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When your mother is a feminist

Through her essay on feminist mothering, Professor Shilpa Phadke says she is on a trial-and-error journey towards understanding sexuality and safety for girls. In course of her research, she spoke to feminist mothers who continuously reflect on sexualisation of young girls, consumption, fashion and sexual choices

July 28, 2013
MUMBAI

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As a mother of a three-year-old girl, Shilpa Phadke, assistant professor at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) obviously deals with hectic drop-offs to playschool and her daughter's vehement defence of her favourite cartoon show (of dubious merit, according to Phadke). Her larger concerns, however, are more complex and contradictory -- how does a feminist mother raise a daughter in post-globalisation India?



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For her project on feminist mothering, Shilpa Phadke spoke to 11 feminist mothers who have multiple concerns about the mixed signals their daughters receive on morality, sexuality and risk in post-globalisation India.

It was this question which led her to publish the first of a series of essays on feminist mothering last month -- Feminist Mothering? Some Reflections On Sexuality and Risk from Urban India. The essay discusses issues around women's clothing, food and drink habits, transportation and sex lives, and tries to understand how feminist mothers walk through this labyrinth while raising daughters.

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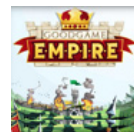
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Phadke says her three-year-old daughter has been told that she has the choice to refuse touch

Interestingly, it all started when Phadke began observing girls' T-shirts with messages splashed across the front. TEASE, said one. Another one: EYE CANDY. "These are available for relatively younger girls, too. One of my friends told me she saw a T-shirt with 'Porn Star' written on it. It piqued me, and I began thinking of the issues a feminist must address as she raises a daughter amid these social messages," says Phadke, who co-authored the book, *Why Loiter: Women and Risk On Mumbai Streets*, in 2011.

Phadke adds that, as a gender studies professor, she has always been interested in stories of how people become feminists and why some women reject the label. "I began contemplating issues around motherhood when I found myself struggling when it came to using the term 'good girl', to express appreciation to my daughter.

It is a loaded word and as feminists, we reject the expectation that girls should be 'good' which, later in life, is synonymous with an impeccable 'reputation' she must maintain at all cost," explains Phadke. The last two decades, according to her essay, have thrown up numerous questions on women's morality. "How does, then, a mother impose constraints when it comes to sexuality and risk, without taking away her daughter's right to make choices?" asks Phadke.

Her first essay, she says, tries to answer these questions by speaking to women who find themselves in the position she is in. Phadke interviewed 11 women (academicians, journalists, activists, a writer and one who conducts children's workshops) currently living in Mumbai, New Delhi and Hyderabad. The interviewees have daughters aged between two and 24 years.

Most mothers, naturally, wonder about how they could keep their daughters safe. Phadke's essay, however, takes the concern a step further by asking how a feminist mother, who values the right to choice, walks the tightrope when it comes to granting her daughter freedom about her clothing choices while balancing what the 'mall culture' expects of her. "A mother told me about how her four-year-old daughter just threw her hands up at a FabIndia store and said she no longer wanted to wear 'that stuff'.

She wanted to wear the ubiquitous sequinned outfits to fit in. The question that comes to the mind is -- should the mother impose her choice on the daughter, which is against the feminist principal of letting one make their own choice, or impose her own aesthetics."

According to the essay, the parent in question decided to keep the daughter's happiness over her own ideas. Another mother, according to the essay, was once called a 'fraud feminist' by her teenaged daughter when she asked her to change into something less revealing.

Another mother revealed that she wouldn't want her daughter to cover herself up in a burqa either. "There were so many opinions, and more questions, it all made sense when one of the mothers put it down to this -- choosing to be sexualised is alright if one understands the gender politics behind it. Then, it includes not just agency but also 'knowledge'."

Phadke says she is also curious about the mall culture young girls so fiercely want to be a part of. Here, she says the question of progressive versus conservative mothers came up in middle-class and upper middle class discourse. One of the most relevant questions here is -- what makes a mother liberal -- the fact that she lets her daughters frequent the mall, but does not acknowledge them as sexual beings?

Or the mother who believes otherwise? One mother disapproved these "textured pleasures" because she saw malls as places that give children the idea that anything is available for a price without comprehending the value of things. 'How has feminism engaged with the idea of consumption and what do these reflections offer us as feminist mothers? As one works through the complex layers of pleasure, risk, ideologies, choices and ideas about agency reflected through the prism of feminist mothering, the questions only multiply,' says Phadke in her essay.

On the personal front, Phadke often tries to find feminist literature for her daughter and changes themes of popular fairy tales to include homosexuality, for instance. "We've told our daughter that she always has a choice about who touches her or even pulls her cheeks. She, however, took it a tad too far recently and 'chose' not to go to a particular school!" laughs Phadke. "It is never simple, and it never ends. I know the essay poses more questions than it answers, and that's how layered feminist mothering can be," she smiles.

Read the essay on

www.academia.edu/3624227/Feminist_Mothering_Some_Reflections_on_Sexuality_and_Risk_from_Urban_India



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