

The Save the Children (UK) South and Central Asia Regional Office and UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia is proposing to make a series of films on masculinities, which deconstructs and reconstructs patriarchy within South Asia. The film-making project involves the production of films on masculinities by male film-makers from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, within their own countries. This film-making project is intended to increase and extend the impact of SCFs and UNICEF's country programmes in tackling the problems of increasing violence against girls. The intent is to try and explore the broad patterns of masculinities without ignoring the particularities of each category of men (in terms of class, caste, sexual preference, etc.). The way men negotiate between duties and dreams, dominance and love, anxiety and pleasure, power and insecurity are the kernels around which the stories are to be constructed.

## **1 Gender and Violence in South Asia**

Violence against women is entrenched in South Asia. It is prevalent in the girl's natal home, conjugal home and at the community level. The rapidly spreading and inflating institution of dowry is one key precipitating factor. Daughters-in-law who are perceived to have brought inadequate dowries are subject to oppression, violence and even murder. Nor is the patriarchal mind-set limited to men, for it is often the mother-in-law who is the instigator and perpetrator of this violence.

Treating gender in development solely as a women's issue seriously underestimates the scale of the 'battle' to achieve a more just society. The purpose of gender and development is the empowerment of women with the ultimate goal of gender equity. If women's empowerment is to be sustained, it must be complemented by a change in men. This means paying attention also to male gender interests and needs. Why, for example, has there been an increase in the practice of dowry and sex selective abortions among urban educated, modern 'empowered' women in India, or domestic violence in the world-wide lauded Grameen Bank and BRAC project areas in Bangladesh (Goetz and Sen Gupta 1996:154; Rao and Kelleher 1998)? In South Asia, class, caste and patriarchy still forge an

# Alternative Masculinities in South Asia

*An Exploration through Films for Schools*

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adversary that no woman can hope to pit herself against and win – even women who are well armoured by ‘empowerment’. The ‘new’ gender relations have a tough fight against the old equations.

The system of patriarchy in which social structures and institutions produce unequal, hierarchical, authoritarian and ultimately violent relationships is highly entrenched in South Asia. How do you combat violence against women, when it springs from such an all-pervasive system? Since men are the main perpetrators of violence, it is imperative that they constitute a primary focus. There have, however, been very few attempts to do this, or to build on the ‘positive deviance’ of some men in a wide range of communities and groups, who are working against violence and the underlying attitudes that support it. Within the popular media nothing, to our knowledge, specifically addresses boys, adolescents and young men concerning their masculinity and that masculinity’s generally violent role models. Regrettably we find the opposite: a steady diet of violence, sex and gender stereotyping that perpetuates the patriarchal system and mind-set. What is needed, therefore, is a powerful campaign to provoke change in attitudes and behaviour. To extend the impact of existing country programmes, SCF and UNICEF are therefore sponsoring a film-making project over a period of about a year. The primary targets are children and youth, whose gender attitudes are still being defined and sense of entitlement to power has not yet been fully formed. The films are to be made with the participation of children and young people by good documentary filmmakers from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, working within their own countries. This article briefly sets out the thinking behind this project.

## **2 Growing into a Man in South Asia**

Child rearing practices, culture, tradition, religious practices and history have insisted on the removal of the boy from the influence of the feminine. In South Asia, this role of segregating and separating boys from girls begins at home and is reinforced at school. When a boy enters school it is impressed upon him that to be male is to be the opposite of feminine, and to be a man he must break away from

women, and the further he travels the greater the success of his journey. With segregation comes another essential lesson, that of superiority and dominance.

His training at school equips him to understand, exploit and uphold a system based not on love, but on power, not on equality, but on hierarchy and patriarchy. This is a critical stage in defining a boy’s sexuality and masculinity – a time full of confusion and conflicts, when life is still full of promises, when gender attitudes are still being defined and the sense of entitlement to power has not yet been fully formed, when a few steps here or there can still make a difference as to what kind of man he is ultimately going to be.

A boy’s sense of self is fundamentally forged in relation to others. His gender identity is formed through socialisation in the family and at school, differential resource allocation, and the impact of external influences, such as mass media, including pornography. While notions of self, identity, roles and obligation are worked out early in a boy’s life, no stage is without change and questioning. These films seek to speak to this questioning in a way that challenges attitudes and beliefs that are violent towards girls and women. This follows from our belief that masculinities are critically about values, so that very different forms of masculinity may be developed over time.

## **3 Why Film?**

Television, videotape and film can bring messages to life. These ‘visual electronic media’ engage the audience, and the engaged audience is an audience ready to learn. As shown by social marketing programmes all over the world in the past two decades, there is ample evidence that these media can help influence attitudes and behaviour. They work particularly well when they combine themes and messages with entertainment in a high-quality, well-targeted production (John Hopkins University 1989).

Television is growing fast. In South Asia, all countries have a national TV station and more than 40 channels, including satellite, are available. Ownership of TV sets and coverage of TV amongst households has increased many fold in the past

decade and Video Cassette Recorders (VCRs) are spreading even faster. VCR is also being extensively used by NGOs to disseminate and communicate social and development messages.

This is associated with a fundamental change amongst children and youth in South Asia. The young in both rural and urban areas are far more visually literate than the earlier generation through exposure to TV (in South Asia). India alone is the highest producer of films in the world. Cinemas and their television equivalent, video parlours, are spreading from the remote hills of Nepal to the fishing villages of Sri Lanka. We have, therefore, a generation of children and youth who have grown up with the visual electronic media and we need to communicate in this way if we are to have an impact.

#### **4 Genesis of the Project**

A group of South Asian men film directors from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan met in Kathmandu in February 1998 to discuss what it is to be a man. The workshop looked at masculinities from the men's point of view. While masculinity is commonly understood as the drive for power, domination and control, this contrasted with the personal experiences of the men film-makers. Using a life history approach they started with the first experience of maleness and traced the events, processes and experiences that shaped, strengthened or affected their experience of masculinity. Across the domains of rearing, marriage, sex/sexuality, parenting, and work/social networks, they considered the inside story of socialisation, roles, stereotyping, and bias.

They spoke of the 'pain' in being a man and the 'pain' in having the so-called 'power'. They did not feel as though they were in power – individually they felt powerless in many instances. The textured snapshots of masculinity that emerged provided a different view to that of gender studies, which has tended to focus on the toll that patriarchy takes on women, but has paid little attention to the cost extracted from men for the privileges of being a son, a husband or a father within South Asian families. The flip side to wielding power is the performance of

duties and obligations from which there is no getting away. The films will attempt to address these issues.

#### **5 Impact of the Project**

The four documentaries will explore the terrain between structure and agency, public and private, institutions and experiences, 'patriarchy' and individual 'men' without losing sight of the institutional embodiment of patriarchy. Together they will present a package which explores the cross-cultural and cross-experiential connections and diversity in masculinity as a social institution across the complexity of South Asian society.

The overall aim is to present boys with alternative male role models to the dominant paradigms, which accept violence towards women as the norm. As demonstrated in substance abuse and HIV/AIDS programmes, strategies that are based on information dissemination alone or admonishments of behavior patterns have not proved successful. Therefore the films aim not simply to present a message, but to provoke discussion. This will create the space for sharing experience and reflection through which personal engagement and learning may take place. It is also hoped to connect with other groups working on gender issues by assisting in the wider feminist project of liberating men from the self-assumed status of generic human beings, to 'men' who are gendered entities. It is also hoped that the film project can play a part in moving the issue of masculinity nearer the centre of the gender debate and so generate other efforts towards addressing men on gender issues.

The project aims to distribute the films widely in carefully planned interactive screenings with beneficiaries in Save the Children (UK), UNICEF and other International Save the Children Alliance members' projects, over extended periods of time. There is of course the recognition that this effort, if successful, is only a beginning to help kick-start a process of creating a movement for working with boys and men to question patriarchal structures and thereby create new masculinities that respect the rights of girls and women to live in a violence-free world.

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