

**EXPLORING INTERGENERATIONAL FEMINISMS:
THE GENDERED MICROPOLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE**

A Thesis Submitted to
University of Hyderabad
for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN COMMUNICATION

By
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December, 2020



DECLARATION

I, SAI AMULYA KOMARRAJU, hereby declare that this doctoral thesis, titled **“Exploring Intergenerational Feminisms: The Gendered Micropolitics of Everyday Life,”** submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of Prof. USHA RAMAN is a bonafide research work and is free from plagiarism. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in its full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma.

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In addition, the student has the following publications:

1. Komarraju, S. A. (Forthcoming 2021). “Immoral, Slut, Arsehole”: Feminist memes reclaim stereotypes. In A. L. Frey (Ed.), *Who’s laughing now? Feminist perspectives on Humor and Laughter*. Demeter Press.
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2.	CC - 802	Advance Research Methodology	4	Pass
3.	CC - 803	Feminist Communication Studies	4	Pass

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Acronyms

AIPWA	All India Progressive Women's Organization
AIMPLB	All India Muslim Personal Law Board
AIWC	All India Women's Conference
AAWC	All Asian Women's Conference
BC	Backward caste
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CMS	Critical Masculinity Studies
CSWI	Committee on the Status of Women in India
CWDS	Centre for Women's Development Studies
DSW	Department of Social Welfare
FGD	Focus group discussion
GAD	Gender And Development
GHMC	Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation
GOI	Government of India
GT	Grounded theory
HfF	Hyderabad for Feminism (a Facebook group)
HITECH city	Hyderabad Information Technology and Engineering Consultancy city
IAWS	Indian association for women's studies
ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research
MAVA	Men Against Violence and Abuse
MRA	Men's Rights Activists
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
LoSHA	List of sexual harassers in academia
PCC	Pink Chaddi Campaign
PI	Phenomenological Interviews
PM	Prime Minister
SC	Scheduled Caste
SEBC	Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission
ST	Scheduled tribe
TARSHI	Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues
UCC	Uniform Civil Code
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WID	Women In Development
YWCA	Young Women Christian Association

Glossary

Amma Mother (Telugu)

Akka Elder sister (Telugu)

Arivu Maturity (Tamil)

Azadi Freedom (Hindi)

Ada pilla lakshanalu Qualities of a girl (Telugu)

Bahir/bahire Public (Hindi)

Bahujan Refers to present day *Scheduled Castes* (Dalits) and *Scheduled Tribes* (Adivasis/indigenous) and Shudra (peasant) castes — cutting across religion, ethnicities and geographies.

Bahut hua naari par atyachaar, abki baar Modi sarkar Vote for Modi to put a stop to violence against women (Hindi)

Baanch Infertile women (Hindi)

Bhai-behen Brother and sister (Hindi)

Bhayya Brother

Buddhi Maturity (Telugu)

Burqa An outer garment that covers that face and the body (usually black). Also referred to as *chadaree* (Afghanistan), *Paranjee* (Central Asia), *boshia* (Middle east)

Chechy/chechi Elder sister (Tamil, Malayalam)

Chettha Muck (Telugu)

Dalit See: Bahujan

Didi Elder sister (Hindi)

Ghar Home/ domestic/ the private (Hindi)

Ghoomna Going out to have fun. Sometimes, it could also mean ‘loitering’, considered to be a subversive act when done by women

Halad-kunkum Ritual involving offering of turmeric and vermilion to Goddesses and other women (Hindi)

Hawa badlegi Winds of change (Hindi)

Inta gelchi racha gelvali annaru peddalu (Proverb) One should first win at home and then conquer the world, say wise people (Telugu)

Ijtihad: Islamic term for independent reasoning (Arabic)

Ijjat/ Izzat Honour/respectability. Synonyms- *paruvu, pratishtha, gauravam*

Iman Faith

Kala Charming (Telugu)

Kattar Hardcore/fundamentalist (Hindi)

Kattubatulu Traditions and culture (Telugu)

Kongu Sari-- usually the end of the sari that trails over the shoulder (Telugu)

Ladki ghar ki Lakshmi A girl represents Goddess Lakshmi, the wealth and prosperity of a family, and is to be duly protected. (Hindi)

Ladki ghar ki zeenat hai (proverb) A girl is the ornament of the house (Hindi)

Log kya kahenge What will people say? (Hindi)

Love Jihad/Romeo Jihad A derogatory term coined by Hindu fundamentalists to describe an alleged campaign by Muslim men to trap Hindu women with the ultimate aim of converting them

Mahram In Islam, a member of the family in whose presence purdah is not obligatory (non-mahram would be the opposite)

Manusmriti Literally, Laws of Manu. A text authored by Manu that prescribes how Hindus must lead their lives. It also codifies the Hindu caste and gender system

Mard dab jayenge Men will be oppressed (Hindi)

Maulvi/Maulana A Muslim religious teacher/preacher

Mazaa Fun. Something that disrupts the seriousness of quotidian life and burden. It is also gendered since women are expected to mature faster and be responsible. Having fun could also be subversive when women upend gender norms and expectations-- such as loitering (Hindi-Urdu)

Mogarayudu Tomboy (Telugu)

Mardangi Masculinity

Mufassil The term Mufassil was first used during the early colonial period to distinguish provinces or states from the Presidency (Srilata Sircar, 2018). Lately, it has been used to describe towns and cities away from the downtown (Urdu)

Narivaad arguments on behalf of women (Hindi)

Nikahnama In Islam, a marriage contract (Urdu)

Nazar ka Purdah In Islam, a rule that prohibits men from staring or leering at women

Paraya dhan Someone else's property (Hindi)

Parida The practice of female seclusion

Pawdas Type of clothing. A long skirt and a blouse

Pragathi Progress

Puranalu Ancient texts considered sacred, like the Vedas in Hinduism (Telugu. Puranas in Hindi)

Punnama narakam In Hinduism. A special kind of hell reserved for those whose last rites weren't performed by a son/male (Telugu)

Quran The Islamic Holy book

Randi Prostitute in popular parlance. Feminists prefer the term sex worker (Hindi)

Romeo Jihad (See Love Jihad)

Salwar kameez A three-piece clothing comprising of knee length dress, baggy pants, and a piece of cloth that goes around the neck and covers the chest

Samskar Culture, tradition, codes of conduct (Hindi)

Sansani khabar Breaking news, often sensationalised (Hindi)

Sharam A word so layered that there is no English word that can adequately explain its meaning. A word that exceeds and escapes linguistic limitations, much like the word culture. Most commonly used to refer to shy and/or shame. (Hindi)

Shaitan Satan, the Devil (Hindi/Urdu)

Sharia Islamic laws

Shastras Hindu laws

Sinf-e-naazuk delicate and feminine (Urdu)

Streevadam arguments on behalf of women (Telugu, Tamil)

Stri Shakthikaran Women empowerment (Hindi)

Svamibhan Self-respect

Tala korivi Final rites (Telugu)

Triple Talaq This is the practice of pronouncing ‘talaq’ (divorce) three times in one sitting, which according to the Muslim Personal Laws as they stand, is a valid form of divorce. However, there is widespread disagreement amongst Islamic scholars as to whether this is permissible in Islam.

Zamana the times (Urdu)

Zeenat Ornament, adornment, jewelry (Urdu)

Zevar Jewelry (Hindi)

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“Holons- who are my people?” David. M. Boje

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Thesis Abstract

Given the resurgence of feminist consciousness amongst the middle class in the post 2012 context, this thesis identifies and attempts to address the lacuna in scholarship about people's relationship with feminisms in India. Drawing on focus group discussions, phenomenological interviews and in-depth interviews with middle class women and men from two different generations in Hyderabad, this qualitative intergenerational study on people's engagement with feminism, offers a glimpse of everyday feminism as rhetoric, micropolitics, and practice in non-traditional spaces of activism-- the home. In doing so, it renders the public-private distinction within feminist activism as obsolete, whilst acknowledging that it cannot and does not replace organized feminist politics.

By examining people's standpoints on feminism and their routes to it, this thesis problematizes the idea that the popularity of feminism along various spheres (state, market, media, ordinary middle classes) depoliticizes feminism. It contributes to the intense debates about lifestyle-based politics of new feminisms and urges scholars to engage with and not dismiss people's identification with feminism. Instead of looking at the passing away of feminism, it urges scholars to acknowledge that feminist politics do not operate in vacuum but exist along with other discourses of power. In order to fully appreciate the participants' varied understanding of feminisms, it argues that there are various ways in which one does feminism, and that feminist discourses are intertwined with, mutually constitute and condition other (competing) discourses of power, such as the socio-cultural discourse of neoliberalism, as well as middle-class morality and respectability. It also acknowledges that the acceptance of contextualized feminisms neither forecloses discussion on how feminisms might be being de-politicized nor replace organized/collective feminist activism. Finally, it also tries to delineate the awkward relationship between men, masculinities, and feminisms.

This thesis draws from and contributes to a number of research areas, namely, new respectable femininities, girlhood and boyhood studies, men and masculinities, and new feminisms. A key contribution of the study is the linking of can-do femininities with respectable femininities and feminism, and complicit masculinities with feminism. From a disciplinary perspective, a substantive contribution of the study is its attempt to expand the contours of Communication Studies beyond media-centric approaches.

Chapter 1

Feminisms in India: Hybrid legacies, internal critiques and external ruptures, fragmentation and possibilities

1. Introduction: Post 2012 India

Brothers and sisters, when we hear about the incidents of rape, we hang our heads in shame., today from this platform, I want to ask those parents, I want to ask every parent that you have a daughter of 10 or 12 years age, you are always on the alert, every now and then you keep on asking where are you going, when would you come back, inform immediately after you reach. Parents ask their daughters hundreds of questions, but have any parents ever dared to ask their son as to where he is going, why he is going out, who his friends are. After all, a rapist is also somebody's son. He also has parents. As parents, have we ever asked our son as to what he is doing and where he is going. If every parent decides to impose as many restrictions on the sons as have been imposed on our daughters, try to do this with your sons, try to ask such questions of them... With the advancement of science, brothers and sisters, we have a rising feeling of modernity in our mind, but what do we do? Have we ever thought what the sex ratio in the country is like? 940 girls are born per thousand boys. Who is causing this imbalance in the society? Certainly not God. I request the doctors not to kill the girl growing in the womb of a mother just to line their own pockets. I advise mothers and sisters not to sacrifice daughters in the hope of a son (Narendra Damodardas Modi, Prime Minister, India, in his maiden Independence Day speech at Red Fort, 2014¹).

The current government, like any other, has time and again co-opted feminist vocabulary and issues strategically, so much so that Kaveree Bamzai², writing for India Today³ hailed Modi as

¹ Read the full transcript of the speech here: <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/zsK6i81EN5kT4tvvImPtOM/68th-Independence-Day-Prime-Minister-Narendra-Modis-full-s.html>

² Independent journalist and author

first “feminist PM⁴” for shifting the narrative from the victim to the perpetrator in his maiden Independence Day speech. Geetha Pandey⁵, writing for the BBC, observed that while past leaders of the nation inevitably mention Pakistan, Modi, in a “break from tradition” focused on issues “bothering Indians [predominantly women] every day”, namely, rape, female feticide and infanticide⁶, and the need for toilets, amongst others.

One of the reasons for this increased dialogue about women by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is that the 2012 gang rape in New Delhi, rising reports of child rape, the general uncertainty regarding the safety of women in public spaces and the extensive media coverage around these issues has triggered “what might be seen as a feminist consciousness” amongst people, especially amongst the middle classes (Raman & Komarraju, 2018, p. 719). Of late, there has been a discernible “cultural shift” with more women now feeling “entitled to bodily integrity and dignity, and many more men and women are beginning to understand how that changes the texture of the everyday” (Roy, 2013)⁷. This would, in part, explain why the Hindu nationalist majoritarian government used the slogan ‘*bahut hua naari par atyachaar, abki baar Modi sarkar*’ (that roughly translates to ‘vote for Modi to put a stop to violence against women’). Even

³ India Today is a weekly Indian English language news paper: <https://www.indiatoday.in/>

⁴ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/narendra-modi-feminist-independence-day-gender-issues-jashodaben-204228-2014-08-15>

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-28799397>

⁶ Of the 1.2-1.5 million “missing women”, India accounts for 39.14% of the cases, 56.51% from China, and about 4.34% from the rest of the world. These missing women are a consequence of number of factors, sex selective abortions, post natal sex selection, dowry murders, violent crimes against women <https://www.behanbox.com/as-sex-ratio-at-birth-improves-indias-missing-women-still-a-global-concern/>

⁷ Nilanjana Roy, author and novelist’s viewpoint published by the BBC at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-24012424>

celebrities who once shied away from describing themselves as feminists have now begun to identify as such⁸.

Feminist rhetoric, broadly described as “any written or spoken act about feminisms within the context of feminist interventions” (Lane, 2015, np) also seems to be fairly ubiquitous both online and offline. This does not mean an unequivocal acceptance of feminism; after all, there is a thriving men’s rights movement in India and anti-feminist groups that make it a point to troll and dox those who claim to be feminists (Komarraju, forthcoming; Banet-Weiser, 2018). There has also been a significant re-emergence of (online) Hindutva that counteracts online feminism prompting Chattopadhyay (2011, p. 65) to observe that we live in a heterogeneous time where multiple and contradictory movements vie for membership and solidarity (the relationship between men, masculinities, and feminisms is explored in Chapter 3 of this thesis). And yet, in comparison to earlier decades, more women and men are willing to identify as feminists (Phadke, 2020; Bhutalia in Griffin, *The Hindu*, 2019) and ‘school’ anyone who might say “*I am not a feminist, but I believe in equality.*”⁹

Despite the general agreement over the recent popularity of feminism and with histories spanning decades, there is no scholarship that addresses how ordinary people outside of academic-activist networks engage with and understand feminism. It is this lacuna that this thesis attempts to address-- it asks questions about what feminism means to people from two different generations, how they come into it (or not), in other words, their routes to feminisms, the social circulation of feminist ideas, and feminism as rhetoric and practice. It takes as its starting point,

⁸ Most notably, Priyanka Chopra Jonas: <https://qz.com/india/509617/sorry-to-break-it-to-you-priyanka-chopra-but-youre-a-feminist/>

⁹ Kareena Kapoor Khan, Bollywood actor, was trolled for saying she wasn’t a feminist but believed in gender equality: <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/05/28/kareena-kapoor-khan-feminist-label/>

people's everyday lived experiences. This is a slightly unorthodox approach, given that the few articles that do attend to the question of people's engagement with feminism in India draw on those who are involved in organized feminist politics, or are engaged in learning feminist theory, such as Mitra (2011), Phadke (2015), Gilbertson (2018a, 2018b). Bulbeck's (2009) work is an exception and deals with what young people make of feminism, but as a quantitative-survey based research, it offers limited insight into people's negotiations with it.

Given the long history of rich and diverse women's movements in India, it is befitting that the thesis begins with a brief 'herstories' of the movements. Apart from providing the context within which these questions arise, it also serves to illustrate that feminism in India did not have "pure" or singular origins (John, 1996, p. 3071). This is also why it would be inappropriate to refer to 'the Indian women's movement' in the singular because women from different ideological dispositions make up for the diverse and heterogeneous movements in India (Chatterjee, 2018; Calman, 2019).

1.1 Herstories of women's movements in India¹⁰

The stories of feminist movements are often told "in terms of a single story or a uniform, continuous process" (John, 2001, p. 105). Even though I also employ the decadal technique for ease of narration, and review and draw from literature that often characterize feminist stories in a singular manner, it is punctuated and clarified by literature that provides evidence against it, a "critical break" so to speak (Hemmings, 2005, p. 115). In order to not slip into dominant narratives of progress or loss, these breaks can be strategically used to credit the hybrid legacies

¹⁰ Histories of feminist movements, whether in India or in the Anglo-American worlds are typically told in terms of waves (for example, see Pande, 2018). In both contexts, they are discussed in terms of three waves, with the fourth being propelled by digital technologies. But the 'waval' method has been critiqued for forcing uniformity over movements that are essentially plural.

of the feminist movements in India. This brief review is not meant to be exhaustive, but only representative of the fact that the women's movements have always been plural, in terms of ideology, politics, and praxis.

1.1.2 The Social reform movement (1857-1947)

Scholarship on the history of women's movements in India, typically, begin with the role of the 'reformer men' who called for the abolishment of some Hindu practices such as Sati¹¹, child marriage and encouraged widow re-marriage. Raja Ram Mohan Rao and Ishwar Chandra and other reformist men of nineteenth century India often find mention in textbooks for their role in the social reform movement (Natarajan 1962; Kumar, 2004). This might make it seem as though the social reform movement of pre-independent India was largely led by upper caste, upper-class men, when in fact, educated women related to these 'reformer men' soon joined forces and participated in the reform movement (Krishnaraj, 2012).

The first generation of English educated Indian women founded women's organizations such as All India Women's Conference (AIWC), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA) and Anjuman-e-Islam. Where AIWC was mostly dominant caste Hindus in composition, YWCA consisted of mostly Christian women who had connections with those in power-- British rulers, politicians, and bureaucrats. Anjuman-e Islam, instead of challenging the Purdah system, which could have closed off any chance of Muslim and other women in Purdah from participation in public life, instead chose to focus on skill development and education, which would enable them to become home-based workers (Patel, 2010). Savitribai Phule¹² and Jyotirao Phule fought for

¹¹ This was not a universal practice as noted by Spivak (2010)

¹² She is variously referred to as the first Indian feminist, - <https://kartavyasadhana.in/view-article/savitribai-phule-first-feminist>;

girls' right to education and were instrumental in establishing schools for girls and a home for widows from across castes and religions. Mazumdar and Sharma (1979) note that the Phules and Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar were some of the few early "radical thinkers who perceived oppression of women as a traditional instrument for maintaining social inequality, and the high castes in Indian society" (p. 113). Those women who had learned to write, expressed their disappointment over not being allowed to study and rigid gender roles (Krishnaraj, 2012).

The colonial rulers juxtaposed the civility of modern societies with the brutality of traditional societies especially in reference with how girls and women were treated. This reconfigured the colonial master as the rescuer of helpless women from the brute Indian man, and was often cited as a justification for colonization (Sinha, 2000). Reformer men from the first phase sought to change the poor condition of women by abolishing entrenched cultural practices against women that plagued the predominantly upper caste, class, Hindu society. But the second phase of the pre-independent movement saw a reversal of the attitudes of the national elites. Referred to as cultural revivalists (Patel, 1998), they acknowledged that India needed to become modern, but in a bid to retain what little autonomy they had left (mainly, in the private sphere), resolved the 'woman's question' by creating a new patriarchy and constructing a 'New Indian woman' to replace the old (Sen, 2000). They envisaged a modernity project that would leave intact India's cultural difference from the West¹³ by differentiating what could be allowed to modernize, and what had to remain traditional. The 'public' could undergo modernization but the private--

India's first feminist icon-- <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/savitribai-phule-7-facts-about-indias-first-feminist-icon/1432140/>; Mother of Indian feminism-- <https://www.shethepeople.tv/sepia-stories/savitribai-phule-feminism-teacher-activist-india/>

¹³ I use the words West, Anglo-American, or Global north throughout the thesis, fully aware that they are not homogeneous but diverse in terms of population and culture. Similarly, the use of Western feminism is a moniker used to refer to the white, middle class, cis-gendered, heterosexual feminisms, with the acknowledgement that there are other feminisms such as Black feminism, Latino feminisms etc.

culture, values and morals, in short Indianness, had to be protected from worldly western influence. Further, the responsibility of safeguarding culture came to rest with women (mostly, Hindu middle-class women, this is discussed in detail in Chapter 2).

Under this project, women were essentialized as feminine, maternal, and sensitive. Such a description doesn't account for the “subversive role” women played in the national movement (Sen, 2000). Some women willingly hid weapons, carried secret messages, and housed fugitives (Forbes, 1996). While this role was still covert, Gandhi's call for Indian women to take a more active role meant that there was an acceptance of women's presence in a more public role and opened up the space for non-elite and non-middle-class women to participate in the national movement (Kumar, 1993). Unfortunately, far from upending gender norms, women's presence in the movement was justified by naturalizing the self-sacrificial quality of women. After all, as Krishnaraj notes (2012, p. 327) did “women as self-sacrificing mothers” not have the right to participate in the national movement?

Different discursive constructions of the ‘New Indian woman’ served to do different things. One construction opened up certain spaces (education and travel) but also locked them in the ‘domestic’ (Banerjee, 1999). Another opened up the space for women to participate in the freedom struggle and yet appealed to the same *normative, essentialized*, view of femininity associated with self-sacrificial love (phrasing it this way acknowledges the existence and expressions of femininities instead of reifying normative femininities), prompting Sangari and Vaid to write, “Both tradition and modernity have been, in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies” (1999, p. 17), and Chatterjee to observe “The new woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy” (1989, p. 227).

Even so, these narratives also belie the fact that women were not simply “banished into inner worlds”. Some Hindu women and socio-religious organizations such as the *Arya Mahila Samaj*, *Seva Sadan* had already begun to transform the sacred space of the home and rituals of “*halad-kunkum*” (turmeric and vermilion) into opportunities for advancing women’s education (Anagol, 2010, p. 530). Since the concept of women attending public meetings was fairly new, she notes, informal occasions centered around rituals and festivals came to be used by women as vehicles to further the cause of women’s education. Similarly, Asghar Ali’s (2000) work also reveals that the decades before independence were crucial for the emergence of feminism amongst Muslim women.

Sinha’s (2000) critical evaluation of the liberal feminist project during the independence struggle also alerts us to a whole new construction of not just the New Indian woman, but one that produced the neutral woman citizen-subject. The colonizers who were dealing with their own “woman’s question” at the time, with Anglo American women organizing for the right to vote, commissioned the writing of Mayo’s book ‘*Mother India*’. It wove a compelling and universalizing story about the pitiable condition of Indian women, particularly young girls who were forced into early marriage and motherhood. The book served the purpose of proving just how uncivilized India was to be granted self-rule, much less total independence. Indian liberal feminists reacted to this by revealing how the British Raj had colluded with the orthodox Hindu and Muslim men in not letting the age of consent pass, effectively displacing the notion of the colonial masters as a savior of the poor, Indian girl and woman. In doing so, they were instrumental in the national movement gaining momentum. The idea of the modern neutral Indian citizen also informed the decision of rejecting reservation for women in any sphere on the

basis of gender by the AIWC (that consisted of predominantly urban, middle class, upper caste Hindu women) even while other marginalized identity groups insisted on such a provision.

Any opposition to this stance of the AIWC, whether on the basis of caste or religion, was seen as an act of dividing women and choosing (anti-national) sectarian welfare, leading to “naturalisations of the 'Hindu', in the context of claiming the space of a united women's movement... contributed to the creation of a 'secular-Hindu' movement, and the minoritisation of other groups” (John, 2000, p. 3826). It was the anti-caste movements such as the 'Dalit liberation movement' that began in 1920s strengthened under Ambedkar's leadership that really picked up momentum and imagined a more radical modernity (Patankar & Omvedt, 1979; John, 2000). This could only be achieved by a complete overhaul of the social order, and needed a social transformation, and not just reformation (Sinha, 2000). Such an imagination, so different from how the national elite's conceived of it, has been variously referred to as alternative modernity (John, 2000) or alternative subaltern modernity (Sinha, 2000). The members of the AIWC, despite claims of working for the welfare of all women, were informed by their own social location. For instance, AIWC was ready to compromise on women's franchise, by restricting the right to vote to urban women. Ultimately, women irrespective of background (caste/class/urban or rural) were granted franchise without the need for a fight (John, 2000).

It was assumed that granting voting rights (something the Anglo-American women had to fight for) and recognizing full citizenship of women was in itself an assurance that women's position would improve. However, *'Towards Equality': report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India* (CSWI)¹⁴ (Department of Social Welfare [DSW], 1974) cast any such illusions aside.

¹⁴ For the report in full, please see: <https://pldindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Towards-Equality-1974-Part-1.pdf>

The inseparability of improving the living conditions of women and their rights (in short, the woman's question) from the nation making (pre-independence) and nation building process post independence (Jayawardhan, 1986) has been referred to variously as national development feminism, official or guided feminisms (Bulbeck, 2009, np).

1.1.3 The autonomous women's movements in India (1970-1990)

A few decades post Independence saw what has been referred to as a "lull" in feminist activism (Kumar, 1993 p. 248). Chaudhuri (2000) draws attention to how it is imperative that one examines this 'silence' or lull, and lists both the aftermath of partition and the focus on developing a newly formed nation as possible reasons for this lull. Popular women leaders associated with the freedom struggle joined mainstream politics and other developmental activities of the State, including setting up women's hostels and skill training centers (Chandra et al, 2008).

By the sixties, there was widespread disappointment and disillusionment at persisting inequalities and poverty and the need for structural and societal changes. The period saw the formation of radical student groups, Naxalbari¹⁵--an armed peasant revolt involving tribals of Silguri (comparable to the emergence of the New Left in the 60s in America). However, by the early 1970s, women in the Left were disillusioned by the mostly male leadership (Omvedt, 1986). This led to some women activists from the left-wing organizations forming the Progressive Organization for Women (POW) in 1974 to ask the gender question missing from the Left's class-based struggles. Other activists chose to break from the Left (while retaining the

¹⁵ To see how the Naxalbari movement of 1967 set the tone for struggles of the marginalized, read: <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/51-years-of-naxalbari-how-a-peasant-uprising-triggered-a-pan-india-political-movement-5191046/>

critical tools associated with the ideology) to form independent feminist groups like the *Stree Shakti Sanghatana* in Hyderabad (Kumar, 1993).

Even though the Left mostly perceived feminism as a western import¹⁶ and as petty bourgeoisie, some of these organizations “declared themselves to be ‘feminist’” (Kumar, 1993, p. 275), while some others preferred to use woman’s question and women’s movement instead of feminism (Niranjana, 2007) since ‘feminism’ was considered to be tainted goods that reeked of Western imperialism and capitalism (Chanda & Owen, 2001). Those who associated with the term feminism did try to make it “acceptable to the masses” (Poonacha, 1999, p. 198) but “the public purchase for a term like feminism was much less in comparison to terms like Marxism and socialism” and could have possibly subsumed Muslim, Adivasi¹⁷, and Dalit¹⁸ women under one singular ideology (Sircar, 2016, p. 134).

Party affiliated women’s organizations, on account of having wider vertical networks, played a pivotal role in the Shahada movement (against wife beating), anti-price rise movements that challenged the stereotypical image of the docile housewife and mobilized women from across classes for causes that were not always gender specific (Kumar, 1993; Gandhi & Shah, 1992; Sen, 2000). Around the 1970s, just as the second wave of feminism was taking off in the Anglo-American societies, the United Nations declared 1975 as the ‘International Women’s year and the following decade (1975-1985) as the International Women’s decade. These three factors --

¹⁶ I am eschewing debates about Indian feminism versus Western feminism. As a slew of scholars have noted, there is enough evidence to suggest that Indian feminisms took off at the same time as in other parts of the world (Forbes, 1982; Kumar, 1993). In addition, the AIWC also had international connections and was instrumental in organizing the All-Asian Women’s Conference (AAWC). Please read: Mukherjee, 2017.

¹⁷ Tribal

¹⁸ It literally translates to broken. A term used to describe those belonging to the lowest caste in caste hierarchy (Gorringe, 2005). Dalit movements have reclaimed the term to mean revolution: Please refer to- <https://www.firstpost.com/india/short-history-of-word-dalit-advisory-to-scrap-use-of-term-has-roots-in-history-ruling-party-always-tried-to-label-community-with-alternative-names-5108311.html>

second wave feminist discourses from the West, the United Nations declaration of the International Women's Year, and the new protest movements shaped the "autonomous" women's movements of the 70s (Desai, 1996). In addition, the new economic policy, and the rise of fundamentalism in the nineties, the rise of new (digital) technologies further shaped the "contours" of the women's movement (Agnihotri and Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1869).

Upon the UN's request, the Indian government set up a committee to investigate the status of women which presented its findings in 1974. The report '*Toward Equality*' (DSW, 1974) reflected on how women's conditions had worsened from the 1913 through 1970s on a number of indicators, starting with skewed sex ratio. Since the political context had considerably changed, i.e., Mazumdar states, there was no longer a need to justify "culture of the colonized" (1994, p. 42). The report provided a frank and honest, but very much within the national development framework, appraisal of the drudgery of women's lives and the normalization of patriarchal attitudes in post-independent India. The report also recommended that research centers for women's studies (RCWS) be set up, and the ICSSR¹⁹ was instrumental in setting up women's studies centers. These centers would conduct research about various dimensions of women's lives and suggest policy changes (Mazumdar, 1994). Vina Mazumdar who was instrumental in setting up the Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS) at Delhi, was one of the founding members of the Indian association for women's studies (IAWS) as well (Patel, 2013). This association was significant in bringing together academics and activists, making women's studies the "academic arm of the women's movement" (Mazumdar, 1994, p 50).

¹⁹ The Indian Council of Social Science Research was established in 1969 by the Government of India to promote research in social sciences: <https://icssr.org/>

In order to implement the other recommendations of the 1974 report, “*A Blueprint of Action Points and National Plan of Action for Women 1996*” based on the UN’s World Plan for action recommended interventions in a number of areas-- health and nutrition, family planning and nutrition, education, employment, social welfare, legal status and provisions (Pande, 2018). Violence was yet to become a major rallying point, as some of the CSWI members admit to have completely missed (Katzenstein, 1989, p. 62).

Eventually women’s organizations with connections to the left or rather the women's wing of the left such as the Progressive Organization of Women (POW), women's development organizations, grassroots organizations, independent women's research institutes, autonomous women's groups emerged to support the causes they believed in (Katzenstein, 1989). These new developments in the 70s (specifically after the Emergency when several activists from these organizations were forced to go underground to avoid arrest) have come to be collectively referred to as the contemporary women’s movements (Phadke, 2003). The ‘autonomous’ women’s movement was used to refer to those women’s groups that were independent of the: nationalist project of social reforms (Ram, 2000, p. 63), political parties and state affiliated groups, and mixed groups working on development issues, distinct from other class-based groups associated with the left parties (Sen, 2000).

Distinct from American feminist groups that were far more liberal, some of the Indian autonomous groups resembled their British counterparts in structure and the socialist values they espoused. Decentralized and working independently, these organizations, placed anywhere on the ideological spectrum, would come together to fight a number of battles under the leadership of middle class, socialist feminists (Katzeinstein, 1989, p. 54). It has also been observed that it was easier to mobilize women around ‘practical gender interests’ such as price rise and water,

rather than strategic gender interests such as issues of rape and molestation (Kannabiran & Shatrugna, 1986, p. 28).

It was the rapes of Mathura²⁰, Bhanwari Devi²¹, Rameeza Bee²², Mira Tyagi²³ that finally put violence and rape on the feminist agenda and united diverse women's organizations. Mass agitations across the nation by women's organizations and the accompanying feminist critique of State power led to introduction of the category "custodial rape", with some resistance from the State in recognizing "power rape" (Agnihotri and Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1870). These incidents also revealed the "gender institutional prejudice" when both the police and judiciary refused to grant justice to these women by questioning their moral standing (Madhok, 2010, p.230). These cases also underlined that the State, while eager to pass pro-women laws, was only interested in increasing its own punitive power, and protecting those in power (Poonacha, 1999).

Even then, feminists hadn't yet realized the "communal" and caste angle in that particular moment, but it did pave the path for the eventual recognition that 'woman' was not a homogenous category and that there could be no universal sisterhood. While the liberal feminist project erased these differences, and socialist feminists were focused on class, these incidents

²⁰ Mathura, a minor tribal girl was raped by two policemen. The Supreme Court acquitted them, for Mathura was supposed to have a sexual history, there was no physical proof of her having fought the rape signaling consent. Widespread protests against such a judgment led to two amendments-- the burden of proof shifted from the victim to the perpetrator and that the victim's identity shouldn't be revealed in media.

²¹ Bhanwari Devi, a Dalit woman worked as a sathin (grassroots worker) with the State government's women development program, stopped a child marriage from taking place. Following which, Bhanwari Devi's husband was beaten and she was gang raped daring to stop a marriage in an upper caste family. This incident, like in the Mathura, revealed the inherent bias of those who have the responsibility of dispensing justice. Judges involved in the case expressed shock as to how upper caste men could have 'touched' much less 'raped' a lower caste woman.

²² Rameeza Bee and her husband (Ahmad), a Muslim couple from Hyderabad, were returning home one late night when the police arrested her for soliciting or so the police claimed. She was gang raped while in custody. When her husband protested outside the police station, he was accused of being her pimp, and beaten to death by the police <https://indianculturalforum.in/2020/06/27/rameeza-bee-rape-case-a-brutal-orientation-to-the-patriarchal-nature-of-the-law/>

²³ Maya Tyagi was gang raped and her husband killed by policemen in UP. The then Prime Minister spoke in support of the police and called Maya Tyagi dubious

forced feminists (from across ideological positionings) to pay attention to the intertwining of caste, religion, and gender, in ways that divided the category of woman creating (productive) fissures amongst themselves (Sen, 2000). The Shah Bano²⁴ and Roop Kanwar²⁵ cases only led to an intensification of debates about feminism, religion and women's rights. Roop Kanwar's case in particular led to a recognition women's agency, unhinged from the broader project of women's liberation, would operate within existing power structures. Feminist agency, on the other hand, would disrupt patriarchal power (Nair, 1994). In both cases, there was a backlash against (mainstream) feminism which continued into the 90s.

The Shah Bano case gave feminists a pause because the conservative Hindu right (represented by the BJP) were on the same side as feminists who thought a Uniform Civil Code²⁶ (UCC) would benefit women. In reference with the Roop Kanwar case, anti-modernists like Ashis Nandy provided a trenchant critique of feminists who were supposed to be woefully out of touch with Indian women's value system. If the former incident raised urgent questions about women's

²⁴ In 1985, Shah Bano, a Muslim woman, filed for alimony beyond the stipulated time or *iddat* period as provisioned by Sharia. The court ruled in her favour, as it did in very many cases that came before Shah Bano and after. Her husband, a lawyer contested the verdict stating the rules of the Sharia. The Judges, apart from ruling in her favor once again, made unflattering comments about Islam and Islamic laws. All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) reminded the court that it has to comply with the The Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937 which stipulates that the court had to follow Shariat in matters related with family laws. This move was seen as a threat to their community and its identity by the AIMPLB. The then Prime Minister gave into the demand of the Muslim clerics and passing Muslim Women (Protection on Divorce Act), 1986. See <https://indianexpress.com/article/what-is/what-is-shah-bano-case-4809632/>

²⁵ Roop Kanwar, 18 year old Rajput woman was forced to commit Sati on her husband's funeral pyre. When feminists opposed this, there were protests by women claiming that as Hindu women, they had every right to become Sati and immolate themselves.

²⁶ In a strange way, the constitution also makes a public-private distinction. It ensures equality irrespective of caste, creed, gender on an individual basis, it also respects cultural plurality. When there is a tension between the two, it deems the supremacy of cultural and religious sovereignty as more important, especially in reference with personal or family laws, the codification of which began in the British era (Agnes, 1994; Agnes, 2007). UCC is a proposal to formulate and implement personal laws which apply on all citizens equally irrespective of their religion. Given the fraught nature of political and social life in India, and repeated categorizing of Islam as anti-women especially following Shah Bano's case and the Hindu right support for a uniform law that governs family codes has meant that feminist discourses on UCC have evolved to account for difference (Kirmani, 2011b). Agnes (2015a) particularly argues that it is the Hindu law that is backward and needs modification.

rights and minority rights, the latter gave the Left an excuse to accuse feminists of serving the imperial cause and imitating the West (Kumar, 1993).

The 80s also saw the rise of Dalit women's organizations and their assertion for a political space distinct from both mainstream feminism and men-led Dalit organizations. The feminist movements of the 80s addressed a whole spate of issues ranging from land rights; nature of development; political representation; divorce laws; custody; guardianship; sexual harassment at work; alcoholism; dowry murders; rape. Some of the major successes of the women's movements in late 70s and 80s included their clear articulation against violence against women which helped garner media support, and legal reforms (Katzenstein, 1989; Kumar, 1993; Phadke, 2003; Gongoli, 2007). Because of the plurality of issues addressed and the keen awareness around issues of class, religion, and the success of being able to collectivize across differences, the 70s and 80s have been described as the 'golden' period of feminist activism in India (Phadke, 2003). In this, the contribution of party affiliated women's organizations and Dalit women's organizations cannot be overstated because the movement could have become entirely "isolated [and] middle class with limited fields of perception and activity" (Hariharan quoted in Katzenstein, 1989, p. 56).

1.1.4 Liberalization, globalization, and NGOization (90s to mid 2000s)

Just as feminists were realizing how the State's response to their demands though positive did not yield favorable concrete results, because of the inherent gender prejudice and improper implementation of laws, economic reforms that started in the eighties came as a new challenge. Liberalization, privatization, and globalization as economic policies, and the new development agenda of good governance (a shift from the welfare state and Nehruvian policies), disrupted feminist movements in more ways than one. Firstly, the gap left by the receding role of the

‘welfare’ state was beginning to be occupied by (international) NGOs funded by the World bank and other international donors, with feminists having to deal with the State, market, and non-governmental organizations (Poonacha, 1999). By the end of 80s and during the 90s, feminist activism in the form of mass protests and sloganeering turned to less “dramatic work” of setting up legal aid centers, making women aware of their rights under the law²⁷, setting up numerous research institutions and publications, indicating the second phase of institutionalization of feminism (Chandra et al., 2008, p.453).

But this is precisely what opened the space for dissent, and subsequently the emergence of a robust critique from academic feminists of the development agenda of both the State and international organizations like the United Nations. In both cases, there was a tendency to frame women as “objects” of development instead of any substantial efforts to make them subjects of their own lives and providing infrastructural support that could help them become or sustain their economic independence. The role of women’s research centers cannot be overstated since they helped sustain the radical element of feminist politics and continue to do so even today, so much that the government has responded by threatening their very existence²⁸ (Sharma, 2017). There was also the added anxiety about reducing third world women from developing countries into passive victims without agency (Mohanty, 1988).

The uneven effects of liberalization forced more women into the unorganized sector, and NGO feminism was critiqued by academic feminists for shifting the focus from the socialist questions of labor exploitation, conditions of employment, and eradication of poverty, to “managing”

²⁷ Tellingly, Flavia Agnes’ 1992 publication is titled “*Protecting women against violence? Review of a decade of legislation, 1980-89*”.

²⁸ For more details, see: <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/why-is-the-government-threatened-by-womens-studies-centres-in-indian-universities/> and <https://thewire.in/education/new-ugc-guidelines-may-cut-funding-for-womens-studies-centres-across-india>

poverty by instituting microcredit systems and setting up self-help groups (John, 1996, 2002). A competing narrative to the ill-effects of liberalization has been that marginalized people (from disadvantaged castes and religions, rural and urban areas) have been able to improve their lives by the opportunities opened by the private and multinational organizations and employed in both informal and IT work (Omvedt & Gala, 1993; Upadhya, 2011).

On the ground, women with supposedly no ideological anchor began to practice feminism as a profession rather than politics through NGOization which has been blamed for a theory-practice, academic-activist divide (Roy, 2009). The militant, radical feminist groups of the 80s, have reduced in number to give way to a “large number of women’s organizations that do not profess a commitment to any school of feminist thought” (Menon-Sen, 2001, as quoted in Roy, 2013). The fact that NGO work is considered as “socially sanctioned work for the urban well educated affluent woman” meant that feminism was considered to be effectively depoliticized and its politics blunted (Handy et al., 2006 quoted in Narayanaswamy, 2017, p. 104).

The parallel rise of ‘national development feminism’ of the State (Bulbeck, 2009), and NGOization of feminism in India, Menon (2004) laments, has transformed and subsumed what were once supposed to be autonomous women’s groups into those that receive funds from either the government or international donors. There has been increasing mainstreaming of gender into the State’s agenda through co-option of feminist goals but depoliticizing it, and making it about empowerment (and not emancipation), just as the print media had done (Chaudhury, 2000). As Menon remarks, “feminism is harmlessly transformed by the term into ‘women’s empowerment’, an ally of the project of governance” (Menon, 2015).

Complicating women's agency

The 90s also brought in new anxieties-- new technologies such as amniocentesis, beauty contexts, objectification and sexualization of women in media, the need for awareness and control of HIV/AIDS, and the rise of LGBTQ movements. These issues forced feminists to confront issues of sexuality and agency. Feminists with strong Marxist and socialist connections rejected sexuality politics as an elite issue (Menon and Nigam, 2007). Media, that had so far been supportive of feminist movements, especially those centered around violence (Katzenstein, 1989; Agnihotri & Majumdar, 1995; Phadke, 2003), post-liberalization pushed the corporate agenda by reconfiguring the New Indian woman as empowered consumer.

The aspirational image of the 'New Indian woman' spoke to the upper and middle-class women consumers. In this process, the media also actively constructed the 'authentic' or 'traditional feminist' who was modern and yet traditional, who was empowered but rooted in 'Indianness'. Unlike 'radical' feminists of the women's movements who were constantly on the lookout for victims to rescue, corporate feminists put forth the image of a 'power feminist'. In her astute analysis of 'feminism in print media', Chaudhury (2000) asserts that these 'corporate feminists of choice' (this is comparable to choice feminism in Western contexts that had already gained currency by late 1990s) are ultimately postfeminist²⁹ since they co-opt feminist vocabulary and divest it off its politics (much like the Hindu right who had coined the word pseudo-secular), flattening the term out by not recognizing caste, class, ethnicities and reproducing women as a homogeneous category.

²⁹ Postfeminism has been used in 3 registers: a) as an epistemological break following postmodernism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism to acknowledge that 'woman is not a monolithic category. b) As a backlash against feminism, either as having met its goal, rendering it unnecessary or not having solved all problems despite the promise to do c) To understand newer forms of activism that are individualistic, choice based, not as radical (Gill, 2016; 2017)

Unfortunately, in some cases these misgivings about feminists looking for victims were not entirely unfounded, for instance, Phadke (2003) notes that feminists who had protested against beauty contests for objectifying women ignored the participants' insistence "on the voluntary nature of their participation" and "were seen inevitably as victims in the thrall of a false consciousness" (p. 4573). Even in the context of representation of women in media, women's movements had taken a similar stance, prompting Agnes (1992) to observe that women's groups' protests against nudity or sexualized images of women in films and ads unwittingly endorses the idea that respect for women necessarily involves treating them as "sexless" (p. 29).

Another tangent to this debate of false consciousness comes from the awareness of intersectional identities of women which challenged the myopic understanding of liberation, emancipation, agency, freedom, choice from the liberal³⁰ feminist tradition, with Kapur arguing for these concepts to be linked integrally to women's "being in the world" (2012a, p. 349). She specifically cites the example of a Muslim woman's choice to wear a veil and urges feminists to understand that her agency might be related to her desire for inner emancipation.

Dalit feminists³¹, on the other hand, have accused the mainstream feminist movements dominated by upper caste, class, Hindu women of rendering caste inequalities invisible through their construction of the "Indian" women (Rao, 2005, pp. 1-2). Stephen (2011) has questioned the casteist consciousness of the "liberal and left-oriented" feminists who have marginalized

³⁰ Liberal feminism (like feminism and liberalism) is not a singular framework but refers to different kinds of feminisms that draw on the fundamental ideas of freedom and equality. For instance, there are classical liberal feminists, egalitarian liberal feminists, cultural libertarian feminists and so on, indicating the different positions available within the broader umbrella of liberal feminism. For a detailed understanding, please refer to *Variety of feminist liberalism* edited by Amy R Baehr's (2004).

³¹ Anandita Pan's recent book "*Mapping Dalit feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint*" is an excellent analysis of Dalit feminism through the years, its relationship with mainstream Indian feminism and what has led them to split from organizations led by Dalit men. She also expertly resolves the tension between identity based and positionality-based Dalit feminist standpoint by drawing on and extending Rege's work (1998, 2003).

Dalit women and their experiences in both theorizing and actions (p. 427). She argues that most of the issues taken up by mainstream women's movement may have challenged patriarchal norms, but it is the Dalit and Bahujan groups that raised questions about caste-based gender violence, manual scavenging amongst others. The focus on new reproductive technologies, alternative sexualities have been described as urban middle class issues, of no consequence to the subaltern women (Stephen, 2011). In fact, it has been argued that middle class women stood most to gain most from NGO work in expanding their national and international networks (Sharma, 2014).

The question of voice and mainstream feminists' "hegemonic impulse" to speak for "Indian women" came to be heavily debated (Rao, 2005, p. 2), and the question of difference led to the "fragmentation... diversification" of women's movements in India (Krishnaraj, 2012, p. 331). Even though the question of difference has always been pertinent to the women's movements (even if the leadership did not always reflect this). It was after the assertion of Dalit feminists for a separate political space that the academic arm of the women's movement turned to engage with the caste question more deeply, and revived the intellectual legacies of Ambedkar, Peiryar, and Phule (Tharu & Niranjana, 1994; Chakravarti, 2003; Rege, 2000).

Rege's seminal work, *Writing caste, writing gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*' (2006) forced feminists (both academics and activists) to re-evaluate their position in the erasure of the Dalit womanhood by claiming that all women are Dalit and that oppression 'women' experience is the same. These debates also fed into arguments about reservations for women³² (Rege, 2003, p. 91).

³² For a nuanced reading on the debates around the legislative quota within quota, see Rege, 2000.

This also marks the beginning of intense debates about how mainstream feminists with links to socialist, Marxist, and Gandhian tradition tend to understand authentic women as rural, poor, victimized women in order to differentiate themselves from Western feminisms and prove their ‘Indianness’. Those middle-class feminists who put aside their individual, personal desires and needs, since they considered their problems as minor when compared to the collective real struggles of the working classes were now being replaced by feminists who did not mind problematizing their own lives. Ironically, the relegation of desires to the private sphere by socialist, Marxist, Gandhian feminists resurrected the “private-public dichotomy which feminists opposed in their campaigns... in a different form within their own groups” (Kumar, 1993, p. 275).

While issues of breakdown of the category of woman due to both internal critique offered by academic feminists, and external forces (rise of sectarian politics, State and NGO feminism) were being debated through the late 90s and early 2000s, and the loss of organized, collectivized activism mourned (by some feminists with strong socialist background), a new generation of urban, English speaking, middle class, mostly upper caste women began to collectivize around issues relevant to them-- street sexual harassment, moral policing amongst other things, via the internet. This period from the 90s onwards can be best described as representing, in Adkins terms, a slow transformation from “*consciousness to self-reflexivity*” (2004).

1.2 New feminisms in India: the rise of online feminist movements³³ (mid 2000s)

The transformation of urban cities into transnational hubs because of the growth of the IT sector, the rise in upwardly mobile middle classes because of economic reforms, the social acceptance

³³ For an excellent interactive review of feminisms in India in the last decade, please see: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/womens-day-feminism-in-the-last-decade>

of working women³⁴ in ‘respectable’ jobs at multinational corporations have been accompanied by infrastructural development that has created new spaces of leisure and consumption (pubs, restaurants, spas, malls). These places are widely considered to be appropriate spaces for middle class women to hang out, outside of the confines of their homes (Brosius, 2010; p. xvi; Phadke et al., 2011). The sustained efforts of the women’s movements have also meant that men and women have grown up with the idea of ‘equality’ as a right that extends to all realms of life, whether education employment or leisure (Bulbeck, 2009).

But the very idea of the city as a space for unlimited freedom is precisely what makes women vulnerable to sexual violence (Mani, 2014). This violence is often accompanied and justified by victim blaming (being out late at night in male company, clothing etc.), which is why women use a number of strategies to justify their presence in public spaces (Phadke et.al, 2011). This penchant for blaming women’s clothing for the harassment they face on streets inspired Jasleen Patheja to create an online art project called ‘Blank noise³⁵’, often seen as one of the first instances of digital feminist activism in India.

Similarly, when Shiv Sene activists attacked a group of women in Bangalore for imitating ‘western culture’ with the choice of their clothes and ‘pubbing’, the Pink Chaddi Campaign³⁶ (PCC) was launched in 2009. Another movement related to right to public spaces has been the Why Loiter project that has opened up the idea of loitering as feminist politics of fun. Since the cultural norm and expectation is that women must have a legitimate reason to be seen in public

³⁴ This began in the 80s through the fifth and sixth five year plans that re-imagined the ‘New Indian woman’ to be an active contributor to the economy, while ignoring sexual division of labor

³⁵ See: <https://www.jasmeenpatheja.com/blank-noise>

³⁶ For more details, please see Nisha Susan’s (architect of the PCC) piece: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/15/india-gender>

spaces, feminist academic activist Phadke et al., (2011) regards ‘loitering’³⁷ (that is regarded as a distinctly male thing to do), as subversive activity and politics.

The slutwalk march, first organized in Toronto, Canada, a protest against a police officer's advice to women that they must avoid dressing like ‘sluts’ so as not to be raped, evolved into a transnational movement because of the internet (Mendes, 2015). Protest marches were organized in various parts of the world including India demonstrating how these issues are relevant across contexts. But these protest movements have been accused of diluting feminist politics on various counts. For instance, Taneja (2019) charges the organizers with diluting the whole movement by replacing the word ‘slut’ with *besharmi*. ‘Slutwalk’ was renamed as *Besharmi Morcha* purportedly because not many would understand the word ‘slut’ and to be *inclusive*, so as to encourage participation of the general public (plainspeak- middle classes). In their effort to appeal to the middle classes, Taneja believes, the organizers lost a great opportunity to reclaim the word slut or even its Hindi equivalent ‘Randi’ (prostitute or sex-worker).

Digital activism, and NGO feminisms, collectively referred to as ‘emergent feminisms’ or as ‘new feminisms’ have also been critiqued for their neo-liberal impulse of encouraging an individualized response to a collective problem and not demanding legislative changes. Digital feminisms in particular have been accused of indulging in non-serious “politics of fun” or “*mazaa*” (such as those explored by Anjaria & Anjaria, 2020; Kirmani, 2020; Phadke, 2020), and centering middle class issues. These debates have often been couched in generational terms, the older feminist being more serious, and the young diluting serious feminist politics, without sufficiently engaging with what feminist politics has meant historically in India (Roy, 2009; Menon, 2004).

³⁷ Also see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nlgGNv5t92A>

It has been argued that it is the socialist and Marxist feminists who have critiqued these movements as being ‘market friendly, mixing consumption with activism, and going beyond the traditional demands of change in legislation (Phadke, 2020). Gupta (2016) critiques new feminisms for transforming women into “desiring subjects of neoliberal feminism” with their unabashed encouragement of cultural consumption.

New feminists and their activisms are also considered ‘elite’, beginning with their entry into organized politics -- through social media, to the “spectacular interventions” of sexual nature it encourages, such as the PCC. Even Losh (2014), who credits online feminisms for having opened up the space to talk about street sexual harassment and other everyday issues, also critiques how these online feminist movements are organized via “corporate hegemonic platforms complicit in neoliberal economic and labor practices for social activism” (Losh, 2014, quoted in Murray, 2017).

Far from disparaging market as the cause for more inequalities and as contaminating feminist politics, Phadke argues:

worthy adversary...offers a strangely democratic space for debate and one that the women’s movement would do well to claim as a potential turf for negotiation...While it is true that this actor is sought to be moulded into a puppet consumer this process nonetheless offers room for resistance (Phadke, 2003, p. 4575)

She also urges feminists to resist creating binaries of good and bad feminists in search of pure politics and dismiss feminists on the streets and online on the grounds of neoliberalism. Instead of letting neoliberal forces design new ways of conformity through defining what modern or choice means, she argues feminists should invest in transformative politics by reclaiming these words and recharge them with a radical edge (Phadke, 2020).

To add to Phadke's suggestions, the state and state led reforms that have always trapped women in their roles of mothers, sisters, and daughters, now encourage the neo-liberal idea of a self-managing citizen who can *choose* to not abort her baby (Modi's impassioned maiden Independence Day speech appeals to women not to abort female fetuses without any reference to the broader societal and cultural aspects that lead to such a phenomenon in the first place). This shifting of responsibility from the State and the venerated 'family' to the individual women in such decision-making processes makes it even more imperative for feminism to continue to be dynamic and ever changing to address newer challenges. In order to hold the State and market responsible, masses must be co-opted by feminists (of all hues), "lest we come out with a *cri de coeur* -'we have the movement but they (the other?) have the women'" (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 1995, p. 1877).

One must recall that a similar argument has been put forth by Gender and Development (GAD) scholars (Flood & Howson, 2015; Esplen, 2006) in reference with the involvement of men as well.

1.3 Men, masculinities, and feminisms

One of the processes that is inaugurated with colonial modernity in India is the construction of the normative male and female body and normative male and female behavior by modernizing nationalist elites (Menon, 2011, np)

Just as feminist scholars have studied the woman's question and femininities, within the broader discourses of tradition and modernity, masculinities have also been subjected to the same analysis over the years. Although work about 'men and feminism' is relatively recent (Chowdhury & Baset, 2018), scholars in the area of critical masculinity studies (CMS) in India have engaged with the man's question through the lens of post-colonialism, communalism,

sexuality, and caste (Dasgupta & Gokulsingh, 2014). There has been extensive research on Hindu masculinities before British invasion, during the colonial era, and post-independence such as Nandy (1983), Gupta (2011), Sinha (2000), Chakraborty (2019)³⁸; Muslim masculinities during the Mughal era and post-independence have been explored by scholars such as O’Hanlon (1997, 2007), Kasim (2020), Osella & Osella (2006), Osella (2011), and hypermasculinities of those marginalized at multiple levels because of their Dalit-Bahujan and/or working class status by Rogers (2008), Lohokare (2016)³⁹. Patnaik’s (2014) exciting work deals with being a man, gay and fat in India. New media scholars Roy & Deshbandhu (forthcoming) make a case for the study of online video games in India at the intersection of ludology and postcolonial masculinity. Historians O’Hanlon (1997) and Sinha’s (1995, 1999) meticulous analysis of how the British built upon pre-colonial masculinities and reorganized gender relations in India, even as they were being challenged by women’s movements in their home turf, attests to the fact that both masculinities and femininities are dynamic and always in relation to each other. For instance, fixing essential femininity has also meant a re-defining masculinity in a particular manner. Srivastava (2007) and Iyer (2015)⁴⁰ offer a vignette of the dominant hegemonic middle class Hindu masculinity. Keeping in mind the recent conversations about love jihad or Romeo Jihad⁴¹ (Gupta, 2009; Rao, 2011) and the popularity of "56-inch chest" of PM (Srivastava, 2015a, p.

³⁸ Chakraborty, A. (2019). *Violence, religion and masculinism in contemporary India: An analysis of the writings of Vivekananda, Golwalkar, and Gandhi*. [Unpublished Doctoral thesis]. Dublin City University. http://doras.dcu.ie/22942/1/A%20Chakraborty_PhD%20Thesis_2019_FINAL.pdf

³⁹ Lohokare, M. (2016). Making men in the city: Articulating masculinity and space in Urban India. Syracuse University. Dissertations – ALL.520 <https://surface.syr.edu/etd/520>

⁴⁰ Iyer, P. (2015). *Risk, rakhi and romance: Learning about gender and sexuality in Delhi schools*. Doctoral thesis. University of Sussex. <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/59533/>

⁴¹ The idea that Muslim men “trap” Hindu women in love marriage solely for the purpose of converting them See: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/nov/02/haryana-may-do-a-up-on-law-against-love-jihad-2218139.html>

The Uttar Pradesh government recently passed the anti-conversion law in November 2020 which would render an inter-religious love marriage null and void if it is found that a person had to convert in order to marry. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55099113>

334), Banerjee (2006) and Anand's (2007) work on nationalism and Hindutva masculinities are a remarkable and timely assessments of how Hindu masculinities are necessarily based on the construction of lustful Muslim and Dalit-Bahujan male. Diasporic Hindutva nationalism has also received some attention (Bhatt & Mukta, 2010), and so has work on sexualities (Dasgupta & Gokulsingh, 2014), an important intervention into expanding the dialogue on alternative masculinities-- both during the precolonial and post colonial times. This space for such a dialogue has been enabled by the rise of LGBTQ⁴² movements and the work undertaken by non-governmental organizations on sexualities.

In fact, a significant share of scholarship from the gender and development area also deals with the shift from Women in development approach (WID) to gender and development approach that started in the 80s. The gender as relational approach in this sector has encouraged men's participation in the fight against gender-based discrimination and violence (Canaan & Griffin, 1990; John 2001; Chowdhury and Patnaik, 2010).

More recently, and perhaps more relevant to this work is the recent interest in men and masculinities in relation with feminism. This includes men who participate in gender sensitization workshops as subjects and beneficiaries, those who set up gender justice organizations or work as volunteers, and those who "teach" gender at these workshops and do feminism within university settings. Chowdhury & Baset's (2018) edited book offers an in-depth insight into the experiences of male academics and researchers who do feminisms in theory and practice.

There is also now available a considerable scholarship on the different ways in which men have organized themselves over the years, in reaction to the rise of feminist politics and politics of

⁴² I use this acronym as it is widely recognized as compared to vernacular terms. For instance, in India, hijra is the local word for transvestite. Please see Dutta, A. (2012).

sexuality-- pro-feminist men organizations (such as Men Against Violence and Abuse, MAVA⁴³), gay affirmative initiatives, and men's rights groups (Kulkarni, 2014). A similar trajectory has been observed in international contexts as well (Kimmel, 1987).

In reference with the pro-feminist initiatives, scholars argue that though sensitizing men is crucial and such work commendable, it risks diverting funds and resources from initiatives involving women (Casey et al. 2013; Dover, 2014; Gilbertson, 2018). Additionally, there is also the risk of men wanting to become leaders in this sphere. For instance, Kauffman's work though influential raises red flags, considering his remark: "Men can proudly take our place – for respecting women's autonomy, capacities, priorities, and the insights of feminism – as leaders in the anti-patriarchal, anti-sexist movement" (Kaufman, 1999, p. 79). Perhaps this is why scholars like Leek argue that any work with men must necessarily be informed by feminist insights. There are three techniques to do this, as suggested by Messner--1) encouraging men to recognize and oppose male privilege 2) motivating men to recognize the "costs of masculinity" such as not being able to cry or form emotional relationships crying 3) learning to recognize the differences amongst men based on different vectors of identity caste, class, race, sexuality (Messner, 1997; also quoted in Holmgren & Hearn, 2009). Where the first and third techniques involve considerable self-reflexivity on part of the participants, the second technique poses the danger of rendering men as the 'real' victims of patriarchy. This is the narrative that men's rights activists (MRAs) who reject feminism as anti-family, anti-men take up. They portray men as the real victims of both unreal expectations of society and demonization by feminists (Basu, 2016; Chowdhury, 2014).

⁴³ MAVA is an Indian non-governmental organization that works with men to prevent gender violence and abuse: <http://www.mavaindia.org/>

Evidently, despite being a relatively young field, CMS scholars have covered a lot of ground. Of relevance here is the fact that men are either being called to play an active role in organized politics of some kind or another or think about gender and feminism because of the increasing public consciousness around these issues.

1.4 Rethinking feminist politics?

Feminism...a structural critique of society and of patriarchy, class, caste et al, it has also evolved into a way of life, another way of looking at world, another mode of weaving theory with praxis... in strategizing for change, we have attempted to personalize politics and politicize the personal. This has meant confronting patriarchy within the family, social institutions, religion and the state as well as challenging core values like authoritarianism, aggression, competition, hierarchy and centralization (AIWC, as quoted in Sivaraman, 2014)

Not all feminists agree that professionalization and institutionalization of feminism has blunted feminist politics, rather they believe that has opened up new spaces for negotiation. The most vocal of these feminists have been Roy (2009, 2012, 2013) and John (2001, 1996, 2014) who argue that the melancholia felt for the ‘golden age’ of women’s movements, now replaced by professional, career oriented, feminist academics and activists is misplaced. Following Roy, Gilbertson (2018b) also suggests that feminisms must attend to a nuanced understanding of the limits of feminist inclusivity, instead of looking for ‘pure politics. Similarly, there is a divided opinion on men in feminist work, as discussed above. The socialist feminist propensity to think of women as hapless victims, and dismiss politics of fun or *mazaa*, Phadke (2020) warns, would translate into thinking of feminist movements as devoid of joy. Ultimately, this would discourage women who are only just identifying as feminists when even a decade earlier so many women distanced themselves from it. It must be noted that works that mention the repudiation of

feminism usually do so by drawing on the examples of famous women political leaders, editors and journalists like Sarojini Naidu⁴⁴ and Madhu Kishwar⁴⁵ (Sinha, 2003; Roces, 2010).

But these discussions are limited to those within the movement in some form or another, at the exclusion of what young women and men themselves are making of feminisms. These arguments are drawn from and dominated by a *small group of activists and academics* who do not take into account the voices of “a larger constituency of women” that they claim to want to speak for (Phadke, 2003, p.4575).

When they do take these voices into account, as in the works of Mitra (2011), Phadke, 2015), and Gilbertson (2017, 2018a, 2018b), they are in contexts where women and men are already exposed to feminist academic-activist vocabulary and knowledge in some manner. While these works are important, they also don't talk about the kind of people who are not a part of academic-activist networks, i.e., ‘ordinary’ middle-class women and men who are not exposed to the histories and developments in women’s movements and feminist theory (Kannabiran, 1986, p. 602).

“‘Sex, love and feminism’ are three aspects of the rapidly changing gender relations shape young people's lives in the Asia Pacific region”, notes Bulbeck (2009). However, since so much literature focuses on organized collective politics online and/or offline, one misses out on how ordinary people are engaging with feminism and how the social fabric might be changing (little by little) at the micropolitical level of the everyday.

⁴⁴ Political activist, poet. She was actively involved in the national struggle and the women’s movement.

⁴⁵ Editor, Manushi (purportedly, the first feminist magazine in India). She wrote an essay titled “*Why I am not a feminist*”. Refer to: <http://madhukishwar.blogspot.com/2014/07/why-i-do-not-call-myself-feminist.html>

There are different reasons for one to focus on the everyday. For one, the current historical moment is such that there is an increasing awareness of how capillary forms of discourses of power, including and not limited to gender, operate. This is reflected in the project of 'everyday sexism' (Bates, 2014) and the coining of terms such as mansplaining and manspreading, everyday racism and casteism (acts of microaggressions) that operate at the everyday social level. This could as well be because digital technologies are able to amplify personal, apparently harmless forms of discrimination such as mentioned above, that it is no longer possible to justify them as isolated incidents, giving rise to terms such as “culture of rape” or "rape culture" (Rentschler, 2014).

There have always been ways in which women have resisted oppression in some form or another. For instance, festive occasions were made into platforms of education, women's songs during festivals have been expressions of resistance (Shukla, 2008; Jassal, 2012). Women's online discussions, blogs, making memes, stand up comedy about gender, caste, religion only give us a glimpse of how feminism emerges in (and in response to) the everyday, and hint at a larger oral tradition of swapping stories and jokes, opinions and so forth.

It is precisely because the everyday was not explicitly considered that the ordinary women's revolutionary role in improving their lives and those of other women and a 2000-year-old history of women's resistance in India (Tharu & Lalita, 1993) failed to make it into the pages of formal 'feminist' history until much later as discussed above (Forbes, 1982). While these may not count as feminist 'politics', these micropolitics do matter. It is the micropolitics of everyday feminism (at the site of the private/home/domestic) that this thesis argues in favor of, keeping in mind that this does not replace collective/organized feminist politics.

In contrast to the feminist media studies scholarship that centers media (Banks et al., 2018), I locate this research in the broader of area of feminist communication studies that has emerged in tandem with the “feminist visibility in the culture at large” (Dow & Conduit, 2005, p.448). This qualitative research explores how women and men from two different generations understand feminism based on their lived experiences, gender and gender politics in relation with feminism, what according to them counts as feminist values, and how these values are lived out on a daily basis. In short feminism as rhetoric, (micro)politics, and practice in non-traditional spaces of protest/activism-- the home.

Chapter 2

Disciplined eclecticism: Everyday experiences and feminist methodology

2. Introduction: Coming into feminism

My journey into feminism began with the reading of what was referred to as feminist literature (such as Suniti Namjoshi⁴⁶ and Bharathi Mukherjee⁴⁷), a part of undergraduate the English Literature curriculum. This introduced me to what one might call a 'feminist point of view' as a legitimate framing of a story and feminist criticism. It wasn't until I entered a postgraduate programme that I began to learn more about feminism. It is with some trepidation at displaying my ignorance I write that this was the first time I heard about the difference between sex and gender. I don't remember it being distinguished in my biology textbook, as it is the practice today. Rarely did we talk about caste at home or school, and it wasn't until my entry into the University that I realized what a privilege it was that we never had to talk about caste. Although there had been inter caste and inter-religious marriages in the family, there was little or no substantive discussion about these issues. We never spoke about gender per se either. Women of the household balanced family and work, men worked. When my father, a banker, was transferred to a remote village, my mother (had to) quit her job to take care of us.

University education was a series of revelations. For instance, in one of our first few classes, one of my professors asked students whose mothers did not work to raise their hands. By this time, my mother had taken an early retirement, and therefore, like most others, I raised my hand. The professor then asked us if our mothers did not cook or perform domestic chores, and why we did not consider that 'work'. Later in the programme, I was introduced to the field of 'feminist media

⁴⁶ A poet and a fabulist, known for her work *Feminist Fables*

⁴⁷ Novelist

studies', and wrote a term paper on online feminisms in India. I went on to look at fashion blogs through a feminist lens for my master's thesis. The more I read about feminisms, and saw women around me embody feminist values of empathy, respect, trust, transgress hierarchies with gentle smiles, the more I began to understand feminist praxis.

At home, my mother and I shared books and readings, and she would often comment, "It's all very well for them to write about going out and working, but who will take care of the house? It's not just about cooking, it's about cleaning, washing, a million things go into maintaining a household, if neither your father nor I do it, who will do it? These things are good to read in books, not in real life." But she did read more and I would like to think we both benefited from it; our relationship matured and we started speaking about gender, caste, religion, sexual harassment, glass ceiling. Conversations in the classroom became topics of discussion at home. My mother and I argued and fought over what feminism meant. She accused me of using the label of feminism to not help her in performing domestic chores. "You only want me to help you because I am a girl", I would retort. But I wondered, what would it be like to grow up in a feminist household? Would I have been more sensitive towards the meanings of sex and gender, caste, religion right from the get go? Would my mother and I fight over what feminism meant? Would my mother have made different choices? Would I have asked my mother if she had quit her job out of choice or compulsion and what this sacrifice meant for her? As a millennial, I was born after the Mathura and Shah Bano incidents, but would I have been aware of the raging debates about Uniform Civil Code and Dalit feminism taking place within the halls of academia in the eighties and nineties, much before I had stepped into the university?

None of the discussions at home lasted as long as the one that followed the Delhi gang rape in 2012. The middle classes have been considered theoretically, politically, and ideologically

important because they practice many forms of gender bias, beginning with and not limited to separation of private and public spheres, and have been implicated in dowry murders (Bhatt et al., 2010; John, 2005; Jaffrelot & van der Veer, 2008) and other forms of gendered oppressions. In such a context, their participation of middle classes in solidarity marches following the gang rape was considered as a positive indication and an '*An Indian feminist revolution*' (Bakshi, 2017). This incident helped bring "questions that were on the periphery of urban India's consciousness" to enter the mainstream, with people questioning if "we are raising our sons to respect women and treat them as equals?" (Kale, 2013).

A new Facebook group, '*Hyderabad for Feminism*⁴⁸' (HfF) was created in July 2013 in the aftermath of the gang rape. It was through this group that I interacted with women and men from across different walks of life interested in feminism and feminist ideas. Like me, there were plenty of people on the forum who were only beginning to learn about feminist politics in relationship with caste, race, religion, sexuality, and unlearn that feminism is just about gender. There were also well-known academic feminists (some of them mothers) too who were generous with their knowledge and academic resources. In many ways, the journey from personal experience to academic learning of feminism worked as a counter-socialization process and gave me the critical tools necessary to reflect on my position, through the lens of class, caste, religion and sexuality.

It is these experiences that ultimately informed this research project. I was first and foremost interested in the process by which *middle class* millennials (aged 18 to 25) come into feminism,

⁴⁸ Hyderabad for Feminism, a Facebook group was started in order to build and sustain a supportive community of feminists committed to collective social action. For a detailed report on the activities of the Facebook change, please refer to the article written by its founders: <https://www.epw.in/journal/2015/44/review-womens-studies-review-issues/locating-hyderabad-feminism-present-struggle>

and how they learn about gender. Discovering that there is a wide network of self-identified feminists in Hyderabad (through the Facebook group) meant that my curiosity about how feminists raised their children could also be explored as well. These led to the three research questions:

2.1 Research questions:

1. What are the specific experiences and exposure that contribute to millennials' subjective understanding of feminism(s)?
2. What are the specific experiences and exposure that contribute to subjective understanding of gender?
3. What does feminist mothering look like in the Indian context? What is the content and expected outcomes of feminist mothering?

2.2 Who are the middle classes?

The middle class is not an easy category to define because a majority of the population in India identify as 'middle class'. A cursory look at the literature on the middle classes in India shows a movement from traditional Marxian (relations of production) and Weberian (network and mobility) approaches to those that employ a more nuanced 'class as practice' approach offered by Bourdieu's⁴⁹ concepts of the habitus, field, capital, taste, and consumption as a differential for middle classness (Deshpande, 2003; Brosius, 2010; Gilbertson, 2017).

The 'old' middle classes were those with modern education and benefitted from the employment opportunities created by the colonial regime (Béteille, 2017). Post independence, during the

⁴⁹ For an in-depth analysis of the relationship between feminism and Bourdieu, please read Lovell (2000) "*Thinking Feminism with and against Bourdieu*"

Nehruvian era, the middle classes consisted of salaried professional and technical employees (both governmental and private) and dominated by caste Hindus, but the Mandal Commission⁵⁰ and the implementation of its positive discrimination recommendations helped break the caste monopoly of the middle classes (Omvedt, 1990). More recently, economic reforms such as liberalization, globalization, and the growth of the IT industry catapulted people from different backgrounds into the category of middle classes-- and are collectively referred to as the 'new middle classes'.

The middle classes are highly heterogeneous, from across castes, communities, and religions, regions (both urban and rural) and those that claim to be middle class often do not really belong to the *same* status, economically or in terms of consumption practices, and also subscribe to different values. Therefore, scholars use the term 'middle classes', plural, instead of the singular and uniform middle class to indicate this diversity (Béteille, 2017). Ray (2019) draws on her previous work (Baviskar & Ray, 2011) to suggest that both middle class and middle classes can be used to describe the "elite and everyman". Although a majority of these new middle classes continue to be dominant caste Hindus (Upadhyaya, 2011), Gilbertson's (2017) work is a further indication of the different sets of values of middle classes on the spectrum of lower middle, middle-middle, and upper middle classes. The middle classes, then, could be regarded as a spectrum along which people identify themselves and are positioned. It is also because of this

⁵⁰ The Mandal Commission or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC) was established in 1979 by the Janata government under Prime Minister Desai. The commission was set up to identify socially, educationally, and economically backward. The committee reported its findings in 1983 and also recommended 27% reservations for other backward classes. The V.P. Singh government passed the ordinance for reservations in 1990. This saw widespread protests but also energized the anti-caste movements (Rao, 2005). The full report can be accessed here: http://www.ncbc.nic.in/User_Panel/UserView.aspx?TypeID=1161. For a well written, popular commentary on the status of India then (1979) and now, 30 years later, read, : <https://theprint.in/theprint-essential/30-years-since-mandal-commission-recommendations-how-it-began-and-its-impact-today/477260/>

variation in the widely disparate population that identifies and is identified as middle class that Neubert suggests the use of 'milieu' instead of class that captures the diversity, a term that:

implies that people can be situated in a certain milieu that captures the primary elements of their value orientations and lifestyle at least for a certain phase of their life. But the previously mentioned subject-centered milieu analysis of part-time lifeworlds offers another interpretation. People may simultaneously belong to different part-time lifeworlds with different value orientations, without a clear preference for any one milieu. (Neubert, 2014, p. 31).

Gender, as one of the foundational dimensions of habitus in Bourdieu's framework (2001), plays an important role in the discourses of modernity, nationhood, and class in India (the middle classes). The first instance of the 'New Indian woman' can be traced to the independence movement when middle class women were encouraged to come out of their homes and engage in activities such as social reform, and spread the word about the national movement, and eventually their involvement in politics (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006). The colonial modernity project also created a new patriarchy that separated the *ghar* from the *bahir* and required middle class women to study and travel but also remain traditional and 'Indian'. As the guardians of the home (domestic), and keepers of spiritual/religious tradition, they were necessarily required to perform essential femininity "to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life" and distinguish themselves from both the working classes and white women, whose independence and liberation from tradition was considered to be dangerous and encouraging of sexual promiscuity (Chatterjee, 1989, p, 626). Men came to be associated with 'material culture', the 'public', and science and technology (Thapar-Bjorkert, 2006).

Post liberalization, the new Indian woman was required to regulate her behavior but also maintain her 'beauty' (Phadke, 2017; Parameswaran, 2004; Reddy, 2006). Thus, the new Indian

woman, in a globalizing, transnational economy, is empowered to exercise consumeristic choice in a variety of ways, such as clothing, spaces she frequents for leisure, and making visible her relationship with the domestic. The new Indian woman, then, is also required to balance her high-tech education without compromising the “sacred construct of the Indian family”. She must continue to distinguish herself from “the promiscuous West, as well as from other Indian women of previous generations and of different class positions” (Radhakrishnan, 2009, p. 211).

The Dalit middle classes are a social class that match the economic incomes of dominant caste middle classes, but are also acutely politically conscious about their identity as Dalit, and thus are both a part of and apart from those who are generally described as middle classes (Gurram in Newsclick, 2017). Anxieties about *svamibhan* (self-respect) and *ijjat* (honor and respectability) also mark the journeys of Dalits in their transition to attaining middle class status. This resulted in the control of Dalit women and a “robust body politics” requiring them to be cultured and respectable during the colonial era and later (Paik, 2016, p. 29, 2018, p.6). Dalit women tend to adopt values of dominant caste Hindus, in terms of *ijjat*, but this does not mean an erasing of the Dalit identity but rather that the Dalit woman’s body becomes the site of a “particular politics of culture” (Still, 2017, p. 65). The use of terms like *ijjat* or “*paruvu-pratishtha-gauravam*” must not be taken to mean an emulation of the dominant caste culture, but from the location within which they speak. Historically, Dalit men and women have been denied respect and dignity, therefore their claims to *ijjat* must also be read as an oppositional act. It is crucial to note that, as Still (2017) reminds us, even if the terms used are the same, their content and politics are not the same.⁵¹

⁵¹ For instance, when mainstream feminists were burning saris as a sign of revolt against the middle-class sensibility of tradition and *ijjat*, Subhadra, a Dandora poetess extolled the virtues of ‘*Kongu*’. Also read about the time when

Middle class Muslim women also tend to distance themselves from “typical Muslim women” and their families. For instance, women in Kirmani’s (2009a) study did not consider themselves to be “real Muslim women” because of their “relatively privileged position” of being educated and respectfully employed. These upwardly mobile women constructed real Muslim women as lower class, uneducated, and burdened with the problems of *triple talaq*⁵², *parda* (female seclusion), polygamy (Kirmani, 2009a, p. 51). As in the case with the Dalit middle classes, can the respectable practices of Muslim middle classes too be read as oppositional to the majoritarian upper caste, middle class, Hindu practices as well?

While the mediated constructions of the middle classes may make it seem as though it is a unified, cohesive group, the category is internally differentiated in terms of caste and religion, and are constituted by the very activities they practice (Fernandes & Heller, 2006). It is these practices that make it possible to chart out what sets the middle classes apart, i.e., the socio-cultural practice of ‘middle classness’ in India, such as a focus on English medium formal education and hard work to move upwards, aspirational attitude towards cultural and political leadership, and the effort to distinguish themselves from those placed ‘lower’ than them, through the practice of taste, preference, and respectability (Ganguli Scrase & Scrase, 2009; Fernandes & Heller, 2006; Gilbertson, 2014). In this way the politics of the middle classes are necessarily

women from marginalized castes were not allowed to wear to cover their chests as a rule, see:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-36891356>

Read from within a Brahmanical tradition, the Sari or the blouse would represent the trappings of gendered nationalism, but the same object when located within the Dalit culture, represents personhood. For a far more nuanced reading on particular politics of culture, please read Thirumal & Komarraju (2016), and Still (2017).

⁵² The Muslim Personal Laws allow “the practice of pronouncing ‘talaq’ (divorce) three times in one sitting”. There is no consensus amongst Islamic scholars if this is “permissible in Islam” (Kirmani, 2009b, p. 76).

Triple talaq was criminalized in India in 2019. Feminists had opposed this on the basis of 1) criminalizing a civil matter 2) counter-intuitive to women’s welfare since Muslim would be imprisoned and unable to pay maintenance 3) referring it to as Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2018 furthers the stereotype of oppressed Muslim women

Please see: <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/comment/why-feminists-are-opposing-triple-talaq-bill-708844>

exclusionary. For instance, their cultural and political aspirations come to be associated with activism and are distinguished from the politics of the poor (Harriss, 2005). It is important to look at the middle classes because not only do they promote dominant discourses about gender (Belliappa, 2013), but it is also these classes that many who claim to be feminists belong to⁵³.

Given the heterogeneity of groups that identify as middle classes, scholars suggest the use of the term ‘middle classness’, as something that needs to be performed or practiced rather than as a static concept (Fernandes & Heller, 2006, Donner, 2008). While there have been mainly two broad approaches to study of middle classes-- economic and cultural, Fernandes & Heller (2006) reject frameworks that speak in binaries, and recommend the use of a synthesis of both the approaches. They recommend the usefulness of conceptualizing middle-classes as a socio-cultural “class-in-practice” that allows one to consider the intersections of education, network, caste, class and gender, language, region, religion, and consumption patterns, and that, perhaps it is better to think of the middle class as a socio-cultural practice that is reproduced in the everyday. It is this synthetic framework that explains how the term ‘middle classes’ is used in this study (Fernandes & Heller, 2006, p. 495).

The middle class has been described as an imaginary phenomenon that links objective conditions and subjective perceptions of those (mostly researchers, journalists and middle-class members themselves) who actually “contribute to the establishment of this class” by trying to define it in the first place (Rocca, 2008, p. 128). Although it is impossible to operationalize middle classes satisfactorily, it is possible to identify loose boundaries of what or who constitutes as middle classes. Following Donner (2008), this study too understands middle classes as mostly an urban

⁵³ Fadaee argues that those who work in the NGO sector belong to a sub-group she describes as “critical activist milieu” (2014, p. 442).

based, self-referential, heterogeneous (economic or cultural) category cutting across castes, religions, and linguistic communities with shared value orientations such as importance of English medium education, hard work, and upward mobility. Additionally, it also draws on Jaffrelot & van der Veer (2008), Donner (2008), Säävälä (2010), Madan (1991) to understand that the diverse middle classes in India often emulate what is considered to be urban, upper caste Hindu values, norms, and practices in their performances of middle classness.

It is also imperative that I first address how ‘sociological’ explorations such as these fit into the discipline of Communication Studies. This chapter proceeds by contextualizing this project within the multidisciplinary field of communication studies, or to be more specific, *feminist communication studies*. After a brief look at the trends in feminist communication studies, I turn to the study’s feminist moorings in more detail. By tracing the ‘everyday’ and ‘experience’ that emerge as strong focal points in disciplines of sociology, communication, or phenomenology, I argue that the everyday becomes a critical source of knowledge because of the contribution made by feminist theorists. The chapter then looks at the three methods employed in order to address the three research questions. Having addressed my positionality as a researcher and my background, I turn to self-reflexivity as I engage with the methodological questions that arose during this research.

2.3 Contextualizing the research: Feminist Communication Studies

The reproduction of societies/social order and movements that seek to disrupt/challenge transform it along various sites (the self, in relation with family, peer groups, media, global networks etc.) are fundamentally a communication phenomenon since societies are said to exist in and through communication (Dewey, 1916 quoted in Carey, 2008). One cannot stress "the

centrality of daily life communication in the construction of reality” enough, where communication refers to the “set of practices through which we ‘make sense’ of our world” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017, p. 16). The vast potential for communication scholarship lies in its ability “to recognize, support, and give voice to the great diversity of human experience” (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004, p. 2). This study draws on the critical and cultural studies perspectives best represented by Carey’s ‘*Communication as culture*’ (2008), Hardt’s centrality of culture (2008, p. 7), Calhoun’s ‘*poiesis*’ or meaning-making (Calhoun et al., 2013) to understand that when participants recount their experiences, they draw from and also stitch “the fabric of everyday understandings” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 84). Given the study’s methodological thrust (in the following section), I locate this study in the rich and diverse sub-discipline of Feminist Communication Studies.

Although feminist media studies mainly deals with mediated representational forms and issues of embodiment, materiality, and disembodiment in the mediated an age (McLaughlin & Carter, 2001, 2013); feminist communication studies as proposed by Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) represents a rich research tradition that details the complex ways in which feminism is infused into different conceptual areas including organizational, interpersonal, family, political, health, mediated, and rhetorical communication traditions. Remarking upon the role of feminist communication theory in making and remaking Communication theory, Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) render both disciplinary boundaries and intra-disciplinary boundaries such as intra and interpersonal communication, group, mass and organization communication as unnecessary. Instead, they propose three criteria that distinguish feminist communication theory from other theory-- it theorizes gender, communication, and social change.

Following Rakow and Wackwitz (2004), I would prefer to avoid an exclusive and narrow definition of communication studies as media studies. In examining the (discursive) meanings of feminism amongst young people, how they learn about gender, what specific experiences and exposures may relate to this understanding, feminist mothering, and the micropolitics of everyday life, this work fulfills the above criteria.

This study does not begin with operationalizing gender and reproducing the very thing we need to explain, but tries to understand gender and feminism by grounding it in people's lived experiences. In keeping with what Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) propose what feminist communication theory does, this research does not limit the definition of communication to any one specific subcategory, and begins with the assumption that we are in need of deep structural change.

Gender relations, the subject matter of feminist studies cannot be contained by any single discipline demanding hybrid loyalties. This is complicated by the fact that there is no feminist method as such, but a methodology that guides one how to go about research. It is precisely due to this that what can be described as 'feminist communication studies' has received considerable attention (Stephen, 2000; McLaughlin, 1995). Given that feminists draw and build on diverse, mostly compatible theoretical orientations, the philosophy behind feminist work can be loosely described as disciplined eclecticism (Velaskar, 2016). This is particularly important in studies such as this that go beyond mediated representations and work with lived experiences.

2.4. Doing qualitative research from a feminist perspective

Given the explicitly political nature of the questions (after all feminisms are political), the study can be epistemologically located in social construction of reality, with the theoretical orientation

being explicitly feminist. Methodologically speaking, grounded theory (GT) through a feminist lens was employed.

Social constructionism, grounded theory, and feminist theory share certain congruences. Social construction theory and feminist theory propose that ‘reality’ is socially constructed, and people’s subjective interpretations of their experiences must be valued. They also acknowledge that these experiences and meanings do not occur in a vacuum but are both influenced by and influence the social world that one occupies, and are therefore context-specific. Language serves as a bridge between social constructionism and feminist communication theory (Plummer & Young, 2010). Language cannot be thought of as merely a description of the social world, but is constructed by and constructs the very social world it describes (Burr, 2004).

There are many types of grounded methodology: Glaser & Strauss (1999) classical GT is firmly within the positivist tradition, Strauss & Corbin’s (1997) book works as a guide to qualitative research based on grounded theory in a post-positivist framework, and finally, constructivist approaches to GT, such those proposed by Layder (1982) and Charmaz (2006). Adele Clarke (2007) proposes situation analysis that draws from postmodernism.

All three approaches emphasize that theories don’t predetermine how data is understood, but understanding must emerge from a rich engagement with the data. But classical GT and Strauss & Corbin’s approaches have been critiqued for their emphasis on objectivity and bias and deriving one single ‘truth’ from the data whereas Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory breaks away from such a notion to allow for multiple truths (Plummer & Young, 2010; Layder, 1982). In acknowledging that those who use grounded theory already have a familiarity with their area of interest, Charmaz (2006) does not recommend starting fieldwork as a blank state,

and notes that this prior knowledge need not be bracketed, to guide methodological choices. This research then follows a constructivist approach of grounded theory as proposed by Charmaz (2006) through a feminist lens.

Charmaz's version of GT is meant to be a flexible guideline that can be used with other approaches compatible and complementary to GT. She writes, "Researchers can adopt and adapt them to conduct diverse studies. How researchers use these guidelines is not neutral; nor are the assumptions they bring to their research and enact during the process" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 9).

Both grounded theory and feminist theory⁵⁴ have similar philosophical underpinnings; for instance, both take everyday lived experiences as their starting point, and thus are well suited for understanding the process of meaning-making. Grounded theory also contends that participants know best about the worlds they occupy and do not make a distinction between the personal and political. Both feminist theory and Charmaz's grounded theory value self-reflexivity, and break away from objectivity in research. They demand that the researcher declare his or her positionality and focus on the interpretive aspect of research that is based on everyday experiences of participants instead of speaking for the participants. The terms 'everyday' and 'experience' require some elaboration, given their importance in feminist research.

2.4.1 Everyday experience(s)

The everyday has been theorized by a number of scholars from various disciplines, including philosophy, both classical and continental, sociology, linguistics, literature, and more recently even in the field of communication that turns to digitalization of everyday life, with Couldry and

⁵⁴ For a detailed explanation of the congruencies between GT and feminist theory, please read 'To GT or Not to GT...What's a Girl to Do? A Look into Feminist Grounded Theory' by Alston (2014).
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2014/roundtables/3>

Hepp (2017) proposing ‘mediated construction of reality’ (also, see the works of Winston, 1998; Hand & Sandywell, 2002).

The first manifestation of the difference between the everyday, as ordinary, and non-everyday as extraordinary appears in the late eighteenth century, following which the everyday came to be characterized at different levels-- the temporal (as a repetition), spatial (home), and biographical (through its association with birth, death, reproductivity), and historical (as uniqueness and innovation, i.e., founding of cities, wars and revolutions). Philosophy, sociology, and other disciplines valorized this distinction by distinguishing everyday knowledge (doxa) and reason (episteme), theory and practice (Waldenfels & Evans, 1982, p. 22; Sandywell, 2004). Such dichotomy meant that ‘everyday’ came to be considered as separate from reason, something banal, to be transcended even in philosophy (Gardiner, 2000). Under Husserl’s phenomenology, the everyday seemed to be on the verge of becoming something more than insignificant, but ultimately, his formulation of the ‘transcendental subjectivity’ reinforced the dichotomy once again (Waldenfels & Evans, 1982). While it seemed as though Cultural Studies was on the brink of re-examining the everyday as a site of serious inquiry, the concept of high and low culture diminished any chance of that (Gardiner, 2000).

Despite the interpretive turn in social sciences, Gardiner (2000) observes that academics like Schütz (1967), Berger and Luckmann (1961) still operated in some part within the positivist framework of ‘objectivity’ that differentiated between authoritative knowledge and experiential knowledge. Enlisting works by Smith (1987), Heller (1975, 1984), Lefebvre (1984, 1987), Certeau (1984) mainly, Gardiner observes that these theorists contribute to “counter-traditional” understandings of everyday as banal, ordinary, static and unchanging that pervade mainstream microsociological theories. These theorists understand the ‘everyday’ to be polydimensional,

dynamic and more importantly as *problematic* (Gardiner, 2000). Such a description in itself highlights the importance of Smith's (1975, 1987) contribution in rendering everyday as a source of critical inquiry.

The 'everyday' as problematic would mean "to shift it out of its ordinary place within a scientific or philosophical discourse and treat it as a property of an actuality lived and practiced" (Smith, 1987, p. 92). Given that social sciences had completely been androcentric (focused on truth and objectivity as something outside of oneself, quantifiable and verifiable), Smith felt a keen disconnection between "the texts of sociological discourse" produced by the academic world and her own experiences (and that of other women) at home. Thus, began her journey to "*invent a language*" (emphasis hers) that spoke of the subjugated gender's (women) experiences in the everyday (Smith, 1991, pp. 155-157). In order to do this, she proposes a 'sociology for women' that does not transform subjects into objects of inquiry and develops a 'standpoint of women' where women, as agents of their everyday experience, are a source of knowledge production. Such an experience is not raw or unmediated but is mediated by the location and historical setting of the embodied subject (structures of power that organize these experiences, but not all are aware of), of which men are a part of, and these she collectively refers to as relations of ruling (Smith, 1987).

Clough observes that Smith, in fact, extends the Marxist standpoint, "by turning his claim that 'life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life'" (Marx & Engels quoted in Clough 1993, p. 170). In doing so, she rejects dichotomies of doxa and episteme, theory and praxis, subject/object, private and public, experience and truth, body and mind, from a distinctly gendered perspective, and uncovers a method that can explore relationships of meaning (Clough, 1993).

The 'standpoint of woman' has been critiqued by post structuralist, post modern, postcolonial scholars for creating a universal and *stable* category of women as a subordinate group, without acknowledging the intersection of class, caste, race, religion, ethnicity that would negate any universal 'woman's experience'. While 'difference' as a concept still plays on a commonality of women, diversity (Menon, 2015) or intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) begins with the recognition that there is no shared and essential womanhood to bind women together (Williams, 2018). Therefore, as Harding (1986) suggests, feminists must "embrace the instability of categories" (p. 648), because identities are based on multiple axes of differentiation or multiple and embedded in a matrix of multiple oppressions (Hill Collins, 2000, in the Indian context, please see Guru, 1995; Rao, 2005).

It is also worthwhile to look at how 'woman's experience' can be defined in the face of its destabilization by Haraway (1991), Harding (1986), but none so forcefully as the postmodernist theorist Scott (1992). And it is this I turn to now. The category of 'experience' is "fraught with methodological difficulties". (Jagger, as quoted in Fox, 2008) because as Scott (1992) and Narayan (1997), note, experience is embedded in dominant ideologies and they are informed by cultural scripts available in whichever context they are situated in, and therefore experiences, and the language used to construct them is also structured by these contexts. However, as already stated above, such a critique is not warranted since standpoint feminists do not refer to 'experience' as 'pure' or 'raw', ahistoric, and unmediated but point to 'lived' and 'embodied' experiences and therefore always mediated by one's local contexts (Mulinari and Sandell, 1999). Hesse-Biber (2012) notes that theorists can define what experience means as suitable to their respective studies. Therefore, it is useful to acknowledge Scott's claim, like Oksala (2014) does in her rejoinder to Scott's essay, and to move beyond it. Indeed, feminists across positions would

accept that there are no pure experiences that are divorced from the body, which is located both historically and socially, and therefore experience can be theorized as “at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (Scott, 1992, p. 37).

In order to avoid exclusively valorizing language or discourse or the social in terms of shaping what and how bodies experience and interpret, the body and the social must be seen as shaping and being shaped by each other (Gorringe et al, 2007)⁵⁵. Such a perspective would then allow academics to not only circumvent essentialist notions about what counts as experiences, but also avoids resurrecting the body-mind duality, and facilitates situated criticality in thinking of the social in all its multiplicities (Guru and Sarukkai, 2019). Such an understanding would then reject explanations of experience as a pre-discursive reality and also acknowledge the subject’s ability to interpret those experiences instead of being wholly *determined* by discourse. These lived experiences are then mediated through language, a channel of meaning-making, and made accessible to the researcher. Feminist reflexivity would then ensure that as one can engage with those who occupy different positions, they are mindful of their own positionality and the fact that the knowledge produced is interpretation of an interpretation. This, Harding refers to as situated knowledge (1990).

While most feminist research retrieves women’s standpoints, Smith herself states that one *can* begin from the “position of any member of the society, explicating the problematic of her or his experience” (1987, p. 99). Even critical masculinity theorists engage with feminist theory since “feminism has played an important role in showing that there are not now and never have been any generic “men” at all- only gendered men and women” (Harding, 1986, p. 647). In fact,

⁵⁵ In some ways I can see a parallel between this and the ontoformative processes of social embodiment that Connell (2011) proposes.

developments in the feminist theory, as a consequence of challenge posed by postmodern feminists has led to a recognition that men and masculinities are not monolithic categories, just as women and femininities are not (Connell, 2000; das Nair, 2014). In the Indian context, male academics have been engaging with feminisms and feminist theories and acknowledge how they have been shaped by feminist movements (Chowdhury & Baset, 2018).

Bargetz (2009), drawing on Smith (1987) and Heller (1975, 1984) argues that because the everyday includes both the public and the private spheres, it involves the reproduction of society, even while “politicizing a concept of work without sticking to the productive/reproductive frame”, it emerges as a critical concept for contemporary feminist research. Such a formulation rejects the negative view of quotidian work that marks the everyday which juxtaposes heroic transcendence with ordinariness of everyday life (Featherstone, 1992). While Smith and other standpoint theorists affirm “women’s special grounding in everyday life” in all its multiplicities (Felski, 2000, p.94), it is important to remember that Smith’s everyday standpoint also states one can begin from any position, making space for what Felski (2000) notes feminists have not adequately addressed-- “the fact that men are also embodied, embedded subjects who live, for the most part, repetitive, familiar, and ordinary lives” (p. 94). Instead of defining women as problematic, one could begin with (as Smith does) the everyday as problematic, and that gendering is, in fact, a part of the everyday of lived experiences, where in men and women are gendered in “highly differentiated yet interrelated ways” (Flax, 1987, p. 629).

The concept of the everyday, then, is a broad category that on account of being relegated to ordinariness, women, repetitions and home-worlds, must find its place in mainstream theorizing by re-appropriating it through its feminist underpinnings. The everyday becomes the site of both differentiation and meaning making, of intersectionality of experience, a place where the

multiplicity of self and life comes together. This is important because the history of everyday (life) and everydayness has been abused so much that Sandywell (2004) proposes an alternate framework that he calls ‘the heterology of the ordinary’ to account for the digitization of social lives.

By drawing on the aforementioned works it is possible to make an argument that the everyday is already a broad enough category to encompass experiences of people (of any position and across genders) as a crucial and critical site of inquiry. This is especially relevant for a study such as this that includes the voices of both women and men, and does not begin with any specific institution as its entry point. For instance, the point of entry for some scholars on how people learn about gender or about the politics of the middle classes is either school (Gilbertson, 2017; Iyer, 2017) or family, and some others it is the work place (Radhakrishnan, 2009, 2011; Belliappa, 2013). The entry point for this research is people's everyday experiences (in all its complexity); i.e., the everyday encompasses these (constructed) institutions.

2.5 Data collection

There is no feminist method, i.e., techniques of gathering evidence as such but there is a distinct feminist methodology that guides how one should proceed with research (Harding, 1986; Mason 1997 and many others have noted this and does not require to be restated). Feminist research is not antithetical to quantitative enquiry as Reinharz (1992). Some research studies in fact benefit from a mixed methods approach, for instance Frieden (1963), Harnois (2014, 2015) Bulbeck's (2009) survey-based research⁵⁶. Qualitative research methods are best suited for questions

⁵⁶ For a detailed account of the quantitative versus qualitative debates amongst feminists, please read, Nicole Westmarland (2001)

concerning meaning-making, lived experiences and their interpretations of it (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

2.5.1 Methods

This study was conducted in 3 phases involving three qualitative tools. The first phase involved conducting focus group discussions, the second, phenomenological interviews, with millennials aged 18 to 25 years, and the third, in-depth interviews with feminist mothers and their partners aged 35 to 55 years. The FGDs were conducted in order to get a broad overview about the discursive meanings of feminisms circulating amongst millennials. Phenomenological interviews explored in detail the subjective experiences that contributed to learning about gender and feminism amongst a selected group of millennials. In order to address the third research question about what feminist mothering looks like in India, in-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified feminists and their partners to explore the content of feminist mothering (by definition feminist mothering acknowledges fathers can mother too), in the Indian context.

2.5.2 Site of study, Selection of participants, and call for participants

a. Site of study: Hyderabad

I chose Hyderabad, the city I have lived in my entire life, as the site of study for reasons theoretical and practical (and always political). The city has a diverse population, with people from across regions, religions, castes, and classes calling it home. Although people living in Hyderabad may belong to different linguistic communities, most people can speak and understand the most spoken languages in Hyderabad: Telugu, Dakhani Hindi and English. As a *mulki* (local), and having lived my entire life here means that I can speak and understand both the regional languages, with some degree of proficiency, even though Telugu is my mother tongue. I considered this as an advantage I would not have had in other states (India states were formed on

a linguistic basis), because such “social closeness” meant that I could understand the communication context, i.e., the slang, jargon, and idioms participants used and did not need a translator (Bourdieu et al. 2000), I knew my way around the city, and had a keen sense of its historical and cultural development. Another pertinent reason is the fact that the city has also been pivotal in shaping the Indian feminist movements. Rameeza Bee’ belonged to Hyderabad⁵⁷, which amongst other things also led to the recognition that neither women nor feminists were one monolithic category.

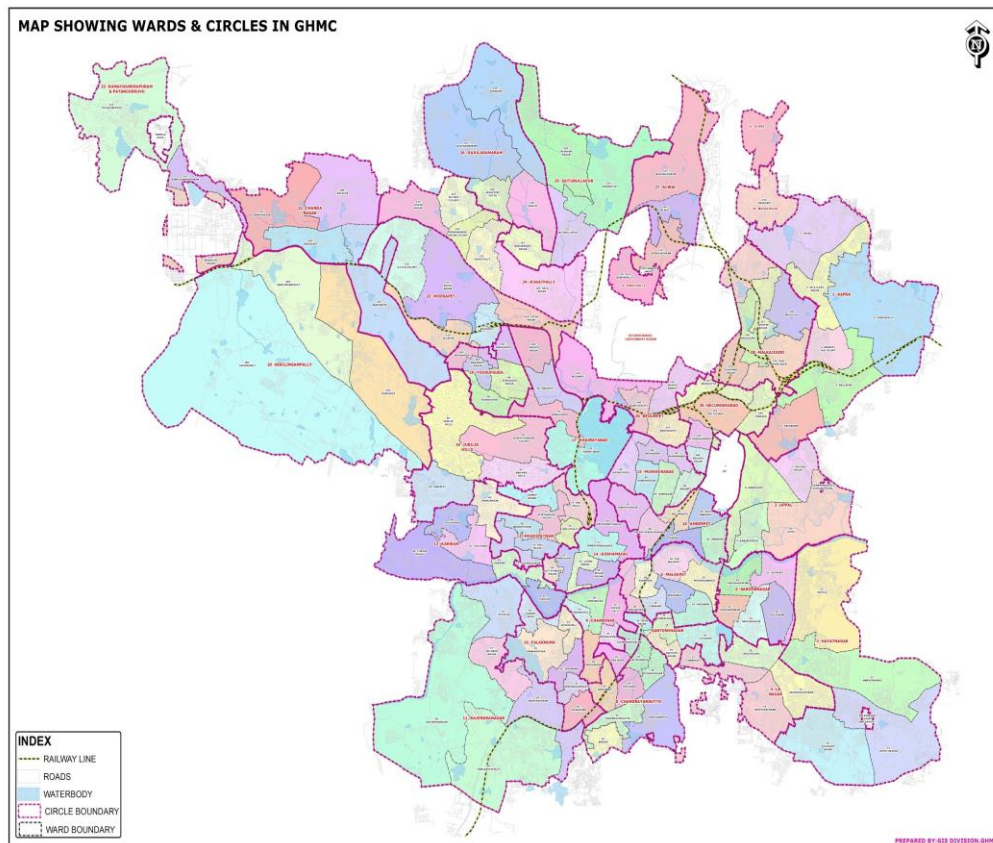


Figure 1: Map 1: The city of Hyderabad. Picture credit: Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC)

⁵⁷ The Anveshi research center for women’s studies was founded in 1985, please see: <https://www.anveshi.org.in/>

b. Selection of participants

Given my familiarity with the city, I proceeded to identify new and old middle-class neighborhoods⁵⁸ (please see: Map 1), to ensure that the participants came from across the city. The areas in and around Serilingampally (Gachibowli, Chandanagar, Hyderabad Information Technology and Engineering Consultancy, or HITECH city, popularly known as the second Silicon Valley of India⁵⁹), and some parts of Kukkatpally are mostly dominated by the new middle classes, ie., those who have benefitted by the growth of the IT sector. The older middle classes are dispersed along the rest of the city. Secunderabad, Marredpally, Tirumalagiri, Bolaram and parts of Alwal-- areas where academics, journalists, high cadre bank managers reside in greater numbers. The Old City -- Charminar, Begumbazar, Malakpet, Mehdipatnam and Tolichowki, Amberpet are areas that have a sizeable Muslim population.

A combination of the grounded theory approach to diversity, with feminist research insistence on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1998) or diversality as Menon (2015) would like to call it, was productively employed for this research. Since it is impossible to know beforehand if someone does or doesn't present a negative case (as suggested by Charmaz, 2006) also meant that the guidelines followed by feminist research helped in directing the selection of middle-class participants from diverse backgrounds and with varied experiences, i.e., representing different religious, caste, and linguistic communities--even though all may be broadly identified as 'middle class'.

⁵⁸ It is not as arbitrary as this. No city can be neatly categorized into new middle classes and old middle-classes neighborhoods.

⁵⁹Read about Hyderabad, the techie "hotspot": <https://telanganatoday.com/hyderabad-the-hotspot-for-techies>
Bangalore is 'the' first Silicon Valley of India, with Hyderabad being the second:
<https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/editorials/2020/jun/06/tgana-it-sector-bright-spark-amid-covid-gloom-2152898.html>

The emphasis, then, was on diversity of experiences and individual accounts of subjective experiences, and not on any kind of representativeness lending to generalizations. Although I do use the terms boys and girls, men and women, male and female participants, mothers and fathers in the thesis, understanding drawn from postfeminist (as an epistemological break that questions universal sisterhood and categories) understanding also means that I do so whilst recognizing that these are neither inherently stable categories nor are they homogenous groups, and the selected participants reflect this heterogeneity.

It also must be mentioned here that all the participants identified as male or female, and it was also clear from the FGDs, phenomenological, and in-depth interviews that the participants were heterosexual. So, this heterogeneity is in terms of caste, religion, language, where ever possible (depending on who volunteered to be a part of the research, and could accommodate the (pretty lengthy) interviews in their otherwise busy schedules.

c. Call for participation:

Phase 1 and 2-- FGDs and PI: A poster was designed and put up on the notice boards of various English medium degree colleges in the city (both government and private), with some of them being women's colleges, and some of them co-education. Interestingly, most participants across these three phases self-identified themselves as middle class, at some point or another. I also uploaded the poster on Hyderabad based groups on Facebook, my personal blog and passed it along to a few of my friends to share it with their networks of friends. I also requested some of my friends who identified as gay, queer, trans if they could post it on the private or 'closed groups' they belonged to on social media. However, as mentioned above, only cis-gendered participants chose to respond and participate.

The poster called for participation of ‘young people’ (aged 18 to 25 years) from *across genders* to discuss gender, feminism, and media. An older friend jokingly remarked that the use of ‘young’ people to point at an age bracket sounded ageist, and therefore the word millennials eventually replaced the term young people. The same techniques and a different poster helped in recruiting participants for the second phase of phenomenological interviews. Distributing posters both online and offline meant that participants in the first phase were a mix of young, middle class, urban (IT) employees and students from various streams-- engineering, arts, humanities and social sciences. Participants in the FGDs and phenomenological interviews identified as male or female.

Phase 3-- In-depth interview with feminist mothers and their partners: For the third phase, participants were drawn from my supervisor’s interpersonal network, as well as social media by posting messages on Facebook groups for feminists, Hindu, Muslim and Christian mothers requesting participation from those who identified as feminists and reside in Hyderabad. These approaches, along with contacting women’s research centers in Hyderabad, helped in recruiting self-identified feminist mothers. All the participants in this participant pool are academics, researchers, activists. A limited snowball was attempted, with interviewees suggesting others, with the result that they increasingly referred to others in similar spaces (academic-activist circles) or single mothers, or those in non-heteronormative family set-ups.

Whilst acknowledging that heteronormative families should not be assumed to be natural or ideal, I focus on them, because they are (unarguably) the *dominant* mode of social organization at the family level. There have been a number of attempts by feminist, queer, Dalit, left scholars to challenge and transgress the institution of family, both in theory and practice, through their choices, but family, particularly heteronormative families, remain a site of contestation from

within which feminist discourse tries to understand, negotiate, and transform oppression (Shah 2005, p. 709). But this choice must not be confused with valorizing and legitimizing a single, narrow idea of one kind of a ‘family’ that is patrilineal, heteronormative, and disregards other kinds of families/ households, or of essentializing woman as a mother, or the idea of biological mother.

2.5.3 Data Collection: FGDs, Phenomenological interviews and in-depth interviews

Phase 1: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

The data collection began with FGDs in order to get a broad sense of the discursive meanings of feminism circulating amongst millennials, how they understand gender, and what they think the media does or doesn’t do in these contexts. Focus group discussions are also a type of ‘interview’, with Frey & Fontana (1993) referring to it as a group interview, where the focus is on why the participants are saying what they are saying. The strength of FGDs lies in the fact that it allows the participants to control the trajectory of the discussion, and for connections to be made between individual and collective experiences. The research did not begin with any definition of feminism that could be checked against participants’ views, but let these meanings emerge from the participants themselves. It has long been established that there is no one unitary feminism, and that there are as many feminists as there are people.

Initially, the idea was to begin with ‘self-identified’ feminists, but upon reflection, and advice from the doctoral committee members, it was decided to not limit participation in such an arbitrary manner. In hindsight, this proved to be beneficial. Group dynamics, a strong feature of focus groups (Puchta & Potter, 2004) was particularly useful in this regard, because participants who had not heard of feminism helped each other in trying to make sense of the term and what it

could possibly mean. The participants noted differences and similarities of their arguments and co-constructed meanings (Wilkinson, 1998). In some cases, FGDS also opened up the possibility of rethinking one's position after listening to others' accounts, opinions and experiences. Not beginning with the label of self identified feminist also proved to be useful in terms of not "nipping in the bud" (Christian, 1985 quoted in Stanley, 1990), the question of how, those who may not have heard of feminism before, and those who share a complicated relationship with feminism spoke about it. This also addressed the feminist question of "ethical concerns about power and the imposition of meaning" (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 112).

A total of five FGDs were conducted with 6-8 participants in each, with the average duration of the FGDs being three hours with a refreshment break in between (please refer to tables 1 and 2 at the end of this section). The first three FGDs were conducted in Lamakaan, a cultural space in Hyderabad, and the other two were conducted in the college students studied in. I moderated the discussion in so far as to ensure that all the participants had the chance to speak and express themselves. Pointed questions were asked either for clarification or elaboration. Any pauses in the discussion were used to ask further questions with the help of an FGD guide. Each FGD began with an introduction to the research and a brief personal background, going through the consent form, obtaining participants' signatures, circulating a sign-up sheet where participants volunteered information about themselves that they thought was important. Usually, the first person to fill the sheet set the standard for others to follow. Name, age, gender, occupation, mobile number, and email id were the standard.

Each FGD began with an icebreaker question and this set the tone for the discussion to follow. The participants were requested not to speak over another person, and let each other finish their sentences, and that it was okay to have different opinions because the idea was to discuss and not

to reach a consensus. Following this, two advertisements (Amul Milk⁶⁰ and JSW⁶¹ steel ads) were played as prompts to get the discussions started (please see annexure 4). I also asked participants if they had any questions for me before beginning the discussion, and they would ask what feminism meant and that would get the discussion started. Since I could not take detailed notes during the FGD, I spent fifteen minutes after each FGD noting what stood out during the discussions and what I could do differently in the next one. Since FGDs are essentially about group interactions, the analysis has also been presented in a manner that foregrounds the dialogic aspect with at length interactions of participants and some individual quotes as well.

Phase 2: Phenomenological interviews

The second phase of the research involved conducting phenomenological interviews with 8 millennials. Of all the participants from FGDs who expressed interest in taking part in further research, only 2 male participants could ultimately be a part of the research (please see: Table 3 at the end of this section for more details).

Both grounded theory and feminist methodology are flexible in terms of the kind of qualitative methods employed, whether they be in-depth interviewing, semi-structured interviews, life history method. While interviews in general are a basic mode of inquiry through which researchers are able to access how participants understand, construct and make meanings of their lived experiences, phenomenological interviewing as suggested by Seidman (2006) was used in this research. Consistent with feminist and grounded approach to qualitative enquiries, where the richness of data is supreme, Seidman (2006) suggests a three part open ended, semi structured interview series with each participant in order to get a rich account of their lives and the

⁶⁰ Amul milk ad: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zx2nFhS6Z_A&feature=emb_title

⁶¹ JSW Steel is an Indian steel making company. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bK04dGgGLY>

phenomenon the researcher is interested in. The first interview, the ‘focused life history’ is veered at encouraging participants to introduce themselves and lay out the context of their lives in as much as detail as possible. The second interview, “details of the experience” explores the participants’ experiences in relation with the research question(s), in this case, how participants understand and learn about feminism and gender. The third interview series calls for a focus on participants reflecting on the meaning of their experiences. In all instances, the third interview had to be followed up by a fourth and fifth.

Following Seidman, a total of 26 interviews were conducted where I met five participants three times, and three participants four times, excluding the *introductory* and what I would like to call a parting meeting. The average duration of each interview was three hours (please refer to Table 3). In the introductory meeting I offered participants details about myself as a researcher, and what this research was about in as much detail as I could, discuss the consent form and participant’s details form, clarify any questions the participants had for me, and have a general conversation with them about the movies they had watched, likes and dislikes. The parting meeting was a chance for me to express my gratitude, show them my notes, and seek permission if I could continue to keep in touch with them.

Some participants used these meetings as an opportunity to ask what a PhD was, and when told, would ask if my parents did not have a problem with me still studying when people of my age would typically be gainfully employed and perhaps even be married. Some participants would be in awe of me for having the patience to “go on studying” when they couldn’t wait to be done with education and earn money. The fact that I was privileged enough to earn a fellowship but did not seem to impress them since I wasn’t earning as much as those in Multinational corporations and the IT sector.

The interviews took place in a range of sites that participants spent a majority of their time in, their college campus, workplace, home, or a park near their home, and explored their lived experiences in relation with their family, siblings, peer groups, schooling, college life, professional life, leisure activities to name a few.

Some of the participants who had heard of feminism before but did not really know what it meant would ask me what it meant, and be visibly embarrassed about it. In such cases, I would tell them how I hadn't known about the term 'feminism' for the longest time either, and that there was nothing to feel embarrassed about. The FGDs also helped me realize that while silence of participants is to be respected by feminist researchers, sometimes the participants do need to be nudged a little in terms of asking them to recall incidents, news stories, people, or ads to help them make connections and guess what it could possibly mean. Listening to them deconstruct its meaning by drawing on specific exposures was as valuable as not trying to fill silences. Some of them would ask why I had to meet them three times for sure, and not four or five, and if each interview would really last 90 minutes, as mentioned in the consent form, only to be surprised at the end of the three-part interview cycle that they lasted for more than 3 hours.

The loosely semi structured, open ended approach to the interviews, and the feminist technique of 'active listening' (Hesse-Biber, 2012) particularly helped with getting a rich detail of participants' everyday lives, their past, present, and hopes and dreams for the future. In most cases, we ended up spending close to four to five hours each time we met. Combining active listening with Holstein & Gubrium's (1998) 'active interviewing' helped create a blend of interview techniques that allowed the participants to speak with almost no interruptions during the first two interviews. The first interview was open-ended to get a rich account of their backgrounds, the second focused on gender, gender politics and feminism, and the third

interview in the three-part interview series, gave me the opportunity to ask participants pointed questions about specific exposures and experiences in detail, seek clarifications, and discuss feminism at length. Note taking during the interviews also helped me remain alert to any mention of gender, caste, gender, sites in which these played out, in the family, at school, media amongst other things, to be brought up and discussed at length in the last interview. Most participants made comments like “I had never really given so much thought about gender” or “I never spoke to anyone in such depth, not even with my best friend”. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if they had any comments on the style or content of the interviews. As with the FGDs, the Amul milk and JSW steel ads were played to encourage the participants to think about stereotypes.

Since participants in the FGDs chose not to include caste in the sign-up sheet, and it did seem appropriate to ask this question directly, a ‘details of the participants’ form was circulated along with the consent form to participants for the remainder of the research-- phenomenological interviews and in-depth interviews. This form included caste as a category to be filled in by the participant, provided they were comfortable doing so.

Phase 3: In-depth interviews with feminist mothers (and their partners)

In the third phase of the research, semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted with self-identified feminist mothers, and if they were comfortable, their partners. While 4 feminist mothers were comfortable with their partners being involved, one participant who was going through marital discord at the time asked for her husband to be exempted from the research. Of the four feminist mothers who consented to their husbands being a part of the research as well, three wanted the interviews to be conducted separately, either for purposes of comfort or time constraints (please refer to table 4 at the end of this section). It must be noted here that while

every effort was made to interview across caste and religions, those who could ultimately make time for the interviews did not include any Christian mother, although one feminist mother's husband was a Christian, I couldn't speak with him, as per the participant's wish.

Unlike the phenomenological interviews which necessarily followed the linear format of past, present, and meaning-making to an extent, these interviews were more open and as most interviews go began with participant introduction. A pattern quickly emerged, participants almost always began the interviews by describing their growing up years, the kind of family they grew up, how they came into feminisms and identified as feminists, issues with the label of feminism, where they met their respective partner, and then about their children, and how feminism informs mothering/parenting and vice-versa. Like in the phenomenological interviews, parents also shared personal anecdotes and experiences during the conversations.

Following are the tables that give a detailed overview of the participants' details across phases.

Snapshot: Participants' details across phases

FGD	Male	Female	Total Participants	Students in each FGD	Working professionals (IT, MNC, advertising, lawyers) in each FGD	FGD location	Duration
FGD 1	4	4	8	6	2	Lamakaan	3.5 hours
FGD 2	3	3	6	6	2	Lamakaan	3 hours
FGD 3	3	3	6	6	-	Lamakaan	3 hours
FGD 4	3	4	7	7	-	Co-education College	3.5 hours
FGD 5	-	6	6	6	-	Women's college	3 hours

Table 1: Phase 1: Focus group discussions with millennials aged 18-25 years

FGDs	Name	Age	Gender	Religion	Occupation
FGD 1	Veer	23	Male	Hindu	HR
	Rashi	20	Male	Hindu	Student
	Inaz	20	Female	Islam	Student
	Farah	18	Female	Islam	Student
	Prem	19	Male	Christian	Student
	Anish	23	Male	Hindu	IT Employee
	Asha	18	Female	Christian	Student
	Jaz	18	Male	Christian	Student
FGD 2	Gaura	20	Male	Christian	Student
	Hema	23	Female	Hindu	Student
	Bhanu	22	Female	Hindu	Student
	Sagar	22	Male	Hindu	Student
	Jog	20	Male	Hindu	Student
	Mohan	21	Male	Hindu	Student
FGD 3	Phani	20	Male	Hindu	Student
	Yash	23	Male	Hindu	Advertising
	Madhuri	25	Female	Hindu	MNC Employee
	Prasad	24	Male	Hindu	Lawyer
	Smriti	25	Female	Hindu	IT Employee
	Vani	19	Female	Hindu	Student
FGD 4	Niraj	19	Male	Hindu	Student
	Ravi	20	Male	Hindu	Student
	Raju	19	Male	Hindu	Student
	Anita	23	Female	Hindu	Student
	Shanthi	20	Female	Hindu	Student
	Arti	23	Female	Hindu	Student
	Chaitra	20	Female	Hindu	Student
FGD 5	Naaz	19	Female	Muslim	Student
	Farhana	19	Female	Muslim	Student
	Nadia	20	Female	Muslim	Student
	Naba	18	Female	Muslim	Student
	Zaira	20	Female	Muslim	Student
	Sara	18	Female	Muslim	Student

*Table 2: Phase 1:
Focus group
discussions with
millennials aged 18-
25 years*

Participants	Religion	Caste	Male/Female	Age	Occupation	Residential locations	Number of interviews	Total hours
Sana B SB	Muslim	Khan	Female	23	Student (MBA)	Near Mojamjahi	4(+2)	14
Prasanna B PB	Hinduism	Scheduled caste	Female	19	Sportswoman	Tarnaka	3(+2)	12
Faith P FP	Christianity	Backward caste	Female	23	University student	L.B. Nagar	4(+2)	15
Carol C CC	Christianity	-	Female	23	IT worker	Alwal	3(+2)	11
Nihar B NB	Hinduism	Backward caste	Male	19	Entrepreneur	Tolichowki	3(+2)	10
Moin F MF	Islam	-	Male	20	College student	Talabkatta	3(+2)	11
Prasad G PG	Hinduism	Brahmin	Male	25	Lawyer	Himayatnagar	3(+2)	12
Anish D AD	Hinduism	Other caste	Male	24	IT worker	Serilingampally	3(+2)	11

Table 3: Phase 2: Phenomenological interviews with millennials aged 18-25 years

Participants Feminist mothers & Partners	Religion	Caste	Male/Female	Age	Occupation	Residential location	Type of marriage	Child/ren	Number of interview sessions	Total hours
Lalitha & Prakash	Hinduism	Reddy	Female	46	Designer & Manager	West Marredpally	Inter- caste love	Rumi (M, 5)	2	6
	Hinduism	-	Male	47	Researcher				1 Inputs from Lalitha	3
Alisha & Kamal	Islam	-	Female	47	Independent consultant- Diversity and inclusion	Gachibowli	Arranged	Aisha (F, 23)	2	6
	Islam	-	Male	54	Entrepreneur				1 Inputs from Alisha	3
Sunaina & Naresh	Ethnic caste	Tribe	Female	41	Academic	Serilingampally	Inter- caste love	Milind Apanna (M, 12) & Adhya (F, 6)	3 Combined interviews	8
	Hinduism	-	Male	43	Academic					
Saritha & Rama Rao	Hindu	Vyshya	Female	48	Researcher	Padmarao- nagar	Inter- caste love	Twins- Mehul & Tara (F, 17)	2	5
	Hindu	-	Male	52	Academic				1	4
Amisha [Married to Sandeep, a Christian*]	Hinduism	Scheduled caste	Female	38	Doctoral researcher	Santosh Nagar	I nter-faith love	Honey (F, 5)	2	6

Table 4: Phase 3: In-depth interviews with feminist mothers and their partners aged 35-55

*I did not speak with Sandeep, as per Amisha's wishes

2.6. Feminist reflexivity and ethics: Role of the researcher in an interview setting

One of the participants expressed that they only started thinking about gender after I approached them for the study because it is not something one would sit and think about otherwise. Similarly, a feminist mother took frequent breaks during the course of the interview, another asked her husband to respond to something, whilst they processed a question, or tried to remember the details of an anecdote that they thought relevant for the discussion. If not for the interview, they said, they probably would not have given it a further thought, which is perhaps why the incident may have escaped their immediate memory? Some of the millennial participants would also question themselves why they reacted to something in a particular manner, undeniably because I would insist on asking them why they thought what they did, and ultimately, they would end up saying that is how the society thinks, but the times are (the JSW steel ad) helped open up the discussion to move from ‘biology is destiny’ to a more nuanced approach of how men and women come to men and women, how women can be masculine, and men, feminine. Although the participants still insisted on the essential biological differences between men and women, the conversations moved from biology as a hard fact to the performance and practice of aspects of gender.

At the end of each interview, the participants were asked if they thought the interview could have been done differently, or improved in some way. Most participants were appreciative of being listened to and for the opportunity to reflect about issues they had never really thought about or had taken for granted. Participants who did have critical feedback to give, were generous to begin with a kind word and then point out to what I could have done differently or not done at all. Drawing attention to embodied and emotional reactions, a participant pointed out how my facial expressions, particularly, a slight arch of my eyebrow (an almost involuntary reaction) let

her know that I wasn't in agreement with what she was saying. Although she felt comfortable enough with me to not let it hinder what she wanted to say, she said there may be others who could potentially self-censor. It was clear that meeting each participant at least once before beginning the phenomenological interview series had served to build rapport and trust with the participants. This helped me also take care to listen without revealing judgment in subsequent interviews with this participant and others.

There were many instances where participants expressed ideas and reactions that were contrary to my own belief systems. I had to work hard to mask my feelings (visibly) in those instances and focus on listening in an open-minded way. This act of visibly masking feelings has come to known as 'surface acting' in feminist literature where, the fear of the participant giving a 'public' account instead of sharing their real feelings and let the participant narratives flow unhindered, the researcher deliberately withholds her opinions or experiences (Thwaites, 2017, p. 4). In such instances, I ended up feeling like a feminist fraud in all its complexity (Sharp & Weaver, 2015). Even though a researcher's emotions are considered natural and essential part of research and are also a source of insight, feminist principles of respecting an individual's opinion also means that one must make their participants comfortable and not be judgmental.

The early stages of fieldwork led me to understand the full import of Reissman's ethics- in-context (2005), where no matter the guidelines you set for yourself, there are always instances where on-the-spot decisions must be made, such as not speaking with one feminist mother's partner since she was worried about the kind of toll the interview would take on her marital life. At this point, I asked her if she herself was comfortable with speaking to me at all, and if she thought this could be triggering in any way, amplifying her stress. She admitted that her friends thought this could potentially be triggering but she had still wanted to go ahead with it. I

reassured her that she was free to not answer questions, and that we could focus on mothering and not discuss marriage at all. We did end up discussing her marital life, but she also admitted that the interview was therapeutic in some sense for having given her the opportunity to speak with someone who was ready to listen without judgement.

The research involved speaking with women and men across age groups, with participants who were younger and much older than me. I requested that all the participants call me by my name, but those younger than me called me *akka* or *didi* (a term of respect for older women), while older participants called me by my first name. Just as I had encouraged participants younger than me to not call me *akka* or *didi*, I was encouraged by those older than I to use first names, although I was more comfortable using terms of respect such as “Ma’am” or “Sir”.

‘Power’ was understood in Foucauldian terms-- power does not always completely lie with the researcher. Given our shared social location (middle class), class did not seem to matter in these interactions, as much as did age and education level in some cases. During the data collection phase, when the researcher would perhaps need to be able to go back to participants to conduct more interviews, clarify or include them in the next phase of their research, the power of refusing or withdrawing remains with the participant. While power shifts according to given contexts, I also acknowledge that the researcher is the one who ultimately benefits from the research. Building rapport, trust and respecting the participants remained a priority throughout. This was done through a variety of ways-- the way participants were addressed and made comfortable, the consent form, furnishing details about myself, and emailing them the transcription for changes to be made.

The fact that this research was conducted in Hyderabad, and the invocation of the term *mulki* (local) must not be confused with trying to reinstate the insider-outsider dichotomy that has its roots in colonialist configuration of the researcher going to the 'field' to speak with the 'native' (Narayan, 1993). Neither should it be taken to mean that only 'insiders' (or natives) can study insiders, because the diversity of participant pools across phases also means that while I may have been an insider in one context, I was an outsider in another, and it is more a spectrum than a stark binary (Fine, 1992). Participants' gender, class, caste need not *match* for researchers to produce 'authentic' research (Thwaites 2017), instead the focus must be on the 'quality of relations' established with the participants through building trust and rapport, and equitable sharing on a case-by-case basis, depending on the comfort of participants (Narayan, 1993, p. 672).

a. Interviewing men

Although most (early and contemporary) feminist research is characterized by its focus on women to de-stabilize androcentric production of knowledge, research about women is not the only criteria that decides whether a work is or is not feminist. As Robbins aptly puts it "feminist researchers produce feminist research" (Robbins, 1996, p. 170) through their commitments towards feminist values, namely and not limited to reflexivity, difference, and respecting participant viewpoints, not speaking for them, or judge them, and calls for an emic approach to writing. Most feminist literature on methodology describes the practice of reflexive interviewing with women, since the focus is on women and their experiences. As a consequence, there is paucity of work in reference with how feminists interview men. Connell (2001) who shows how feminist methodology is useful in exploring men and masculinities, Campbell (2003), Stanley & Wise (1993), Gatrell (2006) are some of the few feminist academics who deliberate on the

feminist principles they followed while interviewing men. Rayaprol's (2016) detailed account of how she approached men and the relationships she was able to retain with them even after her doctoral work was useful in thinking about how to interview men and what to expect. Following Rayaprol (2016) & Campbell (2003), I proceeded with interviewing men in the same manner that I did with women, with respect, empathy, and active listening, and did not feel uncomfortable at any point. When I began to hear more of the same arguments, and no new codes came out of the interviews, a decision was made to stop interviewing.

b. Understanding consent

The consent form (annexures 1-3) in itself was kept short with details about the participant's rights to remain silent, not answer a question, or withdraw from the research completely, permission to audio recording and note taking whilst talking, and permission to publish from the data collected while maintaining anonymity was sought. Carolyn Ellis's (2007, p. 23) 'process consent' was adapted where consent is a continuous process, and the same was communicated to the participants. The participants had every right to ask me to stop recording, or after having said something in a previous interview, demand that I not transcribe it, or after having transcribed, ask for a portion to be removed/edited/deleted when I sent them the interview transcripts (a few participants did make use of this). The final transcription of the interviews was shared with each of the participants to further edit or remove as they wished (also known as member check).

c. Transcribing, transliteration, and translation

Transcribing was a slow and laborious process because participants spoke in English, Hindi, and Telugu and the transcriptions reflected this. Since I cannot type in Hindi and Telugu, I transliterated the conversations. The transcription took a substantial amount of time since it was verbatim and included typing *ooh* and *aahs*, and making note of pauses whether short or long.

Some of the participants asked if I had used a transcription software given the amount of attention paid to transcribing everything they had spoken. Others were embarrassed about grammatical errors and the pauses they had taken. Some of them asked me to remove certain identity markers that they felt could be a potential problem or were simply uncomfortable with.

I also took the time to clarify meanings of specific terms participants may have used, or colloquialisms that were unfamiliar to me. For instance, one of the participants spoke about ‘sharm’ which is imbued layers of meaning (explored in Chapter 4) that change according to the context in which it is used. After having translated everything into English, I would again mark out specific words that were translated from Telugu or Hindi to English and re-verified with the participants, for instance, a participant used an Urdu term ‘sinf-e-nazukh’, explaining that it specifically describes the delicate disposition of girls and women, both physically and mentally. Even though she had already verified its meaning during the interview, she did so in Hindi, and it was only appropriate for me to check if the English translation of it was okay with her.

2.7 Data analysis and writing

In keeping with the grounded theory, field notes and analysis of data as it was collected helped identification of early themes and codes that would be then explored in detail in the subsequent interviews, and also lookout for the development of new codes. After each phase, I would sit with the transcriptions and read each document thrice before even attempting coding. Following Charmaz's (2006) guidelines, I first read each and every line of the transcripts and gave it a code. Then, paragraph wise, some of the paragraphs could be coded as exclusively to do with family, media, religion, femininity, masculinity. This in turn helped with making comparisons within one FGD or an interview and against other FGDs and interviews.

Margin coding, as suggested by Bertrand et al., (1992) also proved to be particularly useful for the FGDs. Not only did it help with identifying themes within each FGD, but also aided in bringing the chapter together. For instance, a participant's use of the phrase "within limits" in FGD 4 and her repeated use of it in different ways, alerted me to the fact that a similar phenomenon had happened in other FGDs. Some of the codes couldn't be described in just one word, and therefore some phrases became codes, for instance 'respectable femininity' made most sense when participants would describe how women are the 'izzat' of the home. Initially, in what is known as 'open coding', descriptive codes were more in number with only a few analytical codes. Respectable femininities was an analytical code that made itself visible early on in the FGDs and PIs. But constant comparison methods helped coalesce these descriptive codes into analytical codes, which then went on to become themes which were then further collapsed to give way for the overarching themes. The course-work done in the first 2 years of the doctoral program helped in analysis and coding, and therefore while the data dictated the theories I borrowed from through open, axial and selective coding, the process was both inductive and deductive.

It also became evident in phenomenological interviews and in-depth interviews with feminist mothers and their partners that participants were using 'small stories' to talk about their selves, support their arguments, and in some cases, even speak about their future relationships, and how they might react in hypothetical situations. Georgakopoulou (2006) describes small stories as:

small stories... are employed as an umbrella-term that covers a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell. These tellings are typically small when compared to the pages and pages of transcript of interview narratives (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p. 123)

This, along with Owen's (1984) methods of coding: recurrence (making note of similar ideas), redundancy (same words and phrases), and forcefulness (vocal emphasis). I also wrote little notes in the margins about my immediate reactions to particular quotes so as not to impose my feelings on participant narratives. The constant comparison between my field notes and transcripts also helped me to write from an emic perspective and stay grounded within participants' experiences. This, however, does not negate the role played by the interviewer in interpreting the data, and therefore sharing the initial findings and themes was important to both address the power imbalance of telling one's story and also as a technique of validation via member check.

Since participants came from different backgrounds and used a combination of different languages, the quotes used throughout the thesis reflect this. While I made no attempt to either grammatically correct their English, or polish it by preserving the use of colloquial English, translated words and sentences have been italicized to mark as translated, and ellipsis used to indicate where a sentence or two may have been omitted without altering the meaning of the quote. An asterisk at the end of a word or sentence indicates the emphasis the participant may have emphasized during the interview. Even though participants came from different backgrounds, their narratives had both similarities and distinctions, and like life itself, often messy. Research from South Asia shows how respectable femininities and multiple masculinities find resonances in diverse contexts. To be sure this research does not concern itself representativeness and generalizations to be made about Muslim, Hindu or Christian femininities, masculinities, and mothering in particular, but interested in how people from diverse backgrounds learn about gender and feminisms in their lived contexts. Attention was paid to how participants articulated their different identities, and these were preserved through

the use of block quotes and citing relevant literature. Following Ahmed (2017) I also tried to adopt a conscious citational style and made an effort to reference as many works by Indian, South Asian, non-dominant caste, women of color, queer, early career academics, newer scholars, and more recent (and open source) research papers and dissertations.

The iterative process of analyzing data from each phase, identifying codes and themes, brought out similarities in experiences, but also reinforced the importance of identifying and preserving intersecting identities as flagged by the participants themselves. Once the rough drafts of the three analytical chapters based on the three methods were written, a discussion chapter that explores the core, cross cutting categories of intergenerational feminisms and gendered micropolitics of everyday life, arrived at through selective coding, was written.

The resulting work can be likened to a patchwork quilt. Just as different pieces make sense on their own, but can also be put together to craft a story, each narrative and phase made sense on its own. Each of these questions on how one learns about gender, and masculinities and femininities, and, feminisms mean to them, feminist mothering could have also been the basis for three separate dissertations on their own. Like the patchwork quilt, one could pick up any chapter in the thesis and read it as a stand-alone piece, including the discussion chapter, since there is no center from which all the other chapters flow. The quilt is also a great metaphor for feminist research (Koelsch, 2012), because just as the quilt maker is responsible for bringing different pieces together in a design she likes, so does the qualitative feminist researcher, whose theory is dependent on the data collected, existing data, and the experiences and skills she brings to the table, making the resulting story one amongst many that could have been told or the same story told differently.

Chapter 3

*Feminism within limits: Routes, Reasons, and Respectability*⁶²

3. Introduction

After the brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a paramedical student in New Delhi in December 2012, feminism re-entered the realm of the “popular” in both media and other spaces of public discourse, with renewed attention to issues of representation and reception, begging a series of questions on the possibility of newly emergent “feminist publics.” The widespread media coverage of the rape case to some extent helped mobilize the middle classes, as witnessed by internationally recognized American feminist Eve Ensler, who was in India to raise awareness about the campaign One Billion Rising in 2013. Ensler remarked in an interview at the time

This is mind-blowing ... To see men and women coming to the streets to demonstrate against rape is a breakthrough in terms of human consciousness. I cannot think of a country in my lifetime where this has ever happened including the United States... (quoted in Danish, 2013).

However, the portrayal of the rape and its aftermath has been criticized by activist-academics in India, who point to the problems in the framing of the incident and the various actors involved. Notably, Agnes (2015b) argues that the media’s dubbing of Jyoti Singh as “Nirbhaya” (*fearless*) ultimately perpetuates the patriarchal more of dying to “defend one’s honor.” In a searing critique titled, “Why India loves Nirbhaya, hates Suzette,” Agnes remonstrates that India loves Nirbhaya because she does not live to tell the tale of her violations but the same public hates rape

⁶² Some parts of this chapter have appeared in a short commentary and criticism piece published by Feminis Media Studies. Citation: Komaraju, S. A., & Raman, U. (2017). Indian Millennials define feminism, *Feminist Media Studies*, 17 (5):892-896, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2017.1350519

survivor Suzette Jordan who lived to speak about her experience of sexual violence. Jordan, a vociferous women's rights activist from Kolkatta, was gangraped by five men who had offered to drop her home from a night-club near Park Street. Rejecting the law-conferred anonymity and the silence expected of rape “victims,” she spoke publicly of her experiences on national television. However, she was forced to keep the shame and stigma of rape alive when the media continued (even after her death as a consequence of Encephalitis in 2015) to call her “the Park Street rape victim” despite her emphatic rejection of the label (Agnes, 2015b).

Shandilya (2015) critiques the media’s construction of “Nirbhaya” as an everyday, upper caste, middle-class woman, and their push for legal reforms for a “normative subject,” ignoring the experiences of those outside the above-mentioned categories, and she invites feminist media scholars to engage more deeply with these issues. It must be mentioned here that the Justice Verma Committee, a three-member committee constituted after the gang rape in December 2012 to study the context of gender-based violence and recommend measures to tackle it, did not just recommend that the legal provisions for sexual violence must account for violence against sexual minorities and marginalized groups but also unequivocally stated that it is the responsibility of society to refrain from situating sexual violence within the framework of shame and honor (see Talwar, 2013 for a detailed analysis of the report).

Despite the internalization within feminist studies of the nuanced nature of gender politics, much of the media discourse in the wake of Nirbhaya suggests that, in the Indian context, the popular understanding of the term “feminism” continues to be stuck within a simplistic frame. Following Parameswaran’s (2003) exhortation to “resuscitate” the feminist audience studies approach, it is important to understand how people make sense of feminisms, and to fathom what may be a widespread view (therefore a “*popular*” version of feminism), by asking what people think about

the content and expected outcome of feminisms. This is not to dismiss analyses of the kind of feminisms that pervade popular media/culture but to underscore the need to understand how feminism is understood and interacted with *on the ground*. Although there is considerable research on media portrayals of feminist movements, and young women's (dis)identification with feminism in the West (Beck, 1998; Lind and Salo, 2002; Mendes, 2011; Moi, 2006) there is little systematic analysis of the media and the Indian feminist movements *and its popular understanding* other than that reported by Kumar (1993), Parameswaran and Chitrapu (2011), Phadke (2003), and Chaudhuri (2000). Much of the Indian scholarship across disciplines (barring media studies) occupies legal and economic frames rather than referring to feminism as an ideological and sociological framework. While no doubt such work is crucial to the feminist project, it is important to balance this analysis with what people think about feminism and where they get these ideas from, particularly given the fractured nature of contemporary political and social life.

This chapter explores the popular (non-academic) understanding(s) of feminisms amongst millennials, the need or lack thereof, in their view, and how they learn about it. The word popular has *mostly* been understood as 1) visibility in media 2) as a terrain of contested meanings, and 3) as popularity. It is in the last two ways that 'popular' is used in this context, popularity as an adjective and also as "struggle for meaning" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 6).

3.1 Feminisms: What is that to thinking about feminisms

"I am not a feminist but..." appears in work about young women's dual entanglement with feminism where feminist goals are agreed with, but the label repudiated (Moi, 2006). This repudiation is based on the idea that having achieved its goal, there is no longer a need for

feminism (Scharff, 2012). While women's (dis)identification with feminism has been the focus of many studies in Western contexts (Scharff, 2010, 2012; Marine & Lewis, 2014; Zucker 2004), there is practically no literature about it in the Indian context except for Bulbeck (2009), Mitra (2011), Phadke (2015) and Gilbertson (2018a, 2018b). Bulbeck's (2009) questionnaire-based survey reveals how, more Indian women than men, and more Indian men than others in the broader Asian-Pacific sample, identify as feminists.

Speaking with young justice workers in "post-Nirbhaya Delhi", Gilbertson (2018b, p. 2) observes that the confusion caused by multiple definitions of feminism leads to a distancing from, if not outright rejection of the feminist label. Most male justice workers who identified as feminists in her study also distance themselves from radical and political feminism (Gilbertson, 2018a). Both Phadke (2015) and Gilbertson (2018b) observe that some young people ask if terms such as humanism or equalism would be more appropriate rather than 'feminism'. While they discuss the rejection of feminist identity by some briefly, they also take note of those who do adopt the label and take feminist activism into new directions. Phadke, particularly, is hopeful about these 'new' directions and focuses on the negotiations of upper middle-class women "who were trying to call themselves feminists" (2015, p.66). Gilbertson (2018a, 2018b) and Bulbeck (2009) note that feminism is mostly understood as gender equality, and about women's rights by their respective respondents.

Participants in this research also echoed some of these ideas. This chapter draws on five focus group discussions with a total number of 33 millennials (13 identified as male and 20 as female) between 18-25 years (refer to Tables 1 and 2 in Chapter 2). It unpacks the different routes through which participants come into feminisms (or not), what they think it means, if they (dis)identify with it, and why. It begins with the question "what is feminism" as asked by some

participants, reasons for the emergence of feminism in India, its continued relevance in reference with the spectrum of patriarchal violence, and how participants understand feminism. In addition, the chapter also explores how participants define feminism, not just in terms of what it means, but also in terms of what it is not, and how they perceive the media to be a force of social change and an ally of feminism. It draws on the scholarship of new femininities, men and feminism, and middle classes to critically examine why both men and women argue for feminism to be within limits.

3.1.1 *What is feminism?*

Despite the popularity of feminism amongst urban middle classes in India (Bulbeck, 2009), there were some participants across FGDs who had not heard of the word ‘feminism’ prior to the focus groups. This made for an enriching account of how people understand feminism when they encounter the term for the first time. Participants were encouraged to understand the term without any prompt in these cases:

Arti: Feminism. Feminine. Domination against females? There is ‘ism’ in Feminism right?

Me: Yes?

Arti: So, rights to females. There's gender difference, no? Domination of men against females. Gender difference, so, feminism means we don't have rights, so to describe that is feminism... I am only guessing, because of the program in Vijaywada, I don't remember the details exactly, but it was about women's rights right?

[The rest of the group says they haven't heard of the term or the program, followed by brief silence]

Amulya: what program is this?

Niraj: Yeah, there was an event in Vijaywada women parliament, they gathered women and spoke about what rights they want. They also discussed violence against women, and how to stop it.⁶³ (FGD 4)

Although there are vernacular equivalents of the term feminism such as “naarivaad” and “streevadam” in Hindi and Telugu respectively, these words were not used as prompts because “the appearance of ‘gender’ in the discourse of development and decentralization” (as is apparent in the example given by participants of the women’s parliament) and the lack of a “homolingual address available to feminism” means that the term “seizes the local context” and loses its political dimension (Krishna, 2007, p.513). While the terms ‘narivaad’ and ‘streevadam’ hold political potential as opposed to the term ‘stri sashaktikaran’ that is favored by government officials (Menon, 2015), both the words would translate into “argument on behalf of women” (Krishna, 2007, p. 513).

In spite of not using these terms, feminism was still understood in the context of the government's efforts to work on behalf of women for their upliftment. In the absence of the historical context of feminism and feminist movements, participants drew upon their local contexts to understand what a fight for women’s rights would look like, of which the women’s parliament is only one example. Members in another group that had not encountered the term also made sense of the term in a similar manner. They confused feminism with the word feminine, before arriving at its meaning as “an act.. related to women...” that they had read about in civics, “It may have been in rights and duties, fundamental rights”, Naaz (19). In both cases, despite confusing feminism with femininity (much like the participants in Bulbeck’s 2009

⁶³ In February 2016, a two-day event, i.e., National Women’s parliament was organized involving ten thousand delegates including girl students from colleges, lawmakers, parliamentarians who discussed, amongst other things, “women empowerment and political challenges, personality development... women’s status and decision-making power”: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/National-Women%E2%80%99s-Parliament-to-be-held-for-three-days-from-Feb.-10/article16785309.ece>

study), they draw on what they studied as a part of their curriculum, and government initiatives that act on the spirit of the constitutionally granted rights of women, and understand feminism as a reaction to systemic inequalities.

Feminist movements (as discussed in chapter1) that relied on the political practice of collective/mass protests and *dharnas* from 1970s through mid-1990s experienced multiple fractures in subsequent years on account of both internal critique about who counts as ‘woman’ (as a consequence of the rise of caste and sexuality politics) and external reasons of institutionalization and NGOisation of feminism (Roy, 2018). This severely limited the potential of women’s organizations to gather forces the way they used to in what has been described as the golden period of feminist activism in India (Patherya, 2017). In the absence of such political tradition, participants draw their understanding of feminism from available discourses about feminism, of which state feminism or national development feminism (Bulbeck, 2009) is one. Individuals in other groups who had heard of feminism prior to the discussion also understood feminism as women’s rights.

3.1.2 *Feminism as gender equality*

The 1974 report on the status of women, 'Towards Equality' underscored how the constitutional guarantee of gender equality had not translated to improving the lives of women. Further, the welfare approach towards women empowerment initiatives in the early years after independence was critiqued for essentializing women’s roles as home makers and mothers while downplaying intersecting issues of caste and class (Agnihotri and Mazumdar, 1995). The various policies undertaken by the State under the rubric of good governance have also been similarly assessed

for their tendency to adopt add (women as they already are in patriarchal society) and mix approach to development.

The appropriation and domestication of the term gender, a term of critical value to feminists because of its destabilizing potential, is stabilized and conflated with women (Menon, 2015) or women's problems without addressing the patriarchal assumptions that lead to systemic and structural injustices (Harding, 1995). It is in this context that Phadke (2015) cautions against understanding feminism as gender equality, since it can easily be hijacked and institutionalized by the State, without offering any political critique of patriarchal power relations and the subsequent need of structural and systemic transformation.

But that is exactly how participants understood feminism. A recurring theme in all the group discussions was that of understanding feminism as gender equality and women's rights.

Yash: For me, feminism is a fight for gender equality, a motion where people are talking, discussing about equal opportunities between men and women, education, work.

Vani: Feminism is equality. Women are oppressed, we are saying they should be equal, we are not saying we should be greater than men.

Phani: Feminism is not against any gender; it means equality of both the genders (FGD 3)

Similarly, Sagar (22) and Veer (23) regard feminism as "equal rights of women" and "supporting both the genders equally" respectively. Women too understand it as "women's rights... equal work and pay" (Inaz, 20), and as "development, equal rights, respect of women" (Rashi, 20).

Explaining why feminism has come into existence at all, participants pointed out to the “higher status” men have in society and the resulting gender inequality.

This concept has come because there is discrimination going on... Men have been used to be given a higher status in society, it is going down now, it is becoming equal now a days but due to that discrimination the concept of feminism has come into existence... Had both the genders been treated equally from the go this concept would not have been there now (Jog, 22, FGD 2)

Gender equality understood as women’s rights on account of being discriminated against in a “male dominated” society or because of the higher status given to men speaks in part to Phadke’s (2015) idea of what remains for feminism to do.

3.1.3 *Feminism as a consequence of patriarchy*

Feminist movements in India have addressed a range of issues—from violence against women to wage gap, sexual harassment at work, and the right to public places, among others. Since the *first wave* of women’s movements that predate independence, feminists have worked towards social, economic, legal, and political reforms. The first wave recognized the need for doing away with ‘evil’ social practices such as Sati, polygamy, dowry and child marriage, and education of women was seen as a sign of modernity. The second wave recognized the importance of political participation of women from across classes and castes in the freedom movement. The third wave was more recognizably feminist, with a clear articulation of gendered oppression, multiple patriarchies, and agency of women. Although participants make no mention of these histories, it is apparent that many of them are aware of the broad range of issues that women have faced over the decades. On being asked about the kinds of discrimination women face in a society that values men, participants moved beyond women’s rights in spaces of education and work, and

located it within the home. Niraj explains that this discrimination starts with preference for male children:

So many people say we want a son, because last rites [tala korovi] are supposed to be performed by the male child, doing so washes away the sins of their parents and they can escape being tortured in hell [punnama narakam]⁶⁴ (Niraj, FGD 4)

He elaborates that according to the Hindu “shastras”, the final rites performed by male progeny have the power to save parents from going to “*punnama narakam*” (hell). Sudhir Kakar (1978), in his now heavily critiqued work, also discusses the Hindu belief that male children, through performing the final rites, absolve their parents of sins committed during their lifetime. While Kakkar makes this observation by drawing on Manushastra (widely regarded as a text that prescribes how ‘Hindus’ must lead their lives), Niraj doesn’t refer to any particular text but says that the “*puranalu*” (ancient texts) mention this and people believe it, irrespective of where they are from-- “city or the village”.

Another reason for this preference for male children and discrimination against girls and women is the practice of patrilineality and patrilocality in the sub-continent, as noted by the participants:

Zaira: it is necessary that every family has a boy right, that is what parents say, that boys carry the bloodline forward. if there is no boy in the family then they think that their family and their family line ends there. And I agree with this

Sara: I didn't agree. We are two daughters and my father never thought that only sons can carry the bloodline forward and I wish I had a son, he never thought like this, and he takes really very good care of us. I don't think he has ever felt that he should have had a son

Naba: it's incorrect to say that only a boy can carry the bloodline forward. Even a girl can.

⁶⁴ As mentioned in chapter 2 words, phrase, sentences that are translations from Telugu/Hindi have been italicized

Sara: This is not there in Islam

Zaira: A daughter leaves her house and goes to another family (FGD 5)

While patrilocality is not contested here, Sara (20) points out that the Islamic law neither endorses the view that a son carries the bloodline forward nor of male preference. Ahmad (1974) in his work on Muslim marriage and families in India observes that “so far as the family organization is concerned, it appears very akin to that of the Hindus. It is patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal” (1974, p. 328). Considering the rules of marriage according to Quranic laws, Ahmad points out how “the kinship system among Muslims is basically Indian though modified by Islamic law and usages” (Ahmad, 1974, p. 329).

Participants also point to the spectrum of violence that the practices of patriliney and patrilocality perpetuate.

Chaitra: Paternal grandmother particularly are like that. They think granddaughters will leave after marriage, but grandsons will carry the bloodline forward. This is the main reason why paternal grandmothers treat grandsons well, and encourage them to follow their dreams, but will keep girls busy in the domestic space, because we will end up in the kitchen, right?

Anita: Even my grandma was like that. Her mentality was such that she would say a woman will end up the kitchen some day or the other. Paternal grandmothers particularly have such a mindset. They feel girls should neither get nutritious food nor education. It must be reserved for the grandsons. This has happened even with me, my grandmother did not think I was worthy of a glass of milk. Paternal grandmothers, particularly, are like that. Because male child will carry the bloodline forward, they get special treatment.

Shanthi: My paternal grandparents had this mindset. My father and mother are related, and everybody knew she was a better student, but she was never encouraged, she was just married off... (FGD 4)

Participants speak about how paternal grandmothers, in particular, discriminate against the girl child. Kandiyoti (1988) describes how “senior women” in the family gain power and control over the younger women, and the family, and become the decision makers. In ‘*Bargaining with patriarchy*’⁶⁵, Kandiyoti notes that women often internalize patriarchal values as a result of early socialization and exposure to the “adult cultural milieu”, which then inform their choices and aspects of gendered subjectivity (1988, p. 285). Patrilineal, patrilocal practices that aid such internalization construct girls as “*paraya dhan*” (others, mostly in-laws’, property, Kurane & Shetty, 2011; Agnes, 2016), who must eventually leave their natal homes and move into their husband’s homes.

3.2 Culture, society, and locality

The modernity project is marked by the beginning of a new patriarchy that fixes the place of women within the ghar (Chatterjee, 1989). Participants also observe that the idea that women must stay at home and take care of the family is because of the “patriarchal culture... as we have seen in the ad” (Veer, FGD 1).

Nuanced understandings of culture regard it as a “moving target” that shifts and changes from context to context, and isn’t monolithic or uniform (Baldwin et al., 2008, p. 24). Participants, who describe ‘culture’ variously as ‘sanskar’, ‘kattubatalu’ or tradition that shapes how the society (understood as “surrounding people” FGD 5) collectively thinks, also understand culture as something that “changes according to trend... and the trend now is of feminism... equality of genders” (Prasad, 24).

⁶⁵ She rethinks and complicates this in her later work titled ‘*Rethinking bargaining with patriarchy*’ where mothers-in-law also help in child rearing (Kandiyoti, 1998)

Niraj says that cultural rules have an “expiry date” beyond which they cease to make sense, and therefore it is best to get on with the times. Similarly, Prasad says that there was a time when women were required to be in the kitchen and men in the armies, but since “rules are a product of time” and “our needs and aspirations have changed”, people must let go of outdated cultural rules that relegate women to the domestic. And this is best reflected in the phrase that kept appearing in each discussion, “things are changing”. Patriarchal culture that restricts girls from studying or women from working is described in generational terms:

Ravi: The previous generations believed that girls must be at home, and even girls wanted to stay at home. But nowadays, neither parents nor girls are like that. They want girls to study well, and learn everything, they tell girls that they can be anything they want to be. Whatever men do, even women can do, whether that be cricket, in fact so many women work as conductors nowadays, they can do anything, like they can even fight in WWF

Raju: This has been going on for generations, that girls must stay at home and do domestic work. But all of this is changing nowadays. With every new generation, girls are also changing and progressing. Everything is moving forward/progressing. The way girls move, the way they are, everything is changing. (FGD 4)

Participants drew from the JSW cement ad⁶⁶ to suggest that once culture or ‘sanskar’ locked women in the domestic sphere. But today, the new visibility of women in various fields also signals that “things” (norms) are indeed changing, and these changes are largely described as generational. The increasing visibility of women in sports, including those seen as “unfeminine” (badminton star P V Sindhu, wrestler Geetha Phogat, boxer Mary Kom, and weightlifter Karnam Malleshwari were specifically mentioned in FGD 1, 2, 4, 5), their participation in the army,

⁶⁶ JSW Steel is an Indian steel making company. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bK04dGgGLY>

holding positions of power (Sumitra Mahajan⁶⁷ and Sheila Dixit⁶⁸, mentioned FGD 1, 3, 4, 5), and their presence in the corporate world, along with instances of girls ‘discovering’ and fighting to achieve their potential are collectively seen as some of the most definite signs of change by participants from across the FGDs .

This new visibility of the “new Indian [middle-class] woman” outside of family comes at the cost of “rendering invisible” the poor women's presence in the public sphere, who have always had to work to sustain themselves and their families (Dhawan, 2010, p. 46). This is not lost on the participants who critique that it is particularly the middle classes who subscribe to cultural norms, whereas the lower middle classes are much more open to the idea of women working because it is a question of bringing food to the table. There is also a consensus that girls and women are rightly being encouraged to step out of their homes and achieve their goals, by both the government through various initiatives and that girls themselves are fighting for these opportunities by “using the feminism card”, Yash (23) elaborates:

Today I don't see there are many places where a woman is not being given the opportunity to go ahead, education, divisional promotions? Within the Government? Private sector probably. 50% of major brands are headed by women, lots of state heads are women... Men and women alike speak more about feminism, even men start saying yeah women have to be empowered, they have to be given that opportunity. Women also, because it is about women, they also talk about it... (Yash, FGD 3)

Chaitra also says that “girls can do anything, you must have seen this too, whether CEOs or designers, girls are everywhere”. Naaz goes further, to comment on the fact that families can no

⁶⁷ Speaker, Lok Sabha (2014-2019)

⁶⁸ Longest serving Chief Minister of Delhi, India (1998-2013)

longer deny opportunity to girls: “Now parents also know that girls can do anything and must be encouraged to pursue like Geetha Phogat’s dad”.

3.2.1 New respectable femininity as can-do femininity

Education and employment of women are indeed seen as desirable amongst the middle classes in “new India” (Radhakrishnan, 2009), and parents actively encourage women to achieve these goals (Phadke, 2015). However, feminist scholarship challenges the notion that this new visibility is due to changing mindsets, and more as an effect of neoliberal economy. While being in the domestic space was once “respectable” for middle class women (Banerjee, 1989), their visibility as consumers and professionals is now a “desirable and essential part of cityscape” (Phadke 2013b, p. 50). This is perhaps because, the “new discourses” of middle-class femininity and respectability (or new femininities) are not divorced from the older responsibility of taking care of the family (Radhakrishnan, 2009).

Remarking upon how women can do anything, Anita (23) says:

*being a woman is about being able to multitask, it includes taking care of everyone, and creating an identity for yourself, which has been missing from the previous generations completely. Women can do anything**⁶⁹ (FGD 4)

Although women are expected to take care of everyone and be patient, these are also described as merits of femininity. In fact, Rashi and Gauri think that these are "superior" qualities of femininity, but they should not be forced upon women. 'Women as nurturers' has a long history and is at the core of cultural feminism (Alcoff, 1988). But the way in which participants frame it - as something that should not be enforced also hints at the idea that there is a recognition that

⁶⁹ As mentioned in Chapter, I have used asterisk (*) to indicate the emphasis a participant placed on the word/phrase/sentence.

women are neither “naturally” care-takers nor should they be expected to be the epitome of patience. Their claims of superiority must be read in the context of vilification of femininity. For instance, Anita and Naaz mention that feminism is not becoming like a man or losing but raising the value of femininity (stereotypically feminine qualities of patience, peacefulness, and care) in a context where men and masculinity have been valorized over femininity that is seen as weak⁷⁰.

Madhuri observes that women are now proving that they can do anything, and are not inferior by any means. Although she doesn’t want to compare men and women, she doubts if men can manage home and work as efficiently as women do. Even though the participants don’t articulate it as such, the belief that women do not have to choose between family and career, but can “have it all” has been described as an effect of neoliberalism’s entanglement with feminism (Rottenberg, 2014; Farris & Rottenberg, 2017). Scholarship on ‘new femininities’⁷¹ also suggests that young women’s avowal of a ‘can do’ attitude is a consequence of the neo liberal economy and late modernity that pick up on “key elements of some general feminist principles” (Harris, 2004, p. 7) to make it “a part of the common sense of our culture” (Budgeon, 2001, p. 23). Such a stance adds to the burden of double, triple, and quadruple shifts women (particularly working classes) have always had to perform (Hochschild & Machung, 1989; Fraser, 2013).

⁷⁰ An article in Hindustan times on the ways in which ordinary, everyday women understand women also echoes this: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/brunch/ht-brunch-cover-story-11-women-define-feminism-differently/story-WZ7y2C1uftFH88XLlZwJqJ.html>

⁷¹ Late modernity and neoliberalism are not synonyms. Although there is an “elective affinity” between them in terms of globalization and individualization, the former is to do with the logic of social processes, and the latter, a capitalist economy (Dawson, 2013, p. 13). In addition, gender is an integral element in both cases. Gill & Scharff (2011) propose that neoliberalism is a highly gendered phenomenon, adding a socio-cultural dimension that draws attention to the effects of neoliberalism on gender relations. Similarly, at the center of Giddens (1991) and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) theory of late modernity is the transformation of gender relations.

Despite the progress made in education and employment, and support from family and governmental initiatives such as the Beti bachao Beti padhao campaign⁷² (structural support), gender equality has not been achieved:

Naba: Nowadays, there is awareness. First they did not allow girls to get education, then nutrition, for example they would give egg only to the boy first, now they give eggs to girls also. They used to think why should girls have eggs, what do they need strength for? It used to be like that but now the meal that they give to boys and girls, it is the same, and even education wise it's the same, both boys and girls are being educated... Government also is helping with the beti padho, beti bachao program... but it is a question of azadi, we still don't have azadi. In some parts they have been given freedom but in some, not yet (FGD 5)

State-led initiatives often tend to instrumentalize girls' education, empowerment, and feminists have critiqued them as not emerging out of concern for girls and their equality but more as a way of addressing the “embarrassing” skewed sex ratio “unbefitting of an ‘emerging global power’” (Menon, 2009, p. 107), and to avoid creating unproductive members of the society and waste precious national resources (Menon, 2009; Kandiyoti, 1991).

3.2.2 Azadi in the city

Latha Mani (2014) in the context of new feminist movements, argues that the neoliberalism reconfigures the city as a space of ultimate, no rule, sex and signal free corridor that is indifferent to both human and vehicular traffic. Participants with exposure to rural contexts (either those that came to Hyderabad to pursue higher education from rural parts or those who visit their villages frequently) also seem to think that city is a space where there is unlimited freedom for both girls

⁷² The Beti Bachao, Beti padho campaign is a government initiative to address the issues of declining child sex ratio and encourage the education of girls: <https://wcd.nic.in/bbbp-schemes>

and boys. For instance, Niraj (who has come to Hyderabad from a village in Andhra Pradesh to pursue higher education) says that people who live in rural parts still subscribe to the notion that women belong to the ‘home’ or the ‘domestic sphere’, and that marriage is the be all and end all for women. But parents in the city, he says, have given girls the freedom to attend schools and colleges⁷³. Anita, who came to the city after her marriage agrees with this assessment. She was married at an early age and credits her in-laws and husband for encouraging her to study.

To reinforce his point that girls in city are better off, Sagar who comes from a small Indian town, recounts the experiences of his female friends:

I have many friends who are quite talented but they are not allowed to go outside to study or learn dance...Here in metro cities, the thinking is getting better, but in small towns, the thinking is like that only that girls should be at home and do domestic work... There are no rules for boys and from where I am, there are none at all. In my understanding, if you are from a small town and you are a girl, then you are playing life in hard mode. (Sagar, FGD 2)

He uses a gaming metaphor to describe the double whammy of living in a small town and being a girl, which requires girls to play life in “hard mode”. Phani (20), Mohan (21), and Veer with exposure to rural contexts too agree that norms regarding education, employment, clothing are changing in the city for girls and women, while the same progress has not happened in rural areas. But this view was challenged by the female participants. Shanthi (20) admits that her father wasn’t thrilled about her wearing jeans, but she took the time to explain to her father that it is her choice to wear it and that “*log kya kahenge*” (what will people say) shouldn’t matter.

⁷³ Interestingly, the University Grants Commission also seems to believe that gender equality in urban areas has been achieved, and now the focus must be on rural areas (John, 2005, p. 58)

She explains that jeans and other western wear are thought to “attract unnecessary attention” by the older generation. Phani and Rashi link dressing with culture as well and say that changing notions of *sanskar* apply to a range of activities. There was a time when *sanskar* was reflected in the way one dressed, but now just because “you go in jeans you are a bad girl, you don't come under that type right, you are grown up you need to live according to the society”, Rashi opines, with Phani pitching in, “I don't think any culture has said we have to wear these clothes.”

Where men dressed in jeans are understood to be cool and hip (Lukose, 2009), acceptable clothing for urban middle class women is a fine balance between being sufficiently Indian and sufficiently modern/Western⁷⁴, (Gilbertson, 2014), between being sufficiently modern and ‘decent’ (Chatterji, 2008). *Saris*, *salwar kameez* or *pawdas* are typically worn by ‘respectful’ women in India (Lukose, 2009) and jeans, frocks, and skirts, generally thought to be ‘Western’ are termed as indecent and provocative⁷⁵. In fact, women who choose to dress in Western outfits are accused of inviting sexual harassment and assault (Bhattacharyya, 2015). However, it has been observed that middle classes' notions about what counts as respectful dressing is undergoing a change. For instance, jeans are considered to be sufficiently modern and fashionable, and yet respectable in a globalizing context⁷⁶ (Gilbertson, 2014; Upadhyay & Ambavale, 2013).

⁷⁴ This can also be traced to the nineteenth century modernity project where women as guardians of (national) culture were expected to dress ‘Indian’ (Bhudev Mukhopadhyay quoted in Chatterjee, 1989).

⁷⁵ However, jeans are still thought to be “inappropriate”, “indecent”, and provocative. For instance, many schools and colleges implement no-jeans. For instance, following the gang rape in 2012, teachers discouraged girls from wearing jeans in order to not invite unnecessary attention: <https://scroll.in/latest/866878/nirbhaya-rape-was-her-mistake-dont-wear-jeans-lipstick-raipur-teacher-allegedly-warns-girls>

⁷⁶ Schools and colleges still prohibit teachers from wearing jeans because they are thought to be “fashionable and provocative”. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/punjab-tells-women-teachers-to-cover-up-fully-and-not-wear-provocative-and-fashi/298815>; Also see, Bandyopadhyay & Lahiri, 2012

While agreeing that there have been qualitative improvements in girls' lives in urban areas, female participants also assert that it would be false to think that city girls have the freedom to go out without restrictions:

Naaz and Naba: boys get a lot of freedom. Girls don't get a lot of freedom.

Fatima: Boys get a lot of freedom; they also get a lot of support. Suppose one has to go on a trip, boys can get permission easily, but girls cannot, there are a lot of restrictions, you can't go, how can you stay without parents is what they will say.

Nadia: I have gone through it.. Firstly, he [my father] used to say you are like my boy but nowadays, seeing the society, he is saying that he is stopping me in everything. Firstly, I used to say that I wanted to do NCC, but now they are stopping me (FGD 5)

While male participants argued that things have changed for girls and women in the city, but not in rural areas, women narrated 'small stories' to demonstrate that this wasn't necessarily true.

Chaitra: The freedom that boys get, that isn't given to girls at our home. I get really angry when I think about it... It is okay if guys roam, but if the girls do that, it is wrong. And that is still happening today. At least the society I live in, this is happening, and this is from my experience... If I ever go back home late, everybody keeps questioning me...

Niraj: But things have changed in the city, girls are able to go to schools, roam freely, grow up with so much freedom, this is not the case in villages.

Ravi: Yes, all of this is happening in the city nowadays. No one discriminates between men and women anymore, but this continues to happen in villages.

Raju: This is not there in the city. I agree.

Anupama: But we face problems, that's why we are able to say this with so much confidence.

Arti: Even after giving so many examples...?

Ravi and Raju (conceding to a certain degree): Alright, this happens in the city but very less, I think. (FGD 4)

Female participants recounted everyday experiences from within the family to support their argument about the restrictions on their mobility. Bhanu (22) admits that if it were only her parents, she would have still been able to convince them about staying out late at night. But living with her grandparents means that she is not allowed to go out in the night, and when she does so on rare occasions, she is bombarded with phone calls. Arti admits that when she returns home late at night, boys in the neighborhood comment about her “character” without a thought that she might have had an extra class at college. She says with certainty that if only her parents supported her, instead of asking her what kept her out so late, the boys in her neighborhood wouldn’t dare to pass such comments.

This is the reason why women participants, in particular, distanced themselves from blanket generalizations about cities and villages, and understood ‘sanskar’ as locality and family specific, “because that is the environment one grows up in” (Inaz), rather than in terms of rural-urban dichotomy. But parents cannot be blamed entirely for this. It is out of love for girls and to protect them from getting hurt that parents place these restrictions, argue participants. After listening to the viewpoints of the female participants, Niraj concedes that life for women in the city is only marginally better than for those in the village, in terms of freedom. However, Niraj also states that restrictions on mobility are there for a reason:

I find the city better than the village I come from. As for limitations placed on girls. Girls are like gold, why would anyone want to display gold for everyone to see, they will hide it in a trunk. Boys are like silver; girls are like gold. That’s why no one cares about boys. And that’s why parents try to provide girls with everything at home (Niraj, FGD 4)

Smriti (25) questions the practice of objectifying women as gold or referring to her as “ghar ki Lakshmi” and restricting her to the *ghar*. A similar saying is reported by Muslim women as well:

Sara: Girls stay at home and she is like the *zevar* (ornament/jewelry) of the house, so that’s why she has a lot of restrictions. This is what they say at our homes.

Naaz: It’s a very popular *proverb*

Nadia For girls

Fatima: It means *Respect* [emphasis mine] of the house is in the hands of a woman

Sakeena: A woman is the beauty of the house

Naaz: Yeah. *Ladki ghar ki zeenat hai* [A woman is the ornament of the house]

(FGD 5)

Feminist scholarship in India argues that the idea behind equating women with the status of the nation or the Goddess is a means of rendering her as asexual or sexless. Further, referring to women as gold and treating them like property further denies them the ownership of their bodies (Petchesky, 1995, p. 309). Since a woman’s body is supposed to embody the honor of the family, caste, community, and the nation (Nair & John, 1998), it is the duty of family (whether Hindu or Muslim) to protect the ‘honor’ of unmarried girls, and regulate their sexuality. In addition, framing the *ghar* as safe and public spaces as ‘dangerous’ and ‘unsafe’ is an old patriarchal trick that enables paternalistic protection and control of female sexuality (Phadke et al., 2011).

Participants are also cognizant of this link between controlling girl’s sexuality and restrictions.

Chaitra (20) questions this kind of control:

My brother chats all night, there are no restrictions for him, but when we have restrictions, we are not allowed to use mobile phones after 11, we can’t even hold mobile phone in our hands. And when we receive forwards from a boy, we are questioned, “why did he send this to you?” I am in a co-ed college, of course I

speaking with boys, we will obviously be friends, but this doesn't mean I am doing something wrong. What's wrong with hi/ hello messages and forwards? I do ask them why they don't keep tabs on my brother. Why don't you ask him who he chats with, and the content of those messages? It's your responsibility to check on him from time to time. But they never check. All these rules are for us (Chitra, FGD 4)

Like the 'Bombay' girls in the work of Phadke et al (2011), girls and women in Hyderabad too know that their "freedom is subject to knowing the 'limits', restrictions that often don't apply in quite the same way to her brothers" (p. 8). Naaz also believes that the parents' perspective is such that "they cannot see that girls need freedom; they think girls will be *attracted [to boys/men]*".

Nevertheless, this link is not questioned as a matter of one's autonomy, but as a matter of trust. It is about proving to their parents that they are virtuous and *respectable*-- that they are "good" and "think in a good manner" (Naba, 18). Arti's parents often tell her that "We have given you freedom, use it to do good things"—which in parents-speak translates to no love [sexual] relationships. The female participants' expressed indignation at being questioned by their parents about heterosexual peer networks. They defend these friendships by saying that they are a part of college life, but do not go to the extent of calling it "bhai-behen" (brother-sister) relationships or adopt the status of 'chechy' (sister) to navigate the terrain the male-female interactions in a context where only certain kind of friendships are approved (Abraham, 2002; Lukose, 2009). Anish (23), Inaz, Smriti, Prem (19) also admit that girls, more than boys are shamed for "hanging out" with the opposite sex, outside of schools/colleges. Although these stipulations are not so rigid once they start working because, as Anish and Smriti put it, it is considered as an integral part of corporate/organizational culture.

The nexus between morality, sexuality, and virginity as a matter ‘honor’ is also about power and control over women and maintaining caste endogamy⁷⁷ (Dube, 1997, p. 50; Gupte, 2013). Only Phani makes this link between love relationships and maintaining caste boundaries and asserts that one must “dismantle caste, crush it” in order to be able to live freely”. Previous research reports a studied indifference towards caste on the part of middle-class Indians to seem ‘modern’ in public, while practicing it in private (Gilbertson, 2017). A similar phenomenon appeared to take place in this context, with Phani being one of the only two FGD participants to have raised the issue of caste.

Participants also explain that the restrictions on women’s mobility isn’t entirely the parents’ fault. Rising violence against women forces parents to restrict women’s mobility, they say. Bhanu has been told that “it’s not safe to be outside, there are a lot of criminals, culprits”. Similarly:

It is the kind of environment outside. It is becoming worse day by day... what if they send the girl and something wrong happens to her? It would defame the whole family, so they are taking a *precaution*... they train her to think that she must be aloof and not go out a lot and don’t give her freedom, the rising crime rates are responsible for this (Naaz, FGD 5)

Rashi also thinks that women are uniquely vulnerable, that more girls than boys are at the risk of being sexually assaulted, and therefore girls must be careful. Like the young students in Phadke’s study, participants in this study too do find these restrictions to be *reasonable*. In fact, Rashi

⁷⁷ ‘Honor killing’ is still rampant in India. As recently as January 2020, a girl was murdered by her parents in Shadnagar Telangana for falling in love with a “low caste person”. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45570981>. In another case, a father hired a contractual killer to murder his daughter’s Dalit husband. Unfortunately, some reporters referred to this crime as motivated by “love”: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/hyderabad/2020/mar/10/all-you-need-to-know-about-hyderabad-honour-killing-2114774.html>

The (state-wise) statistics from the National Crime Records Bureau is not reliable because there is no way to track these killings: <https://theswaddle.com/honor-killings-india-law/>

admits that if she ever has a daughter, she would expect the same from her. Only if her daughter was a hundred percent sure she would be safe or could defend herself, would she be willing to send her out. "Just because our mindsets have changed, it doesn't mean everybody else's has" Naaz explains, justifying parental restrictions and also drawing attention to how social norms regarding women's presence in public spaces haven't changed. It is for this reason, participants argue, that gender equality cannot be achieved without a change in mindsets.

3.2.3 Feminism as change in mindset

Psychologizing change, Gilbertson (2018a) observes, is symptomatic of neoliberalism, with women being made to believe that they can change their circumstances "by the force of their will and techniques of self-management" (Rottenberg, 2018). Shanthi also feels that change in mindset is crucial for girls and women to become achievers. But at the same time, there is a need for change at the familial level. Participants from across FGDs questioned whether wrestler Gita Phogat would have won the Commonwealth gold medal without her father's support. It is Phogat's belief in herself, her talent, and her father's unwavering support that led to her victory, participants argue:

Shanthi: I think it is all in the mind, it's just thinking, *that is only thinking*, that he is a man, this is a woman, this is a boy, that is a girl, it is just thinking. Nothing is going to happen till this thinking changes. *They should think* if a boy can do this, then my daughter also can do this, why can't she do it? God has given everybody a brain; it is just that the way we use it is different.

Chaitra: it's the mentality of the parents that's like that, they need to change (FGD4)

The onus of changing mindsets, participants agree, falls on girls and women. It begins with girl changing her mindset to believe that she can do anything, and then changing the mindset of her family:

Naba: this change can happen with us also for instance I have two sisters and they also talk about gender discrimination and they say that you know we can also do everything that boys do and this has changed my mother's mindset... Now my mother's mentality has been changed, so there is the potential to change her friends' mentalities also, so this change will come about, but we have to try individually at home, first.

Naaz: like the movie, Jai ho (FGD 5)

Young women, in an odd way, think of parents as being susceptible and vulnerable to messages from the 'society'. Since the society is not of much help and often "influences" parents in the wrong manner, it is each to her own. Change must begin with girls first, who must then change their family's mindsets, to paraphrase Arti. The stress on this change of mindsets beginning with themselves, at home (a vernacular Telugu saying was drawn upon—"inta gelichi racha gelvali annaru peddalu"—conquer home first, and then the outside, quoted by Arti, FGD 4), finds resonance with the report submitted by Justice Verma commission that recommends a "social norms-based change" as the only way to achieve meaningful social change, revealing the limits of law-based initiatives.

Even though feminist scholarship regards material improvements in women's lives as suspect, and as a result of co-optation by various conservative and capitalist forces, young women take a more hopeful view. They credit feminism, which has already set into motion cultural changes as indicated above (ensures the questioning of inequitable opportunities between men and women, guides governmental initiatives, creates the space for a dialogue on wage gap at the macro level)

for encouraging them to change their mindsets and that of their families. Unlike the individual focus of neoliberalism or neoliberal feminism, participants speak of changing their family's mindsets so as to bring about a broad-based societal change. It is in this context that participants overwhelmingly agree that the media can help.

3.3 Media and feminism

Critiques of 'media effects' theories such as the magic bullet theory or hypodermic needle theory point out that it is not as simple as the media injecting a message. However, the participants seemed to believe that the media can change mindsets by changing the dominant media narrative. Describing the potential of media as "Pragathi" (progress) (Naba, FGD 5), participants agree that ads, movies, newspapers, social media should inspire girls and women to fight, hinting that it wasn't already being done at the needed scale. Talking about what the media "should do", Sagar says "media should show equality in some ads like dishwash soap ads, its not compulsory that only girls must wash utensils; girls clean plates and guys go out to work and earn" (FGD 2). This is in contrast to male participants' silence on sharing domestic work in Bulbeck's (2009) study.

Participants were convinced about the change feminism in media could bring about. Sagar puts it best, "It has been set in our mind that we have specific jobs. If we change how we make ads, it will change people's mind and their thoughts, the media can affect change". Making more ads or serials or movies that portray women's achievements in various fields instead of focusing inordinately on problems such as sexual harassment or what "men did wrong" (Madhuri), would inspire women to do things differently, that is, "rebel" (Jog) instead of being scared by incidents of sexual harassment. Participants argue that the focus on the solution-- changing mindsets, and

not on sensationalizing stories of rape just to boost ratings and make profits (FGDs 1, 2, 3, 5). Participants from FGD 4 and 5 in particular articulated concerns about how sensational and negative coverage would further limit their access to public spaces:

Naaz: They keep harping on the same thing. News, media, press. The same incident is repeated again and again. They don't show any solutions or what precautions can be taken, what steps are to be taken is not told.

Zaira: they don't show how to solve, but the *big issue* is harped about

Sara That is tagged as sansani khabar

Amulya: Sansani?

Everyone: breaking news!

Naba: Show problems, but also show solutions. *Same news round circle*. No solution, ever... Parents get even more anxious and are not convinced about sending us out. (FGD 5)

Naba complains that her parents refused to send her to NSS⁷⁸ camp because they weren't convinced about the safety measures. One way in which to correct this, young women in the study suggest, is to show more images of empowered women⁷⁹. Much like respondents in other studies (Kotwal et al., 2008), these young women also want to see more representations of women as achievers, as career-oriented, confident, successful professionals. While there was a time when women mostly appeared for beauty and household products, and men in automobile or finance related ads (Munshi, 1998; Das, 2000), Sukumar & Venkatesh (2011) reports that the

⁷⁸ National service scheme encourages community service at the college level.

⁷⁹ In many instances, feminist scholarship finds itself in contradiction with how women on the ground feel. Whether that be in the case of beauty contestants rejecting that they are being objectified as against the feminist stand (Phadke) or about development programs exploiting lower class, rural women (Ganguly-Scarse) or here, making a case for nuanced engagement with what women find empowering instead of blanket dismissal as 'false consciousness' (Phadke) or recolonization (Thapan, 2004).

media have complied to young women's demands of portraying empowered women outside of traditional gender roles⁸⁰.

Participants also present examples of ads that upend gender roles, such as the Ariel ad⁸¹ about sharing domestic work, Havells' 'hawa badlegi'⁸² about not treating women like kitchen appliances, Scooty pep ad with the tagline, "why should guys have all the fun⁸³" symbolizing mobility and freedom were recalled. Ads in which women play cab drivers, police officers, are cited as examples as a definite marker of change (FGD 1 and 2). Gauri, in particular, is highly appreciative of this new trend in advertising that she describes as a "new progress which is not something seen before so that's something... I am glad that there are changes taking place and the topic of feminism is being addressed lately".

3.3.1 Social media

Social media has widely come to be regarded as the new site of conscious raising, where young women are exposed to any kind of feminist organizing (Gupta, 2016). Participants in the study, too, credit social media for having them made aware of 'feminism' in the first place.

Inaz: Now that we're talking about feminism and this whole concept of feminists and upcoming feminists, like you have to credit it to the media because the media has put this whole concept out in the front and it has made people aware of it, so the reason that we are talking about it and we are here right now and we are discussing the whole issue is so out there is because the media has been able to put on such a platform..

⁸⁰ SheKnowsMedia, now known as SHE media (a women's lifestyle and digital media company) describes this turn in advertising that promotes women empowerment as 'femvertising' (SheKnows Media, 2015)

⁸¹ #Sharetheload by Ariel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJukf4ifuKs>

⁸² "I am not a kitchen appliance" Havell's coffee maker: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaJf0mNMqos>

⁸³ Why should boys have all the fun? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y97kLwoN9ag>

Jog: This all has come into existence because of the media. See if I wouldn't have been there on social networking sites or all these, I wouldn't have known about feminism... media is the main reason why people are now aware about feminism. Mainly, social media. (FGD 1)

Sagar and Mohan admit that if it were not for Facebook and other social media, they would never have heard of feminism at all. Most participants also report that it was in the aftermath of “Nirbhaya” gang rape as their entry point into feminism:

Bhanu: When the whole concept of feminism started, it was around twelfth, inter first year aroundish, there was this sudden buzz, there was a rape in Delhi...everybody is talking about feminism..

Phani: Same (FGD 2)

Yash, Madhuri, Prem also speak of mass protests in Delhi against Sheila Dixit⁸⁴ in 2012 as the time when feminism took off in India. When asked if the participants had heard of any feminists, most participants named celebrities like Deepika Padukone, Priyanka Chopra, Emma Watson.

While there was a time when women distanced them from the label of feminist (Phadke, 2020; Sinha, 2000), today feminism seems to be having quite a moment in India. It has indeed become *popular* (to borrow from Banet-Weiser, 2018), so much so that the market is colonizing feminist themes (Rottenberg, 2018a; Chaudhuri, 2000). Although participants don't describe it as such, some did critique how feminism, as a “salable idea” (Anish), has become “trendy” (Prasad), “overhyped” (Inaz), “over spoken and used so much that people don't think twice about claiming to be a feminist” (Anish). Due to this “sudden buzz” around it (Bhanu), “everybody suddenly wants to claim they are feminist” (Yash and Anish). In fact, Yash says, “one tweet from Deepika

⁸⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2012/12/violent-protests-in-india-over-rape-case/100429/>

Padukone and it is as if she has rediscovered feminism all over again”. What such popularity has done, Anish analyses, is that:

people are not taking it seriously anymore... Everyone is a feminist these days, its like that... Like these days you ask any actor about this thing ah yeah, I am a genuine feminist... but then in their own life they probably wouldn't do the same thing. Like everyone's using it, whether they are following it or not (Anish, FGD 1)

Prasad also asserts that male celebrities (like actor Farhan Akhtar) who claim to be feminist do not really understand what feminism means. “Giving up the privilege of being male is easy to say, harder to live,” he concludes. In another FGD, Pavan echoes a similar sentiment and says “it’s good to talk about but nobody takes it home”. Yash agrees that feminism has become a topic that “everybody agrees, but who is doing it?” Madhuri, like Yash, believes that feminism is something that everyone agrees on but doesn’t practice. Prasad asserts that men like Farhan Akhtar who claim to be feminist do not really know what feminism means, it is “giving up the privilege of being male. It’s easy to say, harder to live”.

Participants insist that isn’t enough to just say they are feminists (at the level of rhetoric), for each and every issue, but it must be ‘lived’ in the context of everyday lives. For male participants, this means “acknowledging that women are equals” (Pavan), and “respecting them and the choices they make” (Yash), and “not thinking of domestic work as women’s work or man’s work” (Raju).

But the double-edged sword that is the social media, Inaz observes, has made it possible for feminism to become both cool and uncool, with many celebrities realizing how profitable it can be to call themselves feminists. Both male and female participants also astutely observe that

media and celebrities misconstrue what feminism means. In order to clarify what it actually means, there was a tendency amongst the participants to explain what feminism is not and to counter how feminism is being (mis)interpreted by the media.

3.3.2 What feminism is not

Popular feminism, Banet-Wesier (2018) critiques, often misrepresents feminism as a dichotomous gender war. Participants whose route to feminism was through (social) media also observe this. They define feminism, with repeated assertions as to what it is not. Madhuri offers, “What the media does is to show that women are better than men but that is not what feminism is”. Bina agrees that “feminism is not pitting men against women”, and explains that even though her “preliminary understanding was also by popular understanding that in a way it is women who suffer and men are fine”, her exposure to academic feminist literature meant that her definition of feminism evolved to understanding that the “fight is not against men but the idea of patriarchy” and it is not just about fighting for women but “including all the disadvantaged sections of the society... breaking the idea of caste, class.”

Unfortunately, the media have “stereotyped feminists also... we are man, flower, lipstick, and chivalry-haters, we have become Nazis⁸⁵ for some people now” (Bhanu). For Gauri, stereotyping of feminists is a consequence of not having learnt about feminism “at school”. Vani (19) admits that one of her male friends “feels feminism is women are greater than men... So, the thing is he does not even understand, calls feminazi.” In fact, women participants argued that men too, “face

⁸⁵ Travelling theories and words are interesting to inquire into since they extend the meanings of those words to suit local contexts. In this context feminazi is understood as a woman who hates men or believes that she is greater than men. The term was first used by Rush Limbaugh in the 1990s to describe “a feminist to whom the important thing in life is ensuring that as many abortions as possible occur”. It has many meanings and is now the “go to term troll”. For an interesting insight, please read: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/01/feminazi-feminists-women-rights-feminism-charlotte-proudman>

the brunt of patriarchy” (Smriti) that leaves them “no choice but to be the breadwinners of the family” (Hema), “not cry” (Inaz) or “not play with dolls” (Chitra) as portrayed in the Amul ad used as a prompt during the discussions. Smriti suggests that feminism must “take men also under its wing”.

Hema draws from her own experience and says “but it is not accepted, men want to stay back and take care of family... my father, he does not earn, he takes care of the family, my mother earns, my mother is still not comfortable with the whole idea”. Madhuri, Ash, and Inaz question “why men have* to earn money” but women can choose to stay at home. Hema concludes that “those kinds of responsibilities are unwillingly pushed on to men, as much as women are forbidden from”.

But men themselves maintain that not only do they cry, but have also played with dolls as children (in contrast to the Amul ad). Raju and Anish also admit that men do cry, “like my friend’s mother passed away. He cried. We didn’t say no you can’t cry because you are a guy” (Anish). Sagar, on his part, reiterated that there are no rules for boys as such, “we are not forced to live up to some ‘macho’ image’ like she said. We have no rules, it is as simple as that.”

It can be argued that the ‘women as victim’ narrative makes it easier on the male participants to identify with feminism and as feminists. But an “excess of feminism” could turn the tables on them. Prasad analyses:

The thing is feminism when it's trying to create a balance, that is very good for the society, for the people at least, but when it tries to take off the advantages that a man has then it leans towards something that people do not like... For example, you must have heard about this 498A domestic violence section, so legally speaking it is a very very archaic and completely against men because you can file

a complaint, and even if there is no investigation, even if there is nothing, a man and his whole family can be arrested, without any shred of proof, so that is bad.

Similarly, Veer (FGD 1) also points out that the adultery law is biased, “if a married woman has an adulterous relationship and her husband reports to the police, it is that outside man who is thrown into jail. There is nothing against the women in the law”. Although the participants don’t mention men’s rights activists (MRAs), these are issues that MRAs have raised to portray men as the victims of “feminist laws pertaining to marriage and violence” (Basu, 2016, p. 47).

Despite identifying as feminists, these statements also reveal a deep-seated anxiety about losing the social and cultural advantages of being a male. It is this anxiety that leads male participants to emphasize that feminism is not about women being greater than men but about gender equality and that such equality must not be achieved at the expense of men. Agreeing to this, Phani says “feminism may be about equality” but social media makes it seem like “it is about supporting women, no questions asked”. Anish, Phani, and Sagar bring up false cases of molestation and sexual harassment against men such as the Sonapet case⁸⁶.

Male participants from across the FGDs agree that if feminism is “overused” and “misused”, then “*Mard dab jayenge*” [men will be oppressed] (Sagar). Recalling Deepika Padukone’s *My choice*⁸⁷, Yash says “Men will now start asking ‘why should girls have all the fun?’” (turning on its head the Scooty Pep advertisement on the theme ‘why should guys have all the fun?’). It is because of this danger that feminism must remain “within limits” (Sagar) and “subtle” (Anish).

⁸⁶ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/court-ends-case-against-3-rohtak-molesters-girls-may-appeal-order-1666224>

⁸⁷ Link to the ad: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KtPv7IEhWRA>

For an engaging and expert feminist commentary on the kind of feminism it represents, please read Khanna, 2015: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/KhannaNeolibFemGaze/text.html>

This sort of an understanding, then, makes the male participants say, “I am a feminist, but I am not radical, like I don’t think women must be supported no matter what” (Anish).

3.3.3 *Feminism ‘within limits’*

While male participants worried about what an overuse, or rather, misuse of feminism would mean for men, the belief that feminism must remain within limits was put forth by female participants as well. Although feminism is about fighting for women’s equality, they agree that it must remain within limits. These ‘limits’ were defined in different ways but are undoubtedly linked to sexuality and middle-class morality (as has already been noted), with participants agreeing that women must “utilize freedom” in a proper manner. In the context of feminism and fighting for rights, female participants say that feminism, understood as the fight for rights must remain ‘within limits’:

Arti: Just because we want rights, we cannot do what boys do, right? We can do it in our own way. If we want rights, we need not do what they do. We can fight as silently and peacefully as possible, and in a good manner. Just because boys are doing it, doesn’t mean we will also do it. We must have good target; we must not do stupid things.

All the girls together: But not all girls are like this

Arti: *Yeah they are crossing their limits and they are hurting their parents, that is not good.*

Shanthi: we should not do over

Amulya: meaning?

Arti: Meaning that we should not go out and do whatever we want. We see right here in college, so many things happen here, can’t even imagine how bad it is outside the premises. Why must we betray our parents? Why should we do these things? We must be like, have we attended college, did we study, why all of this? But I can’t even tell you the things I hear from girls on the bus. They spend hours

and hours, My god! [alluding to but not quite admitting to romantic relationships, and possibly flirtatious conversations between boys and girls].

Amulya: But you just said we don't want restrictions, and you are also saying restrictions are needed

Arti: Restrictions are okay, but they must also be in limits (FGD 4)

Female participants repeatedly expressed the importance of being “good”, with “good thoughts”, doing “good things”, and “utilizing freedom” in an appropriate manner, i.e., to achieve success, (Arti, Chaitra, Naaz, Inaz). They readily accept that freedom must be conditional and that moral boundaries or the ‘limits’ of middle-class respectability as set by the family and society are necessary (Phadke et al., 2011; Gilbertson, 2017; and Radhakrishnan, 2009, 2011).

In this context, participants recalled Deepika Padukone’s “my choice⁸⁸” ad as one that crosses the boundaries of morality. Inaz insists that “Feminism is something separate and there is morality that is something separate and ideas of morality should apply to both women and men”. She clarifies that feminism does not mean that women can do *anything*:

Inaz: because of the whole Hungama about feminism, and it has become a trend now what people don't realize is that people are now advocating for if a woman does it it's ok, but if a man does it it's not ok. For example, Deepika Padukone's my choice video, like she, there is one sentence where she says it is my choice to have sex with whomever I want inside marriage or outside marriage. The same thing if a guy says that is going to be a problem, like it's infidelity basically. Just because you are women, it does not mean that you can do whatever you want, and it is my choice, my rights and I am a woman so I should have the right to do it so it should be equal not like either a woman gets more or a man gets more, but equal (FGD 5)

⁸⁸<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/04/01/bollywood-star-deepika-padukone-seems-firmly-committed-to-feminism-but-not-everyone-is-getting-behind-her-message/>

Similarly:

Vani: There was this ad-- Deepika's ad, actually the thing is, there are ads which are doing good, but people take so much offence to it that they start picking up this pseudo feminist, feminazi sort of thing which makes no sense at all. She tells she can marry however many times she wants to, can be with anybody, can cheat on her husband and stuff and you see that in movies, right... Being a feminist, you say it is wrong.. but when you see this ad and say its correct.. why does that happen? (FGD 3)

At this point, I probed further, asking if ideas of morality are applied evenly to both men and women. Participants admitted that it wasn't the case-- women are "slut shamed" for simply "hanging out" with men, while men are either thought of as "studs" for doing the same or not judged as harshly as women. And yet they insist that as feminists who believe in gender equality, they must not have double standards and call women out when they are wrong (Inaz, Vani, Smriti, Pranav, Jog, Ash).

Another tangent to feminism within limits put forth by young women is in the context of the prescriptive nature of feminism (Bail, 1996). Again, it is Arti who says that "feminism must also be within limits" and not fix or prescribe for women what choices can be considered as feminist or not. Academic scholarship argues against creation of bad and good feminists (Roy, 2011; Phadke, 2020). Similarly, Gill (1997) warns against creating authentic and inauthentic feminists by reducing differences amongst feminists as unproductive and not worthy of engagement. A "positive discourse of difference" regards differences as a productive ground for debate (Gill, 1997, p. 23). It does not create an orthodoxy that fixes the meaning of feminism and a politics of correctness that in turn encourages the stereotype of 'feminazis' (Gill, 1997). An argument put

forth by young women participants addresses this from a different angle and for different purposes:

There are a few women who like to be homemakers, and there are a few women who want to go out and have a career, but you cannot exactly say this is being a feminist or that is being a feminist, so each one of them has got their own goals (Smriti, FGD 3)

It must be noted that Smriti is not disidentifying with feminism, but merely pointing out that one cannot prescribe what feminism and feminist choices mean to others. Another young woman says feminism is about “respecting women’s choices whatever they may be. Feminism must not be another thing that tells women what to do, it is about being able to choose for ourselves, and respecting our choices” (Madhuri). For women participants, then, the value of feminism lies in the fact that it empowers them to make choices.

The combination of 1) not hating men, 2) not crossing moral boundaries, 3) not being prescriptive about which choices to make, and 4) not devaluing or being anti-femininity (dismissing qualities such as patience) compel Vani, Anitha, Naaz to say “I am a feminist... but”. In doing so, they reject some stereotypical (received) notions of feminisms and feminists pervasive in the media, adhere to moral boundaries expected out of middle-class women, and argue for feminism to be non prescriptive.

Extending Gill’s (1997) arguments about authentic and inauthentic feminists, Gilbertson urges feminist scholars who critique ‘gender activists’ involved with NGOs for not being radical enough or not politically committed, to find a balance between inclusivity and feminist “purism” in order to (cautiously) encourage them. A somewhat similar argument seems to be being made here by the participants themselves, when they say feminism cannot be prescriptive. However,

while feminist scholars still ground their arguments in collective politics of some kind, participants argue that any choice is feminist, because it is feminism that has granted them the right to choose. In broader scholarship, the idea that “any choice [consciously made] is politically correct” has been referred to as choice feminism (Thwaites, 2017).

3.3.4 Feminism as exclusionary

Intersectional feminism takes into account multiple axes of differentiation on the basis of caste, class, gender, sexuality (Crenshaw, 1991). Although participants do not mention intersectionality, they do draw attention to the difficulties that trans men and women face. A few participants lament about “what kind of equal society feminism aims for” (Gauri), when “women are at least women are recognized as a gender, but what about trans people” (Bhanu). Gauri asks: “Feminism comes under the word feminine, again, even if men and women, hypothetically speaking, become equal, we still don't have an equal society, because we are only talking about the two genders.” She recalls her meeting with a trans person, “he identified himself as ‘we’-- queer, gay, trans and a feminist. They told me that there are so many genders out there. More than 3”.

These participants critique feminism for making it about men and women, without considering the diversity of experiences of people who are not cis-gendered and heterosexual. Since participants seem to draw their understanding of feminism from popular media, which insists “on a universal definition of equality between men and women as its key definition” (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 13), and predominantly addresses the cis-gendered, heterosexual, middle-class woman subject, it isn't surprising that they offer this critique as feminism's blind spot.

3.4 Discussion

Participants understand feminism(s) variously as: a) Rights based discourse that seeks to address (and has succeeded to an extent) the structural and systemic requirements needed to improve the status of women in terms of education, employment, wage gap, and political representation.

b) A critique of social relations where patriarchal culture of male domination fixes the position of women in the domestic sphere, and makes it inferior.

c) An enabler of choice

d) As a way of thinking that must be necessarily practiced or lived, and not be limited to the level of rhetoric.

In short feminisms are understood variously as rhetoric, politics (in the sense of infrastructural support provided by the State), and practice.

In all five FGDs, an instrumental view of feminism seemed to dominate, whether it was described as the “feminism card”, or “used an excuse”, or “encourages women to fight”, it seemed as though ‘feminism’ is a weapon that could be ‘(mis)used’ by women to *act* on whatever they desire. And therefore, feminism must also “be within limits”, and reasonable restrictions be placed on how it is *used*. Participants’ stress on “Women are equal now” cannot be simply read as a post-feminist sensibility (insofar as it means as having achieved its goals), because it is followed by the recognition that “still there are some rules to be followed by girls” (Ash, FGD 1). Feminism is still considered relevant because changes are yet in the making. There also emerged a singular view of feminism as being “for women and of women,” with only a few pointing to the absence of LGBTQ issues in the debate about gender equality.

Feminist vocabulary of choice, equality and autonomy, having entered the popular (non-academic) realm through media and popular culture (Chaudhury, 2000) also seems to be tempered by the discourse of middle-class respectability and being ‘within limits’ (respectable feminism?). Some restrictions are not only seen as reasonable by the participants, but also as desirable. New feminist movements led by elite and/or upper-class women (Gupta, 2016) in India revolve around the idea that women as equal citizens (not only in their roles as mothers, daughters, wives), have the right to public spaces regardless of the time and clothes. They shouldn’t have to perform middle class respectability, i.e., bodily habitus through choice of clothing and comportment of the body, i.e., walking in a manner that makes women invisible (as Lukose, 2009 describes and also pointed out by Phadke et al., 2011).

However, women participants take a different approach to this discussion about access to public spaces. They engage in the “safety conversation” (Phadke, 2015, p. 63) and locate the politics surrounding it firmly within the home. Their acceptance of conditional freedom is also different from the of ‘Bekhauf Azaadi⁸⁹’ or Fearless Freedom that Kavita Krishnan⁹⁰ called for in the aftermath of the 2012 gang rape (Krishnan, 2020). Further, women participants insist that feminism must not become yet another source of orthodoxy of dos and don’ts but empower them to make choices, even if that choice falls within the normative expectations of middle-class femininities. Since feminism has made choice possible, no choice must be judged as anti-feminist.

In reference to the male participants, there was a tendency to mark themselves as *different* from their friends or other men who misunderstand feminism and therefore are suspicious of it. The

⁸⁹<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/deep-focus/The-new-shades-of-feminism/articleshow/46489802.cms>

⁹⁰ Secretary, All India Progressive Women’s Organization (AIPWA)

only participant who understood feminism as an undoing of male privilege and power distanced himself from identifying as one. Interestingly, like participants in Gilbertson's study, men both acknowledge male domination, explicitly mentioning patriarchy as the reason for emergence of feminism and its continued relevance, but also slip into narratives of male victimhood and call for gender neutrality in the legal framework. The young men who participated in this study frame the dangers of excesses of feminism (both as rhetoric and action), as possibly resulting in "reverse discrimination" where men become the "second sex" and suffer discrimination (Coston & Kimmel, 2012, p. 373).

Unlike some academic feminists who have been critiqued for their expectation of pure politics of bringing about structural change through legal recourse (Chaudhury, 2000 and Mani, 2014 for instance) these participants locate it firmly within the home. They believe that they can change their parents' mindsets through concerted effort. This makes it markedly different from pure form of 'collective' feminist politics that has come to characterize feminist movements. As several scholars note (Gilbertson, 2018; Gupta 2016; Chaudhury, 2000), can improving one's own situation by changing mindsets of the self and family, the focus on individual choices and a call for freedom within limits (as suggested by participants) be located in the broader discourse of postfeminisms, choice feminisms, neoliberal feminisms, and popular feminisms to understand millennials' complex negotiations with feminism?

It is indeed ironic that national development feminism and popular feminism, that are considered to be oppositional forces, antithetical to feminism, have popularized feminism (something feminist activists have long tried to do as mentioned in Chapter 1) and are the routes through which most participants come into (thinking about) feminism.

Chapter 4

Feminism & Gender: Complementarity and choice in the contemporary

ghar/bahir politics

4. Introduction

“I think our generation invented feminism. This is the age of equality.” (Anish, PI 1)

As stated earlier, this research began with the questions of how people learn about gender and feminism in the post 2012 context. Following O’Hanlon who notes that, “a proper understanding of the field of power in which women have lived their lives demands that we look at men as gendered beings too” (1997, p. 1), this chapter examines how both young men and women learn about gender, gender roles, along various sites and communities, and how feminism might have informed these understandings. The method employed to gain these insights was the three-part phenomenological interview. Keeping in mind Risman’s (2018) caution that “if anything people with female identities do is called femininity and anything people with male identities do is masculinity, then ‘doing gender’ becomes tautological” (Chapter 2), I asked both male and female participants about what masculinities and femininities mean to them.

This part of the study draws on the rich scholarship of Connell (1987), Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), Butler (1990, 1993), Schippers (2007), Paechter (2006a, 2006b), Srivastava (2015b), Chopra (2003) amongst others to unpack how participants understand and experience the shifting and fluid meanings of masculinities and femininities. It also illustrates how the experience of colonization that fixed normative masculinity and femininity (Menon, 2011) continues to shape present day expectations and expressions of masculinities and femininities. Lastly, it explores

how feminism, understood as an enabler of choice, is entangled into the mix of gendered expectations and exceptions.

4.1.1 Hegemonic masculinities and femininities

Following the 2012 gang rape, scholars argued at the time that globalization and changing economic structures that facilitated the entry of women in the workforce and a restructuring of gender roles, had led to a crisis in masculinity (Kapur, 2012c) or an epidemic of dysfunctional masculinity (Swami, 2013). Kapur described the state of the Indian male as undergoing a sense of “displacement” which led to a spike in “young men” committing crimes against professional women who are just “going about their lives”. This “hostility and anger” that women’s public visibility has caused, requires “an understanding of masculine cultures that is informed by feminist methods and perspectives” (Srivastava, 2013, np, 2015b). Implicit in this understanding is that just as there are multiple femininities, there are multiple masculinities, with hierarchies within and along the spectrum of masculinities and femininities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), prompting Kulkarni (2014) to observe that the “crisis of masculinity” is in fact a crisis of only one kind of kind of hegemonic, patriarchal masculinity.

Men in positions of power, Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) argue, legitimize a particular kind of masculinity, i.e., hegemonic masculinity, in order to maintain and reproduce their dominance in the social order. This dominance is not just over women but also over other men who may not be in positions of power and practice different kinds of non-hegemonic masculinities. Further, what is considered as ‘hegemonic’ is neither uniform (it changes across contexts), nor singular, i.e., there can be more than one kind of hegemonic masculinity in any given society. Since women, in their capacity as mothers, friends, sisters also help in the construction of

masculinities, Connell (1987) suggests “emphasized femininity” that encourages compliance to patriarchal relations as one kind of femininity amongst other femininities that might resist their subordination (p.187). In the Indian context Srivastava (2015b) reiterates that masculinities and femininities are not “opposite and equal categories” because they share a hierarchical relationship with one another, where masculinity is defined in such a way that it renders feminine identity as inferior (p. 33).

Given this position of femininities within this hierarchy, Connell (1987) writes that there cannot be a ‘hegemonic’ femininity, but only an ‘emphasized femininity’, and admits that there is a need for more work on femininities. Schippers (2007), responding to this call, draws on Butler’s heterosexual matrix to ultimately assert what has been missing from Connell’s work (1987) -- masculinities and femininities must be studied along with sexualities. From such a perspective, ‘hegemonic femininity’ is definitely possible when placed within the matrix of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’. Such a framework is sensitive to the heteronormative organization of society and the processes that occlude deviant behavior, i.e., men who do not practice masculinity and women who don’t practice femininity, and who do not conform to heterosexuality. This produces an “idealized relationship” between men and women, with women actively facilitating a hierarchical relationship amongst themselves and men, therefore any enquiry into gender relations and roles would ideally take into account the voices of both women and men.

4.1.2 Feminist perspectives on sex, gender, and the lived body

Feminist theory makes a distinction between sex (biological construction) and gender (a social construction) to de-link women’s experience with their physiology. The early move by feminists, as Menon (2012) describes, was to distinguish sex and gender, sex (thought to be a stable,

naturalized, biological foundation on which gender is built) was the ground on which subordination of women was justified (biology is destiny). Some feminists (for instance Rich, 1986; Daly, 1978) argue that female biology (reproductive capacities) can be empowering, and that this subordination is wholly cultural. Some others (such as Butler 1998, West & Zimmerman, 1987) theorize “doing gender” as a socio-cultural and often normatively-driven process.

Butler (1998) proposes the idea that gender is not a stable identity “from which various acts follow: rather, gender is an identity tenuously constructed through time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (p. 519), making it possible for sex to *appear* pre-cultural, a pre-social category, on which culture does its work. Gender as such is accomplished through repetition of certain acts that change from culture to culture, and context to context. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993) delineates the manner in which in sex, a regulatory norm, is discursively produced by the very act of naming it so, and therefore is in and of itself constructed “through a ritualized repetition of norms” (1993, p. x). It is in the very performance of these norms that ‘sex’ is “materialized” as a stable category at all. Butler moves from theorizing ‘doing gender’ to asserting that sex is “a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the “one” becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (1993, p. 3). As an unstable category, gender must not be thought of as constructed onto a given body, but as “constructed through a performative process” (Channa, 2013, p. 200).

Butler also clarifies that ‘performativity’ is not a theory of voluntarist notion of gender, where people are free to choose performances, but neither are they fully constrained by “available historic conventions”, accounting for agency “understood as the process of rendering such

possibilities determinate” (Butler 1988, p. 521). Even embodiment theorists of the phenomenological tradition who treat the ‘body’ as a fact, consider it a “historic idea” rather than a “natural species” or “a priori” (Butler, 1998, p. 520), as do other post-structuralists (Moi, 2007). These performances or practices of gender change according to cultural contexts, and with the intersection of caste, class, religion, race within specific locations, over time, across one’s lifetime. To acknowledge these multiplicities, masculinity and femininity are always referred to in their plural form-- masculinities and femininities (Connell, 1995; Dasgupta & Gokulsingh, 2014).

Yet another area of scholarship from non-western societies questions whether sex or gender can be a social category or basis for social organization at all, especially as a binary category of men and women (Menon, 2012). Even within Western contexts, there has been a move towards doing away with it, most notably by Moi who argues that researchers must work with the idea of a “lived body” (Moi, 1999), since the categories of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ have become redundant. Suffice to say that decades of feminist scholarship have worked to undo dichotomies such as mind/body, nature/culture, biology/social, truth/experience, subject/object, from which follow other dichotomies like public and private, and agency/structure, and in fairly recent feminist literature, there is a push to work with the idea of the ‘lived body’ instead of gender and sex (Raman & Komarraju, 2017).

Following Butler (1998) and Connell & Messerschmidt (2005), the word ‘gender’ is used cautiously to understand how participants learn about and construct gender. Implicit in this is the understanding that participants speak from specific locations, in this particular historical moment, and that there are different ways of becoming/doing masculinities and femininities. Different feminists describe this variously; Beauvoir draws on phenomenologists Merleau Ponty

and Heidegger to speak of “body as situation” (as quoted in Moi, 1999, p. 197), Connell describes this as ‘social embodiment’ (2011) and Butler writes of this materialization as “stylized acts”. McNay (1999) draws on Bourdieu’s habitus and embodiment to point out how gender is “deeply inscribed on our bodies”, and how the body is the “threshold through which the subject’s lived experience of the world is incorporated and realized and as such, is neither pure object, nor pure subject” (McNay, 1999, p. 98). In all these abstractions, the effort is to balance agency and structure. In order to understand the various ways in which participants describe gender, I draw on these different theoretical concepts to explore both the performative and embodied ways of being male or female.

4.2 Participants’ accounts of sex and gender: “Biology in the age of equality”

It is fairly common for non-academics to use the words sex and gender, often interchangeably, since they are not informed by the sociological understanding of the terms (Windsong 2016; Kaufman, 1994). Participants in this study too used male, masculinity, female, femininity interchangeably, linking the term masculinity to men, and femininity to women.

For me, masculinity and femininity, female and a male, can only be divided as far as physiological features, we are made differently, male has more strength, physically, female ~~cope~~ covers up somewhere else, patience and resilience... Adaptive, I feel, female is more adaptive than male... Physically or biologically there is a difference in strength, no doubt...a girl is more thoughtful, the emotional quotient is higher in a female... that is how God made us.. (Anish, PI 1)

Scholars of critical masculinity studies agree that ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is always positioned in relation with femininities and non-hegemonic forms of masculinities (Srivastava, 2015b; Dasgupta & Gokulsingh, 2014). Anish D (AD, 24, IT worker) does just that by positioning

masculinity in relation with what he perceives to be femininity. Subscribing to the notion that girls and boys, men and women are equal, but biology makes them differently equal, he asserts that this does not make them *unequal*, but differently superior, since this is the “age of equality” (AD). And yet the words he chooses such as starting to say “cope” but catching himself just in time or “covers up” does not match the assertion of “differently superior”. In using those words, he also positions masculinity at a higher level when compared to femininity.

All the participants agree that being a man (and masculinity) is about strength and power, and therefore bold and courageous, and a woman (and femininity) is more about patience and nurturing, as compared to men. Even Prasanna B (PB, 19, professional sportswoman) who believes that both the genders are equal draws on her experiences to explain:

Men have more strength and stamina, which is why most women players prefer playing with them, to improve our game. I think this is also the reason why men and women don't play together because of physical differences, no matter what you do there will always be a two percent difference between men and women in terms of strength and power. (PB, PI)

But she also believes that given enough training, and nutritious food, women too can compete with men, although men will continue to have an edge due to biological differences (PB and AD). Faith P (FP, 21, University student) too says that just because she associates power and strength with masculinity, it doesn't mean that “a woman will not have those qualities or a man will not have the other qualities of a woman”.

4.2.1 Language and gender

PB complains about how girls or women who, like her, do not conform to expectations of being delicate or fragile, are referred to as “*mogarayudu*”, a term she herself loosely translates as

“tomboy”. “Whenever I am called mogarayudu, everybody in the vicinity turns to look at me. I don’t like being called or looked at either”, she complains. Even when a woman demonstrates skill and strength, it continues to be associated with masculinity as *mardangi*, and not with femininity (Menon 2012). These terms ‘mogarayudu’ and ‘mardangi’, like female masculinity, are problematic because they treat masculinity as a stable category (Paechter, 2006b, p.17).

Prasad G (PG, 25, lawyer) and AD, on the other hand, rue the fact that while there is a term ‘tomboy’ for “girls who act like boys”, there is no common term for boys who “act like girls”. PG in particular points out how this is not available for men, “If you look at it in a particular way tomboys are accepted but not the other way around...,” drawing attention to how masculinity is placed not just in relation to femininity, but also in relation with one kind of hegemonic masculinity that is associated with power and strength. Herein lies the importance of studying gender as a hierarchical relationship between various masculinities, and femininities, and how *certain* ‘masculine practices’ of girls like playing sports is acceptable, but the opposite is not allowed.

Further along in the conversation, PB herself says, “I behave like a boy, I play sports... I go out and come back late at night,” and unlike her sisters, she is allowed to stay out till late because she has to train after college. The very act of naming, for PG and AD, is a form of acceptance of girls “acting like boys” but the reverse is not true, men are often ridiculed for “acting like a girl”, revealing both the importance and limits of discursive labels. Consider FP’s analytical take on learning about masculinity or femininity, on being asked how one comes to the understanding that men are strong, and women are nurturing:

Uh, again then thinking of any of these things it's like uh why are you defining these things as masculine or feminine because I think from day 1 when you enter this world, you are taught what is masculinity and what is femininity, because then you not have the mind to question and reason, you are brought up in that very thought for a very long period of time until like I told you, that you develop a thought process of your own, even when you develop a thought of your own, if you have to define a certain thing, how do you define it, you use the very uh things that you were taught, you pick up those things (FP, PI 3)

Scholarship from the broader framework of social constructionism, including but not limited to queer theorists, from various traditions such as post-structuralism and post modernism, demonstrate the power of language in interpreting the world, and naming and un-naming experiences (as a way of empowering for the marginalized and de-legitimizing experiences when used by those who are dominant⁹¹). Participants oscillate between (biological) essentialization, and recognition of the limits of biologically based explanations in the face 'performances' or 'practice' that defy the normative. Though the participants (both men and women) link power, strength, courage, and bravery to male, maleness, and masculinity, and patience and nurturing with femininity, they also say that it is possible for men to be "feminine" and for women to be "manly". If anything, this section is a description of the naturalization of gendered behavior, but it also suggests how no repetition or reproduction, practice or performance is ever the 'same', as Butler (1993) and Deleuze (1994) remind us, and it is in the everyday performance that the possibilities of agency exist.

⁹¹ Ursula LeGuins's 'She Unnames them' is an example:
http://lchc.ucsd.edu/mca/Mail/xmcamail.2013_01.dir/pdf4gQ1dofjT0.pdf
<https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.gsu.edu/dist/6/2276/files/2018/02/She-Unnames-Them-by-Ursula-LeGuin-2dgg19l.pdf>

4.2.2 Socialization—sites and communities

Participants' descriptions about themselves, their childhood, their relationships with friends, siblings, and parents, schooling and college are also accounts of how masculinities and femininities are learnt and reified, drawing attention to the processes of socialization. Socialization must not be understood as a narrow process of adults *teaching* children. Instead, it must be thought of as a process where individuals situated along different sites (family, school, places of worship) and communities (gender, caste, race, religion), not just learn but are also active interpreters of their own worlds (Paechter, 2006a).

4.2.3 Schools

Schools have often been described as one of the main institutions or spaces of the gendering process where both regulation and subversion takes place (Connell et al., 1982; Nayak & Kehily, 2006) Some of the earliest memories participants had about being made aware of themselves as boys or girls is that of gender segregated seating arrangements at school, a phenomenon that is common across many schools in India (Iyer 2015; Mudliar & Rangaswamy 2015)

Teachers emphasize on girls sit in one row and guys sit in one row so that kind of leads you to conclude that okay they are different so that's why they are all sitting there, we are different, we are sitting here.. it would depend on your class teacher, if they were a little strict they would not let you sit beside girls, they would have separate rows for guys and girls, it wasn't uniform or anything. (PG PI 1)

Although in their own neighborhoods, girls and boys would play with each other, participants recalled how even young girls and boys would not play together during break time (intervals or recess), unless forced to do so during a “sports period”. Some of the participants say that the gender segregated seating arrangement acted as a “subtle hint” that boys and girls are different,

and that this extended to other activities as well (PG). But as they grew up, this segregation gave way to heterosociality. “We had this girls versus boys thing going on for the longest period of time, before teachers themselves made sure that we spoke with each other by organizing intra school competitions, dramas, and plays,” Carol C (CC, 23, IT worker) says. She explains that they may have done this to “prepare us for the real world where men and women have [to be] together in offices”.

PG thinks that although seating arrangement was not their decision to take, the same-sex peer groups was their choice. This changed after they grew up because “of hormones, and teachers didn't care as long as we were good academically”. For AD, the acceptance of friendship between boys and girls is more a function of “mindsets opening up”, pointing to a generational change. Extending Gilbertson’s (2017) argument that heterosocial behavior is increasingly being encouraged by the middle classes to position themselves as suitably progressive, as long as it is within limits and does not interfere with academic performance (subtle hinting that romantic relationships do), it could be argued that such an encouragement must be looked at from within the broader heterosexual matrix where man-woman relationships are the ideal, and therefore while sociality is encouraged, it must remain within acceptable limits (especially in the case of women, to safeguard caste and religious purity).

Moin F (MF, 20, college student) also reports that teachers would often try to “shame” boys for not performing as well as the girls in academics to engender a competitive spirit. PG who was not “studious like the girls” would be reprimanded by both his parents and teachers for scoring less on tests. Sana B (SB, 23, MBA student), the first in her family of four brothers and three sisters to be pursuing a postgraduate program explains, “boys don’t take study as seriously as

girls do, they start taking it seriously in high school because that's when they realize they need to study and be employable, and parents and teachers know this".

MF frames this in a different way. The reason boys are naughty and uninterested in the trappings of a school, but girls tend to operate in a disciplined manner, and therefore are better at studies is because:

According to me, girls mostly stay at home, and going out for them, even if it is to school, must feel like a change. I am sure they must be very bored at home, and this could be why school won't feel like a prison to them, but to us boys, it does. Because after school, we get to go out and play, and girls must head back home
(MF, PI 2)

The idea that boys are naughty by nature (Ferguson, 2000-- although she writes about this in a very specific context), but girls are more serious and perform better academically finds resonance across contexts. For instance, Iyer (2015) juxtaposes teachers' perceptions of carefree masculinity with restricted femininity, Sharma (2014), and Major & Santoro (2014) use the silly boys and sensible girls, Jones & Myhill (2004) employ the troublesome boys and compliant girls to describe this.

4.2.4 Family: Carefree masculinities and restricted femininities

In her ethnographic work on gender and sexuality in schools, Iyer (2015) describes carefree masculinity based on teachers' perceptions of boys as being wholly unbothered by the trappings of academic performance in schools, while girls are much more studious. However, in this study, the 'carefree' aspect was discussed by participants themselves, and went beyond the school to explain how this operates.

Describing a typical day in his childhood, PG reminisces, “it was a more carefree time basically, you didn’t care about anything like marks nothing... just play, go out, roam with friends...” Describing ‘childhood’ as carefree, and as the best time of their lives, AD, PG, MF, emphasize that growing up as *boys* in a “decent⁹²”, middle class family with no financial stress” as a “privilege” (PG). But neither are girls allowed such freedom, nor do they want it, which is why girls were like “aliens” to him, explains PG:

They have boundaries, they self-restrict themselves, in the sense, for them how society perceives them is important. Like I don’t want to generalize obviously, every girl is different.. What I was trying to mean is they try to self-restrict, they tend to self-restrict themselves and society also wants them to behave in a particular manner.. they are supposed to be quiet or maybe sober, not do crazy stuff.. Be in their "limitations", while society does not place such restrictions on guys and guys also don’t behave that way.. if you take a classroom example per se, probability wise, a girl would listen to her teacher, because she would fear repercussion, again not to generalize... like boys can do anything, but girls kind of restrict themselves and they are not supposed to act stupid like guys do (PG, PI 3)

Male participants move from the school to the family to explain how boys do not have to contend with as many rules as girls do in terms of going out with friends. Like the FGD participants, Nihar B (NB, 19, college dropout, entrepreneur) currently involved in setting up a start-up says that “there are no rules for boys as such”. In their descriptions, male participants seemed to juxtapose what can only be described as ‘carefree masculinity’ as unbridled access and freedom to public spaces, being ‘fearless’, or not too bothered about academic performance with ‘restricted femininity’—where girls are allowed limited freedom, and also choose to remain within their limitations, compared to boys. The words ‘restricted femininity’ and ‘carefree

⁹² Gilbertson notes adjectives like ‘decent’ or ‘standard’ work as descriptors for the term middle class (2017)

masculinity' are used since they emerge from participants themselves to describe how structures operate to regulate gender-- opening up for boys, and closing in for the girls, especially during adolescence as Devasia & Devasia (1991) points out.

SB agrees with such an assessment to some extent and says that girls from good homes must not loiter (*bina vajah ghoomna*) in public:

Boys can go anywhere they want, and come back home at any time, they have no care. Parents too encourage boys to go out but girls are supposed to be at home, study, learn domestic skills, come back home by a certain time, and we are asked so many questions if we are late. But in my case, I am stubborn, unlike my sisters, who listen to everything they [parents and brothers] say. It could also be because I am the youngest of all, and my father has also changed over a period of time... zamana [times] has also changed (SB, PI 3)

It must be noted there is a considerable age gap between SB and her sisters (her eldest sister is 15 years senior to her). Like SB, PB also compares herself with her sisters:

Boys are like eat, go out, loiter with friends, get into fights, get hurt, come back home. But girls are expected to stay at home, study well, and maybe learn domestic work. I behave half like a boy. I am not scared of teachers, I am into sports, and I go back home late because of my training schedule. My extended family keeps telling me this is not how girls are supposed to behave, dress, and I must learn domestic work, but I never listen to them. My family does not expect it from me either. They expect it from my sisters, not from me, because they are also like typical girls (PB, PI 2)

Lateef (1990), Dube (1998a, 1998b), Bhatti (1998) in their respective studies articulate how passivity and submissiveness are regarded as distinctly feminine qualities that are encouraged in girls across sociocultural and religious contexts. Both SB and PB also talk about this when they

say their sisters simply comply with the rules. However, they mark themselves as different, with SB also pointing to the changing times that have made it possible for her to behave differently from the norm. Despite PB's earlier discomfort with being labelled '*mogarayudu*', she describes her own behavior as boyish nevertheless.

In another interview, while discussing her plans for the future, amongst other things, she says, "*I will bring up my kids to be like me, just like me, like tomboys*". As can be seen, although female participants too construct masculinities and femininities in the framework of carefree masculinity and restricted femininity, their accounts also include rejection of some of those expectations.

4.3 Socio-cultural norms- thinking beyond carefree masculinity and restricted femininity

The framing of public spaces as unsafe for women is partly real and partly a consequence of patriarchal norms (Jayachandran, 2020). "Why girls have a curfew is what I feel is that there are different things happening right, so why put yourself in that state or in that situation, so it's better to be safe than sorry" says CC matter-of-factly. "The way men stare, I feel like asking what they are staring at," SB complains. Indeed, being stared at and being stalked emerges as a big problem, with all the female participants complaining about it. For instance, CC recalls an incident where she was followed, but she brushes it off (and normalizes such behavior) by saying, "I was followed, but nothing serious happens, these things are like normal, so I just ignore, I would rather ignore than worry about [it]." A competing narrative that there are good men who don't stare, or comment, and offer to help a woman in need also emerges in this context-- "For every bad man, there are two who aren't", says SB firmly, an opinion shared by the other female participants as well. The fact that participants must regard being looked at as

normal even if it makes them uncomfortable, points to the normalization of male gaze (as in Mulvey, 1989)⁹³.

There are multiple studies that suggest that young men perceive aggression and sexual harassment of women as markers of masculinity, also referred to as ‘aggressive masculinity’ (Srivastava, 2013; Pradhan & Ram, 2010; Verma et al., 2006). Distancing themselves from such a stance, male participants in the study move beyond carefree masculinities in order to explain that as boys grow up, they must behave responsibly. Referring to men who stared or stalked, molested or raped, as “bad men”, male and female participants clarify that “not all men are bad, in fact most are good” (NB). Young boys in Iyer’s (2015) study also differentiate between good boys (those who respect women) and bad boys (those who harass women, verbally and sexually), even while some subscribe to the notion of violence or aggression (just not against women but amongst themselves) as a particularly masculine trait, reinforcing the notion that there are multiple masculinities and multiple hegemonic masculinities as well. It is worth noting that marking violence and harassment as a characteristic of bad men risks making it about individual traits rather than reading it as a structural problem that is to do with power and patriarchy.

“In Islam, we are not supposed to look at women, but there are bad men too, it is the result of Shaitan’s mischief, he is forever looking to tempt us into sins”, MF opines. Just as women are required to cover themselves, men are supposed to avert their eyes and not stare at women, SB and MF say. Islamic norms of modesty in public spaces apply to both men and women equally (Mazumdar & Mazumdar, 2001), but both SB and MF remark that there are some bad men who

⁹³ While this may be the case here, it is also important to consider that there have been studies that point out that some women enjoy being looked at (Ghosh, 2011). In a context where sex and flirting is considered to be a taboo, it is important to engage with the thought that being stared can be a source of pleasure for some women and to understand why that maybe so.

don't follow '*nazar ka purdah*'⁹⁴ (Jeffrey, 1979) a rule that prohibits men from staring at women. There is a clear articulation between 'good' and 'bad' men by both male and female participants.

Despite the presence of good men, it is better to be safe than sorry, SB says. For FP, this means appropriate dressing is one of the ways in which to avoid being stared at. For SB, it is about women not becoming too "*sinf-e-naazuk*" (delicate and feminine in Urdu), and being prepared to face problems, and seek help if required. She also says that she wears burqa to *feel* safe in public⁹⁵ and avoids going out after dark. PB too thinks that girls must be able to protect themselves. Ironically, it is the neo-liberal understanding of taking care of oneself that enables female participants to challenge 'restricted femininity'. This is where male accounts of what it means to be a girl, differs from women's narratives that include agentic moments of challenging the limitations placed on them by their parents.

4.3.1. *Restricted (agentic) femininity?*

Like the FGD participants, young women in this phase too, emphasized how their parents were always encouraging of what they wanted to do academically or professionally, but they also had to follow rules that boys (friends and/ or siblings) didn't have to. A major negotiation with the family happens around stepping out of the home. This is further complicated by the fact that they do not see their families as oppressive as other families they knew:

There is that guilt factor that I am actually getting a lot more than a lot of kids out there, they don't allow them out of college, if the college ends at 4 o'clock, you have to be home by 4.30, calculating the distance, I knew this in Shreya's house

⁹⁴ Abraham (2010) notes that Nazar Ka Purdah is followed by men when in the company of women from a higher caste/class. This participant made no such observation.

⁹⁵ Private and public have different meanings in Islam. Within the home too, there are spaces that are considered private and public. Presence of na-mahram within the home would make it 'public' and require a woman to wear a burqa. Please refer to Mazumdar & Mazumdar (2001) for a detailed account of this.

this used to happen. Their parents used to literally calculate the amount of time travel used to take and then even one minute late, she used to be questioned. So, I used to compare a lot of things, it did not happen with me at my home, so that's why I used to feel, I have a lot more freedom than the kids out there, so is it right for to open out on these things, that was why I remained silent for a very long time.. They should trust me to make good choices... friends, relationships... (FP, PI 3)

SB also shared something similar, "I have a few friends, they are not even allowed to go out on the balcony, they are not given phones, most Qureshis are like that... they don't even allow their girls to go to their friends' homes. At least I am allowed to go out to my friends' place".

The fact that FP and SB already allowed a degree of freedom that their other girlfriends may not have had, gives these young women pause, but this does not stop them from challenging these restrictions in their own way. For FP, it was about the freedom to go out or use her phone without "constant monitoring". But she could not confront her parents because she knew she had more freedom than some of her other friends. Instead, she asked her friend to stage an intervention with her parents on her behalf. "My parents know... *I won't really loiter on the roads, especially because where I live, a lot of purane zamane ke log stay* [older generation] and *they don't like such things*," SB says, so when she does go to "Imax or Eat Street⁹⁶", she simply chooses not to tell her parents. In a way, then, being given freedom actually acts as a kind of restraint and perhaps this is a strategy that parents consciously deploy in order to encourage girls to regulate their own behavior and be within limits? This could be read as one form of benevolent sexism (as in Glick & Fiske, 1997) where parents are kinder and gentler towards girl children, but continue to justify their attitude of paternalism.

⁹⁶ Popular leisure spots in Hyderabad

Having learnt from her sisters' experiences that going to co-ed college meant that her father would be very strict with the timings, to the point of paranoia, and would expect her to come home without a minute's delay, SB chose to attend women's college. She also chooses to go to a friend's home instead of going out into the public, not just because her parents would allow the latter, but because she wouldn't have to deal with the presence of men which makes her feel "sharam". There was some difficulty in translating the word into English, it wasn't clear if she meant *sharam* as *feeling ashamed* or shy in the presence of boys. But it was neither and both, she said. As Rushdie remarks, *sharam* is a small word containing a range of emotions, "It was not only shame... but also embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotions for which English has no counterparts" (1983, p. 33). This *sharam* is one of the reasons why she wears a burqa:

I think I was in tenth, when I myself felt sharam⁹⁷, your akal⁹⁸ starts working by then, right? You become aware and feel sharam⁹⁹ that we are going on the road, that we should wear burqa. So, after completing 10th, when I started going to college, I asked them to buy me a burqa. We all wear burqas. Now I am so habituated, I don't even like going out without burqa. I am comfortable in it. Even while going to college, even in the class, we all wear burqas. It is only on occasions like parties or something when we don't wear it. Even in the class we wear, sometimes though we decide to dress up... and take photos, then we don't wear it... (SB, PI 3)

⁹⁷ Comparable to 'nanam' in Tamil which means "shyness, coyness, shame... keen moral sense" (Ram in Nair & John, 1998, p. 292)

⁹⁸ This can be likened to "buddhi" (*arivu* in Tamil) that accompanies "a transition to womanhood. In particular, the embodied construction of a specifically feminine morality and cognitive maturity (*buddhi, arivu*)" Ram, 1998, p. 292)

⁹⁹ Anjum Alvi's detailed interrogation of veiling and 'sharam' goes beyond its usual association with female sexuality and its control. She explores additional meanings such as "the Islamic principle of beauty in concealment", honor in responsibility as embodied self-control, affinity, self-respect, dignity, pride, reverence for the other, self-sufficiency, vulnerability, security and protection, embarrassment, an obligation to be humble, humiliation, shyness, reservedness, restraint, "as well as women of the house, in particular, daughter and sister" (2013, pp- 178-181).

Related scholarship also reinforces the point that in many contexts, women choose to wear burqas because the practice makes it possible for them to access public spaces (Phadke et al, 2011; Hoodfar, 1991). This, then, calls for a look at agency, that may differ from a Western, white, middle class, liberal feminist version of what counts for agency.

4.3.2 Defining agency in Non-Western contexts

Agency is about the gaps in performances expected out of ‘bodies’ (in a world where adherence to social norms is rewarded and non-adherence is punished), and this gap is defined in terms of ‘resistance’ and subversion (Butler, 1990, 1993; Clare, 2009). This kind of agency falls short in explaining the kind of agency exhibited by SB when she willingly accepts conditions or proposes to follow them to ultimately be able to pursue what she wants. The goal of the feminist project is to ultimately identify agency in all its forms, to recognize that agency is not fixed, but “must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity” (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 14–15). Just as the temporality of ‘woman’s question’ reveals the need to go beyond it, after having served its purpose at a particular moment of time in history (Komarraju & Raman, 2017; Rayaprol, 2016), the idea of agency too must be re-thought. Mahmood’s (2005) meditation on agency emerges in a post 9-11 era when there was a concerted to mark ‘radical Islam’ from ‘moderate’ or ‘liberal Islam’.

Drawing on her ethnography of the piety movement in Iran, Mahmood flags the spatial temporality of agency as theorized by liberal feminists. For Mahmood, Butler and other liberal feminists’ (mostly white) version of agency as subversion, or resignification of social norms is appropriate for the context in which it emerges and cannot be applied to all contexts arbitrarily. One must recognize “the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15),

the way in which they are embodied by individuals whose idea of personhood might be different from the perspectives offered by (different kinds of) liberal feminists. To define agency in such limited terms would limit feminists from locating agency of women across contexts, and is not sensitive to historical conditions.

Not that Mahmood rejects such a definition altogether; for instance, she seems to accept Butler's performativity theory, recognize its limits, and moves beyond it where required (Clare, 2009). She does this by suggesting that the 'body' must be understood as more than a 'sign' (Butler herself states that body is formed in and through discourse but is not determined by it, and therefore cannot be reduced to it) so as to consider not just the practices of signification, but also of corporeality, where bodies are a "medium for, rather than a sign of, the self" (Mahmood 2005, pp. 165-66). By doing this, Mahmood (2005) offers feminist scholars an alternate way of looking at agentic practices and capacities that is context and history specific. She takes issue with most liberal feminists' conception of agency, noting that it does not account for non-Western contexts (Mahmood, 2005).

Recent work on everyday resistance across different sites in India (family, classroom etc), acknowledges the individual-collective debate in South Asia where "individual agency and collective culture are in constant dynamic exchange" (Kapoor et al., 2017, p. 262). Instead of redefining agency, they expand the meaning of resistance which can be manifested in many ways-- silence, opposition, cooperation, or even ignoring someone or something (Singh 2017, p. 107).

Feminist scholarship also notes that with life achievements, education, and employment, a woman's position in the family improves, and with it their capacity to negotiate (Kabeer, 1999).

Along these lines, one of the male participants, PG, observes that girls are often treated worse than boys, men, and even women, “People judge a girl more, I mean she is bound by more rules than a woman” but as girls grow into women, they are able to negotiate normative expectations and gain independence. He says, “I mean as she grows up she gets more independence but at a younger age, 15-16 years old, a girl has more restrictions... going out of the house, going out with people” (PG).

Although female participants in this study make no such observation, it is interesting to note that they did become more vocal about negotiating with their families, with improvement in their educational qualifications (as in the case of SB and FP), achievements (PB), and employment (CC). For PB, her status of a national and international level layer, and the grueling schedule it involves means that she doesn’t have to follow norms or meet normative expectations-- like coming home early or learning domestic work, for the most part. CC’s extremely hectic schedule of sixteen hours, inclusive of working and travelling hours has made her mother realize that she needs her break on the weekends. FP and SB’s status of being postgraduate students means that they are in a better position to negotiate with their parents. But this access and freedom to public space is contingent on being able to answer questions about who they are going out with, and when they will return home, unlike their male colleagues and friends. For instance, when asked if there are any memories that stand out for her, CC fondly spoke about her first ever vacation with her friends after graduating, and how it required elaborate planning to ensure that their parents didn’t know “boys would also join us”.

As Kabeer (1999) observes, agency “can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis” (p, 438). Agency in non-western contexts may take the form of

bargaining with patriarchy (rather than confronting it outright), where norms could be verbally endorsed to serve a specific purpose that may suit the individual's immediate goals. SB's case stands out-- when her family (male members) did not allow her to work after graduation, she accepted their decision:

Men's respect is outside the home. They must work. A woman's respect is inside the home. What would people say if they came to know I worked? My brothers say that it would show they are incapable. I don't want them to be shamed in front of their friends and relatives. I agreed to that, but it also allowed me to pursue post graduation. I am the only one in the family to do an MBA (SB, PI 3)

In our fourth meeting (perhaps after having established trust), however, she let me in on a "secret" only known to the women (her mother and sisters) of the house. Her apparent acceptance of the expectations placed on her paid off, with her family accepting her decision to study further without opposition (although one of her older brothers was not too happy about it) and earned empathy from her mother who told her she could work if she was able to find a job with flexible timings-- one which allowed to her go after the men left for work, and return from work before men did. Her first job at an English language institute helped her gain confidence, but she had to quit the job as she sensed a whiff of disapproval on account of her burqa, although her immediate superior herself never asked her not to wear it. Later, a Muslim man who wanted to encourage young Muslim women offered her a similar job, which she left eventually to pursue MBA.

Indeed, as mentioned above, it is important to not be overwhelmed by what participants say about structural constraints but to also take into account what participants do in the face of a challenge they have articulated, and therefore it is imperative to note what participants say and

do (Schielke, 2009). The above anecdote also points to the complexities of intersectionality—how does one reconcile these different marginalities—gender and religion? Even while one is resisting the oppression of cultural norms, one is oppressed in the very sphere that one has taken courage to enter.

SB's "outings with friends" and spending time with them after college also takes on a new urgency, because "everything will change after marriage". This is a sentiment shared by other women participants as well, "There is no time like the present, already with my shift, I hardly get any time or energy to go out, after marriage and kids, there won't be any spare time", CC says.

4.3.3 Transitioning into adulthood: Responsible femininities and masculinities

Work on middle classes and the making of respectable femininity notes that women are expected to become mothers and are socialized in such a way that they are prepared for this role (Donner, 2008; Radhakrishnan, 2011 in their respective work¹⁰⁰). All the young women in this phase of the study have been told at one time or another that they need to learn how to take care of the family in preparation for the future. While most middle classes can afford to employ domestic help for quotidian work, and those on the higher end of the socioeconomic spectrum are also able to afford nannies, in the case of these participants, politics of gendering is centered around quotidian work-- issues of cooking, making the home look presentable, in anticipation of the future when they must take care of their children, and ensure well-being of their own families.

My mom says you are not able to take care of yourself only, how will you take care of your family later?... *Her later obviously means post marriage, now only*

¹⁰⁰Amrita Nandy's (2017) work stands out since she explores experiences of 'deviant' women who reject motherhood. Following Nandy, Chandni Bhambhani & Anand Inbanathan (2018) also ask why women choose not to have children. Urvashi Bhutalia's (2013) autobiographical essay "naturally childless" also delves into some of these normative expectations.

you are so lazy, you will not do anything, *how will you manage after marriage*. Both my mom and dad, my dad rarely, but yeah she will tell *you have none of the qualities of a girl*. Tell me now, please sit and tell me what is ‘*qualities of a girl*?’ I have to cook? You are also teaching your son right now that you cook, you help your mom, you are also teaching your son, but, according to you all those are ada pillala lakshanalu no why are you teaching him then? What is ‘*qualities of a girl*’, uh, you know *you should be good, you should comb your hair properly in the evenings*, sit properly, you should be neat, you should not be messy, you are not tidy, keep your things clean, do stuff in the house, help your mom, wake up early, things like that... you are also teaching Rakesh to do similar things. (FP, PI3)

She proceeds to clarify her stand that this does not mean she will not cook but that “there will be some choice and space where everybody can do, it’s not that you will be put into a situation where only you should do, it’s not like that... my husband could know cooking, or my in-laws could cook for me”. FP’s expectations of a husband who has learnt to cook [specifically] is shared by CC, PB, and SB too, but they all seem to draw the line at cooking. Taking care of children, cleaning, sweeping, and doing the dishes or washing clothes are not a man’s work, in SB’s opinion, “If he is single, then it’s okay, but when there’s a wife a man should not do it. A man’s respect is tied with the outside, and a woman’s inside”.

Similarly, FP too believes that when men are in-charge of the household, “charm or kala is missing in the house”. CC, who lost her father as a child, says that she misses having a “man’s presence” in the house, and would much rather want her husband to take care of the things outside the home, and that they can always employ domestic help to do household work, if need be. These women also believe that mothers are best suited to taking care of children, and perhaps, “become a housewife” if required. It is in this context that both religion and feminism

are implicated (explored in section 4.3.4). What marks the transition to adulthood for these young women is having a family of their own and the responsibility of taking care of them.

Responsible masculinities

For men, too, ‘becoming a man’ involves transition from carefree masculinity to a more ‘responsible masculinity’.

One thing is more responsibilities I guess.. I mean that’s for everyone, but I was extremely carefree... I didn’t envisage the kind of responsibilities I will have. I am starting to understand that I need to take care of people.. mom, dad, aunt, uncle, and till now if I didn’t do anything substantial in my life, I am entering a stage where there's a lot more at stake, I need to be successful, I need to have a career, and I need to be rich enough to make sure my family has a comfortable life.. Being a boy means no responsibility. It is a privilege, more than being a man... Being a man is having responsibilities, you have to take care, earn money, build a career, etc.. Being a boy, you don't have to do anything of that sort, you can be an average kid who scores decent grades, you can do whatever you want.. it is very chilled out, there is nothing to do.. being a boy is extremely privileged.
(PG)

It seems as though there is no crisis of masculinity felt by participants, since these men neither talk of aggression as a marker of masculinity, nor do they themselves feel a crisis in reference to gender roles. Like Pradhan & Ram’s participants (2010), they are convinced that it is their responsibility to be ‘providers’ and ‘breadwinners’. NB and MF too reflect this concern about making something of themselves, earning enough money to lead a comfortable life. AD with two years of professional experience seems to be a tad more confident about his professional success and is looking forward to “studying abroad”. However, as men who are either new to their work, or are yet to enter the workforce, it is not with the quiet confidence of Radhakrishnan’s (2011)

male IT workers with more than 5 years of job experience, but with a little trepidation that participants talk about making something of themselves. They frame masculinity in terms of responsibility towards parents, siblings, and eventually a wife and children, echoing Menon (2012, p. 68) who observes that unlike the “autonomous disconnected masculinity familiar from Western literature”, South Asian men’s patriarchal privilege is defined within a network of responsibilities towards their family, i.e., sisters, younger brothers, parents and eventually a wife and children.

Literature on ‘emergent masculinities’ explores fathering done by men in single parent families, fathering by gay men, and in middle-class families, and suggests that globalization, economic changes, and exposure to media images has changed the way in which men perceive their roles as husbands and fathers to a certain extent (Inhorn et al., 2015; Sriram, 2011, 2019; Sriram & Navalkar, 2013; Kumar, 2019). Far from the emotionally distant, stoic father mentioned in older literature (Thapan, 2001; Kakar, 1978), this new literature suggests that fathers are active participants in child rearing.

A recourse to conventional gender roles does not mean that male participants think of domestic chores and child rearing are *entirely* a woman’s job. AD in particular says that he is uncomfortable with the idea that grown men expect a woman to cook for them. He credits such a thought process to his mother, changing times, and his questioning attitude for his belief in feminism (understood as gender equality) that makes it possible for him to not think of chores as men’s work or women’s work. He also adds that unlike his friends who want “homely girls, whatever that means”, he wants a marriage of “equals”. He explains, “I know how to cook... I can take care of kids, I mean I already babysit my neighbor’s kid... but it [marriage] should be even like that, like a barter system. Equals.”

Like AD, NB's mother too wants him to learn to cook so he is independent, and doesn't have to depend on her now, and his wife in the future. MF who used to help his mother in the kitchen to give her company, lately hasn't been able to do it because of academic commitments. He also says that he is more than willing to help his wife when he gets married, "from time to time, but not always, because they also need a break", he clarifies.

Male participants in this study don't mention mediated images of fatherhood, or economic changes, for their ideas about what fathering involves. Instead, their experiences of having a distant, non-communicative relationship with their father has made them rethink the kind of relationship they would ideally like to share with their future children. Barring AD, other participants describe their father as "a typical father, head of the family... Silent..." (PG) or "he talks very less" (NB and MF). In order to share a closer bond with any children they might have, they would like to be more like their mother who is emotionally closer to them and understands them better.

Yet, these views must be balanced with the 4 male participants' belief that women would inevitably *choose* to be with the family, take care of them and be responsible for its general well-being, while men would choose a career to *provide* for the family. Again, they draw on their own experiences to explain this. "I know a lot of women, including my own mother who chose family over career" (PG). Similarly, AD also says, "My mom chose to be a homemaker, but I also have an aunt who loves her career and chose that, but again, she is an exception, not the rule". Inevitably, then, they agree that most women, if not all, would choose family over profession and therefore would choose to take care of the children and other aspects of maintaining a family (PG, AD, and NB). This manner of speaking, in some sense, was the participants' way of not dealing with the anxiety of facing the "exception" and taking comfort in what they believed to be

the rule. The responsibility male participants feel towards their family is more financial, and to a lesser extent about “supportive practices... of care-work” that characterizes “profeminist men” (Chopra, 2003).

Even female participants agree that once married, and especially after children, women’s career takes a backseat, and even if it doesn’t, women *can* multitask, unlike men (echoing the ‘new respectable femininities as can-do femininities’ described by women from the FGDs). For MF, SB, and FP, this is more to do what religion tenets say about women’s role in the family (explored below). Women’s narratives emphasize (essentialize) and glorify the role of a woman as a mother who “gets it naturally, unlike men who have to read books and learn about parenting (CC)”. Similarly, SB also feels that a woman’s role and respect is tied to the domestic and the family, “unlike men who have to work, women’s role and respect is tied to the domestic. That is how Allatallah intended”.

Some participants explicitly mention religion in relation with gender. MF and SB believe that this is how “*Allahtalah* made the world”, and FP puts her faith in the ‘origin story’: “I am a Christian and I know like the Bible, I believe in the creation that happened, God saying that a man has to toil and work hard and a woman has to give birth.” Although CC too believes that women are natural mothers, she doesn’t particularly refer to her faith.

SB, MF, and FP repose their trust in their religion, to interpret why women are better suited to take care of children. SB asserts, “a woman’s work and respect is in the house, she must take care of family and children. A man’s place is in the world, his respect is outside of the home. That is how *Allahtala* designed, and it is how it is”. MF also says something similar, “a woman’s

work and respect is in the house, she must take care of family and children. A man's place is in the world, his respect is outside of the home. That is how *Allahtala* designed, and it is how it is."

Even though the participants who identify as Hindus echo similar thoughts, they draw on their own experiences within families for believing in conventional gender roles and do not cite any particular text such as the *Manusmriti*. Referring to this as "authorless authority", Guru and Sarukkai (2019, np) observe that even though people may not "not ostensibly draw from such texts" or indeed have no knowledge of such texts, it is inscribed in their ways of being. This is problematic because hierarchies of caste, and in extension, gender appear to be natural, and non-contestable. In believing that their belief system is universal and others are exceptional, these narratives also bely the majoritarian way of speaking, especially when seen through the lens of heteronormativity.

4.3.4 Religion, feminism, choice

Feminism's relationship with any religion is fraught with tension (Bakht, 2007), especially Islam that is considered as particularly aggressive and oppressive towards women (Ahmad, 2008). But Islam, or any other religion, both shapes and is shaped by social actors embedded in concrete contexts of their lives. Feminists from across faiths have reinterpreted texts through feminist lens, to move away oppressive androcentric interpretations and invest subversive meanings into them. Samhita Arni & Moyna Chitrakar's '*Sita's Ramayana*'¹⁰¹, and the re-interpretation of personal laws by Islamic feminists¹⁰² are instances of such interventions.

¹⁰¹ Sita's Ramayana is a reinterpretation of Ramayana from Sita's perspective published in 2001 by Tara Books: <https://tarabooks.com/shop/sitas-ramayana/>

¹⁰² The project or the movement of women reinterpreting their religious text that had so far been androcentric has come to be known as Islamic feminism (Vatuk, 2008)

While feminist discourse in India was inclined to be (mostly) secular during the seventies, the rise of right-wing nationalism and their (BJP's) push for Uniform Civil Code (UCC) gave Indian feminists a pause (Chaudhury, 2000; Phadke, 2003). Further, when the law commission had asked a range of stakeholders to respond to their questionnaire on UCC to revise and codify family laws, Anveshi resource center for women critiqued¹⁰³ the move for targeting Muslims by pointing at the lacunae in their personal laws ("Anveshi response to law commission", 2017).

The resurgence of right-wing nationalist politics by the BJP, cemented by the 2014 electoral victory, has also led to a targeting of minority religions¹⁰⁴, especially Islam¹⁰⁵ and to a lesser extent Christians (often labelled as "rice bag converts"¹⁰⁶ on Twitter by "Internet Hindus"¹⁰⁷) means that one cannot read participants' narratives about their beliefs in the same way as one might an upper caste, middle class, Hindu narrative.

MF, in particular, is extremely aware of the way in which Islam has been ridiculed globally as oppressive to women. Having heard about feminism in the context of the Kathua rape case¹⁰⁸, he remarks:

Men and women can never be equal in Islam... but as generation changes, rules change, if I were to follow Islamic laws strictly, I wouldn't have been here talking to a strange woman.. We have changed, as generations change, now you see Muslim women are working like you, they are into sports like Sania Mirza, but

¹⁰³ <http://www.anveshi.org.in/anveshis-response-to-law-commissions-questionnaire-on-the-uniform-civil-code/>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/why-minorities-feel-alienated-in-india/article27407047.ece>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/lynching-in-india>

¹⁰⁶ A trope coined by the Hindu nationalists to refer to Christians who are accused of converting not due to their belief, but for material benefits <https://scroll.in/article/967694/why-are-hindutva-online-armies-so-angry-with-indias-stand-up-comedians>

¹⁰⁷ The term "Internet Hindus" is borrowed from Sahana Udapa's (2015) work on right wingers as the new ideological warriors online

¹⁰⁸ An eight-year-old Muslim girl was gangraped and confined in the Hindu dominated area of Kathua: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-43722714>

ordinary Muslim women must still stay at home, and take care of children. That is their work. Will things change? They might. *Allahtala* may have planned for these changes to take place, one will never know. If I have a daughter and a son, I will treat them equally. If my daughter is not allowed to go out, then my son won't be allowed to look at women either... If my daughter has aspirations to become a doctor or something that will require her to go away from home, I might change myself and allow her to go, but she must follow the Islamic way of life. My son, too, must. No drinking, no dating, no wearing inappropriate clothes, in its rules, Islam is fairly equal. And they must follow it. (MF, PI 3)

In an echo of this, SB says, she too would encourage her children to pursue what they want, whether it be education or employment, "But girls must not do like over like boys, they cannot just go out like men. It is not safe. She should know her limitations...". MF's observation about "ordinary Muslim women" being unable to transcend the limitations of '*ghar*', in particular points to the intersection of religious tenets and class. However, it must be noted that the Quran does not legitimize "gender hierarchy, but the person making interpretation thereof and the context in which it is done" (Ahmad, 2008, p. 551).

SB, who understands feminism as gender equality as well states that, "*Allahtala* didn't make men superior, or women inferior, he created a balance, we take care, they earn, we have our roles to play, take one out of the equation, the family won't run. That is feminism, respect for what women do". Asked if women are not forced to stay back at home, SB reacts, "it is also a choice, *zamana* has changed so much, it will change further. I wanted to study, I did. I wanted to work, I did. I want to be a homemaker and have children. Equality means respect for choices also na?" SB and MF both understand feminism as gender equality, rather complementarity, where each gender has a specific role to play in the family and neither is less or more worthy. Although SB

doesn't state it as such, she also seems to be hinting towards understanding feminism as enabling choices and demanding respecting for these choices.

This also points to the need for an intersectional understanding of gender and the negotiations that need to be made in different socio-cultural frameworks. They both believe they are feminists because they believe in complementarity, and that Islam treats men and women equally, especially in the rules they must adhere to. FP is clear when she says, she is not a feminist because it has already achieved what it had to, "equality" and is now "fighting for causes which are actually bringing down the image of women, saying you can't be patient or nurturing .. It has become anti-feminine". She emphatically rejects feminism because "feminists would come up to me and say why father also has equal responsibility, why he shouldn't bring up a child...but I think that there is a connection that a mother specifically has to do with a child". Moreover, she doesn't need feminism because she has never faced any oppression, and her choices have always been respected by her family. In a roundabout manner, she credits feminism for having made equality and choice possible, and having overstayed its welcome has now become anti feminine.

As for the Hindu participants, there is no mention of religion per se. PB has never heard of feminism. AD identifies himself as a feminist as long as men are not unfairly vilified (he repeats some of the points he made during the FGD). Interestingly, NB understands feminism to mean oppression of women, and feminists as those who suppress before admitting sheepishly, "okay I am not sure what it means, but I believe in gender equality". Given the considerable gap between FGDs and phenomenological interviews, PG says that he has had time to reflect on feminism. He clarifies:

Theoretically men can say they are feminists, but when it comes to actually being deprived of something that they have been enjoying for generations, will they still be ok? I can tell you that yeah I am a feminist. I don't like all this... but when the time comes for something to be taken away from me, I would be like this is bullshit to take this away from me. Like I have this power structure, I have a privilege that I don't want to be deprived of. (PG, PI 4)

He draws on how experiences to elaborate on what kind of deprivation:

I have a colleague, she is next level, she is the national chess champion, she passed out from NULSAR with a gold medal, she has worked in all the top law firms in the country. But when a client interacts with me... when a judge interacts with me is different from the way he interacts with her. He pays attention to what I say, and I can like tell, but she is like she is way more qualified than me, so I know I mean it is definitely privilege it is nothing else, it is male privilege (PG, PI 4)

It is for this reason that he believes that feminists “need to ask nicely, you need to snatch, you need to protest”. But he also believes that feminism cannot change men’s mindsets, “men have to figure it out on their own. I don't know what feminism has to offer to men but if some change has to take place it has to come from inside.”. And when enough men question their privilege, “which is not going to happen anytime soon”, then there will be true equality, he concludes. What PG is describing here can be described in, to use Connell’s words, "complicit masculinity" where men may not defend patriarchy vociferously, but they continue to reap patriarchal dividends, i.e., a range of benefits men enjoy on account of patriarchy (Connell, 2000; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

In an astute analysis, PG draws attention to the difficult relationship men share with feminism. In fact, scholars in India, who have recently started to think about men’s relationship with feminism

note that theoretically, feminist standpoint can be achieved by men as well (Chowdhury & Baset 2018). What this entails, Sircar (2018) notes is to give up the kind of patriarchal dividends that PG describes, both professionally and in the domestic sphere.

Chowdhury and Baset (2018) recommend that it is wise to ask why men would ally with feminism, and what could possibly be the impetus when feminism challenges the residual power that patriarchy gives to all men irrespective of caste, class, race etc. A troubling aspect in AD's narrative, the only participant who was most vocal about being a feminist was the way in which he marked himself as different from his male friends, and yet, like the others was convinced that women will inevitably *choose* the domestic and child rearing. PG remains the only participant who spoke about how male privilege spills into different spheres, while other participants explicitly point out to the *ghar* and family, and the choices made in this context, as the site where feminism plays out, and where (dis)identification with it happens.

4.4 Discussion

The private/public or the '*ghar/bahir*' dichotomy that has been at the center of feminist movements and theory for centuries (Pateman, 1983; Uberoi, 2003) continues to find relevance in the contemporary context, playing an important role in the manner in which individuals are socialized in relation to the world and into domesticity on the basis of sex, thus resulting in a certain construction of gender norms. This dichotomy which existed even before the colonization of India (Chakravarti, 1993), was merely replaced by a new patriarchal structure with the creation of 'middle classes'. The various constructions of the 'new Indian woman' that started with the modernity project continues to evolve to accommodate a variety of macro level structural changes, and is now infused with feminist vocabulary of choice and equality. The 'new

Indian woman’, then, continues to have heuristic value, with the category undergoing subtle changes to accommodate neo-liberal ideologies.

Recent scholarship on new respectable femininities draws on the colonial moment to historically contextualize this dichotomy and explicate its relevance in the current context. Radhakrishnan (2011) in her work on middle class IT women (which has inspired similar work to be undertaken in other South Asian countries), Phadke’s (2011) loitering project, Gilbertson’s (2017) nuanced work on gender and middle classes, work by this author on feminist humor (forthcoming, 2021), draw on the woman’s question in the national movement, altering us to the appositeness of the *ghar* and *bahir* in contemporary contexts, and the formation of new respectable femininities. Domestic space in the pre-colonial times has been redefined as any place that can be associated with the ‘*ghar*’ as long as women can make claim to it, “the physical location does not determine the designation of particular spaces as private or public, it is the appropriateness of the location in terms of the assigned gender roles that makes it private or public” (Channa, 2013, p. 199).

The question then is, as Taylor (2003) and Harris (2004) ask, albeit in different contexts, what is new about new femininities? For both Taylor and Harris, this newness is linked to the rejection of shame associated with femininity and an assertion of girl power, as a consequence of feminist activism. The FGD participants too, both male and female, understand feminism as having begun this process of change of not looking at femininities as inferior. Similarly, participants in this phase too speak of equality of genders, and a ‘can-do’ femininity. It must be noted that the content of such equality is to undo the hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity. All the participants agree that feminism enables this transformation and women participants assert that feminism is about enabling and respecting women’s choices-- even if they choose the *ghar*. In doing so, these responsible femininities can also be read from the

“respectability” lens, and as such can be located within the heteronormative frame. Therefore, these responsible femininities must be read as an extension of new respectable femininities, and can be read as a variant of hegemonic femininities as well.

Just as femininities are marked by continuities and changes, masculinities have also undergone changes. The ‘softer man’ or the ‘new man’ that Dasgupta & Gokulsingh (2014) talk about must be read as a consequence of the “feminized service sector” where men must cultivate both “enterprising personality traits as well as develop “soft skills” of self-presentation and communication” (Goopthu, 2009). The kind of masculinity participants describe in this study definitely moves away from the hegemonic aggressive masculinity that Srivastava (2013) and Kapur (2012) describe and caution against.

However, within the domestic sphere, responsible masculinities are understood for most part in terms of normative expectations of providing for the family in economic terms, by both male and female participants. This makes child care or other kinds of domestic work a choice for men. Their understanding of feminism (and religion) contributes to and is limited to the notion that genders are complementary. Participants make an effort to not render masculinity superior or femininity inferior, and to speak of genders as complementarity, albeit in heteronormative dichotomous terms. Therefore, the kind of responsible masculinities, male and female participants describe, can simultaneously be understood from the lens of hegemonic and complicit masculinities. Drawing on these narratives, it is possible to describe restricted (agentic) femininities, responsible, respectable femininities and carefree masculinities, responsible masculinities, please refer to table 5:

Masculinities, femininities and feminism	
Restricted agentic femininities	Girlhood is described as a slow build up of rules, specifically in reference with access to public spaces. These rules are negotiable. Girls who perform well in education or are achievers in some way are able to negotiate these rules better. Girls are also able to resist rules through a variety of strategies such as verbal agreements with rules whilst not following them in action. As girls grow into women, with education and employment, they are able to deal with these even better. I borrow the term ‘restricted femininity’ (Iyer, 2015), and suggest the inclusion of the term agentic to account for agency in the face of structural constraints.
Responsible femininities	The transition from restricted femininity associated with girlhood to adulthood is marked by responsible femininities. Women become responsible for their own self and also their families, more so in terms of care work. This comes from the idea that women can multitask and their general belief in “can-do” femininities as a consequence of proliferation of feminist ideas. However, when looked at from within the lens of heteronormativity, this can be understood as an extension of ‘new respectable femininity’. I borrow the term “new respectable femininity” from Radhakrishnan (2009). Since their descriptions leave in tact the heteronormative structure, this can be read as a variant of hegemonic femininity as well.
Carefree masculinities	Boyhood is described as carefree, where there are no rules at all—whether in terms of education, access to public spaces. This term came from the participants themselves but has also been used by Iyer previously (2015).
Responsible masculinities	The transition into adulthood for boys is marked by assuming responsibility of providing for the family. This also has shades of complicit masculinity-- men do not offer vociferous support of patriarchy that renders femininity as inferior, but they do not want to give up patriarchal dividends either. However, since such an understanding leaves child care and other domestic work as a choice, this can be simultaneously located within complicit and hegemonic masculinities. Additionally, they credit feminism for their understanding that gender equality is about respecting women's choices and that femininity is not inferior.

Table 5: Masculinities and femininities

This chapter draws from and contributes to scholarship in the areas of new femininities, critical masculinity, men, masculinities and feminism. It begins with feminist perspectives of sex, gender, and the lived body and how participants construct gender. The participants in this study make a distinction between masculinities and femininities in relation with age. Describing

boyhood as carefree, and girlhood as restrictive, male participants observed that girls are restricted when compared to boys, men, and even women. Women's accounts of their girlhood, though draw attention to agentic moments, where agency must move beyond simplistic explanations of resistance and subversion to include a spectrum of activities, including strategic docility sometimes (such as in SB's case). Their position to negotiate improves with achievements, education, and employment. The transition from childhood to adulthood is defined in terms of responsibility, where the *ghar* and *bahir* play a very important role. Although male participants talk about supportive practices, they also continue to subscribe to conventional gender roles to a large extent, as is evident in the way they articulate their concerns about everyday life. These men do not seem to experience any crisis in masculinity because they are convinced that women will choose the domestic.

Whether they think of it as biological design or God's will, participants' constructions of masculinities and femininities echo findings from scholarship in the above areas in key aspects, such as their roles within the family, especially in terms of mothering/parenting. It diverges from the established scholarship in terms of engaging with how participants think feminism changes the tenor of gender relations ever so slightly, one that cannot be grasped when looked at from a static viewpoint. These narratives demonstrate how the '*ghar*' continues to be important, where femininity is defined in essentializing terms of nurturing, patience, and motherhood. While women expect men as husbands and fathers to perform supportive practices, they are thought to be unable to parent or take care of the household as well as women. Some of these accounts by men and women also speak to the interrelatedness of social, economic, and religious institutions, and their embeddedness within it. Their beliefs and values are mediated/moderated by religion, class, (caste was hardly mentioned, perhaps because it is considered to be inappropriate and

because of middle classes' "compartmentalization" that considers caste as a private practice, as Gilbertson, 2017 notes).

The participants are of the opinion that taking care of children is mostly a mother's job, but occasional help from the father is not only expected but also desirable, and men express a desire to have a closer emotional bond with their own children, than the one they share with their father. They also agree on feminism as gender equality where girls/women must not be discriminated against and be encouraged to pursue what they want, academically and professionally. FP's twofold disidentification with feminism (on account of it having achieved what it was supposed to-- equality and her choices being respected, and therefore not oppressed and for becoming "extreme" in the causes it fights) can certainly be read from a postfeminist frame, and is rather revealing. The way in which she articulates it is an acknowledgement of how feminism has made it possible for her choices to be respected in the first place.

If the preceding chapter pointed towards how 'choice' (within limits) is an important component of feminism and only hints at its content (choosing and respecting the domestic instead of vilifying it), this chapter, by examining how participants think feminism informs their understanding of gender (roles) points to the content of these choices more firmly.

Chapter 5

Feminist mothering: Content, values, and the lived practices of feminist mothers

5. Introduction

“Meet the feminist parents who are raising sons in a more equal world”¹⁰⁹ reads the headline of a Vogue article. Another article in 'SheThePeople: The Women's channel' hones in on how “we’re raising our girls to be strong, fierce, badass, outspoken women, but on the other, we’re pretty much raising our boys the same way we always have been doing all these years” and urges parents to start “*Raising A Feminist Son*”¹¹⁰. Yet another article on the same platform is about “9 true stories of Indian families being feminist allies to their daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law”¹¹¹, because “There are few things as powerful as a man standing by his wife for taking on patriarchy, breaking new ground in places she isn’t expected to”.

Just as there has been an upswing of articles on men and feminism in the last three or four years (Chowdhury & Baset, 2018), there has been an increasing conversation around Indian families and feminist parenting in the popular media as an important avenue to bringing about real social change. Right from teaching boys about consent, to moving away from stereotypical notions about men being breadwinners and women nurturers, and growing up with strong women role models, these articles seek to open up a conversation about feminist parenting. However, barring Phadke (2013a; 2017) and Nandy’s (2017) work, little scholarly attention has been paid to mothering from a feminist perspective in the Indian context, a lacuna that this chapter attempts to address.

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.vogue.in/magazine-story/meet-the-feminist-parents-who-are-raising-sons-in-a-more-equal-world/>

¹¹⁰ <https://www.shethepeople.tv/motherhood/raising-feminist-son-gender-equality/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.shethepeople.tv/top-stories/9-true-stories-of-indian-families-being-feminist-allies-to-their-daughters/>

The chapter begins with a brief outline of the feminist perspectives on motherhood and feminist mothering. It addresses the questions of what feminist mothering means to [self-identified] feminist mothers and their partners (aged 35 to 55 years) come into feminism, their identification with it, how feminism informs their choices, and the different ways in which feminism (not just limited to mothering) is lived and played out in the everyday through the choices they make. It also examines the strategies and materials feminist parents use to encourage the feminist value of critical and oppositional thinking in their children.

5.1.1 Feminist mothering: The 'Western' perspectives

Feminism and feminist theory share a contentious relationship with motherhood. Radical-libertarian, material, and Marxist feminists¹¹² like Wollstonecraft (1792), Beauvoir (1989), Frieden (1963), Firestone (1970), and Eisenstein (1999) consider reproduction and maternity as oppressive and as the underlying cause for denying women their education, rendering them completely dependent on their husbands. Firestone famously decries, “The heart of woman’s oppression is her childbearing and childrearing roles”, and that they are “twice doomed” biologically and socially, first when they are pregnant and have no control over their bodies, and then when a woman as a mother is relegated to the home to take care of children (1970, p. 72).

bell hooks critiques the outright rejection of motherhood by white feminists for ignoring the experiences of black mothers who were “working to create a homeplace that affirmed our beings, our blackness, our love for one another as necessary resistance” (1990, p. 46). In contrast to the experiences of white mothers in nuclear families, where child care falls solely on the mother, child rearing or motherwork in black communities is a collective effort where biological and

¹¹² I borrow these terms from Tong’s comprehensive work on feminist thought and theory (1998, p. 3)

other mothers work together to teach children to take pride in their heritage and also protect themselves in the face of racism. As Patricia Hill Collins (1991) notes “A substantial portion of Black women's status in African American communities stems not only from their roles as mothers in their own families but from their contribution as community mothers....” (p. 174). But even these more moderate accounts of motherhood caution against the “cult of domesticity” that essentializes and romanticizes motherhood (hooks, 2000, p. 135; Takseva, 2018, p. 177).

Straddling the middle ground, between the total rejection of motherhood and its glorification, is the nuanced position Rich (1986) takes in her seminal work on mothering. Drawing from a range of disciplines (literature, anthropology, psychoanalysis), as well as the work of scholars like Audre Lorde, and her own experiences (indeed, most works in the area of motherhood studies are autobiographical in nature), to differentiate between the patriarchal institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering. Against the patriarchal, i.e., male-defined and controlled institution of motherhood that is deeply oppressive to women, is potentially empowering ‘mothering’ that focuses on woman’s *experiences* of mothering. In “the kingdom of the fathers” or patriarchy, a mother is expected to “act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values...”, and therefore Rich urges mothers to become *outliers* to the political institution of motherhood, and argues for a “mothering against motherhood” (1986, p. 61).

Other scholars such as Ruddick (1983, 1989) and O’Reilly (2000) also theorize new concepts of mothering that de-link it from the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Ruddick (1983, 1989) develops a “maternal practice” that, by definition, is shared by men as well, challenging the patriarchal construct of motherhood that is oppressive to both men and women. For Ruddick, anyone who does motherwork, i.e., training, protecting, and nurturing children, is a mother.

O'Reilly (2008a), widely acknowledged as having coined the term 'feminist mothering' or 'empowered mothering' defines feminist mothering broadly, as "any practice of mothering that seeks to challenge and change various aspects of patriarchal motherhood that cause mothering to be limiting or oppressive to women" (p. 4). Scholarship in the newly carved fields of motherhood studies and matricentric feminism move towards non-essentialist (biological) notions of mothering to include anyone (regardless of gender) who spends a central part of their lives in taking care of children (O'Reilly, 2014). However, it is undeniable that despite the gains made in education and employment, the multitude of problems mothers face are "specific to women's role and identity as mothers" (O'Reilly, 2019, p.15). Therefore, it is important to examine lived experiences of women who are mothers.

To this end, Green theorizes matricentric feminism as one that that "incorporates maternal theory, activism, and feminist motherlines" (2019, p. 83). Further, she describes a feminist motherline as a practice that provides the "space and a place for feminist mothers to record and pass on their own life-cycle perspectives of feminist mothering and to connect with those of other feminist mothers" (Green, 2006, p. 18).

Given such a divergent set of views, Mack (2018) puts forth a framework to study the historical and social constructions of mothering as: an *institution*, *practice*, *performance*, and *ideology*. It can be argued that this chapter by examining feminist mothering builds a feminist motherline-- a repository of the struggles, dilemmas, hopes and desires of mothers who practice feminist mothering that can be a potential resource for other feminist mothers.

5.1.2 Motherhood: The Indian feminist perspective

Marriage, family, and motherhood, widely regarded as institutions in the realm of the “private”, also represent zones that are highly regulated by the state, and policed by the society (Rege, 2003; Menon, 2012). In *‘Seeing like a feminist’*, Menon poses a provocative, rhetorical question, “if marriage is the end of life, how can it also be the goal of life” (2012, p. 43). Marital relations, in her work, are politicized in a sustained manner to include caste (endogamy), sexuality (heteronormativity), and sexual division of labor that are at the core of the institution of marriage in India. Apart from examining family as the site of reproducing heteronormative, patriarchal order, feminist scholarship also analyses how the state along with the upper caste elites work together to recognize and legitimize a single, narrow idea of ‘family’ that is patrilineal, and disregards other kinds of families/ households (Sonawat, 2001; Menon, 2012; Tamalapakula, 2019). It is for these reasons that reproductive capacity is central to the organization of institutions, whether they be marriage, kinship or social/political (Krishnaraj, 2010).

Despite this recognition, several Indian scholars observe that as opposed to the wealth of literature on kinship, and on the structure and form of households, other dimensions of family life are missing from both anthropological and sociological research in India (Raja, 2014; Uberoi, 1996; Kannabiran, 2006). For instance, Nandy (2017) and Donner (2008) remark upon the lack of literature on mothering and maternal practices in India and generally in the South Asian context. The published¹¹³ works in the Indian context on motherhood can broadly be categorized into the celestial, national, familial (Aneja & Vaidya, 2016) with the word ‘experiential’ perhaps better suited to this last category.

¹¹³ I refer to scholarly, published works based in English and not regional languages—whether on institution of motherhood or lived experiences of mothering

At the celestial level, the unmarried, independent goddesses of the pre-vedic times undergo a transformation after the Aryan invasion. The Brahmanization and Hinduisation of Goddesses and the patriarchal harnessing of divine energy in texts like Manusmriti and Arthashastra spousifies Goddesses and codifies male control over female sexuality (Ganesh, 1990). At the national level, the Bharath matha (Mother India) inspires ‘sons of the soil’ to protect her from danger (Ramaswamy, 2010) and who better than the maternal figure to inspire nationalists, asks Bagchi (1990). Bharath Matha’s regional counterparts such as the Bengali mother (Bagchi, 1990), and the Telangana Talli are also invoked for similar purposes (Srikanth, 2013; Bongani, 2012).

At the familial level, feminist theorizing on motherhood can be summed up in the evocative title of Krishnaraj’s edited volume, *‘Motherhood: Glorification without empowerment’* (2010). The significance of the Mother Goddesses as a social archetype continues to dominate across castes, classes, and even religions (Bose, 2010). With the ghar/bahir separation as a part of the modernity project, motherhood came to be seen as the “ultimate identity” of women (Bagchi, 1990, p. 71). The essentialization and naturalization of women in India is also “epitomized in the discursive definitions of motherhood and the *appropriate maternal body*” (Hegde, 1999, p. 25, emphasis mine) -- one who is married, follows endogamy, bears healthy sons, and is necessarily self-sacrificial (Chakravathy, 1993). Further, a woman is expected to first and foremost serve her husband, and then her children after becoming a mother, with child bearing and nurturing becoming the only “social justification” of their lives (Bagchi, 1990, p.70).

It is by juxtaposing the image of the Mother Goddess and the lived experiences of mothers, Krishnaraj (2010) writes, that the idealization of the mother as a Goddess rarely, if ever, translates into empowerment and rights for mothers in patriarchal societies (like India). She urges scholars to recognize the ‘powerlessness’ of mothers in the Indian context despite the

deification and glorification of motherhood. Interestingly, except for Donner's (2008) work that looks at how middle-class mothers negotiate familial expectations with their own desires for a secure future, existing literature predominantly addresses the experiences of those women who have opted out of a patriarchal (or conventional) framework of motherhood. Nandy (2017), drawing from Rich's (1986) scholarship, focuses on non-normative mothers or mother 'outliers' or deviant women (women who have chosen non-normative mothering—such as single mothers, mothers who have adopted, women who are voluntarily childless, mothers engaged in sex work from across castes and classes) in India.

Aneja & Vaidya's (2016) seminal work on "unfit mothers" (those with disabilities) and mothers of children with disabilities, work on *baanch* or infertile women, surrogacy, and adoption (Bhambani & Inbanathan, 2018;) recognize and resist the patriarchal conflation of womanhood with motherhood, where the proper expression of femininity lies in becoming mother (to healthy sons) after marriage (Lakshmi, 1990). Phadke's essays on feminist mothering of daughters in India explores feminist mothers' concerns and dilemmas around of issues of sexual choices, safety, risks related to sexual health and assaults, and ideals of beauty that young women must now live up to as a consequence of liberalization (2013a, 2017).

This is in addition to the autobiographical accounts written by feminist academics, authors, poets that appear in anthologies such as 'Janani: Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood' (Bhattacharya, 2006) that delve into the different aspects of mother-daughter relationship, adoptive motherhood, step-mothering, and 'Of mothers and others: Stories, essays, poems' edited by Jaishree Misra (2013), a collection of fictitious and non-fictitious, autobiographical accounts that balance varied themes-- voluntary childlessness, stories of bereavement and mothering as a rewarding experience.

These works illustrate how women who are expected to become self sacrificial mothers completely in charge of child rearing resist normative expectations. They disrupt the essentializing of ‘mother’ as a biological category drawing attention to how a ‘mother’ could be any woman who performs the role of raising children— “we have the birth mother, biological mother, the adoptive mother... These concepts are not exhaustive.” (Krishnaraj in Bagchi, 2017, p xi).

Although institutions of marriage, family, motherhood are often assumed to be sites that reproduce patriarchy and heteronormativity, quite justifiably so (Gangoli, 2007; Menon, 2012), this chapter hopes to contribute to the scant Indian scholarship on feminist *mothering* and explore its potential as a counter-hegemonic socializing influence.

5.2. Routes to feminisms and identifying as feminists

The metaphor of a ‘click’ or the ‘aha moment’ is often used to describe the sudden moment when a woman becomes a feminist (Sullivan & Martin, 2010). Amisha, (38, researcher and mother of Honey, 5) who had always been considered as a feminist by her friends, for she is vocal about the discrimination she faces on the basis of her identity as a woman, this click happened slowly and over a period of time, and specifically after the birth of her daughter:

when you look at motherhood, parenting as a mother...it definitely makes me think in a feminist perspective, why only me, why this stress on me*? If I leave for a tour and then I ask Sandeep [her husband] to arrange a lunch or something for Shreya... but he wouldn't do that. I question why only me, why this stress on me, why can't it be balanced, why can't he share certain things with me (Amisha)

Introduced to feminism by a “hardcore feminist” colleague who would lend her books and CDs on feminism and discuss, “Kamala Bhasin, Kalpana Kannabiran, Kalamani, Volga¹¹⁴... domestic violence, dowry harassment was one, gender equality”, she says, she had refused to identify as a feminist for a long time because some of her “intellectual male friends” had created a myth about feminists. “They described feminists as women who leave their husbands and date young men... aggressive,” which is why, even now she insists on saying “I am not a hardcore feminist.” She understands feminism as a fight for equality and “recognizing me as a human being, breaking the stereotypes related to women, girls and so-called values and norms of the society imposed on you.”

Sunaina (41, academic and mother of two young children) and Alisha (47, independent consultant and a mother of Aisha, 23), having grown up in [what they describe as] egalitarian homes, learnt about doing feminism at home. The community that Sunaina grew up in, she explains, is “not as patriarchal as other communities are, it is patrilineal but women are part of decision making, a lot of a whole lot of process, practices... prohibited for women among Hindus around us”. Growing up believing that human beings must place the same kind of value in everything they do and not think of it as a woman’s role meant that “Even before knowing that there is a word called feminism which might have been in my degree days... I was a feminist.”

Similarly, Alisha also credits her family for her entry into feminism early in life. Her mother’s compassion towards those who worked for them, her father’s insistence that it be Alisha’s choice if she wanted to learn the Quran from a Mawlana, and her sister, a self-professed feminist from a very young age, all contributed to her understanding of equality. It was from her sister’s library

¹¹⁴ Feminist activists and authors in India. Volga, aka, Lalitha Kumari is purportedly the first significant feminist translator in Telugu and uses the pseudonym Volga (<https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/tc/index.php/TC/article/view/29423>).

that she had casually borrowed Germaine Greer's¹¹⁵ books at the age of 13. Even though she couldn't understand it at that young age, "now it's making sense to me, *now* I understand politics doesn't only mean electoral politics, there's also personal politics. So it's lifelong 'aha' moments". She also credits her daughter, Aisha, for bringing her "up to date with what happened in the 90s and in the 2000s" that expanded her understanding of feminism as gender equality by "forcing me to read, understand intersectional feminism".

Like Amisha, Alisha also speaks of having taken some time to identify as a feminist. While she was still trying to understand its politics, several strong, independent women she knew kept clarifying they weren't feminists. This is ultimately what pushed her to "proudly declare" that she is a feminist. It was "the irritation with all the women who kept saying but I'm not a feminist, but I am not a feminist", and the myths about feminists being "loud, aggressive, man hating, and bra burning" that she finally became a "preaching feminist" telling anyone who would deny being a feminist that they were buying into stereotypical images of feminists.

Saritha (48, researcher and mother of twins Mehul and Tara, 17) and Lalitha's (46, designer and a mother of a 10-year-old boy, Rumi) entry into feminism happened much later than the other mothers in this study. It was in fact Saritha's research topics at both the M.Phil. and PhD levels that introduced her to feminism, "So, I actually had no clue about feminism till then, and then I started reading on my own about Susan Brownmiller¹¹⁶, Susan Griffin.¹¹⁷" A one-month rigorous summer school program in women's studies "covering entire gamut like women in development, women in literature, history, gender in history, feminism and how, introducing me to feminism as through in various disciplines" gave her a "solid grounding" in feminist thought, she explains.

¹¹⁵ An Australian feminist and intellectual (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Germaine-Greer>)

¹¹⁶ American feminist author and journalist

¹¹⁷ American feminist philosopher

She also points out that unlike younger generation feminists (like her daughters) for whom feminism is made available in “small capsules on the internet”, she and her peers “learnt feminism through hard way by going on marches, shouting slogans, agitations, writing and pamphleteering.”

For Lalitha, the route to feminism was through her work in the development sector. Even though her father was “patriarchal”, she says, he always encouraged them to read, but it was “mostly commercial literature rather than serious literature”. It was the “NGO world which is so much about development and underdevelopment, and fair and Dalit” and her friends that introduced her to feminism. She understands feminism as being not only about women but also about thinking “how do we actually sensitize men to be more sensitive to the issues of women who are for different reasons disadvantaged”. Comparing herself to a “proper feminist” friend, who opted out of marriage, adopted a child and attends weekly meetings at a feminist organization. Even though she identifies as a feminist, she is not sure if she checks all the boxes of being a feminist when compared to her friend. Lalitha says that her feminist friend is often dismissive of her domestic problems since Lalitha chose to go the traditional marriage route, prompting her to wonder out loud “Will feminism mean that you will have to let go all relationships with men, are you not allowed to have a relationship with men?”

Evidently, some of the stereotypes about feminists being man-hating, family-hating, loud and aggressive have neither been dispelled nor have they lost fervor, with even millennials pointing out to these very labels. Undeniably, feminists have critiqued the institutions of motherhood and family for not only fixing women’s role in the domestic sphere but also furthering heteronormativity at the expense of alternative sexualities (some of these issues are also discussed by mothers and their partners as well). But feminist mothers in normative heterosexual

set ups demonstrate how these institutions can be co-opted for the feminist cause whilst also dispelling such negative stereotypes.

5.2.1 Negotiating the 'personal': Marriage, family, and feminism

Indian scholars note that one must move beyond stereotypical notions about arranged marriage as coercive, and love marriage as a marker of independence. This dichotomy, they argue, does not attend to the questions of how women exercise choice in matters of choosing a partner (Puri, 1999; Sharangpani, 2010; Choukroune & Bhandari, 2018). Further, in spite of transgressing caste, community, and heteronormative boundaries through love marriages¹¹⁸, sexual division of labor (within the family), feminization of labor (attributing or fixing certain professions as an extension of “woman’s nature” to nurture and therefore de-valued), remain unchallenged (Menon, 2012). Aware of these issues, feminist mothers explained the basis on which they chose to marry their partner.

Amisha, a Hindu, chose to marry her Christian classmate Sandeep, because “he didn’t seem like a patriarch on the outside... He used to send his sister to freak out with male friends...”. However, his “inner patriarch” surfaced soon after their marriage and became more pronounced after the birth of their daughter. “He keeps reminding me that is your work, as a wife and mother, this is *your* work”, says Amisha in reference to domestic work. However, she also believes they “share the same ideologies” in certain aspects, especially in regard to how to raise their daughter—strong and independent.

¹¹⁸ Although this is not necessarily true in either case. Donner, in her work on love marriages, notes that most love marriages still take place within one’s own *jati* or caste (2002, p. 83). Similarly, same-sex marriages are yet to be recognized legally: <https://www.firstpost.com/india/same-sex-couples-of-all-faiths-must-get-right-to-marry-not-just-under-hindu-marriage-act-8831271.html>

4 out of 5 feminist mothers in this phase of research who married for love, chose their partners on the basis of “similar ideologies” (Amisha), “basic values” (Sunaina) based on “egalitarianism” (Lalitha). Even in the case of Alisha who met her husband Kamal, in an “arranged situation” spoke at length about her decision to marry Kamal, because their “fundamental ways of thinking” matched. Having lost his mother at a young age and seeing his father do domestic work, Alisha says, Kamal grew up in a different environment where men performing what is typically thought of as ‘woman’s work’ became the norm.

Kamal (54, an ex-army officer and now a businessman) believes in equal rights, and respecting each other’s individuality and independence. In fact, Alisha and Kamal had these codified in their *Nikahnama*¹¹⁹ (co-written by Alisha and her father). He doesn’t believe in defining feminism as such because it is “your culture, it’s a way of life how you live; how you treat others that will define” and far as he is concerned, he has always treated people irrespective of their background fairly. Naresh (43, Sunaina’s partner, academic and researcher), like Kamal, grew up in a family that did not conform to gender roles. Not only did his parents share all kinds of domestic work, but he and his brother were also expected to do work traditionally considered to be women’s work such as fetching water. Describing his birthplace as a “Mufassil¹²⁰” town, he recalls being teased by his peers for not being “macho, masculine”. He admits he wouldn’t go out of his way to label himself as feminist, but wouldn’t mind if he is called so by others.

Both Rama Rao (52, Saritha’s partner, academic) and Prakash (47, Lalitha’s partner, researcher) say they grew up in typical “patriarchal families”. Even so, Rama Rao’s early exposure to

¹¹⁹ Muslim marital contract is called the *Nikah-nama*. Muslim women’s rights activists in India and elsewhere encourage women to write their own *Nikahnama*. Women friendly *Nikahnama* or model *Nikahnamas* secure women’s rights by addressing issues of polygamy, divorce, *mehr* and other matrimonial rights. For more details, please refer to Nida Kirmani (2011a) and Suneetha A’s (2012) works.

¹²⁰ The term Mufassil was first used during the early colonial period to distinguish provinces or states from the Presidency (Srilata Sircar, 2018). Lately, it has been used to describe towns and cities away from the downtown.

Marxist literature, feminist critique of it, and participation in student politics at the university level, instilled in him the values of egalitarianism so much so that he believes feminism is as much about gender, as it is about caste, class, sexuality, and “even age”. Prakash comments that a lot of his friends describe him as “feminine and sensitive”, and says that if feminism is about being feminine, then perhaps he is one.¹²¹

In fact, it is precisely because Prakash is not a “patriarchal, macho, typical Telugu guy” that Lalitha chose to marry him. In furnishing these details, feminist mothers explained how feminism informed their choice of partner. For instance, Alisha remembers asking Kamal about his opinion on women in the army, having children and gender roles: “I don’t think Kamal would have known what patriarchy is and what feminism is, but his responses about women in the army, gender roles were so correct”. Kamal himself thinks that though he may not be able to define feminism, he embodies the values of equality and respect in his relationships, whether work or familial.

Naresh admits that a lot of their “hardcore feminist” friends question their choice of having children and “propagating these institutions of marriage”. To which, Sunaina adds that it is indeed “quite a normative path.. love and romance leading to marriage and conforming to a patriarchal norm of a man and woman”, but follows this up with a firm assertion that this can also be one kind of feminism. She also categorically states that feminist mothering can happen outside of marriage by single mothers. And when their friends question them on the choice of having children at all:

¹²¹ Since the term feminist is mostly associated with women, it is not uncommon for people to think that a feminist man is simply not manly enough (i.e., not have stereotypical masculine and has more feminine qualities (Schmitz & Haltom, 2017; Berryman-Fink & Verderber, 1985; Williams & Wittig, 1997)

some of my friends question as to how having children is quite conventional, it's not really a feminist. I say when you cannot raise children who are feminist, then you are actually not contributing to the cause, perhaps raising children in a feminist way is contributing to change in world, rather than not having children, that is one kind of feminism, but its not of one kind, feminisms could be a whole lot of things, it's not stagnant.

For feminist mothers, feminism informs a whole gamut of issues and decision making, with Alisha remarking that it informs her “in so many ways that I can't even cull it out...”. For some, feminist mothering begins even before the birth of the child. Decisions about when to have children and how many (Alisha and Naresh), whether or not to work during pregnancy (Saritha, Sunaina, Lalitha), and once the child is born, how the care work is distributed between the parents and what to name the child (Sunaina, Alisha, Lalitha), when to get back to work, and providing an environment that encourages a critical thinking to question established gender norms through careful selection of socializing influences (Amisha, Alisha, Sunaina) have all been informed by feminism.

5.2.2 The politics of Naming

Bhattacharji (2010) in her work on motherhood note that the woman regarded as the field, is nothing but a receptacle of the male generative power that establishes patriliney (i.e., the kinship system of tracing descent through the father's lineage, and naming children after the father). Despite the fact that mothers are expected to be primary caretakers of children, the inclusion of mother's name in official documentation has occurred only recently¹²². Commenting on how

¹²²The twelfth five years plan tried to address this issue by stating “Review all laws to make mothers equal guardians of their children and to recognize that since normally it is the mother who primarily looks after the children she should be listed as the first guardian.” Unfortunately, as most codification works, the way it is framed reinforces mother as the primary caretaker. Evidently, there is still some confusion regarding the “authority of the

“bureaucracy is so patriarchal”, Sunaina says: “What's the usual practice? You give the child father's name, so for both of us... Feminist parenting started by the act of naming the child, which was a very conscious discussion”. Similarly, Alisha and Kamal also chose a name that honors both of their lineages. “I was very conscious that feminism means equality... So for us, *Heer* [daughter's middle name] represents both of us, you know, so even I think naming our child was, in a way, a very feminist endeavor.”

The politics of naming was something that had completely escaped Saritha's notice, until questioned by her daughters, “That's one thing, they still ask me, why?” [laughs]. One of her daughters wondering “why should both only have father's surname” has now chosen to use her mother's maiden name. While individual choices are not thought of as feminist politics per se, these insights underscore the need to recognize the potential of everyday feminism in identifying and questioning (normalization and repetition of) patriarchal practices that risk being dismissed as mundane and not worthy of attention.

5.2.3 Fighting for space—work and family

The lives of Henrike Donner's Domestic Goddesses, i.e., middle class women, are completely dominated by motherhood, so much so that “their education, their marriages and their professional careers are arranged and represented in relation to the female role of a mother” (2008, p. 32). Feminist mothers reject such an emphasis on motherhood.

mother”: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Parents-name-in-documents-PM-Modi-seeks-clarification-from-law-ministry/articleshow/46362745.cms>

This has caused problems, consider some of petitions made by distraught single mothers on change.org: <https://www.change.org/p/sushmaswaraj-hmoindia-passport-for-my-daughter-with-mother-%CC%81s-name> and <https://www.change.org/p/mumbai-city-council-include-mother-s-maiden-name-in-child-s-birth-certificate?>

Saritha asserts that children must know “mother is there but she is an independent person and she has her own stuff”. Blending theory with praxis, she credits scholars like Adrienne Rich, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, for her understanding that “one need not get sucked into this ideology of motherhood... I didn't force myself to spend all the time with the children.” Alisha too talks about how despite being a mother and a wife, she neither “limited” her life “to just motherhood and marriage”, nor let it consume her. She recalls her field visits to rock temples (as a part of her archeology course) when her daughter was just 3 months old and letting her daughter know when she was a little older that she had interests apart from work and family: “I used to watch X files¹²³ and she couldn't watch it, so I would tell her that these 45 minutes was my time.” She continues, “So I think feminism is also about fighting for your space... that I am not all about motherhood. I am going to try and be a great mother, but I am a human being, and I have interests”.

The fact that she uses the word “fighting” rather than “claiming” or “taking”, indicates a politics that acknowledges and challenges the idea that “motherhood is supposed to be an all-embracing experience” (Alisha), and that sometimes, these decisions must be made in the face of opposition from various quarters. For instance, Sunaina has been accused of being “so independent that she doesn't love her family” by people in her neighborhood. “They make this correction of how an independent woman can't be a good mother or vice versa true, that a good mother is never independent”. Amisha concurs with this. Her own experience has been that of her sisters labelling her a bad mother and telling her daughter that Amisha loves her work more than her family. Although there was a time when her daughter believed them, Amisha took time out to explain to her that being a mother is only one part of her identity and that people can love more

¹²³ American television series: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106179/>

than one thing at the same time. Since the normative conception of middle-class respectable femininity is traditionally measured through women prioritizing family over work in India (Radhakrishnan, 2009, 2011), there is a tendency to label mothers who don't let motherhood consume their life as 'bad' mothers. Feminist mothers actively contest such a patriarchal categorization that seeks to deny mothers their selfhood, and assert their identity as individuals first and foremost, and then mothers.

5.2.4 Systems of support and sharing motherwork: fathers and community mothering

bell hooks (2000) remarks that one of the most positive interventions of feminism in the lives of women has been to recast the role of the father within parenting. Mothering that is informed by feminism recognizes that "the most revolutionary change we make in the institution of motherhood is to include men in every aspect of childcare" (Ruddick, 1983, p. 213).

Sunaina affirms this, "other than perhaps breastfeeding, there is nothing that a man cannot do" and as children grow, "how we share our responsibilities also changes". Sriram (2019) and Roopanarine (2015) argue that fathers in selected demographics are becoming cognizant of their role, thanks to global images of fatherhood, increasing exposure to international media and alternative styles of living. Even the four male millennial participants in the second phase of the study (Chapter 4) speak of playing a more active role in parenting. However, what is unique to feminist mothering is that these decisions are deliberate and aimed at upending the norm where the primary responsibility of care-work rests with the mother. As Phadke (2013a) notes, feminist mothering then necessarily involves the father. This is the reason for using the term 'feminist mothering' instead of a more gender-neutral terminology such as feminist parenting in the thesis.

Lalitha's father and her in-laws were upset when she resumed work soon after giving birth to Rumi. She says that the social-cultural norms are such that there is a "romanticization of why a woman is so important to a child, I think society also reinforces it so much that mother is more important than father or anybody else." But she doesn't subscribe to such views and often leaves Rumi in Prakash's care. Prakash draws on his own experiences and explains why it is not true that a mother is indispensable:

So I have kind of done everything with Rumi and as a matter of fact... even as a young child, as a young baby there have been many occasions when he has been without his mother... he has been absolutely, absolutely fine, so this thing that the child requires the mother all the time kind of thing... it's not true

Saritha, who had begun her career after giving birth to twin daughters, would also leave them in her husband, Rama Rao's care. Although they did employ a caretaker (both were working parents), as an academic, Rama Rao could tweak his working hours to factor in childcare. He would often end up relieving the caretaker early to take care of the children himself. Even in Alisha's case, Kamal played an active role in taking care of Aisha, she says: "He has washed her potty, he has bathed her, he's cooked for her, he has latched onto her."

All the fathers (except Sandeep who was not a part of the interviews as per Amisha's wishes) also spoke of how they *enjoyed* taking care of their children. In an astute observation, Rama Rao says that an active involvement in taking care of children cannot be expected out of those men who do not see it as enjoyable or pleasurable, and follows this up with how there has been a tradition of men raising children in his family, drawing attention to how one can *learn* to enjoy something (this is addressed at length in section 5.5.1- feminist mothering of sons).

In contrast to Rama Rao's experience, Prakash, like the millennial participants, did not enjoy a warm relationship with his father, and wanted to do things differently with his son. Although these couples did not have an explicit conversation about sharing care-work, they say it was understood that fathers would be equally responsible for taking care of the children. These feminist mothers' assertion that they would not let motherhood consume them, and their belief in sharing care work equitably also provided the space for fathers to take responsibility of child care. Feminist mothering, then, stands in contrast to "maternal gatekeeping"¹²⁴ or "maternal resistance" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Allen & Doherty, 1996; Hauser, 2012) where mothers play an active role in continuing traditional parenting roles like the millennial participants, for it is one of the few areas in which patriarchal culture offers women power over decision making within the family (Kandiyoti, 1998; Verma & Larson, 2001).

5.2.5 "*Community mothering*"

Kakar (1978) argues that while the practice of collective care is a feature in the Indian context, it is more about maintaining the unity of a joint family household, where all adults are responsible for children, and share authority, rather than sharing motherwork. Such an androcentric view does not account for the ways in which the women do share the work involved in raising children (Kandiyoti, 1998). These sharing practices are becoming more visible now, with working women making use of "wider family networks" to resume work after childbirth (De Neve 2011, p. 91).

Feminist mothers in this study acknowledge that these support systems make it possible for them to have their own space and establishing that mothering is only one aspect of their life. Amisha explains that the only reason she could have even thought of enrolling for a doctoral program

¹²⁴ To be sure maternal gatekeeping includes maternal opening behaviors and closing behaviors, where the former facilitates, and the latter inhibits father involvement in parenting activities (Shengqi et al., 2019)

was because of her mother's offer to take care of her daughter. Sunaina, Alisha, Saritha also relied on their mothers in varying degrees to take care of their children. It can also be argued that women depend on people beyond kinship bonds. For instance, Alisha was "very particular" that her daughter develops a bond with, not just her extended family, but also her "independent women" friends. She "engineered" a system to facilitate this bonding where her friends would have to take care of her daughter and spend time with her in turns.

Similarly, Saritha explains that she relies on her wide network of "friends and community for mothering" and often has her female friends talk to her children if need be:

They are my support system. I think that is what somewhere I think is feminist mothering. It's not biological mothering but mothering in a community context, of course my community is this, earlier other women would have relied on neighborhoods, and kinships and all that, but for me this is feminist mothering.

This points to the strength of women's networks and the ways in which feminist ideals of supportive and nurturing networks emerge even in patriarchal societies, where mothers make way for their daughters' aspirations and friends providing necessary support when needed.

5.3. Feminist mothering: its content, values and goals

It must be clarified at the outset that feminist mothers (and their partners) do not think that the end point of feminist mothering is for children to identify as feminists: "Feminist parenting is a day today thing... not about the end product that our children should become feminist... but the value feminism has in everyday life..." (Sunaina). Naresh explains that point of feminist parenting is to encourage critical thinking abilities to question dominant norms. This resonates with the larger scholarship on feminist mothering where the effort is to socialize children in a

way that fosters the development of a questioning attitude towards socio-cultural norms (Green, 2005; Phadke, 2017).

Some feminist mothers and their partners understand feminism as equality of and respect towards “all human beings” (Sunaina, Naresh, Alisha) and that feminist values “are not completely separate from other kinds of democratic values” (Saritha and Rama Rao). Even those mothers who understand feminism as essentially about gender, are also sensitive to different marginalities at work, i.e., at the intersection of caste, class, religion, sexuality, race, and age as a result of the values they have learnt overtime through their work. Amisha’s work with the transgender community and her own experiences of being a Dalit woman, and mother, and Lalitha’s work in the developmental sector makes them combine feminism with sensitivity towards other caste and class while mothering.

5.3.1 Living and embodying feminist values

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, socialization cannot be defined narrowly as knowledge transfer. Recognizing that feminist values cannot be “taught”, participants say that they as mothers and fathers must first practice/live or embody these values themselves since children learn by example.¹²⁵ All the 9 participants also echo this, with Lalitha stating that “you have to practice what you want to tell, so I think one way of teaching them values [is] by you practicing them.” Amisha concurs with this, “instead of telling or along with telling, you give that practical exposure” so, as Sunaina says, they know that feminism “is a life led on a daily basis...”. Since feminist mothers and their partners are acutely conscious of disrupting the hierarchy inherent in patriarchal families (fathers as head of the family), distributing regular chores equitably and

¹²⁵ Social learning theory postulates that children learn by listening, observing and imitating (Bandura, 1977).

taking decisions together, as a family, becomes one of the ways in which they live their feminism.

Given how abstract values like equality and respect towards people can be, Naresh draws on his experiences as an academic who teaches gender to say that one must be able to demonstrate “these ideas in a very functional way”. This could be done through letting children see how their parents as equal partners share domestic chores, the way they refuse to conform to societal norms, respect people who work for them, conversations they may have at home (with each other or friends), their networks, to put it simply, the “everyday” life that helps lay the foundation for feminist parenting.

This is important because any disjuncture between who they say they are, and what they do is quickly called out by children. “We used to have very pretty equal division of labor, when we got married, till the children were born, we used to do everything you know all cooking washing”, however, after the children were born, Saritha says, she “took over the house” and “kind of left taking children out, buying them stuff... paying the bills.” Her children were quick to call her out on this and question what kind of a feminist she was. “I know how we got to that point, his travel and age... but they ask”, and therefore she also believes that one has to “constantly practice them, and *demonstrably* practice them.”

In Amisha’s experience, her struggles and arguments with her husband about the division of work at home help in laying out the context for daughter to understand why one needs to question social and cultural norms: “She is also learning things like If I say, ‘why can’t you make breakfast today [to Sandeep her, husband], why me everyday?’ she understands that particular situation”. The gendered nature of parenting and care work is only one aspect of living these

values. As pointed above, feminist mothers and their parents believe that feminism (and other isms) make them sensitive to other marginalities that children need to be made aware of, such as those that lie in the interaction of gender, class, caste and religion.

5.3.2 At the intersection of gender, class, caste

Ray & Qayum (2009) in their work on domestic cultures note that ‘classes’ come into being not just through relations of labor located outside of the home, but also through the quotidian labor that happens *in* the home (emphasis mine). Cooks, caretakers, nannies, domestic help employed by these parents free them from performing boundary-maintaining labor (Banerjee, 1989; Ray & Qayum, 2009). While the children in these families are aware of the “transactional nature of labor” (Lalitha), and the hierarchical employer-employee relationship, involved in these types of activities, these parents lead by example. It is important that the children see how they engage with domestic help.

Although Sunaina has not hired domestic help herself, she has on many occasions explained to her son that the “economy of the quarters” they live in is sustained by the “servant quarters”. She also insists that her children make their own beds, hang their clothes to dry, and take part in domestic activities that they have grown up seeing their parents share—sweeping, mopping, doing dishes, so they learn to value those who perform quotidian work as a livelihood. Her son who is older than her daughter is also expected to share the toilet cleaning routine:

it is the value we place in human being and each work we do, which is important, so how, cleaning toilet is not a less valued work and cleaning toilet is not just a woman’s role but also it has a very caste connotation, right, who cleans the toilets or who, even today manual scavenging, so that value is something that I think all

of us have to share for any small thing or big thing we do.. so that I think my feminism combined with other things have shaped parenting...

Lalitha's approach to encouraging Rumi to view those from working and lower classes with respect is to insist he address them as *bhayya* (brother), *amma* (mother). Where most people in her apartment complex do not let their children play with the domestic help's children, she places no such restriction: "Rumi is allowed to go, sit in their house, eat their food, he is allowed to bring them here, eat food... that caste and class barrier I feel we managed to, since childhood."

But this sort of sensitivity does not come easily, Alisha admits. It would make her a little uneasy to invite her domestic help to sit on the sofa, Alisha confesses and would rather maintain a professional relationship. Similarly, Lalitha and Prakash are comfortable with the "maid's children" playing in their home, and eating along with them, but it would make Prakash uneasy if the domestic help herself were to join them. Clearly, class hierarchy is something that they still are grappling with, but it is also these conversations that demonstrate their self-reflexivity about their own middle classness that requires for a distinction to be made between themselves and those placed lower in the hierarchy. This also reveals the importance of intersectional feminism that takes into cognizance the multiple systems of oppression at work.

5.4. Strategies: Open conversations, recognizing discussable moments, selective and multiple exposures

Lalitha's son Rumi came home one day and declared "women do not make good bosses". Lalitha, who has often taken Rumi to her "child friendly organization" where she is the "boss" was shocked into silence. Her partner Prakash intervened to ask if he thought his mother was a

bad boss as well. She worries about how “mainstream” such ideas are, that even after growing up in a “fairly progressive environment”, Rumi has picked up on stereotypes such as these.

When the mothers were asked if they have any apprehensive about how, despite their best efforts, children seemed to pick up stereotypical ideas, other tangents of feminist mothering emerged. Participants use different strategies that they believe will help children develop non-conforming attitudes: 1) open conversations 2) Recognize discussable moments and 3) Multiple and selective exposures.

Given that children “interface” with (Sunaina and Naresh) different kinds of people at school, neighborhood and are exposed to different kinds of media (books, movies, serials), parents make an effort to choose certain exposures that they believe will help in children learn feminist values: a) meet and bond women friends, family, and colleagues who are, to use Rich (1986) and Nandy’s (2017) terminology—‘deviant’ in some way, b) participate in their (political) activities at work, and c) expose children to carefully selected books and media that are inclusive and encourage them to be critical of the popular media that they choose for themselves. Flagging the importance of various socializing influences, Naresh explains, “we are the product of how we were raised and other experiences... so the exposure our children get, the friends whom we interact with, the sort of books we read, the discussions we have, all of them contribute” (Naresh).

5.4.1. Open conversations: No taboos

As academics, researchers, and activists, feminist mothers and their partners are actively engaged in work that deals with issues of gender, sexuality, religion, caste, and do not shy away from discussing these issues with their children. Having grown up in inter-caste, inter religious

households means that children are already aware of issues of differences, feminist mothers say, but it is also crucial to identify and not let go of any opportunities that might facilitate more elaborate discussions around issues of caste, sexuality, religion and gender.

Participants also report that the conversations they have at home in the presence of their children help set the foundation for children to develop a questioning attitude. Sunaina, Naresh, Saritha, Alisha are particular about using the word *discuss* instead of *teach*. Differentiating between discussion and teaching, Naresh explains, “we consciously don’t make an effort to teach, but when the context comes, we discuss these things, discussing rather than teaching”. Teaching implies (at least traditionally), a hierarchical relationship between the knower and the receiver. By calling it discussions and conversations, the participants not only moved away from the framework of authoritarian parenting, but also shifted the focus to learning, understanding and negotiating.

Lalita believes that it is the “day to day activity itself” that provides context for discussions. For example, when Rumi came back from school to tell Lalitha that “Pakistanis and Muslims are bad”, Lalitha knew she had to act quickly to dispel such notions: “Luckily, I have a driver who is a Muslim and my maid is a Muslim, so I am able to give examples, and ask are they bad people?” She also saw this as an opportunity to take Rumi to a nearby mosque. There, Rumi was introduced to yet another form of discrimination:

They had all these flex sheets where they described what their religion is, why they do namaz five times a day and all, so one of the flex sheet had... Allah says in Quran that a person who kills a girl child is not welcome, after his death to his abode...

That night as he went to sleep, a “shaken” Rumi asked Lalitha why girls were killed in those days, and she unhesitatingly told him that the practice exists till date, and that people continue to prefer boys. What must be flagged here is the importance of drawing on children’s lived experiences to help them understand multiple marginalities. As Lalitha puts it, “you have to draw from his own life, otherwise they are not real for them” in order to develop a “basic sensitivity which is needed.”

Feminist mothers and their partners in this study also believe that children must be encouraged to speak about anything and everything with their parents. Both Lalitha and Sunaina don’t hide the fact that they buy sanitary napkins from their sons. When Lalitha picked up sanitary napkins at the supermarket, Rumi laughed at his mother and asked why she was buying “diapers”, and if she was a child. Lalitha told him that they were not diapers but sanitary napkins that girls, of a certain age, and women need to use. She admits that she knows how to speak with girls about menstruation because so much has been said on the topic, but “I don’t know how to explain these to boys”. Further, she adds that she has lately been thinking about how to have the “sex talk” with her eight-year-old son, “I think we both [she and her partner] have to do that because children nowadays are like so much more aware.”

While Lalitha’s son wondered if he would have to use them at some point in his life, Sunaina’s son reported that even his classmates who were girls did not know as much as he did about girls’ bodies and menstruation. As Abraham (2002) notes, topics related to women’s cycles and sex are not typically discussed by Indian families. Even though parents and schools have begun to introduce the concept of ‘bad touch’ and ‘good touch’, on account of the rising crimes against girls (and in some cases, boys), it is done so as an informative exercise to caution children about

unwanted touch and not to encourage autonomy and agency¹²⁶ (Raghavan, 2019; George, 2020). Amisha says that even before she could have a conversation about bad touch, her daughter came home from school to tell her about “safe circle”. But Amisha’s conversations with her eight-year-old daughter don’t just revolve around possible abuse, but also involve normalizing attraction. She is very conscious about letting her know it is completely okay to feel attracted to boys, and that they can talk about it openly.

Similarly, when Saritha set out to explain to her teenage daughters’ what sex meant, they cut her short and told her that they know more than she herself did. She laughs happily when she says that their heads are not filled with “*chetha*” [muck] like her generation-- “We had *chetha* in our heads that you are not supposed to feel sexual, you are supposed to be demure, you are supposed to be virgin...”.

Even Alisha says that mothering informed by feminism makes it possible for her to not only talk about sex with her daughter, but also reject middle class notions about what will others think. Given middle-classes endorsement of morality and chastity that prohibits women from having sex (outside of marriage), and consider it immoral, Phadke foregrounds issues of sexuality and risk in her essays on feminist mothering (2013a, 2017). She draws attention as to how daughters of feminist mothers are often labelled as “corrupt” for knowing more about sex than friends their age. Although none of the mothers in this participant pool spoke about how friends of their daughters may have reacted to their sexual knowledge, they also think about issues like giving out “age appropriate information”(Alisha and Lalitha) or about how sexuality is inextricably linked with morality (Amisha), respecting their sexual choices and privacy, this is especially in

¹²⁶ Organizations like ‘Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues’ (TARSHI) seek to change this narrative: <https://www.tarshi.net/>

the case of mothers with older daughters like Alisha and Saritha, who clarify that openness must not be confused with vicariousness (Alisha).

5.4.2 Multiple and selective exposure to media: books, television, films

The idea that the media may not succeed in telling people *what to think* but it can be successful in telling people *what to think about* has been referred to as framing (emphasis mine, Cohen quoted in McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Acknowledging the potential of media to set off conversations, and mindful of respecting children's choices and autonomy, feminist mothers and their partners deal with the possibility of exposure to hegemonic notions about gender, caste, sexuality amongst other things in mediated representations differently. Sunaina says that news coverage about "lynching¹²⁷" has helped open up a discussion about religion, and "how we eat everything but some people don't eat, it's ok if they don't eat but they don't have to be violent and so on." Sunaina makes sure to link consumption of meat to caste, religion, and discrimination on the basis of dietary habits. She also recalls an incident where her daughter had asked what caste means. While "I was trying to explain in an elaborate way, my son told, simple Amma caste means inequality, by now he has understood that caste is inequality...". Naresh believes reading newspapers, books, and discussions that follow these activities enable such awareness.

However, not all books and media the children consume serve to encourage critical thinking. Popular books for children such as the Amar Chitra Katha series have been critiqued for perpetuating prevailing hegemonic notions about masculinities and femininities, completely erasing subaltern identities (Sreenivas, 2010, 2011). Indeed, inclusion has recently become a

¹²⁷ Lynching of Muslims over suspicion of transporting/consuming beef has become a regular since the rise of Bharatiya Janta Party in 2014. The first such incident was reported in 2015, when Mohammad Akhlaq was lynched on the suspicion of cow slaughter by a mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh:
<https://theprint.in/india/nothing-can-stop-this-gurugram-muslims-say-after-brutal-attack-on-meat-transporter-lukman/473330/>

buzzword in the children's publishing industry, with Karadi tales, Tara Books and Tulika¹²⁸ encouraging works rooted in the cultural histories specific to India and sensitive to different marginalities becoming more accessible to children and parents over the last two decades¹²⁹ (Radhika Menon¹³⁰ in Joseph, 2016).

Sunaina, whose children are in fact “reading popular stuff that are not really ‘nonconforming’”, she balances this by choosing “folktales from around India, Tulika books”. Naresh also believes that it is important to read books that do not conform to notions of caste, color or gender, like “Mala’s story¹³¹” (by the same publisher). They also make it a point to buy books from across languages, genres, and religions.

Although books with a feminist sensibility, such as a “100 rebel women leaders¹³²”, weren’t available when Aisha was born, Alisha did what she thought best:

“I was very conscious of the books that I put in front of her... I did what I knew best, so, Mahasweta Devi, age appropriate Ismath Chughtai, Kamla Bhasin whose books were really about little girls with parents, the mother comes from tired from office, the father's helping in the kitchen, and all this was very well for Aisha, I didn't even need to really engineer this through books because this is what she saw at home.

¹²⁸ An Huffington article on feminist mothering in India also makes similar observations: https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/04/27/can-you-be-a-feminist-indian-parent-and-let-your-child-read-sexi_a_22058361/

¹²⁹ There is no scholarship that links the parallel rise of social/political movements in India such as the Dalit movement, women's movements and inclusive publishing ventures in children's literature and would make for an interesting project.

¹³⁰ Radhika Menon is the Managing editor of Tulika

¹³¹ Tulika published Mala's silver anklets: https://www.tulikabooks.com/general-picture-books/mala-s-silver-anklets-english.html?search_query=Mala&results=1

¹³² Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women by Elana Favilla was published in 2017.

Saritha, whose daughters picked up reading as a habit only at 9 approached this differently: “we would read out to them certain things with no morals, then with no specific gendered kind of things”. Since moral stories like those in ‘Amar Chitra Katha’ often link morality, chastity, and virginity of women as the ideal to look up to, she made it a point to not read such material, and instead chose books from Tulika and Tara publishers as well. But as they grew up, her daughters made choices that made her uneasy. Recalling a particularly anxious moment she says: “Like I remember them watching this Twilight series, and I was shit scared, why are they watching this, what is this rubbish they are watching, disgusting. It was very scary.” Instead of discouraging them from watching it, she and her husband chose to watch it along with them, and kept up a steady commentary, “we said ‘why is this girl behaving, doesn't she have a life of her own, doesn't she go to school, doesn't she want to do anything in her life, doesn't she have friends, why is she hanging out with this one fellow [laughs]’”. This, they hoped, would encourage children to think critically about movies or books they would likely end up watching and reading. It is with a sigh of relief; she says that her daughters “finally got over that phase”.

Amisha neither consciously chooses books nor thinks about balancing popular fiction with those that are sensitive to gender, caste, and class, or those that disrupt the normative, if not subvert them. What she does is try to help her daughter develop a questioning attitude towards the things she reads and watches. “When she watches kissing scenes, she asks how they do it... so I tell her it is only acting, it is their job like any other.” She says that she doesn’t believe in teaching her daughter right from wrong, rather she has told her daughter that if she is comfortable doing something, then that is ‘right’ for her, and anything that makes her uncomfortable is wrong. It is important to note here, that in pointing out to her daughter that the “right” is subjective, that right and wrong are not universal concepts, she delinks the “right” from its moral connotation and also

forecloses any possibility of judgment based on such (middle-class) morality. She applies the same technique when her daughter reads. Since Sandeep is a Christian, she encourages Honey to read the Bible and Biblical stories, but also intervenes when necessary. “When there is any mention of how women must be submissive or obedient, I sort of ask her open questions, why must only women be like this and leave her thinking”.

Similarly, Alisha encourages her daughter to approach Quran like any other text and use her intelligence to reflect on it and interpret it for herself. She clarifies, “I don't say this, the Quran says this... Ijtihad¹³³ which is your personal reflection of the Quran” because as “a very personalized religion... every Muslim is supposed to read the Quran and make sense of it, herself or himself” and believes that this allows space for critique of “not so nice aspects of Islam...”

However, given the constant vilification of how Islam is so “anti-woman”, she also made it a point to tell Aisha about how she had strategically used Islam as a “vehicle of my feminism through my *Nikahnama*”, in the hope that Aisha sees that Islam is a “pretty modern, progressive religion depending on who is reading the Quran and the intelligence level of that person” instead of making ill-informed judgments. Although an agnostic, Alisha deliberately identifies as Muslim in the presence of “Mawlanas, Maulvis and Kattar Muslims”, and engages them in debates about how Islamic principles, far from being divorced from women’s rights, strengthen feminist ideas. It is anecdotes such as these that reveal how larger issues of multiple identities, marginalities, and intersections of these multiple identities are played out at the everyday level,

¹³³ Ijtihad or independent reasoning or enquiry into the Quran is done to reinterpret it to suit the exigencies of contemporary life (Karam 1998, pp. 252-281). Sabry (2017) and Hallaq (1984) note how Ijtihad was an acceptable practice up until the tenth century when Sunni judges declared that there was no need for new interpretations. However, Cooke observes that Muslim women scholars and activists have increasingly been participating in creating Islamic feminist literature (2001). This project or the movement of women reinterpreting their religious text that had so far been androcentric has come to be known as Islamic feminism (Vatuk, 2008). Amanda Keddie’s (2018) work on how young women are encouraged to apply Ijtihad to confront gendered Islamophobia is resonant with what Alisha attempts to do with Aisha.

and as experienced by a Muslim, feminist, woman, and mother, and how these different identities inform her mothering.

Another way in which feminist mothers and their partners ensure that their children grow up differently from the norm, is to encourage them to bond with their like-minded friends and colleagues, who share their values.

5.4.3. Exposure to different kinds of people and (political) work

I think part of our feminist parenting is also I think around people with whom we socialize... One of our very good friends comes from a matrilineal family, the kids actually know her... understand how different her family is (Sunaina)

It is crucial for feminist mothers to make sure that their children grow up knowing alternative family structures. What this means for Sunaina is that her children “interface” with “non-confirming” people outside the “patriarchal family”. Lalitha who is “always looking for people who have gone through similar experience, as a support group”, says that there is an added benefit to leaving children in the care of her network of relatives and friends since it exposes Rumi to “different ways of living”:

His [Prakash’s] very good friend got divorced so he [Rumi] became friends with the ex-wife. I have two friends who are divorced. I also have friends who have children and are not divorced... As a concept I’m not saying he knows exactly what it means to be single, what it means to be divorced, but he has seen that marriage is not a norm...

This sort of exposure, Lalitha says, helps in being open to and normalizing multiple ways of living. Apart from help and support with motherwork, such selective exposure leads to an awareness about non-dominant family structures, and women who may be single, divorced,

destabilizing the rigid and fixed notions of what can be considered as a ‘family’. Although children know “other kinds of people who say how a woman can be so independent”, Sunaina is also sure that “they [the children] are able to see through what is better by now”.

For Amisha, it is important that her daughter becomes aware of the fact that there are many people who live differently and cannot be slotted or boxed. In order to do this, she has consciously decided to give her some “practical exposure” by taking her along for her field work, and encouraging her to interact with the people she works with—members of the trans-community. She says, “I brought her up like that, you know she had frequently had opportunities to meet trans people, so she is very sensitive... because of my work only she is very sensitive towards that community...”

Sunaina and Saritha also expose children to the political work they are involved in. Sunaina who has always been involved in politics, first as a student, and now as an academic, takes her children for anti-caste agitations even if that may not be seen as “good mothering”. Saritha recalls “dragging” her daughters to the human rights forum march when they were kids, much to the chagrin of some people who looked at the tired children pitifully. However, now “they go on their own, they like it”, she says. In fact, Saritha and her daughters participated in the mid-night march, following the 2012 gang rape and in queer pride marches in the following years. Alisha, who is active in Muslim women’s politics, and is often invited to many Muslim women forums across India is often accompanied by her daughter.

Describing what this means for children, Saritha says “They came to several discussions at my work place... all my friends are feminists, whenever we meet, we talk only about this. So, for them feminism is like probably the air.” If millennials’ (in the preceding chapters) routes to

feminism was mainly through (social) media, and understand it to be predominantly about men and women being equal, children in these families grow up in an environment where discussions about equality are deconstructed through the lens of different axes of discrimination.

5.5. Feminist mothering of girls: Will the real feminist stand up, please?

Scholarship on feminist mothering of daughters argue the necessity of raising assertive, independent, strong girls who go on to become confident young women, challenge normative ideals of femininity and make choices that don't undermine their self-esteem (Phadke, 2017; Green, 2009). Feminist mothers and their partners also set store by this. Recalling a recent 'parent-teacher' meeting, Sunaina says, "The teacher said that I was quite happy that not many girls are so assertive". This prompts Naresh to add that despite this being a "global, international school", and progressive changes that have taken place over time, ideas about gender and other axes of discrimination continue to have a stranglehold. This anecdote is revealing because it points to the fact that Sunaina's daughter is an exception, and that there is indeed a need to raise girls who are confident.

Rama Rao who has two teenage daughters agrees that there have been generational changes, but frames it as the benefit of increasing economic mobility-- "Now middle classes have resources to educate the girl child as well". He also believes that as "conditions change, issues and sites also change." For instance, "a decade or two decades back, they didn't even think about what happens in the workplace because their girl children did not even reach the workplace at that time, my sisters did not even reach a workplace".

So, apart from change at the familial level, he argues for structural and systemic changes as well, and draws attention as to how the macro contexts are dynamic. Although Rama Rao points to the

“spheres” of education and workplace, there are other spheres as well. Saritha, Sunaina, and to a limited extent, Alisha, draw on academic literature to point to the diverse issues/spheres at the everyday level that are affected by changes at the macro level. For instance, Sunaina observes that “with the coming of liberalization, we see a body being celebrated in various... size zero... that was not so very prominent when we were kids, but now we do need to address it”.

Phadke observes how middle-class feminist mothers negotiate their own understanding of bodies and beauty, while trying to set a “good example” to their daughters. In a context where liberalization and globalization have transformed what is considered to be beautiful and desirable, Phadke wonders whether dressing up, waxing or being concerned about body weight would send out the wrong message to the daughters they are trying to raise as feminist with a healthy body image and self esteem (2017). Feminist mothers in this study express no such anxiety in the context of clothing. They speak about setting a good example by choosing clothes that are comfortable for themselves and letting their daughters choose in a likewise manner and encourage them to feel comfortable in their own skin. Sunaina’s daughter likes “flashy clothes”, Saritha’s daughter had a phase where she would resolutely refuse to wear a frock, Alisha’s daughter balances comfort with chic, and Amisha’s daughter loves to dress up for occasions. What feminist mothers want for their girls is for them to be autonomous and confident enough to voice their opinions even in the face of opposition or when patriarchal social norms tell them they can't do, be or look a certain way, or as Amisha put it, she wants her daughter to be decidedly "rebellious”.

However, both Alisha and Saritha, mothers to young daughters, warn that raising feminist daughters is not easy. One of the main reasons for this is that children not only give cutting and critical feedback about their parenting: “I am happy about it... but it is difficult to swallow, you

know?” Alisha discloses, but also call parents out if their actions are *perceived* to be anti-feminist (as has already been mentioned). For instance, Saritha’s daughters have accused Rama Rao of fat shaming when he suggested that they exercise to deal with menstrual issues. Similarly, Saritha has been called out and her feminism questioned by her daughters on more than one occasion. When Saritha would ask her daughters to help with domestic chores, they would flatly refuse to do so, complain about the inequitable division of labor at home (point out to Rama Rao’s lack of contribution in this aspect) and ask if they were expected to help on account of being *girls*. But Saritha believes that this is less to do with feminism, and more an excuse to escape from performing chores. She also reveals that she “quarrels” with her daughters when they say it is their choice to not engage in gendered work as feminists:

I have actually questioned them about their choice feminism. I say who is providing this choice to you? We are all working here, and you are getting this choice. Parents, maids, drivers, grandparents, everybody works, and you assert your own choice. So, for a choice to be truly a choice, you have to take all the shit also, all the responsibility... then you assert, then it is some meaningful assertion. So, I've also not been quiet and not accepted all their assertions as they come. I make it a point to point out to them that hello, you are actually in a privileged position.

A broad-based definition of ‘choice feminism’ that has emerged in the West is that *any* decision taken consciously is a feminist choice. Saritha critiques such a feminism by pointing out to the economy and labor of care that enables her daughters to exercise such a choice in the first place.

Alisha’s daughter, Aisha takes issue with Alisha’s brand of feminism that is empathetic towards men. Given the nature of Alisha’s work (she sits on sexual harassment committees), her feminism is all about reforming, changing and nurturing, but “Aisha's feminism does not involve as much

nurturance and love for men as mine does, so her feminism is quite different from my feminism”, she says. She also describes her daughter’s feminism as “more militant” than hers, but as equals, she believes, they both have the space to argue and fight over each other’s feminisms.

Alisha concludes by saying that feminist parenting is easier when children are toddlers when it is about clothing and books, but warns that “real feminist parenting is bloody tough” when they are adults because “now you have another feminist in the house, who is very articulate, well read, perhaps more than you, and she is going to give it to you”. She regards it as a success of feminist mothering that Aisha as an “independent thinker” is able to stand up for her beliefs. Saritha also wouldn’t want it any other way because being a feminist mother has made motherhood more “exciting and rewarding”, and seeing a new generation of young feminists in the making fills her with hope.

Larger scholarship around (new and old) feminisms delve into the varied positions feminists take in regards with a wide range of issues, including something as crucial as what feminism means, with scholars agreeing that there are as many feminists as there are feminisms. What is interesting here is how heated debates in academic literature are brought home for these feminist mothers, through their daughters.

5.5.1 Feminist mothering of sons

Early scholarship on feminist mothering focused exclusively on the mother-daughter relationship, but more recent scholarship examines how sons and fathers too can benefit from feminist mothering (Gordon, 1990; O’Reilly, 2000, 2001, 2014). In fact, co-opting boys and men in the feminist fight to bring about social change has also been addressed in gender and development scholarship (Flood & Howson, 2015; Esplen, 2006).

However, like the popular media articles cited in the beginning of this chapter, Lalitha moans about the dearth of resources on how to raise feminist sons. For her, a meaningful intervention she can make as a feminist mother is to bring up a “girl-friendly boy”, who is not aggressive, and is sensitive towards issues of gender injustices and inequalities, aware about the vulnerabilities girls and women face on account of being girls and women. Sunaina also echoes the sentiment that boys must be raised to be “sensitive, to share responsibilities, especially at home and how to be responsible in public spaces¹³⁴”. Even Naresh agrees that to “make society better... Feminist parenting of boys is crucial”.

But Lalitha and Prakash harbor a worry that bringing up Rumi to be non-conforming to the ideals of being macho might lead to him being marginalized by boys in his peer group. Green observes that many feminist mothers of sons worry that “boys who do not fit the ‘masculine’ model will be ousted by their peer group and adults” (Green quoted in Peets, 2000, p. 100). Naresh draws on his own experiences of growing up as a “non-dominant boy” and agrees that not living up to images of “toxic masculinity”, not teasing women that is widely regarded as “part of rites of passage” can often lead to being ridiculed by one’s peers and adults. However, both Lalitha & Prakash and Sunaina & Naresh also say that this is a risk they are willing to take.

Sunaina and Naresh also point out another challenge in reference with peer pressure. As the influence of peer group increases, they say, their son might realize the normative power and privileges he has lost that come with being a man, on account of growing up in a feminist household. Therefore, she believes that it is important that boys are raised to be feminist from “day 1” and learn to view loss of patriarchal power as a pleasure:

¹³⁴ hooks prefers to call this feminist masculinity (2000, p.67)

We basically tell our children to enjoy what you are doing. You have to do everything but enjoy. Cleaning the table, sweeping or feeding the dog... one has to learn that responsibility is also a pleasure. It brings in a contentment which power may not actually bring, you are satisfied with your life, you are content or happy with your life. Power always leads to certain kind of insecurities is what I believe, you also want consolidate your power, now when you understand that each one of us has a power of equality, it's a contentment, you don't have to be insecure anymore that when will my privilege of being a man will go, so that insecurity is not there (Sunaina)

The idea of responsibility as pleasure is also echoed by Rama Rao. He says that the only reason he was able to take care of his children when Lalitha was away at work was because he enjoys taking care of children:

We have this tradition of men cooking and feeding children, we like them.. we enjoy doing it.. So how to make sure children grow up to be healthy, what medicines to give, playing with them.. actually I devoted good part of my life personally taking care of them and I used to take half the burden except for breastfeeding, that is not possible biologically (Rama Rao)

Rama Rao's narrative affirms Sunaina's theory that it is possible for boys and men to learn to view responsibility not traditionally associated with men, as not a loss of privilege, but as a source of enjoyment or pleasure.

Like recent scholarship on profeminist men and masculinities (Chopra, 2003; Sircar, 2018), feminist mothers and their partners also move beyond issues of male aggression and violence to include performing care activities at home. Sircar (2018) observes that pro-feminist men must be willing to walk the talk and urges them to "understand doing [feminism] as conduct" and not limit it to theory (p.47). The fathers in the study attempt to do this themselves, and encourage

their children who are boys to do the same in the hope that the “tribe of feminist boys or men increases” (Naresh).

5.6. Discussion

Sowards & Renegar (2006) observe that contemporary feminist contexts compel scholars to think about newer and perhaps more personal rhetorical forms of activism. For instance, sharing feminist jokes, swapping stories that challenge stereotypes, and everyday conversations that go into “creating a meaningful private sphere through personal activism”, that is as important as any public activism (Sowards & Renegar, 2006, p. 62). Stephenson-Abetz (2012) does away with the personal/public dichotomy and describes this as “everyday activism” that cannot be dismissed simply because they are not activism of a collective nature that have come to characterize feminist politics. In addition, she argues that mothering done by feminists must also be considered as one of the sites of everyday activism. Although they happen at an individual and personal level, they must be looked at from the lens of the everyday.

It is this transformational potential that is at the heart of feminist mothering, a supposedly private practice (Sarkar, 2006) that is aimed at changing the society by raising children with feminist values (Green, 2019). In doing so, feminist scholarship on feminist or empowered mothering turns the second wave slogan, “personal is the political” on its head, to re-invest the meaning of political to include mothering as a site of “everyday” activism.

To borrow from Ahmed:

If we think of the second- wave feminist motto “the personal is political,” we can think of feminism as happening in the very places that have historically been

bracketed as not political: in domestic arrangements, at home, every room of the house can become a feminist room, in who does what where (2017, p. 4)

All the feminist mothers in the participant pool agree that they bring the same level of feminist sensitivity towards everything they do in their everyday, whether as teacher, activist, boss, or as a mother and a wife, and that feminism informs how they live their lives in all its complexities. The idea that feminism is about how one lives, has been treated as outdated and dismissed as “cultural feminism” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 2). Nonetheless, as is apparent from the lived experiences and the meaning-making emerging from the narratives of these mothers and their partners, feminist mothering is an everyday lived practice that is aimed at social change by raising children with feminist values.

Feminist mothering (like in the Western contexts) emerges as a political practice, where mothers believe that the best way to raise children is from a feminist perspective to achieve social change. This is done through establishing that being a ‘mother’ is just one of their very many identities, and that feminist values be embodied and practiced in the everyday. Although, like millennial participants in the study, feminist mothers also clarify that having children does not make them any less of a feminist, unlike millennial participants, they neither glorify nor essentialize women as uniquely suited to mothering. Further, they do not take the complementary approach to gender equality.

While “daughters as subjects of patriarchy” (Rama Rao), and sons receive the same feminist values of being non-conforming to gender stereotypes and roles, issues of power and the uneven terrain of gender relations lead to girls being encouraged to be vocal about their issues and boys to treat the loss of patriarchal dividend (that affords men to focus on their “public identities” at

the cost of leaving nurturing and care to women, Chowdhury & Baset, 2018) not as a denial of power, but as a source of insecurities.

There is also a focus on larger goals of intersectional feminism with feminist mothers choosing to understand feminism as respect for human beings irrespective of gender, class, caste, religion, which in turn informs not just their mothering but everything they are involved in. It is their hope that, through feminist mothering, they are able to instill in their children feminist values of respecting human beings with kindness (as Saritha clarifies, not “empty kindness”) and humility. To paraphrase participants’ views, feminist mothering is not a destination, it is a journey where choices must be made on a daily basis.

As mentioned earlier, this chapter contributes to the larger project of feminist motherlines with these narratives potentially becoming a resource for other feminist mothers looking for shared experiences. It explores how feminist mothers negotiate and deal with an experience that can be “all encompassing, binding kind of obligation” (Saritha) and make it a site of empowerment and feminist politics. When looked at from this perspective, feminist mothering as everyday activism is “not incompatible” with “collective activism” (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012, p. 113).

Based on the themes that emerged, it is possible to outline what feminist mothering could mean in the Indian context. Feminist mothering can be described as a lived practice that de-links ‘mother’ from mothering, to suggest that far from an individual practice, ‘mothering’ is a collective task, and can be done by fathers, family, and friends. Feminist mothering is a practice that is informed by the belief that mothers, as independent human beings, have lives and identities beyond that of being a mother. The aim of such a practice is to raise children to become self-dependent by facilitating the learning of age appropriate ‘life skills’ in children

irrespective of their gender (doing the dishes or cleaning the toilet), and develop critical thinking abilities that would further help them in questioning and be non-conforming to dominant norms at the intersection of gender, caste, class, or religion. As a ‘lived’ feminist practice, above all else, it is not taught, but its values are lived on a daily basis. Given that feminist mothers have said that one cannot mentor values that are not espoused by the parents themselves, that values of feminisms (in all its multiplicities) must be embodied, demonstrably so, in their everyday lives. As an exploratory study on what feminist mothering in India looks like, it is beyond the scope of to look at Christian or Muslim feminist mothering¹³⁵ in particular, and that is a lacuna one hopes will be addressed through future research because:

we have had very few conversations, we have had very few resources to deal with mothering as feminists, as women also we have had very little resources, but as feminists we have, there's too many issues, too many problems, and too many dilemmas...(Saritha)

Considering that the disciplines of sociology and anthropology are preoccupied with questions of form and structure of the family, and scholars from women’s studies are anxious about returning to the domestic realm and risking essentialism, feminist communication scholars are uniquely positioned to understand family and mothering as a site of everyday feminist activism.

¹³⁵ Nazia Erum’s (2017) seminal work ‘Mothering a Muslim’ is an excellent treatise on the multiple challenges that Muslim women face as mothers. Writing in the post 9/11 context, Erum speaks with middle class Muslim mothers about the bullying their children go through and what dilemmas they face as Muslims, women, and mothers.

Chapter 6

Intergenerational Feminisms: The Gendered Micropolitics of Everyday Life

6. Introduction

Do all aspects of the women's question involve the same (macro and micro) approach? Is there a major contribution we can make as a result of our experience to the understanding of power today and of ways of resisting, subverting, and responding to it? In other words, can we re-define politics... address the capillary forms in which power is rooted in everyday world, and through which its reproduction is guaranteed.... The tools have to be forged out of one's own life and reality (Kannabiran & Shatrugna, 1986, p. 34)

Despite the long and chequered histories of feminist movements (as noted in Chapter 1) in India, there has been little exploration of how the general people understand and engage with feminisms, what specific experiences account for such (dis)interest, and how they imagine feminism informs their lives. This thesis has attempted to address this lacuna in scholarship about how women and men (from two different generations) understand feminisms, the routes through which they come into it, (dis)identify with it, and how they think it informs their lives and vice versa at a personal level. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 interrogated three specific issues: 1) millennials' subjective understanding of feminism and their routes to feminisms 2) how feminism informs millennials' understanding of gender and gender politics and 3) unpacked feminist mothering as a site of everyday feminist politics and the challenges and dilemmas feminist mothers and their partners face in their effort to conscientize children about multiple oppressions.

The three analytical chapters drew on scholarship from multiple areas: new feminisms and feminist movements, new femininities and girlhood studies, men and masculinities, men and feminism, and (feminist) motherhood studies. It drew on feminist theory that centers the voices

of the participants as they are located in their everyday contexts. The thesis drew on participants' reflections of their own lives to understand the larger public conversations about feminisms (and gender) and its social circulation in the sphere of the everyday. This work engaged with the views of both 'ordinary' middle classes and self-identified feminist academic-activists. Following Kannabiran (1986) I used the term 'ordinary' as a descriptor for those who have neither been exposed to academic feminist literature nor are a part of gender justice work to be ideologically invested in building feminist theory and praxis) and those involved in academia and/or activism (who enjoy a different kind of internally differentiated social capital based on gender, disciplines, race etc., than the ordinary middle classes and therefore can afford to make choices that are non-dominant, as in Broadbridge, 2010; Angervall et al., 2018).

Chapter 1 traced the histories of feminist movements and briefly introduced new feminisms in India. It also turned to the question of men and feminisms in India briefly, and finally ended with the question about why, despite 2000 years of a variety forms of women's resistance, feminism has always been defined in terms public activism and public protests, that characterizes the liberal feminist(s) perspectives emerging out of Western contexts, so much so that the beginnings of women's movements in India that took off around the same time movements elsewhere were not considered feminist enough to make it to the annals of feminist history.

Chapter 2 detailed the methodological and theoretical underpinnings of the study, the tools of data collection, and method of analysis. It discussed at length the need for disciplined eclecticism as a way to keep the boundaries of comparable theoretical concepts porous, so as to understand messy and lived experiences that cannot be contained by any single theory -- such as performativity theory or embodiment theory. In addition, issues of consent, power, translation and interpretation, and self reflexivity made up the rest of the chapter.

Chapter 3 explored the discursive meanings of feminisms emerging from five focus group discussions comprising millennials aged 18-25, and provided an in-depth analysis about the ways in which participants agreed with, endorsed, complicated, and rejected (popular) notions about feminisms and feminists. It first turned to the question of how people interpreted and understood feminism, examined the routes through which they come into it (or not). It examined the participants' views about the historical and contemporary relevance of feminism at socio-cultural, political, and personal level. The participants located these conversations about the politics of azadi and access to public spaces, firmly within the home and the family.

By drawing on women participants' assertions of an "I can do" attitude, I located them in the broader scholarship on new femininities. While most scholarship on girl power and can-do femininities are located in a post feminist context, where feminism is supposed to have achieved its goal and has become irrelevant, participants in the FGDs neither repudiated feminisms nor did they think gender equality had been achieved. In fact, crediting feminisms for qualitative improvements in their lives, especially in the spheres of education and employment, they pointed as to how the project of gender equality has not yet taken root in their homes. I drew on the scholarship of new respectable femininities of the middle classes to illustrate how 'can-do femininity' is linked to new respectable femininities in India. Their understanding of feminism, tempered by middle class morality, made it possible for them to look at feminism as a tool that empowered them with 'choice' (as to what to do with their lives) and also argue that feminism must not be prescriptive.

The men who were part of this phase of the study understood feminism as gender equality as well. But in their conversations about feminism, it was evident that they would support feminism as long as they could see women as victims in some manner. This became even more noticeable

when they said that feminism was in excess in some places (cities) and completely absent in places where it is needed (such as in rural areas where women are still oppressed, for example, not being allowed to wear certain clothes or learn a particular skill).

The chapter also examined the various ways in which, both male and female participants argued for feminism “within limits”. The content of “feminist within limits” is twofold: a. Feminism, women participants contend, must not be prescriptive and dictate to women what choice is or isn’t feminist. They maintained that patience, care is what makes femininity different from masculinity, but it is not something that comes to women naturally, nor do all women want to be that way. Feminism is not about rendering (arguably stereotypical notions of) femininity inferior but treating it as equal to masculinity. b. Feminism must remain within limits so as not to cross middle-class moral boundaries. Women participants argue for the boundaries of feminism means to remain both open (to allow for stereotypically feminine choices to be made) and closed (to allow space for their notions of morality). For male participants, feminism must remain within limits so as not to risk reverse discrimination.

The participants also insisted that feminism has become so popular now that anybody and everybody could claim to be feminist and therefore it isn’t enough to say “I am a feminist” but practice it in their everyday lives. For men this meant belief in gender equality and respecting women, femininity, and the domestic. Women participants too understood it in similar terms, with an acknowledgement that it is feminism that has made it possible for them to exercise choices. Choices are simultaneously understood as having been enabled by and an act of doing feminism.

Chapter 3 drew on the scholarship of Connell, Butler, Schippers, Paechter, Srivastava, Kabeer, Chopra, Mahmood to take into account the lived-- embodied and performative aspects of gender

to accommodate the various ways in which the participants spoke about gender. It delineated how women and men understand what femininities and masculinities mean and how these ideas change over time. Women described transitioning from a fairly happy and free childhood to experiencing a restricted femininity as they grew into adolescence. They also spoke about various ways in which they negotiated with the restrictions placed on them. It was only by expanding the notion of agency following Mahmood that one can fully appreciate how their idea of feminism helps them negotiate respectable practices. Men describe transition from carefree masculinities to responsible masculinities. In this way, both women and men's lives are relational, and this comes through because they take a gender complementary approach to feminism, and locate its politics firmly within the home. Once again, a practice-based feminism emerged from the participants' narratives. Drawing on their narratives, I suggested restricted (agentic) femininity, responsible respectable femininity, carefree masculinity and responsible masculinity as a way to understand participant descriptions of their experiences of gender, marked by continuities and changes across time and space.

Changes, they ascribe to feminism, and are an extension of what the FGD participants said. Feminism, for men and women, meant treating genders as equal. The content of such an equality did not have a homogenizing effect, i.e., masculinities and femininities remained different, but the attempt was to undo the hierarchical relationship they share. Like the FGD participants, women participants acknowledged the role of feminism in enabling choice, and men acknowledged its role in changing mindsets about gender roles. One participant disidentified with feminism and her response can certainly be read in a postfeminist frame. Another male participant who was a part of both the FGD and phenomenological interviews (with a considerable gap in between the two phases) had time to reflect and argue about how it is

difficult for men to give up (accrued) patriarchal dividends that men continue to enjoy, and therefore no matter how strong the assertion of being a feminist, they will continue to share a difficult relationship with feminism.

Chapter 5 drew on feminist mothering literature that provided yet another way of doing feminisms such as the way in which feminist mothers and their partners choose to raise their children, not so they will one day identify as feminists but live its values on a day to day to basis, in the everyday, not just in the home or public spaces, but everywhere. It explored feminist mothers and their partners' routes to feminism, their expanding notions about feminism, strategies used to mentor feminist values/ideas.

All the three analytical chapters take different approaches to exploring the routes to feminism, notions of choice, autonomy, freedom, and generation, and doing feminism or feminism as a lived practice in the everyday domestic realm. This chapter therefore considers the implications of the “coming into” feminisms through various routes, connects the arguments made in the three analytical chapters and contextualizes them within the broader debates surrounding ‘generation’, ‘choice’, and multiple feminisms.

By situating these debates within the broader feminist scholarship, this chapter argues that feminisms, having entered the popular (non-academic), cannot be contained or restricted to “pure politics” of public protests and activism. Where feminist mothering has now come to be widely acknowledged as everyday activism within academia, how can one make sense of a feminism as described by the young millennial that argues for feminism within limits (respectable feminism)? By drawing on Budgeon's (2001) theorization of micropolitics, hybrid and multivariant legacies of feminist movements' in India (Chaudhury, 2012; Roy, 2012), this chapter argues that there are various ways in which one does feminism, and that feminist discourses are intertwined with,

mutually constitute and condition other (competing) discourses of power, such as the socio-cultural discourse of neoliberalism, as well as middle-class morality and respectability. Given that participants of all ages in the study (barring two) actively identify as feminists and understand it as a lived practice, we may extend the meaning of feminist politics and doing feminism to both traditional and non-traditional spaces of activism. In addition, the chapter also seeks to complicate the relationship between men and feminism.

By way of conclusion, this chapter suggests that the thrice told story of feminisms within academia (in support, in opposition, and mixed to ‘new feminisms’) underscores the importance of engaging with non-academic feminisms by ordinary people rather than be dismissive about it as postfeminism (following Adkins (2004) who notes ‘postfeminism’ suggests the passing away of one kind of feminism) or their politics. This chapter (and the thesis as a whole) raises more questions rather than definitive answers about the proliferation of feminist ideas and what it means for collective feminist politics.

6.1 Multiple ‘new’ feminisms

From facing a huge backlash, so much so that scholars spoke of a postfeminist world and worried about the death of feminisms, to a renewed popularity of feminism, a post post-feminist visibility (Gill, 2016) so to speak, has been a cause of both optimism and concern (Portwood-Stacer & Banet-Weiser, 2017). In an attempt to understand the widespread acceptance of feminisms in the Western contexts, scholars provide Neoliberal feminism and popular feminisms as analytical frameworks to understand how feminism has moved from being unpopular to becoming so popular that it is now available along various spheres-- State-led initiatives, (social)

media, and digital campaigns by the market, NGOs, and in the corporate literature, popular culture and the global marketplace (Dabrowski, 2020).

Neoliberalism has been discussed in terms of the economic, political, and socio-cultural sphere. The first refers to the global economic system of market deregulations, privatization, withdrawal of state intervention etc, while the second “political-ideological” sense refers to the global economic elites’ push for the denigration of democratic rights of citizens in order to maintain existing political and social inequalities. The socio-cultural sphere refers to the way in which neoliberalism shapes individual subjectivities in everyday life by shaping social values, and culture (Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016, p. 11).

In relation to feminisms, Rottenberg (2014) and Fraser (2013) refer to the new feminist manifesto ‘Lean In’ that endorses a particular kind of a corporate and power feminism that acknowledge gender inequalities, unlike in postfeminist contexts where gender equality has already been achieved. But the onus of achievement and success in the face of such discrimination is placed on the women themselves. As fully agential subjects, women are called to interiorize feminism and “internalize the revolution” (Rottenberg, 2018b, p. 66), and become fully responsible for their own welfare through the choices they make. Women are told that they don’t have to choose between work and family, but through a slight shift in perspective, they can perfectly, but more importantly, happily, balance both. This would ensure that both productive and reproductive activities continue unhindered, so as not to risk the loss of human capital or creation of future workers. Feminism, then, is transformed into a self-help program, which is combined with the “confidence culture” (Gill & Orgad, 2016, 2017), to create a feminist woman who is a pliable (re)productive worker--consumer- citizen, and accepts that her welfare is in her

own hands. Self-care, happiness, balance now become keywords that operate along with empowerment, choice and rights.

Referring to the celebritization of feminism, and its hypervisibility through media, Rottenberg (2014) observes that media have become a fertile ground for the rise of feminisms. It is precisely such “happy” politics and the talk of rights (unlinked from the political sphere) that has defanged and depoliticized feminism and made it easy for it to be circulated and mainstreamed. Portwood-Stacer and Banet-Weiser (2017) also observe the new luminosity of feminisms and propose the lens of popular feminisms to refer to the “practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organizing marches to hashtag activism to commodities” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2018, p.7).

Evidently, these feminisms have a lot in common with the elements that make up postfeminist sensibility—individualism, empowerment, choice, autonomy. But what distinguishes neoliberal and popular feminism from postfeminism is the recognition of gender-based inequalities. Where postfeminist sensibility tends to produce “un-gendered”, autonomous individuals (Scharff, 2011, p.122), neoliberal feminism acknowledges gender and adds the vocabulary of ‘rights’ into the mix. However just as words like autonomy, freedom, choice lose their political and critical value in a postfeminist context, so does the vocabulary of rights in a neoliberal feminist context. Problems and rights don't need to be addressed to or by the State, but can be managed by the enterprising woman herself. Evidently, these different feminisms are in a “cultural conversation with each other”, creating conditions for the existence of each other (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p.8).

This endorsement of particular kinds of feminisms by the State (national and conservative feminisms), market, corporate world, (social) media also coincides with an increasing number of

women identifying with feminism again, marking a significant transformation in the attitudes of people towards feminism (Scharff, 2020). In an attempt to understand the move from postfeminist “I am not a feminist...” to “I am a feminist but” has variously been referred to as “moderate” or “reasonable” feminisms (Roy, 2013; Lewis et al., 2019; Dean, 2010; Calder-Dawe & Davey, 2016; Edley & Wetherell, 2001) that are not radical, anti-men, anti-family, anti-motherhood, and are now practiced by young women and men in Western contexts. These contemporary manifestations of feminisms have been called by different terms such as everyday feminism, networked feminism, choice feminism, DIY feminisms, lifestyle feminisms, cultural feminisms, collectively known as ‘new feminisms’ (Chatterjee, 2018). The ‘new’ in new feminisms suggests both the mode and content of activism, and who practices such feminisms—the new generation (the third wavers and the fourth wavers). These feminisms are studied through the lens of the aforementioned overarching analytical frameworks-- postfeminism, neoliberal feminism and popular feminisms. They represent a politics that are individualized, personalized, interiorized, psychologized, that offer no critique of the intersections of race, class, and religion that often operate along with gender. Further, they are also different from the collective and oppositional politics practiced by ‘older’ feminists.

In India too, similar trajectories can be seen, from a backlash and disidentification with feminism, to a renewed interest in it. Chaudhury’s (2000) rich and detailed analysis of feminism in print media, and Sunder-Rajan’s (1993) analysis of privatized media producing women as empowered consumer-citizens draw on postfeminisms, corporate feminisms, choice feminisms, popular and neoliberal feminisms to examine the mediated feminist landscape.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ There have also been Indian versions of (neoliberal) feminist manifestos similar to Lean in that speak to working mothers such as Apurva Purohith’s (Fortune India’s most powerful women in 2018) ‘Lady, you are the boss!’

The neoliberal feminist framework has also been used by scholars to understand new feminist movements in India. For Mani (2014), neoliberalism's entanglement with feminism is about how freedom and choice are imagined. She writes "unrestrained choice and obstacle free mobility comes to be woven into the very ideal of freedom," coming at the cost of willfully ignoring the fact that "we live in an interdependent world...in obdurate sociocultural contexts that we are compelled to negotiate at every turn" (p. 27). Further, by moving away from making demands of the State and seeking amendments in law, an approach that has been at the heart of feminist movements in India, new feminist movements encourage "alone together" (Turkle, 2011) politics of the #IWillGoOut kind, tending to leave behind the issues of those who may yet need State's assistance to ensure some modicum of rights, (lower class and working-class women). These new movements, Mani argues makes it seem as though all that is needed for social change, is individual action or an enterprising attitude.

But an exploration of (ordinary) people's personal understanding and relationship with feminism has been missing in the Indian context. Even though some scholarship notes that feminism was so unpopular that most women refused to identify with it (Phadke, 2020; Chaudhury, 2000; Sinha, 2000), this is based on the opinion of prominent women (as has been noted in Chapter 1). Since the early 2000s people's responses to feminisms have been contradictory at best (Mitra, 2011). However, as pointed out earlier, barring Bulbeck's (2009) work, one would be hard pressed to find literature on how ordinary middle-class(es) women and men (not exposed to academic literature on feminism or have not taken part in NGO-ized activism) negotiate with

(<https://www.goodreads.com/en/book/show/53058058-lady-you-re-the-boss>) and "Lady, you are not a man" (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18366014-lady-you-re-not-a-man>), & Kaveree Bamzai's (Editor, India today) 'No regrets: The guilt free woman's guide to a good life' (<https://www.amazon.in/No-Regrets-Guilt-Free-Womans-Guide/dp/9353571421>) that includes advice from powerful women such as Arianna Huffington (CEO, Huffington Post), Sudha Murthy, Smriti Irani and encourages women to follow their own brand of feminism to live a mostly guilt-free life

feminisms--either explicitly or in terms of gender consciousness. For instance, the scholarship on men and feminism is mostly confined to examining either male academics or gender justice workers' relationship to feminism; Phadke's (2015) study involves women who are exposed to academic theory. Even Gilbertson's (2018a, 2018b) most recent study and Mitra's (2011) work concern themselves with gender justice issues faced by workers in the NGO sector who either have read feminist theory or received formal training or have attended workshops on gender. It is within this context of enterprising culture that Gilbertson (2018b) notes the relevance of these 'new' feminisms such as choice, corporate and neoliberal feminisms. Moreover, in all the above studies the responses to feminism swings from a "confident assertion" of being a feminist to a "complete aversion" to it (Mitra, 2011, p. 197) to being confused about what feminism exactly means or recommending other terms such as humanism or equalism (Gilbertson, 2018b).

Likewise, a majority of the participants across the two generations in this study unequivocally support feminisms, with the younger generation arguing for a feminism within limits, one that isn't anti-family, anti-motherhood, anti-femininity, too radical, and only a minority (two to be exact,) did not identify as feminists. Some older feminists like Lalitha and Prakash were somewhat confused by the term feminism, but believe such a sensibility towards gender to be important. Even FP, the only woman participant to have disidentified with feminism agrees that feminism has achieved for her what it was supposed to. She notes that she has not been discriminated against in her family and her opinions are respected. Although she doesn't need it personally (especially in what she perceives to be its current politics of being too radical and anti-motherhood and anti-femininity), she also agrees that it is still relevant for those to whom the benefits of feminisms have not reached. Neither men nor women interviewed for this study expressed any desire to rename feminism, with all of them keenly aware about male privilege

and continuing relevance of feminisms to improve the lives of women. Like in other contexts where reasonable/moderate feminisms are endorsed, younger participants in the study in particular argue for a feminism within limits. In explaining the relevance of feminisms as rhetoric and practice, participants turn feminism into not only an acceptable philosophy to live by, but also as desirable and one at that.

6.1.2 New feminisms in India: The issue of generation

The generational approach to feminisms, like the wave metaphor, has been critiqued for erasing both differences and intergenerational links (Hoogland et al, 2004), and homogenizing diverse movements by arranging it on a linear timeline (Tuin, 2014, p. xii). The word ‘generation’ is also deemed problematic by queer feminist scholars, especially when used in a diachronic sense (Winch & Keller, 2016). But it can also be productive as has been illustrated in the work of Hoogland et al (2004), who take an intergenerational perspective to look at how entry into feminism at different historical points have had a bearing on how individuals think about feminism and shifts in feminist theory. Scholars in the area of girl studies and girl activism too find the generational approach productive since older generation feminists are often thought to be quick to dismiss the agency and feminisms of younger generations (Duits & van Zoonen 2007). Winch & Keller (2016) affirm this and point out that the generational approach can be productive and of critical purchase because it helps makes sense of the historical conditions that have produced specific gendered and feminist sensibilities.

Generational wars are not new in India, and can be traced to the nineties when NGO feminism took off, and with it, the politics of sexualities, much to the discomfort of socialist-Marxist feminists who considered both as diluting feminist politics-- the former not radical enough and

the second, elitist (Phadke, 2020; Chadha, 2017). But it was the first wave of the #MeToo movement, also referred to as ‘The List’ or ‘LoSha’ (list of sexual harassers in academia), dubbed infamously as a “feminist civil war” (Ghosh, 2017) that was predominantly framed as a generational war amongst feminists, both by feminists and media coverage. The older (rather the in-between) generation feminists were accused of behaving like “mothers-in-law”, and the younger generation was accused of not giving enough credit to the in-between generation who actually fought the older generation feminists to make space for politics based on not only gender but caste and sexualities (Chadha, 2017). In the same piece, Chadha also comments that differences (whether generational or way of doing politics) must not be thought of as a battleground but as a playground of ideas.

While the historical shifts in feminist thought are relevant in the case of Indian feminism(s) as well, it must also be pointed out that terming differences amongst feminists as generational wars would be inappropriate because in each of these cases, feminists from across generations (and castes) have positioned themselves on either side of this debate. Early career researchers and ‘younger’ feminists like Gupta (2016) and Taneja (2019) have critiqued ‘new feminisms’, while ‘older’ feminists like Mary E. John, Kalpana Kannabiran ¹³⁷, Geetha. V¹³⁸, openly supported ‘The List’. Chakraborty (2019), in her rich and detailed analysis of the debates surrounding ‘LoSha’ concludes that the generational distinction is baseless and has no critical purchase, because it does not account for such intra and intergenerational differences and solidarities. Further, it does not account for disagreements based on caste, class, sexuality, and perhaps even religion (Chadha, 2017).

¹³⁷ This shows the diversity of support: <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/10/13/metoo-india-feminists-statement/>

¹³⁸ <https://zubaanbooks.com/bookauthor/v-geetha/>

For Geetha. V’s remarks on LoSha, please read: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2017/oct/27/important-to-name-perpetrators-says-v-geetha-on-roya-sarkars-crowd-sourced-list-of-sexual-harasser-1684340.html>

Since most participants across the three phases of research mention generation at some point or another-- Millennial participants hold the older generations responsible for the perpetuation of socio-cultural mores regarding gender and older feminist participants mention generational differences either in terms of how the younger generation come into feminism (Lalitha remarks how her daughters learnt about feminism via the internet), and how “mainstream” normative ideas and norms are, despite the progress over generations, it is still pertinent to ask whether generation holds critical value and is a credible lens to employ to study the differences or similarities.

Both the younger and older participants in this study clarified that there are people who (mis)understand feminism to be anti-men or anti-family. Another point of resonance amongst both younger and older participants is how feminism is a lived practice or about “doing feminism”. But while there are intergenerational similarities in some aspects, there are differences as well.

Inter generational differences would include how young women participants agree that the “excesses” of feminism must necessarily be tempered by middle class morality, whereas (older) feminist mothers are particular about their children growing up not subscribing to normative (arguably “Indian”) moral values. Feminist mothers reject essentialization of women as mothers and refrain from associating women with stereotypical notions of femininities. They reject what are widely regarded as “respectable practices” of women being in charge of the domestic and insist that parenting is a two-people job, and can be done outside the institution of marriage or even by single mothers. Where millennial participants insisted on not confusing morality with feminism, feminist mothers were dealing with being open about issues of sexuality without being vicarious or intrusive. This was especially the case with feminist mothers of slightly older

participants. The younger female participants' expressions of feminisms can be described as accommodating, to account for their gendered, middle class and religious sensibilities, the older women in the study encourage their children to move away from received notions of good, bad, right, wrong.

There are also differences in the ways in which feminism is understood, not only intergenerationally, but intra-generationally (synchronic or amongst peers of similar age) as well. While some participants (both young and old) understand feminism as more than just gender (to include caste, class, sexuality, race, religion), others maintain it is about women's freedom and rights to achieve gender equality. What might explain this difference?

6.2 Routes to feminism: Academic versus popular (non-academic)

The routes to feminism are “many and varied” (O'Reilly, 2008b, p. 201), and these routes need to be examined because they make explicit the feminist discourses that are available to young women and men and the interpretative frameworks, they use to understand it (to paraphrase Budgeon, 2001). Participants in this study came into feminisms through various routes: academic literature, news coverage of State-led initiatives, documentaries, NGOs, popular culture, peer networks, and social media.

Most millennials in this study acknowledge the role of (social) media subsequent to the 2012 gang rape and cite it as their route to feminism. Those participants who had not heard of feminism (before their participation in the FGDs) borrowed their understanding from the developmental programs initiated by the government and NGOs. In short, they draw their understanding of feminism from sources/routes that have been critiqued for either co-opting feminist vocabulary by taking away its radical edge or are not recognizably radical or oppositional

as the “older” feminists intended it to be. It is worth wondering, then, if the absence of visible radicalism is what makes feminism acceptable to the participants? Would they perhaps reject more radical forms of feminist rhetoric and activism, as they did in reaction to Deepika Padukone’s ‘My Choice’ for transgressing the boundaries of morality, as non-feminist?

But what is striking is that those feminist parents and millennial participants with exposure to academic literature, in particular, spoke of feminism as not just about gender, but about class, caste, religion, age, and race, with one feminist mother using the word intersectionality explicitly. Even those participants with no exposure to the developments in feminist theory and largely understood feminism as gender equality, drew on their activist and developmental work and spoke of multiple marginalities. For all intents and purposes, the critique of the kind of feminism that ‘professional’ feminists in the NGO sector espouse definitely seems to be misplaced, because it doesn’t take into account the infusion of academic feminist ideas, particularly about multiple and intersecting oppressions in the sector, and the internalization of these values amongst women who work for these organizations.

Millennial participants and feminist parents (for instance Prakash) with no exposure to either academic literature or activism understand feminism differently-- as equality between genders, because popular stories about feminism do not pay attention to the developments in feminist thought, theory, and politics. As Deem (1999, p.91), the “lack of feminist history in the public sphere” limits both the understanding and possibilities for contemporary feminist politics.

Besides, the temporal and historical conditions or logics within which feminisms emerge and operate, whether in the earlier phases or in the contemporary moment(s), are dynamic and not static (Deem, 1999). While there was a backlash against feminism by women, the conversations

that contributed to this study suggest there is now an easy acceptance and identification with feminism. Further, using the vocabulary of choice and rights could also be seen in the context of the historical logic that operated then and now. The 70s represented a time when there was an increasing awareness about the lack of education, barriers to employment, dowry murders and feminist intervention at various levels. Both social and cultural expectations and lack of structural and systemic reforms were impediments to women's progress. And yet, when feminists attempted to politicize the family (as a site of patriarchal violence), they faced a huge backlash. Feminism was considered as a Western import or anti-family. Today, more women and men are willing to identify as feminists, and also acknowledge the home and the domestic as sites of change.

Can it be argued that just as, “it takes time—maybe one generation— before structural changes affect gender norms and actual gender practices” (Waldrop drawing on Derne, 2012, p. 637), it takes time for feminist thoughts to be infused into various spheres? Can it be argued that slow of infusion of feminist ideas coupled with a) the steady rise in women's higher education (John, 2020), b) the awareness about the lack of any substantial cultural change, specially around access to public spaces and violence against women, and c) its widespread coverage in recent times in media, makes young people more aware about discrimination and inequalities as being a collective problem that most women face?

Neoliberalism operates differently in the context of the participants from those involved in NGO work, here the change is interiorized or psychologized at two levels-- 1) at the individual, and 2) at the familial level. Since India has been at various points described as a collective society, and that women's lives are profoundly relational, the solution to this collective problem lies in a change in mindset at both individual and familial levels.

In their recognition of gender inequalities and psychological change, the study participants do speak the language of neoliberal feminism, but to recall an earlier argument, such neoliberal discourses are pervasive and ubiquitous. For instance, the idea of ‘hustling’ where youngsters create earning opportunities for themselves through alternative strategies, instead of waiting for the State to address the issue of job loss is an integral aspect of neoliberal subjectivity (Mwaura, 2017). From the start-up culture encouraged by the Government of India through initiatives like Make in India or *Atmanirbhar bhharath*¹³⁹, the prefigurative politics of *swachh bhharat* kind (Doron, 2016), to being in charge of one's own welfare as proposed by neoliberal feminism, the socio-cultural neoliberal discourse that attitudinal and mindset change is a basic requirement for improved lives is everywhere. It is not entirely surprising then that even feminism finds expression in can-do femininities and rests on personal initiative, that will ultimately turn into a wave of social change.

Even feminists and Dalit activists have at different points argued that recourse to law and the State can only do so much, and real social change requires attitudinal change. Most memorably, Agnes (1998) observes that there was a time when all issues concerning violence against women were turned into legal issues. But, as the report prepared by Justice Verma commission states, “Correction of the societal mindset of its gender bias depends more on social norms, and not merely on legal sanction” (Verma et al., 2013, pp. ii-iii). Despite constitutional guarantee and legal provisions, the mindset of those in the judiciary and law enforcement agencies have resulted in the “women’s tragedy” of gender and social injustice contrary to the constitutional promise to “secure a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of national life” (Verma et al., 2013, p. 15).

¹³⁹ For more details, please read: <https://inc42.com/resources/atmanirbhar-bharat-stimulus-decoded-for-startups/>

Since feminisms or feminist politics do not operate in a vacuum, but within a particular historical moment, and participants' subjectivities are informed by these prevailing multiple power discourses, it would be prudent not to dismiss young participants' feminism as neoliberal. These are the contexts within which young participants grow up in, and draw their interpretative frameworks from.

6.2.1 Choice feminism and middle-class morality

Across the three phases of research, the word choice is recurrent. Women participants from across generations speak of choice specifically in relation with motherhood; however, as mentioned previously, feminist mothers, unlike millennials, do not glorify or essentialize women as feminine or as mothers. The idea that feminism can be performed through individual choices (regarding a whole host of issues-- marriage and motherhood, deciding to be a stay-at-home parent, wearing sexy clothing) has been described as choice feminism. A term credited to Hirshman (2006), choice feminism has been variously described and critiqued for endorsing and valorizing a “free choice ideology” (Čakardić, 2017) where any choice made by women is deemed to be feminist and politically acceptable (Thwaites, 2017). Baumgardner and Richards (2000) explicate that any choice a woman makes with political consciousness (of gender equality) and support the idea that various iterations of feminisms now practiced by youngsters, must be considered to be a feminist choice indeed. Other feminists critique choice feminism for deradicalizing feminist politics and one that is a consequence of young women's “fear of politics” and in response to the critiques that feminists are too radical, judgmental and exclusionary (Ferguson, 2010). How can women wearing bikinis (slutwalk), lipstick, or going to a pub be feminism? Or, as in the context of this study, how can choosing to be a homemaker be

considered feminisms? How can choosing to be a mother in a heteronormative set up be considered feminism¹⁴⁰?

Even though there has never been a single unitary form of feminism or feminist politics, these new feminisms could be seen as particular iterations of postfeminisms, because the sites and institutions that were considered oppressive by some feminists become the site of new activisms (for instance lipstick feminism or lifestyle feminism, or feminist mothering). Whilst millennial women agree that feminism has made these choices available to them in the first place, they use/define choice in such a way that it enables them to passionately reject prescriptive feminism that tends to create good and bad feminists; such an approach also makes space for the performance of middle-class morality discourses. There is an interesting dual entanglement where participants demand that feminism and feminists not be prescriptive and judge what can be a feminist choice (i.e., if women can be stereotypically feminine, like flowers, choose to be housewives), and yet are prescriptive about what choice is morally acceptable. In a way, then, both academic discourses and the popular/public discourses seek to draw boundaries around feminism and its politics. Evidently, it's not unfettered freedom that younger participants want, neither are all choices acceptable. For instance, where a number of articles speak about how choice feminism grants freedom to women "to sleep with men" (Ferguson, 2010, p. 247) in the Western contexts, this is rejected by younger participants (in India) on account of middle-class morality.

The feminist mothers, on the other hand, who also speak of choosing to be mothers, have the necessary critical tools and capital as academic activists to navigate and deconstruct the morality

¹⁴⁰ In fact, John worries about the decline of female employment rates in India which has always been one of the lowest to begin with and asks what "what kind of autonomy can a new generation of more educated women hope to realize" (2020, p. 139).

discourses and go against a set of dominant normative norms (not to dismiss their difficulties in doing so).

6.2.2 *'Lived' feminisms/Doing feminism: From feminist politics to feminist micropolitics*

Doing feminism or feminism as practice within academia has been about retrieving women's histories and standpoints, producing knowledge by employing a feminist lens and promoting feminist epistemologies. In broader political terms, doing feminism has meant promoting ideals of justice, egalitarianism, fighting for women's rights, and more recently supporting queer politics through sloganeering and protest marches. In contemporary times, feminism as practice is not limited to sloganeering and protesting on the streets, but now includes a wide range of both lifestyle and activities. Being a feminist means leading a lifestyle that is in congruence with what one professes to be. Some scholars draw on Giddens and Beck and note this 'lifestyle turn' in feminist practice that is intensely focused on being a 24X7 kind of a feminist who is acutely conscious of the choices they make (education, marriage, children, spouse, choice of clothing, music, tv shows, etc.). They see this as a necessary condition of late modern life where one is forced to construct a self that is in coherence with the narratives they want to tell about themselves (Belliappa, 2013). This has come to be known as lifestyle feminism. Lifestyle feminism is not just about doing feminisms through consumption choices, but also involves producing cultural and media artefacts or "making feminist media" (Groenveld, 2016) such as zines, rap songs, memes and cartoons. It is also worth noting that such "lifestyle politics" is not just limited to feminisms, but extend to other movements such as veganism, communal living or even the tiny house movement, and new spiritual movements that center around mindfulness, power of positivity, and the laws of attraction (Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

Nowhere can this extension of feminist activism from traditional academic-activist settings to non traditional, possibly “private” spaces be seen as clearly as in the trajectory of feminist communication studies. Recent scholarship draws attention to the “social circulation” of feminist ideas not just by examining the (rhetorical) practices of feminist academics, scholars, and the texts they produce, but extending this to the study of everyday conversations within the classroom (such as Stern, 2018), peer/social/community groups or family, or through the examination of women’s blogs, and feminism as “something one does” (Stephenson-Abetz, 2012).

This has effectively expanded the sites and domains in which feminism is circulated and practiced, both at the collective and individual level, in both public and private spaces, and expands the meaning of politics. However, practices and performances of feminism at home, in domestic spaces and as part of the everyday are often not thought of as politics, because they are neither collective nor are they seen to affect any macro institutional and structural change. Ironically, women's studies and women's movements [a discipline and movement] that emerged to problematize the everyday, politicize the personal, seems to distinguish between personal and public activism-- especially those feminists who have been shaped by Marxist and Gandhian ideas in India (as noted in Chapter 1). It is feminist communication scholars who assert that shared humor, conversations, and sharing life stories must be considered as worthy of attention and everyday activism (as noted in Chapter 5).

There has increasingly been a turn towards this individualized-familial form of affecting change by doing feminism that cannot be called political, if the political is conceived in the limited sense of the mobilization of masses. In this study too, participants across phases speak of “doing feminism”, i.e., putting into actions the values they believe in, at the everyday level, in the realm

of the domestic. One might argue that it is because modern forms of power are decentralized and operate through everyday social practices (Fraser, 1981), along the everyday social field that is inclusive of families, schools, workplace etc., that the lens of micropolitics is useful. It helps us understand how feminism that is not political (because it is not visible on streets) operates at the everyday level. Micropolitics here refers to:

the level of the individual self where the meaning of that self is relational. That is to say that how one's relation to the self (and others) is constructed and enacted depends upon the discourses available within that context. These discourses – including gender, race, sexuality – also organize social relations into hierarchical arrangements so they are inherently political (Budgeon, 2001, p.18)

Before hastening to dismiss everyday feminism at the personal level as something that turns the second wave feminist slogan 'personal is the political' on its very head, one must acknowledge that people are first exposed to "inherently political" discourses of gender, class, caste in the context of their homes that has often been referred to as "last frontier" of feminism. For instance, the clear distinction made between morality and feminism that is made amply clear when young women don't ask for "freedom without fear", but speak of freedom within the protectionist framework, freedom within limits, and utilizing it to pursue goals and dreams, earning their trust through respectable femininities, are governed by the middle-class requirements of controlled female sexuality. Scholars such as Lamont (1992), Donner (2008), Gilbertson (2017), Radhakrishnan (2011) argue that middle classes are not a purely economical category but differentiate themselves on the basis of morality and performances of respectability.

This lens of micropolitics, then, helps us understand how feminism is not the only discourse that informs people's lives, and competing (often antithetical) discourses of power (be they class, caste, religion, socio-cultural discourses of neoliberalism) also structure and shape their lives.

The lens of micropolitics allows us to fully appreciate how feminisms do not operate in vacuum. It also illustrates how feminism is not only transformed by but also transforms competing discourses. For instance, one can see how middle-class morality tempers feminist discourse of *bekhauf azadi*, but it also helps in acknowledging the success of feminist efforts in creating awareness and recognition of how gender structures the lives of people. And it is ‘feminism’ however they might want to understand it, which empowers young women to create spaces for negotiation and expanding the notion of what is ‘respectable’.

Hussein (2017) writing about IT women in Bangladesh suggests that, “rather than focusing on women’s respectable or unrespectable practices, contemporary research needs to address women’s ability to negotiate with the boundaries of respectable practices” (np). To push that thought further, instead of a blanket dismissal of their identification with feminism that accommodates the middle-class sensibility (as problematic as it is), perhaps it would be useful to focus on how feminism has enabled women to negotiate “the boundaries of respectable practices” within which ever they context they choose to, and in this case-- families?

Undeniably, micropolitics is contentious because it arises out of the lived experiences of individuals at the everyday level (Genz, 2006) and is “not put into practice by a political community engaged in activism” (p, 338). It has been critiqued “to be lacking in political content... tends to reduce...the definition of political claims and purposes to a merely anarchistic or dissolutive escapism” (Todd May & Phillpe Mengue quoted in Krause & Rölli, 2008, p. 240). But because the question goes beyond their interpretations of feminism (who is to say what ‘authentic’ feminism is), to why they come to understand feminisms the way they do, the lens of micropolitics is useful. It helps in acknowledging their situated analyses of their gendered

experiences, what makes feminisms relevant to them and how home becomes the site of, if not revolution, then negotiation.

This would also allow us to understand why some participants can afford to circumvent normative expectations because of their location (for instance, middle class women within academia) in a better manner. Micropolitics, then, is not:

politics in miniature but a concern with the multiplicity of flows that traverse individuals and social wholes, flows that do not correspond with articulated interests, identities and institutions but operate as the unconscious machinery of desire and action. (Buchanan & Thoburn, 2008, p, 11).

Micropolitics would allow us to shift from “a politics of prescience to action”, where one does not already arrive at who a feminist is but allows the space for the “becoming” to reveal itself. This idea of micropolitics would include “becoming”¹⁴¹ – or the souls and perceptions from which we are composed – but would not reduce that becoming to the events that make up a subject who is recognizable in advance” -- be they woman, man, or feminist (Colebrook, 2008, p. 132). This ‘becoming’ is not divorced from action; rather, becoming involves both thought and action-- the awareness of how gender (along with other discourses of power, hopefully) structures and shapes lives and then to act on it, that is at the heart of doing feminism in the everyday.

6.2.3 Men, feminism, and remaking of masculinities?

Feminist scholars strongly advise the explicit use of the term ‘feminism’ when working with men, instead of the politically watered down term ‘gender equality’ because 1) feminism implies a “renunciation of masculinity” as they know it and gender equality allows them an “escape route” to not engage with this anxiety, 2) because it is difficult to disidentify with gender

¹⁴¹To my mind, this also resolves the issue of valorizing thought over action or vice-versa.

equality “without sounding anti- democratic, even inhuman” (Chopra, 2003, p2.), And 3) gender equality is often used to justify gender blindness-- such as questioning why girls and women should be granted quotas in educational institutions or period leave¹⁴², or reservations in public transport¹⁴³, and other kinds of infrastructural support. Sarkar & Mazumdar (1999, p.137) argue that “theoretical principle of equality” is often (deliberately?) confused with “unequal situations” and social discrimination that women face at a collective level.

This becomes even more complicated when men, like the young millennials in the study, are open to child rearing and caring but take the gender complementarity approach to gender equality, where doing feminism is defined as accepting, respecting, honoring women and their choices whilst believing that women will ultimately choose the home and the domestic. Even though more men are willing to share care-work and other domestic chores, by claiming that women will inevitably choose the domestic, they do not engage with the anxiety that perhaps they see it primarily as a woman’s job? The responsible masculinities that participants in the study describe are still centered around being breadwinners, which puts them in a position of power.

This, combined with the easy availability and affordability of domestic workers in India means that men don’t actually have to fully participate in either domestic or care work. In fact, if recent reports are anything to go by, the Covid-19 induced lockdowns when most domestic workers could not travel to work, have shown the kind of disparity that exists in middle class, urban

¹⁴² <https://thewire.in/women/period-leave-zomato-women-gender-blindness>

¹⁴³ <https://citizenmatters.in/reserved-seats-for-women-safety-on-public-transport-4901> and <https://www.quora.com/Why-are-seats-reserved-for-women-in-Indian-public-transport-buses-metro-and-railway-Where-is-the-equality>

homes.¹⁴⁴ Report after report suggests the adverse effects of Covid19 lockdowns on working mothers who have had to balance domestic work, child care, and professional work are more likely to leave their jobs.¹⁴⁵

And yet defining feminism as gender equality opens up the space for men to identify as pro-feminists, and still be only as involved in activities related to the domestic, as they want to be and no more. This ensures that they retain their privilege of not completely involving themselves in the private sphere, and yet enjoy the perks of bonding with children. In fact, Balbus (1998) and Bekkengen differentiate between feminist parenting, or what Bekkengen refers to as gender-equal parenting (where fathers are equally responsible for taking care of children) and child-oriented masculinity where fathers have the *choice* of taking care of children (Bekkengen 2002, quoted in Johansson 2011, p. 166). Another way in which young men in the study distanced themselves from the non-feminist men or marked themselves as different from bad men was by moving beyond imagining masculinity as aggressive. In fact, a lot of the emergent new masculinities revolve around fatherhood, or being softer, and this is especially so amongst the middle classes.

The disowning of a particular kind of aggressive masculinity that falls “outside official classification of crimes, but are regarded as morally offensive” such as “eve teasing” (Carrington & Watson, 1996, pp.259-260), and the owning of softer masculinities that would allow them to imagine themselves as different from “bad men” (as in the case of young millennials) or involved fathers (as in the case of older male participants) can also be read from the prism of

¹⁴⁴ Subarna, who describes herself as a “working mother” filed a petition on change.org with a request to PM Modi to tell Indian men to share domestic work equally. 78,996 people had signed the petition as on October 30, 2020 <https://www.change.org/p/pmoindia-narendramodi-tell-indian-men-to-do-an-equal-share-of-household-chores-in-your-next-speech?>

¹⁴⁵ Consider this: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-55016842>

class and caste. For instance, Rogers (2008) in his study of the working class, Schedule caste (SC) male youth observes that eve teasing (staring, stalking, sometimes inappropriate touching) women is the way in which they assert their masculinity and manhood (understood “as struggle between men for dominance over women’s bodies and social spaces”). This cannot be read from the lens of hegemonic masculinity, given their subordinate/subaltern status, but from the lens of hypermasculinity that helps them recover their lost self esteem due to bullying by men from castes higher up in the hierarchy (Rogers, 2008, p. 80). As Digby (1998) notes, it is the middle-class privilege of the participants in the study that allows them to eschew certain aspects of masculinity (violence and aggression), whilst enjoying the perks of being a man because systemic inequities are such that, i.e., “unequal outcomes built into our institutions... will produce inequality even in the absence of biased individuals” (Wade, 2014, np.).

In the case of partners of feminist mothers, the fact that women are as educated, and perhaps also earn as much as, if not more than their partners, puts them on an equal footing. The easy availability of affordable domestic help also makes it possible for carework to be made into a choice. It can be argued that these make it slightly easier to be egalitarian, although as one of the feminist mothers says, “you either pretend to be equal or genuinely are, there is a struggle, a little bit of it is pretense, a little bit of it is genuine” (Alisha).

The relationship between men and feminism has been described, at best, as ambivalent and awkward (Rao, 2018), with some scholars even describing it as an “impossible relationship” because systemic inequities would ensure that men continue to reap benefits of patriarchal dividend. Pro feminist men such as Chowdhury and Baset (2018) argue that feminist standpoint can be theoretically achieved by men and proceed to define it as the “acknowledgement of male privilege”. By that measure, men in this study too may be described as having achieved a

feminist standpoint, since they are keenly aware of the privilege they enjoy as men, especially when they speak of carefree masculinities. Therefore, it is not surprising that Sircar (2018) calls for an undoing of feminism theoretically and academically, and doing it as practice or conduct, especially at home. The easy identification with feminism, as scholars have previously noted, is in fact deeply disturbing since it reaffirms the depoliticizing and de-radicalizing of feminist politics.

Yet, this does not negate the fact that men have often been regarded as “caring brothers and affectionate fathers” who can be co-opted into the feminist movement, instead of looking at them as “principal oppressors” (Jha et al., 1998, p. 127; also quoted in Bulbeck, 2009). Chopra (2003, p.2) also makes a similar argument, when she argues that there is a need to “bring men into the picture as players and partners” and the way to build partnerships with men is to create pro feminist masculinities. Since feminism is “not about that moment of final triumph but about the gradual transformation of the social field, so decisively that old markers shift forever” (Menon, 2012, p. 222), we would need not just men, but people from across genders, castes to be allies to the cause. It is in co-opting such men that negotiations in the domestic sphere are enabled.

6.3. By way of conclusion: The thrice told story of feminisms

The way in which participants understand feminism and feminist politics is most likely different from how academic feminists understand it (Chaudhury, 2000), because once a movement moves from the academic to the popular (non-academic) (Mann, 1994), and becomes a potential empowering resource for young women’s negotiations within the family, it signifies the success of feminism, even if this was not the intention of socialist feminists or new academic-activist feminists (Budgeon, 2001). If family is the springboard from within which they launch

themselves into feminism, and not organized collective action, it is a start, because as both Ahmed (2017) and Humm (1997) argue, feminist fights must be everywhere, at home, at work, on the streets. Framing it this way is an acknowledgement of the fact that this form of a feminist micropolitics cannot replace collective feminist movements (Kinser, 2004).

A number of criticisms levelled at new feminisms can be asked of the kind of feminisms these participants describe as well. There is a complete absence of critique of caste and class, and a stress on individualized but collective change. But if it took Indian feminists two decades to finally (be forced to) acknowledge that their feminisms had largely ignored ‘caste’ and the question of religion, by Dalit Bahujan feminists and minority feminists (Kapur, 2012b) who speak of symbolic annihilation from the feminist movement, then it might be a stretch to ask young women to be cognizant of these nuanced debates. It is to be noted that the two Dalit women in the research also think of feminism as gender equality, and not so much as about caste. This is especially so when their routes to feminisms are social media, their own lived experiences, and news coverage of State funded women empowerment programs. As Menon (2009, p.105) notes, these very depoliticizing forces could also be a source of radicalization and produce solidarities amongst women hitherto unexposed to public activism.

Similarly, when feminists by and large agree that there is no single feminist movement, or feminism, or a single unitary politics. When they agree that there is no commonsensical feminist position towards issues (Menon, 2009, 2015), then it becomes difficult to practice judgement about whether the kind of feminism participants talk about is oppositional enough or not. A brief look at the history of ‘new’ feminisms (in India and ‘elsewhere’) and literature is replete with instances that reinforce the idea that there has never been a universal definition of feminism. At the risk of simplification, the tale of new feminisms is thrice told. There are those that support it

(Roy, 2009; Niranjana, 2010; Phadke, 2020), reject it in the case of professionalization of feminism in the form of working in NGOs (Mani, 2014; Menon, 2004), or are on the fence, like Kapur (2012b) who describes it as feminism lite.

By now, it is clear that the State, popular media and academic discourses on feminism inform and interact with each other (Chaudhury, 2000). For instance, after decades of feminist activism, the twelfth five-year plan finally spelled out that there are different kinds of women: single women, those who belong to different castes and classes¹⁴⁶. So, perhaps it is only a matter of time before these academic feminist nuances enter popular consciousness? One might argue that just as it takes time for structural changes to affect attitudes, so do academic feminist discourses take time to reach the public. One way to accelerate this infusion of academic feminist idea is for feminists to hijack a popular moment or event to further a decidedly (radical) feminist agenda. For instance, when the 2012 gang rape was being increasingly framed as an issue of honor, shame, and women were referred to as mothers and daughters, Kavitha Krishnan (2020) spoke of fearless freedom or freedom without fear. So perhaps one can remain hopeful that one day, academic feminist discourse on difference and intersectionality will reach ordinary people whose route to feminism is non-academic. Perhaps if academic discussions became more accessible to ordinary people, whether through social media or mass protests, then perhaps, and I remain hopeful here, people will soon come to realize how 'woman' is not a homogeneous category. One could argue that my hope, too, is a product of the neoliberal postfeminist sensibility/subjectivity that valorizes a culture of positivity. And perhaps it may be so, but it is also true that my journey into feminisms has been similar to those of the participants in this study, as mentioned in Chapter 2.

¹⁴⁶ Please find the Twelfth Five Year Plan (2012–17) report in full: https://niti.gov.in/planningcommission.gov.in/docs/aboutus/committee/wrkgrp12/wcd/wgrep_women.pdf

It is indeed a credit to the hybrid legacies of the feminist movements in India that participants don't speak of feminism as a Western import but as relevant to the times they are living in. How one understands feminism then is overdetermined¹⁴⁷. In fact, given the complexity of issues faced by women across contexts and cultures, there has been a push towards "contextualized feminism" (Mende, 2018, p. 47; Basu, 2018 refers to this as local feminisms) one that takes into account specific spatial and temporal logics, as a bridge between feminist universalism and feminist cultural relativism.

Acceptance of varied feminisms does not foreclose discussion or debates about feminisms within academia or that one must not be critical of it, but because academia is a playground of creativity (Chadha, 2017) and "Feminist theory is a river fed by different feminisms and different feminists" (Humm 1997, p. 17), there is space for a nuanced conversation around the social circulation of feminism and its popularity amongst people. The quilt could also perhaps be another metaphor to describe this-- to suggest that 'becoming' (through politics or micropolitics) a feminist or practicing feminism is not monolithic. Since no one stitch or a patch can make an entire quilt, and what the quilt represents could change from context to context, there would be room to imagine "feminist for the 99%" (Arruzza et al., 2019) that advocates a complete unravelling of individualist, neoliberal, capitalist feminism advocated by a select few women in powerful leadership positions, while engaging with those ordinary people whose stories of coming into feminisms are not a product of formal learning. These stories do matter because it "tells us something about what we have at stake in our history, what different groups have at stake in our history, and how we erase and/or create our own historical memories" (King, 1994, p. 126), and it is in the patchwork of the everyday that feminism is both created and discovered.

¹⁴⁷ Borrowing from Althusser's idea of overdetermination

Chapter 7

Postscript

7. Limitations and further directions in research

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation “what it refuses to say” ... What the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is acted out, in a sort of journey to silence (Macherey, 1978, p. 87)

As mentioned in Chapter 2, each of the research questions could have been the basis for separate dissertations. What the thesis does is provide a broad overview of how a section of the middle classes are engaging with feminism as rhetoric and practice. Further work could, on the lines of Scharff (2012) perhaps move beyond the middle classes and cis-gendered individuals to understand how they perceive feminism. Similarly, on the lines of Latika Gupta's (2015) work with lower middle-class women, one could study how Muslim women engage with the feminism as practice, micropolitics and rhetoric, and how these might complicate our understanding of what oppositional means? Is a Muslim woman asserting her right to veiling oppositional? It would be, if reacting as a Muslim or Christian is what is needed in a climate of hardline Hindu-resurgence (Kapur 2012a)?

This would be especially interesting given the rise of politics of piety (two Bollywood actors gave up acting for religious reasons¹⁴⁸). It would be interesting to see how the hegemonic understanding of Muslim women as oppressed can be undone by paying careful attention to

¹⁴⁸ Bollywood actors Zaira Wasim and Sana Khan announced on social media their decision to quit acting because it led them astray from their *Iman* (faith): <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48822532> and <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/television/sana-khan-quits-showbiz-says-want-to-serve-humanity-6717090/>

sectarian or class differences within Islam (for instance, the Bohra¹⁴⁹ community engages in genital mutilation. Qureshi community is supposed to be more conservative than others, as one of my participants' states).

Admittedly, the thesis doesn't engage sufficiently enough with the question of disidentification with feminism. Informed by my own location, I chose to either see or valorize affirmations of feminisms over those that did not. It seems it is somewhat easier to critique mediated representations of feminism (whether in print, electronic, social media) than individuals who acknowledge feminism as having enabled them to make certain choices. This does not take away from the fact that there are many women¹⁵⁰ and men who denounce feminism for being radical and anti-family. Similarly, despite the effort to speak with participants from varied backgrounds in terms of caste, it did not come up in conversations the way I thought it would. There could be three reasons for this: 1) Female participants in the study spoke of women as one single group. 2) caste is a private practice and 3) my own location as a person from a dominant caste made it difficult for me to bring it up in a way that wouldn't offend participants or ask them leading questions.

This moment is also apt to revisit questions of women's agency and feminist agency, especially since participants credit feminism for the improvements in their lives. In a culture that expects women to lose their sense of self in service to family, community, nation, claims of being an individual cannot be compared to the individualization in Anglo-American worlds. Here, in this particular context, the very idea of individualizing can be read as an oppositional act. However,

¹⁴⁹ These are different sects in Islam: <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/photo-gallery-who-are-dawoodi-bohras-5-points-to-understand-this-muslim-community-in-india-2663140>

¹⁵⁰ For instance, Deepika Narayan Bharadwaj, a men's rights lawyer, "meninist", and a documentary film maker. Her documentary "Martyrs of Marriage" documents the misuse of section 498A of Indian Penal Code, popularly known as the anti-dowry law: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKRAkw5RUdw>

as one of the feminist mothers' asks, what is it in opposition to? How is it a meaningful assertion, and at whose cost is this assertion made?

Informed by my own location and experience, I have undoubtedly been hopeful about the kind of feminisms participants talk about. Nevertheless, I do realize and wonder if, like the only male participant who refused to identify as a feminist since he could not (and did not) want to give up privileges associated with being a male, would the other men too lash against feminism if they knew it would entail a complete transformation of social fabric? Would the young women too lash against feminism if their children chose to push the boundaries of middle-class morality and respectability in the future?

In reference to feminist mothering, future work could engage with feminist dilemmas, especially in reference with disciplining and sexuality.

7.1 Future directions in research: Making a case for feminist communication studies in India (and elsewhere)

Over the course of this research, I have been repeatedly asked, “but how does this relate to media studies” or “how do you locate this research in the discipline of Communication”?

In some way, the study of identification with feminism based on the public visibility of feminism is in itself is characteristic of feminist media studies. However, since this research was focused on lived experiences without centering media, these questions were to be expected. I drew courage and inspiration to pursue a research such as this from 3 different but interrelated scholarships, namely, 1) ferment in communication studies, 2) feminist communication studies, and 3) de-westernizing communication studies, that collectively put forth the idea that what is

required for a “fundamental advance of understanding of communication” is a “clear focus on what public communication is most centrally about... This is not one thing, but a diversity of phenomena, all involving meaning, all familiar in general terms, often in experience” (McQuail, 2013, p. 225). He believes that political, religious beliefs and norms shared by many, social and revolutionary movements as situated in their varied contexts, public debates about certain issues, amongst others things can and must be a part of communication research.

Scholars such as Carey (2008), Calhoun et al., (2013), Mumby (1997) emphasize that one must go beyond the transmission and representational frameworks of communication to include ritual, aesthetics, and practices and culture. In fact, the history of communication research (predating the world wars and traced back to Aristotle and Plato, described as classical theories of communication) moves from a focus on rhetoric, speech, to journalism, mass media, and to communication. Scholarly works on ferment in the field acknowledge this and draw attention to how the term communication in itself is rich in meaning, and exploring non-media centric questions could help in expanding the scope of communication research. These do not indicate new labels with fixed essences, but they are the “tensions around which our discipline has evolved... where there is unity in ideas and practices and but also inclusion of difference” (Gehrke & Keith, 2015, p. 2).

A cultural approach to Communication Studies is not new for feminist communication scholars, and has particular relevance in Asia, since feminism as an intellectual project was “foundational to the emergence of the new area of cultural studies” (Niranjana, 2007). Therefore, I did not experience any doubts whether questions related to lived experiences and learning about gender, feminism, socialization, everyday activism could be asked from within this discipline.

The focus on everyday ‘lived experiences’ and cultures has been central to feminist and phenomenological communication scholarship and has been of special interest to Asian scholars (Dissanayake, 1982). This is not to suggest that communication studies must become completely anthropocentric but that there is space for all kinds of research questions that span human and/or mediated communication. Scholars who make a case for de-westernizing academia also believe that a cultural approach to communication is invaluable in expanding the contours of the field. However, since the trajectory of media and communication studies follows the Anglo-American trends (Ullah, 2014) there is some anxiety about involving oneself in subfields of family communication, interpersonal communication without some element of media in it. Despite the richness of the word communication, there is a tendency to lock oneself within particular disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. As Chen & Müke (2006) note, there is a need for scholars in Asia to de-center the Eurocentric paradigms of Communication that are media centric and to focus on human communication and meaning-making practices, without having to stress oneself over where to place such a research.

Feminist communication studies is particularly well suited to ask as questions about how people understand their social worlds, including gender, feminism, mothering amongst other things. The acceptance of hybrid methods or synthetic methods, and disciplined eclecticism have been instrumental in not only going beyond predictive cycles of studying either news media, representations or digital media as communication research but in fact encourages the use of varied theoretical frameworks and concepts to explore cultural and rhetorical phenomena. Therefore, just as questions about communication can be asked from Sociology or Anthropology, seemingly sociological or anthropological questions can be asked from this discipline, and all

this, without having to center the media, as is the dominant framework within which media scholars operate.

This is especially important in the current contexts because qualitative research as a whole is moving towards "blurred genres" and disciplined eclecticism. The fact that Denzin & Lincoln (2008, p.540) describe the shift in qualitative research to a more multidisciplinary approach as a "ah-ha" moment (nod to feminist usage of the aha moment of coming into consciousness), is quite telling. Therefore, the time is right to ask more questions that do not necessarily involve print/electronic/mass/new media, and explore human communication in all its complexity.

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Annexures

Annexure 1: Consent form for the FGDs

Informed consent form

This informed consent form has been developed to aid the investigator in carrying out a qualitative research project. I am a Doctoral Researcher at the S. N. School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad and this study is an attempt to understand how young people understand gender and adopt feminist ideas. In the first phase of research, Focus Group Discussions will be conducted for which we request your participation. Please feel free to express your perspectives and opinions in the discussion. The information obtained will be used and stated in the study through quotes and you will not be identified by name. Thank you for participating in the study.

Research Title: Family, Society, Media: Routes to Feminism

Name of the researcher:

Sai Amulya Komarraju: amulyauoh@gmail

Doctoral Supervisor: Prof. Usha Raman usha.raman@gmail.com

Participant's agreement

I have read and understood the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any question in relation to the study. I consent to participate in the study. I am aware that the data I provide will be used for academic papers and doctoral dissertation. By signing below, I am indicating my consent for the data collected to be quoted in the main body of the write up of this research and for this to be fully accessible after publication by University of Hyderabad students accessing the dissertation within the University. Subsequent uses of the recorded data for academic papers will be subject to the standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of the individuals.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the discussion audio recorded and for the reprinted consent forms to be included in the appendix of the research.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of person obtaining consent

Date:

Sai Amulya Komarraju

Date:

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for the duration of the study.

Annexure 2: Consent form for the PIs

Informed consent form

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

This informed consent form has been developed to aid the investigator in carrying out a qualitative research project. I am a Doctoral Researcher at the S. N. School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad and this study is an attempt to understand how young people understand gender and adopt feminist ideas. The phenomenological interviews are a series of three in-depth, ninety-minute interviews with each participant. The information obtained will be used and stated in the study through quotes and you will not be identified by name. Thank you for participating in the study.

Research Title: Family, Society, Media: Routes to Feminism

Name of the researcher: Sai Amulya Komarraju (amulyauoh@gmail.com)

Doctoral Supervisor: Professor Usha Raman (usha.raman@gmail.com)

Participant's agreement

I have read and understood the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any question in relation to the study. I consent to participate in the study voluntarily. I am aware that the data I provide during the three-part series phenomenological interviews will be used for academic papers and doctoral dissertation. I understand that each interview will last for a minimum of ninety minutes during which time the researcher will take notes if needed. I understand that I have the right to decline answering a question or end the interview if I feel uncomfortable and that my identity will be kept confidential. By signing below, I am indicating my consent for the data collected to be quoted in the main body of the write up of this research and for this to be fully accessible after publication by University of Hyderabad students accessing the dissertation within the University. Subsequent uses of the recorded data for academic papers will be subject to the standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of the individuals. In addition to agreeing to participate voluntarily, I also consent to having the discussion audio recorded.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Participant's name _____

Name of the person obtaining consent _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for the duration of the study.

Annexure 3: Consent form for the in-depth interviews with feminist mothers and their partners

Informed consent form

Please consider this information carefully before deciding whether to participate in this research.

This informed consent form has been developed to aid the investigator in carrying out a qualitative research project. I am a Doctoral Researcher at the S. N. School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad and this study is an attempt to understand how young people understand gender and adopt feminist ideas, and feminist parenting in India. The information obtained through unstructured, in-depth interviews with self-identified feminist parents will be used and stated in the study through quotes and you will not be identified by name. Thank you for participating in the study.

Research Title: Family, Society, Media: Routes to Feminism

Name of the researcher: Sai Amulya Komaraju (amulyauoh@gmail.com)

Doctoral Supervisor: Professor Usha Raman (usha.raman@gmail.com)

Participant's agreement

I have read and understood the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any question in relation to the study. I consent to participate in the study voluntarily. I am aware that the data I provide during the interview will be used for academic papers and doctoral dissertation. I understand that the interview(s) may last an hour or a bit longer during which time the researcher will take notes if needed. I understand that I have the right to decline answering a question or end the interview if I feel uncomfortable and that my identity will be kept confidential. By signing below, I am indicating my consent for the data collected to be quoted in the main body of the write up of this research and for this to be fully accessible after publication by University of Hyderabad students accessing the dissertation within the University. Subsequent uses of the recorded data for academic papers will be subject to the standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of the individuals. In addition to agreeing to participate voluntarily, I also consent to having the discussion audio recorded.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Participant's name _____

Name of the person obtaining consent _____

Signature of person obtaining consent _____ Date _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for the duration of the study.

Annexure 4

FGD guide

Play the ads

1. What do you think about the ad? (after each ad)
2. Do you recall ads that specifically stereotype and any that break?
3. How do feel when you see depictions of either gender in specific ways?
4. What are your expectations about gender roles? Where do these come from? What role do you think the media play in their formation?

If any reference to feminism was made, then

5. What is feminism? How does the media portray feminists?
6. When or where did you first hear about feminism?
7. Do you know any feminists?
8. An image or slogan associated with feminism?

If not,

Have you heard of feminism?

If masculinity/femininity was brought up, the participants were also asked to elaborate on it.

Prompts used:

1. JSW ad:

JSW steel ad

A true story featuring a real inspiration, Geeta Phogat (the first Indian woman to win a gold medal in Wrestling at the Commonwealth Games). Geeta comes from a conservative and patriarchal village, Balali in Haryana where wrestling was always considered a man's sport. The film is a depiction of her journey and how she overcame societal norms, busted several myths, fought resistance from her whole community and wrestled her way to success, all because she had the inner strength and the will of steel to achieve her dreams.

2. Amul ad:

Listed as one of the most stereotypical ads:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/advertising/amul-digital-ad-draws-flak-for-being-sexist/articleshow/49131630.cms?from=mdr>

PI Guide

- family background
- education, career aspirations
- views and understanding of gender, gender roles,
- views on feminism
- thoughts/knowledge about feminism
- attitude to, feelings about, images of feminism
- identification with feminism
- experiences with feminism

-Individual level:

- Tell me about yourself (alternatively, how would you introduce yourself?)

How would you describe your life at the moment? Followed by questions about their family background, education and career aspirations.

- Hobbies, likes, dislikes

-Family level:

- Family, family structure, siblings, family values
- Relationship with each of them
- Conversations that stand out

-Peer groups/friends

- Social life
- Relationship with them
- Discussions, conversations, topics of interest

-Media level:

- What kind of shows did you watch?
- Content that made you think

Part 1 questions (loosely structured)

- Introduction
- Tell me about your childhood?
- Tell me about your family?
- What kind of games did you play?

- What kind of things did you discuss with your parents and siblings?
- Are there any particular interactions that stand out to you?
- Can you take me through a day in your childhood?
- What did you like doing as a child?
- Fears and dreams

Part 2

- Reconstructing present experiences
- What kind of relationship do you share with your parents and sibling(s) now?
- What is the kind of interactions you have with your parents and siblings?
- How do you think your childhood compares to your present?
- Tell me about your friends
- Even though the interviews are organized to first reconstruct the past and then the present, the way participants arrange their memories do not have to be linear nor are we looking for linearity.

Part 3

- Although all the 3 interviews are about meaning making, this one is especially so. It is not about opinions of the person but what goes into the formation of those opinions
- Details from the preceding interviews can be called upon for clarification and how they make sense of it
- The aim of all 3 interviews is to have a rich description of the participant's life

Pointed questions:

- Have you ever heard of feminism? [if not yet mentioned]. If yes, what do you understand by feminism? How would you understand it?
- What do you associate with the term feminism? (It could be an image or a slogan or a particular individual).
- Do you have any feelings when you talk or hear about 'feminism'? If yes, could you try to describe them?
- Where do you think your views of feminism come from?
- Do you know any feminists personally?
- Where do you think your views of feminism come from?
- Do you think about feminism or feminist issues?
- Do you sometimes talk about feminism or feminist issues with your friends/family (or partner)?
- How do you think about women and men — do you think they are basically the same? How do you think caring and working roles should be divided up?

Annexure 6

Interview guide: Feminist mothers and their partners

- Views on: Parenting/ Mothering/Fathering, family, childrearing, feminism, activism (?)
- Feminisms
- What is feminism according to you?
- Parenting ideology
- Gender relations, femininities, masculinities, gender roles
- When did they first identify as feminists?
- Does feminism inform their parenting? If yes, how so? In decisions ranging from who gets to decide—who gets to call the shots— parenting ideology, practices, decision making processes, typical family activities, differences or similarities between them and other families
- What are feminist values? -- How do they hope to “mentor” these?
- Tensions and negotiations
- How is feminism learned—is it modelled or taught?
- How their feminism had affected their experience of mothering
- How having children has affected their feminist politics
- How have their experiences been influenced by culturally prescribed gender roles?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- Dreams you have for children, fears?
- Is parenting challenging, how so? Specific to feminist politics within the family and outside of it
- Interfacing with the outside world?

Annexure 7: Details of the participant

Participant's Details

Please complete the form filling out only those categories you feel comfortable providing. This information is only for my records.

Full Name

Age

Gender

Religion

Caste

Annual income

Presence of disability Yes

No

Family structure

Single parent

Nuclear family

Extended family

Education

Occupation

Child(ren)

Address

Mobile number

Email id

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