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‘Due to all this fear, we’re getting less freedom’: Young people’s understandings of gender and sexual violence in New Delhi, India

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This paper explores young people’s understandings of gender and sexual violence in New Delhi, India, based on multi-method research conducted with young people (aged 15-17) in three co-educational secondary schools. Fieldwork took place shortly after the 2012 Delhi gang rape that sparked widespread debates about violence against women in India, and so sexual violence became an important frame for students’ discussions around gender and sexuality. Young people’s understandings are considered within gender narratives – of ‘can-do’ and ‘vulnerable’ girlhood, and of ‘hero’ and ‘good boy’ masculinities – which already shaped their day-to-day experiences of schooling. Findings suggest that tensions arising from these often contradictory narratives led to frustrations among girls, while the dominance of conversations about sexual violence led to confusions in both girls’ and boys’ understandings of sexuality. Reflections are offered on ways schools can better support young people as they learn about gender and sexuality from diverse and contradictory sources.

Keywords: gender, sexual violence, girlhood, masculinities, secondary schools, India

Introduction

In the context of widespread anger and sorrow following the gang rape of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012, much international coverage asked why India had a ‘rape problem’ (e.g. Hota 2013). Within India, prominent left-wing activists such as Kavita Krishnan blamed reactionary patriarchal attitudes at the heart of ‘Indian culture’ (Burke 2013b). More conservative voices argued that Western influences were to blame. These included Mohanrao Bhagwat, a prominent member of the RSS (Rashriya Swayamsevek Sangh), who declared that ‘such crimes hardly take place in “Bharat”, but frequently in “India”’ (Times of India, 4 January 2013). Drawing a distinction

between the rural, 'traditional' version of the nation ('Bharat'), and the urban, Westernized version ('India'), Bhagwat claimed that there are 'no such incidents of gang rape or sex crimes' in the 'villages or forests' of the former (Times of India, 4 January 2013).

Burke (2013a) has characterized the debates around violence against women as a 'culture war', which exposed 'tensions created by the rapid pace of economic change in India over recent decades' (Burke 2013a). The debates over changing gender dynamics, and what constitutes 'Indian' as opposed to 'Western' culture, can be understood within the context of shifting gendered and sexual politics over the past 25 years in post-liberalization, globalized India. This period has seen increasing LGBT and feminist mobilization around sex-positive, non-normative sexualities on the left, denunciations of 'un-Indian' and immoral sexual behaviour from the Hindu right, and the rise of a consumer culture in which new technologies and spaces present the allure of 'Western' modernity.

How do young people understand gender and sexuality within the context of these competing, often contradictory narratives of tradition and modernity? Based on a multi-method study conducted in three co-educational secondary schools in Delhi, this paper examines the implications of these tensions for middle-class young people (aged 15-17) during the immediately post-December 2012 context. Using a narrative analytical framework influenced by Andrews (2014) and Plummer (1995), the paper focuses on how young people understood sexual violence within gender narratives which already shaped their day-to-day experiences of schooling – narratives of 'can-do' and 'vulnerable' girlhood, and of 'hero' and 'good boy' masculinities. As will be discussed, girls were often frustrated by contradictory narratives which both celebrated their ability to succeed and emphasized their innate vulnerability. Meanwhile, the

dominance of conversations about sexual violence led to confusions in both girls' and boys' understandings of sexuality.

Gender, sexuality and 'middleclassness' in post-liberalisation India

Questions of balancing tradition and modernity have had particular implications for young, middle-class women in the post-liberalization period. India's 'new' middle classes are often seen to symbolize modernity by way of their 'consumerism, aspirational lifestyle [and] materialism' (Nijman 2006: 762). However, it has also been argued that 'middleclassness' should not just be understood in terms of the consumption of commodities, but also as a 'cultural project or practice rather than a social category or empirical condition' (Liechty 2003 in Donner & De Neve 2011: 13). Middleclassness in India has been characterized as a fraught, ongoing project of maintaining a 'fine balance' between ideas of tradition and modernity, and gendered and sexual moralities are of particular concern within middle-class understandings of how to be 'appropriately Indian' (Gilbertson 2014: 121; Donner & De Neve 2011).

If urban middle-class Indians have been the primary beneficiaries of globalization, then the young, educated and professional middle-class woman has become 'the icon of the new India' (Dasgupta 2014: 135). In contrast to women at the bottom and the top of India's economic scale, middle-class women who took up jobs in the 1990s were 'doing something novel' (Dasgupta 2014: 135). The increased financial independence that came with this employment has led to middle-class women being able to experience new freedoms and consumption practices, particularly in spaces such as shopping malls, cafés and cinema halls (Dasgupta 2014; Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011).

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However, these new freedoms are still tied to old restrictions. The middle-class woman remains central to contradictory ideals of 'Indian-ness' in the post-liberalization context, and is expected to embody both modernity and tradition (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011). While her education and employment are seen as a measure of family, community and national progress (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011; Gilbertson 2014), her 'virtue, sexual choices and matrimonial alliances' are still 'fraught with questions of appropriateness and dogged by the assertion of caste, community and class endogamy' (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011: 23). Consequently, any freedoms enjoyed by (unmarried) urban middle-class women are conditional on certain limits and restrictions (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011: 8). Women's conditional access to public space in the name of 'safety' has been seen as a means of controlling female sexuality; it is 'not just the fear that they will be violated, but also that they will form consenting relationships with "undesirable" men' (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011: 16-17; Krishnan 2015).

Recent incidences of public violence against women in India have been discussed in terms of a conflict between expectations of women's 'traditional' role within the private sphere, and new, 'modern' visibility in public spheres (Dasgupta 2014; Gilbertson 2014; Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011). Women who transgress traditional 'Indian' roles as wives and mothers by working, travelling or consuming within public spaces therefore become vulnerable to 'forms of violence and violent exclusion' (Banerjee et al 2012: 2). According to Dasgupta (2014), the 'general intensification of misogyny' in Northern India in the post-liberalization era can be understood in terms of the 'transformation of Indian society' being 'laced with threat' and a loss of power for men (2014: 139). Several scholars have described a 'crisis' of Indian masculinity as developing in response to the combined effects of feminism and global capitalism over the past 25 years (e.g. Kapur 2012; Roy 2012). However, as I

will argue, just as the idea that all women are defined by vulnerability to sexual violence has been problematized, the concept of a 'crisis' of masculinity does not adequately reflect the complexities of young men's lived experiences in modern-day India.

Schools, and secondary schools in particular, are widely seen as 'one of the most formative arenas' in which young people learn about gender and sexuality (Nayak & Kehily 2008: 110; Lukose 2009; Bhattacharjee 1999). Following Connell (2000), schools can be seen as both institutional agents in gendering and sexualising practices, and as settings in which other forms of agency, including those of students, are deployed.

To date, school-based studies in India have placed a limited emphasis on the role of young people as gendered and sexual agents, and the ways in which this agency interacts with institutional structures (with Lukose 2009 and Gilbertson 2014 among notable exceptions). However, schools (and peer cultures within them) provide an important space within which 'young people [are] active in producing their own identities' in terms of gender and sexuality (Alldred & David 2007: 5). Students can participate in institutionally-approved masculinities and femininities in numerous ways, whether by adjusting to these patterns, rebelling against them, or forming their own gendered and sexual identities (Connell 2000: 154). This paper explores the tensions and negotiations arising from contradictory narratives of gender and sexual violence, as experienced by 15-17 year old secondary school students in Delhi in the aftermath of the December 2012 case.

The study

Findings discussed in this paper are based on a multi-method study exploring young

people's experiences and understandings of gender and sexuality in secondary schools in Delhi, conducted as part of a doctoral studentship funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Fieldwork took place in August – December 2013 in three English-medium, co-educational secondary schools: a state government school, a central government school and a private school. The key difference between these types of schools lies in their accessibility to different socio-economic groups, largely (but not exclusively) based on the fees charged within each school system. The state government school in this study was originally established to provide secondary education for children from low-income families in central Delhi, and does not charge any tuition fees; meanwhile, central government schools in India provide education for the children of (typically middle-income) central government employees, and charge up to Rs. 8,000 (£97) per year at secondary level. The private school included in this study charged up to Rs. 42,000 (£512) per year, and is typically attended by children from middle to upper-middle class families; it was described as a 'mid-range' private school in comparison to other private schools in the city[1].

These schools were therefore purposively sampled in order to ensure that young people from lower, middle and higher socio-economic backgrounds respectively were included in the study. While these broad differences were observed across the school populations, the young people who volunteered to participate in the main part of the study (described below) were ultimately from fairly homogenous backgrounds. It is therefore important to note that the research has largely captured the experiences of middle-class, Hindu, higher caste, urban young people, and questions of

[1] By comparison, the prestigious Delhi Public School system charges approximately Rs. 191,000 (£2,331) per year. All conversions from www.xe.com, 02.03.17.

'middleclassness' (Liechty 2003 in Donner & De Neve 2011: 13) therefore became an important analytical frame.

Across the three schools, 180 Class 11 students (aged 15-17) completed questionnaires; 41 questionnaire respondents (19 girls, 22 boys) volunteered to participate in mixed and single-sex focus groups, and 30 of these students (15 girls, 15 boys) were then interviewed individually. In light of the potentially sensitive topics being discussed, and largely gender-segregated school environments, a male research assistant (RA) carried out single-sex focus groups and interviews with boys. I conducted single-sex focus groups and interviews with girls, and my research assistant and I co-facilitated mixed focus groups. A total of 25 teachers were also interviewed across the three schools. In addition to quantitative and qualitative methods, ethnographic methods were adopted; this involved formal classroom observations, informal interactions with students and teachers, and recording field notes on my experiences of living and working in Delhi.

I adopted a 'building block' approach to data collection (Allen 2005), so that emerging findings from each research method informed the design of the next. I initially included questionnaires in the design in line with the UK *Youth Values* study, in which young people were more willing to discuss sensitive or controversial topics in writing (Thomson & Holland 2004). However, given the reported taboo of talking about sexuality in India, I felt that I would not be able to gauge students' level of comfort when responding to items about sexuality through questionnaires. In addition to collecting basic descriptive information about students, questionnaires therefore covered broad areas which would be explored in more detail through qualitative methods, including students' gendered attitudes (e.g. gender and academic ability; gender and personal safety) and their experiences of learning about health at school. Subsequently,

student responses to questionnaires shaped the design of mixed focus group discussion guides, topics discussed in mixed focus groups informed the design of single-sex focus group discussion guides, and so on. Overall, the amount of methodological time spent with participants, and the decreasing level of formality within research interactions (from quantitative to qualitative and ethnographic methods), supported the development of closer relationships with the young people who participated in the study, which in turn led to multi-layered insights into their experiences and understandings of gender and sexuality.

I have adopted a narrative analytical framework in my study, influenced by Andrews' (2014) definition of 'political narratives' and Plummer's (1995) 'sexual stories'. According to Andrews (2014), participants' use of political narratives 'reveal how they position themselves within communities in which they live, to whom or what they see themselves belonging to/alienated from, how they construct notions of power, and the processes by which such power is negotiated' (Andrews 2014: 86-87). Meanwhile, Plummer (1995) defines 'sexual stories' as 'narratives of the intimate life, focused especially around the erotic, the gendered and the relational' which are 'part of the wider discourses and ideologies abroad in society' (Plummer 1995: 6). It is therefore crucial to consider what participants (and the researcher) consider to be 'sayable' and 'unsayable' in the telling of sexual stories, as this offers insights into 'understandings of current consensus about what it is acceptable to say and do in […] local and national cultures' (Phoenix 2013: 73) in relation to gender and sexuality.

Using this narrative analytical framework, I have examined the text and context of 'small stories' told within research encounters, and the interrelations between these micro-narratives and macro-narratives of gender, sexuality and education in modern-day India. By examining micro and macro-narratives in terms of 'the relationship

between the stories of individuals and the stories of the communities in which they live' (Andrews 2014: 86), it has been possible to consider the multiple and contradictory ways in which young people's understandings and experiences of gender and sexuality in Delhi secondary schools are shaped by their active engagement with national and international understandings of gender, sexuality, education and culture.

All schools have been anonymised, while pseudonyms are used for all participants. In the case of student participants, most pseudonyms were chosen by the students themselves. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (C-REC) at the University of Sussex.

Narratives of girlhood at school

On December 16th 2012, Jyoti Singh was on her way back from a cinema in one of Delhi's largest shopping malls with a friend; due to a lack of transport options at 9pm on a Sunday evening, they boarded a private bus in order to get home. Jyoti was subjected to a brutal sexual assault by the men who had commandeered the bus, while her friend was severely beaten. Soon after the story of the assault broke the next morning, people took to the streets in Delhi, denouncing violence against women and calling for justice – the brutality of the attack, and the horrific extent of Jyoti's injuries, shocked the city (Burke 2013b). While her friend recovered, Jyoti died two weeks later.

Jyoti, who became known as 'Damini' or 'Nirbhaya', was characterized by the media as having lived the life of a typical urban Indian woman. The only daughter of a middle-class family, her education enabled her to aspire to a well-respected career as a physiotherapist, and she was financially independent enough to enjoy one of the city's relatively exclusive consumer spaces in her leisure time. According to Leslie Udwin's

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controversial 2015 documentary, *India's Daughter*, Jyoti used to say, '"A girl can do anything,"' (in Roberts 2015). Prior to the attack, Jyoti's experiences could be described as consistent with a 'can-do' narrative of femininity, which

> suggests to young women that they can get what they want and do what they want. In this respect, girl power exists as a seemingly new version of femininity that can be seen as an assertive and individualized expression of power.
>
> (Aapola et al 2005, in Kehily 2012: 258)

This is consistent with narratives of the successful middle-class woman in India (Dasgupta 2014; Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011), and wider narratives of young women as the 'winners' of globalisation in the twenty-first century (Ringrose 2013). However, in Jyoti's story, this 'seemingly new version of femininity' was brutally contradicted. The Indian government's belated promises of improved public safety for women confirmed a narrative of vulnerable femininity, in which women are always potential victims and therefore in need of protection. It became apparent that similar tensions between narratives of vulnerable and can-do girlhood shaped the lives of the middle-class girls who participated in my study.

Across the study schools, teachers seemed to subscribe to can-do narratives of girlhood:

> The time has changed, and girls are coming to the forefront. Girls want to come forward. And ah, one thing is there –you can say that it is in the genes of the girls that they are hard-working, right? Boys they are carefree, casual attitude, free to move here and there […] If you compare boys and girls, the girls [do] more hard work. Now I think time has changed, girls are coming more forward.
>
> (Female chemistry teacher, central government school)

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The Chemistry teacher suggests here that girls are genetically pre-determined to be more studious than boys, but she also suggests that there is something temporally specific about 'girls coming to the forefront'. Several teachers offered similar explanations of how 'times had changed', usually attributing changes among students (whether their fondness for junk food or their online social lives) to the influence of 'the media' over the past two decades (i.e., in post-liberalization India). Teachers at all the schools suggested that increased access to 'Western' media has led to different behavioural patterns and expectations among young people during this period. Girls' changed aspirations and success could therefore be attributed to these 'Westernized' influences, along with the national policy emphasis on girls' education during this period, and the emergence of the educated, professional young woman as the 'icon of the new India' in popular culture and middle-class narratives discussed above. There is a notable contrast here with post-feminist narratives in the UK in which 'overly successful' girls are blamed for boys' failure at school (Ringrose 2013). According to teachers in the present study, girls' superior academic achievement is not a cause of concern, but instead an inevitable outcome in light of girls' natural tendencies and this specific moment in time.

The idea that girls are better students than boys can be linked to traditional notions of compliant femininity and wayward masculinity, as well as the 'silly/sensible' dichotomy reported in schools across the world (Sharma 2014). However, girls' superiority in the classroom can also be linked to narratives of can-do girlhood. The idea that girls are more academically able than boys supports the notion that modern girls can 'get what they want and be what they want', at school and beyond. Girls' investment in this can-do narrative of girlhood was particularly apparent in their aspirations for life after school.

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> Mala: I think being self-dependent is the most important thing as a girl. If I get married, I don't want to get married without working in any office or – because I – don't completely want to depend on my husband, and on my family.
>
> (State government school – mixed focus group)

Many girls discussed the importance of women's independence in similar terms to Mala, who defines 'self-dependence' here in financial terms. She discusses this particularly in relation to marriage, stating that she would want a job in order to avoid financial dependence on her husband or parents. The self-sufficient, working woman Mala imagines clearly reflects the 'assertive and individualized expression of power' of a can-do narrative of femininity.

However, can-do narratives were not the only narratives of girlhood available to students. The influence of narratives of vulnerable femininity were most evident in girls' stories about their experiences at home, and the restrictions that their parents placed upon them. The majority of the girls who participated in the research said that they were not allowed out of the house on their own in the evenings, with possible exceptions made only if a male sibling could accompany them. Narratives of vulnerable girlhood were also apparent in the advice that teachers reportedly gave to girls at the schools.

> I always tell to girls that, "See, you always have to be alert […] Moreover there are things which you can – see if you are in a public place, you can raise an alarm, but if you are alone you immediately try to escape that lonely place, or immediately call on your mobile. […] You also have to see where you are going, you have to plan it out, whether it's day and night. And you have to inform everyone, so you will be safe".
>
> (Female school counsellor, private school)

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In her reported advice to girls at the private school, the school counsellor heavily emphasizes the importance of being alert in public spaces. She provides a list of context-specific actions for girls to take in order to keep safe, which notably all involve seeking help from others, or running away. These are not assertive girls who can do anything, but vulnerable girls who are in danger simply by being alone in public, and who need to take appropriate precautions to ensure they are protected at all times, 'whether it's day [or] night'. There is an important distinction between these narratives of vulnerable girlhood and the 'girls at risk' narratives discussed by Aapola, Gonick & Harris (2005) and. 'Girls at risk' narratives largely focus on the risks of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, drug taking and participation in gangs (Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005) – the fear is perhaps that newly empowered girls will make the 'wrong' choices. By contrast, the risk of sexual assault is the dominant concern within vulnerable girlhood narratives in India. This emphasis was perhaps unsurprising following the December 2012 case, but it can also be linked to a wider preoccupation with the control of female sexuality. As Phadke, Khan & Ranade (2011) have noted, sexual assault is seen as the 'worst possible outcome' within conservative gender narratives in India because women's respectability is tied to notions of sexual purity – which is largely maintained through the restriction of women's freedoms. As a result, conditional access to public spaces has been a sustained feature of women's experience in post-liberalization India (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011; Banerji et al 2012).

While girls and teachers alike were invested in can-do narratives of high-achieving, independent femininity, which supported the idea that education promotes gender equality in society, these narratives of vulnerable girlhood had a persistent influence at home and at school. As discussed below, girls' attempts to negotiate these

contradictory understandings of what it means to be young and female in contemporary India often led to anger and frustration.

Fear and anger: girls' responses of cases of sexual violence

Several questionnaire items explored students' perceptions of safety outside school. In response to an item asking students whether they felt safe travelling outside school (Q23), 61% of girls (n = 39) indicated they did not feel safe doing this, while 80% of boys (n = 69) indicated that they did (see Table 1). Just over half of the girls (n = 14) who responded to a follow-up question (Q24) explained that they did not feel safe due to the threat of sexual harassment or violence, while just under half of the girls (n = 12) cited a general lack of safety for women in Delhi (n = 12)[2].

Table 1: Student questionnaire responses, Q23 – 'Do you feel safe when you are walking or travelling around outside school?'

		No	Yes	Total
Female	Count	39	25	64
	% within gender	60.9%	39.1%	100.0%
Male	Count	17	69	86
	% within gender	19.8%	80.2%	100.0%
Total	Count	56	94	150
	% within gender	37.3%	62.7%	100.0%
Statistical test results: Chi-square: significant differences according to gender ($x^2 = 26.584$, $p = 0.001$)				

Fortunately, none of the girls who participated in the research reported experiences of being physically attacked. However, consistent with findings from Leach and Sitaram's (2007) study in a Karnataka secondary school, girls and boys alike mentioned that 'eve-teasing' or verbal harassment was a regular occurrence at school.

[2] 116 valid responses to Q24 were coded using NVivo. 62% of girls (n = 31) responded explaining why they did not feel safe while travelling; 77% of boys (n = 51) responded explaining why they did feel safe.

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Within a context of heightened fears of violence against women, and girls' own experiences of harassment, it is perhaps unsurprising that many girls feared for their personal safety in public spaces. However, tensions between narratives of vulnerable girlhood and narratives of can-do girlhood also left many girls more angry than afraid.

> Aaliya: Ma'am, my question is – why the boys every time, every time they feel safe, when anywhere they should go, ah, then – he is safe anywhere! Why should, why these boys are safe and we are not?
>
> (Central government school – girls' focus group)

This plea from Aaliya is an individual expression of the widespread public anger and a feeling that 'enough was enough' in the wake of the Delhi gang rape case, which was prominently expressed during protests in December 2012. As well as voicing their frustrations with assumptions of female vulnerability within this specific context, girls at all the schools challenged wider narratives of female disadvantage in Indian society.

> Rani: Ma'am, when a girl gets married, sometimes her in-laws force [her] for dowry […] So this should not happen, she should show that she is strong enough, that she can fight for her rights, and nobody can easily harm her.
>
> Padmini: So you mentioned like, fighting for your rights – so how can a woman fight for her rights, what's that about?
>
> Mala: By not letting such people hurt [them], and by fighting for their own rights. Being educated, because – if they are educated so they can know what are their rights, they can fight for that. And they can appeal to the government, that, "We are violated".
>
> (State government school – mixed focus group)

Although none of the girls explicitly identified themselves as feminists, the idea that women should 'fight for their rights' is consistent with progressive political narratives, and the 'assertive and individualized expressions of power' of can-do

narratives of girlhood. Here, Rani and Mala suggest ways in which individual women can seek to change their circumstances; for example, by standing up to practices such as dowry extraction. Mala makes a direct link between women's education and empowerment, and also suggests that an awareness of rights enables women to place demands on the government to fulfil their human rights.

Post-December 2012, girls' calls for women to fight for their rights can be understood in terms of their frustrations that promises of a 'new', modern femininity were not being fulfilled in their own lives, nor in wider society. One of the girls at the central government school eloquently described these tensions:

> You know, I think that, ah – in India, the views are changing, the mindsets are changing. Girls are given more opportunities. But […] the environment, the society for girls is very bad. You know, rape cases, all these stuff, murders, are still happening. And due to this, girls are – the parents are scared if they allow their girls to go out […] Due to all this fear, we're getting less freedom.
>
> (Khyati, central government school – interview)

Khyati suggests here that while attitudes towards girls and women are improving in India, fears for girls' safety still lead to parents placing restrictions on their daughters. In other words, can-do narratives of girlhood in which girls are 'given more opportunities' are being disrupted by narratives of female vulnerability. Many girls' expectations of equal opportunities and freedoms were directly contradicted by their personal experiences of restrictions and fear. However, as suggested by their angry, often politicized responses to cases of sexual violence and discrimination against women in India, many girls' investment in can-do narratives of girlhood meant they refused to accept assumptions that they were defined by vulnerability to sexual violence. As will be discussed shortly, many boys also sought to challenge dominant

gender narratives, particularly in order to distinguish themselves from male predator stereotypes within sexual violence narratives. However, they often struggled to do so within existing narratives of masculinity.

Narratives of masculinity at school

As suggested by teachers' characterisations of girls as 'good students', can-do narratives of girlhood had less favourable implications for boys. In contrast to idealized female students, teachers and students characterized boys as more disruptive in class, and less academically able.

> Sometimes it's easy to manage girls and difficult to manage boys. Boys are after all boys […] by nature they are quite rough and tough, they don't bother, if you call them again and again, they will just think, "Okay let her speak, she will speak and go".
>
> (Female English teacher, state government school)

The English teacher suggests here that boys' untameable natures are essentially incompatible with the self-restraint required for academic application. This 'boys will be boys' narrative is familiar from UK debates on boys' 'underachievement' in schools; however, while sharing features such as biologically determined 'aggression, fighting and delayed […] maturity' (Epstein et al 1998: 9), boys' inferior academic ability in these Delhi schools was understood as directly linked to their 'masculine' traits, rather than 'extrinsic to boys themselves' (Epstein et al 1998: 9). Moreover, perhaps in line with India's ongoing policy focus on promoting girls' education, girls' superior academic ability (both when assumed and 'proven' by exam results) is largely celebrated in India, in contrast to its problematization within UK 'failing boys' debates (Epstein et al 1998).

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Importantly, boys' disruptive behaviour in class held considerable social value within peer cultures. Such boys were referred to as 'heroes', and one of the boys at the central government school described a friend who embodied some of the other traits of a 'hero':

> No-one can forget his name, never ever […] *He was a powerful guy*. *He was the best at fighting* (ladaiyo thha mein maahir). *He was, he was something else. Nobody was able to touch him*. When he was in Class 10, he was having a relationship with a girl in Class 12, she was the head girl of the school.
>
> (Rapper, central government school – interview)[3]

In this quotation, Rapper elevates his friend to almost mythic proportions – his description of his friend as 'the best at fighting' (ladaiyo thha mein maahir) translates literally as 'an expert in battles'. In particular, the combination of being a successful fighter and a lover (with a girlfriend of considerable social status) seemed to form key aspects of the hero narrative of masculinity. An example of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2000; Chopra 2011), this image also draws upon popular narratives of successful masculinity in Bollywood movies; the combination of fighting and pursuing heterosexual romance was encapsulated by the slogan from a Bollywood action movie released in December 2013, *R…Rajkumar.* The hero of the film declares, 'meri life mein sirf do cheez hai: pyaar, pyaar, pyaar – yah maar, maar, maar' ('there are only two things in my life – loving (pyaar) and fighting (maar)'). The relevance of these hero narratives within boys' peer cultures has also been discussed by Lukose (2009) and Osella & Osella (2004), while Jeffrey, Jeffery & Jeffery (2008: 71) have noted the

[3] Data translated into English from the original Hindi are presented in italics, and significant Hindi words are included in brackets. Translation occurred subsequent to data collection; a translator listened to audio recordings of focus groups and interviews, transcribed these files into Hindi, and then translated the data into English.

importance of Indian cinema in providing 'anchor points' in young people's 'efforts to craft distinctive styles'.

The activities of fighting and romancing were also interconnected; fighting male competitors to win the affections of girls was an important part of the narrative of hero masculinity. I heard numerous accounts of boys fighting over girls at all the schools, and these stories suggested that narratives of hero masculinity unavoidably reinforced narratives of vulnerable girlhood. While being 'fought over' (whether in popular movies or in the school yard), the girl is inevitably cast as passive and helpless, with boys fighting to determine who will 'win' her hand. The overtones of male ownership within this narrative clearly contradict the 'self-dependence' celebrated within can-do narratives of girlhood.

While many teachers complained that boys' involvement in fights was disruptive, school disciplinary practices in fact further reinforced links between masculinity and violence. Although two teachers made references to the illegal status of corporal punishment in India (following the Right to Education Act 2009), it was clear from teachers' and students' accounts that such punishment was practised at all the schools, and directed almost exclusively at boys.

Keshar:	[…] All – in school, boys and girls are equally treated. But – when *[laughs]* when boys are, you know, getting slaps and then *[laughs]*, girls do not get anything. That is different thing, but all is equal.
Research assistant:	All is equal?!
Keshar:	All are equal, yah.

(Keshar, private school – interview)

Keshar was one of numerous students who described gender-differentiated disciplinary practices as either 'equal' or 'fair', to the surprise of my research assistant

and myself. Leach & Sitaram (2007) have also discussed the ways in which disciplinary practices reinforced gender stereotypes at a Karnataka secondary school, revealing corporal punishment as another way in which gender is produced within schools. Students' acceptance of such disciplinary practices reflects the extent to which violence and masculinity were normalized in schools, by institutional practices and within narratives of hero masculinity celebrated in peer cultures.

I was struck by the emerging theme of normalized violence within boys' day-to-day experiences of schooling during fieldwork; as discussed above, violence has been identified as a key manifestation of a 'crisis' of Indian masculinity (Kapur 2012; Roy 2012). Importantly, however, violence was not a defining feature of all narratives of masculinity within the schools. Students' accounts and classroom observations suggested that there were many boys who were more studious than 'heroes'.

> If a boy is like, intelligent, good in studies, and a sincere person, [girls] used to talk more to them. Because, you know, they used to help each other and all that.
>
> (Akira, central government school – interview)

> Lego: Ah – there's a friend of mine, ah – I really respect him, he's very gentle. He's good at the studies.
>
> (State government school – mixed focus group)

These quotations suggest that a narrative of 'good boy' masculinity, according to which boys worked hard and helped girls with their work, was a means of gaining the respect of female and (at least some) male peers. Importantly, this was in spite of the dominance of narratives of hero masculinity within the schools, which contrasts Holland et al's (1998) 'gladiator' and 'wimp' formulation of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities in UK schools. Unlike heroes, 'good boys' were compliant

with institutional school structures both in terms of discipline and academic focus, as well as middle-class narratives of educational commitment and aspiration. Consequently, boys who conformed to this good boy narrative were often rewarded with positions of authority over their peers. Moreover, being a 'good boy' meant respecting girls, rather than fighting over or romancing them:

> Tornado: And, we should not judge women the weakling in our society. Because women can also do that thing that man does. Because nowadays womens *[sic]* are coming forward in every field of, ah, work […] and ah, that we should not think [that] they are the weakling of the society.
>
> (Private school – mixed focus group)

Tornado was a class monitor and a self-proclaimed 'good boy', and he presented this argument to support the idea that a 'real man' respects women. By asserting that women and men are equally capable, Tornado affirms a can-do narrative of girlhood and rejects a narrative of female vulnerability. However, as discussed below, heroes and good boys alike seemed to conflate ideas of 'respecting' and 'protecting' women when responding to cases of sexual violence. In turn, this often undermined can-do narratives of girlhood and affirmed narratives of vulnerable femininity.

Avenge and respect: boys' responses to cases of sexual violence

When discussing cases of sexual violence, from eve-teasing to the Delhi gang rape case, many students and teachers explained that a particular 'male mentality' was to blame. I was told that, according to this male mentality, men feel compelled to harass or assault women as a defining aspect of their masculinity; this is fuelled by a general sense of being powerful in society, which leads to some men to feel that they can do whatever they want. When responding to ongoing cases of sexual violence, the boys who

participated in the research all sought to distance themselves from this 'male mentality'.

One of the most striking ways in which this was done emerged in response to an open-ended questionnaire item asking students to reflect on the Delhi gang rape case (Q27). From 112 responses, just under 20% (n = 19) of students gave strongly violent responses; over half of these (n = 12) came from boys, who imagined brutal forms of retribution for the rapists (quotations verbatim):

> My reaction was that when that group of men came [in front of] me I would set fire [to] the[m] all. Ok i will burn [them] in that bus, in which they attacked and killed Damini.
>
> (Central government school boy – Q27 response)

> I want to kill those people who did that. I just want to do with them what they did with damini.
>
> (State government school boy – Q27 response)

This imagined retribution can be understood in terms of 'rape-revenge' narratives discussed by film studies scholars. According to Projansky (2001), rape-revenge narratives in which men take revenge on behalf of women who have been raped 'depend on rape to motivate and justify a particularly violent version of masculinity' (in Heller-Nicholas 2011). The imagined assertion of masculine strength in these boys' responses enables them to simultaneously distinguish themselves from the rapists and assert a superior form of masculinity, as they describe 'good' violence that allows them to avenge the female victim. Within the context of the Delhi gang rape case, these rape-revenge narratives (which were also expressed by women and men during the protests in Delhi following the December 2012 case) can also be understood in terms of a violent reinforcement of class boundaries.

The juxtaposition of Jyoti Singh's middle-class 'normality' and the brutality of the December 2012 attack significantly contributed to the case capturing the 'horrified

imagination of middle-class urban India and the world beyond' (Gopal 2015). The students who participated in this study were similarly responding as urban, middle-class young people; through imagined vengeance in rape-revenge responses, students positioned themselves as 'civilized' (middle-class, urban, educated) Indians who are protectors of similarly 'civilized' women, and slayers of the 'uncivilized' (lower-class, migrant, illiterate) rapists. This is also consistent with the media emphasis on the working-class, migrant status of the men convicted of the gang rape; many of the boys sought to repudiate this 'uncivilized' masculinity in their responses.

Boys' angry, aggressive responses to cases of sexual violence and their focus on 'saving' women can be understood as consistent with hero narratives of masculinity. By contrast, 'good boys' sought to distance themselves from the negative male mentality associated with sexual violence by asserting modern, respectful attitudes towards women. Moreover, rather than responding aggressively, many boys who participated in the research became defensive when issues such as eve-teasing and rape cases were discussed.

Jonny: [Girls] think that all boys are bad – that all boys are rapists.
[…]
Naina: The situation has made her think, has made us think so. *It's become so bad, so* obviously *we'll think like that*
[…]
Lego: I am not a rapist
Naina: I can't – I don't believe you, I don't trust you!
Lego: I don't mind about your thinking. Okay? But I am not.

(State government school – mixed focus group)

In this exchange, Jonny complains that girls think 'all boys are bad'. This is an extension of a narrative of vulnerable girlhood, located within wider narratives of sexual

violence; if all girls are potential victims, then by implication all boys are potential attackers (Cornwall, Edström & Grieg 2011). Indeed, Naina defends this position by locating girls' fears within the specific post-December 2012 moment, arguing that girls inevitably think like this because the situation has 'become so bad'. Although Lego intervenes to disassociate himself from a predatory male identity, Naina's rejection of his claim, followed by Lego's insistent repetition of his defence, poignantly suggests the extent to which this climate of fear may have affected gendered dynamics among students.

These exchanges suggest that some boys were struggling to assert a masculine identity distinct from the male predator of sexual violence narratives, and their responses were also importantly located in 'good boy' rather than hero narratives of masculinity. Rather than seeking violent revenge, these boys made it clear that they would never harass or assault girls because they respected them. While they did not necessarily assert that 'heroes' were potential eve-teasers, there was some suspicion among good boys that those who engaged in disruptive pyaar-maar (loving/fighting) behaviour did not necessarily respect women. For several boys, this seemed based on an assumption that 'respecting' a girl and being sexually attracted to her were mutually exclusive. Particularly within the context of pervasive narratives of sexual violence, there was clearly confusion around what constituted legitimate sexual attraction as opposed to predatory sexual behaviour:

Padmini: So we're kind of talking about this mentality towards girls. So how do you think it can be changed, like what do you think can be done?

Rani: Since the birth of a boy, the parents should teach him to respect girls […]

Lionel: But I think it is very tough to change the mentality […] it's a physical process that ah, means you are attracting towards a girl. Because of the

lust and this type of thing. And – but, ah, I don't think that – but there is very tough, to change the mentality

Rani: We also get attracted to the boys, but we do not rape them! *[laughter]*

(State government school – mixed focus group)

Rani reiterates the importance of boys 'respecting' girls as an alternative to the negative mentality that motivates sexual violence. Lionel, however, is unsure whether this mentality can be changed, as he seems to assume that sexual violence is motivated by sexual attraction. Although this confusion between sexual attraction and sexual violence was laughed off in the group, Lionel's misunderstanding of rape as motivated by an uncontrollable male sex drive is not uncommon. While boys' attempts to distinguish themselves from male predator stereotypes can be located within both hero and good boy narratives of masculinity, this exchange suggests that within a context where sex was frequently being discussed within narratives of sexual violence, many boys struggled to conceptualize sexual desire in positive terms.

Discussion

Findings discussed in this paper reveal that, in these Delhi secondary schools, particular gender narratives were celebrated within institutional and peer cultures in both complimentary and contradictory ways. Students who complied with narratives of can-do girlhood and good boy masculinity, in line with the academic aims of the schools, were rewarded with school prizes and positions of responsibility. Narratives of can-do girlhood also held particular value within girls' peer cultures, arguably reflecting the celebration of the modern Indian woman as educated and assertive in popular culture and middle-class narratives.

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However, in the wake of the December 2012 case, these can-do narratives of girlhood were under threat. Unsurprisingly, motifs of protection and female vulnerability became all the more powerful within this context. Narratives of vulnerable girlhood led to heightened restrictions on girls, and schools themselves reinforced narratives of vulnerable girlhood by advising girls on how best to protect themselves. Nevertheless, girls who participated in the research subscribed to more transformative gender narratives, perhaps motivated by the intensity of post-December 2012 debates about 'appropriate' forms of (Indian) femininity, and the direct implications that these debates had within their lives. Many girls viewed their rights to safety and access to public spaces in terms of their rights as Indian citizens, and this importantly extends Gilbertson's (2014) discussion of the need for middle-class young women to maintain a 'fine balance' between modern freedoms and traditional restrictions. Findings from the present study suggest that girls' expectations of greater freedoms can lead them to vociferously challenge attempts at restriction; as Gonick et al (2009: 6) argue, 'the constraints of gender and normative femininity are […] always a factor in its production, expression and its resistance'. Girls' passionate demands for equal rights to safety in public spaces, and the Indian government's responsibility to fulfil these rights, also indicates a sense of citizenship among these young women that goes beyond the 'consumer citizenship' discussed by Lukose (2009) and others, in which the rights claimed are those such as 'the right to consume good products' (Phadke, Khan & Ranade 2011: 14).

The narrative of hero masculinity at the schools had much in common with the hegemonic masculinity described by Connell (2000), Chopra (2011) and others, particularly in its dominance over other narratives of masculinities and girlhood. Violence, especially in terms of fighting with male peers, formed an important part of

hero narratives; on an institutional level, 'boys will be boys' narratives led to violent disciplinary practices being reserved for boys, based on assumptions that they required and could 'take' such punishment. However, while scholars such as Kapur (2012) and Roy (2012) have described Indian masculinity as in 'crisis', this concept does not seem to accurately capture the multiple ways in which violence was embedded in boys' everyday experiences at school. Rogers (2008) has argued that young men's use of violence in post-liberalization India can be seen as a 'strategic consolidation of men's social power' (Rogers 2008: 92), which is perhaps a more useful way of interpreting fights within boys' peer cultures. Boys sought to assert their dominance over their male peers through these fights, and to 'win' possession of girls they were romancing. Although eve-teasing was unequivocally condemned by boys who participated in the study, other boys' verbal harassment of girls within the schools can also be understood as a means of asserting and 'consolidating' their social power over their female peers.

Importantly, boys also used hero masculinities in order to aggressively distance themselves from sexually violent behaviour, and moreover, several boys invoked alternative, 'good boy' narratives which repudiated violence, and emphasized the importance of respecting girls and women. As Cornwall & Lindisfarne (1994: 9) have noted, it is important to consider the shifting relations between 'dominant and subordinate masculinities and other gendered identities in any given setting'; while violence dominated male peer cultures in various forms, good boy narratives indicated that other, less violent behaviours also held value within the schools. The emphasis on academic success within good boy narratives is also notable; as Jeffery, Jeffery & Jeffrey (2008) have discussed, education can be a key way in which young men in India align themselves to a more 'modern' form of masculinity. The conflation of respecting and protecting women did mean that good boy narratives sometimes still reinforced

narratives of vulnerable girlhood. However, findings discussed here importantly suggest that some boys were attempting to engage with more modern, can-do narratives of girlhood, and to develop ways of interacting with girls on 'equal' terms.

Study findings also reveal that the dominance of conversations about sexual violence created confusions in young people's understandings of sexuality; this was evident in boys' attempts to distance themselves from male predator stereotypes, but also in their struggles to distinguish sexual desire from sexual violence. This indicates the importance of framing conversations about sexuality with young people in more positive terms, whether in formal school settings or more informal interactions. Talking about issues around consent is particularly crucial, as seen in the 'consent classes' recently introduced in UK universities (Dearden 2014). Such classes may struggle to gain acceptance within colleges in India, let alone schools – the introduction of even biologically-focused sexuality education has proved controversial in India over the past decade (Chakraborty 2010). However, programmes such as the Adolescence Education Programme are now being rolled out across India (UNFPA 2011), while the Ministry of Health recently announced the introduction of 'Saathiya', a peer educator-led programme which will focus on 'consent and respect' and challenge dominant gender norms (Ghosh 2017). The inclusion of modules that broach consent within the context of 'healthy relationships' in such programmes could be a valuable first step towards addressing confusions about sexual desire and sexual violence, and encouraging more positive understandings of sexuality which are relevant to young people's everyday experiences.

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