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The challenges of raising children the feminist way

Shilpa Phadke tells Richa Kaul Padte that feminist mothers face the dilemma of giving their daughters agency while teaching them to take calculated risks in negotiating urban spaces.

RICHA KAUL PADTE 27th Jul 2013



2. What sparked your research around feminist mothering, and why did you choose to specifically focus on mothers with daughters?

A. My own struggle to be a feminist mother inspired the project. My conversations with friends and colleagues suggested that these were complex dilemmas that many of us confronted and negotiated, and were worth looking more closely at. As the mother of a daughter I am implicated in this research, but it's intended as a larger project, so I will be researching 'mothering sons' as well. I certainly recognise that a feminist approach to mothering is just as valuable for boys as it is for girls.

Q. How would you define a 'feminist mother' and what is her biggest challenge?

A. The term 'feminist mothering' suggests, among other things, the effort to bring up both boys and girls as human beings without socialising them into rigid and hierarchical gender roles. It also suggests that women will claim choices about lives outside of their roles as mothers. When I use the term, I refer to a commitment to egalitarian gender politics while raising a child, as well as the effort to create an environment where a child is able to make choices and exercise agency. I think the dilemma I attempt to engage with is that of wanting

to give one's daughter choices and help her learn to negotiate various risks, and at the same time keep her 'safe' in cities that are often seen as dangerous.

Q. In an urban Indian setting, how can mothers balance this desire to give their daughters freedom against the risks and dangers of navigating city life?

A. In many ways there is no balance. The important thing is the desire to create spaces where daughters can make choices and exercise freedom. One of the ways feminist mothers offer opportunities for daughters to enjoy the city is by not being worried about reputations. Yes, physical safety is always a concern but it is accompanied



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array of concerns, but it is accompanied by the understanding that women have a

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right to find pleasure in the city. My sense is that feminist mothers are likely to understand that there are also risks in *not* accessing the city. The risk of never building an engaged political and fun relationship with the city one lives in. The risk of endorsing ideas that expound a woman's place is in private spaces. In practice, all of us take calculated risks and learn to negotiate the city. The important thing is to see the city as a space of possibility rather than simply as a space of danger.

Q. From padded bras for 9 year olds, to bikinis for toddlers — is sexualised fashion really that harmful? How does one deal with such trends as a feminist mother?

A. The clothing question is oddly paradoxical. Many of the women I interviewed said that as feminist mothers who were uncomfortable with the premature sexualisation of girls, they were often tagged as 'conservative' [because of their responses to certain kinds of fashion]. The new regime of the public sexual persona now suggests that anything sexual, particularly in relation to clothing, is 'progressive' and then therefore, questioning it is regressive. On the one hand, feminism supports women's right to wear what they want, but on the other hand, a sexualisation that often goes hand-in-hand with gender stereotyping can simply endorse a variety of patriarchal and sexist ideologies. Sexualised fashion often feeds into these ideologies. And yet, we need to be cautious about how we use the term 'sexualisation' as feminists, because we certainly don't want to suggest ever that clothing of any kind places girls at greater risk of attack.

“One of the ways feminist mothers offer opportunities for daughters to enjoy the city is by not being worried about reputations. Yes, physical safety is always a concern, but it is accompanied by the understanding that women have a right to find pleasure in the city. My sense is that feminist mothers are likely to understand that there are also risks in not accessing the city.”

Q. Is the birds-and-bees talk (feared by parents across the globe) made easier by feminist thought, or is it just as awkward for everyone?

A. I think all of the feminist mothers I interviewed — and I'd stick my neck out and say that most other feminists — agree that children do need sexuality education. This is the big difference. Easy or difficult, it's part of the task of parenting. How feminist mothers choose to do it is different, but their children's right to know, and to be able to make informed choices, is non-negotiable. All the women I spoke to struggle with the question of how much, when, and how best to tell. But what makes them feminist mothers is that they also desire to convey to their children that both respect and fun are integral to sex and sexuality.

Q. In your paper you've said that you struggle not to call your daughter a 'good girl'. What are the implications of this term, and why is it so difficult not to use?

A. My research, not just on feminist mothering but also on women's access to urban public space and on the construction of sexuality among middle class women after globalisation, has brought home sharply how much is invested in the idea of respectability. The idea of the 'good girl' exemplifies this respectability. It's difficult not to use because 'good' is a simple and easy word. Often being 'good' and having fun are mutually exclusive and I (and many of the feminist mothers I interviewed) want our daughters to have fun in the knowledge that their mothers will support them, even when we do not agree with them. This is the struggle of feminist mothers — to give their daughters the opportunity to make choices that the mothers disagree with.

Q. What are the ways in which feminist thought can positively inform mothering?

A. Feminist thought believes that women are people first, and that our roles as mothers are but one of the many roles we may choose to take on. In privileging both a woman's right to choose or not choose motherhood, feminism reminds us that even those of us who choose motherhood have lives outside of that role. I read somewhere recently that one of the best things we can do for our children is provide them with a vision of a fulfilling adult life. Being a feminist and a mother comes with a series of dilemmas and struggles, as mothering is a role beset with stereotypes and guilt-inducing situations. By simply questioning these stereotypes about how mothers ought to be and how they ought to bring up girls and boys, feminism unsettles the taken for granted assumptions about women, mothers, and children.

Shilpa Phadke's 2013 paper Feminist Mothering? Some Reflections on Sexuality and Risk from Urban India was published in South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 36:1, 92-106.

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