence can find the space to breathe within the suffocating structures of masculinities.

The proposed dialogue at the Bellagio Centre will attend to this complexity and discuss the practices of both excess and restraint that are crucial to an understanding of masculinities in the region and beyond.

In the last few years we have witnessed the beginnings of an engagement with the theme of masculinities in several social settings through the UN system, civil society groups, activist campaigns, artists and filmmakers. However, the South Asian university system is yet to respond to this emerging theme of masculinities. The subject is yet to enter the curricula of social science departments and ‘gender’ continues to be synonymous with ‘women’. It is essential that a critical mass of both practitioners and research material on the theme be generated through the university system since it is the most important site

for not only pedagogical advances but also the source for enlisting young men and women in activism for gender equality.

Aakar, a research organisation and registered Trust based in New Delhi, has addressed this lacuna through organising a series of travelling seminars on masculinities across a number of countries and institutions in South Asia. The seminars have established a new public sphere of debate and discussion involving universities, NGOs, activists, as well as independent scholars and writers. The proposed conference at Bellagio seeks to build upon the travelling seminars in specific ways in order to extend the scope of both scholarly and policy related work on a crucial aspect of gender in South Asia. The description of the following section provides the broader framework for the rationale and objectives of the proposed conference at Bellagio.

The Seminar Series: Background and Achievements

South Asia has witnessed in the last few years a number of campaigns, programmes and projects by civil society groups, the UN system and governmental bodies that have focused on masculinities and contributed to building a public discourse on the theme. Men's Action to Stop Violence Against Women (MASVAW) in India, the White Ribbon Campaign in Nepal, the Bangladesh Network of groups working on gender based violence, Police sensitisation programmes by Rozan in Pakistan, OXFAM'S We Can regional campaign, Forum To Engage Men (FEM) from India are just some examples of interventions that are seeking boys and men's participation in stopping gender based violence. The four year joint UN programme for Asia - Pacific titled – ***Partners for Prevention: Working with Boys and Men to Prevent Gender Based Violence*** seeks to build on this work and provide an impetus to research, policy interventions, public campaigns and training that will enhance its impact in governmental and public spheres.

The Travelling Seminar on Exploring Masculinities

(<http://www.southasianmasculinities.org/>) was designed to introduce diverse questions of masculinities and gender relations within the university system. The series has travelled to universities in Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka and is slated to visit Pakistan in the

next round of the series in 2009. The seminars comprising of academic papers, films and activist narratives gave a broad overview of the range of work on masculinities in various contexts. Each seminar was spread over two days at a university campus and comprised of conceptual papers, sociological/anthropological/historical studies, psychoanalytic perspectives, activist narratives (experiences from the field of work on gender with boys and men), personal narratives (reflexive stories of men's experience of transitions/journeys/their sexualities) and films on masculinities.

The series, as the title suggests, has travelled to fourteen universities across South Asia. At each location the seminar was organised in partnership with local women's groups and social science and humanities departments at the concerned university. The series has collaborated with forty departments at various universities and has had an audience of approximately 4000 students and faculty. More than 120 academics, artists, media practitioners and activists from different parts of South Asia have been directly involved in the seminars as paper presenters and discussants.

A series of questions and relationships have been explored in the course of the seminar series. For instance, what is the place of masculinity in thinking through the constitution of public discourses? In which forms does it intersect with practices of governmentality and what is the disciplinary matrix of power within which masculinity operates? Are alternative forms and practices of masculinity part of a normative aspiration that maximizes the protection and freedom of gender minorities, of women and of ethnic minorities, especially as they cut across other categories?

The seminar series has been supported by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and Ford Foundation.

Outcomes:

1. The first formal academic discussion on the theme of masculinities at universities in south Asia. The seminar series has been a significant pedagogical intervention on gender studies at the host institutions.
2. The series succeeded in creating a platform for individuals, groups and universities those were keen to take up the theme of masculinities within their work areas.
3. Several students and faculty from the universities have subsequently started research in the area.
4. The papers presented during the seminar series are to be published in a volume being co-edited by Dr. Sanjay Srivastava, Dr. Deepak Mehta and Rahul Roy.
5. The series has stimulated faculty from regional universities to begin a discussion on forming regional networks for the study of masculinities.
6. A web portal is being developed to connect researchers in the area through announcements, tracking of research, listing resources and conducting online discussions and seminars.
7. A network of groups, students, faculty has been created for collaboration of work on gender issues.
8. The seminar has supported student research projects through small grants as well as theatre productions, videos and photography contests to stimulate student participation and their interest in taking up masculinities as a research area.
9. Preliminary planning has started on working with faculty from several universities to develop curricula interventions on the theme.

Future Regional Plans:

The seminar series has been a collaborative process between Aakar and several universities, NGO'S and individuals. The series has succeeded in creating a platform of researchers spread across the south Asian region. We now seek the creation of a formal

regional network that can focus on areas of curricula development, collaborative research and policy interventions besides stimulating more participation of students, especially boys, in raising issues of gender equality and violence prevention. We look at the four year joint UN programme for Asia - Pacific – ***Partners for Prevention: Working with Boys and Men to Prevent Gender Based Violence***, as an opportunity to create this platform and collaborate with the UN system for effective and informed public policies that promote gender equality. Aakar designed and co-ordinated the launch of this programme from Delhi in December 2007. The joint programme envisages initiating during 2008 to 2011 a three - pronged strategy to involve civil society and governments in efforts to curb gender based violence with a focus on work with boys and men. The programme has identified research and policy initiatives as one of the key areas of intervention.

The Bellagio Dialogue: meeting structure and goals

The proposed Bellagio dialogue will bring together researchers and programme managers from south Asia and beyond to discuss research priorities for the region and the creation of a regional network that can stimulate further work in areas of pedagogy and curricula besides contributing to a public discourse on the theme of masculinities. The meeting will be structured so that it provides for an engagement with ongoing research through formal papers presented for discussion. From here the meeting will develop strategies for future research and effective policy interventions. The formal papers to be presented will be contributions to a volume that is to be published on the culmination of the current travelling seminar series on masculinities. The papers are by researchers from different parts of south Asia and provide for the mapping of not only the diverse ways in which masculinities can be interrogated but also point towards the importance of a cross disciplinary approach.. This perspective is necessary in understanding how masculinities are implicated in everyday social life and in conditions of conflict and violence. The respondents to these papers are well known academics from different parts of the globe. The discussions on the papers will contribute not only to the content of these papers but will also identify and generate ideas for future research and collaborations. Subsequent to the formal presentations the meeting will discuss the creation of a regional network of

researchers: a platform/network that liases between researchers, curricula development and policy initiatives. This network is envisioned as critical to various other campaigns, activism and trainings in the south Asian region. It will be interacting with these other efforts through research and knowledge creation. Many of those involved in planning the Bellagio Dialogue, are active in several other initiatives in the area of masculinities and violence prevention. For this reason, the need for this network emerges from within the experience of those who argue that research and knowledge are the most effective instruments for the creation of public debate around policy interventions that privilege gender equality and non-violence.

We are also planning to invite representation from South East Asia and East Africa, where a similar process of setting up research networks has begun.

The Conference at Bellagio has been planned with the following goals:

1. Invite all the contributors to the book being published for a presentation of the papers with the editors and respondents. The invited respondents are academics who have been working on the theme of masculinities at universities and research institutions in and outside the south Asian region but are connected through their research to the region.
2. Discuss and plan for a formal regional network of researchers with the aim of: curricula development, research collaborations and policy initiatives. The network will organise an international conference on masculinities with a south Asian focus to be held in 2009.
3. To introduce the four year joint UN programme for Asia - Pacific titled – ***Partners for Prevention: Working with Boys and Men to Prevent Gender Based Violence*** to the participants and discuss the networks' association with the programme.
4. To create wider international networks of researchers on masculinities. Academics from outside the south Asian region have therefore been invited as respondents/discussants.

Bellagio Conference Plan (To be finalised) :

Day 1

Arrival

Evening: Introductions.

Day 2

Presentation of Papers and discussions

Day 3

Presentation of Papers and discussions

Session on identifying research priorities for the south Asian region

Day 4

Discussion and planning for a regional network of researchers. Identifying the role of the network and planning its activities.

Constituting an organising committee for an International Conference on Masculinities to be held in 2009 and drawing up a plan.

Introduction of the four year joint UN programme for Asia - Pacific titled – ***Partners for Prevention: Working with Boys and Men to Prevent Gender Based Violence***. Followed by a discussion on how the network can collaborate with the UN.

Day 5

Departure

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