

Between the Lines Episode 11

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Fertility, Health and Reproductive Politics: Re-imagining Rights in India - Maya Unnithan

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Maya, I'm interested to hear how this book came about and what was behind it.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Thanks Haley. Well, the book has really grown out of research that started in 1998 and with a number of questions that I had in my mind and my thinking back then. So, questions to do with childbearing, conception and contraception, processes often regarded as so universal and taken for granted, but which seemed actually quite challenging in the context of where I was working in northwest India . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: . . . in Rajasthan. Yeah, I mean there were questions such as the mundane, but what were the experiences of conception, pregnancy and infertility that women and couples had. And how were these sort of culturally shaped and challenged by the very harsh economic and environmental conditions in which people lived. And this seemed completely not taken into account of, within the kind of development policies or the literature that was coming out on family planning and sexual and reproductive health. You know, practical questions, for example: how do you manage your menstruation in a context where you don't have any water to wash? And issues about: we've been told women don't have much agency or decision making when it comes to when to have sex or when to become pregnant, but was that really the case? And how actually do couples in these context decide about the kinds of contraception that they want to use, do they have these conversations at all? What kinds of conversations are they having about these issues and, and also how have these conversations changed over time?

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah, so there was always this longitudinal perspective to this work?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes. I mean, I think that's one of the, I think, the strengths and things that I really enjoyed, but also one of the challenges of how do you write over such, such a long time.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: But, it's within these kinds of conversations that I then became really interested in conversations about entitlement.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Entitlement, yeah.

MAYA UNNITHAN: So that is how senses of reproductive and sexual entitlement and claims over the body, you know, how, how are these held, how are they expressed, how are they practiced by women and men from, particularly from sort of lower caste and poorer groups, both Hindu and Muslim in Rajasthan. So that's really come out, you know, so this focus on, as it were, reproductive rights has this background . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: . . . In a longer, and much more 'on the ground' sense of how people were talking about these issues themselves. And an interest in how they were talking about these issues.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Hmm. And that 'on the ground' picture, was there not also an interest in linking it to government, sort of prevailing *[inaudible; 00:03:28, sounds like 'governant', not sure if this correct or if means 'government' or 'governance']* discourse?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, yes. No, no, absolutely, because this . . . what was happening on the ground and amongst these conversations that people were having in families and in households and so on, it actually then led to a much more dense and layered perspective on thinking about the discourse of reproductive rights. And this was helped, actually, by the fact that this research also took place at a time when the Indian government and NGOs were fervently engaging with rights-based approaches to health and development and sexual reproductive health rights. So this is from, say, 2002 onwards.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, so quite fundamentally there was always this quite anthropological interest in what was going on on the ground, but then also how did this relate to this broader development discourse that was being picked up in government and NGOs, so this interesting, as you said, very layered perspective.

MAYA UNNITHAN: And I think, actually, the book engages with this broader institutional discourse on rights that was taking place at the same time, as you say, that it sort of examines these local practices of reproductive entitlement. And it engages particularly with this broader discourse in terms of its focus on development actors. So, civil society members, members of health in NGOs, working across Rajasthan, but also across the country in terms of the network around the People's Health Movement. But also, health providers and how they were engaged in this kind of rights work and rights talk. And so the book is trying to bring out, I'm trying to bring out, the kind of different ways in which reproductive rights are understood and imagined at these different levels, by state and civil society on the one hand and

then also in terms of understandings and perceptions of those who are both subjects and objects of these state policies and NGO interventions.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: And then you link that quite particularly to power and structures of power, don't you?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Absolutely. And I think that this focus on powers is, again, it's a localised sense of understanding power. So the book uses reproductive rights and the talk and the practice around body-based entitlements as a lens on how power is actually experienced and navigated in the . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: In an everyday...

MAYA UNNITHAN: In an everyday context, both amongst families and development actors, you see?

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: And in its broadest sense, I think, the lens of reproductive rights is drawn on really to understand gender politics on the ground, and also how it plays out in development practice.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah and that sort of intersections between those two levels . . .

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yeah, yeah.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: . . . if you will. Yeah. I wonder, Maya, if you could talk us through the content of the book, how you've structured it and why.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yeah, so, you know, as I said, the book examines how reproductive rights are practiced and imagined. But it does this through a focus on three key disruptions within this kind of linear narrative of childbearing. And these three moments really are: around infertility; around surrogacy, particularly in terms of surrogacy as a prospect for poorer infertile women; and also around sex-selective abortion. So these topics are really the focus each of three ethnographically rich chapters. And then this kind of work is complemented by another three chapters which are ethnographically informed chapters which look at the state health worker and civil society rights work and sort of rights-related institutional vulnerabilities, you know, limitations, challenges, barriers. And also the kind of motivations to follow rights work in particular ways.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: In these different institutions, because I know you have different kinds of civil society organisations as well.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, absolutely and the book looks at health-based civil society organisations and actors, but also legal activists, because the legal activists play quite an important role in translating rights across these different . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, these brokers and the work they do.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, and the work they do. And so in a core thread, really, in these chapters then is how rights are understood and practiced by these different actors and also their own sort of notions and the interplay of notions of individual and collective rights.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Very interesting, and I think that is so powerful in going back to your original intention, to challenge these received assumptions about these various domains of reproductive health. As I understand it, you also link your ethnographic analysis then to contemporary Indian health reform and, indeed, to global discourse in health, on rights. Can you just tell us how you do that?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes. So the book actually starts with two introductory chapters which cover, in a sense, both these . . . the overarching concepts and frameworks, methods. And that's, well that's an introductory chapter. The second chapter is another introductory chapter, which is on the history of state policies and how these have changed around health in India. And then the kind of impact that has on how health programmes are organised state-wise in Rajasthan. So looking both at the sort of national picture and also what does that mean when it shifts? How is it structured at the level of the state? And how does that then sort of provide a framing for, actually, the health system . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: . . . and how it works, in the state? And in a way, these two chapters, I keep returning to these chapters through the ethnography that I set out in the subsequent chapters in the book. And then, towards the end, I actually move more globally in terms of, in the epilogue I actually set out some of the implications of the findings from the ethnographic chapters, but look at it in the context of advocacy work at a more global level, and also in terms of the quest for evidence, by WHO

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: So do you bring in some of your own experience there?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, I talk about this in terms of how I was a member of a committee looking into what constitutes evidence in terms of human rights . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, in WHO.

MAYA UNNITHAN: . . .Basis in WHO, and I reflect on that in terms of what I've experienced in Rajasthan and what people have been telling me and the amazing insights people have given me in to their lives. So . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, and do you reflect on the degree of receptiveness to that perspective, that kind of evidence?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes. And it's really interesting, because there is a receptiveness but it's about knowing to what extent does that evident and to what extent can one actually use that to promote people's own thinking on the ground. And I think one of the really interesting things for me was I felt that I could bring this voice and the story of the people I knew and met in this remote village in Rajasthan, right up to the grand portals of the WHO, so it was . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, it's a rather fitting . . . a fitting end, to reflect on those two extremes of context, isn't it?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Of context, yeah.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah. Moving on, I'm very interested in the title of the book we have *Fertility, Health and Reproductive Politics*, which you've talked about and then your subtitle is very interesting: *Re-imagining Rights in India*. And I'd like to ask why 're-imagining' and not just 'imagining'?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Hmm, okay. Yes well, actually, *re-imagining rights*, that subtitle is actually linked to the core argument that I make in the book, which is really to make a case for a more inclusive approach to reproductive rights, which accounts for diverse senses of entitlement and moral claims on the reproductive body. And really it speaks to the questions, really, of how and whose rights are to be delivered and in what way? How are they going to be realised? And really this is, every time it came back to me, that the presence of rights, upholding institutions and laws, do not in themselves deliver rights, they don't deliver reproductive justice.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Justice, so the central focus on that was really the core concern on the ground wasn't it, justice?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Absolutely, absolutely. And it is, as one of the respondents seeking compensation through the family courts for domestic violence told me, they said, 'Well, you know, rights have arrived, rights have come,' but justice has not, has not come, and that really got me thinking about this relationship between rights and justice, which I think is so important. And it's that link between rights and justice that I think has to be the core focus of development policy and planning. And I really think in the sense, the thinking then on rights-based approaches within global health and legal institutions has to be re-imagined in that kind context.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, no, exactly. I mean, that is such a strong argument in your work, that that language, that global discourse of rights doesn't in any way capture these nuanced and sometimes quite different conceptualisations on the ground. And, I mean, I guess that advocacy work enables you to try and contribute to some of that re-imagining, at least at that WHO level, but also within India, in these different institutions.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, indeed, indeed.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Which, of course, is all quite challenging. So I wanted to just move on and ask a bit about some of the challenges, first of all in the writing of the book, I imagine there was methodological and conceptual challenges. And I wondered if there were any you, you might choose to reflect upon, now that it's published.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, I think there were two sort of main challenges that I can just think of that immediately come to mind. One is really about social change and how do you actually capture it. You can write about it, talk about it, but how do you capture this, in an ethnographic sense? And I found, actually, that being based at a sort of peri-urban site, that is on the margins of the city, so not quite rural and not quite urban in terms of the families that I was going to speak. Where, in fact, the pace of development is quite fast.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Quite fast, yeah.

MAYA UNNITHAN: There was a lot of . . . I've worked around Jaipur city, and there was a lot of money being made through agricultural land and other land being sold in these kind of margins to the city. And so the families living there were becoming really quite wealthy, very, very fast. And so, how did that have an impact on thinking about entitlements. And so that was one thing which actually led to some interesting discoveries, which we can speak of and . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, so there was a choice of site, and then you also had this period of time, this longitudinal approach, didn't you? I mean, did you make some methodological choices there?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Well indeed, I think the longitudinal and the length of . . . this took over 20 years to . . . and various bits of field work. And I think the importance of that was really, I think, in terms of another question, another challenge which was there for me, which is: we talk a lot about intersectionality and as anthropologists we really work . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: In that frame.

MAYA UNNITHAN: We work in that frame. But how do you actually *do* intersectionality? And particularly intersectionality is not something that exists at one point of time only, that how different things impact or come together. But how does intersection— . . . how do you, how can you account for intersectionality over a period of time? And in order to . . . so, this was a real challenge and I don't know if I've managed to really do justice to it, but the way I try to capture some of this complexity was really through telling the life stories of two women whose reproductive journey from motherhood till grandmotherhood, I was actually a witness to. So, when I start the research they were young m— they were young and mums. I was a young mum, and I have witnessed them, you know, their children now having children.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: And I'm not there yet. *[laughs]*

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: *[laughs]* They've overtaken you!

MAYA UNNITHAN: They've overtaken me.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Which is interesting

MAYA UNNITHAN: And I'm so . . . and really, I also want to make this point, that I am very grateful to them for enabling me to do this, not only in terms of just a description of their lives and things, but also I feel in terms of the way they analysed what was happening. And I think we as ethnographers and as scholars we never thank the people we work with for using their analytical models.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah, yeah, their interpretation.

MAYA UNNITHAN: A lot of this work is really building on the work of many, many people – many scholars, many medical anthropologists, many feminists. I talk a lot about feminism in the book as well. But at the end of the day, the analytical models, also, of the people I worked with have to be acknowledged. And this actually is also linked to some of the things that emerged as quite interesting and different and challenging and how I think some of the findings of the book might challenge some standard ways of thinking.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah. So finally maybe you can just summarise for us what you see as the main contribution of the book? Why does this book matter, why should people read this book?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Well, if they read, it I hope they do!

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: *[laughs]* They should!

MAYA UNNITHAN: Then, I think some of the really interesting things about the book that are challenged in terms of standard thinking: firstly, I think, just public health ideas around reproductive health. What does this . . . what does reproductive health as a concept really mean outside these public health framings and development policy framings? And one of the things that really struck me very strongly in the discussion around infertility that I had with the women I was working with was that reproductive health seemed to be regarded very much in terms of ritual purity. And . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Rather than a biological framing of it?

MAYA UNNITHAN: That's right, and not something that has a medical or physiological . . . it's not something about physiological well-being as such. And linked to that, therefore, it was not then surprising to find that healers, faith healers,

rather than public health officials or providers, were the ones who had a greater conceptual hold over how people thought about reproductive health. But also then influenced their reproductive health seeking behaviour.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah, yeah.

MAYA UNNITHAN: So I think this is something again, this is going back to the issue about analytic models and whose analytic models do we prioritise and privilege? So that was something that I think would be interesting for people to read about. I think another issue is about the hidden and implicit, maybe, biases within state health provision and how these might work. And this is particularly around the area of surrogacy: how these might work in the form of having really good quality care. Yes, it can and does exist in India, but it's for a particular class of wealthier, infertile people. Whereas poorer infertile women have absolutely no access to this. There's no thought about raising that standard of quality of care. So even though we have this value now being placed on women's childbearing in India through these amazing National Health Mission programmes and catering to women's rights to their bodies and childbearing et cetera, it does not actually translate into value in terms of healthcare provision on the ground, you see.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah and it's not prioritised in the same way for poor women.

MAYA UNNITHAN: It's not prioritised.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah, yeah. That's very interesting and I think this leads me to . . . finally, I'd like to ask, because I think one of your key insights is these different understandings of agency and reproductive agency. And, I mean, what I've always loved about your work is how those ethnographic accounts, the ones you offer, ready challenge received assumptions about rights and agencies. So I wondered if, finally, you can just encapsulate for us what fresh insights this book brings to reproductive agency?

MAYA UNNITHAN: Well, again, it's through the chapters and I give many examples of this, but I'd just like to use one example. And this is to do, really, with sex-selective abortion. Because, of course, sex-selective abortion has been a major issue in India and it's also reflected in the really significant shift in child sex ratio figures and statistics in favour of boys. And Rajasthan is one of the key areas where this is happening. There's been a lot of state action, a lot of feminist solidarity in talking about how this leads to gender inequalities. And yet, I found there was a very different kind of response to it in the kind of communities I was working with. Both, interestingly, in the health provider communities and in the families that I was . . . and here I found that women actually sought out sex-selective services themselves. They were not coerced, they were doing this with different reproductive futures in mind.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: With an agency.

MAYA UNNITHAN: With an agency. Those of their daughters, they wanted to prevent them from actually even just being born and being subject to discrimination. And it was this kind of language and also that then health providers used, that provided these services. It was actually the language of rights. That is: we're supporting the rights of women who want to . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Have sex-selection abortions.

MAYA UNNITHAN: And prevent their daughters from facing discrimination. And so these kinds of ideas really have led me to re-evaluate standard notions of reproductive agency.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: So that's just, I think, one example.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: And that has relevance, really, far beyond India, so this is really where the book starts to contribute in a very substantial way to anthropology more broadly.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Yes, anthropology more broadly, but also, there's a lot being done, especially now, we're living in a moment of the need to refocus on abortion, given the kind of Neoliberal times that we're living in. And one of the things . . . I really want to make this point in the book that sex-selective abortion also has to be seen in terms of approaches and ideas of abortion more generally.

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yes, yes.

MAYA UNNITHAN: And that abortion on its own can't be looked at without a sense of understanding people's ideas on contraception, and others. So we cannot have a siloed approach to these . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah, or one discourse on abortion that fits everywhere.

MAYA UNNITHAN: That fits everywhere, so I think is . . .

HAYLEY MACGREGOR: Yeah, I mean I think that is a substantial contribution and I think, really, the book shows how these anthropological perspectives then really can contribute to theory but also to reframing global health policy and discourse at that level. And I think, really, your work there and shifting ideas about what kind of evidence counts, is a really interesting contribution also, beyond these fascinating ethnographic accounts of how these concepts are understood differently. So, thank you so much for describing them.

MAYA UNNITHAN: Thank you, thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity to speak about the book and I'd also like to thank John Gaventa for kindly inviting me and to Sarah for organising it as well, so thanks very much.