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May 15, 2013

## Making Choices: The Rhetoric and The Reality

By Sanjana Gaiind

6 comments

By Sanjana Gaiind

*This is the third of a series of posts written from the experiences at CREA of implementing a program called "Count Me IN! It's My Body: Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Young Girls through Sports". The first and second posts are here. CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in Delhi ([www.creaworld.org](http://www.creaworld.org)).*

Sanjay: *Yeh aapka kaaryakram theek nahin hai.* (This programme of yours is not right.)

Me: *kyun?* (Why?)

Sanjay: *Ladkiyon ke sanskaar bigaad raha hai.* (It is corrupting the values of girls.)

Me: *Kaisey?* (What do you mean?)

Sanjay: *Bahar maidan mein khel rahi hai, football ke liye ladai kar rahi aur humarein muhn lag rahi hai.* (They are playing outside in the field, fighting for the football with us, and talking back to us.)

Me: *In teeno mein se, aapko dikkat kis baat se hai?* (Out of these three things, what bothers you the most?)

Sanjay: *Sabhi se hai. Humko teeno ki hi aadat nahi hai na.* (All three of them. We are not used to such behaviour of girls.)<sup>[1]</sup>

On any given day, I would argue with him incessantly, making it very clear that the problem is not with the girls but with him. But, that day, I let him have the last word. Not because I had nothing to say to him, but because I felt a great sense of achievement and pride on behalf of the girls who had upset him and had challenged the patriarchal order and structure which is his comfort zone. He is visibly upset with the young girls in his village who have begun to question his authority. There are many other such men and boys in other villages as well, where the girls have begun to occupy and reclaim spaces like public grounds, which have traditionally been seen to be "male-only" spaces. They are angry, upset, and disturbed by this sudden demand for space by the girls.

The increasing number of female bodies in a playground, running, playing, jumping, laughing, and fighting is upsetting norms, challenging controls, and transforming spaces. These are bodies that are meant to be invisible inside and not visible outside in public spaces. These are bodies that are meant to be monitored and controlled inside homes, those four-walled bastions of patriarchy. In this established order, how they choose to dress, choose to roam, choose to express, and choose to interact with others is not their decision. However, now in small and not-so-small ways, these structures of power, of domination and silencing are being challenged. While some men and boys are not very happy with this overt display of female bodies in the field, there are others who are being supportive and encouraging of this trend. Some react angrily, some positively, and some violently.

It is not just the men and boys who are curious about what is happening. When sessions on topics like bodily changes, menstruation, sex, pregnancy, choice, consent, pleasure, rights, and autonomy are held as part of the *It's My Body* programme, many mothers accompany their daughters to these meetings to check what is being 'taught'. The local health workers are keen to participate in sessions on health, hygiene, nutrition, and menstruation. Sessions on sex, sexuality, choice, consent, and pleasure make them uncomfortable. The discomfort is not just at their end.

We also share this anxiety in talking about these issues freely and openly. The fear of backlash and antagonism makes us choose our strategies, messages, mediums and language strategically and carefully. The title of the programme, 'It's My Body', when translated into Hindi—*Mera Sharir, Mera Adhikaar*, comes across as 'bold' or 'radical' and there is some hesitation in using it, both on our part as well as that of organisations co-implementing this programme with CREA<sup>[2]</sup>. The programme is very often projected as a programme on Reproductive Health, and the 'S' and 'R' in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights are used cautiously. Words like '*hak*', '*adhikaar*', '*pasand*', '*anand*', '*yaunikta*' (right, preference, pleasure, and sexuality) are used selectively and only in certain 'safe' settings and spaces. But, what happens, when these conversations are translated into actions outside these constructed 'safe' spaces?



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- The F Word
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- WIMNs Voices

### Movements & Organisations

- Akshara Centre
- Alternative Law Forum
- AWID
- Blank Noise Project
- Breakthrough
- CREA
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- Jagori
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- Prajnya Trust
- Pukar
- Sakhi
- SNEHA Mumbai
- Vimochana
- Wave India
- Women's Views on News
- Zubaan Books

### News and Opinion

- Alternet
- Counter Currents: Gender
- Feminists India
- Her Circle Ezine
- India Together: Women
- Infochange: Women
- IPS – Gender Equality
- Just Femme
- Ms Magazine
- Women's eNews

### Resources

- Development Gender Bridge
- Feminism and Women's Studies
- International Center for Research on Women
- Lawyers Collective
- Siyanda
- The Feminist eZine
- The South and Southeast Asia Resource Centre on Sexuality

### Feminist reading



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When Rashmi (*name changed*), from Jharkhand, insisted on wearing jeans in the village, her mother pulled her out of the programme. Neha (*name changed*) has refused to marry the boy her parents chose for her because she doesn't like the way he looks. Her parents are shocked and unhappy with this new assertion of her right to say 'NO'. Kavita (*name changed*) slapped the boy who grabbed her hand at the tea shop. The first thing that she had to explain to her parents, family, and others was – why was she roaming outside the house in the evening? Sunita, Mamta, and Jyoti (*names changed*) come to attend these meetings on their bicycles. Some boys hide behind the trees place thorn traps on the way to puncture their bicycles, so that they can trouble and tease them. As a result, the girls have stopped staying back for volleyball practices in the evening and head home before it gets dark.

There are several question marks and circumscriptions outside of these 'safe' settings, where girls feel 'empowered', informed, and confident. All our conversations and discussions in these spaces and the choices girls make often have repercussions. What is the kind of resistance they face outside these safe spaces? How do they negotiate with those who are not part of this 'safe' space? How do they retain this confidence when they are outside this setting? What are the struggles they face to be a part of this group? Why is it that if something goes wrong, it is the girls who have to back down? Why does the fear of harassment, abuse, and violence hold them back from participating in these collectives?

The fear of the consequences for some of these young girls, who are questioning, challenging, and transforming the established social order, is ever-present. This compels us to reflect on our own strategies. We often ask ourselves whether we should tone down the rhetoric? Or should we let this fight run its own course? How do we make our processes of change more inclusive to include others who serve either as gatekeepers or as allies in this process? Creating exclusive, rights affirming and safe spaces for women and girls is necessary. But is that enough when the application of these rights is in the "real world"?

**Author's note:** Big Thank You to Meenu, Shalini, Pooja and Rupsa for the ideas and feedback they shared.

[1] This conversation took place with a 26- year-old man in Jharkhand on 11 March 2013, at an International Women's Day event that was organised by CREA and Mahila Mandal, as part of CREA's 'It's My Body' programme. Sanjay [(name changed)] is the captain of the village football team.

[2] It's My Body- Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Adolescent Girls through Sports, is a programme led by CREA and co-implemented with ten women-led, community-based organisations in rural and urban areas of Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh.

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Tags: agency, choice, consent, CREA, girls, patriarchal structures, public space | Category: Body & Sexuality, Relationships & Marriage, Self, Society, Uncategorized |



### About: Sanjana Gaind

Sanjana Gaind works at CREA as Program Coordinator – Young Women's Feminist Leadership. Sanjana is interested in the application of artistic and creative methodologies in activism and development. She has used mediums like theatre, music, art and sports in her work with young girls and women on issues of gender, sexuality and rights.

### 6 comments to Making Choices: The Rhetoric and The Reality



meghna  
May 16, 2013 at 2:26 pm · Reply

really well written, and thought provoking. challenging the perceptions of your immediate society, be it playing football, wearing jeans or expecting pleasure and respect in bed, requires drawing from a sort of courage most of us women reading this are lucky enough not to have to explore. these girls are brave! they're going to be the revolution..with your help of course. keep up the awesome work

### Making Choices: The Rhetoric and The Reality #Gender #Vaw | kracktivist

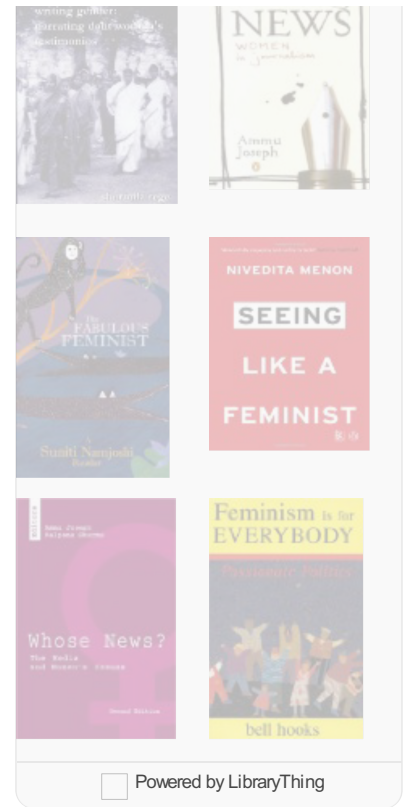
[...] using it, both on our part as well as that of organisations co-implementing this programme with CREA[2]. The programme is very often projected as a programme on Reproductive Health, and the 'S' and [...]



ola  
May 20, 2013 at 10:48 pm · Reply

Thank you for sharing this work it give hope in better future  
Stay strong

Ola



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Surya  
May 24, 2013 at 12:05 am · Reply

I love how complexly you frame the dilemmas of doing any kind of "rights" work. Yes these are questions many confront in the work we do. Thank you for putting them out there.

We need to think about them, talk about them and acknowledge their validity. There are all kinds of risks and we and the people we work with have choices to make... All kinds of choices.



Sanjana  
May 24, 2013 at 6:15 pm · Reply

Meghna, Ola and Surya  
So glad you liked reading this post. Thank you for sharing your thoughts.



Udayraj P J  
May 31, 2013 at 2:58 pm · Reply

The conversation you had with Sanjay is an eye opener. Instead of hiding behind Parampara, he has rightly used the word Aadat. Keep up the good work! The aadat will change. I wish that there are programs that starts a dialogue with young men to point out the non-inclusive nature of patriarchy and elaborate the spirit of gender rights. Kindly let me know if they already exist. Thank you.

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