

MERCY KAPPEN (born 1955)

Development worker, founder of Bangalore-based NGO Visthar.

Interviewed by Laxmi Murthy

Laxmi: For the purposes of recording, this is the 20th of March 2013. I am here with Mercy Kappen in the very beautiful campus of Vistar in Bangalore. And Mercy I want to start by asking you what is your first memory of being in the women's movement and when did you first perceive yourself as a feminist?

Mercy: umm, er, [pause], I think is around '86. The year '86. Umm actually when I talk about my first memory, it was a fear of the feminists, really I tell you. We had come to Bangalore and I had joined an organisation in June. There were some women there and they were feminists and we were having a discussion. And umm, I remember very clearly that we were having lunch. And after lunch we had watermelon. [Laughs] And one of them said "Oh this is like menstrual blood". And I spontaneously said "chee". Because we were having lunch and that women pounced on me and said "What is so dirty about it?" So, now when I look back, now when I work with young people or with er, men and women who say they are afraid of feminists, I recollect those memories. So if you... that is my first thing. And it was a process of ... and in the beginning I saw feminists are really, er, I had fear that you will be attacked and er, you know... fear of speaking with them. But it was a slow process of realising what are the issues of feminism and feminism is not the monopoly of a few group of women and it every woman's desire to be free, to have choices, to have opportunities, to have genuine relationships. Ah, and it is their, ah, you know, women getting choices and getting involved to change the way things are. That kind of consciousness and claiming came much later. And I would say that umm I really got involved, I would say that this kind of consciousness developed because of my interactions with Kamala Bhasin and Vasanth Kannabiran. Umm, I remember at the beginning of Visthar, now we are going to be 25 years, one of the first things I did was organise a seminar on 'Perspectives of Feminism'. And we had both men and women in that workshop, from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, ah, and both of them were facilitators. And again I remember how this whole perception of feminists, which was so much rooted in... negative perception, generally among people. I remember, during that workshop, I was actually getting a grip of things and what we are really fighting for and things like that. But I also sensed that, during a break, one of the men, and there were many, one of the participants came and told me "If you say you are a feminist, we can accept feminism. But we will not accept their feminism". And they were referring to the fact that they were smoking during the break. And I sensed that the whole idea was getting lost, a sense of the content getting lost. So you know, if you have long hair, and you are wearing a sari and also talking about violence against women, and all that, they felt that they could accept. So they also had a kind of an idea, of you know, what feminists are about. So, I think, er, so that was the initial stage. And slowly, you know understanding the perceptions of people, and understand your own experience, and trying to challenge all that and say, "Its not just about... its people's choice". You know how they, er, want to be and how they like to be, and how they like to appear and things like that. It was a slow process of getting that consciousness. And I would say that one of the persons who really contributed to this apart from Kamala Bhasin and Vasanth Kannabiran in the initial stage, is a man. I was so much influenced by my uncle, Father [Sebastian] Kappen.

Who actually instilled in me, er, er, I was part of several study sessions. That is on Marxism and he used to organise er, socialist forums. And he used to meet with men and women from different fields. And so a whole lot of discussion and debates and I remember making this. I remember him making clear criticisms of the left movement, saying that they only look at class and they don't look at other contradictions. And one of this was how they don't look at women; don't look at how the women even in the working class are being discriminated. Umm and so in certain perspective and I started feeling that the women's movement should start looking at oppression and also not see women as one homogenous category. As you start looking at it, as you start relating to women in the villages, I started going to field visits. Women in the slums, urban middle class women, students, uh, I had this feeling, I started thinking and felt that women are not the same, though there are things that are common. We also need to look at the specificities. There I felt that we need to have an interlinked perspective, which looks at class and caste and gender and other identities. And see how these are being experienced. And bring in those dimensions. And so, the first time I really got into the women's movement was the autonomous women's conference in Calicut. With Ajitha and others. And I was there. I think it was er in 1990, was it?

Laxmi: Yes.

M: And...

L: Were you in Bangalore at that time?

M: Er in 1990, yes I was in Bangalore. From '86 I am in Bangalore. Yeah, I was in Bangalore. And I remember the discussions about... one thing I remember, one thing I clearly remember is, I think it was Geeta Menon, I think she distributed a pamphlet saying that they had... she was making a comment on how the fundamentalist movement has er, high jacked the women's movement. You know, the, the, I think that was also the time when the Hindutava forces were gaining ground and Advani's padayatra and all that. And they have women. She had a leaflet saying that they have the women and we have the movement. You know, something like that. [Laughs] Were you there at that time?

L: Yes. I was.

M: [Laughs] that was some of things that were striking. I think that conference had a lot of discussion on communalism, religious fundamentalism and all of that. Umm, I ... that was my real, actually being there, I was really inspired being part of the rally and the fact that thousands of women and women *are* talking about these things and... For me it was very inspiring. By then, I think I had got over my fear of, you know, the so called... what do you say, not so called, you know, you had this fear of feminists. I had got rid of that and I had got a grip of what this whole thing is about. And er, er, I was inspired and but my... That is my first experience of being part of that movement and participating in the discussions. Yeah.

L: Tell me about your early life. Where did you study? How did you experience college life or early childhood? And did you at that

M: Ok.

L: At that time did you experience yourself as a girl or a woman? In a larger patriarchal context or did that consciousness come later?

M: It came later, much later. I was born and brought up in a village in Kerala. And...

L: Where about?

M: That was near Calicut. Near, I mean, er it will be about 35 or 40 kilometres from there. And my early memories are of a beautiful place and forests and going to the river and taking bath and those kinds of things. That is one part of the memory. It is very green and pleasant and you know. Another part of the memory is violence. So much of violence against women, within the family, even within my own family. So much violence and apart from feeling a sense of sadness, anguish, not really anguish, because anguish comes with a consciousness, feeling sad. I have not felt that kind of sadness. I took it in as it was happening, seeing. Er, I think it is much, much later that this idea, that this is not, that this is something we must resist. Much later. In school, in college, umm, though in college, umm, when I did my post graduation, in Loyala College, er, Trivandrum.

L: Trivandrum?

M: Trivandrum. I did my M.S.W. I did my M.S.W after a break of about five years after my graduation. During those five years, I was working with my uncle. He was like my mentor, guide. I had gained certain consciousness about, er, the need to assert yourself, the need to say "no" when you see injustice. Those kinds of consciousness. So when I was doing my post graduation that was the time that I used to raise my voice when I used to see that things are not going right. When there is so much of discrimination, the boys and the girls were treated so differently. More restrictions in the hostel, you have to be back by 6 o'clock, you know, a whole lot of restrictions and rules and really discriminatory. And ... I remember once, I had a favourite poet in Kerala, a revolutionary poet, and I was so... it was like a dream come true when he came near our college, he was reciting his poems, and I asked the hostel warden and she said "No no, there will all be men over there, and what are you going to do? It will be like Chanda, the market place. Why do you want to go?" Then she said, as I was insisting, "If you get permission from the principal you can go". Then I went there, he said "No, one day we will invite him to our college". You know, so I remember fighting against this thing, what is wrong? What will happen if I go? Etc. Finally I didn't go, but at least I raised my voice, when I was in college. Er, I think that gap of four or five years helped and the others saw me as a leader and someone who is bold and you know, raising questions you know. And that time I really enjoyed my college. Really enjoyed, er, the fact that I could speak, gave me certain confidence and others, I felt that others looked up to me and expected me to speak on their behalf, and that kind of a feeling. And then, I also did some kind of ... I was the chair person, those days it was not called the chair person, it was chair man ok, [laughs]. Of the college and I remember, the principal of the college was a priest.

L: Chairman of the college, junior?

K: College junior. So... the Vice chair because, it was not allowed. It was only the boys who could contest to be the chair. So I was vice chair. And I remember the principal; he was getting worried about this and all those kinds of things. Umm, but anyway, umm in

fact they did not want to give me admission, I came to know later. Because I was Kappen's niece. And Kappen is known as the revolutionary who is creating a revolution within the church. Challenging and you know.

L: Was he a priest?

K: Yes he was a Jesuit priest and this was a Jesuit college. And they know what he has been through and in fact, his books have been censored and there has been a lot of support for him from the er, social activists.

L: He was your father's brother?

M: Yes, brother. So he... in fact he is the one who brought me up, because my father left home when I was very young. He went in search of meaning and he became a sanyasi. So it was my mother and my uncle who got me admission in the college, put me in the hostel. So he was like my mentor and a great influence on my life. And so, er, er, yeah, so already I was seen as someone who can be a threat, some thing like that. [Pause]. Small, small changes we were able to bring about, because I was also the hostel secretary. And so small changes in the rules and things like that. That was the best part of my life, with all this and there were so much of restrictions, you know, on where boys can sit and where girls can sit. I used to break some of those rules and I had friends, boys, who used to sit just outside the principal's room. You know things like that. Just the thrill of breaking rules, really to challenge.

L: So it sounds like you were a feminist long before...

M: Exactly.

L: You thought of yourself as one.

M: Exactly. Much later I realised that er, you know, anybody who is er challenging the status quo which is oppressive, is a feminist and whether it is within, in fact this is exactly what people like Kamala Basin would say, because she is a great influence for me. Anybody, because, till then, that kind of a thing for me you know, though you did not call, now I can confidently say I am a confirmed feminist. Not now, you know, I started saying that much before. So, er, even when we do this gender training programme, and things like that. People come with this feeling, no, like 'feminism. Why do you want to discuss feminism?' And what is this do with gender? Umm, those kinds of things, I make it a point that every workshop that we conduct, that we have a session on this. If it is a three day workshop, we look at feminism, history of feminism, what is feminism, what are the different strands of feminism, what do they stand for, you know, what are their strategies. So I make it a point that every workshop, we do this, bring it to people's notice that you know, the history of struggle. As you said. These are the issues, and they are not just... sometimes you have this whole thing that this is against men. So I also bring it in, in the whole context of development, what is our vision of development? And how do we see things? And even there, you know, what is the feminist vision is not just for women, but it is a vision for the whole world. And that kind of ideas I bring in. And at the end of, at the end of every session, the men and the women all say, "We are all feminists". You know, and that is something, which I feel good about that, at the end of every session. Some people invite me to conduct sessions, because they think I am not a feminist. And they feel that feminists

will come and do all kinds of things. So I remember once, in fact, many times I have heard, “We are so happy to get you, because some of the feminists, they come and create problems”. [Both laugh] And I laugh and ask them “you think I am not a feminist?” And then you know, all that. Then I start challenging them ‘what the stereotypes you have? What do they stand for? Etc. You know that kind of ... so what I have learned, over a period of time is that, we need to... if we really want to bring about change, we need to take into consideration the fears, the stereotypes, the assumptions and start challenging them. Not challenging in a threatening way, sometimes, we get this, sometimes I feel that it doesn’t help, they withdraw, you know, so many, hundreds of workshops I have done. I feel that I learned that, bowing, er, sometimes er, you have to be, umm; you have to try and understand from where they are asking the questions. So I go back to my first experience, when I hear them asking these questions. My first experience when I said I got scared. The watermelon experience, [laughs] I will never forget that. I go back to that and I try to understand them, where they are coming from and what are their fears. And I have also got scared of women sitting together when they discuss. They really scream at each other and I understand one part of it which is you *are* in a women’s group, you want to give expression the way you want to give expression, but there were times when I got scared. I remember once I was going up to Streelekha, it was a Saturday, and Saturday they have their weekly meeting. I was going up the steps and I can hear this screaming and this fight going on. They were discussing, but for me at that point in time, it looked like a huge fight going on. Then I didn’t go up, I came back. [Laughs] You know, so now when people raise questions, I am really able to understand what are their fears and I er, I think it is very important to understand that and stay with that. And make them to get into the sense of it, and different expressions of it. So you can be very firm, very assertive without fighting them. You know that kind of a thing, without making the other afraid and whether it is a man or woman, they feel excluded. So that is one thing that I feel. I think it is going all over the place. [Laughs]

L: No, no this is fine, this is exactly what we want. Just they way you remember the way things happened. One question I would like to ask you is: after having studied in Kerala, what brought you to Bangalore? Why did you decide to move and settle down here?

M: Ok, I was actually on er, in between I was in Bangalore and then I went for my studies. As part of it, I was in Chennai, and then... The final decision was that I got married and my husband was working in Bangalore. And I also shifted to Bangalore.

L: Is he also in the same field?

M: He is also in the NGO sector. He is in the same field. And he was also part of the study circle that I mentioned earlier. Where we used to have Marxism study classes and things like that. He was part of that. So in that way I shifted to Bangalore. Then I worked with an organisation called ICRA. You know...

L: Yes, yes.

M: With Siddhartha and all. Pipal Tree. One part of it was Pipal Tree focusing on culture and social re generation, cultures, equality and those issues. [Pause]

L: And another question I have was, since your uncle was a Jesuit and influenced obviously by liberation theology and radical perspective, were you also at any time attracted to working through the church? Simply, you know, for the outreach that it has.

M: No I was not. Because I have such strong criticism about the church. It is highly patriarchal. Highly patriarchal and umm... and I don't believe in many of the things and I think my uncle was also a critical insider, who would have been thrown out many times, in fact the Pope, not the current, not the new one, the last Pope. He censored his book. He had written a book titled 'Jesus and Freedom'. When he was in charge of doctrinal something. And he wanted him to re write some parts of it, where he talks about Jesus as a historical person, in whom the divine was manifest. Which all of us have, but in him it was most manifest. He wanted him to re write, because he felt that this was very dangerous to the church. Because church talks about Christ and Christ is faith and the resurrection and he refused to rewrite. And in fact he wrote a long article on censorship, making a critique of that. So my influence of the church, my critique is very much influenced by Kappen's, my uncle's thinking. So I never thought of working, umm being part of the church. Of working within the church, but I work with for example Caritas. I work; I have done a lot of work with the priests and nuns. Like they invite me to conduct training programmes, gender programmes, things like that. And [pause] after that, I made it a point to challenge a whole lot of things. In the Caritas, I do a lot of work, but the priests, two or three priests are very, very progressive, very radical. They are initiating all these discussions. They want to mainstream gender and do programmes, etc. But when it comes to making a critique of the church, the hierarchy, the institutions, because one of the things we look at is access and control of resources within the church, decision making within the church. When you do gender analysis, you cannot just do analysis and leave it out there and say do analysis of the community out there. I make it a point to also look at the organisation. And it is so revealing that the women have absolutely, women, and here we are talking about nuns, who are equally involved in the social work projects, they have no control, no decision making, whether... in relations to any of the assets. And in so many, innumerable workshops, they share this. But then this confession comes from the er, er, the church, not the church, Caritas, a church related, you know about Caritas?

L: Yes

M: Church's social work.

L: yeah.

M: They say that there is nothing much we can do, you know that. You know how it is ruled, the Pope and the Cardinal and the Bishop and you know it is so difficult to bring about change in that hierarchical order. So all that they hope to make change is in the community and their social work projects. But inside this remains. But there is a huge contradiction. Because every time people can turn around and say "What is happening within".

L: But internally hasn't there been a bit of churning? Among nuns for example and talk about their rights and sexual abuse and ...

M: They are talking about it. They are talking. In fact there is a huge change. They are talking about it and saying, "I am supposed to be the coordinator, but I am not able to take decision". They are talking in the presence of the men and women, the priests. There has been a lot of change, and there are congregations that are highly progressive and challenging. There are.

L: Are they talking about the sexual abuse within the institutions, which the nuns are subjected to?

M: When the nuns are in a nuns only workshop, they talk about it. They share. They share. I remember in one workshop, not so much about sexual abuse, they don't share personally, but they say so much is happening with them. Some of the priests also talk about it.

L: So are there attempts to address that within the institutions itself? You know try to identify perpetrators and discipline them within the parameters...

M: There have been attempts, but there is so much bias against women. Like, for example, I heard this story of a nun who got pregnant and she was sent out of the congregation. They tried... I think she was thrown out after she delivered a child. The child was sent to an orphanage and she was sent out of the congregation. Or you have this case, in Trichy, one nun exposed how she was being abused by priests. It came all over the media. So you tend do... there is so much bias er, like in the larger society. You know, you blame the victim and punish the victim. That kind of thing happens, but within the Protestant church, I do a lot of work with the YMCAs, there have been lot of discussion. Like there is this book written by one of my friends, she coordinated this and the title is 'When Pastors Pray'. P R A Y. And it is about the sexual abuse by the clergy. This again is a very controversial thing. When she... I think this was released and discussed in one of the assemblies. Became very, very controversial.

L: It was published in India? This book.

M: No. It was not published in India, er, I don't know where it was published. It is not available here. It is a thick book with all case studies and all that. I can find out 'When Pastors Pray'. And the person who coordinated this is only a Bachelor of Indian origin, but she is... there have been a lot of changes happening. There are voices with the Catholic Church and the Protestant church, from women who are challenging. But within the Catholic Church it is still so patriarchal. You know you discuss the issue of ... that is one point, about priesthood. That is one major thing and no body wants to entertain that discussion. They ridicule and they think it is a non-issue. Er, things like that. Priesthood is the symbol of, you know, one symbol in the patriarchal society. If you want to really challenge, that is one of the things you should challenge. Power and position within that. So, lot of changes are happening, but I feel that so much needs to happen.

L: Mercy, you have done a lot of gender training and workshops, thousands of workshops you were saying, so how do you see the role of training and workshops in the larger kind of canvas of the movement which has largely concentrated on struggles and lobbying? And somehow the training aspects, there are very few organisations who are concentrating on that or specialising on it. But you seem to have taken a

decision in the '80s itself that this what you would do. So how did you see that fitting into the larger scheme of change?

M: Yeah, I think both are important. Very, very important. Er, participation in struggles and campaigns and advocacy and all that, we need to simultaneously... when you look at training, you are trying to develop both perspectives and skills to take these concerns forward, wherever you are. So you may be part of an organisation, part of the church, part of a village, community institution, but once you gain that consciousness, you see training as a process of gaining consciousness. Consciousness of issues and here we are looking at the whole gender, you know, identities and gender biases and inequalities and discrimination. That consciousness is very important and that consciousness should prompt you to get involved in the movement. Because, sometimes I feel that you are part of a movement and you have not thought enough critically about issues and sometimes it is like mass psychology, you just join something, but it is not a conscious involvement. Except, of course, er a large number of them have thought about it and you know, and it comes out of certain, you know, awareness and you get involved in action. But sometimes when you go for some of these rallies and some of the things, we are trying to mobilise people to join that, but we don't spend sufficient time... why are we doing that? You know, when we have something happening in the city, each organisation, we try to bring as many as possible. I always make it a point, we have our children, the children of devadasis, there may be hundred or hundred and fifty, when we take them for a struggle in the city, they have joined many, violence against women initiated by Vimochana and others, we have gone and joined. Really, I make it a point to spend enough time with them 'why are we doing this'. Making them to discuss. I see all that as part of a training process. 'Why are we doing this? What are the forms of violence that you have experienced?', you know facilitate that sharing. Then they need to protest and be part of a larger thing, that individual consciousness should become part of a collective consciousness and action. So I see trainings like that. It is er, a consciousness developing... a consciousness, which will compel you to be part of this. So I feel, er, that both are very important. And participation in struggles without gaining that grounding is... does not help. Even the change in your own personal life. So er, I, many times when we have the training programme, for example I was invited recently to address a group of two hundred and fifty priests and nuns, it was about Free Thinking Mission. And they asked me please tell us how do we get involved? Please give us suggestions. And I had er, you know this One Billion invitation and I quickly showed them and said, "Please come for this" and this is the issue. It is a global campaign". So I use every opportunity to inspire people, motivate people to get involved. And so many of them came. The nuns, they were wearing their... many were there, and they made it point also to come and tell me "we are here". Because I challenged them and said "you get involved only when a nun is raped. Or something happens to Christians. You know if you are committed to a new heaven and new earth, everything should affect you. You should get involved". And I told them many examples where they come in large numbers when something happens, when Kandhamal [violence against Christians in Orissa] happens, or when something happens. So I challenged them. I want to motivate them to be part of different movements and struggles taking place. And they ask, "give us contacts, give us names and keep us informed". So I see at er, there is a need to bridge, or there is a need to be a multi, multi pronged strategy for change. And the people who are in the movement and I mean who are leading the movement, should also take time to inform and inspire. Like when the One Billion was happening, we were all talking about how we mobilise, etc. And I was suggesting that why don't you go to colleges, take... request them to give you one hour. You speak and inspire those who

come will be coming with certain, you know, motivation and preparation and that will sustain. Er, you ask me, one of the things of my early days I remember is, when I was doing my B.A., there was this, I think it was, there was a Gray Mobile movement, and Priti and Donna were there, they came to ... I studied in..

L: Sorry what the movement?

M: It was called the Gray Mobile movement. It is not there now but it was a mobile training. I am talking of long back, '76 or something. Its just one session, I remember them coming and talking about women's rights or violence against women. [Pause]. That remained with me, one of the things. You know, when you do something like this, you may be, umm, you may be creating or there may be a spark. Not all of them but may be some of them, that spark will continue. So I feel that the feminist movement, the women's movement should do much more, things like that, plus the struggles, the advocacy, the campaigns. Because then it will be much more sustainable and much more strong. I mean an informed kind of a struggle. So that is how I see it. So all the trainings I make it a point to say issues of patriarchy, of feminism, the women's movement and the various struggles that is going on. So that connection is kind of made. Building the link, what is happening in the training and what is happening in the movement and in the struggle.

L: Do you see yourself approaching women's rights training or gender training differently than you did twenty years ago? What has been the shift in your own understanding or experience?

M: Er, umm, I think the earlier stages, er, [pause] I did not have this kind of a comprehensive or holistic perspective. Er, we were, I was doing gender training, but its only in the last fifteen years, er, ten years may be, it is much more strong, in terms of bringing in the dimensions of the movement and may be about fifteen years. But now, in the last ten years, I feel much more strong. Bringing in the kind of struggles that is happening. For example, whether it is Kudankulam or whether it is the Narmada, all not... the people's movement... Umm, initiating the discussions on that and there, the role of women and how these issues are impacting women. So I feel that it is becoming more concretely like looking at and discussing every issue. Looking at it from certain perspective. Much more conscious. Like now, for example, now in our gender trainings now we have the food security, the nuclear issue, umm we have conflict and disasters, all this coming in. Earlier it was just like gender sensitisation. So we look at, okay, the whole socialisation process etc and we look at how to bring about change. But now it about that change, this change in the larger world and this kind of er, yourself. We are also facilitating a process of you become conscious of the social processes and, you, know, with the kind of development taking place, a critique, a feminist critique of development and you know, thing like that. It's much more... I feel that it is becoming much more holistic and integrated. Which was not like that earlier, it was mainly, okay, you are looking at the gender roles and its implications and the stereotypes and the institutions and all that. And er, but now it is much more deeper, much more connected to everything else that is happening. So that kind of a change has happened. I think it has also happened with our, broadening of our perspective, our involvement. I feel that, I feel I am so much with the Kudankulam movement, though I have not gone there. Yet, I feel with it so much. And you cannot have a gender programme without also looking at that. I feel that I was so much part of that Kachegoda Coca Cola issue. And we bring it into our training programmes, we

have debates, and we evolve methodologies where the students can understand the perspectives and in the course of that debate you are taking a stand with the people. So even hearing that kind of a thing, I get so much satisfaction of doing it, you know. [Laughs] You evolve methodologies and you evolve something, means, you feel, okay, you are enabling people to take a stand. And I get so much thrill and so much satisfaction. Really

L: Mercy what is this slogan that has been really integral to the women's movement that 'the personal is political', what has that meant to you?

M: It means a whole lot to me [laughs] it really means... I feel I am really [pause] I am struggling with the fact that even when we are talking about all this, even when you have feminist perspective, and when you are doing all the kind of programme etc, you feel that in your... it's a huge struggle, it is easy to look at the political space and the public space and the movements etc. But if you take to the really personal, and you want to translate your perspectives into your own life, it is a huge struggle. There are times when you are, even within the organisation, within the family, where you are [pause] it's a huge struggle, [laughs] okay, where you are forced to compromise. You know it is not... it is against all that you believe in, but you are forced to compromise. Er, and I know of other friends who have similar experiences and I feel that it is a [pause] huge struggle. Whether it is issues of violence against women, whether it is issues of sexual abuse, whether it is issues of er, gender discrimination in the organisation, in the dioceses, you have to be constantly aware and alert and you have to face the consequences of challenging. You know, there was a time when I was forced in my mind, with my feminist perspective, I should have left, my er, concluded my married life. Ah, because as a feminist I felt that I should take a decision on this. But then, [pause] and you compromise. Part of the compromise comes out of the realisation that this whole thing is so complex. Marriage and family are so complex. And it is like, one the one hand you are experiencing love, a sense of belonging and affection and all that, on the other hand you know that you are forced to give in, whether it is decision making related to many things. So you are kind of caught, it is I think, I think it is a huge struggle. Personal is political and it is a struggle. [Laughs] Even small little things, which we discuss in the gender training programmes – for instance we say that women are discriminated against because they are women; we discriminate because ... even in recruitment, we ask the question "Is she married? Has she finished with her children and responsibilities? Is she likely to take maternity leave?" So we discuss in our training programmes that it is not right to ask these questions because the answers can work against her. But within the organisation, when you are sitting on the interview panel with your other colleagues you hear the same thing. And then you hear that it is in the organisational interest and we need to look at these things. So how do we, you know, work on that? A whole lot of things, so I feel that it will be a life long struggle.

L: This is often this notion, which even I have felt – that feminism as an ideology or a life experience, somewhere posits emotion and reason almost on two ends of the spectrum and in fact quite a struggle to balance the two in one's life, in one's work. So how do you respond to this, because what you are telling me about compromise seems like, you know, a very militant clash between notions of what is right and notions of what you feel.

M: Yeah, umm [pause] yeah, sometimes I think we give in, you know we rationalise the reason er, coming out of your ideological position and you know, your reasoning of what is right and wrong. I feel that that is one end and your feelings for persons or relationships er is the other end and you're trying to... again the process of compromise is, I think, you give up your ideological positions, your sense of what is right and what is wrong. Sometimes it happens. And sometimes you think [pause] 'why should I break my head? Why should I?' This whole notion of peace and, though I often question myself what is peace and can I you know... In training programmes I ask can we have? And sometimes they say 'no' if you ask the question, they say don't break the family and theoretically I can challenge them and all of that. I know it will break the family. [Laughs] Then I can tell them that if that is something that breaks means that it is not worth breaking. And while you are saying this, you are also thinking about, you know, is it worth breaking? And what is the alternative? You know, so those kinds of things. Umm, so sometimes, er I feel that [pause] umm, the emotion, emotionally the sense of what do you call... [Pause] umm, what shall we say...[laughs] you are, I don't know very whether we should call it compromise or sometimes, you are giving up completely, one part of it. Its not even a ... compromise I put it in a positive way that you, its not compromise, okay, sometimes you negotiate. When you say compromise you can say you give up completely, this or that. But a certain negotiation that is happening, and I think that the negotiation can be positive. Where you are not giving up but you are trying to see, how do you, how do you deal with it. And, er, slowly you try to influence, you try to, you know, assert yourself, but you see it as a process without breaking the relationship. In any setting, I am saying, it could be family. So negotiation that does not force you to give up, but gives you time and also takes into consideration of how the other is placed and what is the location of the place, ideological as well as emotional, etc and can be a positive thing I feel. Ah, not surrender. Surrendering can be completely... you're gone. You are not longer a feminist, you know its like... But grappling with these issues, struggle is all part of feminism I think. Er, which makes you strong, which makes you clear, er, which also shows you the world that you have a mind of your own and you can raise your voice, people don't take you for granted, you know she can bring in this point, she will all the be conscious. Like sometimes I say that I am the Kali here. [Laughs] People know, whether it is language, somebody says 'man power' and suddenly they become conscious. Or somebody says, "I think we should get a man to do this" or somebody says, the administrator says, "No, I think they pay men more". Women and men are working in this place and, suddenly when I am around, they know that there is a question coming. So that kind of an influence... it might take several years for people to really implement all that. But I feel that it is a success, suddenly you are conscious that you did something wrong, you said something wrong. That consciousness in the family, the family members, in the organisation, which I feel is umm an achievement, as a feminist, as part of this organisation. My sister says something and she immediately looks at me, her daughter is getting married and she has two daughters and she has lot of property. And now she says, "She is also getting married. So the property, let the husbands decide what to do with that". Then I ask, "what about your daughters?" So every moment you are trying to raise that consciousness, where ever you are. Umm or she says, "We need to have the kanaya dannna". She is following Hinduism, she got married to a Hindu and she has become a Hindu. Fully, rituals and everything. And she says, "this has to be done by someone, the mother's brother has to do it". So I said, "Why don't you do it", you know, things like that. [Laughs] Every time, every point you are engaging and trying to influence and things like that. Or her husband died. Her husband wanted one of the daughters to light the funeral and they bring, this one friend, because may be they feel that there are

only women. And, you know, when we discuss this, they say, “why do you insist?” and things like that. And I see that as a result of my interaction with her during the past three or four years, because she comes here more often because she has bought a house her. I can that slowly, things slowly; this is sparked within her, which you know things like that. And you know I feel... when you talk about the women’s movement, you are talking about large changes, you know you are thinking huge achievements and huge structural changes. Ah ... but I think that every feminist is contributing to that change. When you raise a question and anything that you say. But I feel if I don’t believe in that, it can be very frustrating for me. I believe that every small action and every small question I raise, I ask; in any setting is something that can bring about change.

L: Mercy this is my last question to you. You know a lot of feminists who were active in the ‘80s, that is 20 or 30 years ago, when they look at young people now, you know their daughters or nieces or young colleagues, there is something of a feeling that they take the freedoms and rights for granted and see it as having dropped out of the sky almost without an acknowledgement of what has gone into that, some women have struggled hard and broken new ground so that this generation can have it slightly easier. So do you have a sense somewhere of having been part of laying that ground, that generations coming in now see things differently, their issues are so different and sometimes it is difficult even to relate. So what would be your response?

M: I don’t feel that. I think the younger generation do not have a sense of history. They do not have the sense of the journey that the women’s movement has taken and the struggles. And a lot of the young people, I really became conscious during the One Billion planning meetings. A lot of young people, they feel that can bring about change quickly and through the media. You know, what they call the social media. And when we are sitting and planning, everybody is talking about ten thousand, twenty thousand and you know what they are really talking about? It’s the Face book. And they do not have face-to-face relationship, which was er, *the* grounding where women were women’s solidarity, women shouting, and women screaming. You know, that kind of thing, I feel is not there so much. You have an illusion of a movement when you look at the younger generation. I feel it is an illusion of a movement, because you feel all this Twitter and Face book and you have the change, what you call it the change.org and something and you feel you are part of a movement. You sign a petition and you feel. So, that kind of an illusion. I think that er, [pause] except I felt in the young people after the Delhi thing. When I see the television and watch thousands coming out and not just the Face book, but in person, I felt that, okay, something is happening. There is a sense of purpose and a sense of solidarity and the struggle that is happening. Er, and generally speaking, I feel that they do not have a sense of history and I feel that there is so much of er, a sense that you can bring about change through [pause] okay, there is no sense of struggle and solidarity that was there. It’s a different world I feel. Umm [pause] I remember getting agitated in a Vimochana planning meeting and all these young people are talking about Twitter and Face book and all that [laughs] and getting agitated and asking, “Can you bring twenty people for the meeting? Forget about these thing. You know with flesh and blood people. Can you bring?” [Laughs] We were trying to take a count of people who would be there. So I feel that more of that has to happen. You know, not the... only then you can feel the pain the struggle. You will know what has been gone through. People feel... they take it for granted. I sometimes feel that.

L: And so where do you see yourself sort of changing that and bringing them to the streets? Training or?

M: I think that it mainly happens through... for example we do a lot of work with young people through colleges, Roshan and myself and once we had 45 MBA students. Er, in those kind of things we need to bring in ... anything that you discuss rape, dowry or any issue of violence against women... we need to see that... like you said, a huge history of people raising questions, challenging, coming out, suffering which has brought about the changes. So I make it a point to talk about these things. That it did not happen, you know, just like that. And for any change to happen you need to er, it has happened to certain resistance to the status quo, the way things are. Somebody raising question, somebody organising, somebody mobilising, you know. That point, we make it a point to state that and talk about it. That's one thing, you know that I think. That's one thing we need to do again, so they can also be with us. [laughs] the continuity is so very important because the present is linked to the past and the future.

L: Yes. That's a good note to end and thank you so much Mercy.

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