

GENDER AND CONTEMPORARY SOUTH ASIA

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The panel on Gender and Contemporary South Asia was an interdisciplinary discussion among Harvard University scholars Abbas Jaffer, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Anthropology at the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Mitakshara Kumari, Ed.M. Candidate in International Education Policy at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Lityc Kurisinkal, Masters in Public Policy Candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School. Each panelist gave a presentation highlighting certain aspects of his or her research focusing on issues concerning gender in contemporary South Asia.

Jaqueline Bhabha, University Advisor on Human Rights Education and Director of Research at the Francois Bagnoud Xavier Center at Harvard University, and Jeremiah Smith, Jr. lecturer in Law at Harvard Law School, opened the panel discussion as moderator, by providing a brief introduction to some of the issues surrounding gender; for example, critical gender-based violence, adolescent sexuality, the environment within which gender roles and gender relationships exist, how much these issues relate to the ways in which children and young people are socialized, and finally, to advance innovative approaches to these issues.

Jaffer began the panel discussion with a presentation on technology, music, and elite masculinity in Pakistan. Jaffer addressed several issues that permeate contemporary masculinity by looking at contemporary music in Pakistan and its impact on institutions of power. Such issues included class disparities and differences within musicianship, audiences, and the musician's fan base. The idea of music focused on performance, practice space, and online communities allowing for a certain discourse among young people regarding the embodiment of masculine ideals. The political economy of music was addressed and it involved issues of national import duties and tariffs on musical devices and audio equipment and their influence on the music industry. The media, television serials, and advertisements purported to advance the subject of elite masculinities. Finally, mobility was discussed as the key marker of success for young men.

Kumari continued the panel discussion on masculinities, specifically focusing on the demographic of the middle class urban Indian man. In an effort to understand the social, economic, and cultural forces that are shaping the ideals of masculinity, she prefaced her discussion with a more empathetic view of understanding this demography's worldview and the pressures and motivations affecting them. In a newly opened economy from the late 1990s to the late 2000s, Kumari touched upon the intense pressure to succeed in the job market, the enormously intense competition of admittance into prestigious educational institutions, and the societal expectations of financially supporting not just his wife and children, but also his parents. While she agreed that policy legislation and interventions of the state are necessary to create a

supportive environment, social problems need to be addressed at the base level of the community and family if one is to think about liberating the Indian man trapped in his ideal of what it means to be a masculine middle class urban Indian man.

Kurisinkal concluded the panel discussion by shifting to the world of children, and specifically to boys, and their understanding of gender roles in society. The children that she focused on were between the ages of 6-18 years and usually came from broken families either living alone on the streets, railway platforms, or under bridges. Kurisinkal's research posed the question of whether male gender roles bred child labor. A 13-year-old boy that Kurisinkal interviewed said, "If I don't work, my family will starve. I collect bottles, and sell them. Once I earn about 3000 rupees, I go home and give it to my family. I have to take care of my mother and my sister." Street children were perceived as social deviants, lacked mentors for building character, and developed substance abuse. They tried finding role models to emulate in their environment, but often found stylish aberrant men who came off trains smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol. Kurisinkal also discussed peer pressure and gender violence among these street children. This sobering discussion, however, ended on a more positive note, as Kurisinkal brought to light the work that positive role models are doing to help deviant boys and their substance abuse problems. To this, one 14-year-old boy stated, "In the streets, I thought this [drugs and alcohol] was life. It is only after getting rehabilitated that I realized that we were living like dead people."