

## Interview with Parul Malik

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### Introduction

This interview follows Parul Malik's article "'You Cannot Escape': Children Working with Children for Sexuality Education," featured in *NEOS* Volume 14, Issue 1, Spring 2022.

### Interview

**Chloe: The theme of our Spring 2023 *NEOS* issue is Girlhood and Sexuality at Intersections of Performance, Relations, and Representations. Your Spring 2022 *NEOS* article discusses nurturing children's agency regarding their sexuality. Could you elaborate on the importance of and/or the potential impact of nurturing children's agency in relation to girlhood and sexuality?**

Parul: Girls in patriarchal cultures, as our own, often have fewer opportunities to engage with ideas of sexuality. They have limited control over their bodies, choices or even what they learn. Nurturing their agency enables girls to understand themselves and their worlds better. For instance, how their body functions, what laws protect them, how patriarchal roles can be challenged, or what equitable relationships look like.

**Chloe: You mention in your article that researching sexuality with children is a sensitive topic in India. Can you explain these sensitivities for our readers and elaborate on how you think the sensitivity of the topic affects children's sexuality and sense of agency over their bodies?**

Parul: It is a paradox. Sexuality, on one hand, in India is bound in conventions of taboo, hesitation and shame; while on the other hand, is everywhere. We do not have a formal curriculum for sexuality in schools - apart from some fleeting discussions about violence and reproductive health - and conversations about it at home are sparse. Parents think schools could take sessions, the school thinks the family should. This leads to an intergenerational cycle of silence. It is, then, challenging to justify why we should have discussions about sexuality; especially in a cultural context where children are considered to be 'too young' to engage with anything 'sexual'. The children in turn find it difficult to understand and communicate about their sexuality. This affects one's sense of agency over their body, decision making, and interpersonal relationships as they grow up.

**Chloe: What challenges or barriers did you face while researching such a sensitive topic with children?**

Parul: One did encounter challenges over the course of the research. A few to spell out could be that:

1. Schools and elders (teachers and parents) did not always want their children to have discussions about “sexual” ideas.
2. They wanted me to facilitate sessions built on their worldviews, such as the teachers pushed for teaching children conventional gender norms.
3. They found participatory research on sexuality with children to be tedious and too “detailed”.
4. As a researcher, I was unable to find relevant participatory research on sexuality with children within our cultural context.

**Chloe: How do you think your research was influenced or changed by the fact that you utilized participatory research to research with the children?**

Parul: Participatory research enabled the children to claim their agency in the research process, establish ownership over content and learning, and engage collaboratively on ideas pertinent to their own lived experiences. I was an elder and outsider to their cultures, and the topic was a sensitive one. The research process and experience needed to be meaningful and relevant to the participants. The research was, therefore, completely influenced by the methodology employed, which emerged from children’s active participation.

**Chloe: In your article, you discuss the discourse of protecting childhood sexual innocence and of viewing sex as a symbolic marker of where childhood ends and adulthood begins. You further discuss how this discourse denies children the opportunity to learn about their bodies. Can you talk more about where you think this discourse comes from and further elaborate on how it denies children opportunity?**

Parul: Louise Allen’s work in New Zealand had earlier underlined this fact and this has been pertinent in a different part of the world as ours. This discourse is built and cemented through institutions, such as the family, state, and education. All deny children the opportunity to engage with sexuality. For instance, the state’s policy on education is either silent or inadequate to bring in sexuality education into the school curricula. Or when schools do conduct sessions at their own discretion, they choose ideas like menstrual health and hygiene, which are reductive and do not go beyond biology.

**Chloe: What future research might you like to undertake or see elsewhere that concerns children, sexuality, and perhaps girlhood?**

Parul: Girls' or children's interaction with social media vis-a-vis sexuality in the Indian context is still under-researched. This would include, for instance, prevalent practices of sexting and body shaming within digital peer cultures, amongst a range of others.

**Chloe: We would be pleased to hear more about what you are presently doing, either with the research you wrote about in your previous article or any new projects.**

Parul: I currently teach grades 11 and 12 school students in Delhi, India. This position opens opportunities to explore ideas of sexuality in curricular and co-curricular ways. For instance, my students recently made a very creative presentation to their peers and teachers during the class assembly on 'Masculinities'. This included, poetic and musical performances, well-researched speeches, a report about a short research project (where they had mapped the school space and surveyed junior boys about their experiences of growing up male), and so on.

### **Author Biographies**

**Parul Malik** has received her Ph.D. from Delhi University's Department of Education. Her research was about Critical Sexuality Education with children in and out of school contexts, using peer education and participatory methods. Currently, she teaches English to high school students at a private school in New Delhi, and continues to engage with ideas of gender and sexuality in co/curricular spaces. She is also interested in sexuality and critical literacies, and children's everyday experiences of sexuality on social media platforms.

**Chloe Bozak** recently graduated with her Bachelor of Social Work from Thompson Rivers University located on the unceded and ancestral territory of the Secwepemc peoples. She is interested in many areas of social work, but she is especially interested in law and policy. Specifically, she is interested in how people who are affected by specific laws and policies can inform said laws and policies as the experts of their own experience. Chloe is hoping to further her education in the area of social justice and to end up in a space where she is able to utilize both her social work education and her passion for law and policy.

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**To cite this article:** Malik, Parul and Chloe Bozak. 2023. "Interview with Parul Malik."  
*NEOS* 15 (1).

**To link this article:** <https://acyig.americananthro.org/neosvol15iss1spring23/malik-bozak/>